

# WORLD WAR II: THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

## RESEARCH: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN WWII

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### The European Front

The end of World War I with the signing of the Versailles Treaty brought limited stability to the continent. Germany was suffering from economic and political instability as well as resentment towards the allied powers and the harsh terms imposed on Germany by the Versailles Treaty. This combination of uncertainty, instability and resentment fuelled the rise of Adolf Hitler in German politics who became the Fuhrer or supreme leader in 1934. Hitler was of the firm belief that war was the only way to gain enough space for the German race to expand and gain superiority.

By the end of August in 1939, Germany occupied Austria, Lithuania, and Czechoslovakia. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939 Germany invaded Poland from the West which resulted in France and Britain declaring war on Germany and the official commencement of World War II in Europe. Australia officially entered the war on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939 with Australian Defence Force units deployed from 1940. Germany was quick to advance across Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa. In June 1941, Germany declared war on the Soviet Union.

#### The Pacific Front

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Japan had been gradually increasing its imperial empire. During the 1930's, Japan was focused on expanding its empire and influence throughout Asia and the Pacific region which led to the formation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. This was an imperialistic concept which was distributed to Asian populations who were under western colonial oppression. By 1939, Japanese occupation included: Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, Manchuria (North China) and the border into the Soviet Union, Inner Mongolia, Parts of Eastern China near the Yellow Sea, the Island of Hainan and Hong Kong.

With Great Britain and France occupied with the European War, the Japanese saw an opportunity to advance into areas of Asia that were under colonial rule by European powers. In 1941, Japan advanced into Indo China which provoked the United States to freeze overseas assets held by as well as to impose sanctions regarding the distribution of oil and oil products to Japan.



A group of Australian nurses awaiting to entrain in Singapore. Australian War Memorial 005829



## The Pacific Front- Continued

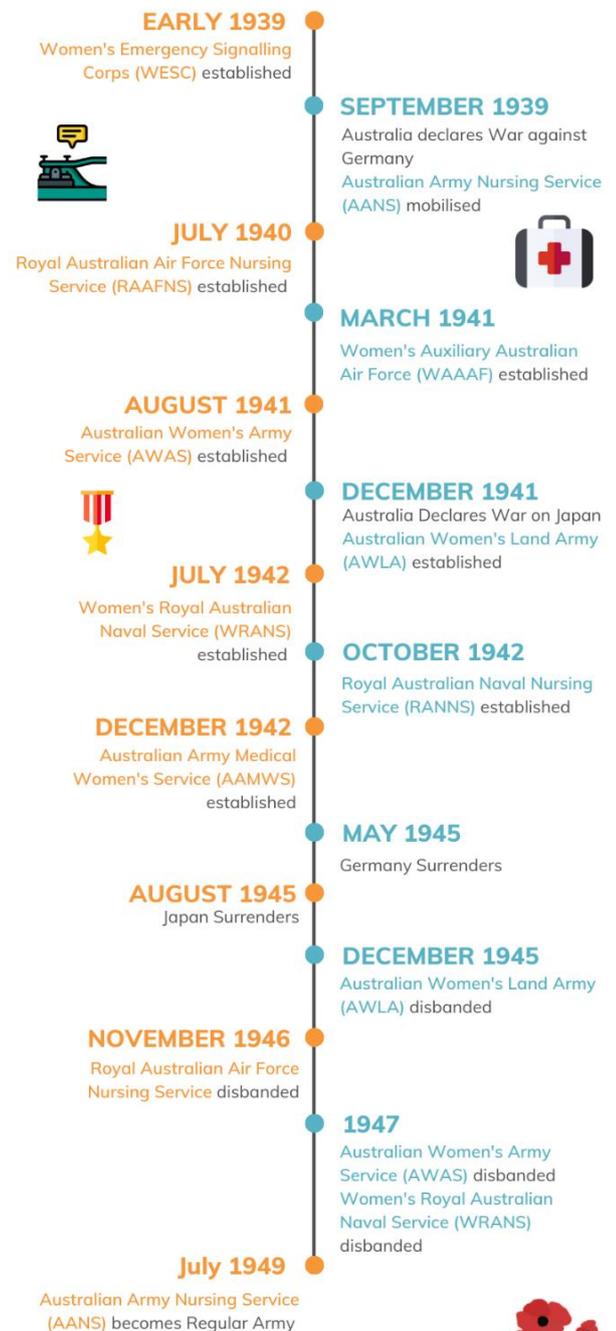
Japan on the quest to expand their empire and to gain greater access to resources such as oil, developed a plan for war with the United States. On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbour a US Naval base on the Island of Oahu, Hawaii. This surprise aerial attack decimated the US Navy's Pacific Fleet and forced the entry of the United States into World War II. With the Japanese also attacking Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand on the same day, Australia declared war on Japan on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1941.

## SETTING THE SCENE

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, Australian women had limited employment opportunities. Employment opportunities that were available depended on your social class or your socioeconomic status. Middle-class women were often restricted to occupations such as nursing or teaching as they were deemed appropriate. Working-class women, however, often found employment in sales, factories as well as domestic service and continued to work after they were married for financial reasons.

Many Australian men invoked their ANZAC spirit and enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force which created a gap in the Australian workforce. By 1941, more men were required than ever to fight against the two fronts, the one in Europe and the one in the Pacific. While men left their roles and went off to war, women were called up to join the workforce in roles that traditionally were not considered acceptable in society. With Australians fighting wars on two fronts, the one in Europe and the one in Pacific placing strain on the defence force, organisations were formed allowing women to enlist in certain roles pertaining to the defence of Australia. Due to the restrictions on female occupations and employment conditions at the time, women's organisations were set up within the Army, Navy and Air Force.

## DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S SERVICES IN WWII



**Research** Research the role of women in World War II and then answer the following questions.

**Q1** What was the role of women prior to World War II?

**Q2** How were women recruited into work and the defence force organisations?

**Q3** Once women were recruited, what were some of the employment conditions?

**Q4** List at least 5 of the women's organisations/ auxiliaries that became a part of the defence force.



**Q5** What are 2 women's organisations that were not a part of the Defence Force?

**Q6** What benefits did women who work for the Australian Women's Land Army not receive when compared to those in the Australian Women's Army Service?

**Q7** What were some of the eligibility criteria and conditions for employment or enlistment?

**Q8** How many women enlisted in the Army, Navy and Air Force and how did they compare to the numbers of men that served?

**Q9** What was the lasting impact in terms of the changing roles of women post WWII?



### Q10

Throughout World War II, there were several women's organisations that were formed both in the civilian and defence sectors. Match the organisation with its relevant civilian or defence affiliation.

Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service

Army

Australian Women's Land Army

Air Force

Australian Army Nursing Service

Civilian

Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force

Navy

Women's Emergency Signalling Corps

Civilian

Australian Army Medical Women's Service

Air Force

Women's Royal Australian Naval Service

Army

Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service

Civilian

Australian Women's Army Service

Navy

Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment

Civilian

Women's Australian National Services

Army

National Emergency Services

Civilian

