

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize 2021



Sister Janet Radcliff
Australian Army Nursing Service

QUESTION 1:

Many viewed that the Allied victory, which ended World War 1, would also end the misery and challenges for the nation of Australia and its people. To what extent do experiences in the immediate years after the war support this view?

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Word Count: 1060

*“Throughout the length and breadth of Tasmania yesterday was a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving. Everywhere in city, town, village, and hamlet the people made high holiday, and celebrated in befitting manner the greatest event recorded in history - the end of the World War -bringing with it peace a glorious victory to the Allies, and the downfall on German militarism. Never in living memory had there been such a day of joy and gladness in our island State.”*¹ The Mercury 13th November 1918.

Often a war is defined by the dates when the fighting starts and finishes, but in reality, the effects of war continue long after the soldiers return. The signing of the Armistice on the 11th of November of 1918 marked the official end of World War One, and people around Australia gathered in large enthusiastic crowds to celebrate the occasion. As the excitement died down it did not take long for people to realise that although the hostilities had ceased and the soldiers were coming home, Australia was still faced with the task of rebuilding itself following ‘a war to end all wars’.²

During the war federal grants and war contracts had helped the economy, but the closing of overseas markets, delays in imports and the loss of access to overseas loans had hit the country hard.³ A long drought and devastating bushfires in the summers of 1914-15 had made things worse. Food and the cost of living had become expensive, society argued over conscription and unemployment increased. Mentally and physically scarred soldiers found the Australia they returned to was not the one they left to fight for.⁴ Not only was Australia indebted and seeking to repair its economy, but it was also under threat from a deadly pandemic and struggling with the challenges of what to do with the returning soldiers, war widows and their children.

Many soldiers did not return home to Australia until 1919.⁵ A new Repatriation Department had been formed in 1918 to help ex-soldiers resettle and find paid work. The department also granted pensions and other benefits, and provided medical treatment for soldiers, their children, and widows. Help was available for the men who had permanent physical disabilities, although much of the caring fell on the family. Mental health was not well understood, and the Government did not expect the long-term mental health problems the soldiers would experience. At the time Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was known as ‘shell shock’, and instead of being recognised as being injured, those experiencing it were often considered weak, cowardly or “angling for a full pension.”⁶

¹ Trove: The Mercury - Tasmania Rejoices. 13 November 1918.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11416979?searchTerm=demonstration%20hobart>

² The Conversation. 2021. *World War I: what we've learned from the 'war to end all wars'*.

<https://theconversation.com/world-war-i-what-weve-learned-from-the-war-to-end-all-wars-106641>.

³ International Encyclopedia of the First World War. 5 April 2016. *Organization of War Economies (Australia)*.

https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/organization_of_war_economies_australia.

⁴ International Encyclopedia of the First World War. 8 November 2016. *Post-war Societies (Australia)*.

https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war_societies_australia.

⁵ State Library of Victoria 2021. *Returning soldiers | Ergo*.

<http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/australia-wwi/abroad-wwi/returning-soldiers>.

⁶ Radio National: The history of forgetting, from shell shock to PTSD.

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/the-history-of-forgetting/5744242>.

As soldiers returned to their families many had, or would go on to develop, PTSD. Treatment was difficult to get and was often experimental and ineffective.⁷ Some soldiers tried to cope by using alcohol or drugs. Families often found the relief and excitement of having a loved one return home quickly turned to despair and suffering as they were left to cope with a damaged man who continued fighting his own personal battles. "A lot of mothers became mothers again"⁸ and instead of having the support of a husband, wives became both carer and provider while trying to keep the family together.

The wives of veterans were not the only women whose lives became more difficult after the war. Prior to the war men in Australia outnumbered women by 162,000. Once the soldiers returned after the war there were 84,000 more women than men.⁹

"A war that had first robbed entire societies of a generation of men now threatened to rob a generation of women of their traditional life path. Wealth, social status and children were—for women—inextricably tied to marriage. With little formal education, few employment prospects, and limited civil rights, unmarried women had to find their way at a time when jobs open to them were limited."¹⁰

Many women who were expecting to marry and become wives and mothers became "superfluous" and "maiden aunts".¹¹

"Many had lost fiancés, boyfriends and family members so in addition to living with grief, many would live with loneliness and the stigma of being a spinster."¹²

Another overlooked group were the nurses who served overseas with the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) and other similar organisations. To serve in the AANS women had to be aged between 25 and 40, educated and qualified (at least three years of training).¹³ In 1916 nurses were given officer rank, but were paid around half of an officer's salary which

⁷ The Conversation: What World War 1 taught us about PTSD.

<https://theconversation.com/what-world-war-i-taught-us-about-ptsd-105613>.

⁸ The Islander Online: Armistice centenary we can never forget.

<https://www.theislanderonline.com.au/story/5701872/armistice-centenary-we-can-never-forget>.

⁹ Sydney Morning Herald: 'Broken from the inside' How four devastating years are still shaping us.

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/broken-from-the-inside-how-four-devastating-years-are-still-shaping-us-20181105-p50e2s.html>

¹⁰ The Wall Street Journal: Maiden Aunts.

<https://graphics.wsj.com/100-legacies-from-world-war-1/maiden-aunts>.

¹¹ Tales From The Archives: Women in World War One - The Social Standing of Women before the War.

<https://talesfromthearchives.wordpress.com/2017/12/27/women-in-world-war-one-the-social-standing-of-women-before-the-war>

¹² Tales From The Archives: Women in World War One - The Social Standing of Women before the War.

<https://talesfromthearchives.wordpress.com/2017/12/27/women-in-world-war-one-the-social-standing-of-women-before-the-war>

¹³ DVA: The Australian Army Nursing Service in World War 1.

<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/military-organisation/australian-imperial-force/australian-army-nursing-service>.

was often less than a nurse's pre-war pay.¹⁴ The war pension act gave nurses a pension if they were disabled or invalided during the war but the pension was based on the level of their army pay and the extent of their injury or illness. Because nurses were not a permanent force, they were not entitled to a service pension.¹⁵ The effects of their war service on their physical and mental health meant many nurses struggled to support themselves and often ended up in poverty.

An example of such a woman is Hobart nurse, Sister Janet Radcliff. Janet spent four and a half years on active service working in stressful, difficult, and dangerous conditions during the Great War. Janet was initially stationed in the Middle East¹⁶ before spending twelve months on the hospital ships HMAS Sicila and HMAS Grantully Castle. These ships transferred the wounded from Gallipoli and to and from clearing stations in the Mediterranean.^{17 18} After a year working in military hospitals in England,¹⁹ Janet spent five months in 1917 just behind front lines on the Western Front working in the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station during the battles of Polygon Wood and Passchendaele.²⁰ Janet spent the last year of the war at the Harefield military hospital during the "Pneumonia Influenza Epidemic"²¹ where "hundreds of patients were being admitted and evacuated each week. It made the work very heavy".²² She was weakened and unwell due to mitral heart disease and anaemia²³ when she received a hero's welcome on her return to Hobart in March 1919.

*"Cheer on cheer was raised when the nurses and the soldiers stepped ashore and confetti and flowers were showered upon them, while each of the sisters were presented with a beautiful bouquet of flowers. Sister Radcliffe (sic), who went away on the Geelong four and a half years ago with the original Anzacs received a remarkable ovation from the returned soldiers."*²⁴

Janet's discharge from the AANS was delayed until November 1919, only because the Principal Matron "pointed out that an injustice has been done in this case. Sister Radcliffe requires complete rest for the treatment of her case and has been in bed for the last four weeks. She is entitled to receive such treatment prior to Discharge."²⁵ Without a husband to

¹⁴ Harris, K. (2009). *Work, work, work: Australian Army nurses after the first World War*. In *When the Soldiers Return*: November 2007 Conference Proceedings, St Lucia, Queensland.

¹⁵ Harris, K. (2009). *Work, work, work: Australian Army nurses after the first World War*. In *When the Soldiers Return*: November 2007 Conference Proceedings, St Lucia, Queensland.

¹⁶ Tasmanian Archives: Colonel Charles Hazell Elliott and Family (NG669): Alice Gordon Elliott (Nee King) – Record of Service in World War 1.

¹⁷ Alice Gordon Elliott (Nee King) – Record of Service in World War 1.

¹⁸ Hand-written drafts collated by Alice Elliott.

¹⁹ Hand-written drafts collated by Alice Elliott.

²⁰ Alice Gordon Elliott (Nee King) – Record of Service in World War 1.

²¹ Alice Gordon Elliott (Nee King) – Record of Service in World War 1.

²² Hand-written drafts collated by Alice Elliott.

²³ NAA: B2455, Radcliff Janet: Service Records pg 34.

²⁴ Trove: The World. More Anzacs Arrive. 8 March 1919.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/187739265>.

²⁵ NAA: B2455, Radcliff Janet: Service Records, p. 34.

support her and a widowed mother to help, Janet returned to nursing, but in November 1922 she died in her sleep. She was 39.²⁶

The misery and challenges that had been faced by Australia and its people during the war continued long after the armistice was signed, and service men and women had returned home. Not only was Australia faced with the challenge of rebuilding itself and resettling its returned soldiers, but many of the soldiers also had, or would go on to suffer from, the effects of shell shock. The country lacked the knowledge, resources, and empathy to manage soldiers' complex mental health issues, and this caused suffering and distress for them and their families. Unmarried women and war nurses also found themselves in difficult and stressful situations due to their changed circumstances. Long after 'the war to end all wars' ended many Australians were forced to continue fighting their own personal battles.

²⁶ Brighton Cremetorians, *Biographies Angels of Mercy [World War One Nurses] of the Brighton Cemetery Janet Radcliff*. <https://www.brightoncemetorians.org.au/biographies>.

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