

BOOK REVIEW:

Anzac girls: the extraordinary story of our World War I nurses

by Peter Rees

*Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, NSW; 2016; 363 pp.; ISBN 9781760293291 (ppb); RRP \$22.99
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By the end of the Great War, 45 Australian and New Zealand nurses had died on overseas service and over 200 had been decorated. These were women who left for war looking for adventure and romance but were soon confronted with challenges for which their civilian lives could never have prepared them. Their strength and dignity were remarkable.

Largely drawing on the nurses' diaries and letters from the war front, the book paints detailed pictures of the life, work and living conditions of the nurses while serving on Gallipoli in 1915, on the hospital ship *Marquete* in the Aegean Sea in 1915, and on the Western Front from 1916 to 1918 – in their camps, tent hospitals, surgeries and casualty clearing stations behind some of the 20th century's most horrific battle-fronts.

The pressure from casualties, from being bombed while working in the operating theatre and while tending to patients, and from the coldest winter for a century on the Western Front in 1916-17, took its toll on staff and patients. During the Battle of Messines in 1917, a casualty clearing station was bombed, despite large red crosses being displayed on the tent roof.

After the Armistice, the nurses were not extended many of the benefits, such as loans for housing, given to other returned veterans. The book's final chapter traces the hard times many of the women experienced as single women, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Perhaps the most touching part of the book is the listing on an honour roll of the 28 nurses from Australia and 17 nurses from New Zealand who died on active service – all were under the age of 40. Each entry gives the name, birthplace, cause and date of death, place of burial, and age at death (where known). The small (20cm) book contains 316 pages of text; a 6-page honour roll; 48 pages of unnumbered plates, illustrations and portraits; 29 pages of notes; a bibliography; and an index.

Anzac Girls was first published as *The Other Anzacs* in 2008 and it later inspired the acclaimed ABC television series, *ANZAC Girls*. It provides a unique snapshot into the lives of Australian and New Zealand nurses while they were on active service and post-war. It is an inspiring account; and I recommend it highly.

Priscilla Leece