



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
AUSTRALIA REMEMBERS WOMEN IN DEFENCE FORCES CEREMONY
CANBERRA, 25 JULY 1995**

I am honoured to be delivering this address in another splendid 'Australia Remembers' commemorative event

But this ceremony is different.

At the launching of 'Australia Remembers' almost 12 months ago, I said that the Government wanted women to be involved in the commemorations to an extent that women have never been involved in our major national commemorations before.

We have not been disappointed.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to Parliament House. Thank you for coming.

Today we remember what Australian women gave to their country and the cause of freedom in World War II.

They gave their labour and their love of this country. Many of them gave their lives.

They gave themselves totally to the defence of Australia and the things Australia stood for - the principles of freedom, democracy and human decency, the way of life Australians had constructed here, their communities and families.

They worked at tasks Australian women had never taken on before. They served in places where Australians had never been. They served as one, regardless of where or what circumstances they came from.

They played an essential role in the defence of Australia.

As Mr Sciacca said, the response to calls for enlistment in the women's services was overwhelming - some 67,000 enlisted in our armed forces.

Within a year of the declaration of war in Europe, almost a third of all Australia's trained nurses had volunteered to serve overseas. The first of them embarked within four months of the beginning of the war. They served in Palestine, Libya, Egypt, Greece, Eritrea, Syria, the South-West Pacific and in England.

Their experience is part of the Australian experience; it is inseparable from our military history, our national legends and traditions, and the inspiration and values we draw from these things.

Women served during the blitz on London. They saw war in the deserts of North Africa. In Greece they served through frequent air raids and narrowly missed the arrival of invading German troops.

In Malaya, Ceylon, Singapore, Papua, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands New Britain and Borneo many became internees and suffered terrible deprivations. Some were brutally murdered.

Forty-one Australian Army nurses died in the fall of Singapore or as internees of the Japanese.

From these terrible experiences emerged many stories of heroism.

I think we are all familiar with the story of Sister Vivien Bullwinkel, who was the sole female survivor when nurses who endured the sinking of the *Viner Brooke* were put to death by the Japanese.

Less well-known is the experience of the nurses who were captured on Rabaul and, along with a number of civilians, sent to Japan. Here they were lodged in the Yokohama Rowing Club and provided with a few items of clothing and an inadequate diet.

One member of the group, Sister Anderson, described their imprisonment: they worked at knitting small silk bags, making and gluing envelopes and at heavier tasks such as constructing air raid shelters, carrying bundles of firewood and clearing paths in the snow for guards to walk through in knee boots - the women were barefooted. Sometimes the women became so hungry they cooked and ate the glue on the envelopes.

There are other stories we should record today. In the bombing of Darwin on 18 February 1942, Sister Margaret de Mestre and 11 other staff of the hospital ship *Manunda* were killed.

Only one nurse was among the sixty-four survivors of the torpedoing of the Hospital Ship *Centaur*.

She was Sister Nell Savage who was awarded the George Cross for helping others while they floated on debris and rafts waiting for rescue.

Fifty-five Australian Army Nursing Service members received decorations for their Second World War Service, including two George Medals. Eighty-two were mentioned in despatches.

Many other Australian women served in medical units.

Members of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (previously known as the Voluntary Aid Detachments) served with our Army nurses throughout Australia and in New Guinea and Borneo.

Their dedication was personified by Miss May Douglas, the senior representative of the women's wartime services present here today.

Originally a nursing orderly for the AIF, Miss Douglas was commissioned in 1941 with the prospect that she might accompany the Army overseas.

But her talents were employed in Australia where, in 1943, she was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and appointed controller of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service.

And in this capacity she travelled in Australia and New Guinea, visiting hospitals where her troops were serving.

Today, I would also like to acknowledge the women of other medical units:

- . The members of the Australian Army Physiotherapy service who served in the Middle East and the Pacific, on hospital ships and in base and forward areas.
- . The women members of the Australian Army Medical Corps who served in military hospitals both in Australia and overseas as doctors, physiotherapists and masseuses.
- . The women of the Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service who cared for Australian and Allied servicemen on bases throughout Australia, as well as at Milne Bay and on the Hospital Ship *Manunda*.
- . And the women of the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing and Medical Service members who served not only in Australia, but also in New Guinea and in air evacuation units in Canada and the United States.

Not all the women who served Australia served as nurses, of course.

27,000 members of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force, fondly known as 'the WAAAFs', worked in 72 of 120 Air Force trades.

And we might note today that they received just two-thirds or less of the male rates of pay.

The WAAAF changed the role of women in wartime.

The women were subject to rules which now seem at best curious.

For instance, they were not supposed to serve further north than Cairns and Geraldton. Nevertheless some did serve in Darwin and the north-west of Western Australia, and in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

They were also not supposed to fly aircraft - though I am told that two women, Nell Palfreyman and Margaret Piddington were given some experience in this traditional part of air force life.

In acknowledging the WAAAFs today I think it is true to say that we recognise not only the great service they rendered to the country in wartime, but the example they set for the peace - the example of women's capacity and right to play a part in realms of our national life from which they had always been excluded.

The same might be said of the Australian Women's Army Service, which was formed in 1941 with the same objective of releasing men for fighting units.

Thousands of women rushed to enlist in what became known as the 'AWAS' - by 1944 the number totalled over 24,000.

Again, they were paid just two-thirds of the male rate.

They were grudgingly allowed the same rank as men and provided with the same basic equipment: with one difference apparently - they were allowed to have "a vase of flowers on the cupboards by their beds".

In November 1944, the War Cabinet approved the posting of 500 members of AWAS to New Guinea. I do not know if the same conditions applied.

When women were first admitted into the Royal Australian Navy in 1941, they were admitted under the proviso 'that there be no publicity about this break in tradition'.

Over 3,000 women enlisted in the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service during the Second World War. None went to sea because it was thought inappropriate to have women on ships, but they played an extremely important role - not least in the Allied Intelligence Bureau and the Coast Watching Service.

Then there were the 7,000 members of the Australian Women's Land Army who, while not one of the Services, wore uniforms, were subject to discipline and learned to take orders.

They covered the loss of 100,000 farm workers to the defence forces.

As John Curtin said, their work was hard, demanding, constant and vital to the war effort.

Of course, 'Australia Remembers' honours all our veterans, including those who stayed at home and kept the country running.

During the war, Australia turned to women as a vast untapped labour resource.

By 1944, 250,000 women were working in Australia's factories. Over 40 per cent of munitions workers were women.

Much of the work was hideously monotonous and harmful to their health. They suffered hardship and illness. But they made a huge contribution to winning the war - and therefore to our freedom and the preservation of our democracy. They made a massive contribution to the story of Australia and I hope that, after today, Australians will always acknowledge this.

Our own generation and generations to come should know that when liberty was threatened, Australian women rallied to defend it. No less than Australia's men, they were prepared to give their labour and their lives.

We all should know what we owe them - to no small extent, our freedom and our way of life, including that part of it which today makes it possible for women to share much more fully in the work and the rewards.

This generation of Australian women were both pioneers and defenders of the Australian faith.

And today all Australia salutes them.