

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0068

Best, Kathleen Annie Louise

(1910 - 1957)

Born 28 August, 1910, Summer Hill New South Wales Australia

Died 15 November, 1957, Richmond Victoria Australia

Occupation Nurse, Servicewoman

Summary

Kathleen Best, as nurse and army officer, was an inspiring leader in both a war and peace time environment. As an army officer in the Middle East, she distinguished herself through her courage and efficiency in her treatment and care of the wounded. After her wartime service, she assumed a number of peacetime appointments, which included becoming the founding director, Australian Women's Army Corps (Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC)) in 1951. Kathleen Best's war effort was acknowledged by the award of the Royal Red Cross medal 'for gallantry, conduct and devotion in Greece 14/27 April 1941' and her subsequent role as Director of the WRAAC was honoured with her appointment as Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1956.

Details

Kathleen Best was the second child of Rupert Dudley Best, commission agent, and Emily Edith, née Stevenson. She was educated at Bondi Public and Cleveland Street Intermediate High School. She embarked on her nursing career at Western Suburbs Hospital and completed her midwifery at the Crown Street Women's Hospital, Sydney.

On 30 May 1940, Best enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service, Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) (service number NX12617), and was posted as matron of the 2nd/5th Australian General Hospital, which opened in December at Rehovot, Palestine. It moved to Greece on 10 April 1941 to assist the Anzac Corps in its battle against the Germans. Medical and nursing personnel worked under constant air raids, and by 25 April, most medical staff were evacuated to Crete. Best and 39 nurses volunteered to remain to care for the wounded, but later that day they were ordered to leave and survived a dangerous journey to Greece. She was awarded the RRC for her gallant conduct under difficult circumstances. She returned to Palestine to reorganise the hospital, then in August 1941, she went with the 2nd/5th AGH to Eritrea, Ethiopia.

Best returned to Australia in March 1942 and her AIF appointment was terminated on 13 June. She then took on the position of controller of full-time voluntary aid detachments for the Australian Army Medical Women's Service. She relinquished this post in February 1943 and was promoted to lieutenant colonel to become assistant adjutant general (women's services). In September 1944 she transferred to the Reserve Officers and became the assistant director of women's re-establishment and training in the Department of Postwar Reconstruction. This position involved helping servicewomen and female war workers adapt to the changed postwar conditions. The culmination of her career came with her appointment as the founding director of the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps in February 1951. She was promoted to the rank of honorary colonel in 1952 and was appointed to the OBE in 1956. She was a member of the Melbourne Lyceum Club. Two portraits of her, painted by Nora Heysen and Geoffrey Mainwaring, hang in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Kathleen Best died in the Epworth Hospital, Richmond, Victoria, from melanomatosis on 15 November 1957.

Events

1942 - 1943

Controller for the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS)

1943 - 1944

Assistant Adjutant-General Women's Services

1942 - 1942

Awarded Royal Red Cross Medal (RRC)

1944 - 1949

Assistant Director, Re-establishment Division, Department of Post-War Reconstruction

1940 - 1942

Served in the Middle East

Published resources

Book

Australian women at war, Adam-Smith, Patsy, 1984

Guns and brooches : Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War, Bassett, Jan, 1992

Soldiers of the Queen : women in the Australian Army, Bomford, Janette, 2001

Colonel Best and her soldiers: The Story of the 33 years of the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps, Ollif, Lorna, 1985

From blue to khaki: The enlisted voluntary aids and others who became members of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service and served from 1942-1951, Mount-Batten, Betty J, 1995

A Stroll down memory lane, WRAAC Association, 2001

Just wanted to be there : Australian Service Nurses 1899-1999, Reid, Richard, 1999

A History of the Lyceum Club Melbourne, Gillison, Joan M, 1975

Edited Book

Proudly We Served: stories of 2/5th Australian general hospital at war with Germany, behind German lines and at war with Japan in the Pacific, Brodziak, Innes, 1988

Who's Who in Australia 1950, Alexander, Joseph A, 1950

Resource Section

Best, Kathleen Annie Louise (1910-1957), Lincoln, Merrilyn, 2006,
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A130206b.htm>

Resource

RSL Returned Sisters' Sub-branch Thanksgiving Service, 100 Years of Australian Army Nursing, 2002,
<http://www.perthcathedral.org/>

Where are the Women in Australian science?, Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre, 2003,
<http://www.austehc.unimelb.edu.au/wisa/wisa.html>

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

Archival resources

Australian War Memorial, Research Centre

[\[Hospitals, General and Special - Work of:\] 5th Australian General Hospital. Report of events in Greece - 1. Report by Lieutenant-Colonel A W Morrow 2. Report by Matron Kathleen Best](#)

National Archives of Australia, Various Locations

[Christmas message from Colonel Sybil H IRVING \(honorary Colonel of the Corps HONCOL\) and Colonel Kathleen BEST \(Director, Women's Royal Australian Army Corps DWRAAC\)](#)

[Speech by Colonel Sybil H Irving \(honorary Colonel of the Corps\) made at the opening of the Kathleen Best Memorial Gates, Women's Royal Australian Army Corps \(WRAAC\) School, Mosman, NSW, 6 November 1959](#)

National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra

[Kathleen Best Memorial \(Gates\) and portrait](#)

Author Details

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