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World War 1 and Conscription debate in Strathfield

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ANZAC Day is commemorated on 25th April each year. It marks the anniversary of the first major military action fought by Australian and New Zealand forces during World War I. This essay discusses the Conscription Referendums of 1916 and 1917 and how it affected the Strathfield district.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, recruitment of men and women to serve in the Australian Imperial Forces was on a voluntary basis only. Despite intense and divisive campaigns in Australia to introduce conscription to allow compulsory overseas military service, only Australia, South Africa, and India of the countries participating in the conflict did not introduce conscription during World War I.

When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4 1914, Australia was a self-governing dominion of the British Empire. Following declaration of war, both the Australian Prime Minister Joseph Cook (Liberal Party¹) and Opposition leader Andrew Fisher (Labor Party), who were in the middle of an election campaign, pledged full support for Britain, which meant that Australia was also at war. Cook lost the September 1914 federal election to Fisher. Fisher resigned as Prime Minister on 27 October 1915, and Labor's William Morris 'Billy' Hughes became Prime Minister for the duration of the War. Hughes had publicly stated in July 1915 that he would 'in no circumstances ... send men out of the country to fight against their will'².

The political alignments of this period were highly volatile, resulting in opportunistic alliances. Following Hughes split the Labor Party in 1916 over conscription with 23 supporters following Hughes into an alliance with the opposition Federal Liberal Party which became the Nationalist Party of Australia³. Former Liberal Prime Minister Joseph Cook became Deputy Prime Minister under Hughes. Hughes and Cook were Australia's representatives to the postwar conferences and were the signatures on behalf of Australia to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

The decision to participate in the War received popular support from the general public. While Australia was located far from the warfront in Europe, most of the Australian population of around five million people were overwhelmingly of British birth or ancestry. In the 1911 Census⁴, the population of NSW totalled 1,315,030 with 590,722 persons recording their birthplace in the United Kingdom⁵. Many Australians strongly identified with the British cause and supported the call to arms from their King and Empire.

¹ The Liberal Party was a parliamentary party in Australian federal politics between 1909 and 1917, which was also known as the Fusion Party, a merger of the Protectionist Party and Anti-Socialist Party. The modern Liberal Party was formed in 1944 by Robert Menzies.

² Conscription referendums (undated), National Museum of Australia

³ Conscription was not generally supported by the Labor Party. Hughes relied on support of the opposition to enable the Conscription legislation into Parliament in September 1916. Six of his ministers resigned and the State Branch of the Labor Party expelled Hughes. Following the defeat of the 1916 referendum, the Federal Labor Caucus moved to expel Hughes on 14 November 1916, however he and 23 supporters resigned and formed the National Labor Party. Frank Tudor was elected as leader of the Labor Party.

⁴ The Australian Census was held in 1911, the next Census was held ten years later in 1921.

⁵ Census 1911: 134-135

With the outbreak of WWI in August 1914, large numbers of volunteers enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) to serve in the war effort. The Australian Government initially committed 20,000 troops to the campaign, though a total of 52,561 Australians volunteered in 1914 without much effort by the Government to encourage recruitment⁶. The 31,881 who actually embarked for overseas service in that year were in excess of the number expected when the war commenced⁷. The majority of enlistments were mainly from cities or recently arrived migrants from Britain, though few had any real experience of the bush.

Due to the rush of volunteers to enlist, the standard for enlistment was high. The requirement was for men of British or European background, in good health, aged 19 to 38 and at least 5 feet 6 inches (1.68 metres) in height and a chest measurement of 34 inches. Enlistments in the AIF were not required to produce any qualifications or trade certificates, they had to simply answer the question 'what is your trade or calling?'.⁸ Within two weeks of the outbreak of War more than 10,000 men had applied to join up in Sydney alone and more than 30% of all volunteers were rejected.⁹

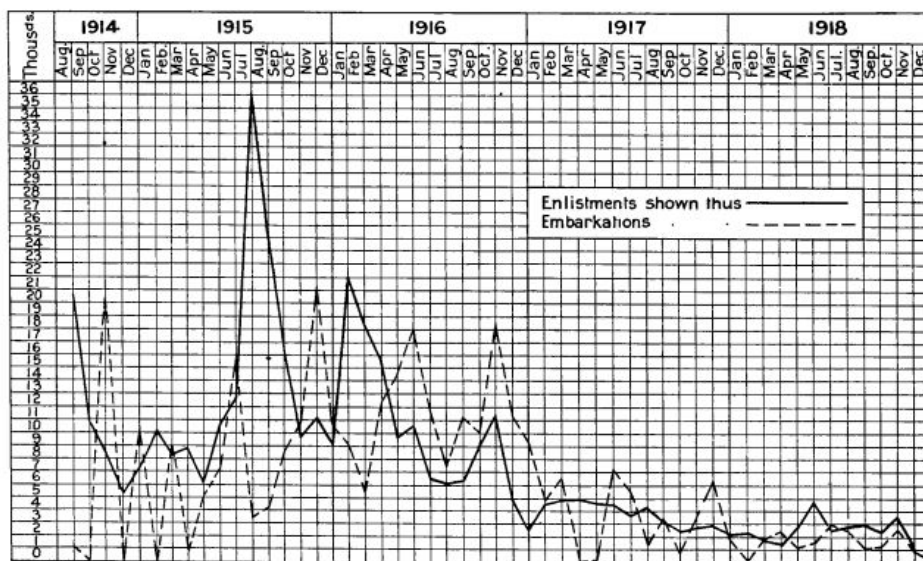
The motivations of the volunteers varied. Firstly Australian soldiers were well paid, an incentive as Australia was in the midst of a drought and depression¹⁰. They were also provided with meals, uniforms and an opportunity to travel overseas. Many were motivated by a sense of duty to support Britain as the overwhelming majority of soldiers were either British by birth or had British-born parents¹¹.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, there were large numbers of volunteers wishing to enlist for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), however by 1915 volunteer enlistments began declining as the conflict wore on, particularly after news of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign made its way back to Australia. During 1915, the Australian Government tried to increase falling enlistments through mass recruitment drives and public campaigns, but their effectiveness waned in the face of increasing reports of high rates of Australian death and injuries.

By June 1915, the standards for recruits were reduced and previously ineligible men were now eligible for enlistment. The age range and minimum height requirements were increased to 45 years and minimum height was lowered to 5ft 2in and by April 1917, the minimum height was 5 feet. The Colonel A G Butler wrote in relation to recruitment standards:

"Not unnaturally, seeing that the height standard had been reduced from 5ft 4 inches to 5ft 2 inches the standard of vision reduced, and men with minor defects accepted. For special units additional

APPENDIX No. 4.



GRAPH SHOWING ENLISTMENTS AND EMBARKATIONS.

⁶ Official History 1941: 286

⁷ Official History 1941: 286

⁸ Inglis 2015: 27

⁹ Official History 1941: 286

¹⁰ Conscription referendums, (undated) National Museum of Australia

¹¹ Radford, 2016, Dictionary of Sydney

lowering had been approved. Thus men for railway sections and mining corps were accepted up to 50 years, and men with spectacles were allowed to enter the ASC, AMC and ordnance corps. Men with minor and curable conditions suitable for operation could be taken into a military hospital for treatment. The conditions under which treatment was given was that if the operation was successful the man forthwith enlisted for general service, if not successful agreed to be discharged and had no further claim for compensation or pension. (So many men pleaded disability, as a results of such operations, and were subsequently discharged, that this method was abandoned)¹².

The AIF faced recruitment shortages and the Australian Government faced pressure from its Allies to send more soldiers to fight overseas. In January 1916, the British Parliament passed conscription legislation, followed in May 1916 by the New Zealand Government. However, conscription for overseas service was prohibited under Australian law.

The *Defence Act 1903*, provided for the raising and servicing of the new Australian army, was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the new Federal Government, following Federation in 1901. In 1911, Australia had introduced compulsory military training for boys and young men but the Defence Act prohibited members of the Australian Military Forces from serving beyond the limits of the Commonwealth or its territories “unless they voluntarily agree[d] to do so”¹³. Under the Act, the Australian Government could not compel Australians to serve overseas.

With the decline of new recruits, Prime Minister Hughes increasingly agitated to change the Act to allow conscription. The Hughes Government called for a plebiscite to be held on 28 October 1916 to seek support for conscription. This plebiscite is often referred to as the ‘conscription referendum’, though the process was a non-binding plebiscite, not a referendum. Changes to the Australian Constitution require the passing of a referendum by a majority of votes and majority of states. However, conscription needed legislative amendments, which required assent of both Houses of the Australian Parliament. Hughes did not have sufficient support in the Senate to pass legislation on conscription. Hughes therefore used the plebiscite as a mechanism to convince members of the Senate there was public support for conscription.

Rarely has any Australian Government provided its people a direct say in war-making powers and policies. The Government did not seek parliamentary approval nor asked the people directly whether Australia should enter World War I. Though plebiscites, unlike referendums, have no binding legal consequences, the conduct of the plebiscite was similar to a Referendum.

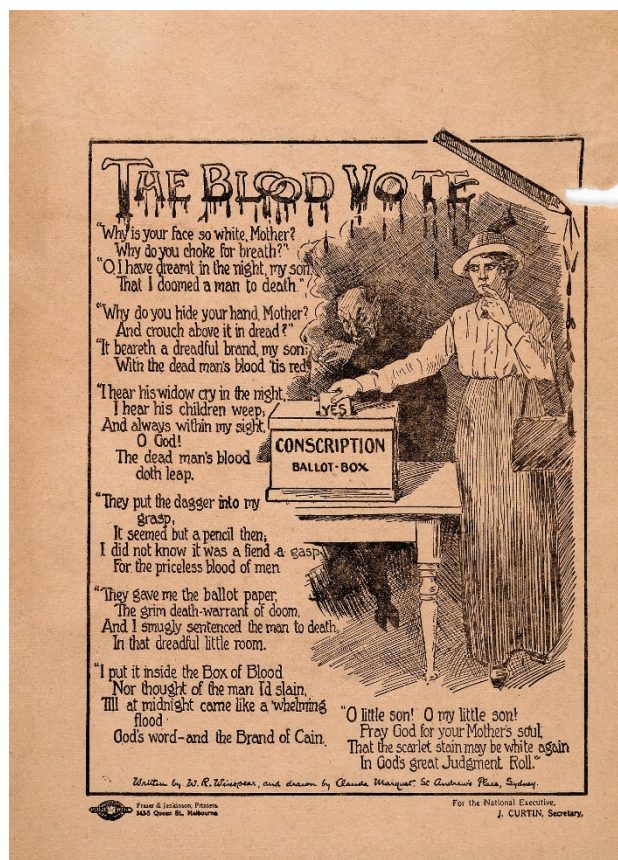


Figure 2 Handbill produced in 1916. National Library of Australia

The conscription debate divided the Australian people. Supporters saw compulsory service as a sign of support for and loyalty to Britain or to the many thousands of men already fighting or killed in the war. Opponents questioned the right of a Government to force men to fight and likely be injured or die resulting in large marches, strikes and propaganda campaigns to protest the proposal.

¹² Official History 1941

¹³ s.49, Defence Act (Comm.) 1903

The Yes case was opposed by a widely-based anti-conscription movement involving some, but not all, women's groups, pacifists, socialists, trade unionists, Labor Party members and some parliamentarians, and some religious groups and leaders. The conscription referendum provoked furious debate within the Australian community with much of the campaign, both for and against, directed at women. As one of the few nations that allowed women the right to vote, women were in a unique position to influence the outcome of the referendum.

The Conscription Debate in the Strathfield district

The Australian Government rallied local governments to take positions and support them on conscription with varied results. In 1916, the current Strathfield Council covered a smaller area. In the 1940s the Council expanded with the inclusion of the former Homebush Council and west ward of Enfield Council.

Homebush Council was one of Sydney's smallest Councils, measuring 1 square mile and in 1916 had a population of around 640 residents. Much of Homebush's population worked in trade occupations and in local industries including Arnotts Biscuits, Flemington Cattleyards and Homebush Abattoirs. Homebush Council refused to take a pro-conscription position and resolved that 'the Council is of the opinion that the voluntary system has not failed and does not see the necessity of conscription'¹⁴. An amendment moved by Alderman Knight, and seconded by Alderman Dalton 'That the time has arrived for 'Universal Service', which was lost'¹⁵.

The NSW Premier, William Holman, sent letters to local Mayors requesting that they call residents together to form a committee to work for the successful implementation of the Prime Minister's proposals for compulsory service but the Council refused and responded that 'it was in the opinion of the Council it was a matter of conscience and should be left to each person to decide'¹⁶

Enfield Council took a similar position to Homebush Council. The Council resolved on 27 September 1916 that conscription was a matter of conscience and should be left to individuals to decide. Enfield Council also decided not to call a public meeting to assist with the conscription campaign.

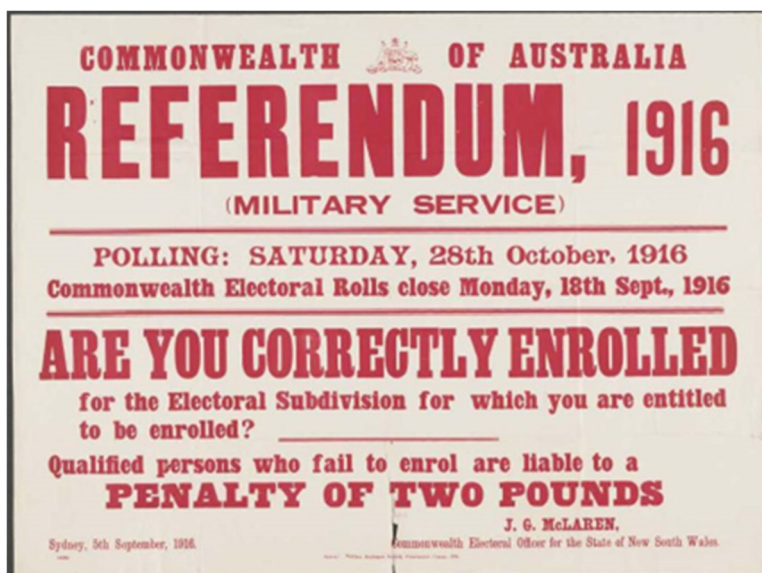


Figure 3 Notice of Referendum 1916 National Library of Australia

However, Strathfield Council was generally supportive of the Conscription proposal. Strathfield Council resolved on October 19 1916 to support the request from the Prime Minister urging the calling of a meeting to form a Committee to work for the success of the Federal Government's proposals for Compulsory Service¹⁷. The Council resolved that 'this Council is in favour of Compulsory Service during the time the War lasts, and will work for the success of the Federal Government's proposals and that copies of the foregoing resolutions be forwarded to the Prime Minister'¹⁸

¹⁴ Homebush Council minutes 15 September 1916

¹⁵ Homebush Council minutes 15 September 1916

¹⁶ Council minutes, 27 September 1916

¹⁷ Letter from Prime Minister dated 26th September 1916

¹⁸ Strathfield Council minutes, October 19 1916

However, not all Aldermen supported conscription. The Mayor, Alderman John Robert Firth, was a pacifist and had long opposed conscription¹⁹. Firth reportedly refused to vote to support conscription as he 'could not alter his convictions'²⁰. On January 16 1917, Firth resigned as Mayor of Strathfield citing his inability to 'take necessary public action in connection with the recruiting campaign and on account of his views generally on military training'.²¹

1916 Referendum

The proposal to introduce conscription provoked furious debate within the Australian and local community. Both pro and anti-conscription meetings were held in Strathfield, Homebush and Enfield. Meetings and rallies for and against conscription were held in Strathfield prior to the 1916 plebiscite. An anti-conscription meeting was held in Strathfield on 19 October 1916. However, meetings and rallies against conscription appear to be out-numbered by those supporting conscription.

A pro-conscription meeting was held on Wednesday 11 October 1916 at Homebush at Railway Station near A G Ball's Chemist Shop with Sgt Morehouse and W A Windeyer²², at Enfield (opposite Ireland's Hotel) with W E V Robson MLA²³ and Alexander Ralston. A large pro-conscription gathering was held at the Strathfield Melba Picture Show on October 1916 with the key speaker former Prime Minister Joseph Cook and Alexander G Ralston²⁴, barrister. Cook in his address argued for the need of conscription to recruit sufficient men to win the war. Alderman John Price of Strathfield Council told the gathering that the 'said question to be decided was whetherwe were going to place Australia on a pinnacle of fame, or whether we should be disgraced forever among the nations'.²⁵

The referendum question on 28 October 1916, asked the nation 'Are you in favour of the government having in this grave emergency, the same compulsory powers over citizens in regard to requiring their military service, for the term of this war, outside the Commonwealth, as it now has in regard to military service within the Commonwealth?'



Figure 4 Australian Labor Party flyer 1916



Figure 5 Australian Nationalists flyer 1916

In 1916, the areas of Strathfield and Homebush were located in the Homebush sub-division of the Electorate of Nepean. Polling booths were located at Flemington Public School, Homebush Public School, South Strathfield Public School and

¹⁹ Labor Daily 1938: 6

²⁰ Daily Telegraph 1916: 9

²¹ Strathfield Council 1917

²² William Archibald Windeyer (1871-1943) was a solicitor, served on Hunters Hill Council with extensive involvement in charities and community organisations.

²³ William Elliot Veitch Robson (1869-1951) was a solicitor, Alderman on Ashfield Council, Member of NSW Legislative Assembly and NSW Legislative Council.

²⁴ Alexander Ralston KC (1860-1932) was barrister, judge and served on Ashfield, Burwood and City of Sydney Councils. He resided in Strathfield.

²⁵ Daily Telegraph 1916: 8

a temporary structure in Redmyre Road near The Boulevard²⁶. While the Yes vote in the Nepean Electorate lost by a majority of 4272, the Homebush sub-division which included Strathfield defied the trend across the electorate and voted Yes (63%) for the referendum. The Yes vote in the Homebush subdivision was the highest in the Nepean electorate²⁷.

Electoral subdivision	Number of Yes votes	Number of No votes
Auburn	1984	2894
Bankstown	764	1496
Concord	889	1370
Homebush (incl Strathfield)	1808	1038
Lidcombe	1159	1688

Enfield and Burwood were sub-divisions of the Electorate of Parkes in the 1916 Referendum. Polling booths were located at Enfield Council Chambers, Croydon Public School, Burwood Public School and Milham's Hall, Water St, West Enfield²⁸.

The results of the 1916 plebiscite were very close. 51.6% of the population voted against conscription and 48.4% for it. New South Wales returned majorities against and without a majority of states, the referendum was defeated.²⁹

In the ensuing political fall-out, the Labor Party split and Hughes formed a new political party called the Nationalist Party from the pro-conscriptionist Labor members. The Labor Party was severely divided on the issue and split within weeks of the ballot. After leaving the party, Prime Minister Hughes and other pro-conscription supporters created the 'National Labor Party', which was in competition with the Labor Party.

1917 Referendum

Enlistment numbers continued to fall, and in 1917 Hughes called for a second referendum for 20 December 1917. The second referendum also failed to pass.

The debates concerning the second referendum were 'vindictive and vicious' following the aftermath of the great strikes in August and September 1917 and Third Battle of Ypres³⁰. Hughes increased restrictions on reporting of anti-conscriptionist meetings, but ordered censors not to interfere with pro-conscriptionist reporting in the Sydney Morning Herald³¹. The 'Yes' campaign was strongly supported by Hughes and his political supporters, most Church and business leaders, and most newspapers³². Many in the 'Yes' camp hysterically portrayed anti-conscriptionists as the 'enemy within'³³.

The 'No' camp centred on the labour movement, many arguing that conscripting more men from Australia would have negligible impact on the fighting abroad and the final result³⁴. While the union movement were short of funds after the recent strikes, the 'no' campaign was well organised based on its experience from the 1916 campaign.³⁵

²⁶ Sun 1916: 5

²⁷ Cumberland Argus 1916

²⁸ Sun 1916: 5

²⁹ Spearitt 1999: 19

³⁰ Connor et al 2015: 124

³¹ Connor et al 2015: 124

³² Connor et al 2015: 124

³³ Connor et al 2015: 124

³⁴ Connor et al 2015: 124

³⁵ Connor et al 2015: 124

The most prominent opponent of conscription was the Irish born Daniel Mannix, Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne. One of Mannix's chief concerns was the potential conscription of men studying to be priests or teaching brothers, which had occurred in New Zealand³⁶. Mannix framed his anti-conscription speeches in terms of class conflict deriding the wealthy classes, in a speech on December 7 1917, for being willing 'send the last man' but having 'no notion of giving the last shilling, not even the first' and stated that the cost of the war 'will be borne by the toiling masses of Australia'. Judge Edmunds³⁷, a resident of Strathfield and prominent Catholic who was actively involved in local war recruitment activities wrote a series of letters to editors in 1917 attacking Mannix's position³⁸.

In 1917, both the State and Federal Governments directly appealed to local Councils to assist with the recruitment of more soldiers. Meetings supporting and opposing conscription were held in suburbs throughout the metro and country areas.

In the local district meetings were held in the lead up to the referendum. The pro-conscription meetings in the Strathfield and Burwood areas boasted high profile speakers including the Prime Minister Billy Hughes. On Wednesday 19 December 1917, the Prime Minister Hughes addressed a large Grand Reinforcement Rally in Martin Place at 1pm, supported by speakers including Joseph Cook, Minister for the Navy and Chris Watson, former Labor Prime Minister. At 7.50pm, Hughes addressed a meeting at Ireland's Corner, Liverpool Rd, Burwood with A G Ralston and J Flockhart and at 8.10pm at Homebush with Benjamin Gelling (former Mayor Strathfield), opposite the railway station³⁹.

The No conscription campaign advertised meetings through NSW on 19 December 1917 to be held at 7pm in various venues including Ashfield Town Hall, Enfield (Ireland's Corner on Liverpool Road), Burwood School of the Arts, Flemington and Concord on Parramatta Road⁴⁰.

At the second referendum held on 20 December 1917, Australians were asked '*Are you in favour of the proposal of the Commonwealth Government for reinforcing the Australian Imperial Forces overseas?*'

The referendum was lost by a larger, but still narrow, margin. NSW recorded the highest single block of No votes at the second referendum in December 2017⁴¹. The vote recorded 1,181,747 votes against compared to 1,015,159 votes in favour.

Strathfield and Homebush were sub-divisions of the Electorate of Nepean in the 1917 Referendum. Polling booths were located at Flemington Public School, Homebush Public School, South Strathfield Public School and Strathfield Council Chambers⁴²

While the Yes vote in the Nepean Electorate lost by a majority of 4272, both Strathfield and Homebush defied the trend across the electorate and voted Yes for the referendum. The Strathfield Yes vote was 1086 and No vote 420, a margin of over 2:1, the highest in the Nepean electorate.⁴³ The Homebush sub-division covered a large portion of the Strathfield Council area also voted Yes but at the smaller margin of 776 to 612.

Subdivision	Number of Yes votes	Number of No votes
Auburn	1705	2620
Bankstown	770	1526

³⁶ Connor et al 2015: 124

³⁷ Judge Walter Edmunds (1856-1932), barrister and judge, lived in Florence St, Strathfield.

³⁸ Judge Edmunds (1917: 8) The Daily Telegraph

³⁹ Daily Telegraph (1917:5)

⁴⁰ Daily Telegraph (1917 12 February)

⁴¹ Spearitt 1999: 19

⁴² Daily Telegraph 1917: 7

⁴³ Cumberland Argus 1917

Concord	973	1357
Homebush	776	612
Lidcombe	1226	1607
Strathfield	1086	420

Burwood and Enfield were sub-divisions of the Electorate of Parkes in the 1917 Referendum. Polling booths were located at Enfield Council Chambers, Croydon Public School, Burwood Public School and Milham's Hall Water St West Enfield⁴⁴. The Yes vote in the Parkes Electorate won by a majority of 2493, though the Yes vote was lost overall in the State of NSW.⁴⁵

Surprisingly, the success of the anti-conscription movement did not translate into the defeat of the Nationalist government. Hughes' Nationalists were returned at the federal election in 1917, following defeat in the first plebiscite, and returned again at the next election in 1919⁴⁶. It wasn't until 1929 that a Labor government was elected to power, led by Prime Minister James Scullin, who had been a prominent opponent of conscription in 1916-1917.⁴⁷

On 11 November 1918 peace was finally declared. During the four years of the war, more than 420,000 Australians volunteered for the AIF, the Navy and the Nursing Corps, and 60,000 of that number died serving their country.

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⁴⁴ SMH 1917: 2

⁴⁵ Australian Worker 1917: 15

⁴⁶ York 2017

⁴⁷ York 2017

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