



Alice Yan | Year 11

Speech from 2023 ANZAC Day Commemorative Ceremony

When we think of ANZAC Day, what comes to mind first is Gallipoli and from that, the subsequent conflict we have experienced and seen across the globe. We focus our commemorations on the legacies, the lives of service people and the sacrifices they made to defend their countries and way of life on the front line. Past ANZAC Scholars have chosen to look at individual legacies of Brisbane State High School students who served nobly and made tremendous sacrifices in the ANZAC spirit. Whilst this is incredibly important and something we will continue to do, the perspective of the ANZAC legend should also include the contributions of non-combatant service during wartime, particularly the contribution of women and war effort groups. As of 1899, women were incorporated into the armed forces, but limited to administrative, behind the scenes, non-combat jobs and medical roles. Today, I want to share and honour the legacy of the Brisbane State High female students who were a part of the War and Social Services groups that were in operation here at our school during World War II.



In the words of Harvard professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich “well behaved women seldom make history”. I think that whilst it can be interpreted as a call to rebel, it is ultimately a comment on how the quiet and supposedly “unremarkable and commonplace” contributions of women have not been highlighted in the history books, despite their efforts being the backbone and support for the war effort. Whilst Australian women may not necessarily have directly sacrificed their lives to support their country, they were nonetheless zealous in their efforts to support those overseas and at home. War had torn their families apart. Many women were running their households on a reduced income and dedicated any spare time to continue the work that needed to be done to keep their communities running. As well as continuing with their education, the girls at BSHS were also expected to contribute to war efforts. Their work was largely volunteer based and due to Australia being ill prepared for war, their unpaid labor was vital.

At State High, there were many war work and social services groups, who did a range of things to support external organisations. Namely, the South Brisbane Branch of the Australian Comforts Fund, the Hospital Supplies Section of the University Women War Work Committee, the Valley Baby Clinic, the Patriotic Funds, the Brisbane City Mission and the Red Cross.



The War Work Group focused on making clothing items, such as mittens and balaclava caps for the Australian Comforts Fund that were then distributed within the armed forces. The ACF was an umbrella body for the various war effort groups that focused on providing military personnel with necessities such as clothes and toiletries. Due to war time rationing, materials for these items were often obtained from the Comforts Fund and once the articles were completed, they would be sent back. The Comforts fund collected these items not just from State High, but other schools and organisations, before dispatching them with troops leaving for overseas.

The Hospital Dressings group focused on making hospital dressings – bandages used for gunshot wounds, with 582 made by 1942. The girls also made and dispatched other items, such as anaesthetic masks, nurses' caps and swabs. These would go to the Hospital Supplies section of the University Women War Work Committee. They would then distribute these dressings to both local hospitals, the Red Cross and the Australian Army Nursing service.

State High students also raised funds for purchasing materials needed to make items that would contribute to the war effort, as well as monetary donations to various organisations. This came about through weekly contributions and lunch hour entertainments where they held concerts and charged an admission fee as told in the book "The First 50 Years of Brisbane State High School", written by Beryl Roberts, for our centenary year. On top of raising money to purchase materials needed by the war work groups, fundraising money was also donated to the Patriotic Funds. These funds were used to support those in active service and their families who may have required additional support. Students also collected books and magazines which were then distributed to the fighting forces.

On Friday 25 July 1941, the Courier Mail wrote an article highlighting the gratitude the troops expressed to the ACF. Lieutenant-Colonel R. S. Goward said after his visit to the Queensland Division headquarters "Through the Australian Comforts Fund, our army is the best looked after in this war and that is due to your efforts. I assure you that the men do appreciate what you have been doing for them. Wherever I went to the Middle East to say goodbye, I was asked on all sides to thank the people in Australia for what they were doing."

The voluntary work of State High students was of utmost importance, assisting those at war in faraway places. In support of the troops, those at home made small sacrifices to try and provide the troops with what they needed to continue to wage war and let them know that they were not alone, and their sacrifice was appreciated. The hard work the State High girls did as part of these groups was done in the background, on top of their own domestic chores and personal contributions for family members who had enlisted. If materials could not be sourced from the Comforts Fund or through fundraising means, they often provided these themselves, with the support of their families.

Today I acknowledge and pay my respects to those that served on the frontline, sacrificing their lives for their home, their family, and their country. I acknowledge all the nameless women who worked tirelessly to support the soldiers and ensure their communities continued to function throughout times of war. The girls of BSHS may not have their names in history books, but their efforts, from the grounds of this school, on the unceded land of the Turrbal and Yuggera people, were of immense importance. Lest we forget.