

Sister Evelyn (Eva) Veronica King



Sister Evelyn Veronica King.

Image from Heritage Darlington Point Collection, catalogue number: X/11

Evelyn 'Eva' Veronica King was born 31 December 1905, at Tubbo Station located 12KMs east of Darlington Point on the Sturt Hwy in NSW. Eva was the eldest daughter of Richard and Mary Anne King and was one of six children. Eva had two older brothers, Richard (known as Laurie), John (known as Robert/Bob) and three younger siblings, Bessie (known as Bid/Beatrice), Edward (known as Ted) and Leslie (known as Mick). The Kings resided at Tubbo Station (a large sheep station) where Eva's father worked as a blacksmith from 1900 to 1913 when they moved into Darlington Point where Richard opened a blacksmith shop^[1].

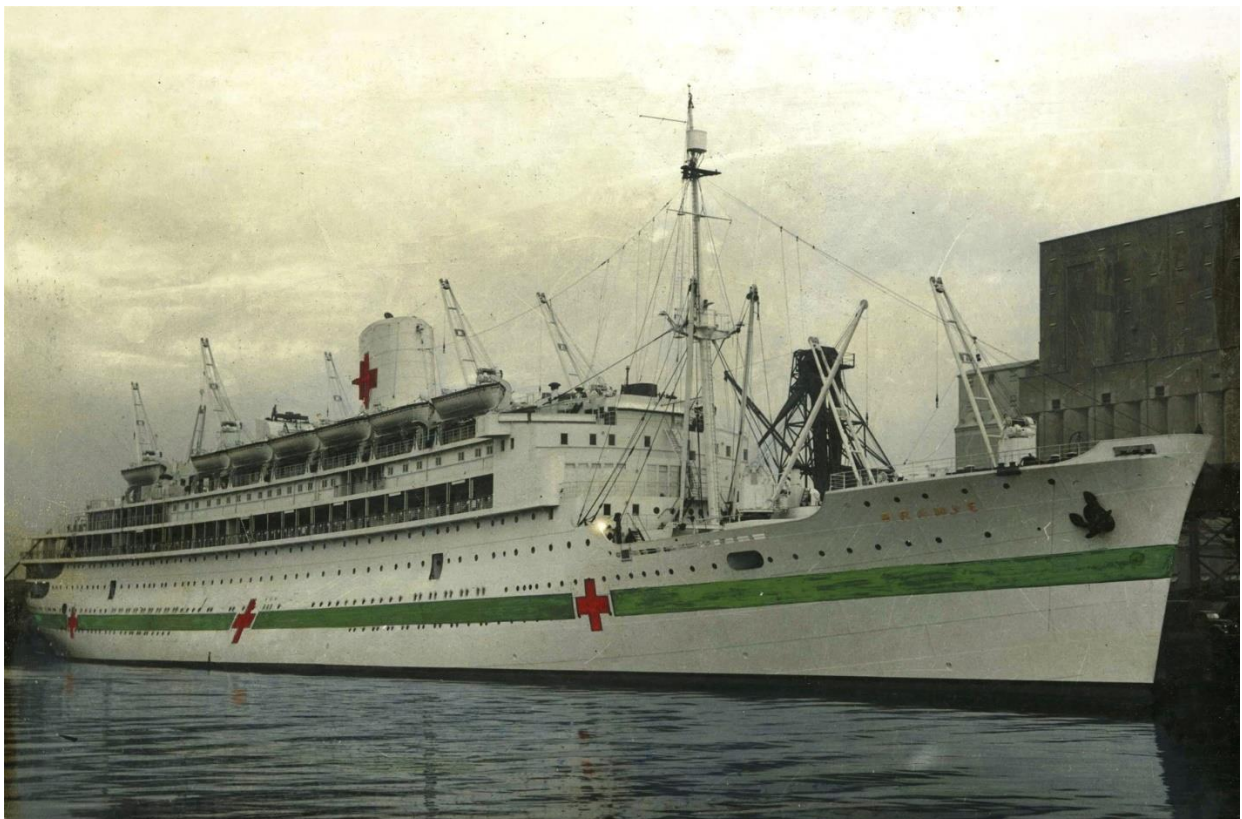
Described as "a true native of Darlington Point", she attended the local Darlington Point Public School and was a popular young lady where many were proud to say they were schoolmates with her^{[1][9][10]}. "Unassuming, quiet and inclined to be reserved, she was beloved by all who had the privilege of her friendship"^{[1][10]}. Such was her popularity that a social evening was arranged in her honour in early December 1941 in the Darlington Point Shire Hall prior to her service overseas. The event was well attended by a large number of friends and well wishers where the "many handshakes and expressions of good wishes were highly indicative of Sister Kings popularity"^[18]. The speakers at the event all expressed their pride and spoke highly of Eva and the importance of the role that the nurses play. One speaker noted "without nurses, soldiers would find their lot extremely hard, and she thought Darlington Point should feel some pride in knowing that one from their midst was going overseas"^[18]. The president of the Red Cross also presented her with a wrist watch on behalf of the Darlington Point Patriotic and War Committee^[18].

Eva began her nursing training at the Cootamundra District Hospital aged 22 on 1 September 1928 and after passing all her examinations she completed her training and obtained her general nursing certificate on 31 August 1933^[4]. Training in smaller country hospitals could take four to five years, because these hospitals had a smaller range of cases to gain experience by^[1]. After training, Eva stayed on at Cootamundra as a staff nurse for nine months and as a sister for fourteen months which saw her spend a total of seven years at the Cootamundra District Hospital^[4].

On 31 August 1935 Eva left Cootamundra to do her obstetrics (midwifery) course at the Paddington Women's Hospital in Sydney where she obtained her certificate^[4]. Eva was then employed at Tumut Hospital for two years until the outbreak of war and from where she enlisted^{[4][10]}.

Eva was the first woman from the Darlington Point region to be accepted in the military services for this conflict, volunteering on 24 June 1941 as a Staff Nurse (Lieutenant)^[1]. One her brothers, Leslie, later joined the RAAF^[1]. Eva was posted for duty for seven months with the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) at 113th Australian General Hospital at Yaralla/Concord West^[2].

Eva joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 18 November 1941 and on 27 January 1942 she embarked from Sydney for the Middle East on the 1st Netherlands Military Hospital Ship AIF *Oranje*^[1]. In early 1941, the Dutch government-in-exile offered the ship to the Australian and New Zealand governments as a hospital ship, an offer that was quickly accepted^[23]. While serving on *Oranje*, Eva made three trips to the Middle East including South Africa, India and also New Zealand to retrieve invalided Australian soldiers. Eva served a total of thirteen months on the hospital ship *Oranje*^{[1][4]}.



Hospital Ship Oranje.
Image from www.nzans.org

In June 1942, Eva returned home to Darlington Point on leave from *Oranje*. She told the *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser** that it was a wonderful ship, fitted with all modern hospital equipment and conveniences^{[1][19]}.

On 24 June 1942 when she had returned to duty, Eva was promoted from Staff Nurse to Sister (Captain), but within twelve weeks she was a patient herself, admitted to hospital with influenza and was discharged four days later^{[1][2]}.

On 17 March 1943 Eva embarked on the 2/3 Australian Hospital Ship (AHS) *Centaur* from Sydney on a trial run to New Guinea with medical and nursing staff, many of whom had served on *Oranje*. At that time, Australia operated three hospital ships, of which *Centaur* was the second to be commissioned. The *Centaur* was launched in 1924 and catered to passengers, livestock and freight. In early 1934 *Centaur* was converted into a hospital ship to accommodate 252 patients as well as medical and nursing staff to serve medical transport between Australia and New Guinea^{[1][6][28]}.

The *Centaur* was a much smaller, slower and lighter ship but it was able to access places the *Oranje* was not^[6]. In its new role the *Centaur* was painted white slashed by a green band 5ft wide, the traditional colours of a non-combatant. Large red crosses were painted on both sides of her hull and funnel along with 47 painted on the bow^{[28][29]}. This was the *Centaur's* registration number with the international Red Cross and indicated that, through diplomatic channels, the enemy had been notified of her status as a hospital ship. Brilliant lights were strung around to illuminate the green band and red crosses. At night with all spotlights ablaze the *Centaur* shone like a showboat^[13].



2/3 Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*.

Image from National Archives of Australia: NAA: B6416, 280

* The spelling of the town name has always been topical but appears to have become officially Narrandera in early 1949. The newspaper was spelt 'Narandera' until the end of 1953^{[20][21]}. In 1954 it was renamed to the 'Narrandera Argus' although the main reason for the delay for the paper rename was the cost associated with re-registration of the paper^[22].

After only seven weeks service on *Centaur*, Eva was reported missing as a result of enemy action^[1].

Centaur had completed only two prior voyages with one being a retrieval of injured soldiers from New Guinea before its ill-fated third and final voyage^{[6][34]}.

In the early afternoon of 12 May 1943 *Centaur* sailed unescorted from Sydney for Cairns carrying 332 personnel, as well as stores and equipment of the 2/12th Field Ambulance. It was on its second voyage to New Guinea to pick up the wounded, including some injured Japanese prisoners-of-war. There were no medical patients yet on board^{[25][28][34]}.

Shortly after 4am on 14 May 1943, while most people were asleep, the *Centaur* was sunk by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine, when it was about 50 miles east north-east of Brisbane. The torpedo struck *Centaur's* port side, hitting the oil fuel tank which ignited in a massive explosion^[24]. According to survivor Alex Cochrane, engineer steward, the torpedo hit just below the Sisters' quarters^[7]. The bridge superstructure collapsed and the funnel crashed onto the deck. Everything was covered with burning oil and a fire quickly began to roar across the ship, while water rushed in through the gaping hole in her side^[24].

Many of those onboard not killed in the explosion or fire were trapped as the ship started to go down bow first and then broke in two. In just three minutes *Centaur* was gone^{[13][24]}.

The *Centaur* had 1,000 tons of ballast in her bottom to steady her which contributed to the ship sinking within minutes^[7]. So quickly had the *Centaur* sunk that no SOS message was sent^[29]. At the time of the attack the ship was flying both the Australian flag and Red Cross flag in statement of her being a hospital ship^[6].

Of the 332 crew aboard the *Centaur* only 64 survived with the survivors spending 35 hours on rafts before being rescued^[25].

The initial public reaction to the attack on *Centaur* was one of outrage, significantly different from that displayed following the loss of Australian warships or merchant vessels. As a hospital ship, the attack was a breach of the tenth Hague Convention of 1907, and as such was a war crime. The sinking of *Centaur* drew strong reactions from both Prime Minister John Curtin and General Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief of allied forces in the Pacific. Curtin stated that the sinking was "an entirely inexcusable act, undertaken in violation of the convention to which Japan is a party and of all the principles of common humanity" and described it as "deliberate, wanton and barbarous". MacArthur reflected the common Australian view when he stated that the sinking was an example of the Japanese "limitless savagery"^{[26][32]}.

Politicians urged the public to use their rage to fuel the war effort, and *Centaur* became a symbol of Australia's determination to defeat what appeared to be a brutal and uncompromising enemy. The Australian Government produced posters depicting the sinking, which called for Australians to "Avenge the Nurses" by working to produce materiel, purchasing war bonds or enlisting in the armed forces^[34].



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ARTV09088

*A propaganda poster calling for Australians to avenge the sinking of Centaur.
Image from the Australian War Memorial.*

The Australian Government at the time delivered an official protest to Japan over the incident. The Japanese did not acknowledge responsibility for the incident for many years and the War Crimes Tribunal could not identify the responsible submarine. However, the Japanese official war history published in 1979 noted that the *Centaur* had been hit by a torpedo fired from a submarine 1-177, under the command of Lt Commander Nakagawa. Lt Commander Nakagawa was convicted as a war criminal for firing on survivors of the British Chivalry which his ship had sunk in the Indian Ocean^{[25][29]}.

The news of Eva's death shocked the small communities of Darlington Point, Cootamundra and Tumut^[1]. Numerous articles following the tragic events described Sister King as "devoted to her work and kind and comforting to her patients and to the nursing staff, and at all times lived up to the highest traditions of a very honourable profession"^[4]. Nurse Joan Fisher who served with Eva on the *Oranje* recalled Sister King "as a highly respected, efficient and professional woman. She was greatly loved and admired by her comrades"^[6].

At the time of Eva's embarkment on *Centaur* her brother Ted and sister-in-law Iris were pregnant and Eva was told that if the baby was a girl, she would be named after her. In July 1943, a baby girl was born and named Veronica, after her much loved and lost Aunty Eva^[6].

Sister Ellen Savage, the only AANS nurse to survive the sinking was best friends with Eva King and the two served together on the *Oranje*^[1]. When interviewed in hospital, Sister Savage reported that she was in her cabin with her cabin mate Sister Myrle Moston when they were awakened by the explosion^{[1][29]}. With her cabin mate they rushed to the porthole and looked out and saw the ship ablaze. They raced for their lifebelts when Sister King ran in from the cabin next door and called out, "Up on deck, Savage"^[11].

Eva and Ellen had talked over and planned what they would do if the ship should ever be torpedoed. Eva could not swim and Ellen was a strong swimmer so they planned to stay together, and Ellen would "crocodile - that is, take her across my shoulders - if we ever finished in the water"^[4].

The Sisters headed out toward the main companionway to get to the deck as per the lifeboat instruction drills issued to the ambulance and nursing personnel. But by chance Eva grabbed her and they headed for another stair case as the main companionway was blocked^{[12][16]}. In the confusion on deck the two became separated but she and her cabin mate met a medical officer on deck^[16]. Ellen grabbed her cabin mate Myrle and they jumped overboard together but her mate was struck by a piece of falling timber and apparently killed^{[11][16]}.

Ellen could see the bridge ablaze and that the ship was sinking^[14]. When the ship sunk the suction dragged her down into a whirlpool of moving metal and wood. Thinking she would lose consciousness as she was hit by the debris and becoming entangled in rope she was propelled to the surface in the middle of an oil slick^{[15][29]}.

Her cabin mate Sister Moston, the medical officer and her best friend Sister King had disappeared when they jumped into the sea and she did not see them again^{[16][29]}.

Suffering from broken ribs, nose and palate, lacerations and a perforated ear drum she managed to clamber on the roof of a floating charthouse with another injured man. For 2 hours they worked their way towards two large rafts where there were other survivors. Sister Savage nursed other injured survivors on the raft, oversaw rationing of the little food and water they had and also led them in prayer during their ordeal^{[8][11][15]}.

In 1944, she became the second Australian woman to be awarded the George Medal for her courage and inspiring behaviour arising from the sinking of the *Centaur*^{[29][30]}.

The citation for her award read; *'Although suffering from severe injuries received as a result of the explosion and immersion in the sea, she displayed great heroism during the period while she and some male members of the ship's staff were floating on a raft, to which they clung for about 34 hours before being rescued by a US destroyer. She gave conspicuous service while on the raft in attending to wounds and burns suffered by other survivors. Her courage and fortitude did much to maintain the morale of her companions'*^[17].

In honour of Sister Evelyn King the board of the Cootamundra District Hospital unveiled a plaque at the entry of the Cootamundra District Hospital on 19 December 1944 and commenced a 'Eva King Memorial' which will take the form of a book presented each year for general proficiency and good behaviour among trainees at the Hospital^[4]. The inaugural winner was nurse Lorna (Laura) Finley who was also a native of Darlington Point^{[1][5]}.

The Australasian Trained Nurses Association's Queensland Branch (ATNA QLD) wanted to establish a permanent tribute to Queensland's military and civilian nurses who served in two World Wars. They saw a physical centre for the nursing profession as the ideal memorial. In January 1948, ATNA QLD launched a state-wide War Memorial Appeal to realise their plan^[33]. A Mr. H. Kruger of Bribie Island

held himself personally responsible for raising £100 on the island as gratitude to Sister King who saved his life when he was a patient at the Wattlebrae Hospital in 1942^[3].



Support the Nurses: War Memorial appeal poster, 1948.

Image from Centaur Memorial Fund Posters, March 1948, OMEG/111, Centaur House Records, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

Sister Evelyn (Eva) Veronica King. Service No. NFX76573

Eva's campaign medals were issued to her mother in December 1951 where she was awarded the 1939-45 Star, Australian Service Medal 1939-45 and War Medal^{[1][2]}.



*Evelyn's campaign medals.
Image by Trent King.*

The wreck of AHS *Centaur* was found on 20 December 2009, 30 nautical miles (56 km; 35 mi) east of Moreton Island resting 2,059 metres below sea level in a steep-walled gully, 150 metres wide and 90 metres deep^{[27][31]}.



*The bell of the AHS Centaur came to rest name side up.
Image from Queensland War Memorial Register, 2/3 AHS Centaur (Final Resting Place) Memorial.*

On Tuesday 12 January 2010 a memorial plaque was placed on the *Centaur's* fore deck just starboard of the forward No. 1 hatch opening. The plaque has an encapsulated CD with the names of all personnel on board the ship, their home state or country, and the service which they belonged to. No ranks for individuals are shown as they considered all were equal in their duty to their country and in the sacrifice of their lives for their country^{[27][31]}.



The plaque attached to the wreck of the AHS Centaur.

Image from Queensland War Memorial Register, 2/3 AHS Centaur (Final Resting Place) Memorial.

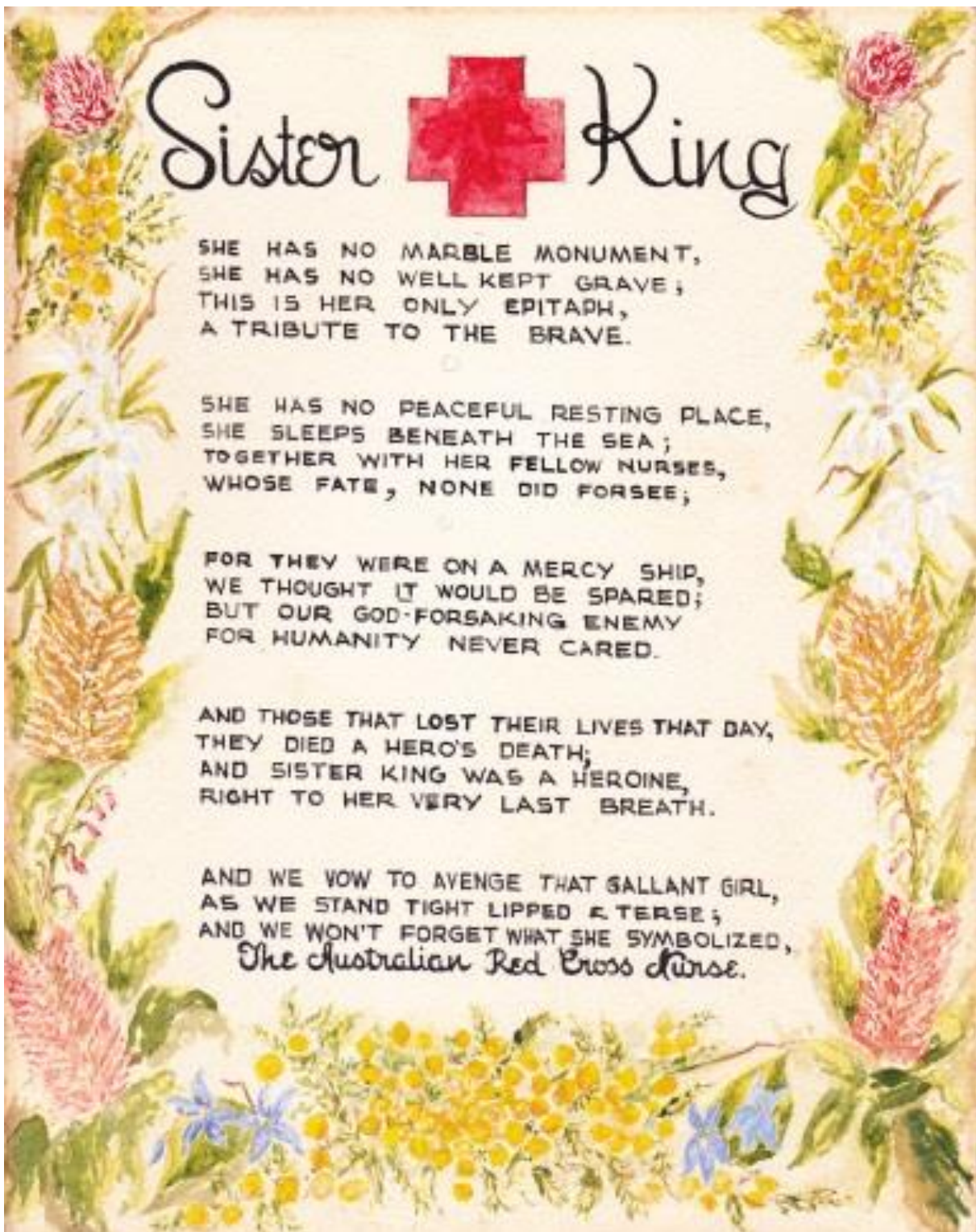


The Red Cross insignia of AHS Centaur.

Image from Queensland War Memorial Register, 2/3 AHS Centaur (Final Resting Place) Memorial.

The wreck of the *Centaur* is listed as a war grave and is protected under the Commonwealth's *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*. On 15 January 2010, the Australian Government announced that an exclusion zone of 200 hectares had been established around the wreck^{[27][31]}.

At the time of Eva's military service Cecil Stanley Fuller was a columnist at the *Narandera Argus*. Fuller served in the 5th Machine Gun Battalion during the First World War and some time after the news of her passing he penned the following poem in her memory.



The poem written by Cecil Stanley Fuller in memory of Sister King. The year that it was written and the artist who illustrated it is unknown.

Image from Heritage Darlington Point Collection.

Memorials listing Evelyn

Brass memorial plaque: Cootamundra Hospital, unveiled on 19 December 1944.

The plaque was in the entry of the old district hospital in Cootamundra. It was removed when the new hospital was built and now resides in the War Room at the Cootamundra Heritage Centre, 76 Olympic Way, Cootamundra.



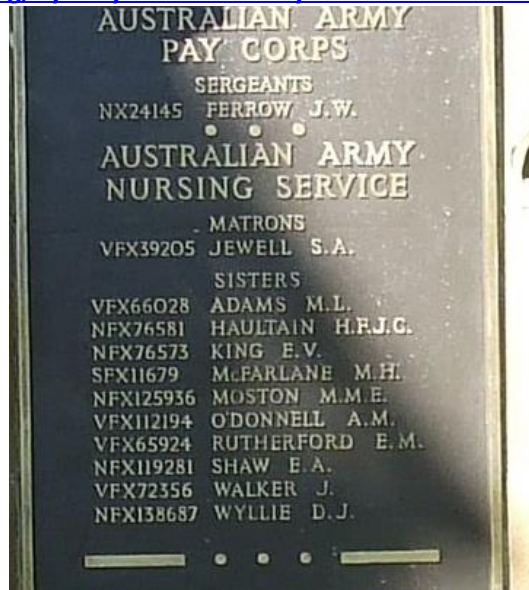
Darlington Point, NSW - Memorial Centre and Gates



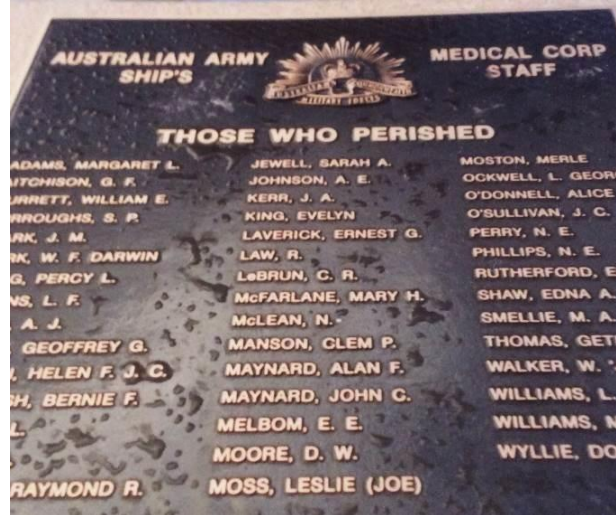
Darlington Point, NSW - War Memorial



[Sydney, NSW - Memorial to the Missing, Sydney War Cemetery at Rookwood Necropolis](#)



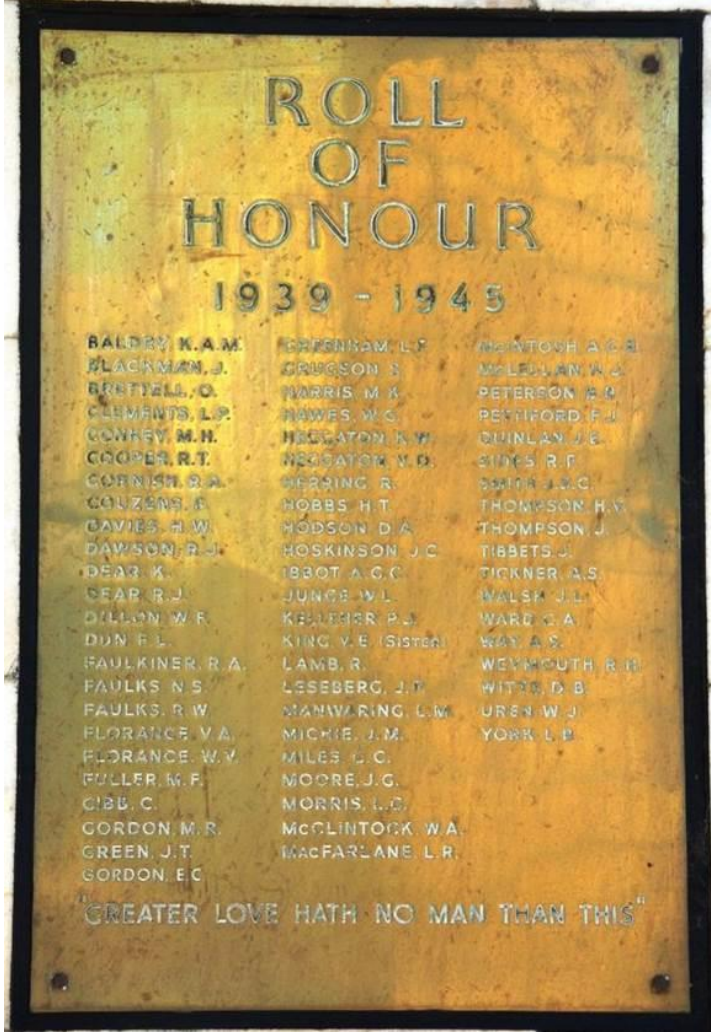
[Coolangatta \(Tweed Heads\), QLD - Centaur Memorial](#)



[Augusta, WA - Army Nursing Sisters Monument](#)



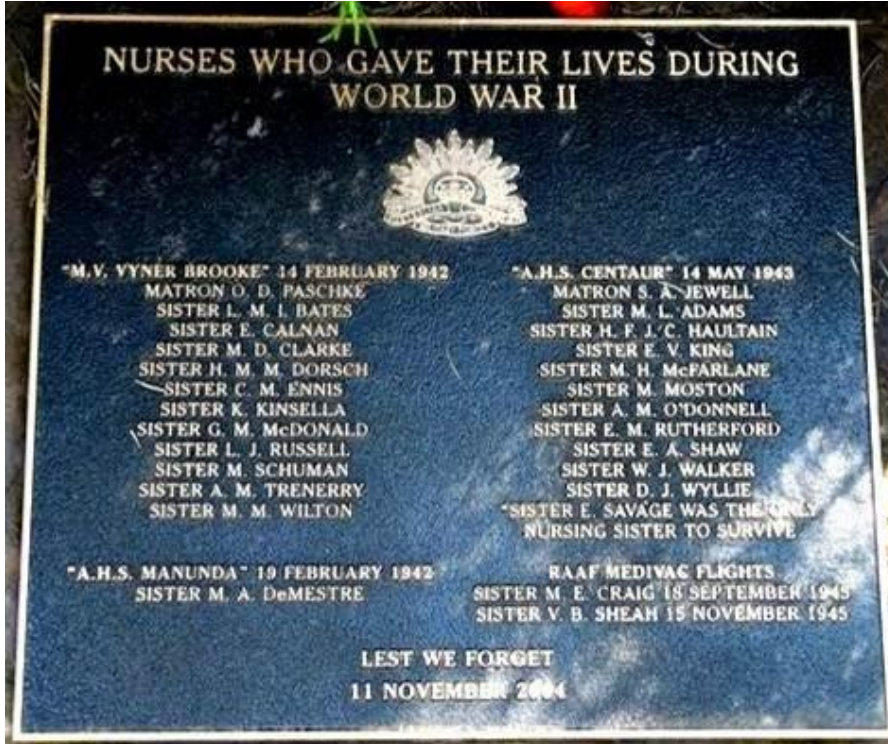
Cootamundra, NSW - Cootamundra RSL Honour Roll



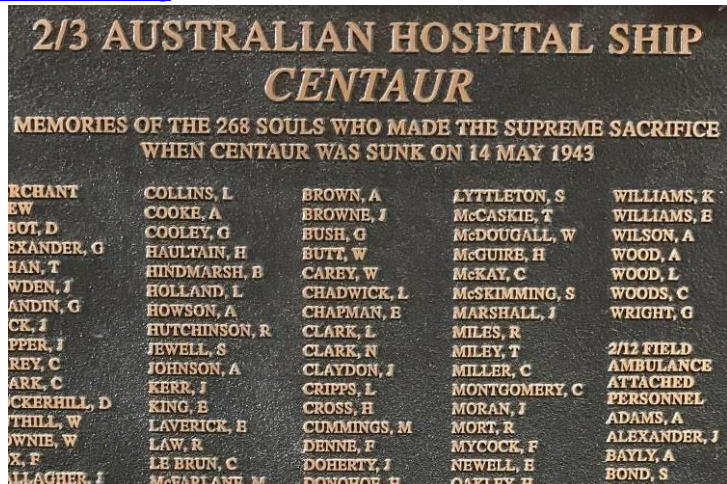
Cootamundra, NSW - War Memorial



[Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital, VIC - Remembrance Garden, World War Two Nurses](#)



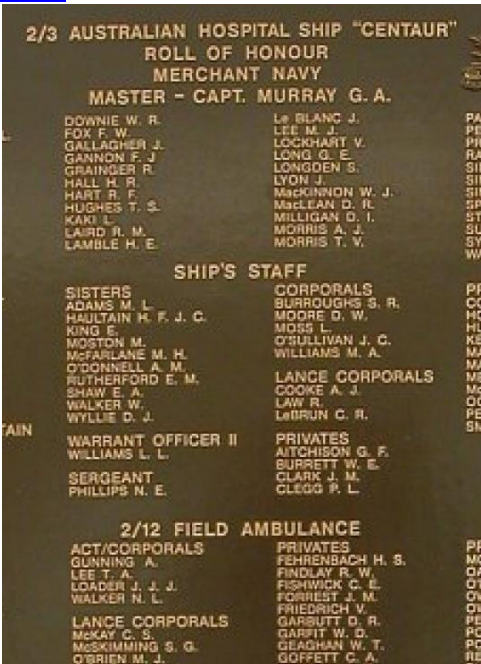
[Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital, VIC - Centaur Wing](#)



Hervey Bay RSL & Services Memorial Club, QLD - Australian Military Nurses Memorial



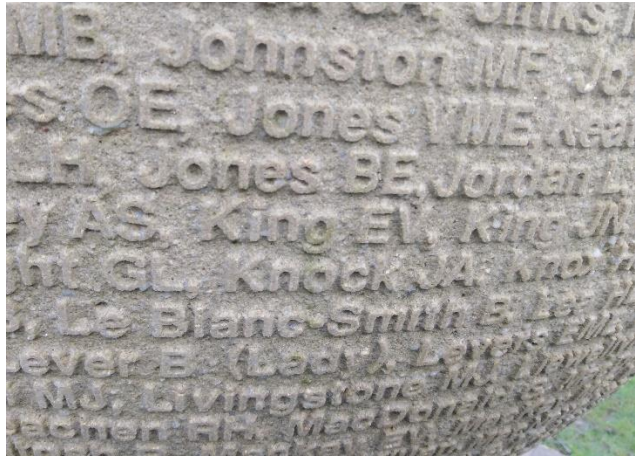
Concord Repatriation General Hospital, NSW - Centaur Memorial



[Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT - Army Nurses](#)



[National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire UK - Wartime Nurses Memorial](#)



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