Australian Women in War

# Summary

In this podcast, I’m going to discuss how Elsie Holmes and her Busy Bees contributed to the welfare of the society during times of detachment, fear of loss, emotional strain and depression. These women are undoubtedly an inspiration for me and by the time we finish with the podcast, the listener will feel the same way. The themes to be covered are Australian women in the war. I am targeting teenagers or students who have an interest in learning about people’s experiences during World War 1. This topic also reflects how women who were to stay back, took control and helped the society.

# Script

*Chorus lines from a song by Split Enz “History never repeats, I tell myself before I go to sleep”-Unfortunately, or fortunately, it does as life comes a full circle.*

Welcome, I am Aneesh Chattaraj introducing you to Melbourne’s Busy Bees feats during the First World War. They were a group of female workers for Swallow and Ariell Biscuit Factory which supported them in totality. They were one of the sets of women organised under the Red Cross to bring aid to our soldiers who were sick and wounded by sending them comforts. They were led by the winning Elsie Holmes who seemed like a charismatic soul.

**\* Low tone piano effect\***

**\***[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVTP0DOL\_2Q&list=PLosbxwcz3aFinM8MT5Ixv5htvlskNvet\_&index=8**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVTP0DOL_2Q&list=PLosbxwcz3aFinM8MT5Ixv5htvlskNvet_&index=8)**\***

Life at home was stressful and the future unpredictable, the atmosphere prevailing was drab and monotonous. These womenfolk endeavoured to make life more meaningful for themselves and the masses by serving in the best way they knew how- charity and labour. Whilst bringing out more meaning in life, they entertained themselves and the masses during mournful times, creating funds to send comforting commodities to those physically involved in the war.

**\*low tone festive music\***

South Melbourne was bustling with cultural fervour thanks to these small band of women who dedicated precious leisure hours to make it easier for the people to cope during those difficult times by creating comforts. Frequently, they organised many social events such as novelty nights, costume parties and masquerade balls. Many of the parties were theme based which brought light heartednesses to the situation that all were connected to. Much hard work and money were put into organising such occasions. The printing and circulation of invitation cards which mentioned the venue and agenda, booking a venue for the party, decoration of the ballrooms, meal and drinks preparation were all done by these girls. All this was done in a systematical way to ensure the smooth running of the show. All these entertaining events often hosted more than thousands of guests, just imagine the amount of cutlery, cooking, cleaning, leaving the ladies overworked and tired. Yet, unitedly, uncomplaining and a strong will to keep the cheer alive they did it with a smiling face.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There was the pleasure of dancing till the Cinderella hour and lots of competitions on the weekend nights. The competitions were judged, and prizes were awarded in various categories. Prizes are prizes and we all love them, which include prizes like dining suite, gold wrist watches, dinner and tea sets, handbags, hats, boots and many other prizes which encouraged more participation. A nominal fee was charged for the entry tickets. This generated funds for further such events and for the making and acquiring of comforting goods to be sent to the men fighting at the Front. The prizes and material costs were funded by the Bees’ committee members or other sponsors[[2]](#footnote-2).

**\*end of low tone festive music\***

Now I think, Elsie Holmes must have been quite a persona at that time as many newspapers have written about her. One such article summed her as having invested interest in the welfare of the girls of the local Swallow and Ariell biscuit manufacturing factory[[3]](#footnote-3). She must have been a keen and insightful person since her judging committee often comprised of Hon. F.J. Derham, managing Director of Swallow and Ariell Mrs F.J. Derham, A.C. Derham and other influential ranked members. This led to the monetary support of funds and donations, bookings of the Town Hall and other settings for the activities to be carried out. All in all, strong connections in the South Melbourne society.

The Busy Bees were not only set up to provide comfort to its people at home but also to the men serving at the front. One newspaper article from the year 1924 mentioned briefly about their contribution towards the cause: "Everyone will remember the splendid work done for the soldiers during the war by Swallow and Ariell's Busy Bees, and the high standard of work achieved by girls whose daily occupation had nothing in common with needles and cottons or sewing of any kind. In addition to monthly contributions of goods to Australian Bed Gross and the Australian Comforts Fund, the Busy Bees, under the supervision of Miss Elsie Holmes, contributed to every special appeal."[[4]](#footnote-4)

With absolute certainty, I could say that these women working under the command of Miss Elsie Holmes were talented and had brilliant ideas. They used old stockings to make new wearables, which included socks, skullcaps and tunics. Furthermore, in another article, it was stated that they had made 1,547 leather cardigans, 23,461 handkerchiefs, 1,474 pairs of socks, 4,939 “good luck” shirts as well as other items[[5]](#footnote-5). The Bees’ had another way to boost the morale of its men serving away from home during festive times, this included making Christmas hampers and stockings which consisted of new garments which were often personalized to the boys in blue with their number and names, sultana cakes, biscuits, raisins, puddings, cigarettes, pipes, greeting cards with positive and warm-hearted messages, to mention a few. In 1917, Sergeant Thos. Greenwood wrote a letter to Elsie Holmes saying how these gifts brought pleasure along with lightheartedness to the troops[[6]](#footnote-6). Many consignments of goods were also sent to the Allied troops in need.

These fundraising activities along with the merrymaking were only a distraction to cheer people up, they did not actually forget the real picture since the casualty counts were increasing. Amazing hearts, these women put in all their earnestness to keep spirits alive during times of turmoil. They spent all their energy in working for the cause, gave hope to all the ones at home whilst sending goods to those at the Front. So much to learn from, as to how we should and can shape our lives by making it meaningful.

# Bibliography

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