EIGHT: WAR AND LOVE

Father didn't approve of me going to war. He said I would see terrible things I would never forget. –Nora Heysen[1]

In September 1943 Australian and American forces launched a major offensive in New Guinea against the Japanese in an attempt to halt its army's rapid southern advance and the imminent threat it posed to Australia.[2] After World War I, the League of Nations under the Treaty of Versailles allocated German territories in the region to the victorious Allies. By 1921 Australia had received a formal mandate from the British government to administer the country as a territory of Australia, including the north-east corner of the island formerly German New Guinea. The suspension of this mandate occurred when the Japanese invasion of New Guinea took place in December 1941. By this time Australians were facing the real possibility of the Japanese on their own shores. The proximity of New Guinea to Australia's northern coast made the unthinkable feasible. In 1942, prior to the combined forces' arrival, young and undertrained Australian units[3] had struggled against the Japanese and the diabolical impact of tropical diseases, most detrimentally malaria, and dengue fever and scrub typhus. The deployment of the joint forces numbering tens of thousands led by US General Douglas MacArthur and Australia's General Thomas Blamey eventually won back large tracts of territory from the Japanese. According to Australian War Memorial records this was the 'springboard'[4] for MacArthur's successful advance into the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines. The Japanese sustained enormous losses against the comparatively well-equipped and resupplied Allied forces supported by air and sea drops:

> Between March 1943 and April 1944, some 1,200 Australians were killed, and an estimated 35,000 Japanese died. That the

> Australian fatalities were so comparatively low is a testament to the army's professionalism and its mastery of jungle warfare, as well as to the strong material advantage the Allies enjoyed over the increasingly desperate Japanese … People may never become familiar with exotic-sounding locations like Bobdubi Ridge, Komiatum, Finschhafen, Satelberg, Kaiapit or Shaggy Ridge. But each was a hard-fought battle honour; each was a bitter struggle in the liberation of New Guinea; each was a stepping stone on the long path to the Allied victory that finally came in 1945.[5]

While Kokoda is often the first location associated with the Pacific conflict, these locations listed above would become very familiar to Captain Nora Heysen. By 8 April 1944 she was en route to Finschhafen five months after its successful liberation. The assault against the Japanese had begun in September eight months before. By drawing the Japanese garrison out of their major base in Lae, the former administrative centre for Australia's mandated territory, the Allies conducted a 'slow, grinding campaign' in nearby rugged terrain, weakening the Japanese hold on the strategic centre of Lae on the east coast. Following this conflict, Australian forces made an amphibious landing east of Lae while more Australian troops were flown into Nadzab to the north-west. After a large-scale pincer movement by advancing forces, Lae was back in Australian hands. While the casualties for the push by the Allies between September and April have already been noted, it is sobering that the total casualties that are recorded for the New Guinea conflict were over 200,000 for the Japanese and 7000 each for the Americans and the Australians.[6]

This was the arena that Nora would participate in, recording the terrors of war and attempting to bear witness to the humanity within the horror. But first she would have to pressure the authorities to let her travel to the theatre of war. The idea of a woman war artist was anathema for some, and painting in the proximity of a war zone unthinkable.

In Australia during World War I, Hans Heysen and his family's allegiance had come into question, like that of all the residents of the German settle-

ment in Hahndorf. They suffered the indignity of having their town, its name place and streets anglicised, as well as it being suspected of harbouring a Nazi spy radio base.[7] Though Heysen was born in Hamburg, he had lived in Australia from the age of six and was a naturalised British citizen. His love of the Australian landscape was 'as a part of his own spirit'[8] according to Thiele, and his birthplace left him open to ignorant behaviour. The art establishment embarrassed themselves by their prejudices, in particular the refusal in March 1915 by the Melbourne Art Gallery to follow through with the purchase of the large oil *In sunset haze*. It had been identified for purchase by the gallery at the Heysen show opened by Dame Nellie Melba at Melbourne's Athenaeum Hall, but it was not subsequently acquired. His accident of birth was the central issue for the gallery's trustees. Heysen told Thiele that it was the questioning of his loyalty and personal integrity that left him 'shocked and hurt'. Melba responded, 'I think the Melbourne Art Gallery has behaved very badly … It is a great shame, but it is their loss'.[9] The painting was returned to his studio where Heysen reworked it after realising there was a flaw in its design. He added a large red gum, 'which helped to bind the two sides of the composition'.[10] Renamed *Droving into the light* 1914–21, it was purchased in 1922 by Perth businessman W.H. Vincent and is an important painting in the Art Gallery of Western Australia's collection. Further insult came from the Australian Art Association, just two years after inviting Hans Heysen to become a member and to contribute to its first exhibition in 1913. Acting on rumours that Heysen 'lacked sympathy with the British cause',[11] the Association wrote to Hans asking him to declare his position in mid 1915. Heysen promptly resigned his membership. In 1917 the National Gallery of New South Wales also demanded Heysen 'definitely and satisfactorily declares whether his allegiances and sympathies are with the British Nation' otherwise the Gallery Board would not include his paintings in their Loan Exhibition of Australian Art. He wrote to his friend and fellow artist Elioth Gruner:

> I am sorry at not being represented, but as I disliked the approach of the Gallery Board on the question of nationality, I must take the consequences of what I thought right to stick up for—if a man's feeling for Australia cannot be judged by

> the work he has done—then no explanation on his part would dispel the mistrust … I cannot give any explanation—it would not be understood in the present circumstances.[12]

The insults did not end there. The South Australian Society repeated what Hans considered an attack on his integrity and he resigned another membership. Family members, German speakers, were also vilified and an uncle of Sallie Heysen spent five years interned in Liverpool, Sydney.[13] In March 2017 the Australian Broadcasting Commission reported that a PhD student at the University of Adelaide had found a cache of letters dated from 1914 to 1917 from a senior commissioner of police in Adelaide to the police officer stationed at Mount Barker. According to the student, Ralph Body, the letters described Heysen as 'being of a highly doubtful character and they request his home be put under surveillance based on little more than anonymous stories the commissioner had heard, and the fact Heysen was German-born'. Until this report in 2017, the Heysen family had not known that Hans Heysen had been under surveillance, though in 1982 a University of Adelaide History honours student, Trevor Schaefer, wrote 'The Treatment of Germans in South Australia 1914–1924' citing a litany of slurs against law-abiding loyal Australian citizens of German descent. It included the material cited by Body:

> One day when one of my informants passed Mr Heysen working, he called out, 'the war situation looks better, the British are too good for the Germans and are giving them hell'. From this it will be seen that although Heysen's sympathy may be with the Germans, he is too clever and cunning to show any sign of disloyalty … The police for not one moment believe he is loyal [to the British Empire] …[14]

Schaefer writes that the local police 'as early as October 1914' had Heysen under observation 'for weeks at a time, without any suspicious action being seen':

> But the local Britisher did not let the military forget Heysen 'the spy', and three years later they advised the Constable [Birt] to again have him watched. So Birt, with the assistance

> of 'reliable residents of the locality' carefully watched his movements and residence for a month, again with no result.
>
> Heysen is a very clever, shrewd man and would be particularly careful of his utterances and actions … he always attends patriotic gatherings in the district …[15]

Allan Campbell rejected the notion of Hans Heysen being disloyal: 'I mean calling Heysen shrewd and cunning, it's ridiculous. He was one of life's great gentlemen and a pacifist to boot.'[16] In his biography Thiele commented: 'Poor Hans, the gentlest and most peaceful of men … who hated all forms of killing so deeply that he wouldn't even suffer his own turkeys to be sacrificed for the Christmas dinner, was being envisaged in the role of spy and desperado. It was ludicrous but also very sad'.[17] There were other insults, after the war, but Hans Heysen did not hold grudges, referring to it as 'one of those things … Circumstance … But of no consequence in the long run—not compared with the things that matter'.[18] Heysen had enjoyed widespread support during the attacks on his character. He received a number of personal letters from artists including John Shirlow, Norman Lindsay and W.B. McInnes. Shirlow wrote: 'I, for one, do not in the least share the quaint opinions of … certain very remarkable loyalists … I have always known you as a very honourable and upright gentleman and an exceedingly fine artist, and for these qualities I admire you and shall continue to admire you.'[19] For Heysen the important aspects of his life were in order—his family was safe, peace was restored and he continued with his work, developing his representation of light and introducing the human figure into his now famous ploughing pictures including *Turning the plough* 1920 (AGSA), *The toilers* 1920 and *Ploughing the field* 1920.[20]

By 1936, good sense prevailed. In the centenary year of South Australia, the German names of the Hahndorf and surrounding settlements were reinstated. In 1940 Hans Heysen was appointed a trustee of the South Australian Art Gallery, a position he held for twenty-eight years until his death in 1968. By World War II any question surrounding allegiances was gone, with two of Heysen's sons, Michael and Stefan, flying for the RAAF. Nora was keen to make her contribution to the Australian war effort alongside them. Her appointment as an official war artist came after she first tried to work as a volunteer in Sydney. Craig Dubery remarks that

she had trouble keeping to the prescribed portions making sandwiches at a navy canteen: 'they disliked her because she was putting in way too much filling'.[21] Her desire to make a concrete contribution to the war effort was an increasing frustration. Her generosity learned in the kitchen at The Cedars was not well received in a time of rations and rules. Nora told researcher Phyllis McKillup that 'she was quite disillusioned by this censure for she felt these men should be given the very best treatment possible.'[22] As a war artist she would continue to push boundaries, well beyond the over-filling of sandwiches.

Sydney Ure Smith had been appointed War Art Council chairman and was arguing in favour of Australia to have a greater breadth of war artists recording the war, including women artists. Catherine Speck writes that Peter Bellew, editor of *Art in Australia*, was critical of the late arrival of Australian war artists on the international fronts. None were deployed until late 1941. Bellew felt Australia should look to the British scheme of appointing high-profile artists and of showing the work widely during the conflict rather than solely as postwar memorial records. His mid 1942 editorial reads:

> Australia has been at war for almost three years. Her troops have been at battle stations in Britain, Crete, Greece, the Middle East, and within the Commonwealth itself … but there is little evidence when it is all over that Australia's artists were at all concerned with the struggle. It is as if Art could serve no purpose in a total war, neither for the record, nor for the nation's enrichment, nor for morale.[23]

While Ure Smith was working to broaden the war art scheme, Nora Heysen sought advice from him and James McGregor, both trustees at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, on how to arrange a commission.[24] Using the influential connections that came with being a Heysen, Nora secured her appointment on 18 October 1943 with the help of Louis McCubbin,[25] who was the director of the National Gallery of South Australia (as it was then) from 1936 until 1950 and also a board member of the Australian War Memorial and a member of its art committee.[26] McCubbin wrote to the appointments committee: 'Nora Heysen is one of the most accomplished women artists, and represented in most Australian

galleries … She could be used in a variety of ways, painting portraits and covering the activities of the women's services.' Her appointment was approved along with Russell Drysdale and Arnold Shore 'to cover the industrial war effort and the Women's Service organisations'—the latter apparently a hastily defined job description added to accommodate Nora's gender and very particular role in the armed forces.[27] Like Nora, Louis McCubbin was an artist who lived under the shadow of a famous father. Frederick McCubbin, a founding member of the Heidelberg School, a major figure along with Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts, is an Australian impressionist whose work portrays the Australian landscape and his view of the quietly heroic lives of the country's pioneers.[28] While Louis McCubbin did continue to paint, his role in arts administration was dominant.[29] As Nora's commission progressed, McCubbin would prove to be a strong advocate for this young woman navigating new territory. He also supported Stella Bowen's commission who was living in London. She would later join Nora as an official war artist along with forty-three male artists. It was not until March 1945 that another woman artist, Sybil Craig, was appointed along with a further six male artists. A fourth woman was appointed, Jacqueline Hick, along with fellow artist Jeffrey Smart, but by then the war had ended.[30] Craig remained in Melbourne and documented the work of women munitions workers and the trials of war on the home front.

It is significant that when the AWM decided to appoint Nora to represent women in the services, it precipitated the granting of military status with honorary commissions for both men and women artists.[31] Until World War II war artists operated under the same terms as war correspondents and were not under the command of the armed forces.

The army officer responsible for Nora's orders was Lieutenant Colonel John Treloar, head of the Military History Section at Army Headquarters in Melbourne and the officer in charge of the welfare of official war artists.[32] Those involved in deciding the details of her commission—the Army Finance Board, Treloar in the Military History Section, and the Australian War Memorial acting director Arthur Bazley—agreed on the rank of captain. Treloar and Bazley believed she was entitled to the same rate of pay as her male counterparts. The minister responsible concurred with Bazley, advising 'that artists were specialists and women should receive equal salaries to male artists … women artists should be treated

in the same way as women medical officers who received the same rate of pay as men'. It was not a straightforward process, however, with the Army Finance Board refusing to pay her at the same rate as male artists as it was not 'policy', insisting that if Treloar and Bazley wanted Nora to receive equal pay, the Australian War Memorial that had decided on her appointment would need to make up the shortfall. The two agreed that the AWM would pay the difference for the duration of Nora's commission as they firmly believed it to be the correct course of action. Nora was appropriately well paid as a result, receiving a male army captain's professional wage of £14.14.0 compared to female arms and munitions workers' weekly pay of £3.14.0.[33]

Aside from her patriotism, Nora was an artist looking for subject matter. Speck writes: 'Nora actually sought the appointment. Inspired by the photographic work of Damien Parer and George Silk which was reproduced in the daily press, she decided "I might as well use what I can do in some capacity"':[34]

> There were wonderful photographs of bringing down the wounded and the blinded men being led, and the comradeship amongst the men. I thought there would be subject matter there that I'd be interested in. I was a good draughtsman. I could draw, and that would be a contribution.[35]

Margaret Woodward offers an insight to Nora's actions: 'she was very determined to do things by herself, possibly because of her association with her family. She just wanted to be her own person. She had great courage.'[36] Nora's courage would be tested in many personally challenging events over the course of her life. But for now it was the war. Nora said: 'There was a lot of intolerance towards women artists especially flower painters. When I was commissioned … the huge laugh went around—flower painter turned war artist—they thought that was very funny. I let them laugh and I went on with my drawing.'[37] By the end of the war the 'flower painter' had produced a portfolio of over two hundred and fifty works covering an extensive range of subject matter that holds a prominent place in the recording of Australian involvement in World War II at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Held in the Nora Heysen Papers, the NLA carries two boxes of newspaper clippings that Nora had collected, starting

with a yellowed square of newsprint heralding her Archibald win in 1938. In another clipping of an interview dated March 1989, Nora responds to earlier news that van Gogh's *Irises* had changed hands for seventy-five million dollars: 'That'll teach them to laugh at flower painters.'[38] At the time it was the highest price ever paid for a painting at auction, and no doubt the news delivered her enormous satisfaction.

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Nora was not impressed with her army uniform and said that though 'this field battle dress was comfortable, it was also extremely ugly, for it was loose, baggy and ill fitting'; she also saw the dress uniform as 'unimaginative and old fashioned'. In conversation with Phyllis McKillup in the mid 1990s, Nora revealed that there were issues with Lieutenant Colonel Treloar from the outset. McKillup suggests from these conversations that Treloar was an army man and she observes:

> … he was proud of his uniform, the outward manifestation of his military success and power … He did not realise that Nora saw the uniform as a problem … Treloar appears to have had an unrealsitic perception of Nora's feelings, and his anxiety to get Nora 'militarised', shows the difference between his ideas and Nora's understanding of Army protocol.[39]

The uniform would not be the only matter of contention during her time of service. With no formal basic training, it is easy to understand Nora's lack of identification with army mentality and the fundamentals of a soldier's life. At first she was uncomfortable with army procedure, having private tuition rather than Officer's Training School 'until I can at least salute'.[40] She wrote to her parents about the mood surrounding her appointment:

> My position is a curious one and seems to cause worry and confusion all round. I am looked upon as some queer specimen that doesn't quite belong anywhere. What seems to disturb them the most is that I have no number. A number, it would seem, is one's identity. Without it, I am dust.[41]

Nora was conscious of her civilian status and that soon she would be a captain with a number, having done nothing in the army's eyes to earn her rank. She wrote of embarrassment at the idea of a lower ranking soldier saluting her. When Nora had first met with Treloar to discuss the possibility of a war artist's commission, it was somehow leaked to the press and an article carrying the news ran on 11 August 1943 in the Melbourne *Sun.* Treloar was approached by the Sydney *Sun* and the Melbourne *Herald* to confirm the report and he responded that it was premature 'and it would be in the interests of Miss Heysen to let the matter drop'; Treloar felt that the attention in the press may act as an impediment to Nora's appointment progressing smoothly.[42] The army and Treloar refused to comment. It was thought that perhaps McCubbin had been the source

22. Nora in dress uniform, Melbourne 1944.
Collection of the Australian War Memorial. 062802.

of the leak. McCubbin denied this and suggested it was Nora's father. The source was not discovered. Eventually the authorities determined how the first woman war artist would be integrated into the defence force's complex systems of appointments. The army made its official announcement on 13 August 1943 in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which ran the story with a photo of Nora captioned 'Miss Nora Heysen, daughter of the well known South Australian artist Hans Heysen, who has been appointed an Official War Artist.'[43] When she was given her uniform and her appointment was publicly confirmed she wrote again to her parents:

> I … have been caught up in a whirl of activity which has ended in my finally being cast into khaki—it took me two hours on Sunday to dress myself for my first rehearsal … [I] was expected to be regimentally correct in every detail. Finally I walked stiffly out feeling very compressed and awkward, and rather damp from exertion. The high stiff collar is very hard to get used to, and my feet are blistered and sore in army shoes, but I dare say I'll get used to it in due course. At the moment I feel rather as if I was minus my identity and playing a part on the stage. When someone saluted me in the street the other day, I looked around to see whom it was they were saluting, then suddenly realised it was myself. These days I dodge everything with red on its uniform and I don't know which embarrasses me more, having to salute or being saluted.[44]

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Nora's commission began with orders to paint the heads of the Australian Army Women's Services, and to execute these she was assigned to the artists' studios at the Victoria Barracks in Melbourne. Her quarters were at the Menzies Hotel. She found the khaki of the women's uniforms particularly unforgiving in her attempts to render an aesthetically pleasing scheme and it was a constant aggravation in her life as a war artist, but one that could hardly be avoided. She was also frustrated about being assigned to a barracks studio rather than being where the forces were actively engaged and where she would find more stimulating subjects. There was no lack of regard on Nora's part for the heads of the services

she was painting—she had enormous respect for these extraordinary leaders, but she had a vision of herself in the midst of action making a lasting record of Australian troops at war.

It was here at Victoria Barracks that Nora would paint Colonel Sybil Irving in a somewhat challenging process, as discussed in my introduction. Nora wrote home that she wished she were able to get to know her subjects before she painted them in order to capture a better likeness.[45] The brief sittings and the khaki scheme did not suit Nora. After her first attempt to paint Colonel Sybil Irving (AWM, *plate 36*), she was invited by Irving to dinner. After getting to know Irving, Nora decided she wanted to redo the portrait. The second attempt reveals an improved handling of the difficult colour and also Nora's capacity to use light to lift the overall effect. A stronger sense of Irving is also captured, her surer gaze with an overall vibrancy reflects Nora's own self-assurance (AWM, *plate 37*). The two women ultimately became friends.

Discussions with Treloar two months after she began her commission resulted in a more positive Nora writing to her parents to tell them that arrangements were being made for her to move up to New Guinea: 'I feel that to do the work they require of me that I must be right on the spot, and the further up north I can go, and the nearer the fighting areas, the better the atmosphere for war activities … and now that they have pushed into Lae, there will be good pioneering work to be done'.[46] Catherine Speck contends that Matron Sage had taken a liking to Nora[47] when they met during portrait sessions and wanted her transferred to New Guinea 'as soon as possible to record the work of the AANS and the AAMWS in hospitals in forward areas before they are fully developed.' This move also came with less restrictive orders for her scope of work, still to represent the women's services, but not confined to them. It is notable that at this point Nora was, as Speck describes her, a 'trailblazer'[48] being the first of the women war artists to paint in an area close to the front. Treloar supported Sage's request by placing Nora on the Special Army List, a move that would smooth the way for her to travel outside of Australia as commissioned officers in the AWAS were restricted to service at home.[49]

Before leaving Melbourne for Brisbane and on to New Guinea, Nora writes that she struggled to prepare for the trip:

> I'm trying to juggle my luggage into 60lbs and what, with my painting gear and all my tropical equipment, I'm having a heart breaking time. It becomes a tube of paint or a jar of face cream. McGregor saw me off in Melbourne armed with a cocktail of three large packets of calsellettes [a brand of laxative]. I drove off in an army truck, gasmask, steel helmet and first aid and dixies and what-not strung on. All I lack is a rifle and swearing vocabulary to be completely war minded.[50]

Nora was the only woman and Australian to fly on the American Lockheed out of Brisbane for Port Moresby at dawn on 8 April 1944. She wrote home saying that she enjoyed her first experience of air travel describing it as 'exhilarating and beautiful':

> Flying these days seems as casual as catching a taxi. It amazed me taking off with so little fuss on such a long trip. Passengers and luggage were piled in haphazardly with rubber tyres, and jeeps and soldiers, all on top of each other. A young fellow with rolled-up shirt sleeves took his place at the engines, and off we went with a cheery call to hang on, as everything tipped down to the tail end.[51]

She arrived in Finschhafen on the Huon Peninsula which, retaken just months before her arrival, had quickly developed into a large base for Allied operations. It was the most forward area where nurses were stationed. Later she served in Lae, Morotai and Borneo. She was assigned to record the work of the medical teams—doctors and nurses, the wounded, and the environs. Nora was also inspired to capture images of the Papuan Infantry Battalion critical to the Allies' success in treacherous jungle conditions. With the lifting of the constraint of recording only the women's services, she produced some dramatic and accomplished portraits and scenes. Speck suggests that she was 'venturing into the issues of cultural diversity she was surrounded by in New Guinea. Her portraits of the Indigenous people convey her undoubted respect for them.' Speck continued: 'Although poorly articulated at that time, the "colonial" relationship between Australians and Papuans was in the process of being redefined, since negotiating the jungle could not have

been done without Papuan assistance.'[52] Nora's male counterparts were sent to the front while she was kept away from the fighting, recording the work at the medical stations and the grind of war in the tropics: 'But it was a wonderful test for me. People were willing to sit and pose for me, and those [the wounded] that had no say in the matter.'[53]

Nora was constant in her quest to get as close to the front as possible, to record scenes of lasting historical value and to honour the soldiers, the Papuans, and the medical staff she held in high regard. It was to prove a difficult assignment but Nora persevered. 'Being the first woman war artist—it was difficult for them to accept me. And McCubbin … he put in a good [word] and my father of course, although Father didn't approve of me going to war, he said I would see horrible things I would never forget.'[54]

In a letter home to her parents in May 1944 after three weeks at the base, she describes a scene that confirms her father's worries about what his daughter might see in a war zone. Nora recounted an expedition to Satelberg, the site of a bombed-out German mission, with a butterfly enthusiast, a photographer and an amateur artist escorted by four soldiers (*Church ruins, Satelberg Mission* 1944, AWM). She writes after negotiating a 'hair-raising' track where they became stuck numerous times in 'feet of mud' that they 'trudged' the last mile to the top on foot:

> The views were magnificent and everything of interest … Everywhere live bombs were still lying around. One found a Chinese cabbage growing out of an old German bible, sewing machines and silver entrée dishes, bomb craters 20 feet deep and the place a warren of foxholes, trees stripped bare, gaunt and broken. Only the cross of the Church is still standing and the pulpit carved and painted by the natives. I found a very nice piece of board amongst the wreckage and put up my paint box on a piece of old school desk and I sat in a foxhole and proceeded to paint the view looking over the scene where our men fought and struggled the bitter way. After working away quietly for some time I became more and more aware of a horrid smell, and looking down found I was quartered on the remains of a dead Jap.[55]

Nora would also face matters of the heart, a peril that her father had perhaps not anticipated. This was to be a fateful journey in Nora's personal

life. In Finschhafen she fell in love with a tropical medicine specialist, Dr Robert Black, a member of a team researching prevention and improved treatments of malaria, the cause of devastating casualties in tropical warfare in the Pacific. Malaria had previously been encountered by the Allied Imperial Forces in World War I in the Middle East. Volunteers at the Land Headquarters Medical Research Unit in Cairns were infected with the parasite and the researchers worked with 'the sole objective … to investigate malarial pathogenesis and chemoprophylaxis, using human "guinea pigs"'.[56] Nora wrote home about these brave volunteers:

> The work done here is interesting, six wards full of men or 'guinea pigs' as they are called used for experiments for malaria treatments. They are bitten with the mosquitoes which are bred here and are given the malaria by biting a patient with the fever. One sees a good bronzed Anzac go down to it and in a week he's lost 2 stone and looks at death's door, then when he's provided the pathologists with the right number of wogs and reactions, he's brought to again, fed up to health and then down to another attack.[57]

AWM history records that it was the skill and the efficient supply chain of the Allies that turned the tide of the war in the Pacific but the extraordinary treatments developed by the malaria researchers must be acknowledged as having played a significant role in that success. The debilitating effects of the tropical disease that immobilised or killed thousands were dramatically reversed:

> As an outcome of the findings with atebrin, the Australian army promulgated orders to ensure that the proper dosage was taken regularly, and that the responsibility for ensuring this procedure rested with the unit commander, not with the medical officer. The results were dramatic. Whereas early in the Papuan campaign the malaria rate had been as high as 2496 per thousand per annum, it fell to 740 per thousand in December 1943 and to 26 per thousand by November 1944. Earl Mountbatten, allied supreme commander, South-East Asia, adopted the Australian orders, with similar results among

> his forces. The control of malaria was a turning-point in the war in Burma and the Islands.[58]

An article that appeared in *The Australian Women's Weekly* in July 1944 describes in detail how the research at the Malaria Research Unit was run. The magazine opened with the lines: 'A little more than a year ago malaria was as dangerous an enemy to the forces in the Pacific as the Japanese'. Soldiers who were convalescing from minor operations in malaria-free zones volunteered to participate once their health was restored. The commanding officer was quoted: 'Many of them have not yet had an opportunity of meeting the enemy, and in the meantime feel this is an effective way of fighting him'.[59] The article went on to reassure the reader that the volunteers rarely contracted full-blown malaria due to the scientific rigour involved in extracting the necessary data and the prophylactic treatment the men were given as part of the research. The wholesome picture for the *Women's Weekly* reader at home perhaps did not reveal the realities the volunteers endured as Nora described.

Robert Black, under renowned tropical medical researcher Colonel Neil Fairley, played a key role receiving recognition for his technique that 'showed that anti-malarial drugs, as metabolised in the body, were active against cultured parasites.' Many of Black's letters to Nora describe the highs and lows of his attempts to breed the mosquitoes in vitro 'under very basic conditions'[60] while in New Guinea. It appears from one of his letters to Nora that Black was also an active participant in the research: 'My malaria is not yet upon me—the CO reckons we'll get it this time …'[61] In July 1944 he left Nora in New Guinea when he was transferred back to the Blood and Serum Preparation Unit at Sydney Hospital to pursue his research before moving up to Cairns under Colonel Charles Ruthven Blackburn, also known for his work in association with Fairley and who headed the Cairns medical research unit. Nora described Blackburn whom she drew as 'a brilliant young man … and has an amazing head on his shoulders somewhere between Beethoven and Byron'.[62] From her drawing, it is clear what she means (*Lieutenant Colonel Ruthven Blackburn* 1945, AWM). Her desire to find good material for her artistic development was being met, while at the same time she fulfilled her army obligations. By December 1944 Robert Black was in Cairns and within six months he and Nora would be reunited when she was posted to his location to document the Land

Headquarters Medical Research Unit in July 1945. It is possible the two saw each other again in December 1944 when Nora was posted briefly to the Blood and Serum Separation Unit at Sydney Hospital.

Nora's relationship with Black was fraught with difficulty. Black was married and father to a young son. For her conservative family, this affair would later prove hard to accept, but Nora would not be swayed. Letters between the two track an intense love and deep commitment to find a way to be together. The timing of their first meeting is not exactly clear, though it was in the weeks she was in Finschhafen, between April and June 1944. To add to her emotional turmoil in the early days of her posting to New Guinea, it appears Nora was not a particularly welcome addition to the base. The nurses who served there had earned their rank and place in the armed forces through service in North Africa and the Middle East and they were often outranked by Nora who had arrived direct from the comfort of the Menzies Hotel in Melbourne with automatic captain's pips and the pay to go with them. She was ostracised within the compound:

> I'm living with the sisters [nurses] and have been allotted a tent to myself. One sleeps on a straw mattress and under a net, and everything creeps and crawls and smells of mildew …
>
> My tent looks out onto the Owen Stanleys and just outside are growing paw paws and bananas. Five months at the Menzies was not the best training for this life.[63]

She adds in a following letter: 'There are 14 women here … They do not accept me as one of themselves, and I live isolated in my little tent apart from their quarters, and they have built-in sheds with electric light, wardrobes and soft mattresses.'[64] After a month of being in the nurses' company Nora suggests that 'they are getting more or less used to me here now'.[65] The working conditions were difficult for Nora apart from any personal issues but she did not allow either to affect her work ethic. Within a week of arriving she had a number of works underway, writing home:

> There is subject matter in plenty, but how to tackle it? I feel like a raw beginner and at quite a loss. When I go out painting for the day, they pack me up whitebait and asparagus and tinned orange juice, and I sit and lunch on a blasted coconut stump or

> on the edge of a bomb crater, and I find myself wondering how many died on just this spot only 5 short months ago. Incredible to try and picture it.[66]

Her descriptions of working conditions include the effects of the constant wet and humidity 'everywhere mud ankle deep and the smell of mildew and rotting … My paintings mildew overnight, they'll be old masters before I get them back'. She spent time in the operating theatre making preliminary sketches for paintings. Her respect for the surgeon is clear:

> Every time a patient comes in for an operation, the surgeon rings me up and I go and get my impressions in the theatre. Yesterday had a native with a badly crushed foot. The surgeon did a delicate skin graft over the wound when he'd sewn the tendons and joined the splintered bones. The skin graft is wonderful and horrifying to watch. It is only by going out from time to time, and coming at it again, that I can watch and draw these things, and I wish someone else had been detailed off to do this job. There's no doubt it's interesting, but I can't get the things I see out of my mind. This composition progresses slowly. The surgeon is an artist at his job and one watches him sew up a vein with the delicate touch of a woman.[67]

Nora met a number of soldiers in Finschhafen who made a deep impression on her and she represented them working and socialising in the harsh jungle environment. She distilled their individualism on her page, an attribute that in the tropics somehow managed to work within an organisation based on working as a homogeneous group that moves as one. At the end of May she had been introduced to the Mechanical Engineering Company, in particular Sapper 'Bashful'—she wrote home 'believe it or not that is his name' (it was in fact Private Sapper Bashforth and perhaps the soldiers were teasing Nora)—known as Bulldozer Bluey:

> Bluey is a character that one would meet only once in a lifetime. A lumber man from Queensland, a great hulking fellow 6 ft 4

and ginger, with pale blue eyes with that distant horizon look, red headed, red moustache and red hairs all over his brawny chest. It was Bluey who blazed the trail for the tanks to get up Satelberg, and who mowed down the jungle to make roads, all under Japanese fire. He and *Dearest*, as he calls his Bulldozer, were a law unto themselves. No one dared give Bluey orders and he and *Dearest* went their own dangerous way. He's up for a Military Cross. He has an enormous red moustache and beard. What a man and yet, sitting for his portrait, he was blushing like a schoolgirl.[68]

23. Study for Bluey 1944, charcoal, sanguine crayon on paper, 61.5 × 49.0 cm. Portrait of Private Sapper Bashforth, Royal Australian Engineers. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. ART22663.

Nora's processes and her personal view of the way she should represent the environment she experienced caused friction between her and Treloar in Melbourne. He wrote to her, two and a half months into her posting, unhappy with the work she had sent. He felt that with the latitude she had been given she was neglecting the nurses and the crucial role they played in the tropical arena. Speck refers to a 'tension between the military culture she [Nora] was working in and her own background as an artist'.[69] Nora was dealing with a climatically foreign environment that made working in her preferred medium of oils extremely difficult. The spontaneity that was often required did not lend itself to the discipline of oil painting. The preliminary drawings that she usually did for an oil study often represented a moment in the cut and thrust of the casualty ward and theatre. In conversation with Catherine Speck in 1989, Nora told her:

> You were working in the wet, and you had to be very quick in the wards; working with patients or anything pertaining to war had to be done rather quickly and getting out oil paints and all this business … and I don't work very much from memory. I work direct. The drawings can say as much as paintings, but paintings mean more to the War Memorial.[70]

An exchange of letters between Nora and Treloar set the tone of their relationship for the duration of Nora's commission. It had been tense from the outset as Nora pushed back against the Victoria Barracks work, before leaving for New Guinea. Once there was some distance, and licence, between her and Treloar, she had endeavoured to work hard. What she delivered was not what he had envisaged and he wanted her to return immediately to Melbourne.[71] Treloar suggested that she was now familiar with the conditions in New Guinea and that she '… should return to Melbourne … and summarise the impressions of your tour of duty. Therefore at the end of the month we shall ask you be returned, but I should like you to have the opportunity of commenting before sending the signal'.[72] Nora was affronted and responded by defending herself in strong terms. Treloar initiated the exchange:

> Now that we have received a number of your pictures from New Guinea I think that I should offer for your consideration

> the following comments from the standpoint of coverage.
>
> The first which suggests itself is that the work of the AANS and the AAMWS is practically uncovered. In the pictures we have received there are only three which deal with this subject. Two are 'social'—one shows a dance party and the other a tea party—and one is a ward with, I think a male orderly on duty.

Nora's watercolour of the nurses' mess showing a relaxed setting with tea cups out, a picturesque view and flowers on the table was not what her superior had in mind (AWM, *plate 40*). It appears that Treloar's desire for Nora to create works that demonstrated the heroic work, the sense of urgency, and the difficulties of war was not the narrative Nora was providing. Nora responded to the criticism vehemently defending her choices:

> It is my belief that these social functions given by the sisters to entertain the men are an important diversion and help moral [sic] of the men. Its aspect is, I suppose, more frivolous but it is surely a part of the pattern worth recording …

Her scope of duties was particularly broad and she had barely settled in to the job in challenging circumstances when she was requested to send work:

> I think it is hardly justified to judge the output of two and a half month's work as conclusive proof that I am incapable of covering the work expected of me here. I think also that for one woman to attempt to portray the activities of all the women's services is an impossibility and that it is rather unfair to expect it of me.[73]

Nora felt Treloar was unreasonable and she had no qualms in letting him know this, despite his status as her superior officer. Nora had not experienced military indoctrination. A trained soldier would not commit such insubordination. Her response appears to be emotional, situated in her artistic practice rather than a response that she might have explained within the framework of her working environment. However, Treloar appeared to be taken aback at her communication, with positive results.

He delayed making a decision about her orders. Her correspondence with her parents over the matter gives an insider view. She wrote that Treloar was 'disappointed and dissatisfied with my New Guinea work' but in fact Treloar was focused on subject matter, not Nora's execution, and she seems to have conflated the two:

> I feel it is a rather unjustified and hasty attack, considering that he has only seen part of the work done here in the first two and a half months while I was trying to work my way in through new and trying conditions. Still, it is very depressing having done one's best, and to put it mildly, I'm fed up. I wrote back in an angry mood giving my comment on his every accusation and insinuation, and now I'm hastily getting out to escape repercussions. But just how long it will be before his authority catches up with me, is a matter for conjecture. I fear that my short career as a War Artist is fast drawing to a stormy close.
>
> The gist of his criticism was that I had not immortalised the war work of the Florence Nightingales. In fact, had gone so far as to undermine their prestige by depicting them in social mood, dancing and holding a tea party, and crime of crimes, I drew them in the bath tub.[74]

Nora also confided in Black about Treloar's communiqué and she received solid support from him as a result. Black displayed all the loyalty that she might have expected from this quarter and he wrote as soon as his work day was finished. He also seemed to forget that Nora was now an officer in the army where taking orders was an absolute:

> I've been bubbling over all the afternoon since your two letters came … That a man should be a critic and be in a position to make his ideas about your work into orders makes me want to say a few well-chosen words. Darling, do not take it to heart—each picture you make is part of you—it is the product of your perception, training and self-criticism—I like your pictures and so do many others more in a position to give an expert opinion. Oh that I could be with you to comfort you. Smile for me … if there is anything constructive

> in his opinion you will see and heed, but if it is personal dislike influencing it—you will know that, too and treat it as such.[75]

It is obvious from Treloar's balanced and sincere letters that his concerns were far from personal and were based wholly on the limited works he had seen. The subject matter was not broad enough. Nora was surprised that her tour in New Guinea might end so abruptly and McKillup writes that Nora was conciliatory at the end of her letter, requesting time to travel further with the nurses who would be travelling to Madang 'to see a Casualty Clearing Station established, and so see the conditions under which the sisters work before any comforts are available'. Nora believed this would provide the subject matter Treloar expected. Her request was in effect granted by Treloar by his deliberate delay in responding to her letter until 7 September, nearly three months later. When he did reply he informed her that the initial letter he had sent her 'had not produced the result he expected' and his delay in responding was 'to let you have the further time in New Guinea'. In the letter of 7 September he also indicated that artists should be engaged for periods of four to six months or twelve months for overseas tours. This was a directive from the AWM Art Committee. She would be recalled to Australia: 'As a result of this decision it will be necessary for your appointment to be terminated about the end of October by when you will have been serving for a period of about 12 months'.[76] The correspondence between Nora and Treloar is held in the archive at the AWM and on close reading it is clear that Treloar was a fair and reasonable man trying to fulfil his army role while taking care of the welfare of the artists under his orders. It is imperative to remember that Nora was the first woman to take on this role for the armed forces and the issues that resulted were firsts on both sides. The opportunity to reward Treloar for his patience with Nora would come after she had spent three weeks designated as rest in Lae during July 1944. She moved from Lae to Alexishafen in order to travel to Madang to cover the work of the nurses setting up the Casualty Clearing Station and this provided subject material for Treloar's brief.

The sights that waited for Nora as she moved further north would have provided her with exhilarating opportunities to record the troops'

24. Strip sitter 1945, conté on paper, 44.9 × 39.6 cm. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. Sister Lucy Mackenzie N500358 is seated at an airstrip waiting for her flight to take off, surrounded by her bags and oxygen equipment, and wearing full uniform, Morobe Province, Lae. ART24282.

movements. A diary entry by a Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) flying sister sets the stage for what Nora might also have witnessed on arrival at Nadzab en route to her assignment:

> We duly arrived at Nadzab after 10 hours flying. It was a hot, sticky day as we circled the airfield and I simply could not get over the number of aircraft of every description that were in the air, on the tarmac, or camouflaged in the revetments. There were operating in and out of Nadzab approximately a 1000 aircraft daily. The whole area was one great big bee-hive of activity.[77]

Before Nora left Finschhafen she created another ruction, when she refused the first movement order to Lae. She already had a questionable reputation, due to a number of hapless incidents while exploring outside the camp. One in particular involved a lost jeep, a potential mudslide and a rescue after a picnic, causing her to write home: 'I haven't lived it down yet and that incident earned me a reputation of a rebel. It is true, I have managed to break every rule peculiar to this place.'[78] She had been working on a substantial oil painting of tropical flowers. This is well outside the parameters of her brief. Yet she produced the stunning work *The flower ship* 1944 (Private collection, *plate 39*) and wrote to her parents that she feared a court martial after refusing the order to move south to Lae. Her lack of army 'awareness' is stunning. The fact that she hoped that her gender might help her is also intriguing:

> Had just begun on a large bunch of tropical flowers and was in the midst of it, when a movement order came through to return to Lae immediately and my plane seat was already booked. I dug my heels in … Last night I was told I had to move this morning, but told them it was impossible as I hadn't finished my flowers, and now I'm waiting repercussions, probably a court martial or I'll be shot at dawn, or else. Being a woman they may allow for whims. This has gone on for three days and through them I have painted from dawn to dusk interrupted by the telephone. The flowers are lovely here … Hibiscus, frangipani, lilies, cannas and coral flowers … Here I am at home and have enjoyed the escape from military subjects.[79]

She continued in her letter that she was called before the commanding officer and was relieved when he told her she had been granted a week's grace. The painting, which changed hands at auction in 2013 for $48,800, is described by Jane Hylton: '… the composition records a moment of joy in an otherwise difficult time, the two blooms echoing the two roses that sit similarly positioned in Heysen's *The lovebirds* of 1942' (Private collection).[80]

Is it possible that *The flower ship* oil she was finishing off at the end of June was a representation of Nora and Black together in the turmoil of war and love? Nora described it in terms of a ship sailing out adorned

with streamers and she kept the work on her return to Australia; she did not hand it over to the War Memorial as she was required to do with all the work done while an official war artist: 'I painted the flower piece and it was one the war museum didn't get'.[81] Eugene Schlusser comments that: 'Sick of war and the wounded, full of love for Robert, she was inspired to paint *The flower ship*.'[82] During the period in Finschhafen before Nora 'moved out', it is clear that the relationship with Robert Black had become serious very quickly—in fact in just over three months the pair had declared their love for one another. A letter held in her personal archive at The Cedars postmarked Sydney 13 August 1944 addressed to VFX94085 Captain Nora Heysen, Att 111 Aust CCS [Casualty Clearing Station] AIF [Australian Imperial Force], was sent by Robert Black. He had left Finschhafen and returned to the Blood and Serum Separation Unit in Sydney, often referred to as the Blood Bank, 'growing his malaria family'—mosquitoes—for his research. He writes to say that he is happy that she has arrived safely at her new posting in Alexishafen after finally leaving Lae:

> I shall not know until to-morrow [sic] if my new little malaria family will thrive—it is a very tough problem they have set me—it is.
>
> No letter to-day but I am happy to know that you have arrived safely—
>
> oh darling—I love you—I do, I do. Keep well and may you find happiness in your work—until those hopes and wishes find their fulfillment—as they will for us.
>
> I adore you. Sleep tight.
>
> Bob.[83]

From what he says it can be inferred that the couple are writing to each other daily, sometimes twice a day, and the archive supports this theory. The letters are romantic and heartfelt. Black may also have been a man in crisis in the midst of his infidelity, back at home in the city where his wife and son lived.

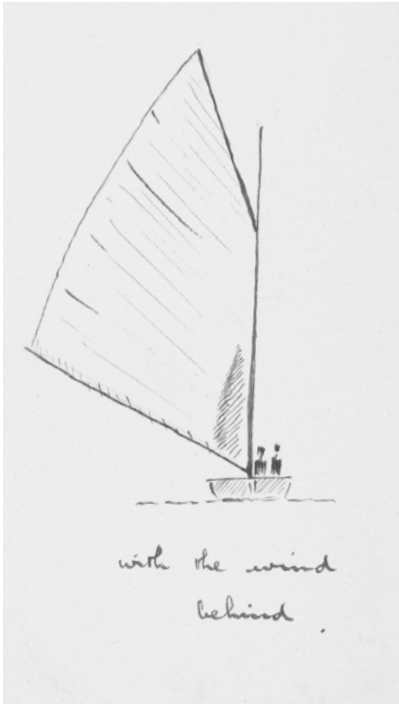
Black in Sydney writes about his love for Nora; he hopes there is help available for her skin ailments; and he alludes to a former state of emotional emptiness. He even sends her news of the art world. He

appears to have sent Nora a photograph of himself from a time before they met and he is responding to her letter that contained a drawing of her Alexishafen landscape autographed with a lipstick kiss:

> Your mountain with its reflections is before me—I sit beside you and we watch the ripples causing the reflection to shimmer—we do not say much with our voices—there is that feeling of completeness—a fulfillment of destiny—my darling, I love you.
>
> I hope there is someone who can fix your hands for you—those firm little hands which can do so much—can I say firm tenderness in their touch for that is what I mean … The little photo is from a period when things were so simple, x = ed y, there was no happiness, no wonder—I slept—waiting to be awakened to the beauty of the world to an appreciation that there were mysteries and magic and the loveliness of you … I give a tiny little modulated sigh as I read your letters—there are tears and a smile—oh darling, darling … The Dobell show had lots of visitors—an article in the *Women's Weekly* and a small paragraph in the [*Sydney Morning*] *Herald*. The Archibald win[84] was not there…
>
> And now good-night my darling. My heart is yours and my thoughts ever with you. I love you, yes'm, I do. Sleep tight.
>
> Oh darling…
>
> Bob. [85]

Black was six years Nora's junior but her lack of romantic experience would not have put her in a commanding position. From Black's letters it appears that both of them were shy by nature and he is expressive in his love-struck wonder. The fact that Black was married is not mentioned in the surviving letters between the two but it informs much of what is written—often from Black with pages of lament of the trials to be endured before they can be together.

> My darling—at times the seas are rough—dark clouds obscure the way—but my star and guiding light reaffirm my hopes and the sun breaks through. I love you—I do. My heart and



25. Nora and Black regularly illustrated their letters to each other. The sketch above appears on the last page of a letter Black wrote to Nora while she was recuperating in Hahndorf after returning home with severe tropical skin disorders. Black described the yachts he was watching on Sydney Harbour and drew one that represented them together: 'Dear Nora I love you. Does my little ship tell you so?' Sketch by Robert Black, Papers of Nora Heysen, National Library of Australia.

thoughts are with you. Good night darling. Sleep tight.[86]

Oblique references to the difficulties the couple face might not only have pertained to the separation dictated by the war. As a recently married man and a new father, he had much to consider.

Black had graduated from medical school at Sydney University in 1939 and was transferred to Innisfail as a senior registered medical officer in 1941 after working as a junior RMO the year prior at the Royal

Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. On 8 November 1941 he was made a captain in the Australian Army Medical Corps. He married Dorothy Rosemary Elsie Tandy on 9 December 1941 and after seven months of married life he transferred to the AIF on 22 July 1942 and served with the 19th Field Ambulance and the 117th Australian General Hospital in Toowoomba, Queensland. Within a year, in June 1943, he joined the 106th Casualty Clearing Station and two months later was posted to New Guinea. While Black was in the field assisting with the treatment of troops on the ground in the jungles of Lae, his son Robert Bruce Tandy Black was born on 1 December 1943 in North Sydney. With her husband away, Dorothy Tandy returned to her parents' home with her newborn to Roseville, a suburb of Sydney.[87]

There is no indication that Nora communicated any news of her new-found love in 1944 to her family back at The Cedars. That revelation would come later and the accompanying consternation of her parents was relentless. It is evident from Josephine's situation that appearances and adherence to social rules played an important role in the maintenance of Sallie Heysen's equilibrium. Her response to Everton Stokes' role in her daughter's life also underscores her concern with propriety. The reality of her daughter in the role of 'the other woman' with a married man must have been a disturbing challenge. The couple's longing for each other is palpable in Black's words:

> [Your letters] bring you along with them—and it is a happy day when I see one waiting in the morning—sometimes in the afternoon. I wish. I wish—I am at the wishing well again—where two shy people found one another—a magic well in a fairies' garden.
>
> I can understand your walks half way through a letter—I can … when the river threatens to flood—when words will not come at all—when I wish to tell you in every way that I can that I love you. I do.
>
> Good night my darling … Sleep tight. I caress you.
> Bob.[88]

Nora received these letters from Black in her new camp at Alexishafen before heading to Madang and perhaps his sweet words offered some

comfort in the midst of the discomforts she was dealing with. Her exposure to the tropical climate, poor access to clean water, issues of prickly heat and a susceptibility to tropical skin conditions had resulted in Nora developing serious eczema, dermatitis and tinea. It would later be revealed to Nora by a specialist back in Australia that atebrin, the anti-malaria medication, was a large factor in her complaint.[89] She described the conditions to her parents:

> After having been so free of skin troubles, I have now developed every brand peculiar to these parts and one all my own. This latter unfortunately is all over my hands. The doctors say sitting out in the sun has caused it, and that I must wear gloves, keep them greased and not get heated or sit in the sun. All things which I'm unable to do, however they are so swollen and irritated that it is difficult to work …
>
> Worse than all this are the rats. There are millions here, every night one gets into my bed. They eat their way through everything, crawl all over everything and smell. If there is one thing I hate it is rats in my bed, and one lies awake watching for them. What they don't eat goes mildew and musty. Sometimes it just gets me down, and I wonder what the Hell—is anything worth it?[90]

Running parallel to these letters to her parents would have been her replies to Robert Black. Nora's fascination for Black is evidenced in a number of her paintings and sketches of him. They are sensual works and he is a handsome subject; she is clearly pleased to render his physical attraction on the page. The viewer senses a pride in the artist's impressions of her man. She was deeply committed to him, while facing serious impediments given the customs of the day. The letters written between the pair over the period they were lovers separated by the vagaries of war and then throughout their marriage indicate a deeply intense affair, punctuated with symbolism they found in everyday objects that came to represent secret rituals. As he was waiting to leave Finschhafen for the Blood Bank at Sydney Hospital he wrote to Nora in Lae on 11 July 1944:

> There is some work to do, but not enough to keep me sufficiently busy. They won't let me go to see you and yet I remain here

trying to find some way to pass the time. Should you not hear from me for a few days you will know that I am on my way—& I hope to lots of work. My darling … you must have sleep—we cannot have those blue eyes rimmed with darkness. Remember—sleep tight. Those two little glasses are tucked away safely until the time comes for them to be used again. For that time will come—on that basis all our hopes rest …

Though there are tears in my eyes and in yours—may I bid you again to be happy in that thought.

I love you. I love you dear Nora
Bob.[91]

26. Nora produced this penetrating portrait in the early days of her relationship.
Robert Black c.1944, pencil on paper, 35.0 × 27.0 cm.
Nora Heysen Foundation Collection.

Two whiskey tumblers consistently sketched in the corner of many of the letters were an identifier of the private times and conversations they shared over a glass of scotch when they were able to be in each other's physical presence. Throughout their correspondence the abbreviated phrase 'I do I do' would mark their signing off. The pair attempted to keep their relationship out of the public gaze and army life, even posting their letters when in Australia in regular postboxes and not through the army dispatch system 'otherwise most everyone knows to whom you write'. The shared secret of a newly declared love is expressed in intimate terms by Black when he tells Nora that a drawing she had done of him was on view at the 106 Casualty Clearing Station in Cairns:

> Your drawing was on view to-day & I wonder if anyone will know what was going on behind it—a whimsical smile when at last I was sure I loved you as you loved me—a feeling of awe

27. Nora Heysen drawing of Robert Black: *Male nude in moonlight* 1940s, charcoal, white chalk on blue paper, 30.0 × 43.1 cm.
Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

> that it should be I, and of happiness that it was, a whole jumble of thoughts reflected in my inability to stay still. What tired me most was the effort required to keep myself looking at you, while you tussled with your problem—which was not one of pencil and paper but one of mind. How I longed to say those few words—that day I saw doubt and wonder change to near-certainty—confirmed when next you drew me.
>
> What a beautiful picture you made sitting behind your board—a picture that I keep near me always. Oh, that I could describe it—I cannot draw it. The blue all-seeing eyes—the brows arching as you criticise each stroke—the frown when you are not satisfied with it—the smile when you have caught it and the smile for me.
>
> Dearest—I walk with you beside your sparkling river and look at the hills and the sky.
> I love you—I do, I do. Bob.[92]

Meanwhile both Nora and Black were committed to making their contribution to the war effort, despite Black's often failing experiments, and her skin conditions that made life miserable. Nora wrote again that she had become so inured to the presence of rats that one had eaten a biscuit under her pillow before she detected it, while another ate through her watch band. She suggested to her parents that her diet was also a cause of the skin troubles she experienced as she had seen no fresh vegetables or fruit for two months. There is a wistful tone in her letter of 12 August 1944:

> Most of the men look ill and we women all yellow and patchy … I look at my hands in revolt … You will be welcoming the first days of Spring. How remote all that sweet freshness seems from this. Here the air is permeated still with the smell of decayed Japanese food, and bodies and camp refuse.[93]

Nora often had to paint in her tent with her canvas set up in an ad hoc easel arrangement out of the rain. It constantly poured in Finschhafen. Conversely she writes from Alexishafen that she suffered out in the 'blazing heat and glare'[94]—not just from the

sun but from passers-by. Nora did not like working in front of an audience and felt the running commentary was an unwelcome distraction: 'You couldn't paint anywhere, without a dozen or so people whooping encouragement behind you.'[95] She arranged with the surgeon to use the operating theatre when it was not in use: 'I was frowned on by the surgeon until I made a drawing of the theatre sister for him, and now he's co-operative and we take the use of the theatre turn and turn about.' She was getting ready to 'blast'[96] Treloar with his desired subject matter:

> I'm working on half a dozen subjects at once. A portrait of the theatre sister in cap and mask and gloves preparing the

28. Nora drew this work in Finschhafen: *Ango, Papuan police boy* 1944, sanguine conté crayon, black crayon on paper, 52.3 × 39 cm.
Collection of the Australian War Memorial. ART22097.

> instruments of torture. As the theatre is the coolest place here, that subject is welcome. Also … painting a blood transfusion on a native, a scene of wounded being unloaded on stretchers off a barge, and a composition of men working amid the ruins constructing a picture theatre—the seats coconut logs, the screen a fantastic structure of bamboo stems. The men here are mahogany colour, they work just in jungle-green trousers and leggings, and make beautiful studies. One of these subjects alone could take months of study. I live and work in a daze of bewildered subject matter, and heat and mosquitoes and flies and smell.[97]

Nora said 'the operating theatre provided relief with its stone floors and white-washed walls'[98] and wrote home that the nursing sisters were friendly and inclusive.[99] She was particularly taken with the Papuans, describing them as 'marvellous models, unselfconscious, patient and understanding … [they] have such graceful movements that it is hard to look the other way towards subjects of military interest.'[100] Eventually she provided Treloar with more than he could have asked for, though it would take time for this to materialise.

By mid September Nora's skin conditions were so severe the specialist at Alexishafen advised her that she must return to Australia or be confined to her bed. On 18 September 1944 she advised her parents she would be leaving New Guinea on a flying boat, once arrangements had been made.[101] She arrived in Melbourne on 6 October. Officially attached to Keswick Barracks in South Australia,[102] she travelled to her parents at The Cedars the following day, where she stayed for four weeks to recover. During her respite from army life and the oppressive conditions of the tropics, Treloar had communicated his concerns about Nora's work to Louis McCubbin. He was clear with McCubbin that he was not assessing her on artistic merit but on the basis of subject matter and he asked McCubbin to visit Nora while she was at home to review her work and make a recommendation about whether to extend her commission.[103] At this stage Treloar's plan had been for Nora to recuperate and return to Melbourne to complete her New Guinea work, offering to try to arrange an extension should she require one. Treloar looked to McCubbin to help him decide what course of

action he should take, and he sent McCubbin copies of his own letters and Nora's response:

> I am not an artist myself, and therefore not qualified to express an opinion, but I feel entitled to criticise the content of Heysen's painting … it will be apparent from the correspondence that Captain Heysen resented my comments.[104]

McCubbin visited Nora at The Cedars to review her work and he wrote to Treloar on 23 October 1944 in positive terms:

> … [the work] consists of drawings and paintings in oil and watercolour. The subjects of these are portrait heads of nurses, doctors and native personnel; sketches and studies of hospital wards, blood transfusions, sick and wounded diggers, natives and Japs, … I was greatly impressed by the amount and quality of the work … which is remarkable considering the very trying conditions in New Guinea, particularly for a woman. She feels … she had been dismissed because you were disappointed with her work and that she is the only one that has been singled out … I feel I have left her with less of a grievance. She is very anxious to do some more work … I have every confidence in recommending that her appointment should be extended for a further three months, and longer if necessary.[105]

It is easy to see when looking through the works done by Nora in the War Memorial archive that her methods could have been at the heart of the problem, as well as the time it took to communicate between artist and authority. The collection of her work shows a series of workbooks containing sketches and working drawings often heavily notated regarding light conditions, reflections, and colours. She intended to use these as reference material for larger works back in Australia. She was clear about the practicalities of working in oils in the tropics during a war. This was an issue for a painter more at home in her studio with a cooperative sitter. As a result, Treloar did not receive many of the works in the early stages of Nora's commission that she planned to furnish to the army as a full representation of the women's services. This is clearly

demonstrated in the studies for the picture *Theatre sister Margaret Sullivan* 1944 (AWM, *plate 42*) at the Alexishafen Casualty Clearing Station and the completed oil painting done in Melbourne.

When she had recovered enough to continue painting, Nora arrived back in Melbourne, writing home on 7 December 1944 that she met with Treloar who had not received her letter about her movements. He was not expecting her in Melbourne nor did he know that she wanted to travel on to Sydney. It appears that Nora had decided that her next stop would be at the Australian Imperial Forces Blood Bank at Sydney Hospital, where Black was posted as part of the malaria research team on his return from Finschhafen. Letters at the NLA in Canberra between Nora and Black illustrate a level of planning as to how they might be stationed in some proximity to each other and how these orders might be brought about. In one letter Black writes from Cairns: 'So you told the Colonel [Treloar] you would like to see this part of the country—my darling—you know my answer but we must await the result of his thinking it over'.[106] Her time at the Blood Bank in Sydney was short, though she produced a number of works 'of nurses using the cumbersome machinery of the 1940s. As the *Weekly* reported in a feature story, she found it "most interesting … as there are AAMWS, VADs [Volunteer Aid Detachments] and Sisters all doing important jobs very efficiently"'.[107] Nora returned to The Cedars for Christmas after a request for leave was granted by Treloar. Thiele writes that it was the happiest Christmas at the family's home for eight years. Both Michael and Stefan had walked away from air crashes during their service, and Freya and her husband, Ted, joined Nora with Sallie and Hans around the tree in the studio with her brothers and their families. Young Josephine was seven and revelled in the festivities.[108]

Nora was back in Melbourne early January 1945 and again posted to the war artists' studios at Victoria Barracks. Here she worked on unfinished pictures from New Guinea, wrestling with the difficulties of reimagining the scenes she had witnessed. In March she wrote about her work and the other war artists at the studios:

> I am still working on New Guinea stuff, but I feel that I have almost finished what I can do with it. It is so difficult, I find to retain spirit and life working only from notes and memory.
>
> Seven new artists have been appointed. Donald Friend is already working here and has unfortunately the room next to mine. He giggles incessantly and entertains. I don't mind the racket of the trains and trams, but that giggling is an irritant. He wears heavy gold rings on his fingers, long hair and the work I've seen up to date repulses me. I'm convinced he is a fake, no doubt a very amusing and witty one with pretty camouflage, but my back bristles.
>
> There's another woman too, a Sybil Craig, elderly and a painter of flowers too so they tell me. Max Ragless and John Goodchild from Adelaide and Solomon Herman and James Flett from Sydney … for six months only and only 4 of them are to be official war artists.[109]

Nora always spoke her mind, and her personal response to Friend is not reflected in the AWM biographical notes on Friend's contribution to the war effort. He had enlisted in 1943. Perhaps if Nora had known that before he was commissioned as a war artist Friend was one of the soldiers who participated in anti-malaria drug trials in northern Queensland in 1943 she might have taken a different view of her flamboyant neighbour. Friend wrote: 'Nowadays we are being given about 30 grains of quinine a day. The result is that my ears ring, my skin is rapidly going yellow and I feel jumpy and rather weak'. Until his official commission as an artist in February 1945 Friend had consistently documented the soldier's life during his military service. Sydney Ure Smith had recommended Friend to McCubbin when there was pressure from the Contemporary Art Society and the media to appoint 'a diversity of modern artists'.[110] It appears that Sybil Craig's and Solomon (Sali) Herman's appointments were also a result of this push by the Moderns.[111]

Friend did not remain in Melbourne but travelled extensively, documenting some horrific aspects of the closing months of the war in Borneo and Balikpapan. He had planned to remain in the Pacific to record the surrender of the Japanese but he was forced to return to Australia and complete his work in Sydney due to a tropical rash

29. Back in Australia between December 1944 and May 1945, Nora completed many of the oil paintings of her subjects in the army's Victoria Barracks studios in Melbourne using the studies she made under difficult conditions in New Guinea. After peace was declared, she continued to work in her own time to finish all her work to her own demanding standard finally delivering over 200 works to the AWM. Theatre sister Margaret Sullivan and Sapper Bashful portraits are being worked on, along with a portrait of nurse Private Gwynneth Patterson. Behind Nora is her work *Blood donor* 1944. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. 085075.

which severely affected his hands. The AWM states at the end of Friend's biographical notes that it 'deplores his now known paedophile behaviour but acknowledges his works in conveying a unique insight into the Australian experience of war.'[112] Flett and Craig were both commissioned—Flett to Morotai and Brunei and Craig on the home front among the women of the arms and munitions factories. Nora's description of Craig as elderly is curious, as she was only ten years older than Nora. Herman was already an enlisted soldier and served in the Pacific as an official war artist.

Nora took leave in late April, the minimum three months extension McCubbin had recommended had passed. She briefly returned to Hahndorf. In May 1945 Nora handed over eighty-six works in oil and watercolour to Treloar. He wrote to Nora: 'I myself would like to see your engagement extended indefinitely so that you can do with the WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service) and the WAAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) similar to which you have done with the Army Women's Service.'[113]

No doubt Nora felt vindicated. She would also have been secretly pleased as her plan to be nearer to Robert Black appeared feasible. In July 1945 she was given 'restricted approval to Land Headquarters Medical Research Unit in Cairns for the purpose of making pictorial records'.[114] While happy with Treloar's acceptance of her work and the extension to her commission, she was frustrated by Treloar's response to Sydney Ure Smith's request to publish some of her work when he visited her in Melbourne:

> Ure Smith was over for a week … and he came down to see my work—was enthusiastic and wants to publish some in his next volume on Australian Art—he says he wants to reproduce some of the war artists' work, but Treloar won't have it, as he thinks all proceeds should go to the Australian War Museum. It seems wrong that the work of the American artists has been given so much publicity, while ours is neglected and the artists, by being in this job, are out of circulation and the public eye.[115]

This could be considered another factor in Nora's gradual fall into obscurity after her Archibald win and her earlier successes. It would be almost eight years after the Archibald when she re-emerged into the public realm once again as independent artist. The early war years had been spent trying to make a contribution at a time when art was not a public priority, after the declaration of war. The rest of her time was spent in service to her country at a time when the focus was still not on art but on survival, victory and the quest for peace. She was certainly out of the public eye and some publicity for all the war artists would have helped in their transition back to civilian life.

Nora did not go straight to the army base in Cairns. Speck details that she was transferred from the army to the air force in May 1945 and appointed to the AIF Medical Air Evacuation Unit at the RAAF Base Townsville in Garbutt.[116] This led to confusion and concern for Treloar as a bureaucratic breakdown resulted in him not knowing where Captain Heysen was stationed. Nora was oblivious, thinking that the air force would have communicated her itinerary to Treloar. As a result, from August 1945 Treloar requested a weekly progress report from Nora.[117]

Early in 1944, fifteen nurses were recruited from the RAAFNS to the newly formed No. 1 Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit (MAETU). 'The nurses' rigorous preparation included training in in-flight medicine and care, emergency jungle and ocean survival procedures, and weapons handling.'[118] Nora's time in Townsville produced some detailed and poignant drawings and oils that represented the flying sisters and their outstanding work, capturing, as Speck says, their 'elevation in status from ministering angels to members of the armed forces':

> As the war progressed the distinction between combatants and non-combatants in the army was becoming less obvious. Nurses died when their hospital ship the *Centaur* was bombed, they were executed at Banka Island, they were POWS and, late in the war they were issued with guns and given modified combat training. Fortunately Heysen was not in a position to document these events, but in an understated way she captured the transition to military nurse.[119]

Nora flew up and down the coastline of northern Queensland as she accompanied the nurses, known as the 'Flying Angels', who flew in and out of the Pacific combat zones delivering supplies and evacuating the wounded to base hospitals in Australia. Nora participated in medical evacuations from Lae and Morotai back to Townsville. She was focused about the kind of material she was after and eventually wrote home late in June that she was on the move from an undisclosed position in the Pacific later revealed as Morotai:

> The first night I spent at Higginsfield way up on the tip of Cape York, then Madang, Wewak, Hollandia and Biak, all round

> New Guinea and up … I move still further up, I'm going with a couple of the flying sisters to bring back the battle casualties. I'll be away three or four days, then will return here, I hope, with my subject matter. It will be difficult working on the plane full of stretcher cases over the eight hour flight, I don't know how it will go … The air is electric with rumours and every hour brings the peace nearer in talk … It will be bedlam here if news comes through. Everyone is hanging over the wireless waiting, the guns are ready to go off in the blast of victory. The island will tremble.[120]

Peace might have been in the air but there was tragedy still to come. Nora was sharing quarters with some of the sisters, and a memoir held at the AWM written by one of these nurses, Flying Sister Beryl Chandler, RAAFNS 502237 No. 1 MAETU, records the interaction her unit had with Nora, and the death of one of her fellow nurses, Flying Sister Marie Craig. Nora drew Craig three days before peace was declared in the Pacific on 15 August 1945 after the Japanese surrendered to the Allies:

> Miss Nora Heysen … was to spend a fortnight with us at Morotai painting us at work. Writing of these days brings to mind Nora's painting of Marie and how it came about.
>
> Nora had approached me many times to sit for her and for one reason or another I did not want to. One day there was only Marie, Nora and myself in the Officer's Mess when once again Nora asked me to allow her to paint me. Again I wasn't keen and dithered whereupon Marie said to Nora, 'Look Nora, you might as well paint me, I'll pose for you. This job is going to kill me anyway and at least people will know what Marie Craig looked like.' I was aghast at this statement, because she seemed to mean it. I remember saying to her, 'Marie, it is a volunteer job and no one would mind if you transferred to ground duties' … but she was adamant, she was going to fly on and she was just as sure she was not going to make it home to Australia. 'No Chan, the writing is on the wall. I am just not going to come through.' She loved

> the work, it gave her immense satisfaction, but she had this strong premonition that she would be killed.[121]

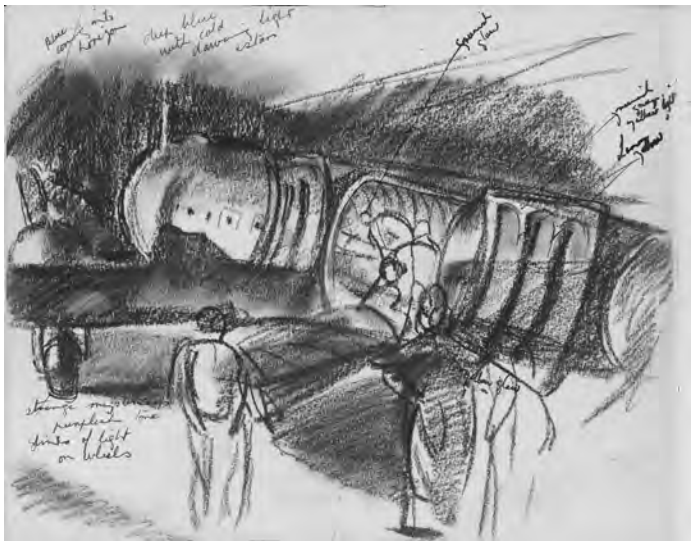
Craig sat for Nora one month before she was lost along with captain, crew and all on board in September 1945 when her plane disappeared. It was found twenty-five years later on the side of a mountain 14,000 feet above sea level in the Carstenz Ranges in Indonesian Papua.[122] In conversation with Michael Cathcart in 2001 for ABC Radio, Nora recalled the event:

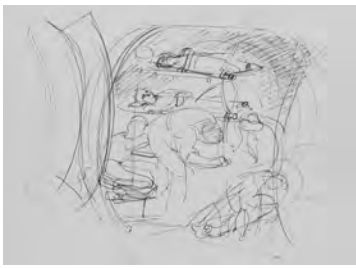
> NH: I was detailed off for bringing the wounded down from New Guinea and there was always a nursing sister in attendance

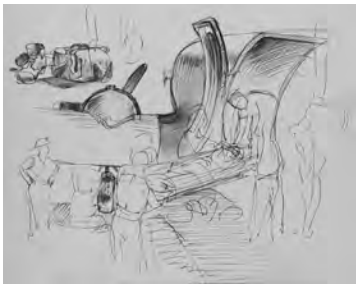
30. Sister Marie Craig 1945, sepia conté crayon, charcoal, blue and sanguine crayon on paper, 47.6 × 32.7 cm, RAAFNS, No. 2 MAETU, killed in 1945 in a plane crash on a flight from Biak. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. ART24278.

31. Sister Sheah 1945, pencil with black conté crayon on paper, 39.6 × 29.0 cm. Sister Verdun 'Chic' Sheah RAAFNS was killed when the transport plane she was aboard crashed during a short flight between Jacquinot Bay and Rabaul. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. ART24305.

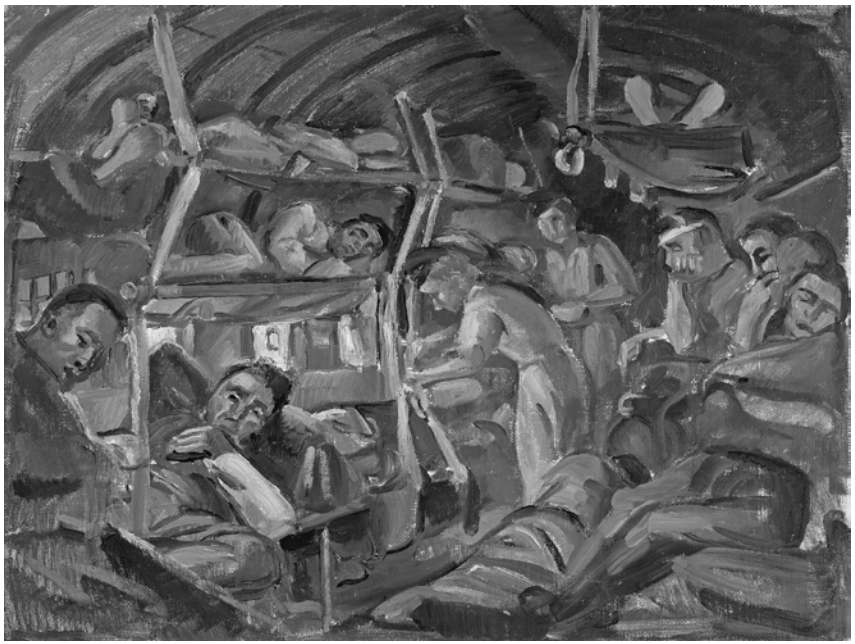
> and I [drew] her. On two accounts they came down and were killed—and I thought well those portraits that I had done of them should go to their families and I sent them to their mothers, I don't know if for better or for worse, I don't know, but I did that. The war museum could have objected to that, couldn't they?
> MC: I think in theory, but not morally.
> NH: Oh no, it was very sad, because they really didn't get any recognition.[123]







32. Nora's work practice involved making studies in situ and annotating the drawings with various aspects for reference later in the studio where she produced fully worked oil paintings. Drawings are from her sketchbook and all inform the work *Ambulance plane carrying casualties from Morotai to Townsville* 1945. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. Sketchbook ART291199.



33. Ambulance plane carrying casualties from Morotai to Townsville 1945, oil on canvas, 38.7 × 45.1 cm. The plane is from No. 2 MAETU, RAAF, and a flying sister of the RAAFNS can be seen in the centre of the picture, Townsville, Queensland. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. ART24375.

The lack of recognition for these nurses referred to by Nora, Marie Craig and Verdun 'Chic' Sheah has shifted over the years, with their work celebrated and remembered by the Australian War Memorial and the RAAFNS and by authors such as Catherine Speck and Scott Bevan. The pictures delivered by Nora Heysen as official war artist recording their activities have been instrumental in remembering them and their sacrifice and underscore the valuable role of the war artist in preserving these memories. Speck describes the Craig portrait: 'Heysen's study of a serious, almost grim RAAF Flying Sister … shows Craig in a peaked cap, collared shirt and jacket; an image in which her femininity co-exists naturally with her air force uniform.'[124] Flying Sister Beryl Chandler wrote that Sister 'Chic' Sheah earned her nickname for 'her immaculate

appearance under any circumstances, even after alighting after a long and difficult flight.'[125] Well after peace was declared, operations to locate and repatriate POWs and the wounded continued, and Sheah's plane crashed on one of these missions. She was twenty-nine when she died on 15 November 1945. The two women are immortalised in Nora's work.

After her flying missions with the air force, Nora returned to Cairns. She was relocated to duties with the army at the Land Headquarters Medical Research Unit. She was also reunited with Black and she recorded the work of his research team. She produced a collection of work that documented the life-saving research by the scientists, and of the volunteers—she wrote to Treloar describing them as 'patients who suffer as "guinea pigs" with malaria for the progress of science: these volunteers do a good job, I think, and deserve recording'.[126] The AWM holds the series of artworks by Nora that record the diligence of the researchers and the sacrifice of the volunteers that contributed to research that would be crucial in later conflicts, including the Vietnam War.[127] Robert Black ultimately took up a position as professor of tropical medicine at Sydney University, a position he would hold for twenty years, and from 1955 served on the World Health Organisation expert advisory panel on malaria. In 1984, director of the Commonwealth Institute of Health, David Ferguson, wrote a tribute to Black on his retirement in *The Medical Journal of Australia*:

> He could be credited in large measure with the eradication of endemic malaria from Australia in 1962 (formally announced in 1981) and has fought persistently and tenaciously to keep the disease out, through the medium of his Malaria Case Register, national committees, clinical consultation, advocacy in medical and other press, meticulous correspondence, untiring advice to travellers and others, and teaching of generations of undergraduate and postgraduate students.[128]

But it was still early days in Robert Black's career. After the war, he and Nora would find a way to be together.

Some of Nora's most significant works representing the women's services were created in the last months of her commission. These non-commissioned portraits of women Nora selected herself display the power and capability of her subjects. Nora has cast these women as heroes in the fields that they were assigned, removing stereotypical representations and introducing the viewer to the new militarised woman. Two portraits central to this collection are *WAAAF cook Corporal Joan Whipp* 1945 (AWM, *plate 41*) and *Transport driver (Aircraftwoman Florence Miles)* 1945 (AWM, *plate 34*). Though the kitchen is traditionally seen as domestic, in this setting with her arms crossed over her strong body in uniform, army cook Joan Whipp is a commanding figure, ready to produce the sustenance necessary to literally feed an army.

Nora also painted the only female entomologist at the Land Headquarters Medical Research Unit in Cairns, Major Josephine Mackerras. Nora described Mackerras as 'another Madame Curie in her own field' and in Nora's typically frank style continued, 'an odd looking little person, ugly and interesting, bright intelligent eyes behind glasses and a lined and pitted yellow face and grey wispy hair'.[129] Despite Nora's unflattering description of Mackerras, she has rendered a strong and serious scientist situated in her professional capacity working in a vital area of research that significantly altered the rate of survival of forces in the tropics (AWM, *plate 38*). By now Nora had developed her technique in successfully rendering khaki in her strong representations of women in the forces. Her treatment of light on the subject's face, her hands, and her workbench suggests clarity along with the glowing edges of the microscope as an instrument of precision.

Aircraftwoman Florence Miles driving her truck is the antithesis of any notion of the tangled identity observed by Schlusser in Nora's 1937 self portrait *Down and out in London*. When the work was painted, towards the end of 1945, Nora was seven years into living as an independent woman, well away from her family and her father's direct influence. In this work, the shackles of the domestic sphere and the traditional role of soldier have been upended. Nora was also in uniform, the academicians that had thwarted her had passed on, London had been bombed and the threat of a Japanese invasion of Australia had presented as a real possibility and the women of Australia were on board, pivotal to a successful Allied effort. In ignoring her father's concerns for

her wellbeing, by enlisting and taking independent control of her life, Nora had succeeded as the nation's first woman war artist. The National Gallery's assessment might suggest a description of the artist herself, not just in her supporting her country but in progressing her personal beliefs and goals to live her life as an artist:

> In this portrait Heysen combines the heroic with the everyday stoicism of women who just get on with the job. Getting on with the job in 1945 meant that women assumed the roles and responsibilities, which before the Second World War had been the preserve of men.
>
> Florence Miles inspires confidence; she is feminine and strong. Her committed gaze through the windscreen together with the RAAF flag, visible through her window, play like a confident anthem on the road to the allies' victory.[130]

Nora's own character mirrors the attributes the NGA applies to the work. This strength of character, her 'committed gaze' and determination is a testament to the upbringing that she received. She learned by example that through thorough application to a task a result could be achieved. That result could be measured in terms of how the job had been approached and this appeared to involve a profound sincerity.

In November 1945 Nora left Cairns and, reluctantly, Robert Black. She was required to return to Victoria Barracks to complete her folio of work for final submission to Treloar. The parting was difficult. Their relationship had been framed by the controlled environment of the armed forces, the constraints of that existence acting as a buffer from what society outside would impose on a single woman's and a married man's social transgression. Previously Black had written to Nora concerned about what his civilian career would be and whether or not there would be a job for him. His successes in the Army Medical Research Unit laboratory would see him put forward as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene by Brigadier Fairley days after peace is declared.[131] His life as a research scientist was secured. Exacerbating his professional

concerns and state of mind is the anguish attached to his personal life. It is potent in Black's letter after he and Nora parted at the end of the war:

> Oh my darling
>
> It has been a bad week—I could not write when so bewildered, never before has our parting been like this—I have just been existing … Please forgive my weakness—I love you, yes' m I do … It is hard to be left in the place which is so full of memories and is now so lonely … oh darling my feet took me over the road which you have painted for me … The heat and smoke haze made the mountains dance in the sun. It was there that I knew you were really with me. … I sat and listened and felt you there. Perhaps that is the only thing which makes staying behind bearable …
>
> Good night Miss Nora, I love you—perhaps more than ever—if that be possible—the ship has been through a storm & now rides before the breeze—sleep tight in that hollow which is yours. I caress you—please I do wish to hear from you.
> Robert.[132]

Nora's departure from Cairns and protracted trip to Melbourne must have been challenging if her emotional state could be compared to Black's. The logistics of travel were taxing, with armed forces personnel on the move around the country. Nora had a job to finish that would take some months but the personal hurdles that she was to face must also have weighed on her. How did she think this relationship was going to move forward? There was no mention of Black to her family and there appears to be a gap between her leaving Cairns and her writing to inform them she is in Melbourne suggesting she made a stop in Sydney to see Black.

Nora wrote to her parents after her arrival in Melbourne from Cairns:

> The trip from Cairns took me nearly a week instead of a couple of days. I arrived yesterday feeling utterly exhausted and today am still in bed … Arriving at the Menzies more dead than alive, only to find they had no rooms, absolutely crowded out as was every other place I tried in Melbourne. At last I rang Sybil Irving and she has put me up, so here I am. I've had air

> travel once and for all. Of course I had 350 lbs of luggage, most of it in brown paper parcels, eleven separate ones to look after and lug on and out of trucks, and planes, and transient camps.
>
> Written in haste and tiredness. I'll write again as soon as I straighten myself out. My love to all and hope it will be the Adelaide Express soon,
> Nora.[133]

Her official discharge from the army took effect on 8 February 1946 but Nora remained in Melbourne until she completed her work. It appears there was a visit home to The Cedars as she wrote in March to her parents asking them to send her some papers she left on the top of the linen press: 'preliminary notes for the cataloguing of my war work and I can't get on without them as I cannot remember numbers or details'.[134] McKillup writes that Nora requested further art supplies from Treloar, advising him that her work was progressing slowly:

> He was very concerned and asked Nora to tell him if she was working exclusively on her War Memorial paintings because if so he felt she must be paid. However there was no record of further payment to Nora. Her completed paintings were handed to Treloar on 22 September 1946.[135]

Nora had been tasked with the daunting role of sole official war artist to document the women's services in the Pacific arena. They are well represented in sixty-two paintings, 102 drawings and five sketchbooks holding eighty-eight works.[136]