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Aftercare and the Second World War soldier: maintaining the masculinity of military men in the Trelowarren Rehabilitation Base 1949-1970

Despite the hopes of Australian political and military authorities that the lessons learned during the First World War would reduce the number of psychiatric casualties from 1939, the Second World War saw an increase in the numbers of men developing war neurosis. After the war, some were committed to mental institutions, beginning a process of advocacy by the Returned Services League (RSL) and others to ensure that ex-soldiers were treated separately from the civilian insane. Scholars have long discussed the fervent attempts by many Australians to ensure that ex-soldiers of the First World War with psychological wounds of war were both defined and housed separately from civilian mental cases to avoid stigma and to preserve their gendered status. Less is written about the fate of the traumatised Second World War soldier, although a similar campaign to preserve their respectability despite their weakened and evidently demasculinised condition took place, not only while they were institutionalised, but also for those who were housed in aftercare hostels, such as Mental Health Auxiliaries of Victoria's (MHAV) Trelowarren Rehabilitation Base. This paper uses Trelowarren's minutes, annual reports and other records alongside RSL archives to chart the attempts by military men to monitor the continuing care of their traumatised comrades by the tireless women of the MHAV aftercare organisation. The subtle wrestling for control between the men and women who took responsibility for the lives of this small group of traumatised ex-soldiers tells a gendered story that illustrates the enduring social influence on the provision of mental health care.