# Community Engagement in the Conservation of a War Museum Collection

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### Overview

A large community of war veterans lives at the Returned and Services League (RSL) LifeCare retirement village in Narrabeen, a beach side suburb of Sydney in Australia. These veterans have museum are made up of objects donated by the residents and their families.

Elva Batts, War Museum Chairperson, a lively woman in her nineties and World War II vet, raised the alarm when she noticed that some of the uniforms in the collection had pest infestations. Concerns served in many Australian conflicts and peacekeeping missions. were also raised about the documentation of the collection, as the Presently, the majority of residents served in World War II under only records were the donor's registry book and a list of books in the three forces: Army, Navy and Air Force. In the community village collection. The ageing population of the museum committee coupled where the veterans live is a War Museum. The contents of this with the need for conservation advice meant they were struggling to manage the museum themselves.

The Australian War Memorial (AWM) was contacted and Head of Conservation, Barbara Reeve, investigated.

The AWM made the following recommendations:

- Preventive and remedial conservation.
- Integrated Pest Management programme.
- Create a catalogue and accession collection items.
- 4. Improved collection displays.
- 5. Oral history documentation.

The AWM contacted the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC) to engage them in implementing these recommendations with the RSL LifeCare through employment of students and graduates. The project planning, logistics and workings of this exercise are an affordable solution to a large scale community conservation project as well as a teaching and learning opportunity for students.

One of the most important achievements so far is that the project has raised the profile of the War Museum and revived the relevance of the collection in the community.

### War Museum Collection

The War Museum collection contains 5,000 items from the Boer War, World War I, and World War II to present day conflicts and peacekeeping missions. It is a typical military history collection including uniforms, medals, photographs, and letters; as well as a variety of military equipment such as weapons and military kit. There are many flags and pennants, including examples of flags from Nazi Germany, Japan, as well as flags of Allied Forces, such as the USA and Britain. RSL LifeCare is planning a new museum for the collection.











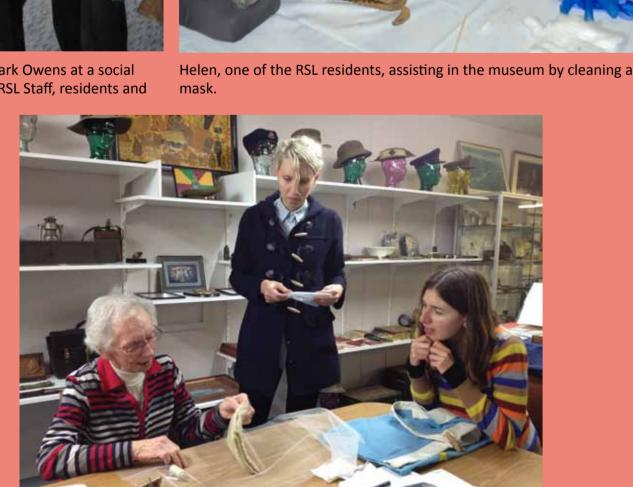


### Community Engagement

Community engagement has been integral to the project and there have been many adjustments along the way to ensure this continues smoothly. Communication has been one of the major areas of learning for the project. This has been achieved through project updates in the form of presentations, flyers, and attendance at community events. Regular meetings with the museum committee have ensured that the community's needs are being met.

As the museum is located within the village, residents whose donations are in the collection are able to drop in while the students are working and discuss use and provenance. For instance, residents have helped with the identification of particular military plane models. The museum committee has also assisted with the development of Community Centre displays. Residents have been assisting students by sewing new enclosures for delicate textiles and cleaning of





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## Oral Histories Project

Aim: To interview the residents about the history and use of items in the collection.

Significance: The importance of this project is that without documenting this information, the stories will be lost. Creating a catalogue, preserving the items and attaching the documentation to those items, are important outcomes for the residents. There are also some rare items in the collection and recording their histories is crucial.

Methodology: The participants are asked to talk about objects in the collection, in particular those that are special to them.

The key questions:

- 1. What is/was the object used for?
- When was it in use?
- What is your personal story relating to the item?
- How did it end up in the collection?

It is important to document personal stories relating to the collection items because the WWII veterans are an ageing population and time is a critical issue.

This research project will seek to explore the historical aspects of the collection in the museum to inform its display and long-term preservation. The study aims to build the catalogue by including interviews with residents to provide primary source material. Increased knowledge in this area informs the preservation of the collection.

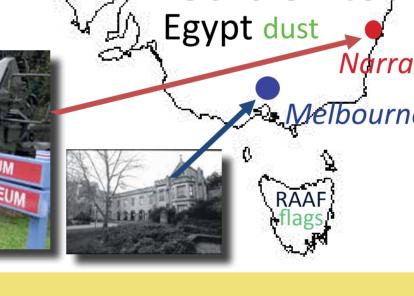


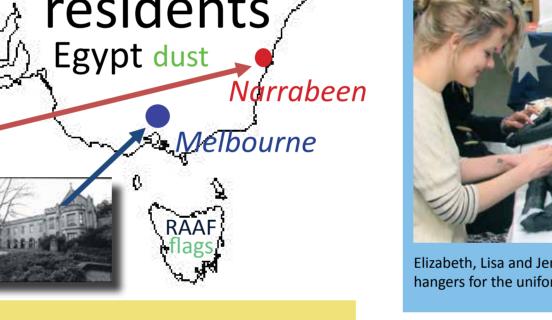
cudents Sophie and Elizabeth working with Merv on the models in the collection. The models have been individually

peacekeeping Returned and Services League Sobjects documentation 3









training purposes and to engage the residents in preservation and conservation of the collection.

University of Canberra students.

Jenny measuring a flag as part of accessioning and

10. Awards, Medals & Insignia

12. Military Kit and Equipment

11. Personal Belongings &

Equipment



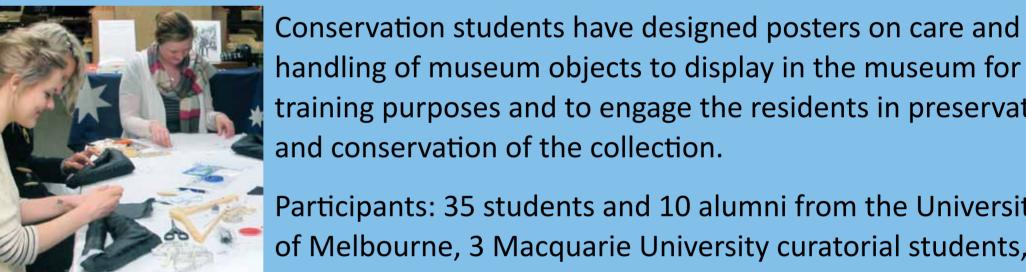
### Outcomes

- Collection database created.
- Oral histories are being recorded.
- The collection is receiving conservation care.
- New museum displays are integrating oral histories. Collection research has been undertaken through two
- student theses. • Several treatments have been successfully completed
- including 25 as part of student assessment at CCMC. Vulnerable items have been treated and rehoused.
- Dangerous items have been removed and hazardous items are stored safely.
- Integrated Pest Management implemented.
- Preventive conservation measures have also been implemented including regular cleaning.
- Care and Handling posters created for the museum.
- Students have received an holistic overview of museum management and conservation in a 'real world'

# Teaching and Learning

In consultation with the residents, students have been cataloguing and assessing all items to create a collection catalogue complete with donor information and conservation priorities. Staff from the Australian War Memorial taught students how to make padded coat hangers for the uniforms and also demonstrated cleaning and rehousing of war medals.

The War Museum collection has been a source of many treatment objects for practical subjects in the Master of Cultural Materials Conservation. Two students have also written research theses based on the collection. On site treatments are supervised by alumni of the conservation masters programme. A major onsite treatment of a Gallipoli tribute painting was undertaken by seven students and alumni with some assistance from residents.



Participants: 35 students and 10 alumni from the University of Melbourne, 3 Macquarie University curatorial students, 10

Catalogue

Students are accessioning the collection and entering data into spreadsheets under different categories (based on AWM database). These will be merged into one database. This was a learning curve for conservation students who tend to divide items by

manufacture. The categories are: Art **Published Works** 

**Private Papers** 

Photographs Weapons

Models Textiles

Flags and Pennants 9. Uniforms Map created by students to identify

### Hazards & OHS

In the first stage, the museum was thoroughly cleaned to remove mould that had grown due to the humid climate. Regular cleaning has since kept the mould under control. The pest infested uniforms were

frozen for 48 hours to kill the pests. They have since been

checked regularly for pests. Police were consulted to ensure safety of ammunition and bomb shells.

Radiation testing was also undertaken on some items under guidance of AWM such as navigational equipment, ammunition and bombs (anything that glowed in the dark). These items were sealed to prevent direct contact.

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I M	Dece	mber 2011	January 2012	February 2012	May 2012	August 2012	November 2012	January 2013	March 2013	May-June 2013	September - October 2013	November - December 2013	January - February 2014	March 2014	April-July 2014	August - September 2014	October 2014	November 2014		
Ε	Past									Current	Future									
L I N E	Australian War	Narrabeen RSL approached stralian War Memorial regarding conservation of collection.	Australian War Memorial contacted the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at The University of Melbourne to engage students in the project.	Staff, Graduates and Students go to Narrabeen to scope the project. Museum Map created. Cataloguing begins. Spreasheets created based on AWM database.	Cataloguing and Accessioning. Preventive conservation introduced.	Cataloguing, Accessioning & Treatment.			Cataloguing, Accessioning & Treatment.	Installation of Gallipoli Display.	Curatorial Research.  Merging of spreadsheets into one database.	Preventive conservation & new planning for new building	huilding	New		collection	Installation of objects in new museum.			

### Biographies



Jennifer O'Connell specialised in paintings in the Master of Arts (Cultural Material Conservation) and also completed the Postgraduate Certificate in Photographic Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. Jennifer won the 2011 ADFAS Student Conservator of the Year (University of Melbourne) for achievements in academia, community outreach and support of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM). Jennifer's conservation experience includes working at the National Archives of Australia, Aboriginal art centres, conserving a flood damaged collection of Aboriginal Art at the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation and mural restoration. Jennifer has worked as a project co-ordinator on the cataloguing and conservation of the RSL War Museum project.

**Sophie Lewincamp,** Paper conservator and Lecturer at the Centre for Cultural Material Conservation, University of Melbourne co-ordinates the Masters hands-on treatment subjects and internship placements. Sophie has worked at some of Australia's leading cultural institutions such as the National Library of Australia and Australian War Memorial. Sophie is a graduate of the University of Canberra conservation course and in 2005-06 was awarded the Harper-Inglis Paper Conservation Fellowship at the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

environment.

Sophie is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne researching Community Memory and Community Collections; this conservation and community engagement project that Sophie has co-ordinated provides an interesting case study.

### Acknowledgements

RSL LifeCare Ron Thompson Penny Joy Donna Robson Elva Batts

Bob Leckie

Museum Committee

**Australian War Memorial** Barbara Reeve Jessica Firth Claire Champion

CCMC





