

Medals for Australians – World War One and World War Two

In both World War One and World War Two, Australian servicemen and women received medals and honours. These generally fall into two categories:

- **service or campaign** medals – these were given to anyone who served at a particular place or time
- **honours and awards** – these were awarded for particular acts of bravery or periods of excellent service

These honours were awarded by authorities to individuals. At the same time, unofficial commemorative medallions were made for various purposes; these are not the same as official honours and have no official meaning.

It can quite often be difficult to tell medals apart. Pay close attention to the ribbon colours.



1 The medals of Lt. Wilmot Hudson Fysh, Australian Flying Corps (vwma.org.au/explore/people/358665)

World War One – service medals

These were awarded to British and Imperial troops enlisted in the armed forces (including nurses). There was no need to apply for these medals, as they were awarded automatically.

1914-15 Star. Awarded for military or naval service overseas before the end of 1915. Approximately 82,000 were awarded to Australians.



British War Medal. Awarded for service in a theatre of war at any point during the war. This was defined more widely than the 1914-15 Star; those who served 6 months in the Merchant Marine were eligible. Approximately 338,000 were awarded to Australians.

Victory Medal. Awarded for overseas service in a theatre of war at any point during the war. The ribbon was the same across all Imperial nations, but the medal itself was a specifically Australian design. Approximately 336,000 were awarded to Australians.



World War Two – service medals

Four general service medals were awarded to Australians engaged in the war effort in various ways. There was no need to apply for these medals, as they were awarded automatically.

1939-1945 Star. Awarded for overseas air, military or naval service, or service in the Merchant Marine, for a period of at least six months.



Defence Medal. Awarded for six months service in "non-operational areas subjected to enemy air attack, or loosely threatened" (including the northern part of the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait Islands), or for twelve months military service away from one's home area. Time spent as a POW was not counted towards the requirement.

War Medal 1939-45. Awarded for 28 days full-time military service anywhere and at any time during the war. Uniformed Red Cross, Salvation Army and press correspondents who served in operational areas were also eligible.



Australia Service Medal 1939-1945. While the other three service medals were awarded in all Commonwealth countries, the ASM was for Australians only. It was initially awarded to anyone who served in the armed forces for 18 months full-time or three years part-time, whether at home or abroad. In 1996 the time period was retrospectively changed to 30 days full-time and 90 days part-time.

World War Two – campaign medals

Australians also received medals if they were involved in specific theatres of war.

Atlantic Star. Awarded for six months' service in the Atlantic, whether in the Navy, Air Force or Merchant Marine.



Air Crew Europe Star. Awarded for six months as air crew in operations from British bases over Europe, up until 5 June 1944 (the eve of D-Day).

Africa Star. Awarded for service of any period in North Africa between 10 June 1940 (when Italy entered the war) until 12 May 1943 (when Axis troops surrendered in Tunisia). This includes naval service in the Mediterranean and off the coast of East Africa.



Pacific Star. Awarded for operational service in the Pacific (excluding Burma) from 8 December 1941. For the Army and Air Force service of any period was enough, but for the Navy and Merchant Navy six months' service was required.

Burma Star. Awarded for operational service in the Burma Campaign from 11 December 1941. For the Army and Air Force, service of any period was enough, but for the Navy and Merchant Navy, six months' service was required.



Italy Star. Awarded for operational service on land in Italy or Sicily (or in other Mediterranean theatres such as Yugoslavia or the Dodecanese Islands) after 11 June 1943. For the Army and Air Force, service of any period was enough, but for the Navy and Merchant Navy, six months' service was required.

France and Germany Star. Awarded for operational service on land in France, the Low Countries or Germany from 6 June 1944. Air crew who flew at least one operational sortie in this region also qualify.



Bravery and distinguished service awards (both wars)

If a serviceperson did anything particularly brave, the commanding officer of their unit could recommend them for an award. If approved, the award was officially published in the London Gazette (and later the Commonwealth Gazette in Australia). There was a hierarchy of bravery awards, as can be seen by the number of each awarded. To receive such an award was a great honour, and the names of the recipients were widely publicised back home. There was also the Mention in Dispatches, which was not a medal but a small bronze oak leaf worn on the ribbon of a service medal. Apart from the VC, most awards were different for officers and other ranks.

Victoria Cross (VC). The highest award for bravery in wartime. Bearing the inscription 'For Valour', VCs are cast from the bronze of cannon captured during 19th century wars. 64 Victoria Crosses were awarded to Australians in World War One, and 20 in World War Two.



Distinguished Service Order (DSO). A high award for excellent service or bravery in action against the enemy, given to officers. Australians received 624 in World War One and 295 in World War Two.

Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM). A high award for bravery, given to NCOs and Other Ranks in the Army and (after 1942) the Navy and RAAF (although none were ever awarded to sailors and only three to RAAF personnel). Over 1700 DCMs were awarded to Australians in World War One, and around 200 in World War Two.



Military Cross (MC). An award for bravery, given to commissioned officers up to the rank of Captain. In World War One, 2403 Australians received the medal, plus 170 who received an MC and Bar (that is, they were awarded the MC twice) and four who received a second Bar. In World War Two, 511 Australians received the medal, plus five who received an MC and Bar.



Military Medal (MM). An award for bravery, given to NCOs and Other Ranks. It was created in 1916 as the equivalent to the MC. Over 9000 were awarded to Australians in World War One, and around 1000 in World War Two.

Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). Created in 1918, this honour was available to RAAF officers, and awarded for bravery in flying operations against the enemy. Australians received 59 awards in World War One (with three officers receiving the DFC plus Bar) and 2154 in World War Two (plus 154 First Bars and 5 Second Bars).



Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM). Created in 1918, this honour was available to RAAF NCO's and Other Ranks, and awarded for bravery in flying operations against the enemy. One award was made to an Australian in World War One and 427 in World War Two.

Air Force Cross (AFC). This was an award for bravery in situations other than active air operations against the enemy. It was initially available only to RAAF officers, although was extended to Army and Navy personnel on flight operations in World War Two. Australians received 15 in World War One and 185 in World War Two.



Air Force Medal (AFM). This was an award for bravery in situations other than active air operations against the enemy. It was initially available to RAAF NCO's and Other Ranks, although was extended to Army and Navy personnel on flight operations in World War Two. Two were awarded to Australians in World War One, and 18 in World War Two.

Distinguished Service Cross (DSC). This was created in 1914 and available to naval officers (and officers of the Merchant Navy) up to the rank of Commander (eventually). It was for brave actions below the criteria for the DSO. Three were awarded to Australians in World War One and 155 in World War Two.



Distinguished Service Medal (DSM). This was created in 1914 and available to Petty Officers and ratings (i.e. naval personnel below officer rank), for bravery. Australians received 17 in World War One and 162 in World War Two.