

ANZAC
SPECIAL

Soldiers' Solace STITCHING

Quiltmaking on the battlefields may seem an unlikely idea, but these patchwork marvels have all been hand stitched by soldiers at war. The quilts are made from tiny pieces of woollen material from disused uniforms, army blankets and other discarded military fabrics. The work is a great feat in precision, beauty and resourcefulness.



The collection of quilts belongs to Dr Annette Gero, and it is due to be showcased at the Australasian Quilt Convention, at the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne from April 14-17. Annette has 12 quilts in this collection (made by British, Prussian and American soldiers, from wars dating back to the nineteenth century). "I didn't deliberately start collecting military quilts; I just bought them when I saw them because they are so dramatic," she says. The quilts on exhibit are from 1800 to 1950 and are all believed to have been made by men.

They were stitched during lulls in the fighting, as a form of therapy while recuperating from war wounds and also while being held in prisoner-of-war camps. "Ordinary soldiers on active duty endured long stretches of boredom, seemingly endless toil and long separation from family and loved ones," says Annette. Patchwork gave the men some semblance of beauty and a connection to memories of home.

The rich mixture of colours was achieved by including material from everyday uniforms, as well as dress uniforms used for formal occasions and pageants. The fabric was either heavy serge or worsted twill, and ribbon and button details have also been stitched on. Military personnel in India used heavy beadwork embellishment on the quilts, referencing traditional Indian textiles. The geometric squares

and diamonds create a mesmerising pattern, some having up to 15,000 pieces. Appliquéd leaves, flowers and hearts are used for intricate borders and focal points.

These handmade wonders were often made to be sent back home to loved ones, and now they can be enjoyed by many. Begin commemorations ahead of ANZAC Day with a visit to the exhibition.

— Janai Velez



READ ALL ABOUT IT

Wartime Quilts, by Dr Annette Gero, features more than 100 quilts made from military fabrics. The hardcover book is available for purchase at the exhibition, or email annettegero@bigpond.com to buy a copy direct.