

**Civilising Forces:  
Class, Gender and the  
Australian Women's Army Service 1941 – 1947**



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ARTV08045

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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Illustrations</b>	5
<b>Abstract</b>	6
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	8
<b>Abbreviations</b>	9
<b>Introduction</b>	12
Historiography	15
Methodology	21
Chapters overview	25
Conclusion	26
<b>Chapter 1 – The Desire to Serve</b>	28
The Depression	28
Gendering of war	31
Volunteering and the class divide	34
Patriotism, the press and British influence	37
The rise of the paramilitary organisations	39
Announcement of a women’s army	43

	<b>Page</b>
Conclusion to Chapter 1	50
<b>Chapter 2 – Creating the AWAS Ethos and Reputation</b>	<b>52</b>
Selection of the First Officers	52
Controller’s leadership style	58
Recruitment: methods and messages	65
Attitudes of service personnel	76
Conclusion to Chapter 2	80
<b>Chapter 3 – The AWAS Experience</b>	<b>81</b>
Army Education Service	81
Bearing of arms	85
Postings to isolated areas	88
New Guinea	94
Preparation for post-war life	99
Disbandment	103
Conclusion to Chapter 3	107

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	109
<b>Bibliography</b>	118

<b>Illustrations</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. There's a Job for You in the AWAS. <sup>1</sup>	Title Page
2. Map of Australia 1943.	11
3. Lt-Col Irving with recruits, Indooroopilly, Qld, 1942.	12
4. Uniform fitting, Melbourne 1944.	59
5. Returning to barracks, Darwin, NT, 1945.	62
6. Recruitment poster c 1942.	70
7. Recruitment posters c late 1942 and 1943.	73
8. Musical appreciation class, Northam, WA, 1943.	84
9. Anti-aircraft station, 1942.	85
10. Truck convoy on The Track, NT, 1944.	91
11. Arriving at Lae, New Guinea, 1945.	96

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<sup>1</sup> Australian War Memorial Collection: ARTV08045, *There's a Job for You in the AWAS*, 1942.

## **Abstract**

The Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) was Australia's first women's army and its largest Second World War women's service. More than 24,000 women served with the AWAS between 1941 and 1947. Established in response to the threat of Japanese invasion, at a time when Australia's elite forces were serving overseas, women volunteered to take over home-based servicemen's jobs to allow them to be sent to the forward areas. Initially required for routine work, women's roles were expanded following the Fall of Singapore in February 1942 and after the start of Japanese bombing raids on Darwin later that month. Taking on increasingly more technical, traditionally male jobs, AWAS servicewomen were posted to remote, isolated and geographically hostile areas of Australia and finally, to New Guinea.

There has been little academic interest in the AWAS, and this dissertation is the first study to investigate the Service in the context of gender and class. Arguing that these key factors motivated women's initial desire to serve, it claims that class and gender influenced all aspects of the AWAS, from its formation and leadership to the management of its ethos, public reputation, the lived experience of servicewomen and their expectations for post-war life. It reveals how class-based feminine ideals which underpinned AWAS philosophy were challenged by the growing demands of war and how traditional norms and values re-emerged as peace approached. Finally, it asserts that those who had originally been most advantaged by their class when the AWAS was established were among those with most to lose on demobilisation.

Key words: Australian Women's Army Service, AWAS, Second World War,  
class, gender, femininity.

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In memory of Lt. Grace Sexton, VF389673.



## Abbreviations

AAMWS	- Australian Army Medical Women's Service
AANS	- Australian Army Nursing Service
AIF	- Australian Imperial Force
AMF	- Australian Military Force
ANZAC	- Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
ATS	- Auxiliary Territorial Service
AWAS	- Australian Women's Army Service
AWLA	- Australian Women's Land Army
AWM	- Australian War Memorial, Canberra
AWS	- Australian Women's Services
CGS	- Chief of General Staff
DAG	- Deputy Adjutant General
IWM	- Imperial War Museum
LHQ	- Land Headquarters
L of C	- Line of Communication
MBE	- Member of the British Empire
MAGNT	- Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory
NAA	- National Archives of Australia
NAA(VSO)	- National Archives of Australia, Victorian State Office
NAA(AWM)	- National Archives of Australia, Australian War Memorial
NDLA	- National Defence League of Australia
NLA	- National Library of Australia, Canberra
NSW	- New South Wales
NT	- Northern Territory
NTAS	- Northern Territory Archives Service, Darwin
NTL	- Northern Territory Library, Darwin
Qld	- Queensland
SLV	- State Library Victoria, Melbourne
WAAAF	- Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force

WANS - Women's Australian National Service  
WRANS - Women's Royal Australian Naval Service  
WVNR - Women's Voluntary National Register  
WVS - Women's Voluntary Service  
YWCA - Young Women's Christian Association

## Map of Australia 1943



During the Second World War the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) served at military bases throughout Australia. The dotted line represents the journey some of them made by train and truck from Adelaide to remote bases in the Northern Territory. In 1945 they served in Lae and Hollandia in New Guinea, travelling by sea from Brisbane.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> National Archives of Australia (Australian War Memorial): 54/88/1 Part 6, History of NT Force, p.1. N.d.; 54, 88/1/1 Part 11, History of Service New Guinea, p.2. N.d. Map reproduced with the kind permission of Margaret Rousseau.

## Introduction



Lieutenant-Colonel Sybil Irving talking with some of the recruits at the training camp.

*Telegraph*, Brisbane, 3 February 1942 p.7.<sup>1</sup>

It is early February 1942 and in a small, faded newspaper photograph, a group of young women are pictured out for a walk, deep in conversation.<sup>2</sup> With only one of them in uniform, they could be any group of friends and the image inconsequential. But the women in civilian dress are Queensland's first recruits to the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) and their military companion is their head of service, Lieutenant-Colonel Sybil Irving. Her presence at their makeshift training camp at

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<sup>1</sup> 'AWAS Controller Visits AWAS Training Camp', *Telegraph*, Brisbane, 3 February 1942, p.7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article172697335> [accessed 6 August 2019]. Reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Indooroopilly, on the outskirts of Brisbane is part of an inaugural national tour of inspection of her troops. It represents a landmark moment in the history of the AWAS and a turning point in Australian women's participation in the Second World War.

On 13 August 1941, the Menzies War Cabinet had, with some reluctance, given its approval for the formation of a women's army.<sup>3</sup> But rather than bringing to an end months of political uncertainty and public debate about whether Australian women should be allowed to serve in defence of their country, this decision was only the start of a series of further delays. Emerging from the Depression and with the First World War a relatively recent memory, the Second World War presented a threat to the rebuilding of the nation.<sup>4</sup> In a male-centric society in which the Digger hero of the First World War Anzac legend was revered, the theatre of war remained a strictly masculine domain.<sup>5</sup> To allow women to serve, some feared, would undermine male supremacy, compromise women's femininity and threaten the status of post-war society by reducing their suitability and desire for motherhood.<sup>6</sup>

Following a change of government in October 1941, women prepared for service in the hope that opinion would change. Ultimately, the events of the war made the decision for the new Labour Curtin Government. If the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941 was the catalyst to the mobilisation of Australian women, then the Fall of Singapore in February 1942 and the bombing of Darwin later

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<sup>3</sup> National Archives of Australia (Australian War Memorial): 113, MH1,214, 'History of AWAS'

<sup>4</sup> M. Peel, and C. Twomey, *A History of Australia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, 2018), pp. 169-170.

<sup>5</sup> P. Hasluck, 'The Government and the People', in P. Hasluck, D. McCarthy and G. Long, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Volume I (Canberra, 1952), pp.1-8. The Digger character was created by the war correspondent and Australia's official war historian of that conflict, Charles Bean, in acknowledgment of the bravery of Anzac [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps] troops at Gallipoli, and has since come to represent Australian soldiers serving in subsequent wars.

<sup>6</sup> Peel and Twomey, *A History of Australia*, pp.198-200.

that month, removed any lingering political doubt. With all available military manpower needed at the forward areas, there was no choice but to allow women to take the places of servicemen on the home front.

Although much attention has been given to the efforts of the men who fought with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), the Australian Military Force (AMF) and as part of allied services, historical research into the 'People's War' to date has conspicuously disregarded the 24,313 women who served in the Australian Women's Army Service.<sup>7</sup> Despite being Australia's first women's army, its largest Second World War women's service and the only women's service from that period to have been established as a unit within the Australian Army, rather than as an auxiliary, the AWAS remains relatively unknown and has been largely absent from academic literature.<sup>8</sup> This study broadens the understanding of Australia's participation in the Second World War by answering three key questions about the AWAS: why, in the face of political opposition, did women want to be part of a women's army, how was the army established and by whom, and how did women experience army life?

Research for this study considers women's lives during this time through the lens of gender and class. It is confined to the involvement of those who fulfilled the AWAS enlistment criteria as being 'of substantially European origin or descent' and does not attempt to investigate issues resulting from race, which could form the basis of a separate study.<sup>9</sup> It first turns attention to the pre-war and early war years to gain understanding of how women's lives were shaped by societal norms and political

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<sup>7</sup> NAA(AWM): 54/88/1/1, Part 42, Enlistments, January 1942 – August 1945.

<sup>8</sup> NAA(AWM): PR00114, Notebook, Private P. Rattray, 'Rookie' training lecture notes, 7 June 1942.

<sup>9</sup> NAA(AWM): 54 88/1/8, Notice, Intending Applicants for AWAS, 23 August 1941; Peel and Twomey, *A History of Australia*, p.200.

change. It then investigates why the AWAS was established, who was chosen to organise its formation, and how, through the conduit of its leadership, political policy influenced the recruitment and experience of the rank and file. While there has been much historical research into issues of gender and class during the Second World War, there has been no academic consideration of these issues in relation to the AWAS, making this investigation the first of its kind.

### **Historiography**

To date there has been only one academic study of the AWAS. *The AWAS: A Social History of the Australian Women's Army Service During the Second World War*, is a BA thesis, written in 1996 by Grace Johansen, a student of Central Queensland University.<sup>10</sup> Within broader wartime histories, analysis of the specialised activities of the AWAS is absent from almost all academic literature.<sup>11</sup> An exception to this is a 1983 history, which includes discussion on the feminine war effort and the formation of the AWAS.<sup>12</sup> Scholarly research into Australia's participation in the Second World War has to date been primarily male-centric. The absence of literature about Australian women's involvement in the war was acknowledged by Kay Saunders and Geoffrey Bolton in 1992, although few historians have since attempted to rectify this omission.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> G. Johansen, 'The AWAS: A Social History of the Australian Women's Army Service During the Second World War' (unpublished BA thesis, Central Queensland University, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Peel and Twomey, *A History of Australia*, pp.199-200.

<sup>12</sup> McKernan, M., *All In! Australia During the Second World War* (Melbourne, 1983), pp. 49-50; 74, 217.

<sup>13</sup> K. Saunders and G. Bolton, 'Girdled for War: Women's Mobilisations in World War Two', in K. Saunders and R. Evans, (eds.), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Marrickville, 1992), pp.376-395.

Where the women's services are discussed by historians, little attempt is made to differentiate between their roles and activities. With the exception of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), distinguishable by its overseas service with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), most historians refer to the other women's services, which include the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS), the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF), the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) and the AWAS, as a homogeneous home-front group of 'women's auxiliaries'. This description has frequently been wrongly applied to the AWAS, while the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA) was a civilian organisation and never part of the military.<sup>14</sup>

The first popular history of the AWAS to be published was Lorna Ollif's memoir, *Women in Khaki*, published in 1981.<sup>15</sup> Although lacking academic analysis and objectivity, this book, like others which followed, was an attempt to commit to the record an account of the AWAS by a former servicewoman.<sup>16</sup> A body of scholarly work followed the publication of oral histories recorded by former AWAS in their later years, the largest collection created between 1989 and 1991 for the *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the 1939-45 War*, at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.<sup>17</sup> But while the anecdotal accounts of former AWAS mostly tell stories of innocence, adventure and romance, the academics turned their attention to topics that few who had grown up conforming to the conventions of the 1930s would

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<sup>14</sup> See M. Lake, 'The War over Women's Work', in *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, (ed.), by V. Burgmann and J. Lee (Victoria, 1988), p.206; Peel, and Twomey, *A History of Australia*, p.199.

<sup>15</sup> L. Ollif, *Women in Khaki* (NSW, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> For example, A. Howard, *You'll Be Sorry: Reflections of the AWAS from 1941 – 1945* (Sydney, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Launch speech, Prime Minister, 17 February 1989, Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, PM Transcripts, <http://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00007497.pdf> [accessed 1 July 2019].



discuss, or write about. In 1990, Marilyn Lake published *Female Desires: the Meaning of WWII*, marking the start of academic interest in Australian women's war-time sexuality, a theme which she and other Australian feminist historians explored throughout the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Findings by Lake and others presenting 'servicewomen', although not specifically AWAS, as a group with loose morals or as lesbians, are strongly contested by Grace Johansen in her 1996 thesis.<sup>19</sup> Using original oral history as a primary source, Johansen claims that historians misinterpreted servicewomen's morality and misrepresented their sexual behaviour. Her own research into these issues in relation to the AWAS, which is discussed over two of four chapters, finds that AWAS behaved predominantly according to contemporary social codes eschewing sex before marriage, with most also choosing the conventional option of marriage and motherhood following the war.<sup>20</sup>

Although it is not the intention of this dissertation to continue the debates on women's sexuality, which have already been fully explored, the relationship between the AWAS experience and femininity will be closely examined through the lens of class-based values, which Johansen's thesis omitted. It is argued that through careful selection of its First Officers, the army's role as educator ensured that AWAS recruits were schooled in feminine behavioural ideals in preparation for their place as good citizens in post-war life. This policy of creating what Elizabeth Edwards described as a 'culture of femininity', was found in women's teacher training colleges in Britain during the 1950s, as a way of socialising students into a middle-

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<sup>18</sup> M. Lake, 'Female Desires: The Meaning of WWII', *Australian Historical Studies*, 24:95 (Oct 1990). This article was reproduced in J. Damousi and M. Lake, (eds.), *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 60-81.

<sup>19</sup> G. Johansen, 'The AWAS: A Social History', pp. 28-59.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

class value system reflecting the status of the teaching profession.<sup>21</sup> It can also be linked to Pierre Bourdieu's notion that 'cultural capital' is acquired through upbringing and education.<sup>22</sup>

In connection with the understanding of idealised femininity as an improving influence, this dissertation challenges Johansen's interpretation of an editorial written in an AWAS journal in 1943, which she understood to mean that older people believed women lowered their standards by joining the services.<sup>23</sup> In Chapter Two it is claimed that the words in question are meant as encouragement for servicewomen to recognise and reclaim their power as a civilising force. There are two further points in Johansen's thesis which this dissertation contests. The first is her claim that the Fall of Singapore in February 1942, the subsequent fear of invasion and the ensuing wave of patriotism that followed, inspired women's desire to enlist with the AWAS.<sup>24</sup> It is shown in Chapter One that women's interest in army service began well before February 1942. Secondly, Johansen states that the AWAS served only as far north as Adelaide River, in the Northern Territory, when the most northerly posting was Darwin, a major strategic military base for the allies, as is discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>25</sup> The remainder of Johansen's study investigates how participation in the AWAS impacted on women's post-war lives and she concludes

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<sup>21</sup> E. Edwards, *Women in Teacher Training Colleges, 1900-1960, A Culture of Femininity* (London, 2001), pp.23-38.

<sup>22</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Abingdon, Oxon., 2010), pp. 5-6, 56-58, 74-75.

<sup>23</sup> G. Johansen, 'The AWAS: A Social History', p.65. This comment refers to the Editorial in *Yes Madam! In Aid of Prisoners of War Fund Dec 1943*, p.5. State Library Victoria: <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/129542> [Accessed July 2018].

<sup>24</sup> G. Johansen, 'The AWAS: A Social History', p.11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63.

that while AWAS involvement did not lead to a transformation in women's lives, it contributed to an improved status of women within Australian post-war society.<sup>26</sup>

Joan Davis's study of the presentation of the women's services by the Army Education Service journal, *Salt*, discusses how the publication perpetuated national values and myths about women.<sup>27</sup> Davis also claims that through its articles offering career ideas for servicewomen, *Salt* helped to change expectations that women would naturally return to the home post-war.<sup>28</sup> However, it is argued in Chapter Three of this dissertation that towards the end of the war, *Salt* contributed to the promotion of homemaking as the ideal post-war occupation for women, over and above the option of employment.

The intersection between class and gender in relation to volunteering activities in Australia during the war has attracted scholarly interest. Carmel Shute found that women's voluntarism polarised class groups and reinforced the sexual division of labour by perpetuating the view that women's primary service should be to the 'national cause'.<sup>29</sup> This issue is examined in his 2004 PhD thesis by Ian Willis, of Wollongong University.<sup>30</sup> By analysing the profiles of members of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) in Camden, a country town in NSW, Willis found that older, middle and upper-class women with a strong sense of British patriotism, Christian

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<sup>26</sup> G. Johansen, 'The AWAS: A Social History', pp. 22; 77-80.

<sup>27</sup> J. Davis, 'Women's Work and the Women's Services in the Second World War as Presented in *Salt*', *Hecate*, 18:1 (1992), pp. 64-87 <https://search.proquest.com/docview/210932887?accountid=10910> [Accessed August 2019].

<sup>28</sup> Davis, 'Women's Work and the Women's Services', pp. 64-87.

<sup>29</sup> C. Shute, 'From Balaclavas to Bayonets: Women's Voluntary War Work 1939-41', in E. Windschuttle, (ed.), *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia, 1788 – 1978* (Melbourne, 1980), pp. 359 - 367.

<sup>30</sup> Willis, I., 'The Women's Voluntary Services, A Study of War and Volunteering in Camden, 1939-1945' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Wollongong University, 2004), pp. 303-310.

charity and feminine duty had controlled women's wartime volunteering effort in the town, allowing them to engage in a 'righteous war' alongside their domestic commitments. Willis also found that as girls and young women, many of Camden's volunteers had belonged to the Girl Guides or the Red Cross, organisations which fostered an obligation to serve the community. As is shown in this dissertation, membership of these groups contributed to the values shared by senior AWAS officers, which they passed down the ranks.<sup>31</sup>

Although not including Australians, Penny Summerfield's research into women's wartime experiences found parallels which transcended nationality.<sup>32</sup> Like Shute discovered in relation to volunteering, Summerfield learned that engagement with the war effort 'reaffirmed cultural constructions' of masculine and feminine roles.<sup>33</sup> In a separate study, Summerfield and Gail Braybon used oral history to compare women's experiences in the First and Second World Wars.<sup>34</sup> They found that while women's participation in both events had led to change, 'an undertow pulling women back' reinforced women's roles as wives and mothers and their place in the home.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp.303 - 310.

<sup>32</sup> P. Summerfield, 'Gender and War in the Twentieth Century.' *The International History Review*, 19: 1 (1997), pp. 2–15. [www.jstor.org/stable/40108080](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40108080). [Accessed June 2018].

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> G. Braybon and P. Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London, 1987), pp.281-287.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

## Methodology

A wide selection of primary sources was consulted in the preparation of this dissertation, including Australian military and government manuscripts, newspaper and magazine reports, memoirs, letters, journals, oral histories, marketing materials and photographs.

While some sources are available from the Imperial War Museum in London and online, most primary and some secondary sources are only available in Australia. The largest and most relevant primary sources are held by the National Archives of Australia at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and in Melbourne.<sup>36</sup> Additional archives include the personal manuscript collections of Sybil Irving, Controller of the AWAS and of her sister, Freda Irving, both held at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne, and contemporary journals and memoirs held at the National Library of Australia in Canberra.<sup>37</sup> Further documents, oral history recordings, contemporary military publications and manuscripts are held in Darwin at the Northern Territory Archives Centre, the Peter Spillett Library at the Museum and Art Gallery Northern Territory and at Northern Territory Library.<sup>38</sup> Visits were made to each of these centres as part of a research trip lasting several weeks. It is acknowledged that due to the limitations of transnational research, some files may have been missed. Of the large body of available online material, the most useful has been contemporary press

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<sup>36</sup> NAA(AWM): Series No., AWM52; AWM54; AWM60; AWM61; AWM80; AWM113; AWM193; AWM227; AWM315; AWM375;

National Archives of Australia (Victoria State Office): Series No., B551; B668; B1552; B3533; B5499; B5500; B5501; B5503; B5505; B5506; B6680; MP70/1; MP159; MP508; MP727; MP742; MP5499.

<sup>37</sup> State Library of Victoria, Irving, F., & MacDonald, J. S. (1932). *Papers, Ca. 1932-1984*, MS 12758, Box 3539/1; Irving, S. (1941). *Papers, Ca. 1941-1946*, MS 10050, Box 1-7.

<sup>38</sup> Northern Territory Archives Centre oral history recordings series no., NTRS219, NTRS226.

coverage obtained through the National Library of Australia's database, *Trove* and collections found on the Australian War Memorial website.<sup>39</sup>

Government and military documentation from the NAA centres in Melbourne and Canberra provide the framework to this study. While online searches allowed items to be identified, prioritised and ordered in advance, it was found during visits to both centres that some folder contents did not match their descriptions and that subject matter was randomly distributed throughout many files. Furthermore, with each centre using a different system of accession, some files were found to be duplicates. Because it was necessary to view several hundreds of files in a limited time, documents were photographed and catalogued on site, for analysis back in London. Allowing a chronological order of events to be formed, these documents provide an understanding of how key decisions were made and by whom, as well as an insight into the opinions of the decision-makers and those who had to abide by them. It is noted that like all archival collections, none of those accessed offers a complete record and each is the product of curatorial subjectivity. It is likely that, given the preference afforded to male military history, not all AWAS documentation will have survived.

Additional military documentation is found in the manuscript collections of Sybil Irving and Freda Irving. Personal correspondence to Sybil Irving allows insights into the affiliations, relationships, experiences and opinions of her correspondents, of which the most important are her senior officers.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, as there are no letters from Irving herself, the correspondence is one-sided and is only representative

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<sup>39</sup> Trove: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>; AWM: <https://www.awm.gov.au>

<sup>40</sup> Irving, F., & MacDonald, J. S. (1932). *Papers, Ca. 1932-1984*, MS 12758, Box 3539/1.

of the few officers who wrote to her or whose letters were valued enough to be kept. The National Library of Australia's online *Trove* press library offers substantial coverage of AWAS activities by regional newspapers and *The Australian Women's Weekly* magazine.<sup>41</sup> News stories provide a chronology of events while editorial and advertising content reveals much about the social norms of the day and Establishment views, given the considerations of press bias. Similarly, the Army's publications, *Salt*, and the *Army Education Service Newsletter* gives insight into army policy in relation to servicewomen and how these publications were used to influence opinion within the rank and file.<sup>42</sup> Unofficial journals reflect the life lived by servicewomen but contributions by senior male contributors and anonymous editors reveal attempts to influence opinion internally.

Oral histories raise questions of impartiality in relation to the informant, the interviewer and the commissioner of the study. Most of the oral histories used in this project were commissioned as part of the Australian War Memorial's *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, named after the newspaper proprietor who became the Army's first wartime Director-General of Information.<sup>43</sup> Issues of subjectivity and potential bias must therefore be considered in relation to both the collection itself and the War Memorial as a site of national commemoration. A disadvantage of using existing oral history accounts is the inability to ask specific questions or to influence the direction of the interview. Additionally, if only a transcript is available, as is the case with two

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<sup>41</sup> Trove: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>

<sup>42</sup> Australian Army Education Service, *Salt*, Vol 1, No. 1 – Vol. 12, No. 4 (29 September 1941-22 April 1946); *Army Education Service Newsletter*, (December 1942 – August 1945).

<sup>43</sup> 'Launch of the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45' PM Transcripts, MS 7497 <http://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7497> [accessed 19 February 2019].

of the accounts used in this dissertation, there is also the potential for misunderstandings, due to the absence of aural nuance, which would be apparent to an interviewer or the listener of a recording. The use of pre-recorded interviews for this dissertation was the only practical option, however, given the passing of time and the geographical distances involved. An advantage of using them is that they were created when the informants' memories were still strong. All memories deteriorate and are subject to external influences over time and there must be awareness of this during the process of selection and interpretation. By giving a platform to those who are unrepresented or otherwise lacking a voice, however, oral history provides unique personal insights into the human experience, helping to create a more balanced, democratic history. In this case, the personal accounts of former AWAS of all ranks provide insights into experiences and opinions influenced by gender and class which would not be found in other sources.

Posters available online at the AWM and the Imperial War Museum in London, provide a visual record of how AWAS recruitment campaigns reflected the specific needs of the Army alongside the changes in public acceptance of women's participation.<sup>44</sup> With very few items dated, references made to them in other documentation were used to deduce their chronology.

None of the sources identified above would provide more than a one-dimensional picture of the AWAS if consulted alone, but used in conjunction with a broad archival mix, a more rounded and inclusive understanding becomes possible. In

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<sup>44</sup> AWM: [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) ;Imperial War Museum: [www.iwm.org.uk/collections](http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections)



answer to the research questions, the chapters of this dissertation are set out as follows:

**Chapter One** provides essential background to why women were attracted to military service. It considers women's pre-war aspirations against the backdrop of the Depression, which stripped Australia of its prosperity and left it with the highest rates of unemployment in the Western World. In a culture which revered the First World War Digger hero and advantaged males, it evaluates the influence of gender and class on women's educational and occupational opportunities and their expectations for marriage and motherhood. It then moves on to the beginning of war in Europe and discusses why it was important for the government to control and limit women's wartime occupations. It shows how their participation in voluntary roles and the industrial workforce was determined by class. It examines how far British culture and values influenced the Australian response to war and how government attempts to promote patriotism encouraged Australian women to form themselves into paramilitary organisations. It maintains that the controversial and halting progression towards the formation of the AWAS was dominated by fears that military service would damage traditional gendered behaviours and pose a threat to post-war goals for population-building.

**Chapter Two** argues that development and maintenance of a good reputation was key to public acceptance of the AWAS, the fulfilment of its recruitment needs and its successful functioning within a male environment. It reveals how the selection of the First Officers was engineered through class-based social networks to enable the efficient formation of a women's army that would be sympathetic to

Establishment values and long-term goals. Revealing how civilising moral codes influenced by class and the Girl Guides were used as a framework to choreograph the behaviour of the lower ranks and maintain their femininity, it discusses how press and advertising campaigns both reflected and challenged these principles. Finally, it shows how hard-wired social attitudes of service personnel reinforced by the persistent emphasis on servicewomen's femininity proved to be more difficult to manage than public opinion.

**Chapter Three** examines the impact of policies devised for the Service on the AWAS lived experience. It looks at how the Controller's beliefs and ideologies were supported and developed by the Army Education Service. Revealing the tensions between feminine behavioural ideals and the conditions of army life, it shows how rules designed to protect women and their good reputation were challenged, modified or forgotten over time as the demands of the war took precedence. Arguing that restrictions on sending women overseas were primarily devised to protect the morale of servicemen, it investigates how AWAS policy was engineered by politicians and army leaders to achieve military aims. Finally, this chapter considers the effect of the ending of the war on those who through class, had occupied positions of privilege in the AWAS and argues that for them, disbandment represented a disadvantage in terms of post-war prospects.

### **Conclusion**

Women's experience of the AWAS was influenced by a mix of political aims and principles and practical requirements, often conflicting with the need to cultivate ideal standards of gendered behaviour considered necessary to the nation-building

needs of post-war Australia. Women who had joined the AWAS hoping to expand the limitations of their class and gender enjoyed new opportunities only briefly before the end of hostilities saw their aspirations re-wound back to pre-war models of marriage and motherhood. Although the AWAS Controller and the senior officers had enjoyed some power and influence in service, ultimately, they were as much the victims of government policy as were the lower ranks: the only difference being that those who had found their metier as leaders unceremoniously lost rank and status on demobilisation, at a time in life when for many of them, even the opportunity for marriage and motherhood, should they have wished it, was fast fading.

## Chapter 1

### The Desire to Serve

To understand why the prospect of military service was attractive to Australian women of all classes, it is necessary to consider their place in society during the 1930s and the early years of the Second World War. The legacy of the First World War and the Depression left a deep imprint on the social order and significantly reduced women's prospects during the interwar period. Additional factors, including cultural heritage, gender norms and class, all impacted on women's opportunities and influenced their contribution to the early war effort.

### The Depression

The Depression years reversed many of the gains made by women in the workplace during the 1920s and saw their return to the domestic sphere.<sup>1</sup> In 1933, the peak of the Depression, Australia suffered the highest rates of unemployment in the Western world.<sup>2</sup> Many of the unemployed were former First World War Diggers, whose military accomplishments were a source of national pride.<sup>3</sup> The Government exploited the revered Anzac legend to boost morale among unemployed men and also to legitimize the preferencing of males in the workplace.<sup>4</sup> A conservative and patriarchal society, men were considered the breadwinners, and

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<sup>1</sup> J. Mackinolty, 'Women's place...' in J. Mackinolty, (ed.), *The Wasted Years? Australia's Great Depression* (Sydney, 1981), pp. 100-104.

<sup>2</sup> Peel and Twomey, *A History of Australia*, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> P. Hasluck, 'The Government and the People', pp.1-8.

<sup>4</sup> R. White, 'War and Australian Society' in M. McKernan and M. Browne, eds., *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Canberra, 1988), pp. 398-403.

women's incomes supplementary, and expendable.<sup>5</sup> While males were paid a family wage, women's earnings were based on the needs of a single person, regardless of circumstances, and they received just over half the basic male rate.<sup>6</sup> Of those women who were in recognised employment, one third were in domestic service and among the lowest paid workers.<sup>7</sup> Many working-class married women who were forced back into the home by unemployment, generated earnings by taking in laundry, their hardship underestimated because it was 'invisible'.<sup>8</sup> Middle-class women were affected too, with previously emancipated professionals the target of an anti-feminist government campaign accusing them of causing the Depression by taking men's jobs.<sup>9</sup> In such a climate, women were obliged to seek what work they could and to lie about their marital status. Former AWAS stenographer, Reena Rad, recalls that her mother, a teacher, was obliged to become a waitress, after a marriage bar imposed on women prevented her from teaching, even as a widow.<sup>10</sup> According to Betsy Leemon, a secretary, women kept their marriages a secret, even after the Depression, when jobs were still tight. 'You didn't wear a wedding ring and you didn't tell your boss that you were married.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> L. Beaton, 'The Importance of Women's Paid Labour' in Bevege, M., James, M and C. Shute (eds.), *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia* (Sydney, 1982), pp. 85-86.

<sup>6</sup> J. Bremner, 'In the Cause of Equality', in Bevege, M., James, M and C. Shute (eds.) *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia* (Sydney, 1982), pp. 289 - 290.

<sup>7</sup> W. Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour, An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia* (Carlton North Vic, 1989), p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Mackinolty, 'Women's place...' pp. 107-110.

<sup>9</sup> A. Wright, 'The Australian Women's Weekly: Depression and the War Years, Romance and Reality', *Refractory Girl*, 3 (1973) 9-13; Bremner, 'In the Cause of Equality', pp. 288-291.

<sup>10</sup> Reena Rad, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00915, interviewed by H. Martin, 13 April 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Betsy Leemon, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00786, interviewed by J. Wing, 22 January 1990.

It wasn't only married women who faced hardship. Most working-class girls left school at fourteen, and teenagers could find themselves the sole family breadwinner. Some found trade apprenticeships but during the Depression these were frequently abandoned.<sup>12</sup> Regional location affected employment, and single young women living in country areas were commonly expected to help out on family farms.<sup>13</sup> As the Depression eased, many young women turned their backs on traditional work on the land to seek other options in the cities. By 1938, the lack of local female labour in one farming community was so great that it was reported that migrant workers would have to be brought in to replace those who had allegedly 'lost their pioneering spirit' and left outback stations.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, country life was tough and many country women later rejected the option of joining the Australian Women's Land Army in the hope of better opportunities with the AWAS. Norma Bruce, who had grown up in a small country town admits, 'We couldn't get away quickly enough.'<sup>15</sup> Another countrywoman describes how the deprivation of her childhood prepared her well for the relative hardships of AWAS life in the Northern Territory. '...we'd come through the Depression and we had nothing... I mean you had your food, which I suppose some parents found very hard to have...but where I lived, we had no electricity, hardly any water... When I got into

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<sup>12</sup> Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour*, pp.2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Mackinolty, 'Women's place...' pp.95-96.

<sup>14</sup> 'Pioneering Spirit of the Women', *Barrier Miner*, 3 March 1938, p. 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article47966192> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>15</sup> Norma Bruce, Currumbin Returned and Services League of Australia, 'Australia Remembers, Stories shared by our Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS)', July 2013, <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=australia+women+world+war+two+oral+history&&view=detail&mid=7665B9EF7475888775487665B9EF747588877548&&FORM=VDRVRV> [Accessed 3 June 2018].

the services, if we didn't have anything like that it didn't worry me, I was used to it.'<sup>16</sup>

With young women expected to marry and therefore not considered part of the permanent workforce, those who became unemployed were deemed the responsibility of their families rather than the authorities. This was disastrous for those without family support and many relied on charity provided by the philanthropic middle-classes.<sup>17</sup> Former AWAS private Norma Burns, who left home at fifteen, remembers becoming a 'Cinderella in the kitchen' after taking on live-in domestic work for a family.<sup>18</sup> While the philanthropic middle and upper-middle classes enjoyed public praise for helping those affected by 'the cloud of depression', working-class women like Burns, with no family support or permanent home, imagined a life with regular work and free board and lodgings in a women's army.<sup>19</sup>

### **Gendering of war**

Promotion of male status through the Digger character strengthened as war started and remained central to the gendering of wartime activity.<sup>20</sup> With the power of the Anzac legend used to promote patriotism and encourage male enlistment, it was also used to uphold ideal, gendered models of behaviour, which served to confine women's activities to acceptable feminine norms.<sup>21</sup> This began in February

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<sup>16</sup> Unidentified speaker from oral history interview with Marie Furlong, Eileen Norris, Nancy Hemm, by H. Wilson, 18 August 1984, Northern Territory Archives Service, NTRS 226 TS 368.

<sup>17</sup> Mackinolty, 'Women's place...', pp.60, 94-110.

<sup>18</sup> Norma Burns, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00948, interviewed by H. Martin, 23 May 1990.

<sup>19</sup> 'Review of 1930: Women's Work in the State', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 December 1930, p.5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article28042178> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>20</sup> K. Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', in J. Beaumont, (ed.), *Australia's War 1939-45* (St Leonards NSW, 1996), p.61.

<sup>21</sup> S. Encel, *Equality and Authority: A Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia* (Melbourne, 1970), pp.432-33.

1939 with the setting up of a Women's Voluntary National Register (WVNR) to provide comforts and other support to the troops in the event of war.<sup>22</sup> The message was clear: men were the fighters and women's role was to support them by providing homely touches. The establishment of the WVNR well before war was announced is itself seen as an indicator of the Government's intention to limit women's activities to traditional feminine stereotypes.<sup>23</sup> This notion is reinforced by an official announcement which, a year later, lavished praise on those women who had given support as '...every efficient housewife and mother always does for her menfolk in any time of need.' Such work, women were reminded, was '...just as much a part of the successful prosecution of the war as the massing of troops and the firing of guns.'<sup>24</sup>

It was common for women to join the AWAS in honour of Digger fathers or husbands they had lost in the First World War.<sup>25</sup> Beryl Fowler, whose father was a Gallipoli veteran, was just one of those who was influenced by the Anzac legacy in this way.<sup>26</sup> After the Fall of Singapore in February 1942, others, like Joan Johnstone, enlisted after a Digger relative or friend had been taken Prisoner of War by the Japanese.<sup>27</sup> The Digger character was used prominently throughout the war to

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<sup>22</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, Letter to Lady Mayoress, All Capital Cities, from T.A. Blamey, Chairman, Manpower Committee, 29 March, 1939; 'Proposals for the Establishment of a Women's Voluntary National Register, Circular No. 1', n.d.; 'Particulars of Women's Services in a National Emergency', C 76, 5/39. n.d. c 1939.

<sup>23</sup> Shute, 'From Balaclavas to Bayonets', p. 356.

<sup>24</sup> NAA(AWM): 80, 11/209 Folder 4, 'Women in War Time, First Reactions on Declaration', 8 February, 1940.

<sup>25</sup> 'Many Women Seek Army Service', *News Adelaide*, 26 August 1941, p. 3. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131524602>; [accessed 8 March 2019] 'Women Respond', *Cairns Post*, 16 September 1941, p.4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131524602> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>26</sup> Beryl Fowler, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00773, interviewed by H. Martin, 31 January 1990.

<sup>27</sup> Joan Johnstone, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00772, interviewed by H. Martin, 30 January 1990.



boost the morale of the male troops and to remind servicewomen of their supporting role.<sup>28</sup> Advertising was one of the most visual examples of this and the use of the Digger character in AWAS recruitment campaigns is discussed in Chapter Two.

The pressing need to repopulate following the loss of more than 58,000 men during the First World War, undoubtedly refocused attention on women as potential wives and mothers.<sup>29</sup> Although during the mid-1930s, the average age for marriage was twenty-one for women and twenty-three for men, economic uncertainty reduced the birth rate to the lowest on record, while divorce rose.<sup>30</sup> By 1938, the Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, was warning that failure to increase the population would be tantamount to 'national suicide'.<sup>31</sup> Marriage remained a goal for young women throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but the memory of the losses in the Great War stirred fears that some would never be wives.<sup>32</sup> In 1941, Lady Cilento, President of the Mothercraft Association War Auxiliary, urged soldiers to marry their fiancés and girlfriends before leaving for service abroad because not all of 'our finest men, splendid, virile types of Australian manhood' would return. 'If they leave a child or a family, something of themselves will remain, whatever may happen.'<sup>33</sup> While evidently made in the interests of the nation, Lady Cilento's

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<sup>28</sup> *Salt*, Vol. 3., No. 2., 13 April 1942, 'A Tribute to the Digger', p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> J. Beaumont, *Australia's War, 1939-45* (St Leonards, NSW, 1996), p.xxii; 'Duties of Women', *Mercury*, Hobart, 18 September 1942, p.6. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article25893597> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>30</sup> 'Commonwealth's Marriage Statistics', *Central Queensland Herald*, 19 March 1936, p. 14 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article70352564> [accessed 8 March 2019];

'Divorce is on the Increase', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 3 February 1934, p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51269828> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>31</sup> 'Static Population Means National Suicide', *Canberra Times*, 1 January 1938, p.2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2448982> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>32</sup> Betsy Leemon.

<sup>33</sup> 'Army Marriages Important for Australia', *Daily Mercury*, Mackay, Queensland, 26 August 1941, p.1. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article170522052> [accessed 8 March 2019].

comments overlook the hardship such action would, in the absence of state support, mean for women without private financial backing and illustrate the class divide that existed within Australia at the time.

### **Volunteering and the class divide**

Although widely regarded as being one of the most egalitarian Western countries, scholarly investigation shows that Australia's original British immigrants recreated the class system they had left behind.<sup>34</sup> A study carried out by anthropologist Jean Martin in the 1950s, found that Australia had evolved a 'flexible or open class system' based on traditional scales of social ranking.<sup>35</sup> The churches maintained a strong conservative influence and the Protestant and Catholic middle-classes upheld puritanical moral values.<sup>36</sup> Many middle and upper-class women experienced the Depression through charitable and philanthropic work, often undertaken through the many voluntary organisations.<sup>37</sup> These groups provided an enduring network of friendship with women of similar backgrounds and interests. For leisured women without financial pressures, the voluntary groups presented a way to lead a meaningful life and, when war broke out, a chance to demonstrate their patriotism.<sup>38</sup> By the start of the war, elite women dominated the highest offices of the voluntary organisations.<sup>39</sup> With ample free time and the means to

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<sup>34</sup> J. Jupp., *The English in Australia* (Cambridge, 2004) pp. 99-100.

<sup>35</sup> J. Martin, 'Marriage, the Family and Class', in A. Elkin, (ed.), *Marriage and the Family in Australia* (Sydney, 1957), pp. 24 – 54.

<sup>36</sup> R. Thompson, *Religion in Australia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., (Melbourne, 2002), pp. 87-90.

<sup>37</sup> Mackinolty, 'Women's place...', p.98.

<sup>38</sup> Shute, 'From Balaclavas to Bayonets', pp. 355-356.

<sup>39</sup> Martin, 'Marriage, the Family and Class', pp. 24 – 54.

provide uniforms, cars and other forms of transport that these groups needed, these women developed contacts, influence and Establishment support.<sup>40</sup>

The entry of Japan into the war In December 1941 created a greater demand for labour and by early 1942 a Manpower Directorate was established to oversee recruitment to industry.<sup>41</sup> Unemployed working-class women were quickly absorbed into the workforce but as the demand for labour grew, the reach extended to married women and those from the middle-classes.<sup>42</sup> By February 1942, the need for textile workers had become acute and women's voluntary work was categorised as a non-essential occupation. It was announced that, 'Service in woollen and cotton mills...offers to women opportunity for far more urgent real war work than the part-time honorary jobs now being done by many women who have leisure for full-time work'.<sup>43</sup> As a willing, unpaid resource, women's contribution to the war effort was not to be underestimated, however, and the government decided that single women engaged in voluntary activities would be exempt from conscription to the paid workforce.<sup>44</sup> Shortly after, War Cabinet quashed a proposal to abolish the employment of domestic servants, allowing families to keep one servant, and women free to continue voluntary work.<sup>45</sup> Although volunteering was by no means the sole preserve of middle and upper-class women, there is no doubt that they

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<sup>40</sup> Shute, 'From Balaclavas to Bayonets', pp. 359 – 367; 'Red Cross Transport Drivers on War Service Duty', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 June, 1940, p.19, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51942782> [accessed 29 March 2019].

<sup>41</sup> Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', p.63; Beaton, 'The Importance of Women's Paid Labour', p. 88.

<sup>42</sup> Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', pp.63-64.

<sup>43</sup> National Archives of Australia (Australian War Memorial): 80 11/209, Folder 2, 'Women's Textile Army Calls for Reinforcements', 8 February 1942.

<sup>44</sup> Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', pp.61-62.

<sup>45</sup> 'Restriction of Employment of Domestic Servants Order', *Commonwealth Gazette*, 335, 29 December 1942, cited in Hasluck, 'The Government and the People', pp. 278-280.

made a significant contribution to the war effort.<sup>46</sup> In his thesis on Second World War volunteering by women living in Camden, NSW, Ian Willis found that volunteering there depended on middle-class philanthropy, rooted in strong cultural and emotional links with Britain.<sup>47</sup>

Membership of the Girl Guides played a significant role in the lives of many of the women chosen to become First Officers of the AWAS, and it is shown in Chapters Two and Three how through them its core values influenced the lives of the women who served beneath them.<sup>48</sup> The teaching of leadership skills allowing girls to compete on equal terms with men was of particular value to those who became First Officers in the new women's army.<sup>49</sup> For those of independent means, the organisation provided a respectable public service occupation and a fulfilling social life. After war broke out, many Girl Guides also joined other voluntary groups, including the Women's Australian National Service (WANS).<sup>50</sup>

Sybil Irving, later to become Controller of the AWAS, had been State Secretary of the Girl Guides in Victoria for twenty-four years.<sup>51</sup> During this time, she also worked for the Victorian Division of the Australian Red Cross and was awarded the MBE in 1938. Guiding offered Irving a stimulating life, with opportunities to mix with influential people, and to travel overseas.<sup>52</sup> Personal correspondence between

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<sup>46</sup> M. Oppenheimer, 'Voluntary Work and Labour History', *Labour History*, 74 (1998), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27516549> [accessed 28 February 2019].

<sup>47</sup> Willis., 'The Women's Voluntary Services', pp.v-vi.

<sup>48</sup> Girl Guides Australia, 'History of Guiding', <https://www.girlguides.org.au> [accessed 15 March 2019].

<sup>49</sup> J. Hampton, *How the Girl Guides Won the War* (London, 2010), pp. xv, 12.

<sup>50</sup> M. Coleman and H. Darling, *From a Flicker to a Flame: The Story of the Girl Guides in Australia* (Sydney, 1990), pp.79-84.

<sup>51</sup> Coleman and Darling, *From a Flicker to a Flame*, p.82.

<sup>52</sup> 'Girl Guides in England: Miss Irving's Experiences', *Argus*, 17 March 1931, p.3. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article4375098> [accessed 15 March 2019].

a sixteen-year-old prospective recruit to the AWAS and Irving soon after her appointment as Controller, expands our understanding of class-influenced social networking at the time by illustrating how membership of the Girl Guides facilitated women in the way that school and club ties traditionally privileged men.<sup>53</sup> By mentioning her previous membership of the Girl Guides and making oblique reference to her class [having been away at school] this young girl established the requisite credentials of 'club membership', entitling her to engage confidently in correspondence with a high-ranking military officer, many years her senior.

### **Patriotism, the press and British influence**

Although Australian nationalism had been gaining ground as a reaction against British control since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 1939 there was ample support for Australia to follow Britain into war.<sup>54</sup> The Anglophile Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, had the support of British-born immigrants who dominated influential positions in the church, education, the professions and in business, while Britain still influenced many aspects of Australian society, including the monarchy and the armed forces.<sup>55</sup> Christianity had been seen by the early migrants as a significant civilising element.<sup>56</sup> By the Second World War, the Protestant majority remained politically conservative and the government, particularly under Menzies,

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<sup>53</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1, Letter to Sybil Irving from Betty Kelley, 2 October 1941. SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1, Letter to Betty Kelley from Sybil Irving, 7 October 1941.

<sup>54</sup> Jupp, *The English in Australia*, p. 105; J. Miller, 'Australia in the World', in K. Hancock, (ed.), *Australian Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p.232.

<sup>55</sup> Miller, J., 'Australia in the World', pp. 235-236. See also W. Ward, *Australia* (New Jersey, 1965), pp. 77-81.

<sup>56</sup> Peel and Twomey, *A History of Australia*, p. 54.

upheld Christian moral values.<sup>57</sup> Nearly half of the general population attended church regularly and among the middle classes, observance was even higher.<sup>58</sup>

Patriotism to the 'mother country' was common among those who served in the AWAS. Like others, First Officer, Joyce Whitworth, had British ancestry and had been brought up to be 'very pro-England'.<sup>59</sup> Melva Croker, a lieutenant, said, 'you felt as though you were really British. You lived in Australia, but you were really British.'<sup>60</sup> Expressions of British patriotism were not unusual among servicewomen after the AWAS had been established. In a journal written by signalwomen for Christmas 1943, a poem in support of Australian servicemen praised the men for working hard '...to help old England win this war.'<sup>61</sup>

The authorities used the mainstream press to encourage support for Australia's involvement and one of the key titles used was the *Australian Women's Weekly*, whose founder-owners were Menzies supporter, Frank Packer and Ted Theodore, a former labour politician and Deputy Prime Minister (1929).<sup>62</sup> Targeting the women's press allowed the government to influence men through their women. In September, 1939, the *Weekly* published a feature that left no doubt where Australian allegiances should lie: *Famous Tunes That Stir The Empire!* was illustrated

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<sup>57</sup> Thompson, *Religion in Australia*, p.115.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Joyce Whitworth, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00793, interviewed by J. Wing, 26 February 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Melva Croker, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive* AWM: S00788, interviewed by J. Wing, 14 February 1990.

<sup>61</sup> NAA(AWM): AWM085838, *Signals, – A Journal Compiled by the Signalwomen of the Australian Corps of Signals, LHQ Xmas 1943*, p.33.

<sup>62</sup> Australian Dictionary of Biography, Edward Theodore, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/theodore-edward-granville-8776> [accessed 15 April 2019].

with images of Australian marching troops alongside the British Grenadier Guards.<sup>63</sup> As the war progressed, newspaper and magazine reports, radio broadcasts and newsreels shown at cinemas kept the population abreast of developments overseas. It is evident from a series of press releases issued between 1940 and 1941 detailing the wartime activities of British women that the Australian Government took its lead from Britain as both an influencer and in deciding how Australian women could contribute.<sup>64</sup> Arguably, it was news of British women's activities with the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), which inspired Australian women to demand greater participation.<sup>65</sup> Some women with the means took matters into their own hands and joined the ATS, under the terms of a reciprocal agreement with the British Army. By 1944, however, Australia was in such need of recruits that there was a formal request for the practice to cease.<sup>66</sup> For most women, serving in the UK was neither possible nor desirable, but in 1940, as reports from England continued to filter back, women in Australia clamoured to have their own uniformed services.

### **The rise of the paramilitary organisations**

Women's dissatisfaction with passive volunteering roles led to the formation of paramilitary groups which trained them in the military skills they hoped to use in defence of the country. By 1940, hundreds of regionally-based, uniformed, women's

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<sup>63</sup> 'Famous Tunes That Stir the Empire!', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 23 September 1939, p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51592999> [accessed 14 March 2019].

<sup>64</sup> NAA(AWM): 80 11/209, Folder 3, 'Women's War Work'.

<sup>65</sup> 'Britain's Great Unpaid Army', *The Age*, 30 November 1939, p.3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article205593003> [accessed 8 March 2019].

<sup>66</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1. Letter from C.E.M Lloyd, Major-General, Adjutant-General to the UK Army and RAF Liaison Staff in Melbourne, 8 September 1944.

auxiliary and paramilitary groups had been formed, indicating the high level of interest there was among young women for active participation.<sup>67</sup> Betsy Leemon joined the National Defence League of Australia (NDLA) which trained her in military drill, Morse Code, signalling, motor mechanics and first aid. Betsy recalls, 'It was fun for that year because the AWAS had not been formed...and we were filling in time.'<sup>68</sup>

Although these groups were initially publicly scorned, their ambitions ultimately won press and public approval.<sup>69</sup> A spokeswoman for one paramilitary group expressed the opinion of many by lamenting, 'It is a pity that the Commonwealth Government does not approve of employing women in military work.'<sup>70</sup> Later that month, however, the conservative Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, relented and agreed the formation of the uniformed Women's Australian National Services (WANS), as a 'standing army' of trained women ready to step into the shoes of men who could be released for fighting, as and when required.<sup>71</sup> In a quiet display of double-standards, however, it was decided that the WANS would be administered under State, rather than Federal control, because the government did not want to be seen to be condoning the diversion of women from their traditional feminine roles.<sup>72</sup> Such was the interest in the WANS that an estimated 10,000 women turned out for the inaugural meeting at Sydney Town Hall on 25 June 1940.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', p.62.

<sup>68</sup> Betsy Leemon.

<sup>69</sup> Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', p.62.

<sup>70</sup> 'How You Can Help to Win the War', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 1 June 1940, p. 32, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51942782> [accessed 9 March 2019].

<sup>71</sup> 'Schools for WANS', *Sun*, Sydney, 6 July 1940, p. 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article230918335> [accessed 25 March 2019].

<sup>72</sup> J. Beveridge, *AWAS: Women Making History* (Chevron Is. Qld., 1988), p.2.

<sup>73</sup> Coleman and Darling, *From a Flicker to a Flame*, p.82.



Although the WANS attracted women from all walks of life, those at the top were drawn from the class of family which commonly occupied positions of high office within public service.<sup>74</sup> Headed by Lady Wakehurst, wife of the State Governor of New South Wales, Eleanor Manning, daughter of women's rights supporter, and NSW State Attorney General, Sir Henry Manning, became the officer in charge of the WANS Leadership programme.<sup>75</sup> Manning, a senior Girl Guide, was later appointed second in charge of the AWAS as Assistant Controller, Eastern Command. The speed at which these elites were able to use their influence to establish the WANS drew praise from the press. 'Already this new word added to our war vocabulary means something,' pronounced an editorial in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, 'It stands for the strength and resolution of our women winning the war.'<sup>76</sup> Stella Swinney, one of the AWAS First Officers, refers disparagingly to WANS meetings as a place where women 'pretended they were soldiers.' Nevertheless, she attended meetings up to three nights a week.<sup>77</sup> According to another AWAS First Officer, Joyce Whitworth, the training provided by both the WANS and the Guides was essential to the early success of the AWAS.<sup>78</sup>

At the beginning of the war, it suited the government to allow women to continue with their voluntary work and self-funded skills training, which benefitted

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<sup>74</sup> Ollif, *Women in Khaki*, p.44; NAA Melbourne: MP508/1, 339/701/61, 'Nominations for Officers Interviewed in NSW', Memo to Adjutant-General from Sybil Irving, 22 October 1941; Martin, 'Marriage, the Family and Class', p.31.

<sup>75</sup> Ollif, *Women in Khaki*, pp.19, 44.

<sup>76</sup> 'Salute to the WANS', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 20 July, 1940, p. 16, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article48071586> [accessed 9 March 2019].

<sup>77</sup> Stella Swinney, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S01025, interviewed by E. Stokes, 21 January 1991.

<sup>78</sup> Joyce Whitworth.

the nation at no cost.<sup>79</sup> Until defence of the nation became acute, arguably it was the need to protect Australian manhood, which prevented women being mobilised.<sup>80</sup> The fear that their appropriation of men's wartime jobs would emasculate servicemen developed into greater concerns that women would want to take over men's jobs in peacetime.<sup>81</sup> A proposal for a women's auxiliary to fill a shortage of trained male telegraphists by the Royal Australian Air Force had already been turned down in July 1940 for both those reasons.<sup>82</sup> Then there was the concern that national uniformed service would compromise women's femininity, leaving them unsuited to post-war motherhood.<sup>83</sup>

Initially it was manpower shortages for both the armed services and munitions which forced the government to reconsider the position of the AWAS.<sup>84</sup> The Air Force set the precedent by gaining permission to recruit women when its need for replacement personnel became critical, and subsequently the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) was formed in March 1941.<sup>85</sup> The following month, the Royal Australian Navy enlisted women as part of the newly-formed Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS).<sup>86</sup> Although some women gave up hope of a women's army ever being formed and joined these two services,

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<sup>79</sup> Hasluck, 'The Government and the People', pp. 401-403.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p.401.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 403.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 403-404.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 401.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p.406.

<sup>85</sup> Beveridge, *AWAS: Women Making History*, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> NAA(AWM): 'Women's Royal Australian Naval Service WRANS' [https://www.NAA\(AWM\).gov.au/learn/understanding-military-structure/ran/wrans](https://www.NAA(AWM).gov.au/learn/understanding-military-structure/ran/wrans) [accessed 28 March 2019].

strong affiliations between the army, the Girl Guides and the WANS ensured that the loyal were prepared to wait.<sup>87</sup>

### **Announcement of a women's army**

As the WAAAF and the WRANS began to show their value, the government reconsidered its position on a women's army. The desire to keep financial investment low for what would be a temporary organisation remained uppermost but with knowledge that the overall cost of employing 1000 women per day would be an estimated £400 compared to £590 for the same number of men, the savings that could be made were enough to overshadow other concerns.<sup>88</sup> Following a meeting of the War Cabinet on 13 August 1941, it was announced that a women's army would be formed for the duration of the war to allow men to be released for the fighting services.<sup>89</sup> Sybil Irving was appointed Controller, the equivalent rank to an Australian Army Lieutenant-Colonel, and answered to the Army's Chief of the General Staff (CGS).<sup>90</sup> While the Economic and War Cabinets calculated the number of women who would be needed and thrashed out rudimentary policies, Irving set about selecting a team of senior officers whom she could rely on to help her build an army from scratch.<sup>91</sup> As is discussed in Chapter Two, she did not have far to look.

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<sup>87</sup> Stella Swinney.

<sup>88</sup> National Archives of Australia (Victoria State Office): MP70/5, 139/1/162 'Notes in Relation to the Formation of an Australian Army Women's Service' n.d.c.1941. Australian Women's Army Service Formation File.

<sup>89</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1, 214, History of AWAS; 'Women's Army Enrolments Are For Duration', *News*, Adelaide, 23 August 1941, p. 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131520824> [accessed 10 March 2019].

<sup>90</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1, Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter of appointment to Sybil Irving from General Stantke, 30 September 1941; J. Grey, *The Australian Army, A History* (Oxford, 2001), p.145.

<sup>91</sup> NAA(AWM): 54, 88/2/4, 'Organisation and Control of Personnel', 'Organisation of Australian Army Women's Services, 4 May 1945.

Once the government had made its decision, the first newspaper reports appeared just a few days later.<sup>92</sup> Although it would take months for organisational details to be refined, basic details of enrolment were made public.<sup>93</sup> Strict criteria ensured that initial applicants were educated and skilled, qualities which at the time could only be gained from a relatively privileged background. Recruits were to be British subjects of 'substantially European origin or descent', aged between twenty-one and forty-five years old, hold suitable professional or technical qualifications, be physically fit and of good moral character. Roles ranged from the practical to the professional, but the majority were clerical. Pay details were not finalised until December 1941, when the age of enrolment had been reduced to eighteen years.<sup>94</sup> It was announced that enrolment would be for the duration of the war and no women would be sent overseas without approval of the War Cabinet.<sup>95</sup> Selections would be made from applications made to a Women's Voluntary National Register (WVNR).<sup>96</sup>

Following the announcement, the press in all states reported a rush of women eager to join up with the AWAS, with WVNR offices swamped with enquiries.<sup>97</sup> A spokeswoman for the Australian Women's Legion declared that Australian women were at last being given the status equal to the ATS in England.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> 'Women's Home Army Plan', *Argus*, Melbourne, 18 August 1941, p.1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8198973> [accessed 10 March 2019].

<sup>93</sup> NAA(AWM): 54, 88/2/4, 'Organisation and Control of Personnel', 'Organisation of Australian Army Women's Services', 4 May 1945.

<sup>94</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, 'History of the Women's Army Services', n.d.c.1947, p.78.

<sup>95</sup> NAA(AWM): 54 88/1/8, Notice, Intending Applicants for AWAS, 23 August 1941.

<sup>96</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, WVNR Circular No. 6/1941.

<sup>97</sup> 'Women Eager to Enlist, Home Army Plan', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 1941, p.9, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17762727> [accessed 10 March 2019].

<sup>98</sup> 'The World of Women, Enthusiasm for Women's Army', *Argus*, Melbourne, 19 August 1941, p. 6. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8199247> [accessed 10 March 2019].

Amy Taylor, a member of the WANS, was one of the first to join up. 'I think we all had that pride. We all wanted to do our bit.'<sup>99</sup> Joy Boehm, whose fiancé was serving abroad, was not alone for joining because 'I wanted to get the war over quickly so that he could return home.'<sup>100</sup> Dorothy D'Alton's brother was in the Air Force 'and I wanted to do my bit as well as he did.' D'Alton, a retail worker, had been a volunteer in her time off. 'I thought it wasn't enough, I just felt as if I really wanted to do something worthwhile'.<sup>101</sup>

Accusations that women were only interested in the excitement of service life were hotly defended by a patriotic press. One Perth columnist observed:

'There is prevalent in this country a rather spiteful suspicion that all women and girls who want to join the army, navy or air force have an ulterior motive. Well perhaps some of them. How many soldiers want excitement, sailors crave variety and airmen seek fame? We do not see sinister motives in them.'<sup>102</sup>

Suggestions that women were after 'glamour' jobs in the army, were rejected by reports that recruits were prepared to do anything from scrubbing floors to washing up,' including 'girls who had lived leisured lives'.<sup>103</sup> But while most saw these as evidence of women's keenness, regardless of class, one journalist expressed her

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<sup>99</sup> Amy Taylor, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00758, interviewed by R. Thompson, 15 December 1989.

<sup>100</sup> Joy Boehm, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00795, interviewed by J. Wing, 21 February 1990.

<sup>101</sup> Dorothy D'Alton, Northern Territory Archive Service, NTRS 226, TS 373. (transcript), interviewed by H. Wilson, 14 August 1984.

<sup>102</sup> 'Mary Ferber and War Work Women', *Daily News*, Perth, 27 August, 1941, p. 20, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article83277880> [accessed 16 April 2019].

<sup>103</sup> 'News Summary It Happened On...', *Nambour Chronicle and East Coast Advertiser*, Qld., 2 January 1942, p.5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article78048791> [accessed 16 April 2019].

objection to the recruitment of any woman for domestic work, by commenting: 'You might just as well tell a gallant lad who wanted to join the AIF that he would be doing good work slicing bacon.'<sup>104</sup>

If War Cabinet had bowed to pressure by announcing the formation of the AWAS before it was ready, the vacillation that followed smacked of a government that was either ill-prepared, or unwilling, to honour its decision to mobilise women. Given the ample time it had had to prepare, it is arguably its unwillingness to allow women to take on men's jobs that was behind its procrastination. As the weeks went by and prospective recruits were left waiting for further announcements, press criticism reflected the exasperation of the official recruitment coordinators, the paramilitary organisations and the women themselves:

'After two years of war and all the lessons it has taught there should be something better than the slipshod arrangements for starting the organisation of women's full-time service in the defence of the nation.'<sup>105</sup>

A representative of the Women's National Defence League of Australia, (NDLA) wrote to Percy Spender, then Minister for the Army, warning that if the Government did not hasten recruitment, 'the cream of the women' from its highly-trained Transport Unit would join other services and 'be lost to the army'.<sup>106</sup> Further delays seemed inevitable with a change of Government at the beginning of October, but after Labour's John Curtin became Prime Minister, the new Minister for the

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<sup>104</sup> 'Mary Ferber and War Work Women', *Daily News*, Perth, 27 August, 1941, p. 20, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article83277880> [accessed 16 April 2019].

<sup>105</sup> 'Another Muddle', *Courier-Mail*, 17 September 1941, p.4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41952638> [accessed 16 April 2019].

<sup>106</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1, 339/701/68, 'Letter to P. Spender from K. McDowell, 2 October 1941.

Army, Frank Forde, reassured the NDLA that once the Senior Officers had been selected, recruitment would begin for the other ranks.<sup>107</sup> His confidence was not shared by those coordinating applications, however. Correspondence to Irving from the WVNR in Adelaide reveals a lack of coordination regarding the distribution of application forms to potential applicants and a suggestion that its recommendations for First Officers from South Australia had been lost or ignored.<sup>108</sup> As the officer responsible for First Officer recruitment, Irving would have been answerable to this charge, and this is discussed in Chapter Two. She was not responsible for the delays which continued to blight progress, however. In a letter to the WANS in late October, Irving regretted that recruitment had been put on hold until War Cabinet had made its decision. 'And in the present state of uncertainty we cannot make any definite plans...' <sup>109</sup>

Matters were brought to a head by emerging press reports that the government had called a halt to the recruitment of women for the auxiliary services altogether.<sup>110</sup> Dissent within the Labour party over proposals to pay servicewomen less than the men they would be replacing were cited as the reason.<sup>111</sup> At this point, pay scales for the women's army had not been finalised, but a proposal to pay them two-thirds of the male rate was more than many were receiving in industry.<sup>112</sup> There were other problems: the lack of discrete camp accommodation for women

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<sup>107</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1, 339/701/68, 'Letter to K. McDowell from F. Forde, 27 October 1941.

<sup>108</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 1, Letter to Sybil Irving from Phebe Watson, WVNR, Adelaide, 16 October 1941.

<sup>109</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1, 339/701/61, 'Nominations and Appointments for AWAS', Letter to Miss E. Manning, WANS, Sydney, from Sybil Irving, 27 October 1941.

<sup>110</sup> 'Recruiting of Women for Auxiliary War Units Suspended', Courier-Mail Brisbane, 25 October 1941, p.1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41928659> [accessed 16 April 2019].

<sup>111</sup> Hasluck, 'The Government and the People', p. 405.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.406.

was one, and with no immediate plans to build, AWAS would have to take lodgings or be based close to home.<sup>113</sup> Another issue was the cost of providing uniforms and there were press fears that if they were not supplied, women from wealthy families would buy their own, creating the class distinctions seen in the paramilitary organisations.<sup>114</sup> Government procrastination had, according to the NDLA, left women feeling 'staggered and confused.'<sup>115</sup> As debate continued, it was pointed out that with recruitment to the military falling well below current needs, women must be allowed to take on war work, just as they had been doing in the United Kingdom.<sup>116</sup> Press criticism unsettled the government: just a few days later, official denials were issued that any action had been taken to curtail recruitment.<sup>117</sup>

By December it had been agreed that pay would remain at the two-thirds rate and because of this, the provision of uniform was considered a 'desirable' benefit.<sup>118</sup> In the meantime, news that the army had decided not to utilise women as drivers, despatch riders or mechanics once again infuriated the women's paramilitary organisations.<sup>119</sup> In a heated telegram to Forde, the NDLA reminded him that its members were 'qualified under army supervision' in driving and mechanics among other essential military skills and were looking forward to

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<sup>113</sup> NAA(AWM) Canberra: 227,12, 'AWAS Miscellaneous Papers'. Notes taken at a Conference on Recruiting, 10 November 1941.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid; 'Girls' War Jobs in Peril', *Sun*, Sydney, 25 October, 1941, p.3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article230951056> [accessed 16 April 2019].

<sup>115</sup> 'Women Concerned About Uniform Policy', *Hobart Mercury*, 27 October 1942, p.1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article25900637> [accessed 17 April 2019].

<sup>116</sup> 'Women's War Service', *West Australian*, 28 October 1941, p.4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article47166907> [accessed 17 April 2019].

<sup>117</sup> 'Halting Recruiting Denials by Ministers', *Geraldton Guardian and Express*, 30 October, 1941, p. 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article67336449> [accessed 17 April 2019].

<sup>118</sup> NAA(AWM): 227, 12, 'Miscellaneous Papers 1941-1942'. Secret Minute Paper, 10 December 1941 and Minute Paper 18 December 1941.

<sup>119</sup> NAA(AWM): 61, 5181, 'Replacement of personnel by females, 1941'.



‘bearing a share in the total war effort’. This latest decision, it warned, was likely to discourage enlistments to the AWAS and it was hoped it was ‘not a complete reflection of your Government’s attitude.’<sup>120</sup> Clearly, the government was either unconcerned about losing skills that it considered it did not need or troubled by the effect that the employment of highly trained young women in male jobs might have on existing servicemen.

It took the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese in December 1941, to reposition the women’s army in political and military minds. With the entry of Japan into the war posing a direct threat to Australia and with so many servicemen overseas, the inadequacy of Australia’s resources for home defence could not be ignored. Reluctantly, it was agreed that women would be mobilised.<sup>121</sup> That month, War Cabinet hastily approved the appointment of 1,600 women to the AWAS and soon after the Army issued a press release calling for women with clerical, domestic and service skills.<sup>122</sup> There was no mention of any need for drivers or mechanics and at the end of the document, a statement that the Australian Women’s Army Service was the only army organisation to be officially recognised, was surely intended as a message to the NDLA and the other paramilitary groups that they held no influence.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> NAA(VSO): MP 508/1, 339/701/68, ‘Concern expressed by Women’s National Defence League re enrolment in AWAS’.

<sup>121</sup> Beaumont, ‘Australia’s War: Asia and the Pacific’, pp.26-27.

<sup>122</sup> NAA(AWM): 227,12, ‘AWAS Miscellaneous Papers’. Notes for Minister for Army, 8 December 1941; NAA(VSO): MP70/5, 139/1/2568, ‘Australian Women’s Army Service – Notes for the Press’, n.d.c 1941.

<sup>123</sup> NAA(VSO): MP70/5, 139/1/2568, ‘Australian Women’s Army Service – Notes for the Press’, n.d.c 1941.

The Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, posed a direct threat to Australia. The extent of its military isolation was reinforced just a few days later, on 19 February, when Japanese bombs rained down on the city of Darwin, the country's most northerly and strategically important coastal military base, killing 235 people and decimating buildings and shipping in two attacks.<sup>124</sup> Although after Pearl Harbour, the Government had evacuated Darwin's civilian population in anticipation of an attack, news of the extent of the destruction was suppressed for fear of undermining public confidence.<sup>125</sup> As Darwin was placed under martial law and fears of a possible invasion grew, the AWAS became crucial for the release of servicemen to the front. A dramatic change in the official attitude towards the AWAS was marked by reports of praise heaped on the fledgling army by Forde, while new recruits in Melbourne were told that they were serving their country at a time when the need was 'most serious and urgent'.<sup>126</sup>

## Conclusion

The hardships of the Depression years significantly reduced Australian women's opportunities, and the sustained promotion of the First World War Digger hero reinforced their inferior socio-economic status. With war accepted as a

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<sup>124</sup> R. Reid, *Australia Under Attack: Darwin and the Northern Territory 1942-1945* (Canberra, 2007), pp. 1-9.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-9.

<sup>126</sup> 'Darwin is Under Martial Law, Evacuation Plans for Civilians: No More Raids', *Newcastle Sun*, 21 February 1942, p.1. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article167547267> [accessed 12 March 2019]; 'Army Women Praised, Men Now Freed', *News*, Adelaide, 21 February 1942, p.6, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131950400> [accessed 9 April 2019]; 'Women's Army School', *The Age*, Melbourne, 21 February 1942, p.9 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article205277595> [accessed 9 April 2019].

masculine activity and feminine participation strictly boundaried, class became both an inhibitor and an enabler to women's involvement in the early war effort. Government attempts to encourage patriotism through pro-British propaganda encouraged women's determination to follow British women's lead and equip themselves with the traditionally male skills that would prepare them for military service. Fears that feminine participation would demoralise male troops, alter the gender-norms of post-war society and threaten nation-building led to delays in the formation of a women's army. It took the threat of invasion for women to be mobilised, and aware that its hand had been forced, the government remained determined to keep servicewomen on a tight lead. Chapter Two examines how issues of class and gender were instrumental in shaping the character of the AWAS and how its ethos and reputation were manipulated to meet and maintain accepted societal norms.

## Chapter 2

### Creating the AWAS Ethos and Reputation

The assembly of a trusted cohort of women to help form and guide the development of the AWAS according to government needs was essential to the success of the AWAS. It was, therefore, to known individuals already occupying senior positions in the Red Cross, the Girl Guides, the WANS and other wartime voluntary services, that politicians, the Army and Sybil Irving, turned. By following the established class-based practice of drawing on personal networks to fill senior roles, they effectively facilitated the transfer of class hierarchies from the women's voluntary groups into the new officer corps of the AWAS.

### Selection of the First Officers

Although the First Officers were told on their first training course that '...there was a good deal of competition...' for their posts, that selections 'had been made from people with very different kinds of backgrounds' and that the army had not relied on 'somebody's recommendation that a woman was capable', evidence exists that in some cases none of these statements was true.<sup>1</sup> It is also notable that the women chosen were later described as being 'a representative selection of Australian women' when all of those appointed had *curricula vitarum* reflecting high-achieving, privileged backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> All possessed leadership experience in a voluntary organisation or had held positions of responsibility in public service or in business. Five were university graduates and a similar number had spent significant

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<sup>1</sup> NAA(VSO): B5500, 2, 'Lecture Notes, First Officers Course, 'Opening Address', 24 November 1941.

<sup>2</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1/214, 'History of AWAS', p.5-10.

time overseas, which in the 1930s, was itself an indicator of privilege. On a personal level, the majority were in their thirties and still single at a time when most women were already married, which, according to observations made by Martin, was a characteristic of the financially independent, upper-middle classes.<sup>3</sup>

Chosen to become Controller of the proposed women's army in October 1941, Sybil Irving exemplified the ideal senior officer recruit.<sup>4</sup> Born into a military family at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne, her father had been a Major-General and her brother was a Brigadier.<sup>5</sup> At the time of her appointment, Sybil was forty-four, unmarried, a committed Anglican and devoted to public service.<sup>6</sup> Her lack of formal education, something which might have held back someone from a different family, was evidently no barrier: 'Somehow luck was always on my side. I was not trained for anything, yet I enjoyed great success.'<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, her military pedigree, extensive service within the Girl Guides and the Red Cross, conventional Christian principles and uncomplicated personal life made Sybil Irving the safe pair of hands the army needed for the woman tasked with the job of developing a women's army from scratch.

It is likely however, that, given her military background, Irving was already known by the officer in charge of recruitment at Army headquarters in Victoria

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<sup>3</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1/214, 'History of AWAS', p.5-10; Martin, 'Marriage, the Family and Class', p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Colonel Irving from Chief of the General Staff, 30 January 1947.

<sup>5</sup> Ollif, *Women in Khaki*, pp.32 - 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> NAA(AWM): PR85/123, Tribute to Sybil Irving by the Australian Women's Army Association, (Victoria), 6 August 1976, p.2.

Barracks, General Stantke. A sentence in her letter of acceptance to him, indicates personal familiarity:

‘I would like to add how proud I am to have been selected as Controller and also how delighted I am that you, personally, are pleased with the appointment.’<sup>8</sup>

Irving had not been the only candidate for the Controller’s job. Two other women had been put forward by the then Minister for the Army, Percy Spender.<sup>9</sup> Although neither was chosen, one of his suggestions, Eleanor Manning, the daughter of the NSW State Attorney General, was appointed Irving’s deputy, becoming Assistant Controller, Eastern Command.<sup>10</sup> Spender was also behind the selection for another important post, the Assistant Controller for the Northern Command.<sup>11</sup> At least one other of the First Officers was recommended for her role by a high-ranking member of the army. Elizabeth Lucas, who became the second Controller of the AWAS for a few months in 1947 after Sybil Irving retired, claims she was offered a position on the suggestion of a colonel whom she had met through her voluntary work as commander of the Australian Women’s Service Corps.<sup>12</sup>

Recommendations for other First Officer posts were passed to General Stantke at his request, by Lady Wakehurst, President of the WANS, and, as indicated

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<sup>8</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Freda Irving Manuscripts, Box 3539/1, Letter from Sybil Irving to General Strandke, 4 October 1941.

<sup>9</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1, 339/701/61, ‘Nominations and Appointments for AWAS’, Letter to General Stantke from P.C. Spender, Minister for the Army, 26 August 1941.

<sup>10</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1/214, ‘History of AWAS’, p.4; Ollif, *Women in Khaki*, p.44.

<sup>11</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1/214, ‘History of AWAS’, p.4.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Lucas, (née Ratten), *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00912, interviewed by H. Martin, 7 April 1990.

by the familiarity of her correspondence with him, a family friend. Her four recommendations, made with consultation with the WANS and the WVNR, had all held responsible positions in the WANS for at least a year, were unmarried and aged between thirty and thirty-eight.<sup>13</sup> All four of Lady Wakehurst's recommendations became First officers and are likely to have been among the five women whose appointments were made prior to the start of their initial officers' training course.<sup>14</sup> This is in contradiction to advice given to the new Labour Minister for the Army, Frank Forde, that all of the First officers were appointed as a result of a competitive examination held at the end of this course.<sup>15</sup>

Although as the recruitment coordinating body, the WVNR had also been invited to make recommendations for First Officer posts, it was noted in Chapter One that concerns were raised by them about the handling of applications from South Australia. In a letter to Irving, the Secretary of the Adelaide WVNR had written, '...I feel you should be informed of the manner in which these nominations were called for, which, I felt strongly, was the wrong procedure.' Around fifty applications for officer positions had been sent from to the army, but there was 'no knowledge of where they were sent, or what was done with them.'<sup>16</sup> Although women from South Australia were among those chosen to be First Officers, it is not known if any of their names had been among the applications put forward by the WVNR. While it cannot be assumed that the applications had been lost, forgotten

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<sup>13</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1, 339/701/61, 'Nominations and Appointments for AWAS', Letter to General Stantke from Margaret Wakehurst, 28 August 1941.

<sup>14</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1/214, 'History of AWAS', p.4.

<sup>15</sup> NAA(AWM): 227,12, 'Miscellaneous Papers, 1941-1942', AWAS Seniority List, 20 January 1942.

<sup>16</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 1, Letter to Sybil Irving from Phebe Watson, WVNR, Adelaide, 16 October 1941.

or even deliberately discounted while Irving settled into her post, the fact that the applications went unacknowledged raises the question of whether the WVNR's recommendations for the First Officer positions were ever properly considered.

According to former First Officer, Stella Swinney, Irving wanted women who had held leadership roles in the WANS to be included in her senior team and relied on 'knowing the people who knew these women' to find them.<sup>17</sup> It is also evident from correspondence that Irving personally knew many of those chosen to be First Officers through her long association with the Girl Guides. Eleanor Manning had held senior roles with both the Guides and the WANS. In a personal letter to Irving shortly after the AWAS was established, she revealed friendship between themselves and affiliations with other officers which were likely to have been forged through these organisations.<sup>18</sup> A letter addressed affectionately to 'Sybil dear' from First Officer and former Girl Guide, May Douglas demonstrates a similar close relationship.<sup>19</sup> In this correspondence, Douglas shares family news with her friend before expressing dismay about having to work with a senior male officer, whom she describes as a 'pig-headed old devil', a phrase which none other than a trusted friend could use about one superior officer to another. A postscript advises that she has since discussed the problem with another high-ranking mutual female friend, whom Douglas is sure will 'straighten things out for us.' This comment echoes

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<sup>17</sup> Stella Swinney.

<sup>18</sup> SLV: Freda Irving Manuscripts, MS 12758, Box 3539/1, Letter to Sybil Irving from Eleanor Manning, 24 December 1941.

<sup>19</sup> SLV: Freda Irving Manuscripts, MS 12758, Box 3539/1, Letter to Sybil Irving from May Douglas, 15 December 1941.



Martin's findings that those in higher social groups used social networking to achieve outcomes that would be unavailable to outsiders.<sup>20</sup>

Existing connections between the Army and the Girl Guides was reinforced by the choice of Guide House at Yarra Junction in Victoria to host the First Officers' training course.<sup>21</sup> With so many of the twenty-eight First Officers having been members of the Girl Guides, it would have been reassuring to them to be told that: 'There is really very little difference in the way the Army is run from the top to the bottom than in any large business ... or any organisation such as the Girl Guides.'<sup>22</sup> That most had been privately educated and some were university graduates mattered little to the Army, which valued their leadership skills above all else.<sup>23</sup> They were told: '...what you have done, particularly on the question of organisation and control of women – counts in making you capable or otherwise in carrying out the work which is before you.'<sup>24</sup>

Having themselves been selected through personal connections, some of the First Officers then used their own contacts to recruit from the voluntary organisations to the rank and file. Joyce Whitworth, one of the First officers, recalls that in NSW, priority was given to around one hundred women who had been intensively trained in the WANS Defence Units.<sup>25</sup> Reena Rad had been a leader with the Girl Guides and a member of the WANS and had met two of the AWAS First

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, J., 'Marriage, the Family and Class', pp. 24 – 54.

<sup>21</sup> NAA(VSO): B5500, 2, 'Lecture Notes, First Officers Course, Yarra Junction, Opening Address', 24 November 1941.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Joyce Whitworth.

Officers through these associations before she became an AWAS at the age of nineteen in 1942. She says, 'Eleanor Manning decided that she would take girls who, if we signed to say that if Australia was involved in a war, we would enlist, she would take us and train us every Saturday afternoon...'<sup>26</sup>

### **Controller's leadership style**

As the Controller of a new and ground-breaking organisation, Irving had many critics to please. With the responsibility of ensuring that the AWAS achieved its objectives, came the obligation to do so without compromising socially acceptable female behavioural norms. As remembered by AWAS veterans, the new women's army was something to which 'many hide-bound army types were ... antagonistic.'<sup>27</sup> Both she and the women in her charge were effectively on trial, by the press and public, male politicians and the army hierarchy, including the male soldiers they were sent to replace. Irving knew that if she was to be successful, she would need to encourage the high standards of behaviour and self-discipline that had been the cornerstone of the Guides.<sup>28</sup> Shortly after her appointment, Irving told members of women's voluntary organisations in Brisbane that she would use the codes of Guiding and Scouting to help her with her task.<sup>29</sup>

The AWAS uniform was central to Irving's philosophy, becoming, as had been the case with the Girl Guides and other voluntary and paramilitary groups, a

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<sup>26</sup> Reena Rad.

<sup>27</sup> NLA: NLP355.3480994 A938, NSW AWAS Association, *Khaki Clad and Glad 30 Years After*, 1971, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> SLV: MS10050, Sybil Irving Manuscript, Box 2, 'Controller's Address, 27 November 1941.

<sup>29</sup> 'Women's Army Chief Tells Code of Service', *Courier-Mail, Brisbane*, 18 October 1941, p. 7. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41924377> [accessed 9 April 2019].

powerful symbol of unity and purpose.<sup>30</sup> With uniforms initially unavailable, early recruits wore civilian dress with an armband and the eventual issue of uniform caused a wave of excitement among the ranks.<sup>31</sup> Amy Taylor remembers feeling 'very proud' to wear the uniform after having only an armband for the first few weeks: 'I just sort of felt that then they would know that I was in the army and that I was doing a job.'<sup>32</sup>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

100383

### **AWAS uniform fitting, 1944.<sup>33</sup>**

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<sup>30</sup> Hampton, *How the Girl Guides Won the War*, p.8.

<sup>31</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1, 214, 'History of AWAS', p.14; NLA: NLP 355.3480994A938, 'AWAS – Khaki Clad and Glad 30 Years After', AWAS Association. NSW; SLV: Freda Irving Manuscripts, MS 12758, Box 3539/1, Letter to Sybil Irving from May Douglas, 3 February 1942.

<sup>32</sup> Amy Taylor.

<sup>33</sup> AWM Collection: 100383.

Aware of its association with glamour, a concept that the Army's marketing men exploited throughout the war, Irving ensured that new recruits saw the uniform as a representation of virtuous collective endeavour. They were told: 'The AWAS is the first women's service to have the honour of being part of the Australian Army and to wear the King's uniform. Uniformity gives you loyalty and confidence. We are all one; we all belong to one service.'<sup>34</sup> Pride in the uniform was expected and on top of their duties, women had responsibility for its laundering and care.<sup>35</sup> Like all liveries, the AWAS uniform had the ability to both eliminate and bestow social status.<sup>36</sup> Externally, distinction was created between servicewomen and civilians and between the AWAS and the women's auxiliaries. Internally, differences in quality of materials and adornment separated officers from the other ranks in the way that these distinguishing features denote class in civilian life.<sup>37</sup> Initially, with only the First Officers given officer status, uniform was also a class signifier but later, as promotions were obtained through the ranks, social stratification became blurred.<sup>38</sup>

Although public acceptance of women in uniform increased as the war progressed, concerns about the detrimental effects that army life might have on women's femininity lingered.<sup>39</sup> As it had been a concern of Baden-Powell, founder of the Girl Guides, that girls should not be made 'coarse' or 'over-toughened' by their involvement in Guiding, the fear that women would become manly and lose

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<sup>34</sup> NAA(AWM): PR00114, Notebook, Pte. P. Rattray, 'Rookie' training lecture notes, 13 June 1942.

<sup>35</sup> NAA(VSO): B5505, 36, 'Take Pride in Your Uniform', n.d.

<sup>36</sup> T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (Oxford, 2009), pp.55-56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.70-71.

<sup>38</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 1, 'Promotion' History of Matters, Part VII, pp. 103-107.

<sup>39</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1/214, 'History of AWAS', p.4.

their interest in marriage and motherhood once hostilities were over remained a continuing concern for a government mindful of the need to balance the demands of the present with those of the future.<sup>40</sup> It was without doubt for this reason that the protection of servicewomen's femininity remained at the forefront of policy and of Irving's philosophy for the AWAS. As a practical person, Irving was not drawn to personal embellishment but she took great pains to encourage women to take a pride in their personal appearance, famously allowing them to wear lipstick because, 'It makes you look better, so naturally you feel better and therefore do a better job' and to receive regular hairdressing.<sup>41</sup> Women were also allowed to wear wedding and engagement rings and, notably, signet rings, jewellery traditionally worn by the upper classes.<sup>42</sup> With camp accommodation basic, AWAS were encouraged to make their living quarters as attractive, comfortable and homely as possible.<sup>43</sup> Joyce Whitworth remembers that '...some of the girls would make bedspreads and curtains and things like that and this was her [Irving's] idea of women remaining feminine.'<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hampton, *How the Girl Guides Won the War*, p.4.

<sup>41</sup> 'Controller Won't Ban Make-up', Daily Telegraph, Sydney, 2 October 1941, p. 9. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article247629459> [accessed 16 April 2019]. Servicewomen were offered regular free hairdressing from 1944: NAA(VSO): B5499/1 Vol.8. 'Free Hair-dos for All Service Girls, New Army Feature', *Sun News-Pictorial*, 24 February 1944.

<sup>42</sup> NAA(AWM): PR00114, Notebook, Pte. P. Rattray, 'Rookie' training lecture notes, 13 June 1942.

<sup>43</sup> AWAS were encouraged to create colour-coordinated bedspreads, curtains and rugs and given instructions on how to make their own lampshades, vases and bedside cabinets in a leaflet entitled 'Make B-A-R-R-A-C-K spell H-O-M-E for the duration', issued in October 1943. SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 3; NAA(VSO), B5499/1 Vol. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Joyce Whitworth.



**AWAS signalwoman returns to her barracks after having her hair set, Darwin NT, 1945.<sup>45</sup>**

To ensure the good reputation of AWAS personnel, Irving introduced strict codes of conduct for women, both in camp and when off duty. The First Officers were told:

'...do let us remember always that this is the Australian Women's Army Service. If our conduct is based on good taste and good sense it will naturally follow that conduct will be unobtrusive, courteous and natural...Another thing to watch will be our general attitude towards the men with whom we are working. To some it may be a new experience and they will need to

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<sup>45</sup> AWM Collection: 088295.

remember that they are on a job of work and conduct themselves accordingly. Don't be hearty – be womanly.'<sup>46</sup>

This message was passed down to the other ranks attending their initial 'rookie school' training. In the notes taken during her first lecture, Private Patricia Rattray writes, 'We are reminded that because we are filling a man's position and are in uniform, not to become mannish in our manner, or habits.'<sup>47</sup> A later entry notes that as part of a code of behaviour which the Controller and First Officers had based on 'common sense and good taste, 'smoking on trains or in the street and chewing gum while in uniform were forbidden.'<sup>48</sup> Beryl Fowler recalls that it wasn't considered right for a women to smoke in public. 'You always looked twice if someone smoked in a public tram or bus those days...they were seen to be a bit fast.'<sup>49</sup> But while Irving was keen to defend class-based perceptions of correct public behaviour, the reality of the work and living conditions was often quite different'. 'I think that was part of our troubles with the AWAS headquarters,' recalls Betsy Leemon, an ambulance driver, 'They wanted us to be women and we were in there to do a man's job. And the point was that we had to do the job, heavy work and all, as well, if not better than a man...We worked harder than the average man did, just to prove the point, that we could do the work.'<sup>50</sup>

As a practising Anglican, religious observance was part of Irving's civilising philosophy and with the assistance of the Education Service and her officers, Irving

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<sup>46</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 2, 'Controller's Address', 27 November 1941.

<sup>47</sup> NAA(AWM): PR00114, Notebook, Private. P. Rattray, 'Rookie' training lecture notes, 7 June 1942.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Beryl Fowler.

<sup>50</sup> Betsy Leemon.

ensured that opportunities were provided for women's spiritual enrichment.<sup>51</sup> This philosophy is reflected in an editorial in an AWAS journal produced as a fund-raiser for prisoners of war, which reminded women of their calling to 'set the standard' if the world was to find peace.<sup>52</sup> Arguably the words refer to women's ability to be a civilising force but Johansen inaccurately interpreted them to mean that some older people believed women lowered their standards by joining the military services.<sup>53</sup>

In line with the army's policy on preparing personnel for post-war life, the women were encouraged to engage with a wide variety of opportunities for intellectual stimulation and practical learning, in preparation for civilian life.<sup>54</sup> As is discussed in Chapter Three, the Army Education Service played a significant part in providing AWAS personnel with the cultural capital that Irving and the First Officers would have gained through their families, schools and club memberships, including the voluntary organisations.<sup>55</sup> During their initial training, the First Officers were reminded that that the AWAS would be formed of all types of women, and that '... some of them will not have been connected previously with any organisation.' Nevertheless, Irving reassured officers that although the young Australian was 'independent' and 'often opinionated', she was 'sound' and 'is bound to uphold the code of discipline set for us.'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 2. Assistant Controllers Conference Folders, Minutes No.2. 17-20 March 1943, 'Christian Welfare'.

<sup>52</sup> SLV: *Yes Madam!* In Aid of Prisoners of War Fund Dec 1943, p.5.  
<http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/129542> [Accessed July 2018].

<sup>53</sup> G. Johansen, 'The AWAS: A Social History', p. 65.

<sup>54</sup> NAA(AWM): PR85/123, 'Tribute to Miss Sybil Howy Irving MBE', AWAS Association, Victoria, 6 August 1976.

<sup>55</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction* pp. 5-6, 56-58, 74-75.

<sup>56</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 2, 'Controller's Address', 27 November 1941.



## Recruitment: methods and messages

Australia's wartime responsibility for the supply of manufacturing and agricultural products to its own forces, to the Americans based in the South West Pacific, and to Britain, put pressure on human resources, making it difficult for the authorities to meet the recruitment demands of both industry and the military.<sup>57</sup> From its beginning, every AWAS application was vetted by the Manpower authority to eliminate those who might be useful for industry or who came from areas where labour shortages were acute.<sup>58</sup> According to Gwen Mann, some women applied to the AWAS to avoid having to do monotonous jobs in factories.<sup>59</sup>

Competition for personnel led to huge tensions between the two agencies.<sup>60</sup> With recruitment to the AWAS reaching its peak in July 1942, there were fears in NSW that the large numbers awaiting enlistment with the AWAS would be redirected into other work by Manpower and permanently lost.<sup>61</sup> This situation changed in 1943, when a severe drop AWAS recruits corresponded with the introduction of even tighter Manpower restrictions.<sup>62</sup> Marking a dramatic departure from initial recruitment policy favouring high-quality candidates, AWAS Assistant Controllers were told of the 'necessity for not turning away any applicant', even if

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<sup>57</sup> Grey, J., *A Military History of Australia* (Cambridge, 1990), pp.179-181.

<sup>58</sup> NAA(AWM) 54 88/1/5, 'Enlistment of Women in the Women's Auxiliaries', 7 August 1942.

<sup>59</sup> Gwen Mann, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00782, interviewed by H. Martin, 23 January 1990.

<sup>60</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1 339/701/286, Correspondence between the Director-General of Manpower, Sydney, with the Army Director of Recruiting and Mobilization, Melbourne, May and June 1942; NAA(VSO): B1552 944, Memo to Assistant to Controller of Advertising from Advertising Liaison Officer, 3 July 1942; NAA(AWM) 54 88/1/5, Memo from the Director-General of Manpower, 'Enlistment of Women in the Women's Auxiliaries', 7 August 1942.

<sup>61</sup> NAA(AWM) 54 88/1/1/ Part 42, AWAS enlistments, January 1942 – August 1945; NAA(AWM): 61 527/1/769, Memo from Eleanor Manning, Assistant Controller, NSW, 23 October 1942.

<sup>62</sup> NAA(AWM) 54 88/1/5, 'Schedule of Restrictions Respecting the Recruitment of Women in the Women's Auxiliaries', from the Director-General Manpower, 28 April 1943.

there was no appropriate role available for them to fill. Adaptability Tests were created for their guidance in cases where applicants were 'suspected to be of low mental or moral standard.'<sup>63</sup> The downward trend in recruitment continued through 1944 until the end of the war and led to recruitment campaigns targeting eighteen-year-olds, because it was felt that women of this age were less subject to Manpower control.<sup>64</sup>

The large body of available press coverage from the time shows that the Army's Department of Information kept up a steady stream of positive news stories about the AWAS throughout its duration, ensuring that a good reputation was developed and maintained.<sup>65</sup> Although the journalist Keith Murdoch, appointed head of the Army's Department of Information in 1940, was no longer in post by the time the AWAS was formed, other professionals were taken on to promote the AWAS through the press and broadcasting.<sup>66</sup>

Advertising was initially handled by the AWAS itself, with First Officers responsible for local advertising undertaken on an ad hoc basis by non-specialists.<sup>67</sup> With interest in the AWAS high, at the beginning, officers could afford to be selective. 'The applications are pouring in and it is taking time sorting the sheep from

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<sup>63</sup> SLV: MS 10050 Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, Assistant Controllers Conference folders, No.3. 15-17 November 1943, Minutes, 17 November 1943.

<sup>64</sup> NAA(AWM) 54 88/1/1/ Part 42, AWAS Enlistments, January 1942 – August 1945.

<sup>65</sup> See the Trove database: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>.

<sup>66</sup> K. Saunders, 'An Instrument of Strategy: Propaganda, Public Policy and the Media in Australia During the Second World War', *War & Society*, 15:2 (1997), DOI: 10.1179/072924797791201201 [accessed 10 July 2019]; SLV: MS12758, Box 3539/1, Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Sybil Irving from A.N. Kemsley, former radio station manager and Director of Information, 24 January 1947.

<sup>67</sup> NAA(VSO): MP70/5, 139,1,162 'AWAS Formation File', AWAS Recruiting, 27 December 1941 and Letter to AWAS Assistant Controller Southern Command from AWAS Controller, 30 December 1941; SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, 'History of the Women's Army Services', n.d. c.1947., p.67.

the goats,' one officer reports in a letter to Sybil Irving.<sup>68</sup> A 250-mile round-trip to interview applicants at a country town had resulted in the recruitment of only three: 'The others I would not have touched if they had been wrapped in sugar'.<sup>69</sup>

Following War Cabinet approval for an additional 7,000 recruits to the AWAS in April 1942, the Army's Department of Information stepped in to prepare a broadcast appeal for clerical workers.<sup>70</sup> Describing the AWAS as 'this splendid little army of patriotic women,' it was declared that prospective recruits were needed to release fighting soldiers who 'loathe clerical work', 'resent being forced to sit in offices' and 'are itching to put on their field equipment and get to their battle stations.' Until women came forward, trained soldiers would be kept in offices doing 'women's work.' The language used here left women in no doubt that war was primarily a male activity and that their own role was one of passive support. Furthermore, it was implied that by failing to respond, they would be responsible for allowing the country to remain undefended. One final message, offered in a way that conjures up visions of a Victorian physician calming a woman with suspected hysteria, advises: 'If you are worried and anxious about the war, the cure for your anxiety is action – full time occupation of your mind in useful work.'<sup>71</sup> The suggestion of women's suitability to the routine of office work is a perception endorsed by other army officials. One pronounced that: 'women generally are much more

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<sup>68</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1. Letter to Sybil Irving from Doris Hymus, 7 February 1942.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> NAA(AWM): 80, 11/209, Folder 1, Department of Information, 6 April 1942.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

proficient in stenography, typing and duties of a private secretarial nature, than is the case with men...'<sup>72</sup>

There is no documentation available to confirm if Irving or other AWAS officers had been consulted about the content of this broadcast, or what their opinions of it might be. The absence of Irving's name or comments on documentation indicates that she was rarely consulted about AWAS advertising handled by the Army's Department of Information, although the 1944 campaign, 'Khaki Clad and Glad' was a notable exception, possibly due to the influence of her sister, Lieutenant Freda Irving, who as a journalist, had been seconded to the Army's Public Relations team that year.<sup>73</sup> Correspondence relating to this campaign shows that the Controller's hopes had been dashed on sight of the proposed image, which she said 'might well have been used in a "Maclean your teeth" advert,' while the message 'lacked any appealing spirit that might be calculated to urge a girl to join up.'<sup>74</sup> This was not the only time that Irving disagreed with the way advertising was handled by the Department of Information. The same year, with recruitment on the decline, she complained that publicity they produced for the WAAAF 'swamps all areas, to the detriment of AWAS recruiting', revealing that competition for personnel was not confined to industry.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1, 240/701/647, Confidential Memo, Army LHQ: Utilisation of Manpower in the Army, 28 November 1942.

<sup>73</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, Assistant Controllers' Conference 4, 24-25 April 1944.

<sup>74</sup> NAA(VSO): B1552 944 AWAS Advertising and Recruitment Campaign, Memo, 11 March 1944.

<sup>75</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, Assistant Controllers Conference folders, No.5. 24-30 August 1944.

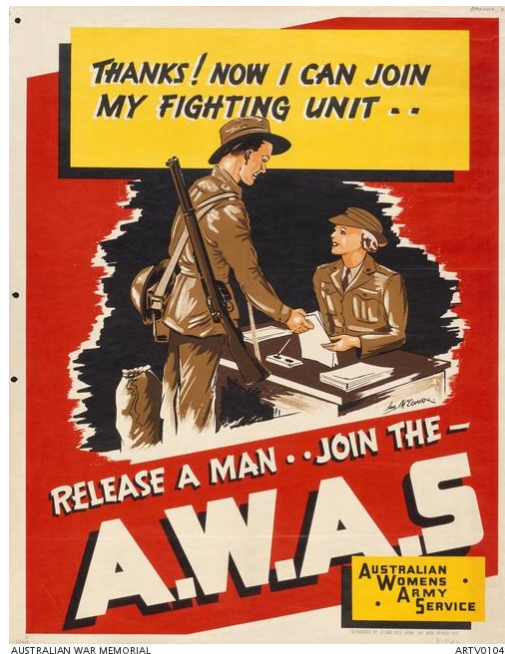
From 1942, marketing materials reflected the roles that women were required to fill.<sup>76</sup> Although undated, recruitment posters can be linked to identified campaigns. One, which was likely to have been produced in early 1942 at the time the broadcast appealing for clerical workers was made, features a Digger with a kitbag handing over a sheaf of papers to an attractive AWAS seated at an office desk, with the strapline, 'Thanks! now I can join my fighting unit. Release a man – join the AWAS.'<sup>77</sup> Notably, the AWAS hat is incorrectly drawn in this image. Another shows the head and shoulders of a Digger standing in front of an empty desk, accompanied by the words, 'Join the women's army: Take my Chair, I'm wanted at the battlefield'.<sup>78</sup> In both of these posters, the prominent display of the Digger character serves as a reminder that the important work of war is male, while the rightful female role is one of efficient, compliant, support.

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<sup>76</sup> NAA(VSO): B1552, 944, 'AWAS Advertising and Recruitment'.

<sup>77</sup> NAA(AWM) website: [https://www.NAA\(AWM\).gov.au/collection/C96594](https://www.NAA(AWM).gov.au/collection/C96594) [accessed 14 May 2019].

<sup>78</sup> McCowan, Ian, (Second Australian Army Survey Mobile Reproduction Section: 1941-1944) *Join the Women's Army: Take My Chair, I'm Wanted at the Battlefield*, Imperial War Museum, Art. IWM PST 16604, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/18192>, [Accessed 16 July 2019].



Recruitment poster c 1942.<sup>79</sup>

The desire to attract the kind of recruits that would conform to this standard persisted in 1942. Efforts to attract recruits from good homes by promoting army life as healthy and wholesome is reflected in press coverage of AWAS taking part in sporting events attended by friends and families.<sup>80</sup> Newsreel footage from such events was thought to 'make excellent publicity' when shown in theatres.<sup>81</sup> Notably, theatres located in middle and upper-class suburbs were sought out for this purpose to ensure that the message 'gets to the right audience.'<sup>82</sup> Circular

<sup>79</sup>McCowan, Ian, (Second Australian Army Survey Mobile Reproduction Section: 1941-1944) *Thanks! Now I Can Join My Fighting Unit, Release a Man, Join the AWAS*, AWM ARTV01049 [Accessed 16 July 2019].

<sup>80</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1 339/701/426, AWAS Sports Day, Memo, 31 August 1942.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> NAA(VSO), B1552 944, 'Details to Discuss with Controller of Government Advertising', 20 July 1942; NAA: MP742 -1, 256-1-7.

letters designed to be passed on by existing servicewomen to friends and relatives offered the chance of attracting recruits from similar backgrounds.<sup>83</sup> Posters imitating the style of contemporary women's magazine cover portraiture used photographs of serving AWAS, rather than models, to provide reassuring girl-next-door authenticity.<sup>84</sup>

If the politicians had been unconvinced of the necessity of providing a uniform for the AWAS back in 1941, by 1942 the marketing men of the Department of Information were displaying their superior understanding of its appeal by making uniform the focus of advertising campaigns. With no uniforms initially available, an urgent call for more women to enlist in January 1942, described what the uniform would be like for both summer and winter wear.<sup>85</sup> The strapline: 'AWAS, the Service that is Uniformly Smart' was used across advertising materials and a brochure of the same name listed the uniform in full, including underwear.<sup>86</sup> Close attention was now paid to the accurate representation of the hat, which 'must turn up' at the back.<sup>87</sup> The wide-brimmed AWAS hat, styled on one of Irving's own, was demonstrably different from the 'harsh' peaked caps worn by the other women's services and was considered more feminine and flattering.<sup>88</sup> So important was the uniform considered at that time that the army Directorate of Public Relations

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<sup>83</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 256/1/7 AWAS Recruitment Publicity Campaign, 1942.

<sup>84</sup> NAA(VSO): B1552 944 Advertising and Recruitment 1943 refers to the AWAS girl who was photographed for the front cover of *New Idea*. Many of the 'models' featured in AWAS recruitment posters in the NAA(AWM) are named AWAS personnel.

<sup>85</sup> NAA(AWM): 80 11/209 Folder 2, Recruitment statement, 7 January 1942.

<sup>86</sup> NAA(AWM): 54 88/1/1 Part 27 Recruiting brochure n.d.c.1942; NAA(AWM) website: [https://www.NAA\(AWM\).gov.au/collection/C103196](https://www.NAA(AWM).gov.au/collection/C103196) [accessed 14 May 2019].

<sup>87</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 256/1/7 AWAS Recruitment Publicity Campaign, 1942.

<sup>88</sup> NLA: NLP 355.3480994A938, 'AWAS – Khaki Clad and Glad 30 Years After', AWAS Association. NSW, 13 November 1971, p.1.

demanded an assurance that sufficient quantities of uniforms would be produced for all new recruits before the 1942 winter recruitment drive was instigated.<sup>89</sup>

As the war progressed, the imagery used in advertising reflected the transfer of women from clerical jobs into more active roles. A poster which is likely to have been created in late 1942 or in 1943 when women were needed at anti-aircraft units, features the face of a hearty-looking AWAS in a steel helmet, clutching a pair of binoculars.<sup>90</sup> The accompanying words: 'AWAS wants 100s of Australia's keenest women urgently. Anti-aircraft defence – your greatest opportunity for service,' marks a departure from the portrayal of the AWAS as an efficient office-worker, instead referencing the strong, resilient, female pioneer who did not mind getting her hands dirty or living under basic conditions. The following year, a poster used to recruit to the Corps of Signals illustrates the breadth of their work by listing women's roles and surrounding the traditional portrait image with snapshots of signalwomen engaged in routine duties.<sup>91</sup> As it is almost certain that by 1943 any of the women who were trained in Morse Code by the paramilitary groups would have already been absorbed by the services, this poster had to appeal to a new, younger cohort of recruits.

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<sup>89</sup> NAA MP742/1, 256/1/7 AWAS Recruitment Publicity Campaign, 1942.

<sup>90</sup> NAA(AWM) website: [https://www.NAA\(AWM\).gov.au/collection/C95911](https://www.NAA(AWM).gov.au/collection/C95911), [accessed 14 May 2019].

<sup>91</sup> NAA(AWM) website: [https://www.NAA\(AWM\).gov.au/collection/C1222738](https://www.NAA(AWM).gov.au/collection/C1222738) [accessed 14 May 2019].





Recruitment posters for Anti-Aircraft c late 1942 and Signals 1943.<sup>92</sup>

The second anniversary of the AWAS in 1943 presented an ideal opportunity for the Army to issue a news release as an attempt to reverse the worrying downward trend in recruitment.<sup>93</sup> Although as an established service, it was now credible for the AWAS to be publicly praised, the Army's description of the women as 'better than the men' and, as the ultimate accolade, 'the true daughters of Anzac,' reflected just how much recruits were needed. Undermining this message however, the slogan: 'Sacrifice salary for service and help save Australia', typed in capitals at

<sup>92</sup> McCowan, Ian, (LHQ Lithographic Coy, Australian Survey Corps), *AWAS Wants 100s of Australia's Keenest Women Urgently*, AWM: ARTV00335 <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C95911> [accessed 11 August 2019]; Warner, Ralph, (AWAS, 1943), *The Corps of Signals has a Special Job for You!* Imperial War Museum, Art. IWM PST, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/37308> [Accessed 16 July 2019].

<sup>93</sup> NAA(AWM): 54, 88/1/8, DAD Public Relations, 'Nearly Two Years Old', n.d. c. 1943.

the bottom of the notice, was a reminder that however much 'better than the men' the AWAS were, they were still paid only two-thirds of the male rate.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the severe shortage of available recruits, the need to maintain the good reputation of the AWAS remained paramount. Broadcast the month before AWAS Assistant Controllers were told not to turn down any applicant, a radio interview with the Army's communications advisor in September 1943, can be interpreted as a pre-emptive measure taken to reinforce good public opinion of the AWAS at a time when its reputation was in greatest peril.<sup>95</sup> Listeners were reminded that the Army had achieved respect for the AWAS by careful selection of women in the ranks, who were of 'good character' and 'above the average in intelligence, ability and education', qualities that clearly would soon no longer be universal.<sup>96</sup> It was also important that the women were seen as feminine, and from 1944, the public relations team ensured that a steady stream of positive press on this topic was generated.<sup>97</sup> One male journalist gave a glowing report on how army life had improved Australian womanhood, recommending that young men looking for a wife after the war would do well to look around the ranks of the women's services.<sup>98</sup>

The continuing decline in recruitment during 1944 led to a dramatic shift in advertising.<sup>99</sup> The summer uniform, thought to be badly-designed and unpopular, was rejected in favour of promoting the distinctive AWAS hat.<sup>100</sup> The strapline, 'A

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> NAA(VSO): MP159/1 87/1/453, Army Design Directorate, Transcript of broadcast from 3UZ and 3SR, 10.30am, 10 September 1943.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> NAA(VSO): B 5499/1 Vol.8., 'AWAS Feminine As Well As Efficient', *Telegraph*, 21 February 1944.

<sup>98</sup> NAA(VSO): 5499/1 Vol.9. 'Will They Be the Same at Home?', *Sun*, 17 August 1944.

<sup>99</sup> NAA(VSO): B1552 944, Letter to Director-General of Public Relations from Assistant to the Controller of Advertising, 5 October 1944.

<sup>100</sup> NAA(AWM): 61 527/1/755, 'Recruiting for AWAS and AAMWS', 18 October 1944.

new hat for your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday', was designed to appeal to the 60,000 teenage girls who would soon be eighteen and eligible to enlist.<sup>101</sup> But it was the steady gaze of AWAS eyes framed by the brim of a hat, which demanded attention. In direct imitation of the masculine pose of a Digger, this image announced that the AWAS had moved on from its support role and was now taking centre stage. By 1945, with interest in joining the services on the wane, all previous associations with glamour were dropped.<sup>102</sup> In a notable messaging about-turn, an advertisement in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, asserted that, 'it wasn't the glamour of uniform' which made women join the AWAS. Furthermore, the service had now become, 'The proudest job in Australia today.'<sup>103</sup> War in Europe may have ended but hostilities in the Pacific were ongoing and this was a reminder that there was still a job to be done. With emphasis on the swift return of the Digger hero a constant theme, messaging echoed those of 1942 which made women feel responsible for outcomes: 'I'll stay up here ten years if necessary...that's my obligation to you...', a Digger character promises in one advertisement, 'but don't make me stay ten minutes longer than I have to...that's your obligation to me.'<sup>104</sup> Images began to return to 1942 styles too, with the resurfacing of traditionally gendered ideals used as a means of preparing women for their new post-war lives as wives and mothers.

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<sup>101</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1 Vol.10, 1944-45, Advertisement: 'A New Hat for Your Birthday', *Sun*, 13 November 1944.

<sup>102</sup> NAA(AWM) 61 527/1/763 Recruiting activities, NSW, 17 February 1945.

<sup>103</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1 Vol.10, 1944-45, Advertisement: 'In Which we Serve', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 3 March 1945.

<sup>104</sup> 'Let's get it over quick!', *Woman*, 23 April 1945, p.40. (Private collection).

## Attitudes of service personnel

Despite Irving's insistence that servicewomen should not be 'mannish' in their behaviour, her Girl Guide training had taught her that women were as capable as men in getting a job done, whatever the task.<sup>105</sup> Recruits understood that the successful completion of duties normally performed by men was important if both they and the AWAS, were to be successful. They were reminded that, 'The AWAS is a unit formed within the Army, not an auxiliary. We are enlisted just as men are...Although we are women, and the weaker sex, we can equal a man's work by a sustained effort, working with quiet fortitude.'<sup>106</sup>

Acceptance of the AWAS by male soldiers of all ranks remained a continuing challenge for Irving, however. It was also clear from the beginning, that gender norms impacted not only on male attitudes, but on how women saw themselves, creating a confusion among servicemen and women of all ranks that the persistent emphasis on femininity did nothing to reduce. Correspondence to Irving from two of her First Officers, both also personal friends, during the early weeks of the AWAS reveals that despite their maturity, backgrounds and seniority, these women were just as unsure about navigating inter-personal relationships with officers of the opposite sex as were the men. Eleanor Manning, Irving's second in command, recounts an awkward moment when, during a discussion about the opposition of male officers to the AWAS, a visiting Colonel had suggested to her that most army men 'would think of taking you out to tea.'<sup>107</sup> Uncertain of how she should have

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<sup>105</sup> NAA(AWM):PR00114, Notebook, Private. P. Rattray, 'Rookie' training lecture notes, 13 June 1942; Hampton, *How the Girl Guides Won the War*, p.12.

<sup>106</sup> NAA(AWM): PR00114, Notebook, Private. P. Rattray, 'Rookie' training lecture notes, 13 June 1942.

<sup>107</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1. Letter to Sybil Irving from Eleanor Manning, 24 December 1941.

responded, Manning chose to take his remark as a compliment, confiding with some discomfort to her friend and superior that, 'I don't know whether that incident was a lamentable failure or not, but I purred for hours.'<sup>108</sup> Another First Officer recounts being told by a senior male officer that women were needed to replace men in clerical jobs because there were currently 'A lot of able-bodied men twiddling papers that women could twiddle better.'<sup>109</sup> Rather than taking the remark as a slight, she had chosen to accept it as a form of inoffensive flirting. Further comments in this letter reveal how the unfamiliarity of their new role caused women to fall back on their sexual power, rather than using their rank, to gain things they needed. Describing in her letter how AWAS officers were 'getting the Colonels eating out of their hands', she admits to having used her own 'personality and S.A' [sex appeal] to persuade one officer to provide her with items for the camp, adding, '...the poor man hasn't a chance of resisting...a little feminine tact and wile goes a long way.'<sup>110</sup> It is not known how the Controller replied to either of these letters, but it is likely that these responses were not what she meant when, in their training, she urged her officers to 'be womanly.' Furthermore, they demonstrate exchanges influenced more by entrenched gendered responses than by military protocol and indicate how unprepared both servicewomen and servicemen then were for formal interaction as professionals.

Articles appearing in the Army Education Service's newsletter *Salt*, reveal that gender stereotyping was prevalent throughout the ranks.<sup>111</sup> Written by male

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1. Letter to Sybil Irving from Doris Hymus, 7 February 1942.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> *Salt*, Vol. 3., No. 10., 8 June 1942, 'Salt, its Origin, Name, Content and Aims', p. 45.

journalists and distributed to servicemen and women, *Salt* reflected the views of its predominantly Digger readership.<sup>112</sup> A cartoon depicting a female surrounded by dirty plates and saucepans, with the caption: 'I'd like to meet the bloke who said servicewomen were not feminine', appeared following the publication of an article investigating AWAS femininity.<sup>113</sup> *Salt* had devoted the cover and five pages of editorial issue to the subject, before finally reassuring readers that members of the AWAS were 'as attractively feminine as any other Australian girl.'<sup>114</sup> However, a letter to the editor following the publication of the *Salt* article, reveals some resentment of the women by servicemen. Accusing the AWAS of 'play[ing] up their sex to the very hilt' in order to get men to do their work for them, one soldier described the women in his section as 'the prettiest (possibly), laziest, most incompetent herd of "shemales" I have had the misfortune to meet.'<sup>115</sup> This is line with Davis's opinion that women soldiers would have been seen as 'an intrusion' or 'abrasive' to the careerist or returning soldier.<sup>116</sup>

Irving tackled the problem of male condescension towards the AWAS by sending in the 'best types' of women to do a job, in the expectation that opinions would be favourably changed.<sup>117</sup> AWAS veterans posted to the Northern Territory recall how one male officer, who was 'quite against' having women under his command, had been 'gracious' in his praise for their work when it came time for them to leave.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, AWAS documentation is littered with examples

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<sup>112</sup> Davis, 'Women's Work and the Women's Services' pp. 64-87.

<sup>113</sup> *Salt*, Vol.8., No.9., 3 July 1944, p. 64.

<sup>114</sup> *Salt*, Vol.7., No.12., 14 February 1944, 'Are they feminine?', pp.1-5.

<sup>115</sup> *Salt*, Vol.8., No.2., 27 March 1944, 'Those AWAS', p.34.

<sup>116</sup> Davis, 'Women's Work and the Women's Services', pp. 64-87.

<sup>117</sup> NAA(AWM):113/MH1/214, 'History of AWAS', p. 14.

<sup>118</sup> Australian Women's Army Service Association (WA), *AWAS News*, July 2005, p.11.

revealing the unwillingness of soldiers to accept servicewomen as equals. In 1942, male officers who showed 'reluctance' to release AWAS personnel attached to their units to attend training schools, were reminded that 'no attempt should be made to place obstacles in the way of their release.'<sup>119</sup> In a report to her Senior officers in 1943, Irving records that it had been necessary to point out to a male officer that when AWAS personnel were posted to mixed units, 'no cases should exist where personnel are posted to clean male Other Ranks' sleeping quarters'.<sup>120</sup> Acknowledgement that these unhelpful attitudes should change was made by male Army officials in cases where the smooth running of operations were at stake. In 1943, when women were being posted to anti-aircraft and searchlight stations, it was noted that 'an acceptance by male personnel of AWAS personnel as soldiers on an equal footing seem important considerations...'<sup>121</sup> Nelly Hennessy recalls that when she was first posted to New Guinea in 1945, soldiers thought the women had been sent to entertain them. The men's superior officer immediately cancelled all leave and reminded them that, 'The girls are here to work, not to play.'<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> NAA(VSO), MP70/5, 139/1/2568, Memo, Base Headquarters, Southern Command, 'Release of Members of AWAS attached to Units', 14 April 1942.

<sup>120</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 1, Assistant Controller's Conference, No.3, Minutes, 16 November 1943.

<sup>121</sup> NAA(AWM): AWM54, 88/1/6, Allied Land Forces in SW Pacific Area, 'Employment of AWAS Personnel in Artillery Units', 14 August 1943.

<sup>122</sup> Nelly Hennessy, Currumbin Returned and Services League of Australia, 'Australia Remembers, Stories shared by our Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS)', July 2013, <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=australia+women+world+war+two+oral+history&&view=detail&mid=7665B9EF7475888775487665B9EF747588877548&&FORM=VDRVRV> [Accessed 3 June 2018].

## **Conclusion**

Class-based principles echoing Establishment values influenced the formation of the AWAS, with women from elite backgrounds chosen for principal roles. Through them, civilising philosophies adopted by the Controller were disseminated through the ranks. The reputation of the AWAS was professionally crafted by the Army to win the acceptance of the public and service personnel and central to this was the promotion of servicewomen's femininity. Press and advertising campaigns broadly reflected this need, but pressure on recruitment, and the need for women to take on more active roles as war progressed, caused tensions between policy and practice. Personnel of all ranks struggled with inter-personal professional relationships that contested deep-rooted social conditioning, something the persistent emphasis on servicewomen's femininity did nothing to help. The following chapter explores how efforts to maintain civilising principles and gender-appropriate behaviour for the AWAS were challenged by the conditions of war.



## Chapter 3

### The AWAS Experience

With class-defined ideal standards of feminine behaviour at the heart of the culture and good reputation of the AWAS, principles were reinforced through the routines of daily life. As the war progressed and the AWAS began to take on more traditionally masculine roles, it became increasingly important for these policies to be supported by additional guiding influences.

#### Army Education Service

The primary vehicle for embedding Irving's philosophy amongst recruits was the Army Education Service. Established by the Army in 1941 to serve the physical, mental and spiritual welfare of male soldiers, the Service also delivered training in preparation for their return from war.<sup>1</sup> The AWAS took the lead in extending education to the women's services in what was later described as 'an experiment in Adult Education for women – an unprecedented experiment on so large a scale'.<sup>2</sup>

Although she had been educated only to matriculation level, Irving was aware that very few recruits shared the privileges that she and many of her First Officers enjoyed, and that after the war 'There will be those women who ... will be forced to earn their own living.'<sup>3</sup> To avoid repetition of the unemployment that had blighted pre-war prospects for so many, opportunities were made available for

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<sup>1</sup> *Salt*, Vol. 3., No. 10., 8 June 1942, 'Salt, its Origin, Name, Content and Aims', p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> NAA(AWM):54 88/1/1, Part 24, 'The History of Australian Army Education Service for Army Women's Services', p.15, N.d.

<sup>3</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 89/4/28, 'The Education Officer and Her Job', Vic L of C Area AWAS School, May 1943, p.2.

academic study and instruction was offered in vocational and domestic subjects.<sup>4</sup> Davis claims that academic training was aimed primarily at male soldiers, with such provision for women made 'by vague implication only.'<sup>5</sup> However, according to Iris Nyman, a part-time Army Education Officer based in Darwin, women were encouraged to study for the School Certificate and matriculation through correspondence courses.<sup>6</sup> 'Some girls did their exams and finally managed to get their beginnings, so that after the war they could then go to university – and some did.'<sup>7</sup>

Irving was also concerned to help servicewomen acquire an appreciation for art, literature and music, the cultural capital that she and her First Officers would have acquired through the class-based norms of their upbringing.<sup>8</sup> Culturally enriching activities ranging from lectures and debates to films, music and drama, aimed to promote 'liberal thought, expression and action'.<sup>9</sup>

While the Army Education Service provided Bible study groups, confirmation classes and religious literature for the AWAS, the spiritual welfare of the AWAS was of importance to Irving and many of her senior officers and a First Officer with a degree in theology was appointed Liaison Officer to the Army Chaplain's Department.<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging that personal belief was not something that the Army could influence, Irving felt that any attempt to educate the women 'would be

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, 'Women's Work and the Women's Services', pp. 64-87.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Nyman, Northern Territory Archive Service: NTRS 226, TS 847, interviewed by F. Good in 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> NAA(AWM):54 88/1/1, Part 24, 'Army Education for Women's Services', pp.1-2, n.d.c.1943.

<sup>9</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 89/4/28, 'The Education Officer and Her Job', Vic L of C Area AWAS School, May 1943, p.1; NAA(AWM):54 88/1/1, Part 24, 'The History of Australian Army Education Service for Army Women's Services', pp.10-13, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1, Vol. 6., 'Spiritual Welfare', n.d.

useless without some sort of spiritual basis.<sup>11</sup> It was agreed that its provision 'should be made through the officers and by their example.'<sup>12</sup> During their training, Irving suggested to the First Officers that, as been the practice in the Guide camps, prayers would be said before breakfast. Joyce Whitworth, an officer on that course, recalls: 'Sybil said she wanted us to have this. It wasn't forced on us, it was voluntary... And [later] every unit had it.'<sup>13</sup> Morning prayers became a supplement to formal Sunday church parades, which were met with mixed enthusiasm by servicewomen. According to Whitworth, 'It was army regulations that you couldn't force anyone to go to church. So, you had to say, "Fall out... those who don't wish to go." And the majority would fall out... some of the services were very dull. Anyway, we got over that because they didn't ...stay at home and do nothing. We gave them some jobs to do.'<sup>14</sup>

Although Irving's desire to nurture religious observation among the ranks reflects her own beliefs, as a practising Christian she would have been aware of the growing Church concerns for the future of the nation due to the loosening of sexual morality caused by new wartime freedoms.<sup>15</sup> As well as an increase in cases of venereal disease, divorce had begun to rise.<sup>16</sup> Irving's efforts to promote Christian values as a way of providing a moral compass in *loco parentis* were supported by the Army Chaplains, who served the primary Christian denominations and the minority Jewish faith.<sup>17</sup> The YWCA representative also backed Irving's mission,

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<sup>11</sup> NAA(AWM):54 88/1/1, Part 24, 'Army Education for Women's Services', pp.1-2, N.d.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce Whitworth.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, *Religion in Australia*, p.97.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1, Vol. 6., 'Spiritual Welfare', n.d.

extending her official role as the provider of welfare facilities for the women by appealing to older servicewomen to set a good example to younger recruits, by attending church parades 'in good spirit'.<sup>18</sup> Amy Taylor, who had been brought up to be a regular worshipper, found the familiar ritual and routine of the services comforting after she was sent to New Guinea when she was just twenty-one. 'It did give you strength...a lot of the girls became more observant in their religion...It was a way of life for me and I was really glad that I was able to do it in the army.'<sup>19</sup>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

055686

**Member of the Army Education Service plays his violin to AWAS during a lecture on musical appreciation, Northam, WA, 1943.<sup>20</sup>**

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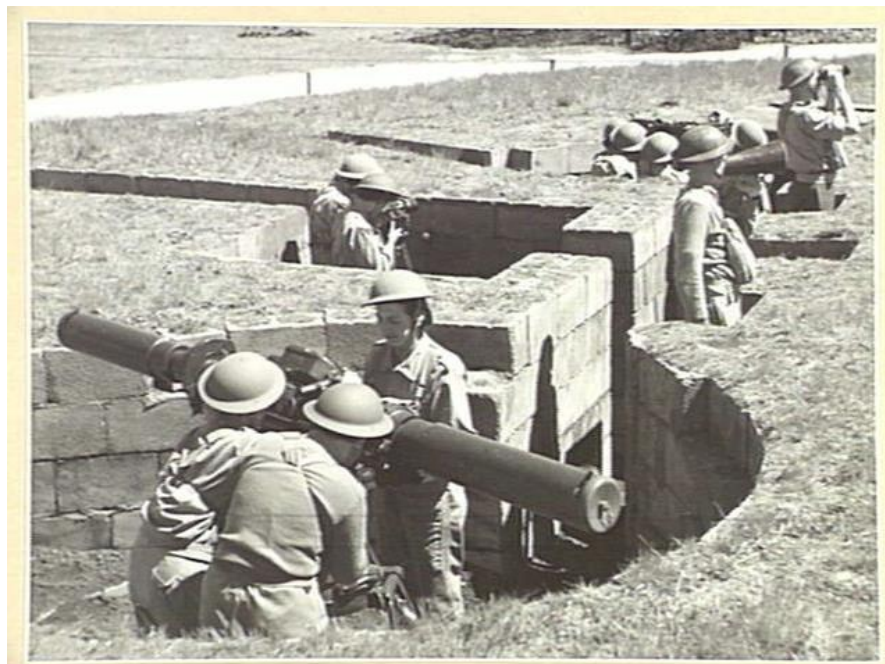
<sup>18</sup> NAA(VSO): MP508/1, 339/701/339, 'AWAS Welfare', 10 July 1942; NAA(AWM): 074050, *Signals*, Christmas 1943, p.12.

<sup>19</sup> Amy Taylor.

<sup>20</sup> AWM: Collection 055686.

## Bearing of arms

As war progressed, there were increasing demands for women to take on roles that challenged feminine ideals, tested Establishment views and Irving's own moral convictions. Presenting the greatest challenge to these values was the issue of women carrying weapons. In early 1942, the Minister for the Army, Forde, had spoken on behalf of all Diggers when he said, 'Our manhood would feel insulted if the Government allowed women to take up arms.'<sup>21</sup> Irving's opposition was due to her strongly-held conviction that as future mothers, it would be morally wrong for AWAS to be responsible for the death of another mother's child.<sup>22</sup>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

01 3560

**AWAS at the battery command post of an unidentified anti-aircraft station, 1942.<sup>23</sup>**

<sup>21</sup> 'Women's Plea for Rifle, Grenade Instruction', *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 8 February 1942, p.5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article247921844> [accessed 9 April 2019].

<sup>22</sup> Bassett, J., Australian Dictionary of Biography Online, 'Irving, Sybil Howy (1897-1973)', <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/irving-sybil-howy-10591>, [Accessed July 2018].

<sup>23</sup> AWM: Collection 013560.

Both government policy and moral argument gave way to practical needs when circumstances dictated. A severe shortage of male recruits gave the army no choice but to post AWAS to anti-aircraft and searchlight stations and by 1943, forty per cent of AWAS recruits were deployed in artillery batteries, while all vacancies for AWAS officers in artillery units were filled by gunners.<sup>24</sup> Serving at an anti-aircraft station in NSW between 1943 and 1944, Signalwoman Millie Cameron and other AWAS on the station were trained to fire the anti-aircraft guns 'because a gun site just can't stop if half a dozen of its people are put out of action, it still has to operate.'<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of this need for AWAS to be fully utilised, Irving allowed her beliefs to compromise both the health and safety of servicewomen based at remote and isolated stations. Concern for the safety of women in the event of enemy attack had surfaced in late 1942.<sup>26</sup> Despite some reservations, it was agreed that women stationed in units considered vulnerable to 'attack or sabotage' would be instructed in how to use weapons in defence.<sup>27</sup> A year later, it was considered that the single rifle issued for use by AWAS on night-time guard duty in searchlight stations was insufficient and additional personal weaponry should be provided.<sup>28</sup> Irving's unwillingness to make a decision on the type of weaponry to be issued and her referral of the issue to unit commanders shows a desire to distance herself from this

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<sup>24</sup> NAA(AWM): AWM54, 88/1/6, Allied Land Forces in SW Pacific Area, 'Employment of AWAS Personnel in Artillery Units', 14 August 1943.

<sup>25</sup> Millie Cameron, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: S00787, interviewed by J. Wing, 1 February 1990.

<sup>26</sup> NAA(VSO): MP/508/1 339/708/61, 'Prohibition of Weapon Training for AWAS', 7 November 1942.

<sup>27</sup> NAA(VSO): MP/508/1 339/708/61, 'Weapon Training – AWAS', 19 December 1942.

<sup>28</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 17/2/550, Minute paper, 'Provision of Weapons for AWAS Personnel Manning AASL Stations', Minute Paper, 27 October 1943.

matter.<sup>29</sup> While further delays in decision-making were not wholly Irving's fault, it is notable that she did not intervene to ensure the timely resolution of this issue.<sup>30</sup> Some months later, officers were told that the health of servicewomen on guard duty was suffering on account of having to handle the heavy .303 rifles that they did not know how to use properly, resulting in significant numbers of sappers repeatedly admitted to hospital.<sup>31</sup> A senior male officer reproached Irving for having allowed the situation to develop by failing to act on his repeated advice and recommendations for alternative weaponry.<sup>32</sup> Once again, Irving avoided confronting the issue by delegating the handling of her reply to a senior AWAS officer.<sup>33</sup> By the time the Army had issued instructions for AWAS in anti-aircraft and searchlight units to be appropriately trained and armed when on guard duty, it was too late for action.<sup>34</sup> With plans to begin the withdrawal personnel from anti-aircraft bases by mid-1945, the need for AWAS to bear arms had passed.<sup>35</sup>

Testimonies of former AWAS support claims that servicewomen were unable to use .303 rifles properly. Millie Cameron had been issued with a .303 rifle during her service at the anti-aircraft battery.<sup>36</sup> Although physically strong, she found firing the rifle difficult and recalls that most of the women padded their shoulders with sanitary towels to avoid being bruised by the kickback.<sup>37</sup> Tessie Goodstate was a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 17/2/550, 'Provision of Weapons for AWAS Personnel Manning AASL Stations', Minute Paper, 20 January 1944.

<sup>31</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050 Box 1, Assistant Controllers Conference No.4, 24-25 April 1944, 'Rifle Drill and Guard Duty.'

<sup>32</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 17/2/550, 'AWAS Personnel Carrying .303 Rifles', Minute Paper, 8 March 1945.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 17/2/550, 'Use of Rifles by AWAS Personnel', Memo, 20 April 1945.

<sup>35</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 17/2/550, 'Use of Rifles by AWAS Personnel', Memo, 3 May 1945.

<sup>36</sup> Millie Cameron.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

sapper based at a searchlight battery in NSW in 1943.<sup>38</sup> According to Goodstate, all AWAS carried .303 rifles when on guard duty. Although she had been taught how to shoot, dismantle and clean her rifle, a male training officer had helped her pass her proficiency test by pulling the trigger for her while she held the gun 'because of my shortness of arms and the weight of the rifle, I couldn't hold it straight and pull the trigger at the same time...'<sup>39</sup> Irving's disapproval of women carrying weapons had the support of servicewomen. Melva Croker, who joined the AWAS in 1942, says, 'I think you accepted it happily because you knew you were not going to be in a situation where you would need it, because you're not going to a forward area.'<sup>40</sup> She adds, '[Irving] wanted women to be women...and I think it was part of the undertaking with the Minister for the Army, too...'<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Lucas, one of the First Officers, also backs Irving: 'If you kill ten men the world will still go on, but if you kill ten women, they are the people who are going to bear the children for the future and ... the human race wouldn't go on if you killed all the women.'<sup>42</sup>

### **Postings to isolated areas**

When in mid-1942, AWAS began to be posted to isolated camps where they were completely alone or significantly outnumbered by male personnel, it was agreed that they should be sent in groups of at least ten and be accompanied by a female officer.<sup>43</sup> In mixed camps, male soldiers were strictly forbidden from

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<sup>38</sup> Tessie Goodstate, *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive*, AWM: SOO785, interviewed by J. Wing, 30 January 1990.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Melva Croker.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Lucas.

<sup>43</sup> NAA(VSO): MP70/5, 139/1/2568, Australian Military Forces, Vic L of C Area, 'Employment of AWAS in Camps', 17 August 1942.



entering AWAS quarters and there were night-time patrols of the women's accommodation.<sup>44</sup> Some felt that even minor male transgressions on camp were used as an excuse to further restrict the women. Betsy Leemon remembers the sense of injustice she felt when a Colonel ordered barbed wire to be put up around the AWAS quarters in her northern NSW camp, after transient troops had inadvertently wandered into the women's area. 'They didn't do any harm and ...they said "Sorry" and moved off....we were furious, we didn't like that barbed wire one little bit. It ...hurt our dignity...'<sup>45</sup>

By contrast, other AWAS were left to live and work alone in relative isolation with little official intervention. In June 1944, a Queensland newspaper reported on the activities of a group of sixteen young AWAS who were solely responsible for operating a searchlight station.<sup>46</sup> With an average age of nineteen, the women were under the command of a twenty-two-year old female bombardier. Although the women received 'frequent visits' by their AWAS officer in charge, they were otherwise unchaperoned. This reveals that the 1942 ruling that women posted to remote areas must be accompanied by an AWAS officer had been superseded, or dispensed with, indicating that regulations were relaxed to suit circumstances.<sup>47</sup>

A similar situation arose in Northern Territory in 1943, following Irving's discovery that a small number of AWAS were not only working in a camp nearly 1000 miles further north than AWAS were then permitted to serve, but that they were

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Betsy Leemon.

<sup>46</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/, Vol. 9., 'Work of the AWAS Complete Control of Northern Searchlight Station', *North Queensland Register*, 10 June 1944.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

living under canvas in a male camp, without supervision.<sup>48</sup> With no other accommodation available, Irving had no choice but to let them stay. What is unexplained however, is that she allowed the situation to remain unchanged for six months before an AWAS officer was sent to live with them.<sup>49</sup> It was inevitable that AWAS rules and policies would be adapted in the field, but the extreme conditions of Northern Territory significantly tested Irving's efforts to preserve feminine ideals. Officially classified as a forward area following Japanese attacks on Australia in 1942, all civilians had then been evacuated from the region north of Pine Creek, and the area occupied by defence forces from Australia, America and Canada.<sup>50</sup> To send women to this isolated area was a major step for the Army but because of manpower shortages, between August 1942 and March 1946, nearly 700 AWAS were mobilised to serve at military bases accessed from the North-South Road, [now the Stuart Highway] a newly-completed, 930-mile dirt road otherwise known as The Track, which ran between Darwin and Alice Springs.<sup>51</sup> While some AWAS were flown in to NT, most servicewomen from the south were transported from Adelaide by train and truck in a journey lasting several days.<sup>52</sup> Long, uncomfortable and with few staging stops, the journey was the women's first challenge. In March 1944, several AWAS were admitted to hospital on arrival at Alice Springs.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> NAA(VSO): MP727, GP14/234, Memo: Employment of AWAS in NT, 12 September 1943.

<sup>49</sup> NAA(VSO):MP742/1, 339/1/412, Employment of AWAS in NT, Correspondence, June – December 1943.

<sup>50</sup> NAA(VSO): MP727, GP14/234, Memo: Employment of AWAS in NT, 12 September 1943.

<sup>51</sup> NTAS: NTRS 71, AWAS NT 1942-46 - List of Personnel.

<sup>52</sup> NAA (AWM): PR89/039, AWM315 701/060/014, E. Macintyre, (Lt. Col. Eileen Parry, Asst Controller AWAS, 1944-46) *Australian Women's Army Service in Northern Territory 1942-1946* (Typed manuscript, 1984), pp.7-39.

<sup>53</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050 Box 3, Folder 3, Norforce Reports, Weekly Report, 18 March 1944.



**AWAS troops travelling in convoy along The Track to their military bases in NT, June 1944.<sup>54</sup>**

Attempts were made by Irving and her officers to protect feminine health and well-being in Northern Territory.<sup>55</sup> Because the severe climatic conditions were found to affect both physical and mental health, by April 1944, it was recommended that all future drafts be personally interviewed by the First Officers and warned that they would find 'conditions hard and amenities few'.<sup>56</sup> It was agreed that AWAS should not serve more than twelve months in the most northerly bases of Darwin and Adelaide River.<sup>57</sup> Attempts to feminise and civilise life included the appointment

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<sup>54</sup> Source: author's personal collection.

<sup>55</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050 Box 3, Folder 3, Norforce Reports, Report of Inspection, 12 March 1943.

<sup>56</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, Assistant Controllers Conference folders, No.4. 24-25 April 1944.

<sup>57</sup> NAA(AWM): PR89/039, AWM315 701/060/014, E. Macintyre, (Lt. Col. Eileen Parry, Asst Controller AWAS, 1944-46) *Australian Women's Army Service in Northern Territory 1942-1946* (Typed manuscript, 1984), pp.7-39.

of two hairdressers and the encouragement for AWAS to decorate their huts and to create and nurture gardens.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, living conditions in NT were basic, duties routine and separation from home and loved-ones lengthy. In such circumstances, the need for spiritual succour was intensified. Irving's provision for religious observation was better-received in these isolated camps, as is demonstrated by the enthusiastic reporting by AWAS of the opening of an interdenominational chapel built from bamboo, by the 'loving hands' of male officers at Adelaide River camp.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, romantic attachments intensified under these conditions. A YWCA Welfare Officer appointed to organise entertainment and recreation found herself called upon to provide counselling to servicewomen considering marriage.<sup>60</sup> Possibly to avoid the scandal of illicit liaisons, marriage between serving personnel based in Northern Territory was permitted, although according to AWAS rules, servicewomen were then posted south.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the prospect of spending seven days together at the Darwin Recreation Centre annexe, known as 'Honeymoon Cottage', following a service at the Garrison Chapel and a reception in the AWAS barracks, was enough of an incentive for many couples to formalise their relationship.<sup>62</sup>

Despite Irving's best efforts to civilise living conditions for the AWAS, some of her harshest critics were the senior army officers whose principles she had

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<sup>58</sup> NAA(AWM): 54 88/2/3, Memo: 'Hairdressing Facilities for AWAS'; 69 Barracks, Adelaide River, NT, *From the North to the South, Xmas Greetings*, pp. 6, 9. n.d.c.1944.

<sup>59</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 3, Folder 3, Bi-monthly report, 28 February 1945; *From the North to the South, Xmas Greetings*, p.18. n.d.c.1944.

<sup>60</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1, Vol.10, 1944-45, 'Doing a Real War Job', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 1944.

<sup>61</sup> NAA(AWM):113, MH1,214, History of AWAS.n.d.c.1947, p. 49.

<sup>62</sup> NAA(AWM):113, MH1,214, History of AWAS.n.d.c.1947, p. 49.

adopted as the cornerstone of AWAS policy. It may be understandable that the Army chaplains should be concerned for the moral welfare of women but their formal request in April 1944 that women should be withdrawn from NT suggests an underlying misogyny hidden behind good intent.<sup>63</sup> Their fear that the lack of privacy would lead to a breakdown of women's 'natural modesty', and make them unfit to be mothers of the next generation was, they claimed, more important than the Army's need to avoid the 'embarrassment' of a manpower shortage.<sup>64</sup> The Army's Director of Organisation applied a practical approach to this suggestion, compiling a statistical review of women serving in NT.<sup>65</sup> The reality was that in 1944, lack of manpower meant the Army could not do without the AWAS. The Chaplains were told that any withdrawal of women would 'be taken as a slur against the personnel at present in the area who have done a very good job' and would amount to a confession by the Army of its failure to provide adequate care for female soldiers.<sup>66</sup> No further action would be taken.<sup>67</sup> Aside from the central issue, what is also significant here is the description of the AWAS as 'soldiers' and recognition that they had done a good job. This is in stark contrast to the comment made by a senior male officer in 1942 that AWAS would be useful to 'twiddle papers' and shows how far the internal reputation of the AWAS had progressed in two years.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> NAA(AWM): 227, 8, Minute Paper 'Women in Isolated and Advanced Areas', from Chaplain-General (Methodist), 3 April 1944.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> NAA(AWM): 227, 8, 'Appreciation Female Personnel in NT', Director of Organisation, 30 June 1944.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> NAA(AWM): 227, 8, 'Women in Isolated and Advanced Areas', Minute Paper from Adjutant-General, 31 July 1944.

<sup>68</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1. Letter to Sybil Irving from Doris Hymus, 7 February 1942.

It is indicative of Irving's confidence in her servicewomen that, following the chaplain's request, it took her two months to organise a tour of inspection of the AWAS in NT by her deputy, instead of immediately going herself.<sup>69</sup> The resulting report suggests that she was right not to be worried. Morale was found to be 'generally high' and most women were reported to be 'more than satisfied with the conditions and expressed their desire to remain in the area.'<sup>70</sup>

## **New Guinea**

While the 'most wanted' prefix on a women's army number was 'X', denoting overseas service, there had been no intention that women would be sent out of Australia when the AWAS was approved in 1941.<sup>71</sup> Women could only be sent overseas if it was 'established beyond doubt' that males were not available to fill the required roles.<sup>72</sup> By 1943, Australian military operations in the South West Pacific area were focused on the allied effort to repel the Japanese from the north-eastern area of New Guinea, which, by April 1944, had been achieved.<sup>73</sup> Thereafter, Australian troops were engaged in other campaigns in New Guinea and Borneo, under the direction of the United States Commander and Allied Commander of the South West Pacific Area, General MacArthur.<sup>74</sup> With Australia a relatively junior player in an allied military force dominated by the US, Australia's General Blamey,

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<sup>69</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 3, Norforce General AWAS, Report on Tour of NT to Controller, AWAS, by Deputy Controller, 26 September 1944 – 11 October 1944.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> NLA: NLP 355.3480994A938, 'AWAS – Khaki Clad and Glad 30 Years After', AWAS Association. NSW, 13 November 1971, p.12; NAA(AWM): 54, 88/1/1 Part 11, AWAS - History of Service New Guinea, p.1. n.d.

<sup>72</sup> NAA(VSO): B6680, 386/1943, War Cabinet Agendum No.386/43, Posting of AWAS Personnel for Service in New Guinea.

<sup>73</sup> Beaumont, 'Australia's War', pp. 43-46.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Commander in Chief of the Allied Land Forces in the South West Pacific Area, was disregarded by MacArthur, and his troops were side-lined or diverted into battles which did little to raise morale or enhance Australia as a military power in the way that the Anzac Diggers had done at Gallipoli.<sup>75</sup>

Arguably, it was the emasculated position that Australia found itself in under General MacArthur and the need to protect the morale and reputation of its male troops which strengthened government resolve to keep the AWAS within Australia. General Blamey had been asking for AWAS Signals personnel to be sent to New Guinea to perform essential communications roles since October 1943. They were, he believed, the only available personnel with the required skills and aptitude for the job.<sup>76</sup> Despite having the support of Frank Forde, the Minister for the Army, the government refused all Blamey's requests.<sup>77</sup> Finally, in November 1944, with no Signals servicemen available, recruitment stagnant and a pressing need to provide long-service leave to existing servicemen, War Cabinet reluctantly agreed that 500 AWAS could be posted to New Guinea.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> NAA(VSO): B6680, 386/1943, War Cabinet Agendum, Posting of AWAS Personnel for Service in New Guinea.

<sup>77</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 339/1/333, Employment of AWAS Personnel in New Guinea, War Cabinet Agendum No. 386/43, Letter to Minister. n.d. c. September 1943; NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 339/1/333, Letter to General Blamey from F.M. Forde, Minister for the Army, 20 October 1944.

<sup>78</sup> NAA(VSO): B6680, 492/1944, War Cabinet Agendum, Posting of AWAS Personnel for Service in New Guinea.



**AWAS arriving at Lae, New Guinea, May 1945.<sup>79</sup>**

Despite the hardships they would face, a posting to New Guinea offered the novelty of overseas service and was highly sought-after.<sup>80</sup> It was considered a privilege for women to be sent overseas, however, and with only internal applications permitted, officers were the first invited to apply.<sup>81</sup> Notably, those considered the 'best' officers came from Victoria, home state of AWAS

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<sup>79</sup> Photograph: SLV: MS10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 7.

<sup>80</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1, Vol.10, 1944-45, 'AWAS Keen to Get to New Guinea', *Telegraph*, 16 November 1944.

<sup>81</sup> NAA(AWM): 54, 88/1/1 Part 11, AWAS - History of Service New Guinea, p.1. n.d.



headquarters, and it is likely that Irving had a hand in their selection.<sup>82</sup> Strict eligibility rules were enforced and AWAS serving in NT were excluded on account of the stress that the conditions there had already put on their health.<sup>83</sup> Preparation included, at the behest of the Controller, lectures euphemistically entitled 'Social Hygiene' and 'Local Problems', warning against inappropriate relationships, particularly in relation to 'natives'.<sup>84</sup> Beryl Fowler was one of the main contingent of 350 AWAS posted to Lae in May 1945.<sup>85</sup> Fowler recalls, 'I don't know whether the native population was a threat as such but we were women in a war zone and a male area, so we were well and truly protected.'<sup>86</sup> Close protection of the AWAS was evidently necessary: Lucy Crane, an officer, describes how a male intruder broke into the AWAS camp one night by using a ladder to scale the ten-foot high barbed-wire fence.<sup>87</sup>

Crane describes being billeted in open huts with louvred sides and that during the night, 'It was not unusual for snakes and rats ... to drop from our thatched roof to the top of a mosquito net over one's bed.'<sup>88</sup> According to Amy Taylor, the latrines were, 'holes dug in the ground – pits – with a wooden seat over it. And we

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<sup>82</sup> SLV: MS10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 1, Assistant Controllers Conference folders, No.6. 28, December – 2 January 1945; NAA(AWM): 54, 88/1/1 Part 11, AWAS - History of Service New Guinea, p.5. n.d.

<sup>83</sup> NAA(AWM): 54, 88/1/1, Part 11, Procedure – AWAS Personnel on Draft for Overseas. n.d. c. 1945; NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 339/1/617, Minute Paper 'AWAS Personnel, Service in New Guinea and Northern Territory', 9 March 1945.

<sup>84</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 339/1/617, 'Employment of AWAS in New Guinea', Memos from Adjutant-General, 23 March 1945; 29 March 1945; 4 April 1945.

<sup>85</sup> Beryl Fowler; AWM: S00773, 31 January 1990; NAA(AWM): 54, 88/1/1 Part 11, AWAS - History of Service New Guinea, p.2. n.d.

<sup>86</sup> Beryl Fowler.

<sup>87</sup> NAA(AWM): MSS1614, Lucy Crane, Notes accompanying oral history interview for the *Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia*, 'In the War of 1939-1945', October 1990.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

didn't like that... very unpleasant.'<sup>89</sup> The intense humidity commonly caused skin problems and necessitated three changes of uniform safari jacket and trousers daily, with laundering an extra duty for AWAS at the end of the day.<sup>90</sup> As in the NT, the women tolerated the conditions, enjoying the camaraderie of army life.<sup>91</sup> Off duty there were swimming trips, dances and on Sundays, according to Fowler, the church at the Lae base provided a good opportunity to meet men, 'because you'd have a cup of tea... afterwards and get to know people that way.'<sup>92</sup>

Although the decision made in late 1944 to send AWAS to New Guinea appeared to indicate a change of heart by politicians and the Army towards women's overseas service, male resistance persisted until the end of hostilities. The primary argument was that it would cause resentment among the servicemen left behind in Australia and deter recruitment to the AMF's mainland clerical positions.<sup>93</sup> After the first AWAS contingency arrived in Lae, Forde suspended further movement of servicewomen to New Guinea, due to the number of inactive servicemen already there who could be utilised instead.<sup>94</sup> While this decision appeared logical and would do much to appease servicemen's resentment, it disregarded Blamey's advice that the AWAS had both better qualifications and aptitude for the required tasks than the available soldiers.<sup>95</sup> Before any decision

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<sup>89</sup> Amy Taylor.

<sup>90</sup> NAA(AWM): MSS1614, Lucy Crane.

<sup>91</sup> Beryl Fowler.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 339/1/617, Memo: 'AWAS Personnel for New Guinea', from Brigadier DAG, 15 February 1945; Letter from J.M. Fraser, Acting Minister for the Army to General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander in Chief, Allied Land Forces, South West Pacific Area, 2 June 1945.

<sup>94</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 339/1/617, War Cabinet Agendum, No.355/43, Posting of AWAS Personnel for Service in New Guinea, August 1945.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

could be made, however, Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, ending war in the Pacific. Three days later, the War Cabinet agreed that no further AWAS would be posted outside of the Australian mainland.<sup>96</sup> Fowler was disappointed when the end of the war was announced and the women knew they would be going home, ‘..we’d only been up there [Lae] a few months and that was the end of the war. There was a lot of rejoicing...I felt more like crying somehow.’<sup>97</sup> While Fowler and most AWAS returned home, Crane, a senior officer, was one of a small group who stayed on, helping to wind down operations until the end of February 1946.<sup>98</sup>

### **Preparation for post-war life**

The importance of equipping women for the demands of post-war life had been at the forefront of the work of the Education Service throughout the war but its focus narrowed from general topics to the domestic sphere from 1944. Just as the senior officers had been conduits for Irving’s philosophies from the beginning of the AWAS, the education officers promoted official post-war policy towards its end. Key to this was the *Army Education Service Newsletter*, which provided material for education officers to share with the ranks. A report written by the male head of service for the June 1944 edition, stressed the importance of the army as an adult educator for the future prosperity of the nation: ‘If studies are not continued ...such subjects as current affairs and all the others which are fundamental to modern ideas of democratic living will remain a closed book to the great majority of Australians’.<sup>99</sup> But while it was claimed that, ‘...there are few aspects of Army Education which do

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<sup>96</sup> NAA(VSO): B6680, 355/1945, War Cabinet Minute, Canberra, 18 August 1945.

<sup>97</sup> Beryl Fowler.

<sup>98</sup> NAA(AWM): 54, 88/1/1 Part 11, AWAS - History of Service New Guinea, p.11. n.d.

<sup>99</sup> *Army Education Service Newsletter*, ‘Adult Education and the Future’, June 1944, p. 1.

not apply equally to men and women,' it was made clear that matters relating to the home and parenting were solely female concerns.<sup>100</sup> Towards the end of hostilities, the Education Service steered women's aspirations towards the national objective of developing the population, with marriage and motherhood upheld as the ideal and the home their natural post-war domain. This was achieved through skills-based training offerings and discussions organised by the education officers, which were supported by articles in *Salt*. In January 1944, *Salt* claimed that most women intended to make 'Home Sweet Home' their post-war job and recommended the Education Service's new Home Membership course, which was 'guaranteed to turn the most ineffectual butterfly into something no home should be without'.<sup>101</sup> This promotion coincided with efforts by the Army to transition the AWAS from soldier to mother in the public consciousness, through press publicity of its baby-care classes.<sup>102</sup>

Despite claims by Davis that *Salt* was a forum for changing the 'myth' of women as homemaker, the return of married women to the workforce was actively discouraged.<sup>103</sup> After an unofficial census carried out by the Education Service found that most servicewomen wished to find paid post-war employment, the *Army Education Service Newsletter* reported that most servicewomen agreed that the birth rate would suffer if married women worked.<sup>104</sup> The message that education officers were to pass on was clear: if a woman had a home and a family, she already

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<sup>100</sup> *Army Education Service Newsletter*, 'The Female of the Species', October 1944, p. 5.

<sup>101</sup> *Salt*, Vol. 7., No. 10., 17 January 1944, 'Future for Females?', p. 36.

<sup>102</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1 Vol.8., 'Servicewomen Learn Child Welfare', *Telegraph*, 25 February 1944; 'Army Girls Train for Peace', *Pix*, 15 April 1944.

<sup>103</sup> Davis, 'Women's Work and the Women's Services', pp. 64-87.

<sup>104</sup> *Army Education Service Newsletter*, 'Women at Work in the Post-War World', December 1944, pp.4-5.

had a full-time occupation and should leave the paid jobs for those who needed them.<sup>105</sup> This particularly applied to those over the age of forty-five, whom *Salt* referred to as the 'Old Brigade.' To endorse this view, its reporter declared: 'I personally believe that, after the Armistice, many of the old people who are working so wonderfully now, will feel the weight of their years a large enough burden and gratefully push their jobs aside.'<sup>106</sup>

By 1945, four AWAS had trained as post-war re-establishment officers, focusing on helping servicewomen back into civilian life.<sup>107</sup> Official messaging promoting the home over work became more direct. An article aimed at education officers asked the question, 'Are women becoming afraid of the difficult and exacting career open to them – the career of homemaking?'<sup>108</sup> Suggesting that talk of the dullness of domestic duties was 'probably the result of twenty-five years strenuous effort towards emancipation' the article claimed that women 'have had careers for long enough now to find that no career can be a satisfying substitute for marriage, family and home.' Furthermore, it stated, most women wished to be married, even if that wish was 'subconscious'. Professing the role of homemaker as 'the greatest triumph for any woman' the article asserted that it was easier to be a successful businesswoman or professional, requiring only one line of specialised knowledge, than to be a successful homemaker, which demanded many.<sup>109</sup> In June 1945, AWAS re-establishment officers reported that most servicewomen did not

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> *Salt*, Vol. 7., No. 10., 17 January 1944, 'Future for Females?', p. 36.

<sup>107</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 89/5/661, Memo: AA Edn. Service – Women's Services – Education and Re-establishment Officers, 29 September 1945.

<sup>108</sup> *Army Education Service Newsletter*, 'Post-War Women – Back to the Kitchen?', April 1945, pp.4-5.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

now intend to work after demobilisation and would be relying on marriage for their financial security. There was a drawback to this, however. Few had considered the possibility that they may still need to work even if married, a factor which the army acknowledged was a 'problem' of re-establishment.<sup>110</sup> An article in an informal AWAS journal draws attention to the educational and training opportunities available to servicewomen under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme.<sup>111</sup> Betsy Leemon turned down the chance to study at university under the scheme, 'because I was going to be married and I was already a trained secretary, it didn't seem important to me.' Instead, she took temporary office work until her marriage, because, '...once you got married you were supposed to leave your work and leave the jobs for the unmarried girls...'<sup>112</sup>

Irving believed that care of servicewomen's spiritual welfare would enable them to carry forward ideals of good citizenship during the period of post-war reconstruction, when those in the services 'would constitute the majority of mothers and homemakers'.<sup>113</sup> In support of this, the women's Liaison Officer to the Army Chaplain's Department was active in producing a *Readings and Prayers* booklet, considered by Irving to be 'one of the most important things that had happened to Women's Services.'<sup>114</sup> Intended 'to help meet the needs of women living in the unusual conditions of the war period' but not published until mid-1945,

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<sup>110</sup> *Army Education Service Newsletter*, 'Re-establishment of Servicewomen', June 1945, pp.2-3.

<sup>111</sup> AWM 074050, 'As Time Goes By', 3 *AWAS Barrack Magazine*, Vol.1. February 1945, p.1.

<sup>112</sup> Betsy Leemon.

<sup>113</sup> NAA(AWM): 61, 549/11/33, 'Spiritual Welfare, Army Women's Services', 14 January 1944.

<sup>114</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 1, Assistant Controllers Conference Folders, Minutes No.7., 18 – 25 July 1945, 'Welfare.'

the booklet also served as a memento of their service days.<sup>115</sup> With the total of AWAS then numbering 24,284, the investment required to provide significant numbers with a copy illustrates both the army's wider role as national educator and the association between religious observance and the public good.

### **Disbandment**

The initial intention to demobilise the AWAS by the end of September 1946 was not achieved and after this date just under a thousand AWAS volunteers were retained in ordnance, signals and administrative roles until 31 December 1946.<sup>116</sup> Sybil Irving retired as Controller of the AWAS in January 1947.<sup>117</sup> She was succeeded by Major Elizabeth Ratten, who became responsible for the final disbandment of the AWAS and was the last women out of the service, on 25 June 1947.<sup>118</sup>

It is clear from letters sent to Irving that senior officers experienced 'mixed feelings' and a sense of loss following the ending of the war, with some facing reduced prospects and uncertain futures.<sup>119</sup> The war had offered many of the First Officers a unique opportunity to flex their leadership muscle in a stimulating environment and by comparison, the return to civilian life appeared colourless and unrewarding. For those posted to New Guinea, it felt like they had only just arrived before it was time to go home and, as had been expressed by Fowler, there was

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<sup>115</sup> SLV: MS 10050, Sybil Irving Manuscripts, Box 4, Australian Army Chaplain's Department, AAB35 – Readings and Prayers for Members of AWS, 9 July 1945.

<sup>116</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742, 339/1/656, Ref to Minute 4578, 'Reduction of Australian Women's Army Services'; Memo to Secretary, Department of Defence, 28 May 1946; NAA(VSO): MP742, 339/1/645, Memo: 'Australian Women's Army Service – Reduction', 2 September 1946.

<sup>117</sup> SLV: MS 12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Colonel Irving from Chief of the General Staff, 30 January 1947.

<sup>118</sup> Elizabeth Lucas.

<sup>119</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Sybil Irving from Millicent Aspinall, 19 August 1945.

underlying resentment that they had been denied a complete experience.<sup>120</sup> Lt. Col. Margaret Spenser, officer in charge of the AWAS at Lae, implies a sense of guilt for having these feelings in a letter written to Irving in August 1945, asking to stay on to assist with winding-down operations in New Guinea. 'Naturally I am facing the next few months with a mixture of hope and dread. For the sake of everyone here, I hope they will return to their homes very soon but for myself I hope that I do not return until I do know what my future is to hold. It's a coward's way I expect, but apart from that I came up here with these girls and would like to remain with them till the end'.<sup>121</sup>

Spenser's desire to put off life as a civilian was shared by First Officer May Douglas, who expressed similar feelings about the loss of army life in a letter to Irving, in July 1946, three weeks after having been demobbed.<sup>122</sup> Apologising to Irving for not having written before, she confesses, 'Almost every day I have thought about writing to you and every time I have put it off.' Douglas admits that she hated saying goodbye to all the people 'who have been part of my life for the past four and a half years' and had left Irving until last, 'hoping to get used to the idea a bit.' Acknowledging that Irving would be unlikely to 'get any decent recognition for all you've done for women's services in general, let alone your own Service,' she proffers that as well as the commitment to duty, 'We did have some fun too, didn't we?!'

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<sup>120</sup> Beryl Fowler.

<sup>121</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Colonel Irving from Lt.Col. Margaret Spenser, HQ First Aust. Army, 23 August 1945.

<sup>122</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Sybil Irving from May Douglas, 14 July 1946.



Douglas ends her letter by telling Irving of her intention to visit the Army in Brisbane the following week because she, 'Can't bear being completely cut off for too long.'<sup>123</sup>

Major Jean Wood, one of the First Officers, wrote to 'Madam dear', telling her of the 'marvellous team-spirit and comradeship' that she had found in the AWAS and would never forget.<sup>124</sup> Indicating a close, possibly long-standing relationship with Irving, Wood shares intimate news about her elderly parents, and her acceptance of her responsibility towards them. In the way that as a former Girl Guide and an AWAS officer she would have expected to get on with whatever was required without complaint, so too, this new obligation in her life was being faced stoically, if with some sense of resignation.<sup>125</sup>

These comments reveal the impact that serving with the AWAS had on the lives of the senior officers, most of whom found fulfilment as leaders during that period. For some, military life had provided a compelling lifestyle, offering a meaningful occupation with status and a chance to achieve their potential. With any expectations for marriage and family receding by the end of the war as these women reached their late thirties and forties, post-war life for those who had held positions of great responsibility would have come as a significant anti-climax. Unsurprisingly, many of them remained single and later took up other roles with the military or in some form of public service where their talents and skills would be used and appreciated. Irving, Douglas and another First Officer, Stella Swinney, took on senior or honorary roles with the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC) when it

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Colonel Irving from Jean Wood, 14 September 1946.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

was formed in 1951.<sup>126</sup> Although not a First Officer, Major Lucy Crane, was appointed Assistant Director.<sup>127</sup> Others, including Major Jean Wood, Major Millicent Aspinall and Major Eleanor Manning, remained single and took up senior roles with the Girl Guides in Australia and internationally.<sup>128</sup> Major Joyce Whitworth joined forces with another servicewoman after they were demobbed in 1946 and, with the help of a small re-establishment allowance from the army and parental assistance, set up in the country as farmers. ‘...very few of us wanted to go back to what we’d been doing before the war. Some had lost their husbands or... fiancés and their lives were virtually changed. There was a change of direction. Those who had been fortunate enough to keep their husbands and fiancés were quite happy to go back and be wives and mothers. But others of us wanted to do something different...’<sup>129</sup>

The observation by Douglas in her letter that Irving was unlikely to receive much recognition for her work indicates an acceptance that as a woman, she would not be considered as worthy of the praise that arguably, male military leaders would have expected. Douglas was right. On her retirement, the Chief of the General Staff to whom Irving reported, wrote her a two-paragraph letter expressing his appreciation for the ‘service you have rendered your country in this war’.<sup>130</sup> Other letters reinforce the central argument of this dissertation that the issues of class and gender were considered essential to the success of the AWAS. An informal letter to Irving from the Army’s former Director of Organisation, who had been in charge of AWAS

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<sup>126</sup> Trove: WRAAC, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/people/712063> [accessed 19 June 2019].

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ollif, *Women in Khaki*, pp.33-66.

<sup>129</sup> Joyce Whitworth.

<sup>130</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Colonel Irving from Chief of the General Staff, 30 January 1947.

public relations and advertising, noted that the Army had been fortunate to have 'someone of your background' able to take command.<sup>131</sup> Cyril Chambers, then Minister for the Army, offered Irving his congratulations on her achievement of the 'high standard of efficiency and decorum which has characterised the Australian Women's Army Service' revealing that above all, the maintenance of the feminine ideal had remained paramount in the minds of politicians.<sup>132</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Controller and her First Officers ensured that values influenced by class and notions of a feminine ideal underpinned AWAS life. The mentoring of servicewomen into middle and upper-class value systems was facilitated by the Army Education Service, which provided opportunities for cultural enrichment and religious observation as well as formal education and training. The moral principles it endorsed were challenged by the need for women to take on traditionally masculine roles as war progressed. Lacking the power to contest decisions which opposed her beliefs, the Controller used delaying tactics to try to steer policy but ultimately some issues which compromised AWAS culture had to be conceded.

Politicians and military leaders gave preference to male troops, with women's activities restricted to maintain the morale of servicemen and promote their status. As end of war approached and leadership attention returned to the post-war needs of the nation, the Education Service was instrumental in reinforcing expectations for

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<sup>131</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Sybil Irving from A. N. Kemsley, Director, United Service Publicity, 24 January 1947.

<sup>132</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Colonel Irving from Cyril Chambers, Minister for the Army, 16 December 1946.

women's return to the home. Although the end of hostilities brought joy for those who looked forward to beginning a traditional life as a wife, many women mourned the ending of their army experience and the opportunities it had brought. Such feelings were deeply felt by the senior officers, for whom the army had provided direction and status and who now, in their late thirties and forties, faced uncertain and potentially unrewarding futures as single women.

## Conclusion

Women's wartime activities in Australia remain in the shadow of male endeavours and there has been little academic attention given to the activities of the Australian Women's Army Service. Despite its significance to the lives of many thousands of Australian women, there has been only one scholarly investigation into the AWAS.<sup>1</sup> Other research has been confined to a relatively narrow focus within a broader investigation of all servicewomen.<sup>2</sup> The attention by scholars on the actions of a few has, arguably, compounded the omission. This dissertation claims that issues of class and gender affected all who served in the AWAS, beginning with their motivation to serve and influencing the way the Service was established, organised and administered. It argues that although the AWAS was a female organisation, it was guided by masculine perceptions of femininity and attitudes, which were aimed at promoting male interests. Class ideals remained central to almost every aspect of the lived AWAS experience, underpinning its leadership and ethos. Furthermore, it is shown that the influence of AWAS philosophies concerning class and gender extended beyond army life, serving to shape women's post-war attitudes and expectations. By addressing these two key factors, which in combination had a profound influence on all recruits to the AWAS, this dissertation provides a broader understanding of Australia's participation in the Second World War.

As has been shown, the years leading up to the Second World War had left most young Australian women with limited opportunities. Crippled by the

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<sup>1</sup> Johansen, 'The AWAS: A Social History'.

<sup>2</sup> M. Lake, 'Female Desires', pp. 60-81.

Depression, jobs were few and low-paid and education beyond the age of fourteen the preserve of the privileged.<sup>3</sup> With Australian manhood represented by the Anzac Digger hero, all men were given preference in the workplace as family provider.<sup>4</sup> The most working-class women could hope for was early marriage to a man with prospects, somewhere respectable to live and a few months' grace before the first child. Prospects were better for the educated middle-classes, although women in the professions had been targeted by a misogynistic campaign and married teachers were forced out of work following the imposition of a marriage bar.<sup>5</sup> The upper classes, with no expectation to work and no financial pressure, had the freedom to delay or decline marriage and motherhood. Society life was not for all, however, and the search for a meaningful occupation often ended with the voluntary organisations.<sup>6</sup> Public service was considered both respectable and suitable for women of middle class and above, and the Girl Guides, offering informal education, peer-group friendship and wholesome endeavour, was arguably one of the most attractive options. The Guides' routines and regulations, improving ethic and emphasis on the practical, would also have been compatible with Sybil Irving's military upbringing.

The outbreak of war did not impact on Australia with the force that it hit Europe, but following the departure of the AIF in support of the allies, and with so many of the population having British ties, it was natural for all women to want to do what they could to help. Working and middle-class women who had jobs were limited to volunteering in the evenings and at weekends. For the leisured class, the

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<sup>3</sup> Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour*, pp.2-3.

<sup>4</sup> White, 'War and Australian Society', pp. 398-403.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, 'The Australian Women's Weekly', pp. 288-291.

<sup>6</sup> Shute, 'From Balaclavas to Bayonets', pp. 355-356.

opportunity to play an active role in the voluntary war effort provided a way to legitimise their lifestyle while making a meaningful contribution.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, the government agreed, allowing upper-class women to keep the domestic staff they needed to free up their time for volunteering and relieving them of the obligation to join the industrial workforce.<sup>8</sup>

Government attempts to encourage patriotism by reporting on British women's activities with the ATS, arguably backfired, however.<sup>9</sup> Serving only to diminish Australian women's domestic efforts by comparison, it was only matter of time before Australian women demanded to do more. By taking matters into their own hands by organising themselves into paramilitary groups, women were able to exercise some agency and satisfy their need to become more active.<sup>10</sup> It is unlikely that politicians could have predicted the extent to which Australian women would embrace this level of involvement but not surprising that those with money, time and influential connections, dominated the voluntary and paramilitary groups. Once again it suited the government to encourage their participation, keeping women occupied and engaged in self-funded activities that could later prove useful.<sup>11</sup>

It is easy to see why the prospect of military service was appealing to women of all classes. All wanted to contribute to the war effort but there were also other attractions of a women's army. For working-class women, the AWAS offered a chance to escape dull factory work or to delay a life confined by domesticity. For middle and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', pp.61-62; Hasluck, 'The Government and the People', pp. 278-280.

<sup>9</sup> NAA(AWM): 80 11/209, Folder 3, 'Women's War Work'.

<sup>10</sup> Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', p.62.

<sup>11</sup> Hasluck, 'The Government and the People', pp. 401-403.

upper-class women, an opportunity to put ready-made skills to good use with a renewed sense of purpose. Undoubtedly, military service presented potentially unparalleled opportunities for women to change their lives and to expand their horizons.

While the politicians would undoubtedly have preferred to have kept women within the domestic sphere and out of military uniform, eventually, the difficulty of finding available male recruits left them with no option but to turn to women to fill the gaps. The Army's innate reluctance to use women for the jobs usually done by men was sweetened by the knowledge that they would be paying them considerably less than servicemen, but the fact that there was no initial appetite to invest in discrete accommodation or uniform revealed their lack of conviction.<sup>12</sup> Female participation was offered as a privilege rather than the fulfilment of a national necessity, although the press did its best to offer encouragement. Public accusations that women were only interested in the glamour of army life were refuted by reports of women who joined in the name of Anzac forefathers or serving loved-ones.<sup>13</sup> In any case, the jobs needing to be done were not glamorous, but mostly routine, clerical roles usually undertaken by servicemen who were far from being the elite Diggers who brought glory to Australia as part of the AIF and allied forces overseas.<sup>14</sup> It was necessary, however, for the Army to maintain their morale, so these men were presented as tough, fighting soldiers, anxious to get to the front.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the skills offered to the Army by the women's paramilitary groups were initially dismissed

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<sup>12</sup> NAA(VSO): MP70/5, 139/1/162, 'AWAS Formation'.

<sup>13</sup> 'News Summary It Happened On...', *Nambour Chronicle and East Coast Advertiser*, Qld., 2 January 1942, p.5, <https://trove.nla.gov.au> [accessed 16 April 2019].

<sup>14</sup> NAA(VSO): MP70/5, 139/1/162, 'AWAS Formation'.

<sup>15</sup> NAA(AWM): 80, 11/209, Folder 1, Department of Information, 6 April 1942.



as unnecessary, as a way of diminishing their value and asserting Army control. It wasn't until war took a more threatening turn that it became necessary for the Army to ask women to take on roles demanding the more traditionally masculine skills that they had trained for in the paramilitary groups.<sup>16</sup> Although promotion of the Digger persisted throughout the war, it became more critical in 1944 after the side-lining of Australian troops in the Pacific by the US General MacArthur. Arguably, initial government refusal to send the AWAS to serve in New Guinea, despite their evidently superior skills and aptitude, was made in support of boosting male morale, serving to illuminate how highly-skilled women were continually disadvantaged by male preferencing policy.<sup>17</sup>

To establish and manage a women's army in a relatively short space of time required women in charge who shared Army hegemony. The appointment of a Major-General's daughter, with a track record in the Girl Guides, a group strongly affiliated to the Army, was a natural fit for the role of Controller, as was the choice of other senior officers with similar, middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> Their selection through personal contacts reflected the practices of class, but denials that this had been the case indicates an awareness that the process was not universally acceptable.<sup>19</sup> The previous association with the Girl Guides by so many of the First Officers is a common thread revealing Irving's hand in their selection. Irving's allegiance to the Girl Guides is reinforced by her early declaration that she would use

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<sup>16</sup> NAA(AWM): 80 11/209, Folder 2, Recruitment statement, 10 February 1942.

<sup>17</sup> Beaumont, 'Australia's War', pp. 43-46; NAA(VSO): B6680, 386/1943, War Cabinet Agendum, Posting of AWAS Personnel for Service in New Guinea.

<sup>18</sup> NAA(AWM): 113, MH1/214, 'History of AWAS', p.5-10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

its principles as the basis of the AWAS and is evidenced by the norms and values she established and aspired to throughout the life of the AWAS.

Central to Irving's philosophy was the uniform, which the former Guide saw as a unifying and empowering force. Its importance as a means to generate a sense of belonging and loyalty is demonstrated by her requirement that servicewomen cared for and laundered their own uniforms.<sup>20</sup> This was perhaps all the more necessary, given the way the AWAS uniform was persistently used by Army marketers as a symbol of glamour to attract recruits.<sup>21</sup> It is unlikely that the Army chiefs would have thought of this strategy without the help of the Department of Information's professional advertising consultants, however. Advertising campaigns overseen by the Department of Information conformed to traditional gendered norms and the secondment of Irving's journalist sister, Freda, to the advertising team represented a token gesture, rather than proper consultation with the AWAS.

The promotion of the Digger character as a representation of all male Australian soldiers was introduced in advertising in 1942 as a way of maintaining servicemen's morale, while attracting AWAS recruits. Thereafter, depictions of strong, uncompromising male soldiers became the dominant imagery, with servicewomen presented as their amenable supporters. There was some experimentation with stronger female imagery during the middle war years, but by 1945 this was

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<sup>20</sup> NAA(VSO): B5505, 36, 'Take Pride in Your Uniform', n.d.

<sup>21</sup> NAA(AWM): 54 88/1/1 Part 27 Recruiting brochure n.d.c.1942; NAA(AWM) website: [https://www.NAA\(AWM\).gov.au/collection/C103196](https://www.NAA(AWM).gov.au/collection/C103196) [accessed 14 May 2019].

abandoned in favour of a return to the earlier depictions of women as subordinates as a form of subliminal preparation for their primary post-war roles.

Irving's adoption of Baden-Powell's principle that Guides should not become coarsened by their activities, as an underpinning AWAS philosophy, was in sympathy with government needs for women to retain their femininity during their service so that they would remain suitable for motherhood and nation-building afterwards.<sup>22</sup> Persistent emphasis on servicewomen's femininity, as a cornerstone of AWAS policy and supported by the Army Education Service, was far from the benign civilising force it was purported to be and caused tensions between the AWAS and the Army. Irving's insistence that the AWAS should be as competent as men but without being 'mannish', contested gender norms and led to some confusion and resentment among both servicewomen and men of all ranks, as illustrated by articles and letters in *Salt*.<sup>23</sup> Correspondence to Irving revealed that even the First Officers initially struggled to achieve appropriate professional relationships with male superior officers.<sup>24</sup> As women's participation in tougher, traditionally male, duties expanded, conflict also surfaced between Irving and the army hierarchy. The most prominent example of this is her objection to women bearing arms, even in self-defence, a view initially shared by both politicians and Army chiefs.<sup>25</sup> While their objection was overridden by the practical needs of women in the field, Irving's views were,

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<sup>22</sup> Hampton, *How the Girl Guides Won the War*, p.4.

<sup>23</sup> SLV: Sybil Irving Manuscripts MS10050, Box 2, 'Controller's Address', 27 November 1941; NTL: *Salt*, Vol.7., No.12., 14 February 1944, 'Are they feminine?'pp.1-5; *Salt*, Vol.8., No.2., 27 March 1944, 'Those AWAS', p.34.

<sup>24</sup> SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1. Letter to Sybil Irving from Eleanor Manning, 24 December 1941; SLV: MS 12758, Box 3539/1. Letter to Sybil Irving from Doris Hymus, 7 February 1942.

<sup>25</sup> Bassett, 'Irving, Sybil Howy' (1897-1973) *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/irving-sybil-howy-10591>, [Accessed July 2018].

arguably, equally driven by deeply-held moral and religious values.<sup>26</sup> This issue also serves to illustrate Irving's lack of power within the Army hierarchy, showing how the employment of delaying tactics was evidently the only available means for her to exercise agency. It is also a reminder that Irving's power was confined to the routine running of the AWAS, and overarching decisions ultimately remained in the hands of the Army's Chief of General Staff, to whom she reported.<sup>27</sup>

In parallel with the management of women's femininity during their service was the attention afforded to the preparation of women for their post-war return to the home as good citizens and mothers. As an experiment in adult education, the Army Education Service initially provided access to academic learning and training to help women avoid unemployment on their demobilisation.<sup>28</sup> Additional provision for their spiritual and cultural enrichment, included as a civilising factor, was arguably made in emulation of the informal education enjoyed by the higher classes as part of their upbringing, and was intended to improve women's contribution to nation-building. In parallel with the necessity to focus servicewomen's attention on the practical skills of home-making and motherhood, was the need to refresh public perception of the AWAS. The transformation of servicewomen from soldiers to future mothers in the public consciousness is reflected in the Army's external press campaigns.<sup>29</sup> While the prospect of assuming this new role was undoubtedly attractive to many AWAS servicewomen, particularly those for whom the end of the war would see them reunited with finances and husbands, domestic life was of little

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Grey, *The Australian Army*, p.145.

<sup>28</sup> NAA(VSO): MP742/1, 89/4/28, 'The Education Officer and Her Job', Vic L of C Area AWAS School, May 1943, p.2.

<sup>29</sup> NAA(VSO): B5499/1 Vol.8., 'Servicewomen Learn Child Welfare', *Telegraph*, 25 February 1944.

relevance to many of the First Officers, whose demobilisation and return home represented myriad loss and few prospects of a comparable occupation.<sup>30</sup> It is understandable that some of them later returned to military life or took up senior roles with the Girl Guides and other voluntary organisations.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, the AWAS satisfied the needs of women of all classes to make an active contribution to the war effort and to transform their lives, but only for the duration of the war. It was founded on class-based, gender-driven philosophies aimed at fulfilling military needs, while maintaining the good reputation of the service and women's suitability for post-war nation-building. Paradoxically, the Controller and the Senior Officers, who had been privileged by their class at the beginning of the AWAS and were complicit with gendered Establishment policy throughout its duration, stood to be disadvantaged by these factors at the end of the war.

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<sup>30</sup> SLV: MS12758 Box 3539/1 Freda Irving Manuscripts, Letter to Sybil Irving from May Douglas, 14 July 1946.

<sup>31</sup> Trove: WRAAC, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/people/712063> [accessed 19 June 2019]; Ollif, *Women in Khaki*, pp.33-66.

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