



THE AUSTRALIAN AIR CAMPAIGN SERIES – 9

# CHANGING ALTITUDES

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Stories of Australian Air Force Women

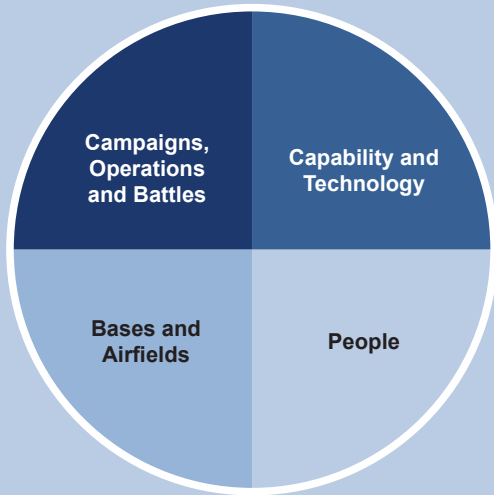
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# ABOUT THE SERIES

The Australian Air Campaign Series (AACS) produced by Air Force's History and Heritage Branch consists of well researched books on RAAF history that are not only underpinned by rigorous scholarship and solid evidence, but also are readable, well-illustrated, educational and enduring.

The intent of the AACS is to promote an understanding of Air Force history by examining the Air Force's development, performance, heritage, and contribution to the Nation in war and peace. By using examples of air operations and exploring the use of the Air Force, these publications contribute to the professional military education of Air Force members, and the education of those with an interest in Air Force history.

The AACS is comprised of four sub-series of titles, as shown below. Through the collection of works in each of these sub-series, the reader gains an appreciation of the depth and breadth of the facets that have formed the history and heritage of the RAAF over the past 100 years.





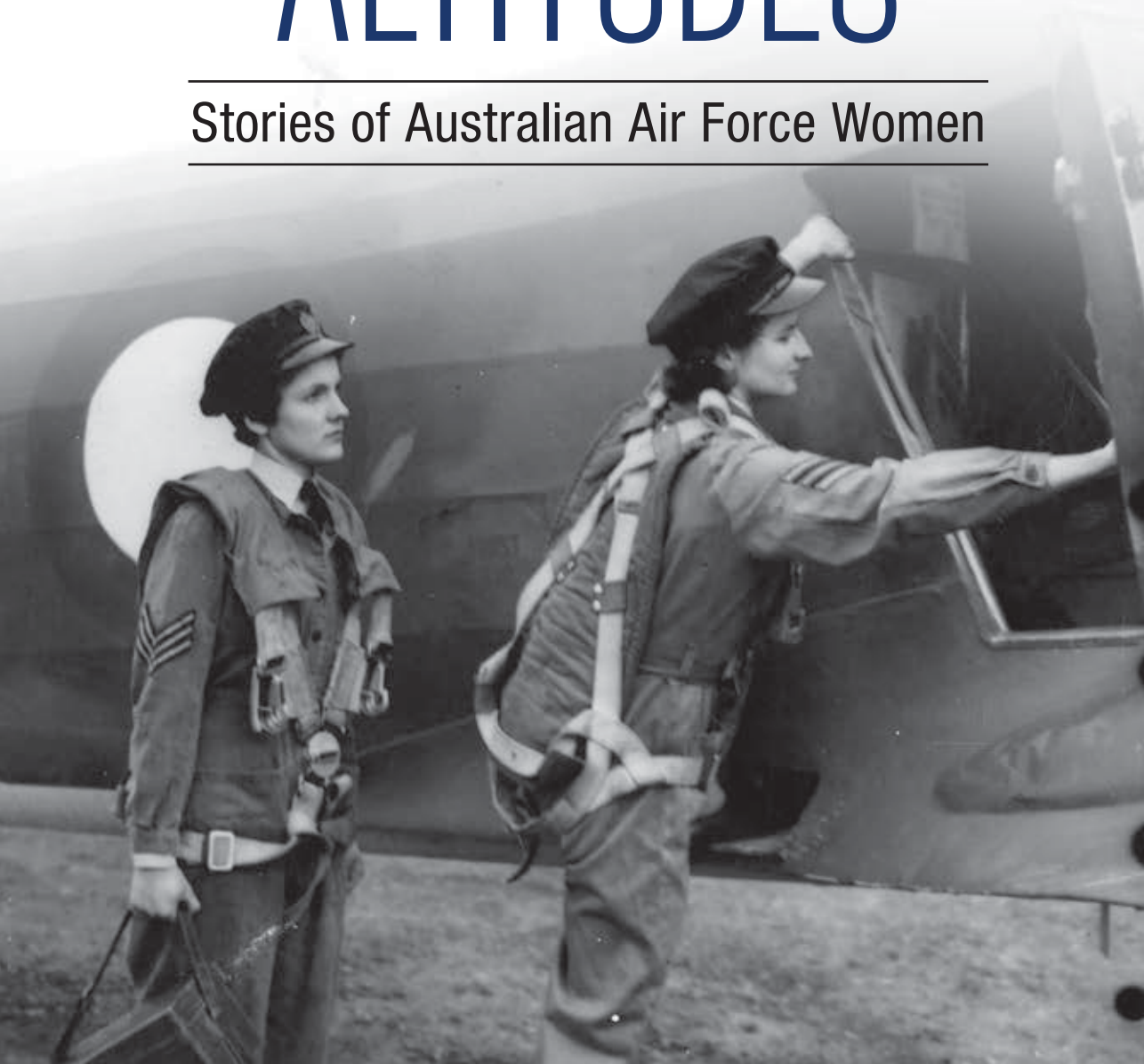
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Stories of Australian Air Force Women

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**RAAF**

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

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**Disclaimer**

This book is a representation of some of the thousands of women who have served with courage and diligence in Australia's Air Force branches. It is not intended to be an exhaustive reference or history, nor to promote any military, political, social, personal or other agenda.

While the researchers and writers have taken great care to ensure the accuracy of all information, neither they, nor the Royal Australian Air Force, accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.

Some official military titles (e.g. names of bases and ranks) and military practices/protocol may be inconsistently presented due to the passage of time and disparity in records. Some terms which were acceptable within the culture and society of a different time (e.g. referring to women as 'girls') have been included, even if they are no longer generally regarded as appropriate. Some details have intentionally been omitted or condensed for reasons of privacy, personal preference, and literary merit.

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**Front cover image:** Sergeants Hilary Josephine Benn and Glennie Goodwin Morton, Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force cinema operators, climbing into an aircraft, 1943 (State Library of Victoria, Argus Collection)

Sergeants Hilary Benn and Glennie Morton were among the first few Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force servicewomen mustered as cinema operators, which was a diverse role.<sup>1</sup> One day they may have created filmstrips to instruct aircraft recognition, and the next recorded instructional films. Film topics ranged from completing 'the daily inspection of a bomber', to reconditioning spark plugs, to the importance of dental hygiene.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the RAAF found that moving images were very effective teaching tools because details could be magnified and slow motion used to show even the 'smallest movement'.<sup>3</sup>

As pictured, Hilary and Glennie also frequently worked while airborne, filming bombing experiments or cargo drops, or paratroopers leaping from an adjacent aircraft. Reportedly, Glennie's 'most exciting aerial task was to photograph a fighter attack on a bomber ... from the rear gunner's turret of ... [the] bomber while a fighter "attacked" it'.<sup>4</sup> Their wartime experiences saw Hilary and Glennie both develop 'a love of the air'.

# CONTENTS

Abbreviations .....	1
Ranks of the Australian women's Air Force services.....	4
About the contributors .....	5
Series foreword.....	7
Preface.....	8
Foreword.....	9
Introduction.....	11
Timeline of key events for Air Force servicewomen .....	12
<b>THE 1940s .....</b>	<b>16</b>
Introduction.....	17
Group Officer Clare Stevenson OBE AM.....	23
Group Officer Margaret Lang OBE .....	28
Sister Alma Skeers (née Pearse) .....	30
Flight Officer Norah Penglase (née Cooke) .....	37
Corporal Audrey Haughton-James (née Philp) .....	46
The White Australia Policy .....	55
Aircraftwoman Rena Pascoe (née Porter) .....	56
Corporal Olive Jardine (née McNeil) .....	62
Royal Australian Air Force bands .....	68
Corporal Shirley Brettle (née Robinson) .....	70
Corporal Margaret Clarke (née Johnston) .....	75
Sister Lucy Lane (née MacKenzie) .....	81
Aircraftwoman Sheila Van Emden (née Ferguson) .....	90
Second World War recruitment language and imagery .....	97

<b>THE 1950s .....</b>	<b>104</b>
Introduction.....	105
Sergeant Shirley McLaren AM (née Lemon) .....	111
Australian Defence Medal.....	117
Sister Grace Halstead (née Bury) .....	118
Sergeant Yvonne Thompson (née Tebay) .....	126
<b>THE 1960s .....</b>	<b>134</b>
Introduction.....	135
Leading Aircraftwoman Lynette Mitchell (née Kyte) .....	139
Leading Aircraftwoman Sandra Perry (née Guy) .....	146
Squadron Leader Patricia Furbank.....	151
The Vietnam War: the silent contributors .....	158
<b>THE 1970s .....</b>	<b>161</b>
Introduction.....	162
Air Vice-Marshal Julie Hammer AM CSC.....	164
Group Captain Jenny Fantini OAM .....	172
Society's attitudes and national policies: the impact on women in the Air Force .....	178
<b>THE 1980s .....</b>	<b>182</b>
Introduction.....	183
Air Vice-Marshal Tracy Smart AO .....	187
Warrant Officer Melinda Skinner CSC (née Banks) .....	196
Warrant Officer Michelle Hardy.....	205
<b>THE 1990s .....</b>	<b>214</b>
Introduction.....	215
Group Captain Hannah Jude-Smith AM.....	218
The evolution of women's uniforms .....	227

<b>THE 2000s .....</b>	<b>239</b>
Introduction.....	240
Sergeant Jade Evans.....	243
Flight Lieutenant Ingrid Van der Vlist.....	250
Air Force women killed in service.....	258
<b>THE 2010s AND 2020s.....</b>	<b>261</b>
Introduction.....	262
Australian female fast-jet pilots: Flight Lieutenant Connie Dixon and Flight Lieutenant Jess Stone.....	265
Flight Lieutenant Olivia Little (née Salvatore) .....	270
Sergeant Brodie Stewart.....	276
Flight Lieutenant Dani Cornish (née Jorgensen) .....	284
Leading Aircraftwoman Kate Clarkson (née Lutkins) .....	293
Leading Aircraftwoman Emma Gall .....	301
Leading Aircraftwoman Paige Boyd (née Stockdale) .....	308
Leading Aircraftwoman Kobey Misios.....	314
Sport and service .....	321
Wing Officer Doris Carter OBE.....	324
Conclusion.....	325
Acknowledgements.....	326
Bibliography.....	327
Endnotes.....	339

# ABBREVIATIONS

1BAGS	No 1 Bombing and Gunnery School
1RTU	No 1 Recruit Training Unit
2MRS	No 2 Medical Receiving Station
2TG	No 2 Training Group Headquarters
3CRU	No 3 Control and Reporting Unit
3SQN	No 3 Squadron
33SQN	No 33 Squadron
37SQN	No 37 Squadron
383CRS	No 383 Contingency Response Squadron
5SFTS	No 5 Service Flying Training School
6SQN	No 6 Squadron
76SQN	No 76 Squadron
77SQN	No 77 Squadron
8EFTS	No 8 Elementary Flying Training School
902nd AMES	902nd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron
AC	Companion of the Order of Australia
ACO	Air Combat Officer
ACSC	Australian Command and Staff Course
ADF	Australian Defence Force
ADFA	Australian Defence Force Academy
ADG	Airfield Defence Guard
AFHQ	Air Force Headquarters
AFL	Australian Football League
AFLW	Australian Football League Women's
AM	Member of the Order of Australia
AMAB	Al Minhad Air Base
AMO	Air Mobility Officer
ANU	Australian National University
AO	Officer of the Order of Australia
ASD	Australian Signals Directorate
ATA	Air Transport Auxiliary



AWLA	Australian Women's Land Army
BBJ	Boeing Business Jet
CAC	Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation
CAF	Chief of Air Force
CAOC	Combined Air Operations Center (US)
CO	Commanding Officer
CREWATT	Crew Attendant
CSC	Conspicuous Service Cross
CWD	Combined Working Dress
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Commission
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
DFR	Defence Force Recruiting
DI	Drill Instructor
DMT	Driver Motor Transport
DPCU	Disruptive Pattern Camouflage Uniform
DWAAAF	Director of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force
EATS	Empire Air Training Scheme
EDDH	Explosive Detection Dog Handler
EW	Electronic Warfare
GCI	Ground Controlled Interception
GPU	General Purpose Uniform
HADR	Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HMAS	His/Her Majesty's Australian Ship
HSW	Health Services Wing
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IET	Initial Employment Training
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus others
MASH	Mobile Army Surgical Hospital
medevac	Medical Evacuation
MO	Medical Officer
MRTF	Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force
MWD	Military Working Dog
MWDH	Military Working Dog Handler
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer

## CHANGING ALTITUDES

NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
OAM	Medal of the Order of Australia
OBE	Order of the British Empire
OC	Officer Commanding
OPCON	Operational Conversion
OTS	Officer Training School
PCS	Personnel Capability Specialist
PKF HQ	Peacekeeping Force Headquarters
PNG	Papua New Guinea
Qld	Queensland
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAAFNS	Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (1940–77)
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RMAF	Royal Malaysian Air Force
RSL	Returned and Services League
SA	South Australia
SDA	Sex Discrimination Act
SFS	Security and Fire School
SPS	School of Post Graduate Studies
SSO	Specialist Services Officer
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USAF	United States Air Force
VIP	Very Important Person
WA	Western Australia
WAAAF	Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (1941–47)
WATC	Women's Air Training Corps
WRAAF	Women's Royal Australian Air Force (1950–77)

# RANKS OF THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S AIR FORCE SERVICES

## **Star-rank officers**

Air Chief Marshal (four-star)

Air Marshal (three-star)

Air Vice-Marshal (two-star)

Air Commodore (one-star)

## **Officers**

Group Captain (formerly Group Officer for women)

Wing Commander (formerly Wing Officer for women)

Squadron Leader (formerly Squadron Officer for women)

Flight Lieutenant (formerly Flight Officer for women)

Flying Officer (formerly Section Officer for women)

Pilot Officer (formerly Assistant Section Officer for Royal Australian Air Force  
Nursing Service only)

## **General enlistment ranks**

Warrant Officer

Flight Sergeant (formerly Senior Section Leader for women)

Sergeant (formerly Section Leader for women)

Corporal (formerly Assistant Section Leader for women)

Leading Aircraftwoman (formerly Aircraftwoman 1st Class for women)

Aircraftwoman (formerly Aircraftwoman 2nd Class for women)

# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

## **Air Commodore Kirrily Dearing AM**

Kirrily Dearing joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as a supply officer (now logistics) through the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1988. Throughout her 34 years of permanent service, Kirrily served at Air Force and joint Defence establishments throughout eastern Australia in both logistics and other roles. She spent three years in Hawaii from 2014 to 2016 as the inaugural liaison officer to the US Pacific Air Forces. She deployed on numerous operational tasks overseas, including to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and the Middle East, including a deployment to Afghanistan. Kirrily retired from full-time service in March 2022, and now enjoys working on select Reserve opportunities and other work and hobby interests.

## **Squadron Leader Anna Williams PhD**

Anna Williams is a museum curator, educator and social historian. She holds a Master of Arts – Museum Studies and a Doctorate of Philosophy from The University of Sydney. Her multidisciplinary thesis, awarded in 2022, sought to understand the disparities between the artefactual, archival, and written histories of Air Force training in Australia during the Second World War. Anna was appointed as a squadron leader (specialist capability officer) in the RAAF in December 2021. She currently works as a curator for the Royal Australian Navy and holds a reserve position with History and Heritage – Air Force. As an extracurricular activity, Anna enjoys singing for and with military veterans, transporting them to yesteryear with the sweet harmonies of the Second World War-era and beyond with her band Company B. She has a son with whom she shares her love of music, a pet rabbit called George, skiing and weekends kayaking on Sydney Harbour.

## **Flight Lieutenant Karyn Markwell MA MIntell**

Karyn Markwell holds a Master of Publishing from The University of Queensland and a Master of Intelligence from Macquarie University. She joined the RAAF as a reservist in 2015 and has deployed on tasks and exercises to every state and territory of Australia (except Tasmania – but she lives in hope). A lifelong lover of history, she joined History and Heritage – Air Force in 2022. Her other passions include travelling, reading and cheesemaking, with triple-cream brie her specialty.

**Flight Lieutenant Fiona Earl PhD**

Fiona Earl joined the RAAF Reserves in May 2022, the same year she was awarded her PhD in aviation heritage. Fiona has long enjoyed researching and writing about aviation heritage, especially in Australia's Northern Territory. In 2018, she contributed the first definition of 'aviation archaeology' to the *Encyclopaedia of Global Archaeology*. Her role as a specialist capability officer in History and Heritage – Air Force provides her with a brilliant opportunity to combine her passions for aviation and heritage. Fiona's interest in aviation extends beyond her work and she enjoys flying ultralight aircraft.

**Ms Rosalind Turner BHIP**

Rosalind (Roz) Turner holds a Bachelor of Historical Inquiry and Practice from the University of New England. She also holds a Certificate IV in Museum Practice and a Diploma of Professional Writing (Editing and Proofreading). She joined Defence as an Australian Public Service trainee in 1989 and worked through various administrative positions before joining the Office of Air Force History in 2005. Having always had an interest in history, she was finally able to pursue her dream and in 2018 became the Deputy Air Force Historian. Roz was project lead on the publication *Then, Now, Always*, produced for the Air Force's Centenary in 2021. She finds leading others in their pursuit of historical research a very rewarding career and became the Executive Officer Historical Research and Reviews for History and Heritage – Air Force in 2023.

# SERIES FOREWORD

The Australian Air Campaign Series produced by Air Force's History and Heritage Branch focusses on four themed sub-series:

- Campaigns, operations and battles
- Capability and technology
- Bases and airfields
- People.

These themed titles explore specific facets of the Air Force from its inception in 1921. What they reveal are unique insights, providing the reader with a greater appreciation and deeper understanding of those aspects that have shaped the Air Force's history and heritage.

Importantly, these publications are sourced from official records and research, often including first-hand accounts. While endorsed for studies in military history, the range of topics in these publications provides an ideal conduit for the broadest of audiences to pursue and learn more about the many aspects that have contributed to the development of Australia's Air Force.

Apart from being a significant point of reference, these publications ultimately acknowledge bravery, ingenuity and resilience – in essence, the service and sacrifice which is the hallmark of those who have served and continue to serve in the Air Force.

**Robert Lawson OAM**

Air Commodore

Director-General History and Heritage – Air Force

# PREFACE

*Changing Altitudes: Stories of Australian Air Force Women* is a collaborative writing effort by a small team of women who proudly represent the Royal Australian Air Force and the Department of Defence. Each of us brought our own skills to the project – writing, communication and research – or lived experience of more than three decades in service and the Department.

The story of each woman has been developed using interviews and transcripts and is therefore a recollection in her own words. Significant research into each decade of service and relevant vignettes provide context around the social and political landscape of the time.

This book captures the unique experiences of women from all backgrounds who joined the Air Force for many reasons, including to serve their nation, to follow in the footsteps of a loved one, to seek a life outside of a small country town, or to pursue adventure. It is merely a snapshot of the stories of thousands of women who have dedicated themselves to the profession of arms. As a result, we pay homage to all women who have served over the decades.

# FOREWORD

Over many years, I have had the privilege of meeting Australian women who have proudly worn the uniform of the Air Force and committed to serve their nation in times of peace and war. When I received a request from the Chief of Air Force to play a small role in the development of *Changing Altitudes: Stories of Australian Air Force Women*, of course I accepted. The Air Force has been a constant in the lives of Michael, my late husband, and me. Michael was an Air Force Reserve officer with the Queensland University Squadron when he was a university student and later with No 23 Squadron, and I am also a proud Patron of No 23 Squadron Association.

In my roles as Governor of Queensland and as Governor-General of Australia, I enjoyed many engagements with the incredible women of the 'Triple As' and 'Double As': the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force and the Women's Royal Australian Air Force. These extraordinary women were the trailblazers of our Air Force's development: joining at a time when Australia was still a maturing Commonwealth nation, and supporting the war effort in whatever field was available to them. During the Second World War, when a woman's role was traditionally a wife, mother and homemaker, thousands queued at recruitment centres to join trades as diverse as meteorological assistants, electricians, flight mechanics and instrument makers. Their emerging working role in the Australian war effort signified the vast, untapped potential of women in the workforce, going into a 'man's world' and excelling.

I have also met many talented and capable women of the contemporary Royal Australian Air Force on bases here in Australia, and on overseas deployments, including Afghanistan and East Timor. What has always impressed me deeply is their professionalism, work ethic, confidence and sense of humour. They all embody the strength and power of our Air Force capability.

*Changing Altitudes: Stories of Australian Air Force Women* captures a selection of the experiences of women of all generations and backgrounds: those of mothers, daughters, wives and friends. They are women who consider themselves ordinary everyday Australians, however their stories are filled with inspiration, adventure, humour and are at times poignant. In their own way, they are simply extraordinary.

**Dame Quentin Bryce**  
AD CVO





Governor-General Dame Quentin Bryce and Wing Commander Kiri Dearing, Commanding Officer No 1 Airfield Operations Support Squadron, at RAAF Base Townsville, Queensland, August 2013 (Kiri Dearing)

# INTRODUCTION

*Changing Altitudes: Stories of Australian Air Force Women* is a book capturing the unique experiences of women who have proudly served their nation in different elements of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) since the 1940s. While not an official history, this publication incorporates significant historical events, the social norms of the day, and policies and government decisions that influenced the professional opportunities afforded to women. These all provide context to the featured stories of our women as they recount their own experiences of their time in service.

When Australian women first joined the ranks of the Air Force in an auxiliary capacity in the early 1940s, their contributions were considered as a temporary necessity due to the ongoing effort in support of the Second World War. Despite the woman's traditional role of the time as one of homemaker and mother, more than 600 joined the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service, and women joined the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force in their thousands. By the end of the war, more than 27,000 women were making significant contributions to Air Force capability. However, within two years of the war concluding, the auxiliary arm of the service was disbanded, having been deemed surplus to requirements, and many of these women returned to their family kitchens.

As the social norms have changed over the decades, so has the employment of women in the RAAF. Women now serve in every employment category: they are loadmasters, aircraft technicians, logistics specialists, personnel capability specialists, military working dog handlers and pilots. They all enable the RAAF to contribute to a broader defence capability in support of the Australian Government's requirements to ensure domestic and global security. Thousands have deployed on operations around the globe and domestically, often in dangerous environments in unfamiliar territory. They do so unreservedly, frequently leaving loved ones behind and, in many cases, having their partners looking after children – quite the role reversal from decades ago.

All of the women featured in this book recount their own unique journey as a serving member. Some stories cover only a handful of years, while others span careers over several decades. Some women joined as teenagers and others not until later in life, after having other careers and perhaps raising a family. All stories have either been drawn from the Oral History archives of the Air Force and other historical agencies, or from contemporary interviews conducted specifically for this book. Their stories highlight the challenges they have faced, and the opportunities they have created, as they recall their time in uniform, many breaking the stereotypical view of a woman's capacity in the profession of arms. Their recollections serve to inspire the reader, and perhaps even lead them to consider the world of opportunity that could await them as a member of the RAAF.

# TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS FOR AIR FORCE SERVICEWOMEN

**1940** The Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service is established.

## Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service 1940–77

Modelled on Princess Mary's Royal Air Force Nursing Service in the United Kingdom, the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) was established in July 1940 with 36 nursing sisters. Between 1940 and 1955, more than 600 women joined the RAAFNS, serving overseas during the Second World War, the Korean War and the Malayan Emergency, where they lived and worked in the same conditions as the men whom they served alongside. One of the key duties of RAAFNS nursing sisters – especially during the Vietnam War – was caring for patients during the long and demanding medical evacuation flights back to Australia.<sup>1</sup>



Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service nursing sister Helen Blair gives a magazine to released prisoner Private John Mackay during a medical evacuation flight from Korea to Japan (Department of Defence)

**1941** The Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force is formed.

## Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force 1941–47

The overseas deployment of RAAF personnel (all men) during the Second World War created critical shortages within the RAAF back home in Australia. The Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) was approved by the Advisory War Council in February 1941, and formed as a temporary service in March, following lobbying by women who were eager to contribute to Australia's wartime effort. Initially working as wireless telegraphists (who were urgently needed for the war effort), as well as clerks and cooks, WAAAF servicewomen took on an increasing number and variety of duties, ultimately working in 77 per cent of the available RAAF roles.<sup>2</sup>



Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force engine mechanics working on a Spitfire aircraft (RAAF Museum)

**1947** The WAAAF disbands and its members return to civilian life, with approximately 27,000 having served.

**1950** The Women's Royal Australian Air Force is formed.

## Women's Royal Australian Air Force 1950–77

When the Korean War and Malayan Emergency once again required the overseas deployment of RAAF personnel, reinstating a women's Air Force was regarded as a solution to the resulting shortages within RAAF ranks. This was approved, in principle, by Cabinet in July 1950, with the first recruits to the Women's Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF) commencing in January 1951.<sup>3</sup>



Women's Royal Australian Air Force meteorological assistants (RAAF Museum)

**1957** Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother is appointed as the Air Chief Commandant of the WRAAF.

**1965** WRAAF officers are offered permanent commissions.

**1967** WRAAF servicewomen are permitted to serve overseas. Some deploy on Exercise *Southern Cross* to New Zealand.

**1969** Servicewomen are permitted to remain in the WRAAF if they choose to marry. Already-married women are also able to join.

**1975** Pregnant servicewomen are permitted to remain in the WRAAF.

**1977** With the growing recognition that separate services for men and women are no longer required, the RAAFNS and WRAAF are integrated into the RAAF.

**1978** RAAF servicewomen receive the same pay as their male counterparts.

**1987** Women are eligible to join the RAAF as a pilot or aircrew on non-combat aircraft.

**1992** Women are eligible to join the RAAF as aircrew on combat aircraft.

**2011** The government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard removes gender restrictions from Australian Defence Force combat roles. Women are now able to serve in every specialisation of the RAAF, including as Airfield Defence Guard and Ground Defence Officer.

## Royal Australian Air Force Present day

Women in the RAAF are on par with their male counterparts, earning the same wage and receiving the same rights. They can marry and have children while in service, reach star rank, deploy overseas on combat-support and humanitarian aid and disaster relief missions, and have long-term, rewarding careers in service to Australia.<sup>4</sup>



The first all-female C-27J Spartan aircrew from No 35 Squadron, 2022. Left to right: Flight Lieutenant Thea Margalit, Flight Lieutenant Katherine Mitchell, Flying Officer Lauren Townsend and Flight Lieutenant Emily Renshaw (Department of Defence)

# Second World War recruitment language and imagery

Recruitment advertisements and articles published during the Second World War depicted the valuable contribution of WAAAF servicewomen to Australia's war effort, including undertaking jobs which had previously been available only to men.

## Support the men

One of the most urgent and compelling messages of WAAAF recruitment advertisements and articles was that women could (and should) support the RAAF to free up men to carry out other essential war work.

The article 'W.A.A.A.F's [*sic*] do vital war jobs' from 1942 features a photo of a WAAAF servicewoman serving a RAAF officer at a dining table.<sup>1</sup> The article reads:

Among numerous duties which WAAAF's [*sic*] perform is serving at table on RAAF establishments. Aircraftwoman O'Brien ... gives smiling service to Flight-Lieutenant Gill. This work has released a number of men for other war work.<sup>2</sup>



'W.A.A.A.F's do vital war jobs' article in *PIX*, 2 May 1942 (National Library of Australia)

After describing the recent intake of women into the WAAAF, the article continues, ‘This has resulted in the release of hundreds of physically fit young men for more active service in the RAAF.’<sup>3</sup> Or, as one of the most famous WAAAF posters succinctly puts it: ‘Keep them flying!’<sup>4</sup>



‘Keep them flying!’ recruitment poster, circa 1942 (Australian War Memorial)

The language and imagery in this poster imply the WAAAF servicewoman at its centre is directly helping to keep aircraft operational and flying. These aircraft were crewed only by men.<sup>5</sup>

Referring to women as ‘girls’ is common throughout WAAAF recruitment advertisements and articles. A photograph taken in 1943 at Flinders Street train station in Melbourne shows a WAAAF recruitment billboard which reads, ‘Girls! Help him!’<sup>6</sup> Even the recruitment advertisement with the respectful heading ‘Airwoman we thank you’ refers to women as ‘girls’ in the body of the text. However, we can accept this language as culturally appropriate for the time, and instead look at the broader messaging of the importance of women’s contribution to the war effort.<sup>7</sup>





*Airwoman  
we thank you*

Australia congratulates you on the completion of two years of magnificent war service. To-day, more than ever, the R.A.A.F. appreciates your co-operation and your capacity for hard work.

In two years the W.A.A.F. has grown from a few girls to an organisation which now co-operates with the R.A.A.F. on practically every Air Defence Station in Australia.

The W.A.A.F. urgently needs more and more recruits in a great variety of absorbingly interesting and vital categories.

**W.A.A.F.**

9/43

Apply to your nearest  
**R.A.A.F. RECRUITING CENTRE**  
or Local Committee

*Applicants must not be disappointed if, in the National interests, they are not admitted because of the importance of their present employment.*

'Airwoman we thank you' recruitment advertisement, 1943 (Department of Defence)

Additional wording in this ad – seemingly delivered by the smiling pilot to the marching WAAAF servicewoman – reads, 'To-day, more than ever, the R.A.A.F. appreciates your co-operation and capacity for hard work.' The other imagery in the ad shows a group of servicewomen diligently working on various tasks, including in communications and folding parachutes.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the recruitment ad 'A tribute to the W.A.A.A.F.' from 1943 mentions the contribution of WAAAF servicewomen from a male perspective: 'Theirs is a comradeship of which the R.A.A.F. is mighty proud'.<sup>9</sup>

**A TRIBUTE TO  
THE W.A.A.F**

Australia owes a debt of gratitude to members of the W.A.A.A.F. for the splendid service they are rendering. There is a comradeship of which the R.A.A.F. is mighty proud. Thousands more are required for immediate duty in a variety of interesting and vital musterings.



*Prospective applicants and parents are invited to enquire at the nearest R.A.A.F. Recruiting Centre for full information regarding the splendid training opportunities and excellent Service conditions in the*

**W.A.A.A.F.**

Apply personally or by letter to the nearest  
**RAAF RECRUITING CENTRE** or RAAF Committee



**YOUNG WOMEN  
WANTED FOR THE  
FOLLOWING DUTIES**

Stenographers and Typists  
Sick Quarter Attendants  
Cooks and Trainee Cooks  
Telephone Operators  
Teleprinter Operators  
Office Orderlies  
Messwomen

*Also girls for training as:*  
Signals Clerks  
Cypher Assistants  
Equipment Assistants  
Radio Telephony Operators  
Service Policewomen  
and numerous others.  
PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE  
NOT NECESSARY.

*Applicants must not be disappointed if in the national interest they are not admitted because of the importance of their present employment.*

'A tribute to the W.A.A.A.F.' recruitment advertisement, 1943 (Department of Defence)

The key messaging of such recruitment advertisements and articles was that a woman – traditionally a man's 'helper' in a marriage, family and home – could support men in their wartime duty as well.

### Serve your country

A second common message in Second World War recruitment advertisements and articles was that women who joined the WAAAF would thereby fulfil their patriotic duty.

The 1942 article 'W.A.A.A.F's do vital war jobs' states that:

Members come from all walks of life. They include accountants, secretaries, artists, dressmakers, cooks, waitresses, beauty parlor specialists. Many have actually given up better-paid jobs to engage in this essential war service.<sup>10</sup>

Through this example, the article implies that women should be willing to make personal sacrifices to serve their country.

Similarly, the article ‘Girls with sports ability volunteer for W.A.A.A.F.’, published in *The Telegraph* in 1942, notes that:

Miss Valma Simpson travelled from Cairns to volunteer as a store clerk. ‘I’ve no brothers, so it’s up to me [to join the war effort],’ she says. Hazel Gardner, second of three sisters thinks the same.<sup>11</sup>

This sentiment is echoed in another iconic WAAAF recruitment poster, which urges, ‘play your part in the big task ahead’ (emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup>



‘Doing a grand job!’ recruitment poster, 1942 (Australian War Memorial)

The title of this poster, ‘Doing a grand job!’, was similarly used in other advertisements. The recruitment ad ‘I wouldn’t be out of it for anything, Dad!’, published in *The Australian Women’s Weekly* in 1944, states, ‘You’ll love the life, doing a grand job for Australia!’ This ad continues to ask its readers, ‘How, then, can you hesitate to join when your country is needing you? ... Your country looks to YOU to enlist with pride in our Air Force.’<sup>13</sup>





# Flight Lieutenant Ingrid Van der Vlist

## Air Mobility Officer

**Place of birth:** Mildura, Victoria

**Date of enlistment:** 25 September 2007

I know I can be very driven and focused on a set goal once I have one. I really don't subscribe to the 'such is life' mentality at all or the idea that we should settle for what we've got, even if we're unhappy with it. I'm a huge advocate for change and personal growth, even if it means taking a leap of faith outside your comfort zone. I really do think that an individual can have all the potential in the world, but without a clear sense of direction and some personal grit, potential is just a word.<sup>1</sup>



Flight Lieutenant Ping Van der Vlist standing next to the refuelling boom of a Royal Australian Air Force KC-30A multi-role tanker transport aircraft (Department of Defence)

Ingrid ('Ping') Van der Vlist may have grown up near naval bases, but her career has included time serving in both the RAAF and the Australian Army. Ping spent the majority of her childhood and schooling years in Jervis Bay, a small coastal town south of Sydney and close to two naval bases. Her elder brother's career, firstly in the Royal Australian Navy and then in the RAAF, influenced her while she was in high school to consider a profession in the Air Force:

By the time I was in Year 10, he'd planted the idea of becoming a RAAF crew attendant [CREWATT] in my head, because he'd worked with so many of them at [No] 33 Squadron on the Boeing 707, and he thought I'd be a good fit for the job. [So] I shaped my Year 11 and 12 electives towards applying once I'd finished my HSC [Higher School Certificate].<sup>2</sup>



Aircraftwoman Recruit Ping Van der Vlist's first official photo while on her recruit course, 2007 (Department of Defence)

During Years 11 and 12, the aviation museum at HMAS Albatross offered engineering aeroskills as an elective, and Ping attended; it was one of the few units at school which she admits she enjoyed. With a CREWATT career as her sole focus, Ping visited RAAF Base Richmond and the Fairbairn establishment in Canberra to familiarise herself with the role and speak to as many CREWATTs as she could, to demonstrate to Defence Force Recruiting

her determination to join. Her plan hit a temporary snag when the Boeing 707 was retired and, as a result, few CREWATTs were being recruited:

I wouldn't say it was great timing for me to want that job specifically. It worked out anyway, in the long run, but there was a solid 18-month gap there [between] finishing my HSC to actually starting recruit training in Edinburgh.<sup>3</sup>

In September 2007, Ping finally started her recruit training at No 1 Recruit Training Unit, the last course to be held at RAAF Base Edinburgh in Adelaide. She recalled 'absolutely loving' the structured environment of the course:

I had a regimental approach to plenty of other things in my life, so when people were having a difficult time, I found myself confused by it, to be honest. I was like, we're all here together, we can all suck it up. It's not forever. I had, I think, a longer foresight into what a military career could be.<sup>4</sup>



Aircraftwoman Recruit Ping Van der Vlist at No 1 Recruit Training Unit, RAAF Base Edinburgh, South Australia, 2007 (Ping Van der Vlist)

After graduating, Ping started the basic prerequisite courses for all enlisted aircrew at RAAF Base Richmond, with a focus on the skills and qualities required to be an effective member of a crew on board an aircraft:

Even if you're not the captain or the most senior person [on board], you still need to contribute and value-add, especially in an emergency scenario where you might be the SME [subject matter expert] on a piece of equipment or a situation. So yes, it was a very interesting course.<sup>5</sup>



Ping's CREWATT course was the first to be conducted solely at No 34 Squadron at Fairbairn, Australian Capital Territory, the home of the RAAF VIP (Very Important Person) fleet, after the decommissioning of the Boeing 707. She started serving on the Boeing Business Jet (BBJ), graduating as a 'D-CAT' (the bottom of the skills ladder with 'A-CAT' being a member who has extensive experience and additional skills and responsibilities). Ping's family proudly watched on as she was presented with her first 'brevet' (awarded to aircrew on completion of their qualification course) on graduation, fulfilling a plan that had been hatched as far back as 2004.

Further training on the Challenger 604 aircraft ensured that Ping was trained on both aircraft types, and she spent a total of two-and-a-half years as a part of small crews, flying VIP passengers around the globe and the country. She recalled the posting taught her the importance of flexibility, with regular last-minute changes to tasks and even aircraft types:

There were many times, especially during an election campaign, where I would be on the BBJ as part of a crew going somewhere, and then the plan change[d] in the background ... [and] I would be chucked on the Challenger instead. So I'd literally step off the jet, walk across the tarmac, and jump on a different jet, and go and do something else.<sup>6</sup>

Ping recalled those early years as formative in shaping her future career aspirations, with the next phase serving as a CREWATT on the new air-to-air refuelling capability, the KC-30A. The aircraft itself did not arrive until a year into her posting to No 33 Squadron (33SQN), so she spent time developing operating procedures and the methods in which CREWATTs would operate. She also put that time to good use to start checking off courses and qualifications which she would require to progress in her field. She remembered the first time she walked through the aircraft, she was struck by the sheer size difference to what she had previously worked on, including crew size and the number of passengers on board:

The jet is just immense. It's a wide-bodied aircraft with these two big, long aisles that just feel like they're going on forever. I wanted to experience the military side of what it was to do the CREWATT job [on the KC-30A]. I wanted to see how different they could be and what a military-focused mindset could be, noting that [No] 33 Squadron's primary role is air-to-air refuelling, but we can also do huge passenger movements and take cargo.<sup>7</sup>

Ping spent five years as a CREWATT on the KC-30A, increasing the level of responsibility she held as a crewmember as the years progressed. A highlight was becoming a cabin manager, thereby holding the responsibility to lead the entire CREWATT team:

I really enjoyed the moment I got to become a cabin manager ... as far as the back end of the jet's concerned, you're running the show. Everyone that is operating with you, is also operating for you, and that was another huge sense of achievement, because I really got to test my leadership skills in that area. There [are] plenty of times where stuff can go very right, or very wrong, and only you, as the cabin manager, can influence which way that goes ... That was when I started to get a taste for, 'Oh, maybe piloting

is where I move professionally in the future’, because I started to get a taste for not just the management side of things, but the greater level of responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

Once Ping had achieved a B-CAT CREWATT role, her main focus shifted to checking and assessing other members’ levels of competency; the hands-on leadership role she enjoyed as cabin manager was greatly reduced. This was a natural turning point for her to consider what was next in her career. She started exploring options to commission to pilot but did not meet the academic entry requirements for maths and physics to apply. So, her determination to achieve her goal of flying led to Ping taking on intensive courses in aeronautical mathematics and physics, which she funded herself and had to take time off work to complete:

And I hated every second of it, because I’m not a mathematically inclined person ... If something didn’t make sense, I had to force myself to understand it in a different way. I saw it as a test: if I can get through this, I should be able to do pilot training ... I would say it’s another time where that tenacity had to come in, and I had to really grind at getting through those courses.<sup>9</sup>

Ping put everything apart from work and study aside to achieve that goal. She believes that one of her strengths is her ability to accept discomfort as a temporary concept, and this has been a driver throughout her life. ‘It’s just a drop in the bucket. It sucks, and it’s uncomfortable ... but that’s at least something I’m good at.’<sup>10</sup>

After successfully completing her studies, Ping applied to commission to pilot: not for Air Force, but for Army. She said this was a deliberate decision; she had already decided her end state was to apply as a specialist services officer (SSO) to fly helicopters in the Army. Growing up, she had always had an interest in rotary wing aircraft, believing she had the coordination to fly a helicopter well. The role of a RAAF pilot held less interest for her:

I could have been one of these people that maybe makes it through all of that basic training, but then spend[s] your time hating your job, or not quite liking the airframe you’re posted to; so many things that could influence your mindset moving forwards, and your ability to perform at your best. I was like, maybe that’s not it. That’s why I was absolutely gunning for SSO [with] Army from day one.<sup>11</sup>

Ping was accepted to commission and spent 10 weeks at the Royal Military College Duntroon in Canberra, completing an abridged version of officer training, before starting Basic Flying Training at Tamworth, NSW. The course focused on the basic principles of flying in fixed-wing aircraft, then additional instrument skills, before Ping travelled to Oakey, Queensland, to commence training in the Kiowa helicopter. Of her experience at Tamworth, Ping reflected:

It’s a very humbling experience, being there. You really do learn a lot about your own strengths and weaknesses. I would say tenacity got me through again, and the ability to study something even if I’m not interested in it, to the required standard to pass a course. And then also I learned – I was already fairly certain of this anyway – [that] my ‘hands and feet ability’ to fly would far outweigh my academic abilities.<sup>12</sup>



Ping Van der Vlist during her first solo mission as the pilot of a Bell 206 Kiowa aircraft, 2016. She had transferred to the Australian Army in late 2014 (Ping Van der Vlist)

Ping's Kiowa training took up the better part of a year in 2016; when she was completing her second-last flight before graduation, she was involved in a response to a serious motor vehicle accident. It was in the evening, she was wearing night-vision goggles, and so far she'd been meeting the time milestones she needed to pass the navigation element of the task, when she experienced a flash of light. On closer inspection, Ping and her instructor confirmed the source of the light was a fire from a single-vehicle accident. The safest landing zone was quite a distance from the crash site, and Ping had to run up a hill, hurdling several cattle fences, to reach a man who was trapped in the car. After pulling the elderly driver from the car and assessing his condition, she had to race back to her instructor to provide an update, and grabbed some first-aid equipment so she could tend to the driver. 'I snapped straight back into first-aid mode, and all of that training and drilling as a CREWATT I think is what prepared me best mentally for that.'<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the driver passed away the following day from his extensive injuries, but not before his family had a chance to see him. Ping then had to refocus and repeat her second-to-last check ride, given the accident the night before had prevented her from finishing the task. Yet again, she drew on her determination and ability to compartmentalise, and she passed to go on to her final check ride.

Her family and an unusually large Air Force contingent of friends from 33SQN saw her achieve yet another significant milestone: receiving her second brevet, as an Army pilot. Ping then went on to the regiment which she had initially set out to join and was posted to the 6th Aviation Regiment in Sydney to convert to the Black Hawk helicopter.

However, she faced a significant setback towards the end of her conversion training when she was carrying out underwater escape training. Having caught the boot of her right foot underwater, Ping suffered a significant knee injury to a joint that had already been reconstructed. After another full reconstruction and a significant rehabilitation period, by which time the Black Hawk was being phased out of service, Ping found herself in a position where she had to re-evaluate her career options:

There was this consideration to maybe pick a career that doesn't involve lower limb coordination and excessive force or pressure needing to be put through either of your feet, especially the right one. So yes, I started to look at other options then. It was very much 'I don't want to relinquish an aviation career if I don't have to', so noting that [an] Army aviation career is quite limited anyway, I'm thinking, 'Hey, if I'm not going to be flying helicopters in the Army, I'd rather be going back to do something aviation-related in the RAAF.' And that's when the AMO [air mobility officer] opportunity popped up.<sup>14</sup>

At the time, the RAAF was developing a new officer aviation specialisation on the KC-30A to manage aircraft refuelling tasking, a role which had initially been carried out by enlisted personnel of various musterings:

The long-term reason for standing up AMO is leadership potential and the command pathway, and I was like, 'Hey, I'm interested in that. That sounds like a good fit for me.' It's back at a squadron that I love. It's on a jet that I know quite well. I missed the travel, and yes, all of a sudden, this opportunity popped up that I didn't think was going to happen at all.<sup>15</sup>

Fortunately, the RAAF was receptive to Ping transferring service and commencing training as an AMO. By July 2019, she was back in 'blue' to attend a six-month interim posting and, later, the full air refuelling operator conversion course. Within four months of training on a simulator, Ping was back in the KC-30A, refuelling other aircraft in the air, starting with experience on other large aircraft before transitioning to fast-jet refuelling:

You've got a C-17 [Globemaster] slowly creeping forward, and the sheer inertia of that airframe coming forward ... [if] they come too far forward, then you're in a dangerous spot, and [if] they're too far back, you can't reach them at all ... it's a very spicy and interesting flying environment to put yourself in.<sup>16</sup>

Ping experienced her third and final brevet ceremony to receive her AMO wings on 15 June 2020, after her completion of the air refuelling operator conversion course. So far, she has enjoyed the new challenge of additional leadership responsibility as an AMO, including being able to positively shape the culture of the specialisation:

Making the decision to have a commissioned aviator step into the role, I did feel a sense of responsibility, I would say, rather than a sense of obligation, to step us off on the right foot ... I did draw on a lot of CREWATT and rotary pilot experience to help make that work.<sup>17</sup>



Flight Lieutenant Ping Van der Vlist at the aircraft-refuelling console of a Royal Australian Air Force KC-30A multi-role tanker transport aircraft during an air-to-air refuelling mission (Ping Van der Vlist)

Ping's next career ambition is to gain experience in a non-aircrew-related role at Headquarters Joint Operations Command, to broaden her perspective within the Department of Defence. As is her approach, Ping believes this will set her up for success in going back to the air mobility environment. She believes the AMO specialisation will provide her with a pathway to achieve her leadership and career aspirations, potentially as the Commanding Officer of a squadron in the future. Ping's intrinsic drivers are evident when she sums up what she wants to achieve:

I'd say what motivates me is probably just wanting to do the best at what I'm currently doing. It doesn't matter what that is – whether it's a CREWATT, whether it's as a pilot or an AMO, whether it's in my personal life – whatever it is that happens to be the next step ... just approaching that as positively as possible with a plan in place. I can't say I've ever gone into something having not thought it through. I'm very much a planner.<sup>18</sup>

# Air Force women killed in service

Dozens of Australian Air Force servicewomen have lost their lives in service. These include 57 members of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) and five members of the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service. The majority of these women died in Australia during the Second World War, with their causes of death almost evenly divided between illnesses and accidents (including aircraft crashes).<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, the bodies of two WAAAF servicewomen who lost their lives in Australia have never been found. Corporal Ray Diggles died on 27 February 1942 when Empire Flying Boat A18-12 crashed in Cleveland Bay in Townsville, Queensland, with seven of the 11 personnel on board losing their lives. Aircraftwoman Margaret Carey died on 7 April 1945 when Avro Anson W2244 crashed into the sea between Williamtown and Evans Head in New South Wales, with all five personnel on board losing their lives. Because their bodies were never recovered, Corporal Diggles and Aircraftwoman Carey have never been buried.<sup>2</sup>

A small number of Australian Air Force servicewomen have lost their lives when serving overseas. Sister Marie Craig died on 18 September 1945 in an aircraft accident in Dutch New Guinea in the Netherlands East Indies, and Sister Verdun Sheah died on 15 November 1945 in an unspecified accident in New Guinea. Due to the Australian Government's repatriation policy of the time, these women were buried overseas.<sup>3</sup>



Sister Marie Craig attending to patients in a Royal Australian Air Force Dakota on what would be her second-last flight. The aircraft on which she was travelling disappeared over Dutch New Guinea in November 1945 (Department of Defence)

Until 1966, the policy of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC, known as the Imperial War Graves Commission until 1960) for all Australian service personnel who were killed overseas was to bury them where they died. The policy stated, ‘deceased Servicemen [and -women] should not be returned to their homeland countries for re-burial but should be buried in the countries in which they died’.<sup>4</sup>



Graves of Australian service personnel at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in Singapore, 2017 (Department of Defence)

The reason was to ensure that all who were killed were treated equally. At the time, the Australian Government did not finance the repatriation of bodies to Australia, and it recognised that not all families would be able to afford to bring home their dead. Therefore, it agreed with the CWGC that Australian service personnel killed overseas would be buried overseas in the ‘nearest practical CWGC cemetery’. Consequently, Sister Craig is buried in the Port Moresby (Bomana) War Cemetery in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Sister Sheah is buried in the Bitu Paka War Cemetery in East New Britain, PNG.<sup>5</sup>

During the Vietnam War, the Australian public put increased pressure on the Australian Government to repatriate those who were killed in service overseas. In 1966, the government changed its policy to repatriate the bodies of service personnel who were killed overseas during operations and exercises, for burial in Australia. Consequently, RAAF personnel killed while serving overseas are now repatriated to Australia as an acknowledgement of their sacrifice.<sup>6</sup>

Three RAAF health professionals were among nine ADF personnel tragically killed when a Royal Australian Navy Sea King helicopter crashed on the Indonesian island of Nias on 2 April

2005. Two of the three RAAF personnel were women; Flight Lieutenant Lyn Rowbottom and Sergeant Wendy Jones were part of a task force that was providing humanitarian assistance to the local population following devastating earthquakes in the region.

It is a reality that the women who serve in the RAAF today – just like the women who served in Australia's historical Air Force services – sign up knowing that, someday, they may not return home.



Aircraftwoman Breeanna Williams of Australia's Federation Guard during the memorial service for the 70th anniversary of the Battle of El Alamein, held at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in El Alamein, Egypt, 2012 (Department of Defence)



## THE CONTRIBUTORS

Air Commodore Kirrily Dearing AM

Squadron Leader Anna Williams PhD

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Flight Lieutenant Fiona Earl PhD

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### Back cover images:

Main: Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force representatives from the Australian Victory Contingent. Left to right: Sergeants MM McKinnon, OM Caldwell, E Galt and J McLean; Matron AV Wheatley; Squadron Officer DV Carter; and Sergeant LL Armstrong (Department of Defence)

Inset, top: Aircraftwomen Jessica Johnson and Jade Evans from No 37 Squadron in Sydney, New South Wales, Anzac Day 2009. Between them is Second World War veteran Meg Thomson from the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force, holding a photo taken on Anzac Day when she was 20 years old (Department of Defence)

Inset, middle: Sergeant Brodie Stewart during her loadmaster conversion course (Brodie Stewart)

Inset, bottom: Flying Officer Dani Jorgensen meeting local villagers while she was deployed to Papua New Guinea in support of Operation *Hannah*, 2017 (Dani Cornish)





## THE AUSTRALIAN AIR CAMPAIGN SERIES – 9

In the early years of the Second World War, Australian women began lobbying to contribute to the nation's wartime effort. From 1940, women were signing up to serve in the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service and, in 1941, an auxiliary arm of the Royal Australian Air Force was established, allowing women to join on a temporary basis to enhance the organisation's ability to fight.

In the decades since, Australian women have continued to contribute significantly to the operational capability of the world's second-oldest air force. They have done so regardless of the social norms of the time, or the perceived limitations of their abilities, always showing their detractors they are capable of great things.

*Changing Altitudes: Stories of Australian Air Force Women* includes the personal stories of some of these women, recounting, in their own words, their experiences while proudly wearing the uniform of the RAAF.

This volume of oral histories aims to capture the one capability the RAAF cannot operate without: its people.

