Were they feminine? An AWAS in uniform. ca.1944.
Source: Author's personal collection
THE AWAS

A social history of the Australian Women's Army Service
during the Second World War

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Rockhampton

1996
DEPARTMENT OF ELECTRONICS

DECLARATION

I declare that all material used in this thesis has not previously been submitted for any other degree and that the main text of the thesis is an original work. Also, I declare that to the best of my knowledge, all sources used have been acknowledged.

July, 1996
ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the argument that enlistment of women in the Australian Women’s Army Service during the Second World War impacted significantly on the social structure of the 1940s. It focuses on the question whether enlistment resulted in liberation for women from the restrictions of the social mores of the period, or whether it was merely an exchange of home discipline for military regimentation. By considering their work in units such as artillery batteries, it demonstrates that in the performance of the work allotted to them, members of the Australian Women’s Army Service played an important role in paving the way for acceptance of women into new and stimulating areas of employment which were not available to them pre-war.

The dissertation points to misconceptions based on an historicist perspective adopted by some modern feminist historians which misinterprets the social behaviour of servicewomen. It considers these misconceptions also arise from their failure to take Army organisation and control, and the range of circumstances in which women serving in the defence forces lived and worked, into account. Because their approach has perpetuated the view of servicewomen as immoral and unfeminine this work adopts a revisionist approach to the question of the immorality of servicewomen as presented by these recent historians.
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"Postmortems: the impact of war on Australian society"

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My thanks too go to Dr Jeffrey Grey who arranged access for me to theses concerning ex-service women held by the History Department of the Australian Defence Forces Academy, Canberra and for making facilities available to me for their perusal.

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I also wish to express my thanks to all the ex-members of the AWAS who participated in my oral history survey.

The assistance of the CQU library staff both in Rockhampton and Gladstone is also gratefully acknowledged. As too is the assistance of the library staffs of the University of Queensland, John Oxley Library, Victorian State Library, the ADFA, and the staffs of the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Archives and the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
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<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Australian Archives</td>
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<tr>
<td>AACC</td>
<td>Army Ambulance Car Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAG(WS)</td>
<td>Assistant Adjutant General (Women's Services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAMC</td>
<td>Australian Army Medical Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AANS</td>
<td>Australian Army Nursing Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>AASL</td>
<td>Anti Aircraft Search Lights</td>
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<tr>
<td>AckAck</td>
<td>Anti Aircraft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a/c</td>
<td>Aircraft</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADFA</td>
<td>Australian Defence Forces Academy</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIF</td>
<td>Australian Imperial Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMF</td>
<td>Australian Military Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMR&amp;O</td>
<td>Australian Military Rules and Orders</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMWAS</td>
<td>Australian Medical Women's Army Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWAS</td>
<td>Australian Women's Army Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWL</td>
<td>Absent Without Leave</td>
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<td>AWLA</td>
<td>Australian Women's Land Army</td>
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<td>AWM</td>
<td>Australian War Memorial</td>
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<td>AWS</td>
<td>Army Women's Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOR</td>
<td>Battery Operations Room</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bty</td>
<td>Battery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Commanding Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWAC</td>
<td>Canadian Women's Army Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>Defence Preparedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETA</td>
<td>Estimated Time of Arrival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETD</td>
<td>Estimated Time of Departure</td>
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<tr>
<td>GROs</td>
<td>General Routine Orders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HQ</td>
<td>Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOL</td>
<td>John Oxley Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHQ</td>
<td>Land Headquarters</td>
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<tr>
<td>L of C</td>
<td>Lines of Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Military Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCOs</td>
<td>Non-commissioned Officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ops</td>
<td>Operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ors</td>
<td>Other Ranks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTU</td>
<td>Operations Training Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAA</td>
<td>Royal Australian Artillery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAAF</td>
<td>Royal Australian Air Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rec.Hut</td>
<td>Recreation Hut</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLC</td>
<td>Searchlight Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Supervisory Personnel</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOET</td>
<td>Tests of Elementary Training</td>
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<td>VAD</td>
<td>Voluntary Aid Detachment</td>
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Abbreviations (Cont’d)

VSL Victorian State Library
WA Western Australia
WAAAF Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force
WANS Women’s Australian National Service
WE War Establishment
WEB Women’s Employment Board
Wing Cdr Wing Commander
WRANS Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service
WVNR Women’s Voluntary National Register
YMCA Young Men’s Christian Association
YWCA Young Women’s Christian Association
ZOR Zone Operations Room

RANKS

Pte Private
Gnr Gunner
Spr Sapper

L/Cpl Lance Corporal
L/Bdr Lance Bombadier
Cpl Corporal
Bdr Bombadier
Sgt Sergeant
S/Sgt Staff Sergeant
WO1 Warrant Officer First Class
WO2 Warrant Officer Second Class
Lt Lieutenant
Capt Captain
Maj Major
Brig Brigadier
Lt Col Lieutenant Colonel
Col Colonel
Maj Gen Major General
Gen General
Introduction

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND METHODOLOGY

The Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS), was founded in 1941 to augment the Armed Forces and release men from defence positions for overseas war service during World War Two. This dissertation will argue that enlistment of women in the AWAS during the 1939-1945 conflict impacted on the social structure of the time and accelerated change in the status of women within Australian society.

Despite the fact that a large body of writing exists concerning the Second World War very little recognition has been given to the role of women in the armed forces. Yet the enlistment of women in the defence forces, in other than a nursing capacity, and on such a large scale, was a turning point in the history of Australian women. This phenomenon has been all but ignored by historians. The limited literature, inclusive of general and specific histories which is concerned with, or makes reference to, the AWAS is both fragmented and repetitive\(^1\). Attempts to historically analyse the roles of women in the forces have mainly come from a feminist perspective. This has shown itself in some cases to be ill-informed and historicist in the sense that it has been considered from the social perspectives of the 1980s and 1990s. As commented by Jeffrey Grey

social history has been very much in the fashion in academic

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circles for several decades now [but] very little of it has spilled over into writing on the military.

Popular histories such as You'll be sorry by Ann Howard, Australian Women at war by Patsy Adam-Smith and Women in Khaki by Lorna Oliff have played a role in filling this gap. While documentation and bibliographic details in popular histories do not reach academic standards, this literature is a valuable resource as it is descriptive of the social conditions under which AWAS lived and worked during the 1940's. It also provides an insight into women's perceptions of the meanings of the social mores of the time. Eileen Tucker's book We answered the call: AWAS of Western Australia supports the oral history used in this work on the question of the cultural shock experienced by AWAS when they were first introduced to Army life.

A chapter by Saunders and Bolton "Girdled for war: Women's mobilisation in World War Two" points to the disparity between the volume of historiography which exists concerning men's role in wartime and that of women. This inequality is also addressed by Carmel Shute in Windschuttle, Women, Class and history. She demonstrates the progression of women's wartime activities from the prescribed women's role of knitting and "keeping the home fires burning" to working in occupations vital to the war effort. Shute also discusses women's patriotism and the expression of their desire to participate in

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3 Tucker, E., We answered the call: AWAS of Western Australia, Cloverdale, E., Tucker Publisher, 1991, p. 18.
the defence of their country by joining para-military forces and later by enlistment in the armed forces\(^6\). The reasons for Australian women’s enlistment in the services was not restricted to patriotism and this is addressed in Chapter One of this work.

Discussion concerning AWAS officers is taken up in popular history by Lorna Oliff and Patsy Adam-Smith. Adam-Smith gives a good profile of Lt. Col. Sybil Irving and discusses attitudes of other AWAS officers\(^7\) whereas Oliff takes a celebratory approach\(^8\). A more down to earth look at the role of officers surfaces in the oral history survey. AWAS officers often performed duties which included the administration of Army discipline. This relates to the question of regimentation, which was an important part of Army organisation, and it too is considered in Chapter One of this dissertation. The Chapter also demonstrates that regimentation was a key factor in all aspects of the life of AWAS during the period of their enlistment. This was made evident in documentary sources located at the Australian Archives and the Australian War Museum\(^9\).

Arising from the question of regimentation is the degree to which this induced a dependency on the state by servicewomen. This matter has been explored by Darian-Smith. She maintains that regimentation undermined women’s

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\(^6\) Women’s mobilisations are also the topic of a journal article by Helen Taylor. Taylor’s article is concerned with ways in which woman-power was used in Queensland. “‘Total was is woman’s war... All can serve’: War mobilisation - a matter of geography” in Queensland Geography Journal, Vol.3, 4th series, 1988, pp.71-88.


\(^9\) AAMF70, File No.139/1/2568, AAMF508/1, File No.339/701/275. AWM, 709/34/2, GRO 169, 88/1/1, 4.2, AWM, 88/1/1, 10, AWM, 88/1/1, 18.
independence and encouraged a general sense of helplessness\(^\text{10}\). However in an oral history interview the interviewees endorsed the opinion of one ex-AWAS who stated that servicewomen became independent adults during their time in the Forces\(^\text{11}\). This demonstrates the historicist nature of some conclusions reached by recent historians which this dissertation maintains results in misconceptions.

This historicist viewpoint is apparent to a much greater degree in the introduction and the chapter by Ford in \textit{Gender and War} edited by Damousi and Lake. Much of the argument in this book is valid, but on the issues of morality and femininity, discussion appears to be based on the malicious gossip about service-women which existed during the Second World War. Most Australian historians seem to infer that immorality consistent with these rumours was unique to Australia but as pointed out by Thomson the same rumours were prevalent in Britain and the United States of America\(^\text{12}\) while Forstell refers in her doctoral thesis to the circulation of the same insubstantial stories in Canada\(^\text{13}\). Consideration of these issues by Australian historians is also discussed from the point of view of the 1990s, and in terms which were unknown in the 1940s. These aspects of the social history of the AWAS are considered in Chapters Two and Three. Replies of respondents to the written

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Darian-Smith, K., "War stories: Remembering the Australian home front during the Second World War" in Darian-Smith, K., & Hamilton, P.,(Eds), \textit{Memory and history in twentieth-century Australia}, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.145.
\item Group interview with ex-AWAS conducted on 10 July 1995, at Birrong, NSW, hereafter referred to as Interview 10 July 1994.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
questionnaire and views of interviewees in the oral history survey conducted for this dissertation contrast markedly with the views of academic historians.

Morality is also the subject of a journal article by Gail Reekie. This article voices the concern of women in Perth about women both within and outside of the armed forces\textsuperscript{14}. Concern arose when there was an apparent lack of the implementation of the accepted moral codes of the time. The article highlights the ideological inconsistencies of wartime, when women were called on to accept new responsibilities under the pressures and sense of urgency created by the conditions of total war, and yet were still expected to abide by pre-war social codes. Also pertinent to the issue of morality and the way war altered social behaviour is the analysis of wartime memories and culture written by Darian-Smith. She draws attention to the perception of increased social, economic, and sexual freedom during this period in Australia's history as opposed to extensive and comprehensive state controls over all aspects of life\textsuperscript{15}.

The condemnation of servicewomen on the grounds of promiscuous behaviour in accordance with the social codes of the time, has assumed an undue importance in the historiography. This emphasis is quite out of proportion to the significance of their role during a time of national emergency. The issue has been raised by most academic historians who have referred to the role of servicewomen in wartime, while quite often the value of their service at the time and its consequences for women in later decades of the twentieth century have been ignored. However, Joyce Thomson considers assumptions of the immoral behaviour of servicewomen from another angle. She looks at the evidence


\textsuperscript{15} Darian-Smith, K., op. cit. p.
available on pregnancy rates for both AWAS and WAAAF and concludes that a
definitive statement cannot be made on the data available\textsuperscript{16}. However the
conclusions arrived at in Chapter Two of this dissertation based on the available
evidence do not indicate widespread promiscuity among servicewomen. One
exception to acceptance of the wartime myth of Australian women’s low
morality is to be found in a journal article by Connors and Taylor in which these
historians point to oral evidence which shows that Australian women were
committed to the social mores of the time\textsuperscript{17}. Chapter Two of this dissertation
examines the myth and the reality of the morality of members of the AWAS from
the perspective of both the secondary sources and primary source documents and
oral evidence.

Chapter Three will go on to address questions raised by academic historians
regarding femininity and lesbianism among servicewomen. Finch looks at
consumerism in gender relationships and while much of her argument is valid
she does not take into account that the wants of women in the services were
minimal and they had little need for consumer products\textsuperscript{18}. Lake too does not take
this into account\textsuperscript{19}. Lake asserts that advertisements for cosmetics reaffirmed
gender difference despite the fact that women were doing men’s work. She also
affirms that advertisements were designed so as to make it appear that the use of
advertised products would make women sexually attractive\textsuperscript{20}.

\textsuperscript{16} Thomson, J., op. cit., pp.184-192.
\textsuperscript{17} Connors, L., & Taylor, H., “The testing of the family and gender mythology of World War
\textsuperscript{18} Finch, L., “Consuming passions: Romance and consumerism during World War II” in
Damousi, J., & Lake, M., Eds., \textit{Gender and war}, Melbourne, Press Syndicate of the
\textsuperscript{19} Lake, M., “Female desires: the meaning of World War II” in \textit{Australian Historical Studies},
cit.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p.268.
Joan Davis approaches the question of the femininity of AWAS by reviewing articles in the Army issue journal *Sale*[^1]. It is interesting to note that Davis comments that the femininity of the AWAS was a “current civilian controversy” while a respondent to the questionnaire for this dissertation commented, “I suspect femininity was a journalistic construct”. It was obvious throughout the oral history survey that views expressed about the femininity of AWAS contrasted sharply with the views of modern historians.

Ford’s chapter in *Gender and war* in which she expresses her views on the prevalence of lesbianism among servicewomen is both speculative and lacking in substantial evidence[^2]. Chapter Three of this work produces specific oral evidence in contradiction of Ford’s assertions that lesbianism was widespread. It also points to weaknesses in her arguments and in the insufficiency of her evidence.

It has been argued that post-war there was a strong affirmation of the feminine image[^3]. The fact is that women in the services in the 1940s never lost their femininity. Those women surveyed strongly denied that they had adopted masculine traits during their time of service in the Army. The greatest majority of all AWAS opted for the role of wife and mother after the war. However as discussed in the oral survey this was not seen as returning to a male defined role. The main feature affecting their decision was a certain amount of war weariness and the desire to “get back to normal”. After their families reached adulthood

the self-confidence and wider interests many women had achieved as a result of
their wartime experiences in the AWAS induced many to rejoin the workforce.
This leads to the final chapter of the dissertation which is concerned with ways
in which AWAS crossed the line of demarcation between what, prior to World
War Two, were defined as women's roles and men's roles in Australian society.

This Chapter looks at the differences between conditions of employment of
women in industry and the work of the AWAS in the military forces. The
conditions of work in the Australian Women's Land Army as reported by
Beverage24 is also briefly discussed and compared with that of the AWAS. Oral
history is used extensively in this chapter and use is made of popular history.
The final chapter of Noel Hill's book concerning the operation of searchlight
batteries by AWAS provides information authenticated by the oral history of the
work of AWAS of the searchlight station at Fuller's Bridge, NSW25. Other
primary sources such as typescripts compiled by ex-members of the AWAS26
were also used.

Although emphasis has been placed on the various types of work undertaken
by AWAS, and the conditions under which it was performed, Chapter Four
points out that this did not mean that servicewomen were consequently placed on
an equal footing with men. As Richard White has demonstrated in his chapter in
War and Australian society in McKernan and Browne, women were relegated

24 Bevage, M., "Women's experiences in North Queensland during World War II" in Women
25 Hill, N., Expose: A history of searchlights in WWII, Brisbane, Boolarong Publications,
1993, pp. 137-139.
26 Goodtate, T., Undated typescript, Copy in author's private collection.
Patterson, J., An ambulance driver's war, Copy in author's private collection.
to supportive roles and this made certain that male perceptions of their own superiority in the armed forces was vindicated\textsuperscript{27}.

To complement the secondary source material wide use is made of primary sources such as records held at the Australian Archives and Australian War Memorial. These and other documentary sources are used in conjunction with oral history interviews with ex-servicewomen who served in Anti Aircraft Searchlight Batteries and on Anti Aircraft Gun Sites. Use is also made of the responses to a written questionnaire\textsuperscript{28} completed by those interviewed and other women who served in these RAA units. It has been found necessary in this dissertation to revise parts of the secondary source material and both documentary and oral evidence have been used for this purpose.

The decision to use oral history was made as it is believed that the historiography does not altogether impartially represent the conditions which existed for women serving in the AWAS during the Second World War. It was not possible to interview large numbers of ex-servicewomen so it was decided to request women to come forward who were prepared to complete a written questionnaire. One group of women then volunteered to take part in a group interview in Melbourne and others participated in another group interview in Sydney. In addition three other women took part in single person interviews. A questionnaire was used because it was deemed necessary to get answers to specific questions rather than memories of random events. It was found that the documentary evidence supported the oral history. As a result the assertions made in this work are based on primary source material.

\textsuperscript{27} White, E., "Australia: Two centuries of War and Peace" in McKernan, M., & Browne, M., (Eds), War and Australian society, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1988, p.408.

\textsuperscript{28} See Appendix B.
Many of the women who wore uniform during the Second World War still take pride in the part they played in the war effort and the friendships they formed then are still an important part of their lives. It has been suggested by L.L. Robson that an extensive analysis of the roles of all women in the armed forces is needed\(^\text{29}\). Joyce Thomson's book *The WAAF in wartime Australia* has fulfilled this need as far as the WAAAF is concerned. This dissertation only goes part of the way in fulfilling the same need in regard to the AWAS.