

WRANS-RAN Womens Association WA



Printed courtesy David Scaife MLA
Member for Cockburn

Hello Members of the Association.

I received the following wonderful article from Graham and gladly share it with you all. Due to the length, It has its own issue of our Newsletter.

THE WOMEN'S ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVAL SERVICE 1941-47

By Graham Caldwell

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'What? Women in the Royal Australian Navy!' (Roger Gittus cartoon 1945)

'What! Women in the Royal Australian Navy', so begins the first chapter of *WRANS* published by the Naval Historical Society of Australia, which continues: 'if women wanted to dress up and do something to help the war effort, they could work in a canteen or a factory, or stay in a women's proper place: the home, or so thought male officialdom: fortunately many women realised that sooner or later every able-bodied person would be needed if Australia was to keep her place in the sun'. At the outbreak of war, the services realised that they were desperately short of wireless telegraphists: cue 50-year-old Florence Violet McKenzie, affectionately known as Mrs. Mac, who created the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps (WESC) in 1939 to train women in telegraphy to free up men for war service.



L-R: First Officer (later Chief Officer) Sheila McClellans OBE, Director WRANS, at her desk in 1944 and Florence Violet McKenzie, Director, Woman's Emergency Signalling Corps in 1939

In 1940 McKenzie wrote to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Minister, Billy Hughes: 'I would like to offer the services of 120 members of our Signalling Corps as telegraphists, but if not acceptable, then as instructors to men ratings'. Dismissed by the minister, Commander Jack Newman RAN, Director of Signals and Communication, visited WESC to test Mrs. Mac's trainees. Finding they were highly proficient, he recommended the navy admit them. Hughes continued with

his prejudiced stance until McKenzie threatened to take her offer to the Royal Australian Air Force instead. The urgent need for trained telegraphists prevailed and on the 21 April 1941, Hughes finally authorised the entry of the women to work within the RAN on condition that no publicity be accorded to break with its male tradition! However, due to the RAN's reluctance to accept women, the authorities prevaricated, resulting in the women not being officially sworn-in as enlisted personnel until 1 October 1942, which date is regarded as the official formation of the WRANS, when the telephonists discarded their WESC forest green uniforms for WRANS navy blue. The Cinderella service

The WRANS was the smallest of the three women's services, with 124 officers and 2,338 ratings at its peak in March 1944, but was nevertheless 10% of the RAN. With over 1,000 WRANS on the books by the end of 1942, it's difficult to understand why no consideration was given to provide for WRAN commissioned officers, the organisation's supervision resting with the Director of Naval Reserves and Mobilisation, a male commodore; nor was a patron of influence appointed as honorary commandant, as was the custom with the other two services.



Left: The first eight Wran Telephonists arriving at HMAS *Harman*, February 1942.

Right: HMAS *Harman* Canberra 1941: Wrans Frances Provan (right) and Heather Dunshea, proudly wear their new Telegraphist rate badges

In 1942, King's Regulations provided no guidance on how to deal with females. Most of the recruits were aged between 18 and 23, never having lived away from home before. In the tricky situation during the earliest Wran medical examinations, a male sick berth attendant questioned: "can you pee into this bottle?" whilst being met with blank stares as he handed out pear-shaped receptacles and turned his back! On another occasion, the obligatory chest expansion measurement, which required girls to breathe in deeply, caused a stir when the standard tape measure ran out on a well-endowed Wran. Finally, on 18 January 1943, the decision was taken to open the first female naval officer's course at HMAS *Cerberus* in Flinders Victoria, followed by 16 further courses completed by September 1945. On the initial course was civilian barrister Shelia McClemons, who enlisted a month earlier as a Wran rating, but whose brilliance and organising skills were immediately recognised. Enjoying rapid promotion, she was appointed Director WRANS in August 1944 in the rank of First Officer (later Chief Officer) but still one rank lower than her woman counterparts in the army and air force. Her services to the Woman's Royal Australian Naval Service was recognised in 1951 with the Order of the British Empire (OBE).



Left: 1943 recruitment poster, the only one to feature a Wran at far left.

Right: Women wishing to sign up as Wrans at the naval recruiting depot in Collins Street Melbourne. Being the smallest of the three services, demand to enlist always exceeded capacity

With so many women wishing to enlist, but so few places, the need to advertise was unnecessary: for example, the WRANS did not publish a recruiting poster, although an image of a Wran was tacked onto the end of a line of six uniformed women in a 1943 poster 'Join Us in a Victory Job'. Janet Allport remembers that she selected the navy in preference to the woman's army or air force out of vanity: 'the navy was the Senior Service; I liked the uniform and the thought working near the sea would provide opportunities to surf when off duty: how wrong I was! We were not allowed to serve afloat or overseas; even employment as small boat crews was forbidden'. By August 1942, a minority of farsighted male officers began to see that the benefit of employing women would be to release men for sea service, for example, the Commodore Superintendent of Training at HMAS *Cerberus* said that 400 qualified Wran's could usefully be absorbed at the depot.



Left: The WRANS navy blue winter uniform and khaki tropical uniform for summer.
Right: WRANS WWII hat badges: Wran and Leading Wran; Commissioned Officer and Wran Petty Officer

Not just telegraphists

A breakthrough occurred in July 1942, when the RAN allowed Wrans to be employed as car drivers, writers, supply ratings and 'Gunnery Girls' (rifle-range wardens). By 1944 there were also coders, writers (typists and clerks) transport drivers, sick berth attendants, dental mechanics, cooks, mess stewards, supply assistants, teleprinter operators. Wran's also worked on degaussing ranges assessing and neutralising the magnetic attraction of steel-hulled vessels. Visual signalling employed flags (semaphore) and Aldis lamps (Morse). Gwenda Cornwallis remembers parties on board merchant ships, after which flirtations continued by signal lamp; where one Wran married a liberty ship signalman as a result! The work of Wran officers fell into two groups. The first were responsible for discipline, administration and welfare, while the second group were attached to naval staff officers in Australian ports and assumed responsibility for much of the cypher and confidential work.



L-R: Wrans J. Barnes (left) and D. Eaton under training in the use of signal flag semaphore.
Wran F. Walker sends messages by Aldis lamp at HMAS *Torrens* 1943. Publicity photograph used to explain that any woman can master difficult jobs with the correct training if they join the WRANS

YZ&C signals intelligence

As early as 1940 the Americans had broken the Japanese diplomatic codes *Red* and *Purple*. HMAS *Lonsdale's* satellite centre in Moorabbin (a S.E. outer suburb of Melbourne) was where a secret Y-Service listening station was manned by 35 USN male Cryptographers and 24 Wran Y-Service Telegraphists. Wran Robin Levett worked alongside the Americans: "there was a certain innocence about young girls in those days and although the men were given to wolf whistles and pats on the behind for a job well done, no-one ever considered that as sexual harassment as they would today; in fact, because there was no messing allowance for the Wran's, the Yanks split their own 18/- per day allowance with their female shipmates".



Another party of recently qualified Wran Telephonist's arrive at Y-Section Branch, HMAS *Harman*, 1942.
Right: Also at *Harman* in the ACT 1941, Wrans work in one of the wireless telegraphy rooms

Janet Allport worked in Y-Service at HMAS *Harman* near Canberra, intercepting Japanese JN25 naval Morse code messages, which the USN had broken in May 1942: "The *Katakana* syllabary was unbelievably complex", explains Janet, "but we learned to recognise the call-signs of every enemy warship!" Encryptions of Japanese Top Secret Ultra were handled by FRUmel (Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne) a joint USN/RAN operation run by the Directorate of Naval Communications. The participation of Wran's in the encryption of this vital information was kept secret until 1985. Florence Hellier, a Wran Writer with a good mathematical ability, worked as one of six Wran Z-Operators at *Harman*, who were trained in Z-Radio Finger Printing, a new technology using radio oscilloscopes. Each enemy radio transmitter signal has a unique tone. High speed photography was used with the oscilloscope to convert the audible signal into a visual one on film. This meant that whenever Japanese submarines and naval bases changed their call-signs, they could still be recognised. Judith Lusby enlisted as a Wran Writer on 30 November 1942, plotting the movements of Japanese submarines. In 2001, Judith gave an account of her service: 'At *Harman* there was a gentleman from Mi5 who came from London to instruct us. He told us never to explain our work to a living soul, otherwise we'd be shot! And I remember him saying in his English voice: "Rather messy but still, I've shot so many in my time!" 'We used a method of identifying enemy ships, airplanes, and submarines from the way each operator sent Morse-code. As a petty officer I was in charge of this group working in a little shed with soldiers marching around for our security. I remember seeing the bayonets pass by the window, and we had to have a password to get through the main gate'.



L-R: Receiving drill instruction at HMAS *Harman*.

Wran PO Judith Follett and her husband. Judith was trained by British Mi5 in naval intelligence work on how to recognise Japanese Morse code signatures. Instruction in visual signalling, aided by a model flag mast



Left: Australian Third Officer Joan Cowie (standing) is wearing the wide-brimmed felt hat with the same gold wreath officer cap badge that is issued to male RAN officers (artist Henry Hanke). Right: Third Officer Ruby Boye BEM, wearing the prescribed summer khaki uniform. Boye was the only WWII woman Coastwatcher

By contrast, the Coast Watch Organisation (Section C, Allied Intelligence Bureau) played a significant role in the South West Pacific theatre using Allied and civilian operatives stationed on remote Pacific islands to observe enemy movements, particularly Japanese shipping, Coastwatcher, Third Officer Ruby Boye BEM, monitored enemy activity at an extremely remote location on the island of Vanikoro in the Solomon Archipelago. Aside from the ever-

present threat of capture or death at the hands of the Japanese, she faced a daily struggle to survive with infrequent supply drops, yet she remained at her island post for the entire four-year Pacific War. Her honorary WRANS commission provided legal protection under the Geneva Conventions, although it was far from certain that the Japanese would honour it. She was Australia's only female Coastwatcher.



Left: Wran Cooks Fay Gaskett and Jean Hayton at HMAS *Cerberus* Naval Training Depot in Victoria.



Right: Wrans queue for their midday meal at HMAS *Harman* Naval Wireless Station

VJ-Day: 15 August 1945

Shortly after the war, Admiral Sir Bruce Frazer, Commander-in-Chief, British Pacific Fleet, sent the following signal to HMAS *Harman*: 'The efficiency of the Harman W/T has greatly assisted the BPF in the handling of a large amount of signal traffic. In particular I would like to thank all those Wran's who will shortly be leaving the Australian naval service. Goodbye and good luck to you all'. The WRANS was disbanded in 1947. When reconstituted in 1951, war-time service was not recognised towards to pay or promotion and married women could not serve. Finally in 1959, everything changed when the WRANS achieved permanent status as part of the Royal Australian Navy.



Wrans welcoming home the men of the 6th Australian Division from New Guinea, November 1945

A park in Campbell, ACT, will be named after the woman fondly known as 'Mrs Mac' this month to recognise her dedication to service including the creation of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS). The park will be behind the Campbell shops between White Crescent and Blamey Place.

Violet McKenzie was a driving force behind the early innovative work in signals, wireless and radio, even opening the country's first wireless spares shop – the Dick Smith of the time. Head of Navy History and Heritage Miesje de Vogel said without Mrs McKenzie's work, Australia wouldn't have been prepared from a signals perspective for WW2.

"Without starting her school for Women's Emergency Signalling Corps (WESC) before the war, Australia would never have had enough trained Morse code operators," Ms de Vogel said.

"At the time, the services did not intend to employ women at all in technical work – until Mrs Mac successfully petitioned Navy to establish the WRANS. She led the way in getting people trained, with her graduates finishing quicker, and at better speeds than those being trained by the Army."

The introduction of the WRANS was achieved by McKenzie energetically campaigning to have some of her female trainees accepted into the Air Force and Navy as telegraphists. She encountered a great deal of official resistance. In 1940 she wrote to the Minister of the Navy, former Prime Minister WM (Billy) Hughes, saying "I would like to offer the services of our Signalling Corps, if not acceptable as telegraphists, then at least as instructors."

Despite her suggestion being dismissed, in early January 1941, Commander Newman, the Navy's Director of Signals and Communications, visited the WESC headquarters on Clarence Street to test McKenzie's trainees. Finding they were highly proficient; he recommended the Navy admit them. Hughes still took some convincing, but sometime later, McKenzie and six trainees were provided third-class train tickets to Melbourne to meet with the Naval Board for testing.

Although McKenzie threatened to take her offer to the Air Force instead, the urgent need for trained telegraphists prevailed, and on 21 April a Navy Office letter authorised the entry of women into the Navy. This was the beginning of the WRANS. The Minister's condition was that "no publicity...be accorded this break with tradition".

McKenzie accompanied 14 of her WESC trainees (twelve telegraphists and two domestic helpers). for their medical tests on 25 April and arrived at HMAS Harman on 28 April 1941. The women were dressed in their green WESC uniform which had been designed by McKenzie herself– it was several months before a female Navy uniform was ready. Francis Proven became WRANS number 1. From this initial intake of 14, the WRANS ranks expanded to some 2,600 by the end of the war, representing about 10 per cent of the entire Royal Australian Naval force at the time.

In May 1941, the Air Force appointed McKenzie as an honorary flight officer of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force, so she could legitimately instruct Air Force personnel. This was the only official recognition McKenzie received during the war for her efforts. The school provided more than 2000 women to the WRANS and Women's Auxiliary Air Force and an additional 12,000 men from Navy, Army and Air Force with the ability to transmit Morse code. This included American forces who were under-trained on arrival.

Violet McKenzie helped with rehabilitation after the war, keeping her school open for as long as there was a need for instruction in wireless signalling. In the post-war years, she trained men from the merchant navy, pilots in commercial aviation, and others needing the trade qualification known as a "signaller's ticket". In 1948, a reporter from Sky Script visited the school and described the scene, and diversity of the students. In 1950, she was awarded an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for 'voluntary service to the WESC'.

Mrs McKenzie died at Greenwich, in northern Sydney, on May 23, 1982. In late 2022, the local community was encouraged to nominate names for an existing park area in Campbell. The theme agreed on by the ACT government was 'female Defence personnel'. From 21 candidate submissions, although only an honorary WRANS, Mrs McKenzie appeared several times and the ACT Place Naming Committee selected her name.

ACT ex WRANS at the dedication of Violet McKenzie Park.

