Margaret Leishman Coten

The W.A.A.A.F.

I was born in 1923 and brought up on a mixed farm at Highbury, south of Narrogin with my parents and two older brothers. Farming was hard physical work in those days. Horses were the only means of power and transport. Milking cows, making butter, looking after stock and poultry as well as carting water, wood and chopping it, were all tasks which had to be carried out as well as the major work needed to grow grain and raise sheep.

We had a telephone but it was the mid thirties before we got a radio, a bulky Breville, operated by a battery. We sat around listening to the news and the Lux Radio theatre every Saturday night. The ABC children's program the Argonauts brought me great joy each weekday afternoon.

We got a Ford car in the mid-thirties too. It made the twelve-mile journey to Narrogin, which we had previously done by horse and sulky much quicker. When war broke out in 1939 petrol (as well as butter, sugar, tea and tobacco) was rationed. My father made a gas producer, a drum filled with burning coal, which he fixed on the back of the car to power it. We had to be careful that sparks did not fly out as we drove along and set fire to dry grass.

My father joined the local Home Guard and trained at the weekend with other farmers in the district. My mother sent food parcels to relatives and friends in the United Kingdom, some of which reached their destination, some did not. Although we had very little money we were better off than most people as we produced a lot of our own food and sold eggs and butter to pay for our other requirements.

My childhood was very free and there was a creek nearby and any number of animals to play with. I rode a pony to the one teacher school in Highbury but was bullied a lot for the first few years so wagged it as much as I could.

In 1938 my mother was left some money and could afford to send me to Albany High School where I took my leaving in 1941. It was arranged that I should train as a nurse but against my mother's wishes joined the W.A.A.A.F. to become a radio location or radar as it became known, operator instead. Although it was accepted that we should support England in the war against Hitler it was no patriotic zeal which fired my decision to join up but the fact that I had seen a small news item in the paper calling for girls of integrity and intelligence to train in secret radio location work. It sounded exciting.

The interviewing officer obviously doubted my intelligence when I failed all the maths questions he asked me but I told him I could skin a sheep and drive an eight horse team (with certain poetic license) as well as make bread if I had to which must have convinced him I was worth a chance because I was accepted.

There were seven other aspiring radar trainees, as we were called later, on the rookies course at Karrinyup, beginning on 21st September 1942, a beautiful spring day. Karrinyup was surrounded by bush then.

When we finished the course we were sent to Radio School No. 1 at Richmond in N.S.W., very exciting as only one of us had been out of W.A. We travelled over in a troop train with mainly Army personnel. We had two first class compartments and although we had to sleep head to toe in the bunks we were much better off than the men, crowded in dogs boxes.

The logistics of moving so many troops across the continent must have been enormous. A lot of the stock was old and the engines kept breaking down. All water had to be carted from Kalgoorlie or S.A. and as it was a single line it meant often waiting on a loop line for westbound trains to pass us.

We stopped for meals, trestles were set up beside the train and the cooks ladled food onto our tin plates as we all filed past. Rabbits, dead from the myxomatosis virus lay everywhere and the smell and the flies were overwhelming. We had to clear a piece of ground dotted with Spinifex and rocks to sit and eat, so mealtimes were hardly a gourmet's delight. We washed our messing gear in a large tub of water, which became greyer and greasier as the 200 or so of us dipped our utensils into it.

In all, the trip to Richmond took eight days. We arrived on a Saturday afternoon when the station was on stand down and were left standing in a squad outside the orderly room for twenty minutes. It was only when one of the girls fainted in the heat that someone came, showed us our quarters and gave us palliasse covers to fill with straw in a shed some distance away.

We were always rushing at Richmond. We had a lot of duties to do before we went on parade at 7am every morning. The ablution blocks had to be cleaned and the long central passages and our bedroom floors had to be polished on our hands and knees, our beds made according to regulations and we had to present ourselves looking immaculate. If we were lucky we had breakfast.

Discipline was very strict at Richmond and the parades large and formal. As well as No. 1 Radio School to which we were attached there was a Flying Training School and for the first ten days an R.A.F. Spitfire Squadron awaiting posting. We saw them fly out and months later heard the Japanese had wiped them out up North.

There were about forty eastern states girls on the course with us. We had lectures every day, learning about radar and how to operate the gear. The course took four weeks but we needed three months practical operating on a station before qualifying fully.

We had leave over Christmas and New Year and went to Sydney together. Sydney people were very friendly, asking us home for meals or to stay on leave. We had a wonderful time seeing the sights, visiting Taronga Park, catching ferries on the Harbour and going to the races. Service people were given free entry everywhere.

Unfortunately I developed mumps half way through the course and had to go into the sickbay while my friends finished the course and were posted back to radar stations in W. A. When I recovered I had to join the next group.

Most of the radar gear came from England at that stage and as a lot had been lost at sea our group was told there were no vacancies for us and we may have to re-muster. None of us were very happy and in the meantime we had to wait.

At very short notice I was sent to the Orderly Room at Laverton RAAF station and after a few days was told to pack and go to work at the Airmen's Records in Prahran. There were six of us redundant radar operators based on the fourth floor of a draughty old warehouse. We were told we had been especially selected to set up a system for the orderly discharge of airmen when the war was over.

We had to go through all the records and allocate points to each man, for marriage, number of children and overseas service. As the squadrons moved around so much we had to work out where each one was stationed while the airman was in it. By the end of the six weeks we could give the exact movements of every squadron in the RAAF verbatim.

A sergeant who had just returned from two and a half years service in islands was in charge of us. He was skeletally thin and a bright yellow from Atebrin, supposedly and anti-malarial treatment. It had not been very effective as he continued getting high fevers and the shakes.

After rechecking everything twice the whole system was changed and we lost enthusiasm for the task. We felt we had been conned and wrote a letter to the C.O. demanding postings to radar stations. Only the almost tearful pleadings of the sergeant of whom we had all become quite fond of stopped us, plus the fact that he said if more than one person signed the letter we could be court martialled. None of us wanted to go that far so we sank back in sullen gloom. The saving grace for me was being billeted in a beautiful old home in Toorah Road and meeting a girl from Sydney who became a close friend.

The RAAF had taken over four of these mansions. We were the first two in but as more and more WAAAF arrived we, with the blessing of the WAAAF sergeant in charge, moved to the next house. We kept moving ahead of the rush until we ran out of houses and looked for an alternative haven. We found a broken down glass house come potting shed at the bottom of the large overgrown garden and surreptitiously moved our beds and gear in to set up house.

There was no electricity and we had to buy candles so we could read in bed but it was peaceful, if rather chilly at times. We still had to go up to the house to the bathroom and for meals but no-one ever missed us or wondered what we were doing.

The meals were not very good and the porridge for breakfast was always burnt so one morning I rather rashly complained when the duty officer came round. The messing staff soon made it clear that I had made a mistake and that I was persona non grata in the mess. It was so unpleasant I stopped going to meals.

My loyal friend supported me but as she got only 3/4 and I, as a trainee, 2/10, we could not go out for meals so we turned to crime. We discovered the food store window was never locked so we began regular late night raids. She would stand by the window with a kitbag while I climbed in, scooping up meat, cheese, milk, fruit and

anything else edible. We were always paralytic with giggles, partly from hunger and cold but also nerves. We lived like that for three months and to our knowledge, no-one ever queried the missing food.

Although we were good friends at work we were bored stiff and only our regard for our sergeant kept us from complaining too much. One of our number, a girl whose husband was a prisoner of war in Germany and who was particularly fed up suggested we try the cold stare treatment with the C.O whenever he came on the floor. We were ideally placed by the lift and the poor man met our strong fixed stares every time he stepped out of it. It worked and we heard on our well established grapevine that he stormed down to the posting officer and said "Get rid of those six radar trainees on the fourth floor. Send them anywhere in Australia but get them out of here." Joyfully three of us headed for Geraldton where I had a great reunion with my friends.

47 Radar or Group 447 as it was designated for security reasons was spread around in several houses on the southern edge of town. Apart from the "doover" or Operations Room, which had a big aerial like a bedstead swinging round on top of it, no-one would know it was a RAAF establishment.

There was a Flying Training Station seven miles east of Geraldton but the only connection we had with "the drome" was the rare occasions when some of us went out there in the back of the tender over the gravel road to a film.

Army troops were stationed along the coast, some of whom we met at the dances held regularly at the town Yacht Club. An American Catalina base near the town did regular daily sea patrols.

Most of the women and children in Geraldton had been evacuated inland or down south.

The technical staff were divided into crews of two or three operators and a mechanic in each. We worked six-hour shifts around the clock, the operators spending half an hour at a time on the cathode ray tube, watching for blips reflected back from the radio waves sent out by the aerial whenever they hit an object. These were converted to a grid map reference, in turn passed on to filter room in Perth. Once a day we practised coded messages relayed to the telegraphist.

Crews approaching the doover at night were challenged by the duty guard and had to give the password for the day before being admitted. We were all sworn to secrecy and never discussed our work with non-technical staff, or outside the doover for that matter. The work was exciting and we were all very keen.

Routinely we plotted the trainees Ansons flying from the drome like so many little orange insects, the regular Catalina patrols, manned by Americans at Geraldton and the mail runs from Perth, north and back. Twice a week a Catalina did a mail run from the base at Crawley Bay to Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and back. They were good to plot as they flew on a cross bearing.

Due to the temperature inversion common off that part of the coast and when our mechanics switched the 200 time base to 400 miles and beyond we sometimes

traced outgoing A.C great distances. On one epic occasion taking the plane to 1,111 miles before losing the bleep.

A number of us, myself included, had our 21st birthdays at the unit. We danced in the recreation hut to music played on a wind-up gramophone, “Buttermilk Sky”, “I Lost My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen”, “Tumbling Tumbleweed” and “The Anniversary Waltz” were great favourites.

When we were not working we were free to come and go as we pleased, trudging through bush to the back beach to lie on the hot sand, improving our ever deepening tans and laying on a legacy of skin cancers in our old age.

Tragically the mechanic on our crew was swept out from the beach by an undertow and drowned. He came from Sydney, a laughing red headed boy, he now lies in the little military cemetery in Geraldton beside the air crew of a plane that crashed near Northampton one night. I was operating when the blip simply disappeared and we knew they were gone.

Although we were young and light hearted there was sadness too. All of us had friends or relatives who had died in combat, been taken prisoner or posted missing. Some, my younger brother included, were serving in theatres of war, often out of communication.

Without radios or newspapers we knew very little about the war. It was only many years later after it ended, when I visited Broome and Darwin that I discovered how many raids the Japanese made on northern Australia and the numbers of people killed. Our only defence was an aged cannon, mounted on a sandhill near the doover. It was fired for testing only once while I was on the Unit. There were slit trenches opposite our quarters but we never tried them out. We would have been an easy target if we had been attacked.

Late in 1944, southern radar stations were being wound down and I was posted to 5 Embarkation Depot, Wembley, which was surrounded by thick bush. With no prospect of a radar posting I applied to the Commonwealth Training Scheme to study social work. I was eligible because I had joined up under twenty-one years of age. I spent two years at the Adelaide University and a further year in Sydney to qualify.

Leaving the service, especially before the war ended was very upsetting and although I enjoyed my study, I never fitted into the university scene. I missed my friends and their camaraderie deeply. There were five other ex-WAAAF at University, four doing social work, one medicine, so that helped. There were also about a hundred RAAF studying. The men decided we should have a party and promised to arrange it. It was one of the most boring entertainments I have ever been to and their catering consisted of two kegs of beer and five cartons of pig’s trotters!

There were very few social workers in Western Australia then and another new graduate and I ran the Department at Royal Perth on our own. Later I moved to the Repatriation Hospital at Hollywood and saw a microcosm of the aftermath of war. Once healthy young men who would never recover their health and many suffering from mental trauma.

Four wards were filled with tubercular patients alone. Confined to full bed rest for many months, the only known treatment at that time. Not only their lives but those of their families would suffer, probably for the rest of their lives. Their cheerfulness and fortitude were an inspiration. Valour is not won on the battlefields alone.

I spent some months in the Kimberley teaching the children at Forrest River Mission (now Oombulgurri) and went on to be governess at Mardie Station. While I was there I saw the explosion of Britain's first atomic test on the Monte Bello Islands on 2/10/1952. Early in 1954 I travelled to England and spent four years working in a number of places in the British Isles as well as bicycling through a lot of Europe, including France, where as an Australian I was made very welcome, and Spain.

Many of the places I visited showed the devastation of many beautiful old buildings caused by bombing. Rebuilding was going on everywhere but it was clear the world had changed for everyone, not always for the better. I recalled how my mother grieved for a dearly beloved brother who died and was buried in France during W.W.I. Although I was a small child then, I knew she would mourn for him for the rest of her life. And she was one of the many who had been bereaved.

Returning to Australia I worked for the Commonwealth Immigration Department, Princess Margaret Hospital for Children and at Fremantle Hospital. I left to get married in 1963 and lived firstly in a tent on the Nullarbor on a newly opened sheep station and then on stations in the Pilbara and Gasgoyne.

We had two sons but after my husband's untimely death we moved to Narrogin for family and educational reasons. Firstly I worked with Aboriginal families for the Department of Community Welfare and then at the Narrogin Regional Hospital for twelve years until my retirement in 1988. I also served as a Justice of the Peace and member of the Children's Court.

I contributed very little to the war effort but benefited very much personally from the experience and training, many doors opening for me. While defending one's country by force, when all else fails, is justified, I am convinced that making an unprovoked attack on another country is a crime and brings only shame and dishonour to the attacker.