

A.W.A.S.

In the Australia Women's Army Service
1942-1945

A Personal Narrative in Retrospect



By Sgt. Joyce A. Harvey

As Told To Harvey R. Pearce

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I.T. Assistance by Rowland F. Pearce

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1939...

In August, as we, in Perth, looked forward to new spring, the international machinations in Europe seemed quite remote.

Then, at the beginning of September, these events accelerated with breathtaking speed. The Germans had invaded Poland. The Mother Country - as we referred to Britain - and supported by France delivered an ultimatum to Germany to withdraw. By Sunday the third of September, there being no move by Germany to relinquish its conquest, the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, declared that a state of war now existed.

Here in Perth, later that day, we heard a radio announcement advising that our Prime Minister, Robert Menzies would address our nation by radio in the early evening. I think my widowed mother, Nel Harvey, had, for sometime, carried a heavy sense of foreboding but neither my brothers Doug, Gordon and Ken and younger sister Thelma nor I had really considered an outbreak of war and its possible consequences on our lives.

So it was on that Sunday night, we were all at home, 32 Clifton Street, Hollywood, when Mr. Menzies announced on our lounge room radio, beginning, " My fellow Australians . . . it is my melancholy duty to inform you that Australia is also at war . . ." Our mood was that of being stunned and probably didn't get much sleep that night !

The following day, being a Monday, I went to work at Whitfords Broadcasting - operators of radio station 6AM, Northam - in William Street, Perth, where I was employed as a clerk. All of my workmates were in a state of numbed silence.

It was during that week, that my brother Gordon, who had already experienced some militia training was called up with orders to report to Rottnest Island which, like Garden Island, was to be off limits to civilians for the duration of the war. My other two brothers, Doug and Ken, decided not to enlist at this stage. Almost overnight, it seemed, most city buildings which contained basements or cellars, were sandbagged around their foundations just in case of enemy air raids. As best as we could, we tried to get on with our lives, in spite of impending rationing.

1940...

By the time my twenty-first birthday rolled around on July 13th, I knew it was common practice amongst most employers, like mine, to ' let young female employees go ' upon their majority , so , not only did I get ' the Key of the Door ' I was also 'out through the door ' - figuratively speaking. Fortunately, I was able to get another job - at Caris Brothers the jewellers in Hay Street , Perth - relatively quickly.

1941...

Around the middle of the year, I heard that the Federal Government, in an effort to boost recruitment in our armed forces, had announced the formation of the Australian Womens Army Service (A W A S) to satisfy a genuine need to get able bodied young women like me, who weren't nurses or professional drivers , into uniform. I thought about it but decided to file it away for future reference.

Later in the year, after more than two years, during which time, some of Australia's military forces had been committed to aiding the 'British Empire' by being deployed to fight

the Germans and Italians in North Africa and garrisoned in Singapore, Japan suddenly attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. The United States instantly declared war on the Empire of Japan, followed by Britain's and Australia's subsequent declarations. Immediately, Australia was under direct threat and Doug joined up within a few days with Ken following suit a few weeks later.

1942...

As I approached the end of my second year at Caris Brothers and feeling that I was in a 'dead end' job with virtually no advancement prospects, I decided to enlist in A W A S. I can only presume that because of my clerical skills - such as they were - I was soon accepted. Thus it was on Tuesday August the 4th that I departed by train for Melbourne, Victoria. With my mother on hand, it was, an emotional farewell because now just Thelma remained, officially, at home.

After six strenuous weeks of basic training at Ivanhoe, I was told that I was to be trained in deciphering which meant going to Toowoomba in Queensland. Prior to leaving for the Darling Downs, I was quickly promoted to Acting Corporal, which was an essential requirement for my new role. Soon after arrival in Toowoomba I quickly learned an almost time-honoured tradition amongst women in uniform. To ensure that we were well looked after by the catering corps we would 'platonically' attach ourselves to the cooks. It never failed! Ah ...cupboard love!

It was while at Toowoomba, my fellow trainees and I went to a few dances. At one in particular, there was the usual mixture of local girls in all their finery and we service girls compulsorily in our drab khaki uniforms. For our part, we felt like a dowdy bouquet of wallflowers. Early in the piece, I was standing away from the dance floor when a uniformed sailor minus his cap, approached. Now, with Toowoomba being some 85 miles from the nearest open water, I thought his appearance was a bit unusual, but then he asked me onto the dance floor. After accepting his invitation, we started to dance. It was only then that I noticed, that despite being about my age (23 years), he had lost most of his hair - as bald as a badger! As we continued to dance, he opened a conversation by querying,

"I've seen you before, haven't I?"

I thought to myself facetiously, "Well that's original!"

He must have detected my suspicion and explained,

"No, no, I mean it! ... Did you go to Nedlands State School in Perth?"

With my mind hurriedly ticking over, I slowly replied,

"... Yes ... I ... did!"

"Hmmm I thought so," he added "My sister was in your class and I went there too although I'm younger!"

On another occasion, with some other girls from my course, I went to a cafe or tearooms and while waiting for the cuppas to be served at our table, I noticed a vase in front of us which contained some flowers which were well past their use-by date. Before we finished our tea and left, against the vase, I put a small card on which I had written, 'Died In Action - 1942'

Alas a few weeks later, I received from home, the sad news that my one remaining grandparent, Adeline Harvey had passed away on November the 22nd aged 79 years. This information was tempered by the pleasant news of Doug's impending marriage to Joy Bennett in early January of the New Year.

Approaching Christmas, I was given home leave, and my superiors were mistakenly convinced that I was going to be in the wedding party. So, without even trying, I was given an extension on my leave. Getting home all the way from Toowoomba proved to be a bit of a problem after the journey's first leg to Melbourne. From the Victorian capital, I managed, after some hiccups, to get on what would have been the last available transport to Perth. Eventually, I arrived at 32 Clifton Street in the early hours of Christmas morning. Not unnaturally, I found the house in darkness and securely locked. As I didn't possess a key, I went over to the window of Mum's bedroom, knocked on the glass and called out. Mum woke up with a bit of a start but was pleasantly surprised to find her elder daughter was home for Christmas.

1943...

While on leave, my promotion to the rank of Corporal was posted to me. At the same time I was informed to report back to Toowoomba after Doug and Joy's wedding, for a continuation of training in ciphering techniques and, hopefully an eventual active service posting. The end of March saw my promotion to the rank of Sergeant. Midway through the year, a letter from home, which, before opening, I had expected to contain routine news from Perth, turned out to be exceptionally good news - Mum had won a £1000 (\$2000) lottery but still a lot of money in those days. It was the very last draw of that value and it couldn't have come at a better time. Mum had been widowed ten years earlier and paying the mortgage had been a real struggle particularly since Doug had married six months before and was no longer in a position to contribute by remittance. From Mum's standpoint, the lottery windfall was a genuine Godsend! Meanwhile, in Toowoomba, word of my Mother's big win quickly got around the barracks. I was teased wherever I went - people would mockingly step aside, proclaiming,

"Make way for the heiress!"

Ceremoniously, I was assisted into the back of troop transport truck as if it was a limousine, whenever we had to go any distance. Fortunately, the novelty wore off after a few days!

In early December, I finally received my first proper posting - to Swan Barracks in Perth and was to take effect from January.

1944...

Because it was my home town, there was no barracks life for me - I was 'permitted' to live at home and catch a trolley bus to and from the city each day. Contrary to conditions in the early days of the war, the sandbagging of city buildings around Perth had, by and large, been discontinued.

In mid January, Gordon and his fiancée, Joy Vivian revealed that they were 'expecting' and their 'little bundle of happiness' was due in August. They chose to bring forward their wedding date and were married on Friday, February the 4th.

My work at Swan Barracks was fairly routine. Still in ciphering, the nature of my work was never 'top secret' - just processing orders from the frontlines for munitions, medical requisites, general supplies and so on. The genuinely sensitively operational work was decoded by commissioned officers.

Thursday, August the 17th, saw the arrival of Mum's first grandchild as my sister-in-law, Mrs Joy Harvey was 'safely delivered of a baby girl', Kerry Dawn. Naturally, there was much celebrating in both the Harvey and Vivian households. Then, about a month later, Doug and his bride of one year and eight months announced that they too were blithely 'anticipating' a new addition which was due to arrive in late May of the New Year.

In early December, I was advised that I would be going to Alice Springs soon after Christmas / New Year. At the same time, the duty rosters for pre-Christmas through early January were posted on a notice board at Swan Barracks and I copped Christmas Eve i.e. 2200hrs to 0800hrs (10pm to 8am) which as it turned out was better than being on duty for most of Christmas Day.

On the appointed night, I turned up at the Barracks and was somewhat relieved to find not what you would call an abundance of work. Apparently, our people at the front were 'gearing up' for their own modest Yuletide celebrations. At about 6am - Christmas morning - a strikingly memorable event took place. We were casually sitting at our desks, when, very much to our surprise, we suddenly heard the bells of St. George's Anglican Cathedral clearly pealing out the traditional carol 'O Come All Ye Faithful'. Now with Swan Barracks being a half a mile (800m) away from the Cathedral in a straight line and in unusual atmospheric conditions, it was as if the bells were just a block away. In a sense of unreality, we were drawn to the windows overlooking Francis Street singing the well-known lyrics with nerve-tingling, tear-jerking passion in time with the distant tintinnabulation.

1945...

The usually HOT month of January saw me commencing my stint in 'The Alice'. I'd been there but a few weeks, when there was a somewhat uncharacteristic rainstorm sweep through 'The Dead Heart' which lead to the normally bone dry Todd River to rapidly flood virtually without warning. The waters rose so quickly, that we only just managed to evacuate to the Old Telegraph Station on the eastern bank of the, by now, raging torrent. We witnessed two military semi-trailers getting caught on one of the causeways which crossed the Todd. Luckily, both drivers escaped as each heavily laden vehicle rolled over and over in turbulent muddy waters. We later heard that one of the drivers had lost a pay packet in his haste to escape.

When not on duty, escape from the barracks was vital for our sanity and to relieve our boredom, we had various haunts to visit. One of these was the railway station particularly if we knew that a 'Ghan' train was about to depart or arrive and may have had a familiar face or two aboard. On one such occasion, I was strolling beside a soon-to-depart train when a recognisable voice called my name. Upon locating the source, I discovered that the voice belonged to an officer I had known when we were teenagers in the early 1930s while attending the Methodist Church Easter holiday youth camps around Perth. The officer was leaning out of a carriage window. He summoned me closer, and as I went to give him a regulationary salute, he leaned forward and gave me a light peck on the cheek, then said, "Under different circumstances, I might have been a bit more demonstrative!" (meaning a hug and a 'pash')

The officer's name? Richard Cleaver, who from 1955 to 1969, would be the Honourable Member for Forrest in the Federal Parliament!

It was while I was in Alice Springs that Germany surrendered - on May the 8th which was cause for mild celebration for we knew that our job would not be finalised until the Japs had also unconditionally surrendered.

About a fortnight after VE day, I received orders to transfer to Darwin. This required transportation by truck to Katherine - a distance of some 735 miles (1170km) followed by the 200 mile (320km) rail journey on the infamous train 'Leaping Lena' to Darwin. Soon after arriving at my new posting, I received some from home which happily revealed that as of May the 24th, I now had a nephew, Gregory Newton James Harvey courtesy of proud parents, Doug and Joy.

Around the end of June, we heard that the famous English entertainer, Gracie Fields, would perform for the troops in our area. Alas, on the night of her concert, my fellow decipherers and I, got landed with a ten hour night shift - 10pm to 8am. Needless to say, we were very disappointed at missing 'Our Gracie' - as she was known - but the war effort came first!

The following morning, after coming off duty, we returned to our 'digs' where we were told that Gracie was going to drive past soon thereafter. So, in various stages of uniform, we trotted out to the roadside, and, sure enough, chauffeur-driven Gracie motored up to where we were standing. As the open tourer drew level, we yelled out,

"Good morning Gracie!", to which the celebrity responded,

"Good morning girls!"

A couple of seconds later, the car skidded to a rapid halt on the dusty road. Thinking that there was something wrong, we ran up to the vehicle, where the ever-smiling Gracie, having rightly suspected that we had just come off duty, enquired,

"Did you enjoy the show last night?"

"No Gracie," we replied, "We were doing nightshift!"

The 'Lancashire Lass' then instructed her driver to turn the motor off, then stood up in the back of the car. After a couple of 'warm-up' warbles, she then launched into a short bracket of her well known songs to a most appreciative and enthralled - albeit - smallish audience.

When she finished, Gracie wished us well, then drove off in the direction of the airstrip.

Largely, for security reasons, we were confined to our base, although on a couple of occasions, our officers permitted us to venture into the central part of the 'city'. The full extent of the Japanese bombing three years earlier, was most apparent - numerous damaged buildings. However, all of the loose rubble had been removed.

I was in Darwin for less than two months, when I was ordered to mobilise to Melbourne where, along with a number of other girls, I was to undergo a course of disassembling, reassembling and using a 303 rifle! It was a task to which I was hopelessly unsuited. Furthermore, I was unable to complete the course as the sudden climate change from Darwin's tropical warmth to Melbourne's late winter chill left me with a very heavy cold. I was admitted to a camp hospital where the army doctors diagnosed an 'URTI', the quaint military acronym for an 'upper respiratory tract infection'. After a nine-day convalescence, I was told to return to Darwin for a second tour of duty. This again required the long train trip to Port Augusta, followed by the 'Ghan' journey to Alice Springs, then road transport. It was while on this road transport leg of our journey that we stopped at Tennant Creek for petrol, refreshments and a chance to stretch our legs after our uncomfortable ride. Due to the lack of space on the truck, we had to lie on top of mailbags and our kitbags. As we alighted from the back of the vehicle, we were somewhat astonished to see a detachment of British Army 'tommies' (also heading for Darwin and beyond) sitting at an outside table, drinking, carrying-on and, it seemed, laughing at our discomfort. As we headed for the WC, we demanded to know what they found so amusing. In between fits of chuckling, one of them answered,

" Wool yer see luv . . . ba 'ome . . . none of are gells would 'ave ever fought abart ridin' in a lorry lie you lot . . . day would 'ave insistidd on a lorry wiv seats!"

Eventually we saw the wry humourous side of the situation. After our fifteen minute stop, we clambered aboard our truck and continued our journey.

On the war front, we'd heard that the Japanese home islands had, for many weeks or months, been on the receiving end of widespread heavy conventional bombing but still opted to fight on.

Back on the Stuart Highway, every stop we came to, we asked anyone around if the 'Nips' had surrendered after two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been virtually wiped out on Monday August 6th and Thursday the 9th respectively. Invariably, the answer was 'no'. Finally, late on Tuesday the 14th of August, while on the last leg aboard 'Leaping Lena', the train made one of its customary water and coal or firewood stops, that we were told of the unconditional surrender by Japan. All we had to toast the arrival of peace with, was some hot black unsweetened tea courtesy of the train engineers. So there we were, squatting on the railway lines, toasting the newly won peace with the strong black, almost brackish, brew, in the middle of nowhere and in rapidly fading daylight. But the relief we felt was overwhelming - peace after six years of dogged war.

Soon after arrival in Darwin, we were informed that the first of the Australian prisoners-of-war from Changi prison in Singapore, would be coming through by ship. Our officers added that these ex P.O.W.s, would be the fittest of the survivors. When they did arrive, nothing could have prepared us for what we witnessing - the diggers were not much more than skin and bone. It numbed us to think, "If these blokes were the 'best' of the P.O.W.s, what were the worst of them going to be like?"

By late October, the demand for my services in the 'Top End' was very much reduced, so I was posted back to Melbourne's Victoria Barracks, where I was to be retrained for Morse code operation, which took the form of reading an oscilloscope - a long wave on the 'scope equalled a dash and a short wave, a dot. During the course, I travelled to 'Vic' Barracks from tent billots at Albert Lake.

After a few weeks, without being totally proficient in my new role, I was ordered to report to Swan Barracks in Perth in preparation for my final demobilisation. In due course, I was put on board a R.A.A.F. Dakota C47B (DC3) at noon one day and arrived at Pearce Air Force base fourteen hours later - 2am next morning.

I lived at home and initially reported each day to Swan Barracks. On one such occasion, still in uniform, I was on my home and as it was a warm day, I took my khaki tie off and unbuttoned my collar. Walking down London Court to the trolley bus stop, I was stopped by a Military Policewoman who was considerably shorter than me. She demanded to know why I was out of uniform - namely minus my tie. Indignantly, I replied by saying that I had just come from Melbourne where hardly any military personnel wore ties even though the Victorian capital was generally cooler than Perth, and what's more, I didn't think it would offend anyone by not wearing a tie! Eventually, the M.P. accepted my point, but I'll never forget the feeling of elation at having had a win over that would-be officious Corporal. After a fortnight or so at Swan Barracks, I was ordered to report to Irwin Barracks at Karrakatta where I was just to check in daily, until at long last, on December the 17th, 1945, my final discharge came through.

And so concluded my small contribution to Australia's war effort.

Sadly, I report one person with whom I was acquainted before the war, who did not return. Colin Craft, the son of the then Perth Wesley Church organist, who had been an exceptional violinist and was possibly destined for an international soloist career. Colin had joined the covert 'Z' force, was captured by the Japanese and subsequently beheaded.

With God's grace, neither my brothers nor I came to any real physical harm and joyfully returned home to start anew.

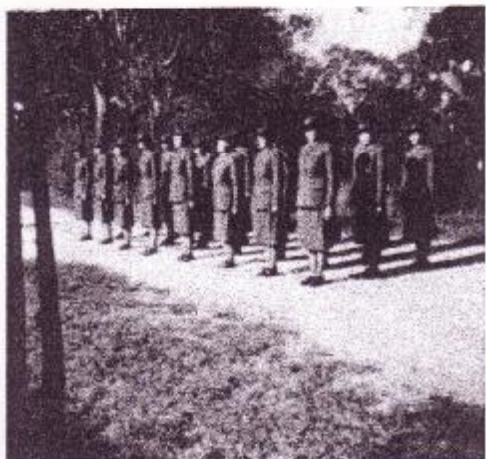
Along with my return to civilian life, would disappear the fantastic camaraderie and fellowship with the other girls in the Australian Women's Army Service and in particular, the Signals Corps, although we would continue to send cards to each other every Christmas for many years to come.



Me, a few months before enlisting

Basic Training at Ivanhoe, Victoria

August – September, 1942
5 Sec. 2 Coy.



Lieut. G. TOPP & Sgt. D. HUGHES



Sgt J. TANKARD (Drill Sgt.)



Sgts G. WEBSTER & J. TANKARD



Doug and Joy on their wedding day



Me, Mum and Ken at 32 Clifton Street,
Hollywood



Gordon, Me and Ken at Hollywood



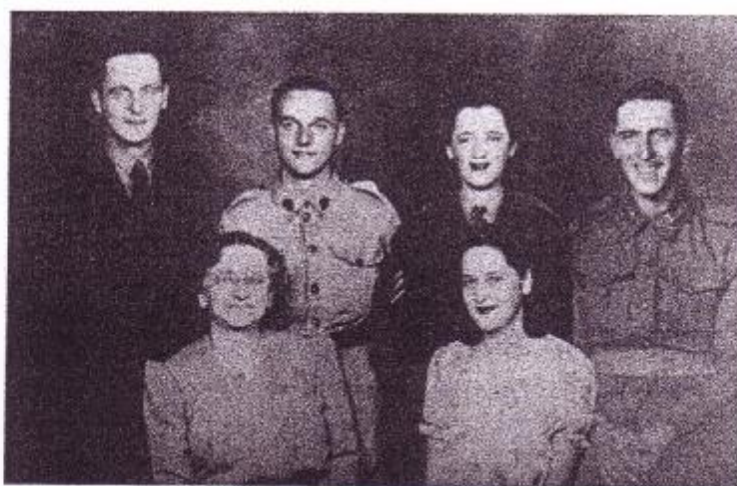
Me at Toowoomba, early 1943



Me at Toowoomba, early 1943



On train mobilisation
From left: Doreen DRAKE, ?, Sonya ?, Me,
Jean ? (2nd from right)



THE HARVEYS - Late 1943
Back Row: Lieut. Gordon, Sig. Ken, Sgt. Joyce, Sig. Doug
Front Row: Mum (Nel), Thelma



Picnic near Alice Springs, Alma COOKSON at right



Dorothy CANN (5th from right)
Me (2nd from right)
Near Alice Springs



Anzac Hill, Alice Springs
February 18th 1945, Dorothy CANN

ADDENDA

Toowoomba: 1943 . . .

One morning, after coming off a ten hour shift, a colleague and I returned to our barracks where two civilian male reporters were waiting for another girl to go on a golfing date. Having determined that this girl wasn't going to make it, we were talked into taking her place in spite of our exhaustion. So, the four of us trotted off to the nearby golf links. Quite literally, it was the first time that I had ever attempted to play the game and it must have showed. After a series of tee shots on each of which, I had unavoidably 'topped' the ball, one of the blokes voluntarily moulded an extra high cone of soil on which to sit the ball. I took one look at it and announced,

"I'll go right under that ball!"

"No you won't," he responded with misplaced confidence.

Expectantly, I addressed the ball, took a swing and, despite my best efforts - you guessed it - displaced most of the dirt and sent the ball a couple of feet straight up in the air before coming back down in front of me. Right then, I sensed everybody's frustration and instinctively knew that I'd never be capable of making a professional career out of this confounded game.

Shortly after, one of our blokes noticed that playing right behind us was the A.O.C. (Area Officer Commanding) then he said to us that the A.O.C. had a well earned reputation for having any subordinate, who defeated or embarrassed him at golf, transferred to a frontline combat unit in New Guinea at very short notice. Through a series of gestures, the A.O.C. insisted on 'playing through' while we waited. As the A.O.C. approached, the other bloke in our party quietly told us that our A.O.C. was really a very good golfer. Patiently, we watched as he lined up to take his shot nearby. After a prodigious swing, the ball flew straight into the foliage of a tree a short distance down the fairway. We waited for the ball to fall out of the tree. It didn't. Slowly, the A.O.C. turned around to look at us as we were summoning all of our powers of self-control to stop ourselves from bursting out laughing. Nothing more was said, albeit, a notice was circulated a day or so later to all personnel that golf beginners were not play on the main course but to use the practice fairways.

Later in the year, after a few other girls and I had received our new postings, I knew from previous experience that it was part of barracks 'culture' to play pranks on the departing girls. It came to the last night in Toowoomba by which time nothing had happened. Warily, I decided to sit with my back to a wall in the barracks and make like I was earnestly polishing my brown shoes, so that if any would-be perpetrator tried anything on me, she would 'wear' the entire contents of the tin of shoe polish! Alas, one of my friends, Doreen Drake, wasn't quite as vigilant. Casting caution to the wind, she took herself off to the ablution block for a quick shower. I soon found out that the pranksters had followed Doreen and dragged her out of the shower 'as naked as the day she was born' and was then made to run around the outside the ablution block. It was here that a heavy mist was settling which, in a sense, was fortunate for her, for it was later rumoured that there was a reported intruder on the base and all the guards were out patrolling the perimeter fence.