

Sister Julia O'Sullivan

My name is Julia Josephine O'Sullivan, born in Bunbury WA, 14/12/1921, the fifth of seven children. I received my education at St Joseph's School, Manjimup, and was working as a shop assistant when World War II broke out in 1939. Four brothers enlisted in the Armed Forces, one a fighter pilot in the RAAF, and three in the AIF. By 1940 I watched many friends leave the district to join the forces. War in the Middle East seemed so far from Australia but when the Japanese Air Force bombed Peel Harbour in December 1940; the Americans declared war on Japan, and then the Japanese bombed Darwin in February 1942, I knew Australia was threatened with invasion.

Women were being called to enlist in the Armed Forces, and to work in ammunition factories. I was desperate to enlist in the army, having learnt Morse Code in anticipation of joining up but my father refused to sign my papers. After much pleading and threat to join when I was twenty-one, he relented, and in August 1942 his fifth child was serving in the Australian Women's Army Service. With many others, I left Perth in August 1942 and travelled on a troop train, with eight girls in a carriage. Because of the shortage in WA of army clothes, we were supplied with some of the items of army uniform, and had to wait until we reached our destination before receiving full issue.

It was an uncomfortable trip across the Nullarbor, stopping in places for meals. We had our first taste of army stew, which was a greasy, grey, conglomerate mess. We were young and eager to serve our country, so made light of it.

Finally we arrived in Bonegilla in Victoria where there was a huge army camp of men. We were only about two hundred or three hundred girls so we were guarded day and night! Our first job was to fill our palliasses with straw, then we were allotted to huts containing sixteen girls in each hut. We were issued with full army uniform. It was August, it was freezing and we were homesick, confused and a little afraid.

The next morning we went on parade and were addressed by the Commanding Officer of the Unit, which had just returned from the Middle East, where it had been intercepting German air-traffic. The C.O. was a tough and hardened soldier, used to controlling men on active service and we stood in awe of him. He told us we were to be trained to intercept Japanese air-traffic, which was Kana Code, a system using seventy-two symbols, compared with the twenty six in Morse Code. This was a very secret and confidential work and we signed a document not to reveal its whereabouts for thirty years! His words were "As far as you are concerned, this unit has never existed, does not exist and will never exist. There will be no medals in this unit." We now belonged to a unit named Australian Special Wireless Group. There were women officers to look after us but the responsibility of the unit was his. He was respected and trusted by his troops and we learned to respect him too. The men from the Middle East were trained wireless operators and had to learn the Kana Code. Their first lessons were on the troop ship returning to Australia. They had to train new men and the girls in this difficult code. We were there to release men for active service in Darwin and the Islands, and reminded often that we 'had volunteered'.

Life was hard in the camp and primitive by today's standards. There were no home comforts and no privacy. We ate in a huge mess hut. The menu could be bully beef, dried egg dishes, dried apples, plum jam and stews of every description. We did not complain because we were eating food not always available to civilians in shops.

Sleeping in a hut with sixteen others took some getting used to. We had to clean ablution blocks, huts etc. We had hut inspections. The beds had to be made tidily, no surplus articles seen. Our uniforms hung on nails on the wall. There were drills, route marching, troop inspections where shoes had to shine, uniforms clean and tidy and the endless lessons in Kana Code, which was Morse Code run together. We "dit darterd" each other's names, the signs around the camps, anything to make it stick in our minds.

Despite the hardships we had fun. There was the tuck shop, dances within the camp, Sunday afternoon off, swimming in the river and all supervised of course. It was three months before we got a leave pass. Albury was the attraction, with buses to transport us, we survived.

When we received our certificate as a wireless operator, we were taken to the set room, where the men were working intercepting the Japanese Kana Code. There were two receiving sets. One frequency could be from Tokyo and the other on some island in the Pacific. The operators worked continuously day and night so we had to get used to reduced sleep and the actual work.

In 1943, a section of the unit was transferred to WA and the Western Australian girls were delighted. We travelled back to WA on a troop train, and finally arrived at Queens Park, a suburb of Perth. Men had been sent ahead to set up camp, but they had not finished the task. We arrived at what was a cow paddock, which became boggy in winter. It is now called Coker Park. Once again we filled our palliasse with straw, helped to erect a few tents, and were allotted a tent with four girls. Later, we had a type of bakelite hut, with a wooden floor and door, and a flap we could open as a window. Little gardens soon sprang up around them, and pretty posters on the wall, but we still had hut inspections however we settled in nicely. Our work place was about a couple of kilometres along the road to Cannington and was much the same routine as Bonegilla. Our truck driver would wake us for night shifts, and feeling half dead, we would stagger to the truck and were driven to work. We had to be wide awake by the time we took over from a tired operator. Our shifts were four hours only, because of the concentration span, but the next four hours came quickly enough. We had these draconian shifts for two days, then two days off which we enjoyed.

In 1944 the camp closed, and I was sent to Brisbane and our camp was at Nundah, a suburb of Brisbane. It was the same routine, but we looked forward to leave to explore Brisbane, which was awash with American soldiers, sailors and airmen, who were a novelty with their accents, their money, their smart uniforms and their loud talk. The Aussie men had little time for these itinerant counterparts, who no doubt were helping in the fight to win Australia's war. Their major objection to the American men was the manner in which they won the Aussie girls' hearts!!!

Despite heavy losses by the Japanese in the Pacific, they would not surrender. It was obvious that the allied troops were reclaiming the Japanese occupied islands, and inflicting heavy casualties. As interceptors, we knew first hand, as the Japanese operators in the islands were constantly sending messages which we understood as "closing down raid". The atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima can never be justified for the terrible loss of innocent lives and destruction, however the Emperor of Japan refused to capitulate and only the threat that Tokyo would be bombed did he concede to surrender.

I recall clearly the 15th August 1945. The bells began to ring, the ships in the harbour tooted incessantly, cars and trams joined the racket and Brisbane went mad. People in the streets were singing, dancing and hugging one another with such sheer joy. Peace at last! Life had changed forever. The question was, what now? We were no longer the young women joining the army. We had been trusted to take responsibility. We had grown up. We had survived, made good friends with people from all over Australia, and had observed the rise and fall of humanity! So many men and women would return home. So many would not. We would learn of the atrocities committed in prison of war camps, we know for sure many of our friends did not survive...

Now that life had changed, what would peace bring? The challenge stared us in the face. In January 1946 I was discharged from the army in Perth. In January 1947 I became a nun. I entered the convent of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Mount St, North Sydney. The foundress of the Order of the Nuns was Blessed Mary MacKillop, an Australian women, who started the Order in 1866 to educate the poor and underprivileged children in the bush and care for the homeless and aged, on the streets. I was trained as a teacher, and taught in schools, mainly in WA. It is a decision I have never regretted.

I can truly say my war time experience was a tremendous influence in choosing a Religious Life. I still maintain contact with many of my army and pre-war friends. I am proud of the fact that I have served my country in war time and have enjoyed my service to God in peace time. I volunteered for both services!!! Life is what you make of it and for me LIFE IS GOOD!