
Lorna Palmer

I went into the WAAF in November '42, reason being I was a telephonist, from August '39, training at Fremantle Exchange and when it went automatic, Mr Davie, who lived up Bruce Street, five doors up from us, suggested I apply for a job at Hollywood Military Hospital, which had civilian staff at that time. The Matron was a **B----**, she hated not having charge of us and decided to get Army girls (can't remember their initials) and suggested we join the army and she'd see we still worked at Hollywood.

I thought "NO THANKS", then my brothers girlfriend (later wife) said, "join the WAAAF, the Army uniform is awful". So I did. I trained at Karrinyup Golf Course and met up with a wonderful lot of girls, whose names I have forgotten, except for Margaret Smith from Cottesloe.

We were issued with heavy-duty overalls and shoes (plus other clothes), but next we know we go on a route march to North Beach. "Anyone with bathers can take them and have a swim". That was for me, but by the time we'd marched back to Karrinyup, I was as hot as could be.

We finished our Rookies course and postings came out – Margaret Smith and I to Geraldton. The telephonists tried to talk me into staying at Karrinyup, but sister in law Joy Thomas said it was great at Geraldton. She and my brother, Keith Richards, were married in Wesley Church, Perth, on 30th September, 1942.

Margaret and I travelled to Geraldton by a crowded troop train. The last WAAAF to get into our carriage said excitedly, "He, I've just seen Joy Thomas and she's pregnant!" Then she noticed Margaret and me and said "Rookies! What are your names?" I said, "Margaret Smith and Lorna Richards, Joy Thomas's sister-in-law!" She looked a bit embarrassed. My nephew arrived on 1st July, one day after Keith and Joy had been married 9 months!

I was a fairly religious person, so on Tuesdays I would get leave to go into town for Christian Endeavour meetings and would be early enough to have a swim before a meal at Shepherds Hotel, then after C.E. I'd get a lift back to camp with an army padre – Smith by name.

In August I was posted to Merredin, where I didn't want to go – another Geraldton telephonist, Yvonne Keyser, who came from near Merredin, wanted to go, but Flight Officer Darbyshire wouldn't even consider the swap, yet shortly after, she got herself transferred to Merredin.

We WAAAF were in huts, built like houses and the hangars had roofs shaped so they looked like lakes from the air, in case of air raids by Japanese. Lennie Warren sent me photos taken on her way back from the 2001 Adelaide reunion and the hangars are still there.

I also enjoyed cycling so I had my bicycle at Merredin and often on a moonlit night I would go cycling along the Highway – not much traffic, but it could be seen for miles. Also, when I was due for weekend leave, I'd work all night Thursday, then cycle around the nearby farms buying eggs, I often saw Italian POW's in

maroon coloured uniforms working on farms. A few years back I made myself a maroon tracksuit, after wearing it for some months my husband, Ken, remarked that I looked like a POW. So I gave it to the Op Shop. I made a green one instead!

Being a shift worker, our job for Tuesday morning was to clean the latrines, which sometimes was a really filthy job. The guards on duty had to call the telephonist at certain times during the night and we recorded it. The Orderly Officer would do a round of the hangars, so I'd do a hurried phone ring around to see if I could warn the guard of his coming. One night, F/L Ahearn was O/O, not a very popular man, so this guard stood on the far side of a large puddle, called out "Who's there?" "Orderly Officer", so the guard shined his strong torch in the O/O's face and said "Advance and be recognised" and the O/O found himself splashing through the puddle!

On all night duty I used to write to 5 girlfriends or work tapestries for anyone who wanted it done. My sister, then a teacher in the country, had worked a beautiful supper cloth with tiger lilies that mum had sent her, so I asked mum to buy me one and when it arrived I was disappointed as it was just five petalled flowers in sprigs in each corner. However, I worked it and bought an edging, which I crocheted on. I was still not happy with it, till some WAAAF offered to buy it. But, I wouldn't sell and now my son Timothy appreciates it as well as the Mexican set I embroidered.

The dances at Merredin were very different from Geraldton – not nearly as many men, so you didn't refuse to get up with anyone, or you'd find yourself sitting out – perhaps all night. I got to know the guards quite well and was often taken to the cinema by one or another. They would show me photos of their wife and kids and their pets. Just friendly gestures.

The young lads would go out to a dam for a swim, one boy drowned, so the others rushed back to report to Sq.Ldr Jelbart, a big strong man, he went out and dived till he found the body. He was well respected for his effort.

Cpl. Dill was one of the RAAF Police and you watched out for him, especially if you were trying to sneak on the all-night train after having cadged a leave pass from the Orderly Room, on a Thursday afternoon, when we had Friday off. One night, Joy Marks and I had done that, so we stayed in the toilets off the Ladies waiting room, the train pulled in, out we dashed, jumped into the nearest carriage, which had soldiers on their way to Perth. We told them to hang out the windows so Dill wouldn't see us. They laughed, but did it. When the train arrived in Perth next morning, we walked boldly out, saw our C.O., saluted and smiled and walked out of the station. He must have known we shouldn't have been on that train, but never said anything about it.

The first winter I was at Merredin, I awoke one morning feeling very ill – "Flu", so I reported to the medical orderly, who said I needed to go to hospital. He saw the adjutant, F/L Watts, who told him to use the motorcycle and sidecar. M.O. said he may as well take me straight to the morgue. So I was driven in a Ute to a military hospital outside Merredin. They were there resting up after overseas work. I was put in the theatre, being the only building which didn't have draughts

and it was wonderful, I slept most of the time, but one, only the one, nurse's aide kept saying to me in a sneering way, "You WAAAF's don't go overseas" When I began to get better, I said, "It isn't our fault, we go where we are sent."

The RAAF stations had a swimming carnival and we were all invited to swim. I put my name down, had to go to one of the larger dams and an officer had to watch me show my style. I'd made myself a two-piece cotton swimsuit and the officer said haven't you got anything more suitable. Oh, yes, I had a pair of Jansen's at home. So I wore those and won the 55 yards freestyle at Crawley Baths. Someone from Merredin asked me to go in the 110 Yards, but I hated the turns, so I didn't. I got a great cheer when I arrived back at 10S.D. at least that was one swim I hadn't expected to get! By the way, now nearly 84 years old, I still go body surfing at Torquay, Victoria and also cycling, as I have just, last September, bought a second hand Ladies' English Raleigh cycle, which is absolutely great. I keep it at Torquay in our on-site caravan and annex, where we spend as much summertime as we can. Ringwood having too much traffic and too many hills, we would have to walk a mile down hill to the cycle track!

I said earlier that F/O Darbyshire had got herself transferred to Merredin from Geraldton, as her husband, F/Lt Darbyshire, was there. He had red hair and a huge red moustache and a red setter dog that matched his hair. The boys used to say "Here comes Darbyshire with his moustache's pup".

We did eventually get a nursing sister, but I can't remember her name. She was Australian born Chinese and a lovely woman. Towards the end of the war she was transferred to QLD, and was on an aircraft bringing back ex-POW's from Thailand, when it crashed and all lost their lives. The wreckage was found recently, August 29th, 05.

Margaret Smith, who followed me to Merredin, had a great sense of humour. As I said earlier our huts looked like houses, inside it had a half wall down the middle and we were mainly Signals section on our side, except for Margaret. She'd throw the door open and call out, "Here I am, Mr Signal himself", which was a catchphrase for Signal soap. She felt the cold, so would have all her blankets, with winter uniform on top for extra warmth, so we'd go and put socks on the top saying, "Here's a bit of extra heating for you."

To earn extra money – half my pay went into the Commonwealth Bank – I used to polish shoes at 3d a pair. One day I had over a dozen pairs all polished and lined up, so the owners could collect them. Some bright star jumbled them up as there were a lot without names in them. I just left them for each to pick their own. I also ironed summer uniforms, possibly for 3d apiece. I'd bought an electric iron at the local hardware shop as I think there was only one iron for all the girls.

At the beginning of summer we had to wear our shorts one evening and the WAAAF officer came down to check that they were the correct length. Joy Marks was very slim and I was rather hefty, so we each put on the others shorts. Mrs Darbyshire had a laugh, then made us change into our own.

The shoe repairman used to make sandals and the like for anyone who was willing to pay him. I had a lovely pair of sandals made of green leather with crossover straps and a strap around the heel. They lasted for years.

I mentioned Lillian the farmers' daughter from somewhere near Kellerberrin. There was a farmers' meeting in town one weekend, so her parents came, brought her baked chicken and salads, so we Signals crowd took our plates and cutlery up to the office for a feast. Of course, Margaret Smith was included. The table was cleared and we all sat down to eat. Margaret seemed to finish very quickly, so after we'd all eaten, I got her to one side and asked her why she'd eaten so quickly. "Don't tell the others", she said, "but the chicken was fly-blown!" No one was sick afterwards!!

Just along the street at the front of our hut was a bakery, where we used to sneak out to of an evening and buy loaves of hot bread, pull the dough out and eat the crust, really yummy. However, Mrs Darbyshire called us all up to her office and said we were not to go to the bakery again as the baker's wife thought we were ogling her son! He was a retarded man about our age! Some hope?

I was one of the first WAAAF to be discharged in December 1945, so I took a notebook with me and wrote down all the procedures we had to go through and posted it back to the Sigs girls.

By the way, what sort of jam did you have in the Mess? At Geraldton and Merredin we had apple jelly, so we used to empty the container at each meal and throw it in the bin. Next meal, more **b-----** Apple jelly, as some WAAAF once wrote in a poem. I met a Victorian WAAAF at Torquay who had been a medical orderly at East Sale. Their jam was peach and they would do the same, hoping to get a change.

The evening shift Signals used to be able to draw food from the kitchen to make a snack. A couple of us would go into the kitchen, fill our pockets with potatoes and onions and our hands with slices of bread and pat of butter. Up at the office we would borrow the heaters from all the offices, it is a wonder we didn't blow a fuse, had a small pot and would cook the vegies, make toast etc. Sometimes we'd go to the QM store and get tinned Kraft Cheddar cheese which we'd toast, being careful not to mark the heaters which would be balanced so the pot would sit comfortably on top. Half the time we'd all go one after another and get cheese, most of which we took home on leave. Mum never asked how I got the lot I gave her. Perhaps she thought the less she knows the better.

I was a regular church goer and as mum worked for the Inland Missions of Methodists she knew of the Rev Fred Whittle and I was often invited to his home. Later, after the war, he was the Minister of Nedlands Methodist Church and lived 5 doors down from us in Bruce Street.

My first leave from Geraldton I couldn't wait to get home, so I paid to fly down. Don't know what sort of aircraft, but at one stage we had to turn around to see if we could spot a RAAF aircraft, which had gone missing. It turned up okay, but that swing around churned my stomach and now I still don't like flying in small aircraft.

By the way, at the 2001 reunion I spoke to Nancy Bird, telling her of my first flight when I was about seven years old. My 76 year old grandmother, Elizabeth Fisher, wanted to go for a sight seeing flight over Perth, so my dad took us in his BSA and sidecar to watch. He took a photo of grandma, son George, grandson Rene and great granddaughter Margery standing in front of the De Havilland aircraft with Kingsford Smith in the cockpit. Dad used a large camera, which took photos on glass plate. When grandma came down she saw we three Richards children looking very envious, so she paid for us to go with her again. All I can remember is we sat in the cane and sea grass chairs. Nancy Bird said that would have been Kingsford Smith's plane. So I looked him up in the 'People and Places' Book and it mentioned that Norman Brearley had started a company flying to the north west to open it up for a mail run. He employed lots of his pilots from WW1.

Margery Fisher joined the WAAAF. She was a tailoress, but wanted a change, so it was suggested she go in as a cook's assistant and perhaps remuster later. She was in the Sergeants Mess at Geraldton, as they wouldn't remuster her. Then when we had to enlist in March 1943, she refused unless they would remuster her. Like a shot she was remustered to tailoress and sent to Melbourne. When I went to join up, I thought I'd like a change, but nothing suggested suited me, so the officer said, "Go in as a Cook's assistant and perhaps remuster later". I was still a civilian, so I said; "You don't catch me like my cousin, who has been trying to remuster since she found out what a foul job she's in". So I ended up being a Telephonist till I married in 1956!

This year Ken and I got up at 4.45am on Anzac Day to go to the Dawn Service at Torquay. It is held on Point Danger and is a wonderful event. The sun comes up over the sea. We've had some very good speakers, Vivienne Bullwinkel and Sir Edward Dunlop (Weary). This year over 7,000 turned up. It was beautiful weather so I didn't need my long johns and the surf looked good as we walked back to our camp, various people asked if we were going to call in at Hell Fire Corner – a barbeque breakfast put on by local stores and the RSL, but no, we go straight back. Ken is not a very good mixer, whereas I talk to lots of people I regularly see at the shops. They are very friendly people down at Torquay, some having retired there from Melbourne suburbs, but housing prices have skyrocketed this year.

My brother Keith Richards, was posted to Nhill as a flying instructor, which he hated, so when ANA applied to the RAAF for pilots he volunteered and was in Sydney for a while where his first son was born in 1943. Joy came through on the overland when Edmund was about 12 months old, so I snuck out the night she passed through Merredin. The train stopped and she was looking out for me, so I saw my first nephew sound asleep.

After a couple of weeks at home, Joy went off to join Keith, who had been moved to Brisbane, from where he flew to New Guinea and later on was the first commercial aircraft to fly into the Philippines after they were liberated. He had to stay at American bases and the pilots nicknamed him "Tex". When he came back to Melbourne after the war he was still called Tex by aircrew members. It was never used by any family member. His granddaughter married Gavin

Wanganeen and their son was born on the 32nd anniversary of Keith's death, so they named him Tex! (Poor little bugger). Their photo appeared in the free newspaper given out at Melbourne Railway Stations. My daughter Lisa, picked one up on the way to work and recognized Stephanie, she is so like her grandma, Joy!

Keith flew for TAA for years, then went overseas, flying Biafra with food and medicines for the starving people, even took his son, Edmund, with him one time to help unload the goods. He also flew over Europe, crossing the borders without any interference, flew over concentration camps – this was after the war had been over for years, but some of the camps were still as they were when the war survivors moved out.

I am getting away from the origins of this letter, sorry about that.

As I said, I was the first WAAAF to be demobbed – I was very overweight as we would throw our food out and buy ice cream, Coke and sweets at the canteen and fill up on that – like junk food! I soon lost weight and was back to my pre-war weight in no time. One day I was in Perth with mum, who was pushing my baby nephew in a pram, coming from the GPO when we turned the corner and coming towards us was June McIntosh and another ex-WAAAF – June nudged the girl and they both looked in the pram as they passed. I could just imagine them saying, "That's why Lorna was the first to be demobbed!" I'll add that I was a virgin till I married!!!

Yes, arthritis seems to effect most of us oldies, my toes are twisted to one side, so I wear rubber wedges to keep them apart, also I have it in my hands and neck, but I only need one tablet a day, thank goodness!

Two things I forgot to say:

I was on the night shift in 1943, when suddenly a lot of huge army trucks rumbled towards the hangars. No one said anything as to why they were there. Stores persons were on duty to load them up and away they went. In the Surf Coast Newspaper of 18 April this year (2005), Melva Stott, who usually writes about the Anglesea doings, instead wrote an article called "Anzac Day", and wrote about the Japanese air raids on north west Australia and mentioned that Onslow was bombed, which was the first time I'd heard the news, so putting two and two together, those trucks must have been loading up replacement gear! Vera you can now add our bit about seeing trucks at Cunderdin!

Article two. It was the all night telephonists' duty to phone the WAAAF officer, so she could be dressed and on parade each morning. One morning I forgot to call her till it was almost time for me to sound the parade alarm. So I apologized. F/O Darbyshire hurriedly dressed and rushed out to the parade. Standing next to the C.O. suddenly a pyjama leg fell down, much to the amusement of the people on parade.