

Marjorie Jean Roberts

9th September 1941, my fiancé RAAF pilot sailed on the first Queen Elizabeth in convoy with other troopships.

25th September 1941 I travelled by rail to Melbourne for a rookie's course with the Women's Air Force, formed by the worthy Prime Minister, John Curtin.

Hello Melbourne town and an old mansion, which had been stripped of furnishings, at Clendon Road, Toorak. The house, surrounded by about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre of gardens and camellias and more camellias, not bunches but trees, they must have been very old. Gardens bordered by cinerarias of all hues.

Firstly, we were issued with a palliasse on which to sleep, filled with straw, and two grey blankets. Then blue winter and khaki summer uniforms, black shoes and drab cotton stockings. Eating utensils and a kitbag for storing all belongings, plus a tin hat and gas mask.

There were girls from all states, but the majority were Queenslanders – approximately 40 in total. While on rookie course, which lasted about 4 weeks we wore a blue boiler suit contraption, which covered from neck to ankle and the coarse material was rough on the skin. We also wore a navy beret.

It was really a physically toughening exercise, with discipline thrown in. Officers were addressed as Sir or Madam and saluted. And we stood to attention while speaking to any rank of NCO.

There followed a vaccination programme, which seemed to cover every tropical disease known. They had a nasty reaction on many, some were quite sick and rotten colds developed after this barrage. I was soon sent to a Colin Street Specialist for a series of antrum washes. URK – least said the better.

The food was nutritious and plentiful, and after 4 hours daily pounding the parade ground (which was the area of two tennis courts) with the drill instructor barking his orders, most girls felt like eating a horse and chasing the jockey! I remember we had lots of hot cocoa to drink, as the weather was quite chilly.

I enjoyed the route marches for miles around the Malvern and Toorak districts. Despite sore feet and aching legs it was worthwhile to take in this exclusive area. We were lectured on various subjects and told what streets in Melbourne were out of bounds and given a metal disc to be worn around the neck, with number, 94434, name, blood type O4 and religion.

The passing out parade really was a credit to the drill instructor, for the proficiency that the squad had attained in such a short time. I watched the previous course including Leslie Anderson (Bateman) walk out, and they were a sight to remember; very smart, alert and sharp as a tack.

Then to Air Board in St. Kilda Road, to become efficient at my mastering of teleprinter operator. The signals room was the nerve centre, with wireless operators, cipher assistants, signals clerks, secret registry and the very noisy teleprinter machines.

I remember, without pleasure, the coded messages, miles long, they seemed in letters or numbers, or jumbled, not the casualty notifications. "Air Board regrets to inform you that your husband, 406400, Squadron Leader Bob Fletcher, is reported missing in action. Any further information will be immediately conveyed to you."

One sensed being the bearer of tragic tidings by sending out a message that would shortly cause misery to the recipient. On night shift when the pace slackened, I liked to get on a machine linked by landline to Perth and ask for local news.

Melbourne shops were full of delights, but on 5/- (50 cents) daily pay, one could only spend frugally. I saw my first mannequin parade at Buckley & Nunns; we'd never seen a more gorgeous display of girls!

After completing the course, I was posted back to H.Q.W.A A.N.A House, St George's Terrace close by and on the same side as London Court.

Within weeks I was promoted from ACW to Corporal – the first T/P NCO in WA and then to Air Operations Room, the 7th floor CML shared with the US naval officers, an RAF pilot grounded after losing an eye. They were a classy bunch – officers and gentlemen.

How fearless and trusting was I, at 21.

We worked two day-shifts, 2 afternoon and 2 night, then one day off. After the second night shift, midnight to 8am, one felt somewhat weary, so up to the Town Hall to catch a tram down Hay Street to No. 1195 where Aunty Vi, Rix and I lived. Waiting would be a generous cooked breakfast, prepared by our very caring Aunty. Then to bed, and youth could sleep soundly despite the jangling noise of passing trams.

Married 14.3.1944.

Discharged February 1945 when pregnant.

Per Ardua ad Astra.
(Through Toil To The Stars)