



## WRAAF News

### The ex WRAAF story in Victoria. A personal memoir.

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"I became Me" during that time of my life; a quote from firstly a university graduate seeking information and then she became a friend. Colleen joined the Royal Australian Air Force in 1985, 20 years after I took my first step into a challenging, but wonderful world of women in a male dominated world of a RAAF Base.

**151 WRAAF RTU** (Click the pic for names)





**WRAAF Reunion – 2011, Brisbane.**



I served at RAAF Base, East Sale for the “huge” total of 19 months. There was still a Commonwealth Public Service Act in 1965 to be discharged for “being no longer eligible for WRAAF Service”, if you wanted to get married. Marriage being the cake with cherry on top if you lived in those early years of the twentieth century. The Act was changed only months after I was married, when the women’s fervour for equality gained maximum demand in the second wave of feminism. I was a Clerk General in the Orderly Room and became Wing Commander Slam Sullivan’s secretary along with a Junior Officer Dougal McKenzie and a Warrant Officer Murray. I shared in the workload as a Clerk General and my Corporal was Tony Keene. It was a busy life in Base Squadron Orderly Room and every day was truly a great day at work.

***ACW Kyte, 19year old, 1965.***

I was to meet a girl in the ‘mysterious’, ‘shush’, ‘secret’ room in the same building. Flt Lt Haber was ever so good looking and appeared occasionally, but WRAAFs couldn’t be interested in ‘going out with an officer’, so it was a salute only between us, and I think he was married! However, I did meet the wonderful, Pam Nelson, an EDP Operator. It is still in the realm of what’s out there, big brother and the World Wide Web. I never did go into the room. Pam and I had conversations through the small wooden cut out that one would now put into a door as a doggy door. Knock and Pam’s face would appear as the wooden window was flipped up.

B





When I say wonderful, I mean one of the most sincere people on this earth, warm, funny as, but didn't stand for nonsense. She was this way all her life, but sadly passed away this year, quite suddenly. A loss to the world. Pam remustered to WRAAF NCO and became part of the Recruit Training at Edinburgh RAAF Base. She was well known throughout the sporting fraternity of all the Services.



The WRAAF life gave many of us a haven from abuse, but also gave us freedom albeit within the confines of a hierarchical structure of authority. We had possibly one or two girls in our room to share our lives, and mostly they became friends for life in a bonding that morphed us silently into one body. Wing Commander Lois Pitman, a lady I adored, but after WRAAF Service, because I didn't meet her until 1980, explained Esprit de Corps – Spirit of the Body – and that is what happened. We all became one.

And in the time we arrived to the day of discharge, we also had a bunch of other sisters who passed through our lives; all from different states, so there were many discussions, on names for food (cheerios, cocktail frankfurts), towns (Newcastle or Newc'ar'stle). I was from Queensland and said togs for a swimsuit, the way New South Wales girls described it. I had an argument about peanut butter and my way, peanut paste. I asked mum to post a jar down to prove it. Don't know why I did that now after 55 years have passed.

### **We were Royal**

At the time of my Service, June 1965 to February 1967, we were no different to our predecessors, those girls who joined in 1951, girls like Shirley Lemon and Patsy Hogan, both precious friends now, having met them at various reunions. We were the younger versions of the Triple A's, the women who joined the forces who were fighting World War 2. We were distinct from those girls, not just because we didn't have a war to fight (at that stage), but we were given the privilege of having Royal in our identity. The Triple A's being Women's Auxiliary Air Force. However, and sadly for many of us, the world puts us in the same basket, and just like younger sisters in families, the women of the Women's Royal Australian Air Force, are proud of their own identity. And yes we were in existence throughout the Vietnam War but only the Nursing Service women were allowed to go overseas. Neither WAAAF nor WRAAF were allowed in operational areas.

In this article I have not researched figures of participation in the 1960s, or the mustering's that came into existence as the women's service grew and the years passed.

The exWRAAF organization in Victoria, which has been in existence for 42 years was conceived as a Branch of RAAFA, and I became the founder and first member. I met a Peter Hannan and Reg Yardley of that organization and convinced Peter to let us join without the required 15 members. As a branch we were hopeless as far as the Board was concerned because we never had enough members, and those of us who were members of RAAFA were mostly the women were so immersed in baby nappies and the raising of several children, as indeed I was. The 3rd wave of feminism was happening and women were starting to find a life for themselves. Still in infant stages but for exWRAAF it was indeed a space to recapture the freedom of soul that we had in the service.





### **First Official Australia wide reunion**

Our first WRAAF reunion in Victoria had 300 women arrive at the Laverton Golf Club on my birthday, 22nd June 1980. This was four years after a known gathering in SA where there were interstate attendees. But this reunion was promoted Australia wide, and all the women had to bring was memories and a plate of food. The bar was manned by the husbands of the committee members, and they were handy when it came to cleaning up.

That first reunion had a wonderful feeling of elation. My own roommates met each other for the first time in years. ExWRAAF arrived from all over Australia and the CO of the Base came and congratulated us. He also allowed us to have the Golf Club to hold the reunion as long as he was in his position. We did convince his replacement as well. We held reunions in Victoria for many years in the 80s.

Our committee grew, and as we became a stable entity and planned our yearly reunion in June, we needed a place to meet. That's when we decided to join RAAFA, and have our meetings at Cromwell Street, South Yarra.



*Above - the only photo I have seen of South Australian exWRAAF. It was taken, I believe, at Marie Chenery's home, or at the CWA rooms. If anyone has information please contact me at [kipling3@bigpond.com](mailto:kipling3@bigpond.com)*



*Below - First Victorian National Reunion 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1980 at Laverton RAAF Base Golf Club. We had to have two photos to get everyone in. 300 ex WRAAF attended.*



So many of my East Sale hut mates attended. And also the friends of the friends. Since 1980 we have kept in touch and I made it a personal crusade to find the others, but that's another story. That day was just a buzz and a few girls must have had a headache the next day, and if you were there you will connect the dots if I say Amy and teeth in the same sentence. Amy left without her dentures.





Below: After all had left, we cleaned up the club and sat down and congratulated ourselves. These girls are mostly East Sale WRAAF. Laverton RAAF Base Golf Club 1980.





**L-R:** Lyn Mitchell nee Kyte (Author), Ann Steele nee Dodds and Anne Quinell nee Whiting, roommates from August 1965 to December 1966 c. That's when Ann Dodds left to be married. I followed in Feb 1967. I cried when I reached my home in Brisbane. My mother questioned why I got out of the Service. I cried back "because I had to". Only months later the marriage bar was lifted (21st August 1966) (Sawer M, 2016) (as was the right to have an umbrella while in uniform! Now with special rules.)



The four people who organized the reunion were friends, three were at East Sale at the same time and Jackie Walsh nee Rodger joined us. Jackie and I became wonderful friends and sadly





for me her husband was posted. I have never been able to find her despite many attempts, most recently on Facebook. Jackie, where are you?

We were at a Sergeants Mess dinner and someone must have been talking about the SA meetings. I said let's do one also. Brenda Douglas at that table and has been an important member as the years have passed. She has served on committee since the very early years. Betty was one character – she knitted and wore her own dresses. They fitted her personality like salami wrapped in clear plastic. She loved her cats and cottage garden and there were books in every corner of her little house. She would cook eggs and they would be forgotten and blow to the ceiling. She loved to make chocolate with rich fillings, her chocolates were her – rich, dark, mystery, flamboyant, colourful, and lovable. She played her part in our history, always at meetings (I drove, she talked),



*Laverton Reunion 1980. Three officers well known to WRAAF, Pearl Cox, Doris Carter and Lois Pitman all attended that year. Doris was previously an Olympian. Carter was a high jumper and Australia's first women's field athlete to make the finals. She was placed sixth in the women's high jump with 1.55 metres. (See [HERE](#))*

By 1985 we had a well-structured event and Patsy Ludwick nee Hogan had joined our celebrations. Those years we were developing a vibrant club atmosphere with ladies joining our committee. Friends Sally Cook nee Nutting (dcd), Chris Rogerson, Jan Smith (dcd), Jacqui McCloud (dcd), Pat White (dcd), followed by Lyn Morrison nee Christmas, Joy Emery, Brenda





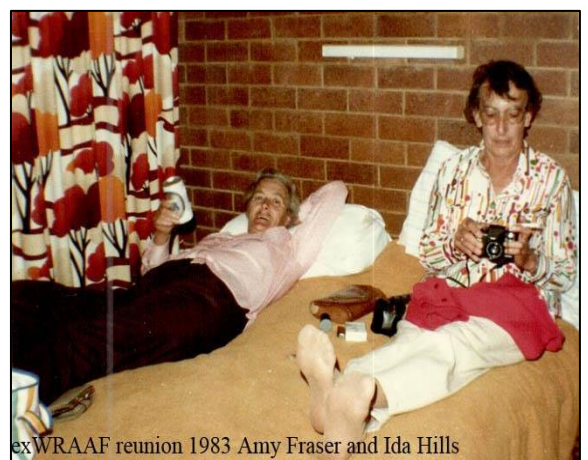
Douglas, Rosemary Pulz, Betty Cooper (dcd), Cheryl Hersey, Trish Hodda, Colleen Withers (dcd), Cath Pettit, Eileen Mostyn, Ann Dodds, June Gospel dcd, and so many more as the years passed by.

Patsy loved her local amateur theatre group and for some years we had skits and Patsy made us do terrible things.

The photo at right is blurry – but it reflects our joy.



Pat White, our splendid cook and a future President of the Branch.

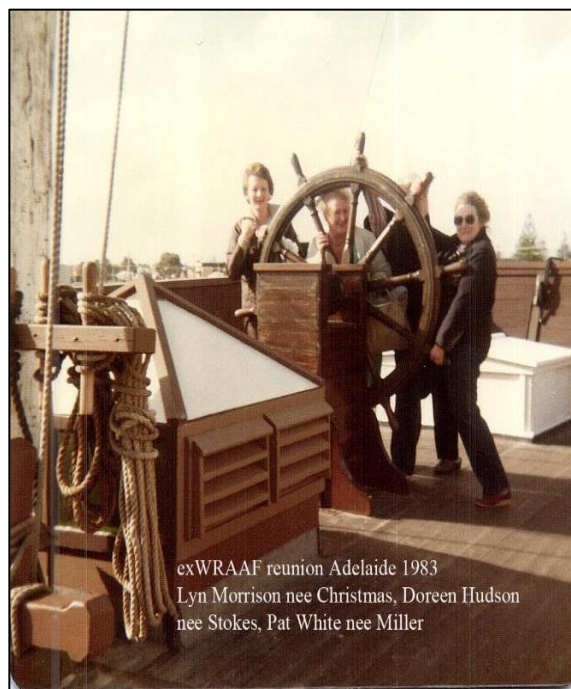


exWRAAF reunion 1983 Amy Fraser and Ida Hills

Ex WRAAF reunion 1983, Amy Fraser and Ida Hills.



Chris Rogerson counting money – a silver coin donation at the door.



exWRAAF reunion Adelaide 1983  
Lyn Morrison nee Christmas, Doreen Hudson  
nee Stokes, Pat White nee Miller

**L-R:** Lyn Morrison (Christmas), Doreen Hudson (Stokes), Pat White (Miller)  
ExWRAAF reunion Adelaide, 1983

ReunionsToowoomba and Adelaide.







### Ex-WRAAF reunion, Toowoomba, 1985



**L-R:** Jan Smith, Colleen Withers, Amy Fraser, Margaret Townsend, Don't know, Shirley Davey, Patsy Ludwick.

At that time, I had been to a Primary School Function and they had a fund raising raffle called a Dutch auction. Everyone had to bring something worth \$5. Bring as many gifts as you cared to. We then bought raffle tickets and they were drawn out after lunch. The object being some of us could go home with many gifts. It was accepted with great enthusiasm and the cries of "yes" as names were called can be recalled still, after so many years.

Our 1988 reunion was a blast. We were given permission to hold it in the Airmen's Mess at Laverton and amazingly some of us could stay in one of the blocks on Base. It was a space all wanted to experience. When does one ever relive an experience that is like no other? The talk, the jokes, this time no short sheeting of beds, and the conversation with close friends that is personal and deep, knowing we are in a bubble with just us.

This time we had a mannequin parade with real uniform borrowed from Pt Cook and some individuals. It was joy to see the women/girls reliving the past.

I will never forget that reunion. I had just sold my floristry business and went straight into picking up people from airports and coping with all facets of bringing hundreds of women together. As every exWRAAF knows, we have a Friday night Meet and Greet, Saturday night a formal evening meal and Sunday morning an all denomination church service to celebrate those who have passed, and all women of the WRAAF.

### WRAAF Reunion Melbourne, 1988. Parade of Uniforms.

K





East Sale people from all years at Laverton reunion, 1988.

L



We were building an organization that intended to keep the history of our service to Australia in the eye line of Australians. As a group we made the decision to march on Anzac Day. I think our first day was in 1989. It was the most remarkable morning every year. I made it to the train early (that in itself is a remarkable feat). For many years we marched behind the WAAAF who marched in their blue blazers and looked wonderful. We didn't achieve the same formation but we were cheered on each year. Comments such as "you're still looking good girls" gave us a giggle.

Marching so close to our older sisters from war time, we, at a younger age, merged and the sad fact was there was no recognition of a post war section of the WRAAF! We developed a banner and that eliminated some of the confusion and in later years we were put in front of the Vietnam boys, and a lot more identifiable.

Your job as a woman is to observe when your man is happy  
and immediately put a stop to that nonsense.

2003 Waiting outside the Town Hall, Melbourne. The banner made by a WRAAF



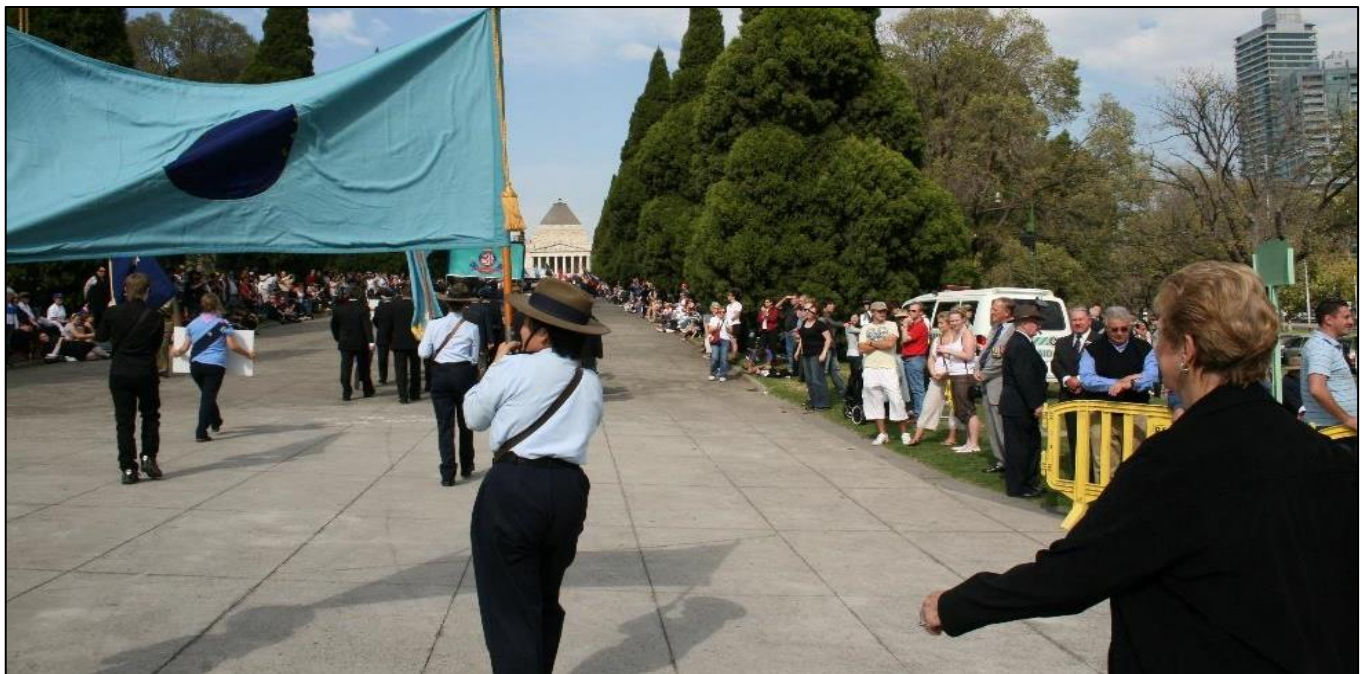


It was so much fun. The bands conflicted with each other and we would get out of step. We marched on rainy days and dodged the horse poo and the tram tracks. We loved the clapping and "good on you girls". It was a time to be proud of being a WRAAF. One of my top 10 moments in my life. It has been years since we marched but the sounds of the bands and the cheering and clapping remain and pride in my service is relived.





*Anzac Day 2008 June Gospel and Ann Steele. Jeeps can manage tram tracks. You feel a sense of identity and the heart races while you keep your outer person hopefully in time with the others.*



*Anzac Day 2008. I like this photo – Memorial Flag WRAAF*





The enthusiasm to get together to relive our memories led the other states to develop their own identities and Sydney decided to have the next reunion. South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia all formed branches and we took it in turns to have reunions. The last one being in South Australia in 2016 with West Australian Branch financing the event.



**L-R:** Anne Steele, Rosemary, Pulz, Kate Pettit and Trish Hodda.  
Meetings were held at RAAFA Cromwell St South Yarra. This one 2000.



Our reunion became an Annual Luncheon as the other states requested to hold the National reunion. At some stage, we moved to have our luncheons at Cromwell Street (RAAFA). It was more convenient as our numbers decreased.

Our Committee still met, and lunch began to be held at the various RSL venues when we felt the venue at RAAFA became restrictive. We did try various RSL venues, but for many years Werribee RSL was home, and many locals attended. Many RAAF on discharge stayed around that area, however, we did try the other side of town and had a few luncheons at Ringwood, and Caulfield and on the west, Altona RSL.

All had a train line within walking distance of the venue, but still our numbers were low despite our efforts.

Our newsletters kept everyone in the loop as much as was possible. Rosemary Pulz for many years delighted all with her passion for aircraft and the women who defied gender bias. I took over from Rosemary and the world still relied on the postal service. That was to change. The world discovered technology and an electronic form of communication we all call "The Web". Brenda Douglas took over the newsletter and now Victoria and the other states newsletters are sent by email.





Above & Below Luncheon at Werribee RSL June 2001





A meeting held luncheon at Werribee on 26th June 2001 after the lunch with the always committed WRAAF.



**L-R:** Colleen Withers dcd. Pam Steele nee Dodds (hidden), Don't know, June Gospel nee Hoy dcd, Pat White Dcd, Trish Hodda, and Rosemary Pulz Dcd, our newsletter editor for many years.







*Werribee RSL. Our 2002 luncheon was well attended and possibly the highest attendance rate.*

I haven't singled out many women this time. Really, I thank you all. Those of you who supported the ideology of keeping connected and who contributed so many years of dedication to the Branch. A club cannot survive without all members working together and though at times WRAAF Branch Victoria had moments, so too, do all clubs or committees. This is from memory and photographs, and names have not carried through to my brain in this year of 2022. Please forgive me. Hopefully, one day, papers will remind me. Perhaps the newsletters will help.

### **Luncheon at Caulfield RSL, 27th February 2011**



Our last President. June Gospel felt strongly about the WRAAF as so many do. Being a WRAAF changed the lives of so many young girls in the 50's and 60's, and probably still does today though there would be major differences as equality has been reached and women are in all musterings.

June passed away in 2022. She will be remembered as having a keen sense of humour, and a sense of fairness. She was a good President.





### Altona 2012



### Altona 2013



Reunions every three years became the norm as each state took its turn. Then every two years but as the generations of WRAAF age, there is less energy for the hard work that it takes to create an event for women reaching an age where they need far more care and concern. The last reunion was held in 2016 in South Australia with finance from the WA Branch.





**Perth Reunion 2007. Most Victorian Committee attended.**



The last reunion Victoria held was in 2004 and held at Mayday Hills resort at Beechworth. A one-time asylum, the hotel and grounds were gracious in their age and we all felt the spirit of friendship spread through the attendees.







Now part of a university, the grounds of Mayday Hills are spectacular. These are photos of the service on Sunday morning. I had just lost my friend Sally Nutting. We nominated the departed and it was as sorrowful as the series White Coolies – the calling with the word – Missing.

Unfortunately age is gaining on us and there are so many more.







My girls from East Sale. This was Beechworth 2004, but we do keep in touch and have grown our group by finding friends more easily through the various Facebook sites. Messages are sent via someone else who knows someone else. Just this year have found another of our Sale 80s group looked for near 60 years.

June Gospel and friend.



Patsy Ludwick, Kate Petit and friend.



The committee girls did have time together just having a coffee after a meeting and we had some Christmas lunches.





Though not a Victorian reunion but it should be highlighted that the Governor General of Australia recognized the WRAAF's place in history when she was guest speaker at the 2011 reunion in Brisbane.







One of my proudest moments in my life – meeting Dame Quentin Bryce. I wrote to her some weeks later and thanked her. When I met her I told her how good it was that she raised our profile and that of women in general. Some years later I was asked if she could put my letter in one of her books. I was proud of that not only for myself but for WRAAF. Brisbane Reunion 2011.







This particular reunion in 2011 attracted in the vicinity of 500 ex WRAAF. A noble feat indeed. The Governor General was charming and mesmerized us all. A great occasion for WRAAF.







WRAAF Reunion Queensland. Fri Meet & Greet. We used to stand on the Friday night but now we have to have tables and chairs.







*Reunion Brisbane 2011. June Gospel, Brenda Douglas, Cheryl Hersey and with her back to us, Ann Steele, part of Vic Branch committee.*



*A luncheon at Maroochydore Qld. This is the modern version of a reunion in each state. Local and smaller. A chat and lunch with friends and making new friends.*

For me, having been a foundation member, it was a moment of reflection and pride, even though there is an ignorance in the community – Australia wide – of our place in history. My hope is that a young WRAAF of 18 or 19 will enter the Force with the excitement that another young, blonde, naïve and determined young WRAAF had. A young girl who thought she could be another Mata Hari. She wasn't but she learned and grew to recognize that women were equal and their strength of resilience shone through the lack of power in their female bodies. I was that WRAAF and the Service changed my life.

Though we were dismissed from Service upon marriage, the breadth of empowerment we all enjoyed by being in the Service made us all women of courage and achievement, each in our own sphere of society. Women in the RAAF of today are enjoying the equality there is and this is achieved through determination of the modern WRAAF. Perhaps one day the women of 1951 to 1977 will be recognized for playing our part in those decisions. WRAAF friendships are still being lived through all ways of today's communication and for those with computer understanding, we can ask a question within seconds through the various applications.



There are almost 2,000 WRAAF on a Facebook site called exWRAAF and I am committed to a website called exWRAAF.com.

The Victorian Branch of WRAAF may not be as strong as it was and may even be disbanded but it was a link to our past and served the women in Melbourne well. We should all be proud of what we achieved and shown children and grandchildren what women can put their capabilities towards achieving whatever we desire.

The RAAF motto is Per Ardua Ad Astra – through adversity to the stars – we certainly have.

An old man calls his son and says, "Listen, your mother and I are getting divorced. Forty-five years of misery is long enough." "Dad, what are you talking about?" the son screams. "We can't stand the sight of each other any longer", he says. "I'm sick of her face, and I'm sick of talking about this, so call your sister and tell her," and he hangs up. Now, the son is worried. He calls his sister. She says, "Like hell, they're getting divorced!" She calls their father immediately. "You're not getting divorced! Don't do another thing. The two of us are flying home tomorrow to talk about this. Until then, don't call a lawyer, and don't file papers. DO YOU HEAR ME?" She hangs up the phone... The old man turns to his wife and says, "Okay, they're both coming for Christmas and paying their own airfares.