

YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 14 TO THE DEFENCE HERITAGE STORIES OF ROTTNEST ISLAND



The Virtual Visit series was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when Rottnest Island was closed to the public due to social distancing restrictions and periods of use for quarantine from March to June 2020.

The intent was to maintain a connection to the Island by exploring stories of interest and offering links for self discovery.

Now that the Island is once again open to visitors and guiding services are being gradually re-established, these Virtual Visits have been retained as part of an archival record for future reference and enjoyment.

PHOTOGRAPHS – AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S ARMY SERVICE



Group photo of Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) members on the steps of the Bickley Battery Command and Observation Post. As the operational situation changed during the war, more positions were opened to AWAS personnel particularly in coast defence and air defence roles. To highlight the WW II service of the Australian Women's Army Service, the Rottnest Island Authority and the Royal Australian Artillery Historical Society, as part of the Centennial of Women Suffrage in Western Australia, presented exhibits showing service women in non-traditional and leadership roles from 1899 – 1999. Over 3,618 AWAS served with the Royal Australian Artillery and manned the Fixed Defences of Australia from Hobart in the South and Cairns in the North, to Perth including Rottnest in the West.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

On 30 April 1941, a draft of the Australian Women's Army Service Regulations was prepared by the Adjutant General and handed to the Secretary, Military Board for submission to the Minister for the Army. The object of the Service was to release men from certain military duties for employment with fighting units. The principal condition governing the appointment of members of the AWAS was that they were to replace men, not to be used in addition to them. Subsequently on 29 July 1941, War Cabinet Agendum No. 257/41, "Formation of an Australian Women's Army Service" was submitted to Cabinet.

Formal approval was recorded on 13 August 1941 subject to the following conditions:

- No woman enlisted in this organisation were to be sent overseas without the approval of War Cabinet.
- The draft regulations to govern condition of service and rates of pay were to be referred to the Treasury Finance Committee for examination and report.

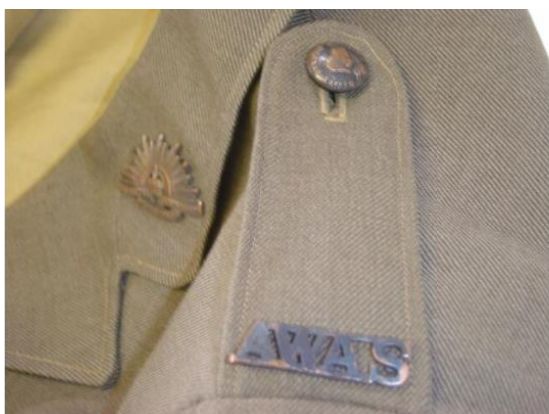
On 29 September 1941, the Army Minister approved the appointment of Miss Sybil Irving, MBE as Controller, Australian Women's Army Service. She immediately visited all Commands to confer with HQ Commands regarding recommendations for first officer appointments. As a result of her visits the Army Minister approved of the appointment of six Assistant Controllers, thirteen Commandants and six Assistant Commandants. All the appointed officers attended a Training School of three weeks duration commencing 24 November 1941. It was held at Guide House, Yarra Junction, Victoria. At the conclusion of the School all officers returned to their Commands and Military Districts to commence recruiting of their quota of personnel and prepare for training.

During the duration of the School - on 8 December 1941 - War Cabinet approved of the recruitment of 1,600 as the first complement of the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS). Each Command and Military District established an Interviewing Committee to deal with prospective recruits and to select suitable types for the various categories. The initial need was envisaged for: Transport Drivers, Cooks, Typists, Orderlies, Assistants, Telephonists, Canteen Attendants, Draughtswomen, Photographers, Photowriters, W/T Operators, Driver/Mechanics, Tailoresses, Waitresses, Textile Refitters, Equipment Repairers, Intelligence duties and Cypher duties.

In January 1942, Recruit Training Schools had been commenced in all Commands and Military Districts to ensure the 1600 personnel authorised would be absorbed by March 1942. It was anticipated that ultimately 5,000 to 6,000 personnel would be required. Such were military needs and the response to the program, that during the war a total of 24,026 women enlisted (with a maximum strength of 20,051 in January 1944). They were paid wages equal to two-thirds that of their male equivalents.

By 30 June 1947 all members of the AWAS had been demobilised. The Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC) was formed in April 1951 to meet a manpower shortage that developed due to hostilities in the Korean Peninsula and full employment post-World War II. At the time of its formation, many senior WRAAC personnel had previously served in the AWAS. By the late 1970s, female soldiers began integration into the Army at large and in early 1985, the WRAAC was disbanded.

FROM THE COLLECTION - CYNTHIA'S "GUNNER LEAKE" AWAS JACKET 1942



Cynthia Mary Leake was born in Perth on May 26 in 1921, She grew up on her parent's farm in Kununoppin, attending the local school and District High School, completing her secondary years at St Mary's School in West Perth. Cynthia then undertook nursing training in Kununoppin, working also at Norseman, Corrigin and Menzies before volunteering for war service. While nursing, Cynthia had the nickname of "Springer". On Rottneest she was recognised by an ex-patient, leading to her being frequently asked if she was "Gunner Springer Leake", She dealt with this appropriately! Cynthia used the buttons from her father's army jacket as being of better quality than those issued to her.

After the war she married Vernon (Bill) Wright and they farmed at Bencubbin for a few years before taking over a family farm in Kellerberrin which had been founded by her grandfather in 1867. Her uncle, Maitland Leake was one of the founders of Westfarmers. Twice widowed, Cynthia Ritson now lives in metropolitan Perth.



An RVGA Oral History (OH 2007.6), interview with Cynthia Wright was conducted on 10 January 2008 by Don Baker. Further details of Cynthia's jacket can be found on the Australian Dress Register: <https://australiandressregister.org/garment/557/>



Because of wartime restriction of photography in operational areas, most of the wartime AWAS photos on Rottnest show informal, recreational or administrative activities. The Football team and wash day are shown above.



Gathering greenery for a concert



The names of many in the photos in the collection are fully identified thanks to a program of active collecting, oral histories, island visits and commemorative events in the late 1990s. Follow on activities and engagement, over the years, has ensure continuity through the recording of both maiden and married names in collection records and archives..



Recruit training at Gloucester Park