

# WWDHS NEWSLETTER No. 443 June–July 2020

## Meeting, 13 May 2020

A Zoom meeting was held by the committee to approve some outstanding payments and to pass the minutes of the previous meeting. Members will be given advance notice about when general meetings will be resumed and will be advised of date and venue.

The committee agreed to support two applications for the Wagga City Council Annual Grants Program:

1. **North Wagga Residents Association** for their North Wagga Wagga Village Heritage Track project. Twenty-six sites have been identified as significant, a walking track devised and a two-page pamphlet (map one side and sites listed and briefly described on the other), an 80-pg Booklet with detailed descriptions and photographs of each site as well as a walking tour app (IZI.Travel) and interpretive signs for each site.
2. **Gurwood Street Public School P&C Association** for the publication of a book commemorating the sesquicentenary of the school.

**Annual Subscriptions Are due by 1 July 2020: a Membership Renewal Form is attached to this email. Fees are: Single \$20, Couple \$30 Corporate \$50. A Warm Welcome to new members:**

**Anne Barclay, Andrew Holmes and Marie Clear.**

**Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, meetings remain cancelled. Members will be notified re when they will be resumed as soon as possible.**

**WWDHS Patron:** Michael McCormack, Deputy Prime Minister  
and Federal Member for Riverina

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**Huthwaite's Project:** the manuscript is currently at the printers and scheduled to be completed by the end of May or early June.

A virtual (not physical) exhibition on the Huthwaite's store is also being organised.

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# Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS)

## Part 1: Searchlight Training Regiment at Kapooka

By Sherry Morris

During the Second World War women were eager to serve in the armed forces. Although reluctant at first, the Federal Government eventually bowed to pressure. It accepted the assistance of women but insisted that they were to be subsidiary to men and that their assistance was to be only a temporary measure. The Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) was formed in October 1941 because of the desperate need for typists, clerks, stenographers, cooks, drivers for cars and ambulances, photographers, switchboard operators, orderlies and messengers, to release men for overseas services.

By August 1942, there were 7000 members of AWAS and there was a recruiting drive to encourage more women throughout Australia to enlist. Feature articles in magazines such as the *Women's Weekly*, emphasised how happy and healthy the AWAS girls were. One described how bronzed they were from working so much in the open air. Another claimed that their enthusiasm 'surmounts the heat, the swirling clouds of red dust, the flies, the glare, the mosquitoes, the ants and even the spiders.... The girls grin, wipe the red mud packs from their faces and carry on.'<sup>1</sup> By the end of the year over 10,000 had responded.<sup>2</sup> By the first anniversary in November 1942, 9000 women had been trained and posted for duty with the Australian Military Forces (AMF) and thus 9000 men released for service in the field.

To be eligible for enlistment in the AWAS, a woman had to be a British subject of substantially European origin or descent, aged between 21 years and 45 years of age (later the minimum age was reduced to 18 years), physically fit and in possession of professional, technical or other qualifications approved by the Military Board. In addition, all recruits had to be certified by a clergyman, a municipal councilor, a Justice of the Peace or an Officer of the Australian Military Forces to be of a good moral character. Uniform, clothing and equipment was supplied to all recruits as well as a small cash allowance for the purchase of items not provided.



Left: Advertisement for AWAS and AAMWS (Australian Army Medical Women's Service)

Source: *Australian Women's Weekly*, 24 October 1942

Before coming to Kapooka, AWAS personnel had about four weeks' training in Army organisation, routine drill, hygiene and first aid before they advanced to specialist training, for example, signalling school, searchlight training or clerical school (to train in army clerical work) or to cooking or waitress school. Most of the AWAS women at Kapooka were in the searchlight detachment. They were recruited from all over Australia but mostly from Victoria, NSW and South Australia. They came from a wide variety of civil occupations. Some were 'farm girls', some managed retail businesses. Others were shop assistants, librarians, telephonists and business girls. Many had never done any paid work.

Lieutenant Lorna Maye was appointed as the 'Administrative Officer in Charge' of the Australian Army Searchlight Training Regiment at Kapooka. Fair-haired blue-eyed Lorna had been working as a show card or ticket writer and a telephonist. She had also been active in the community and raised substantial sums of money for patriotic organisations. She was only 25 years of age but, according to one of her charges, she was 'very hard on discipline'.<sup>3</sup>

The first AASL personnel began arriving at Kapooka towards the end of 1942 and by May 1943 there was a full complement of about 400. Most of the women arrived by train at the Kapooka Siding and were taken to the AWAS Searchlight Detachment Camp by three-ton trucks. The camp was under the gum trees on the side of the hill on the south-west perimeter and isolated from the remainder of the camp (between the third and the second battalions). It consisted of the AWAS compound, a location (station site) adjacent to the rear of the compound, a training area and a parade ground, an operations room, a Camp Orderly Room, a mess hut and a recreation hut (both unlined galvanised iron buildings), lecture halls and the tents of the instructors (all men).



*AWAS Camp, surrounded by barbed wire. The sign on the tree says 'AWAS'.  
Source: Les Sharp Collection, Kapooka Museum.*



*Above right: Making a cobblestone pathway to the tents  
Les Sharp Collection, Kapooka Museum*

Within the AWAS compound were probably three wooden buildings, an orderly room inside the entrance gate, a recreation hut and the ablution block. There was also a RAP tent and about forty tents (mainly five-man American tents and three-man tents) for living quarters. The tent ropes were attached to steel posts which had been cut in half and driven into the ground. Some tents were very close and the ropes from neighbouring tents crossed. According to one AWAS member, 'there were many gashed legs from these pegs'.<sup>4</sup> The compound was surrounded by barbed wire fencing initially one roll wide and to a height of about two metres. Later the width was increased to three rolls after some American engineers, on their first night in camp, tried to get into the compound, having been advised by mischievous Australian sappers that this was an easy short cut to an after-hours canteen.

The women, just like the men, had to wear their uniform – trousers, battle jacket, slouch hats and half heavy boots and carry .303 rifles and tin hats. At times they had to wear the gas mask on parade or on a route march (and on one occasion were taken through a gas chamber while wearing them). In winter they had to wear greatcoats as part of their uniform and according to Dorothy King 'sometimes drilling in them was a stifling procedure'. Greatcoats were also used for warmth on guard duty or standing out in the middle of a paddock in the early hours of the morning in pouring rain or freezing cold to operate the searchlights. They wore the searchlight colour patch (a purple rectangle crossed with a red flash) on their upper arms and hatbands. Their working dress included blue dungarees and 'giggle dresses' with men's army socks and boots and a wide-brimmed felt hat with leather chin strap. The women learned to march, drill and parade. They also had rifle drill so that they quickly learnt how to pull down Bren guns (and later Lewis guns) and put them back together again.

The AWAS members training for searchlights were lectured on the basic workings of the lights, on the engines which generated the power to run them, on procedures to be followed to operate them, and on their role in illuminating aeroplanes for the anti-aircraft batteries. They undertook



an intense course of aircraft identification. The women learned how to handle the mechanism of the searchlights and to clean, maintain and repair the machinery. The equipment consisted of 90-centimetre American Sperry and the English S.L.C. (commonly known as 'Elsie'), both operated by a generator. They were also shown the basics of radar-controlled searchlights, which had only just become available.

It took a crew of between nine and twelve to man a searchlight. The controller (or detachment commander) gave the orders. Spotters sat at vantage points about fifty metres away from the light in swivel chairs scanning the sky with binoculars with special sights, watching for planes and shouting instructions to the operators. The projector controller operated the projector, which moved the light. The lamp attendant cleaned and mended the lamp and kept the arcs in focus. Sound locators listened for the plane and gave readings of the height and bearing of the approaching target to the projector crew. Generator set operators operated the generator or 'gen'. Others worked the control pillar. Each member completed a thorough course of the various roles and was capable of taking on any of the duties but was then permanently assigned to the one for which she was most suited. This made teamwork smoother, speedier, and more efficient. As soon as the women were trained sufficiently, they were expected to take the place of men operating the searchlights and eventually, it was expected, they would man the searchlights entirely by themselves.



*Left: Gunner MacGregor on guard duty at Wagga Wagga Searchlight Station.  
Right: Members of an AWAS Searchlight crew, cleaning and overhauling the searchlight while the  
AWAS spotter in the foreground is relining in a swivel chair, looking for planes.*

*Source: Australian War Memorial*

Eighteen-year-old Dorothy Kingston, a former typist, was chosen as a spotter. She recalled she had to undergo an intense course to learn how to identify aircraft (those of Australia and their allies and the Japanese). She wrote:

One of the lecture huts had model aeroplanes of all types hanging from the ceiling which were illuminated one at a time and described in detail. Spotting chairs were canvas structures in which one could lie parallel to the ground, the binoculars were very powerful and the theory was that the spotter scanned the sky in their area, discovered the aircraft, gave some directions such as 'aircraft approaching north, south, etc and the approximate height in feet'. After the beam was exposed, the directions of left, right, up, down were given - meanwhile never losing sight of the target - and then lastly 'On Target'.<sup>5</sup>

Another small group of AWAS personnel worked in the operations room. They recorded and plotted the movements of planes in the district on large maps spread out on tables and received and relayed messages to the searchlight crews. They worked in co-operation with the RAAF and were in constant communication. Honor Kells was posted to Kapooka to train as a Radar Operator on the searchlights. She explained:

My job was to look into a small screen like a TV with a cathode ray tube, line up the fixed echo, take the bearings and elevations and instruct those on the ground particularly the spotters whose job it was to recognise all the planes and the ones on the Bren guns.<sup>6</sup>



*Left: Private Marjorie Power at Angel's Bridge near Wagga Wagga engaged in aircraft spotting. Source: Australian War Memorial. Right: Honor Kells. Source: Museum of the Riverina.*

In October 1943, the trucks carrying searchlights and their AWAS crews participated in a spectacular procession through Baylis and Fitzmaurice streets which was enjoyed by thousands of spectators.<sup>7</sup>

*Right: Trucks carrying searchlights and their AWAS crews, participating in a spectacular procession in Wagga Wagga. Source: Museum of the Riverina.*



Towards the end of their training, the female searchlight teams, like the male teams, spent some days 'on location'. One 'location' was at the back of their compound. Another was at Angel's Bridge (a deserted farmhouse) outside Wagga Wagga. The women packed up their tents, took rations and were driven some kilometres from Kapooka towards Uranquinty where they set up a searchlight station and camp and practised living and working under conditions they could expect on a searchlight station. They pitched their own tents, dug pits for toilets and cooked in a camp oven. Showering was usually non-existent. According to Tess Goodstate, 'in desperation' they used a paint can with holes punched in the bottom and suspended from the roof of an outhouse. The lady having the shower stood underneath the tin and another lady poured in enough water for soaping up and then enough for rinsing off.<sup>8</sup>

The camp was described in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by staff correspondent, Constance Robertson, who had visited the searchlight unit training at the 'army camp under canvas':

Well-placed and dispersed the tropical tents of the camp are camouflaged under the shade of every tree but even if this were not so the tents at times are completely hidden behind banks of dust, which make it impossible to see from one side of the road to the other.

The girls grin, wipe the red mud packs from their faces and carry on. They are so busy at their job and so eager to learn that they have not time to use the perfect mirror of the searchlight for make-up....

Training of the searchlight units attached to the Army consists of drill, lectures, and practical instruction on the searchlights...

Lieut. Lorna Maye, AWAS, formerly a telephonist in Adelaide, told me that the girls learn all the jobs and are then permanently assigned to the one for which they are most suited. Lance-Corporal Everard who four months ago was a trainee is now instructing on the searchlight unit.

A large number of country girls are in training, and as in all groups of Servicewomen, questioning reveals a wide variety of civil occupations. There are land girls, shop assistants, librarians, telephonists, business girls, but they have all forgotten the jobs they knew for the more interesting job at hand.

Private Rita Buttsworth, a farm girl from Taree, told me that 'calling hogs' was nothing to the yelling practice given to the spotters who sit in chairs about 50 yards from the searchlight. Spotters are issued with binoculars with special sights, and it is their job to sight the aircraft and yell directional instructions to the girls at the light.

The four directional instructions – right, left, up, down – are spoken 'slowly' or 'quickly' which means, in effect, drawled or staccato. But if you say 'right quick' you must say 'stop' as well, and give another order immediately, because the beam must not remain stationary.

Sapper Nell Birrell, who formerly managed a retail business at Cremorne, told me that you couldn't gossip when on the sound locator. 'The slightest whisper is picked up, and you can listen effectively for only about five minutes at a time', she said. 'You get a funny sensation across the top of the head when the sound of aircraft is picked up'.

All the girls wear a smile that won't rub off. 'We are not bomb-happy. We are 'Kapooka happy'.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes the Uranquinty RAAF aircraft and the Searchlight Units practised together, the RAAF evading the beam and the searchlight crews trying to expose them within it. A feature of the camp was a 'Take Post'. Dorothy Kingston explained:

This meant those on air sentry would be alert to a searchlight beam stationary at 90 degrees. 'Take Post' was shouted to the sleeping girls who donned trousers and greatcoats, tin hats etc and ran to their positions. The length of time it took to set our searchlight operational and resting on this 90-degree stationary beam was recorded.<sup>10</sup>

According to Constance Robertson:

Army co-operation with the RAAF ensures that the girls have actual practice with aircraft, and some of them told me that they thought they were becoming 'quite expert' at locating the aeroplanes and getting the beam into position. By the time their training is completed they will be sufficiently skilled to take the places of men at present operating the searchlight units...

When the camp concluded, the women took the tents down, packed up the camp and returned to Kapooka where the tents were re-erected.



*Above left: Setting up the AWAS Searchlight Camp. Source: Kapooka Museum*

*Above right: Searchlight Camp. Source: The Australian War Memorial.*

*Right: Kapooka Searchlight Ladies  
Source: Australian War Memorial*





*Kapooka Searchlight Ladies. Source: Australian War Memorial*

By 1945, AWAS personnel provided a large percentage of the people managing searchlight stations. In fact, many of the searchlight stations around Australia were completely manned by them, thus releasing men for overseas service.

Late in November 1943, the Searchlight Training Regiment was shifted from Kapooka to Georges Heights in the Sydney suburb of Mosman. Before their departure they participated in a very large march in Wagga Wagga, which was a magnificent spectacle. Lorna Maye was posted to the Second Australian Army as Administrative Officer. In February 1944, she was transferred to the 53 AWAS Barrack in the Northern Territory as Assistant Commandant. Just over a year later, she was released from the AMF to allow her to transfer as a probationer to the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

One of these searchlight ladies who completed the Searchlight Course at Kapooka was Honor Kells. After the war she was involved with the Ex-servicewomen's Association for many years and was President of the Junee Branch for 17 years and President of the Wagga Wagga Branch for the last three. On Anzac Day, 25 April 1994, she made history when she was the first woman to present the Occasional Address at the Anzac Day Commemorative Service in the Victory Memorial Gardens. In her speech she featured the role civilians played in Wagga Wagga during the war.

## **HONOR KELLS: ANZAC DAY ADDRESS IN WAGGA WAGGA, 1995**

I feel privileged to address the gathering here today.

ANZAC Day has always been a very special day to me. A day when we join together to honour the men and women who joined the services and fought for their country.

Many gave their lives, others suffered as POWs and many more lived with the horrors of war.

By your attendance in the streets and here today you show it is a special day for the people of Wagga Wagga too.

1995 has a very special significance – being 50 years since World War II ended and is to be known as ‘Australia Remembers – 1945-95’. We not only remember those who joined the services, but those who stayed at home and supported the servicemen and women.

The mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts, who took on jobs they had never done before – keeping the farms going and the food supplies flowing, picking fruit, driving tractors and heavy trucks, milking cows, working in ammunition factories and other factories, in hospitals and joining the Land Army, VAD, Red Cross, CWA comfort funds, and other charities, raising funds to buy planes, knitting socks and scarves, making camouflage nets, making cakes and sending comforts to the boys overseas, and those who became war widows rearing their families on their own while they themselves were living with severe food, petrol and clothing rationing, blackout restrictions and much more.

We remember the young folk who grew up without a father, because of war, and thank the members of Legacy who tried to fill the gap.

The men who didn’t pass for the services or were in restricted positions, joined the volunteer defence services, Legacy, Salvation Army and other organisations.

Many young people left school at 14 and joined the war effort.

Others worked on the railways keeping the troops moving, or kept the Post Offices functioning, getting all the important mail through to the soldiers, and the important troop movement messages to the leaders with signals and morse code, even to the homing pigeon fanciers, some of these were very hush hush and still are.

The people of Wagga Wagga can be justly proud of their war effort, particularly in World War II.

Many mothers and families who lived a long way from Wagga Wagga appreciated the kindness and comfort shown to their sons and daughters, many of them only 18 years old and away from home for the first time training at Kapooka, Forest Hill, Uranquinty, Temora, Narrandera and Cootamundra before going overseas.

I know many of the old residents of Wagga Wagga will remember the sad farewells at the Railway Station when the troop trains left taking the young servicemen away to destinations unknown and some never to return – also the long and devastating wait for news after the fall of Singapore – years of waiting and wondering of the fate of those who were captured and

finally at the end of the war the return of the shattered and starved bodies that had been those young men – and those who became Rats of Tobruk.

We remember the anxiety of the parents and young wives of local airmen who left for shores so far away to fly strange aircraft, some to be shot down and others to be taken prisoners in foreign lands.

Many local youths joined the navy even though there were no training facilities in Wagga.

When news of a ship being sunk, all wondered who they knew in the silent service and anxiously waited.

We remember our Nursing Sisters and VADs who nursed our troops and those who trained them in Wagga Wagga.

We remember the families who answered a knock at the door to find a clergyman or the post boy with a telegram in their hand bringing news of a loved one, and the fear of what it might be.

We remember our Korean and Vietnam veterans with great pride for the sacrifices they made for the rights of others and for peace.

We also remember the disaster at Kapooka when 26 engineer recruits were killed in an explosion and two seriously hurt, and the funeral march through the city.

Many service personnel have happy memories of their stay in Wagga Wagga like dances at the old Coconut Grove and the Palais De Dance – the old Picture Theatre in Gurwood Street, staying at the YWCA, Red Cross comforts, CWA cups of tea, hot cocoa from the Salvation Army, the churches and visits to private homes, the concert parties who entertained the troops.

These are the things that will be long remembered and honoured this year.

My own personal memories of Wagga Wagga go back to arriving on a very cold July 4, 1943 as a member of the AEAD, to Kapooka, away from home for the first time.

I came to train as a radar operator on the searchlights – I had never heard of radar. I had volunteered as a driver, which I became later. There were girls from every state of the Commonwealth here as Kapooka was the only training centre for searchlights.

We had to learn every job on the station and trained with the Air Force from Forest Hill and Uranquinty on the old Wirraways.

I'm sure many of the older Wagga Wagga residents remember seeing the searchlights raking the skies at night while we were training.

We did a Farewell March through the city before the whole unit moved to Georges Height in Sydney.

These Memorial Gardens also have happy memories for many service people, as it was a great recreation centre and many young couples met here – as lots of other places were out of bounds to the troops.

Wagga Wagga remembers with great joy, when the war ended and the boys and girls began to return home.

The welcome home parties and weddings that took place – many of the brides in borrowed frocks or the whole bridal party dressed in window curtain material to save clothing coupons, which were very scarce.

To the boys and girls of today and those who are making Australia their new home – I say the strongest thread in a person's character is 'loyalty'.

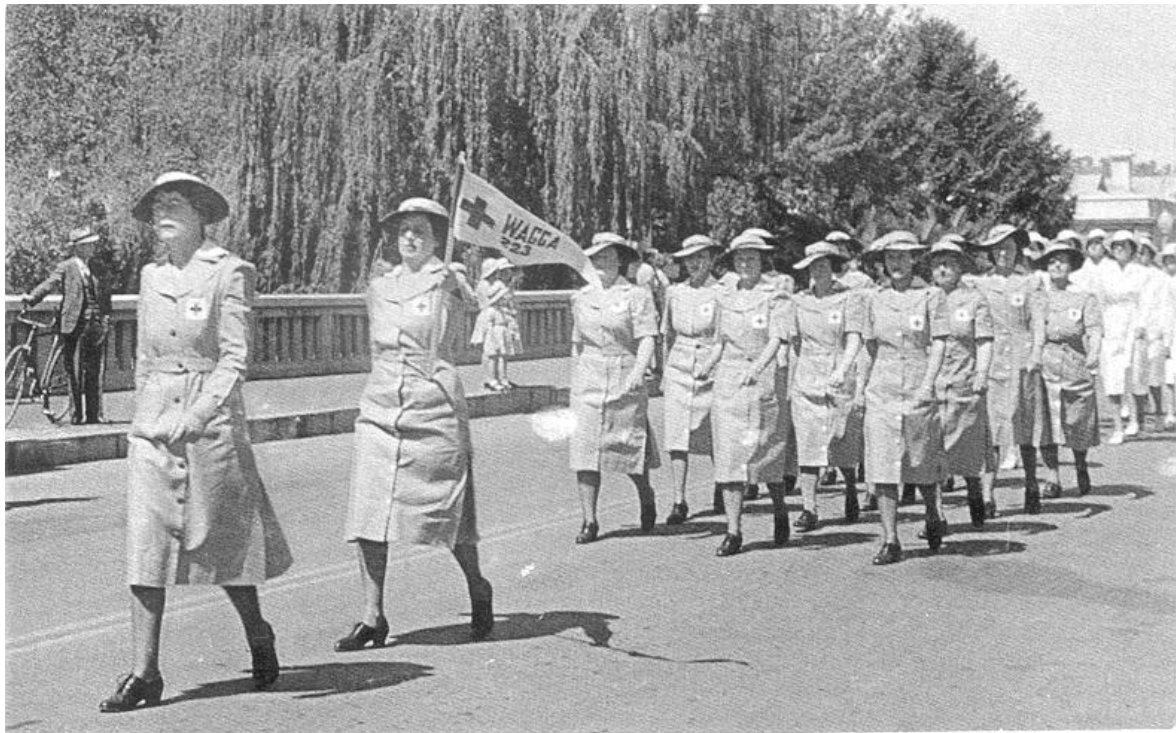
So be loyal to our beautiful country – honour your flag and remember a whole generation of youth who died and the sacrifices made so you can live in a free country. You have freedom of speech – freedom of assembly, the right to vote – let them not have died in vain. Preserve their memory and thank God for the freedom they won for you and future generations of Australians.

These gardens with their cenotaph – aeroplane propellers, *HMAS Wagga* anchor, the Sandakan Memorial and the Eternal Flame tell the story. Let the Dove of Peace be our real memorial and 1995 truly be a year of remembrance as we salute the Ex-servicemen and women who are here with us today. May God bless you.

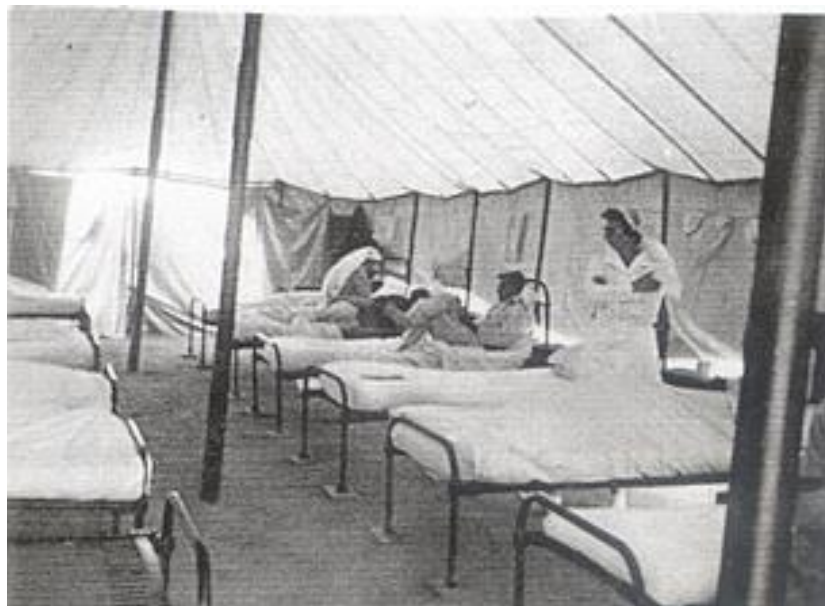


*Above Members of the Wagga Wagga WANS Fire Brigade Auxiliary Division on a fire engine at the front of the Wagga Wagga Fire Station. Back from left to right: Mary Sullivan, Joyce Graham, Olive Dunn, Marge Johnson, Enid Johnson. Front: May Peacock (standing behind fire extinguishers), Lorraine Davies (standing), Elma Paul, Jean Weeks, Alma Collet, Marion Oxley, Joy White, Betty Morrow (behind the steering wheel), Audrey Cameron, Miss Aberdeen, Elaine Bertram, Shirley Armstrong. CSU Regional archives RW2008*





*Above: Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) Market Day Procession, 5 October 1940. There were 84 members in 1940. They attended parades every week in uniform, performed drills and learnt first aid. They assisted in the clerical work associated with recruiting and in the vaccination of troops, made articles for hospital use such as bandages, slings, binders and drains and made jams, sauces and pickles for the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. On 5 October 1940 the VAD organized a Market Day to raise funds for the local branch of the Red Cross. Military and other organizations (including children's organizations) joined the VAD processions through the two main streets prior to the Market Day.*



*Right: Members of the VAD nursing troops at the first military hospital in Wagga Wagga (in a church marquee at the showground) under the supervision of trained nursing staff and with army orderlies. The bed covers and lockers were supplied by the Red Cross.*



*RSL Ladies Auxiliary packing parcels to send to the 'boys' overseas. Standing from left to right at the rear: Margaret Ellis, Nell Wilks, Catherine Graham and Ethel Wild.*

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Knox, 'AWAS Girls Learn to Man Searchlights: Hard Life in the Bush', *Argus*, Melbourne, Victoria, 23 February 1943; Constance Robertson, 'Army Women Train: Learning to "man" searchlights', *SMH*, 23 February 1943; *Goulburn Evening Post*, 26 January 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Recruitment drives were advertised in all states.

<sup>3</sup> NAA, B884, Lorna Maye, World War II service record; Lorna Maye, letter to the editor, *The Advertiser*, 4 May 1939, 17 September 1940; *Sunday Times*, Perth, Western Australia, 20 April 1941; *Northern Times*, Carnarvon, WA, 16 August 1941; CSURA, RW1572/1, Honor Kells nee Sandford, Ex-Servicewomen's Stories, p.11.

<sup>4</sup> CSURA, RW1572/1, Dorothy King and Margaret Parker, Ex-Servicewomen's Stories, pp.3-4, 7, 70; Tess Goodstate, '1<sup>st</sup> Australian AASL Training Regiment: Kapooka 1942-1943', Les Sharp Collection.

<sup>5</sup> CSURA, RW1572/1, King, p.5; NAA, B884, Dorothy Kingston, WWII service record.

<sup>6</sup> CSURA, RW1572/1, Kells, p.11-12; King, pp.4-7; Cath Simmons nee Knipe, p.19.

<sup>7</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, 5 October 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Goodstate, '1<sup>st</sup> Australian AASL Training Regiment'.

<sup>9</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 1943.

<sup>10</sup> CSURA, RW1572/1, King, pp. 5, 6; Kells, pp.5, 11-12.