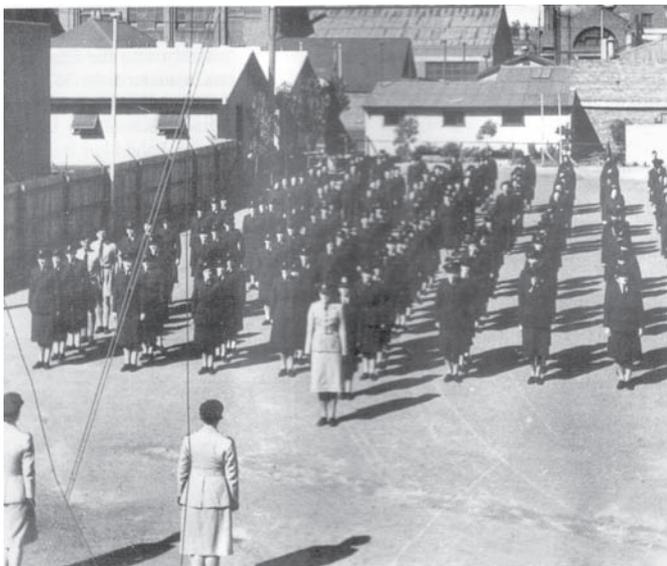




WOMEN - AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

As announced by the Prime Minister last year, it is planned to increase the ADF's authorised full-time strength from approximately 51,000 to 57,000 by 2016. This includes an increase in the size of the RAAF of 8.1 per cent over the next ten years. To achieve this, a recruiting rate 39 per cent greater than the present one will need to be sustained over the next decade. Considering the demography of the nation, is this an impossible target to achieve? Or has a large part of the population been overlooked when considering potential recruits?



Women trainees on morning parade, RAAF's No 1 School of Technical Training, West Melbourne, November 1941

Until the pressures of World War II forced a change in policies, the only area open to women in the Australian armed services was nursing, a role that women had carried out successfully since the time of Florence Nightingale in the nineteenth century. When the RAAF came into being during the 1920s, it was required to largely share medical and dental facilities with the Army as an economy measure, and it was not until 1940 that the RAAF separated out its medical services. This included a nursing service, the RAAFNS, which was established on 26 July that year along similar lines to the RAF service set up in June 1918. Between 1940 and 1955, over 600 nurses joined, serving in World War II, the Korean War and the Malaysian conflict where they lived and worked under the same conditions as their male counterparts. During the Vietnam War, RAAFNS members flew many long and demanding medical evacuation flights ("medivacs")

from Vietnam back to Australia. Some members also served with American units in the Philippines, conducting medivacs back to USA.

In March 1941, the RAAF formed the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force (WAAAF). This was the first and the largest of the three women's services to be formed in World War II. Initially, members of the WAAAF were recruited on 12-month contracts to temporarily fill critical mustering roles such as wireless telegraphists, clerks and cooks in the expanding Air Force. It



Air Vice-Marshal Julie Hammer

was expected that the WAAAF would return to civilian life once sufficient numbers of male recruits had been trained. However, the need for trained personnel continued to grow and WAAAF members took on other roles, until by 1945, 77 per cent of RAAF positions were available to them. Women maintained and armed aircraft, operated radars, drove trucks and instructed in drill—all jobs previously considered the domain of males. However, despite the RAAFNS members serving with distinction in combat areas overseas without difficulty, Government policy would not permit WAAAF members to serve overseas or in Australia north of the line joining Cairns and Geraldton. In line with the social structure of that time, the WAAAF was seen as a temporary service that was only needed during wartime. With the end of the war the need disappeared and the service was disbanded in December 1947.

With commencement of the Korean War in 1950, the RAAF once again needed skilled workers quickly. The Women's Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF) was formed as a permanent (that is, not auxiliary) force in July 1950 to fill positions such as cooks, drivers, clerks, medical orderlies and teleprinter operators. As the need for skilled staff increased, the WRAAF increased in size and restrictions on employment (such as not being allowed

to serve overseas) were eased. By the late 1970s, Australian society had largely accepted the equality of women with men and that separate services for men and women were not required. As a result, in May 1977 the members of the WRAAF and RAAFNS were integrated into the RAAF with equal pay and conditions.

In the RAAF today, women work successfully alongside men in every branch and mustering except Ground Defence Officer and Airfield Defence Guard. Female RAAF members have served overseas on combat support tasks and humanitarian missions, living under the same field conditions as their male counterparts. Within the RAAF, women have achieved many milestones. These include attaining two star rank, command of a flying squadron (in particular, a squadron that was introducing a new aircraft and a new capability to the RAAF), command of an Australian overseas task force in Sudan, and being dux of many courses (including Pilots Course and Test Pilot Course).



**Squadron Leader Ruth Elsley,
Commander Australian Sudan
Contingent**

Women made up fractionally over 50 per cent of the nation's population in June 2006, yet only 13.3 per cent of full-time ADF members at that time were female. The 2087 women then in the Permanent Air Force represented a

higher percentage (15.7) than the female component of the Army (10.0), but not the Navy (17.5). Although the percentage of female officers in the RAAF (16.7) was again higher than the Army (14.0), it still lagged behind the Navy (19.3). So, while the RAAF's performance to date is by no means the worst, the question remains: does this represent best utilisation of the female sector of the recruitment pool available to the RAAF? This consideration must not be at the recruiting end alone. Are females being given fair consideration in selection for courses and promotions? Are social and sporting amenities on bases equally suited to men and women? There are many questions to be answered.

In this time of intense competition for the best people in a shrinking pool, can the RAAF, as a service, afford to have women filling fewer than one in five positions?

Doris Jessie Carter (1912-1999)



Squadron Officer (later Wing Officer) Carter was Director of the WRAAF from 1951 until 1960. She had previously served in the WAAAF during World War II, as a squadron officer in administration. Before the war she had been a primary school teacher and an outstanding athlete, representing Australia at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and the 1938 Empire Games in Sydney.

With the disbandment of the wartime WAAAF, Carter was seconded to the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction, then went to London with the Department of Immigration. Capable, effective, energetic, she was the ideal person to head the RAAF's women's service when it reformed. Her qualities were recognised wider afield, when she was selected as assistant manager of the Australian team for the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne.

Yet Carter was never granted a permanent RAAF commission, serving until her resignation on a series of short-term appointments.

- *Historically, the RAAF has been at the forefront in utilising womanpower in non-traditional (ie. not nursing) capacities in war*
- *The main barriers to women seeking careers of the highest standard in the RAAF of today have already been brought down*
- *In a period of intense pressure on achieving recruitment targets for sustaining and growing the ADF, is the RAAF getting the maximum benefit from using the talents of Australia's female population?*

"[Questions regarding employment of women] should be resolved during peacetime and not be a forced decision at time of war because sufficient men were not available."

Joyce Thomson
The WAAAF in Wartime Australia(1991)



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