

Basic Detail Report

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Title

Printed material collected by WRAN Margaret White

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History

Margaret White joined the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service in 1968 at the age of seventeen and signed up for four years. She completed six weeks initial training at HMAS CERBERUS and then trained as a radar plotter at HMAS WATSON. Radar plotters prepare the map used in simulated exercises, to record the movements of all the ships and submarines. Margaret transferred to the Australian Joint Anti-Submarine School at HMAS ALBATROSS and worked in radio communications. In 1969, she studied aircraft and ship based weaponry. Margaret was promoted to the position of Leading WRAN in 1970. She applied for an early discharge in 1972, as she felt stifled by the lack of opportunity for career advancement and the restrictive life on the naval base. Margaret went on to join the New South Wales Police force. In 1939 a voluntary group called the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps (WESC) was established in Sydney by Florence McKenzie. It was made up of a group of young women who were trained by McKenzie in wireless telegraphy and visual signalling. Unable to join an Australian armed service, these women voluntarily gave up their time to teach their skills free of charge to men who hoped to join the defence forces. After much persuasion by McKenzie, Commander J B Newman agreed to test a number of the WESC women and was astonished by their skills. Commander Newman and Commander G C Muirhead-Gould of the Royal Navy, recommended that the women be employed in the Royal Australian Navy. After persistent letters from McKenzie, the Minister for Navy W M Hughes invited six of the women to Melbourne to be tested. On 18 April 1941, the minister reluctantly approved the employment of twelve telegraphists and two attendants for HMAS HARMAN in Canberra. Later that month the entry of women into the Navy as the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) was authorised, and on 28 April the group of women travelled to Canberra. Early in 1942, the first advertisements recruiting telegraphists and clerks to join the WRANS were issued. By the end of the year, servicewomen were being recruited as drivers, clerks, storekeepers and office orderlies. The estimate for the number of servicewomen required rose from 600 to 1000, prompting the introduction of WRANS officer training courses and eventually officer appointments. By 1943 several new categories of work were introduced to the WRANS, however many suggestions were rejected including the possibility of recruiting women as motor mechanics, and sending servicewomen

overseas. All WRANS recruits undertook a two week entry course, which gave them a solid service background before completing specific category training. This training varied from five weeks for stewardesses to 12 weeks for sick berth attendants. By the end of World War II the Navy had more than 2,600 servicewomen in its ranks, which made up 10% of the entire Royal Australian Navy complement. The WRANS was considered unnecessary after the war and demobilised, with the last servicewoman discharged in July 1948. Despite the reluctance of many RAN administrators, the government approved the re-entry of servicewomen into the navy and in 1951 the WRANS was reinstated. From 1959 women served in all Australian naval establishments. Women in the WRANS were not permitted to serve at sea, with the exception of select officers who were allowed up to three weeks sea experience on the RAN's training ship HMAS JERVIS BAY. Servicewomen received only two thirds of the male wage, were required to be single and were discharged upon marriage until 1969. From 1983 women became eligible to serve at sea and the WRANS was finally dissolved in 1984 as women were fully integrated into the RAN.