



## You'll Be Sorry: How World War II Changed Women's Lives

by Ann Howard

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It is very easy to recommend Ann Howard's *You'll be Sorry: How World War II Changed Women's Lives* as it provides authentic insights into an aspect of Australia's history which has largely gone untold. This book features stories from women of all ages and all walks of life who served in the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) during World War II. These stories are not sugar-coated or romanticised, nor are they all doom and gloom. Indeed, many of the women articulate their delight in the friendships they shared, often far from home and under difficult circumstances.

In the first of the two Forewords, Margaret Whitlam acknowledges the scope of the 'remarkable archival material' that Howard draws on. In the second, the teacher, scholar and feminist Dale Spender notes that this 'splendid account of women's participation in Australian History' also 'shows how shabbily these women were treated at the time and afterwards.'

Howard's aim, as she states in the Introduction, is to ensure that women who served in the AWAS receive their place in history. Her book is timely in that oral histories of World War II will, in time, become impossible. *You'll Be Sorry* ensures that as its participants age, forget and pass away, their voices will remain. The book is divided into two parts, focusing on women during and after the war.

Part One explores how women's desire to contribute to the war effort was often resisted by government, military and general society. Australian women had to fight to be allowed to contribute in a meaningful way, particularly in branches of the armed services. Female volunteers were actually seen as a nuisance by

War Cabinet ministers and as late as July 1940, ministers were stating that 'they had no need for women and that training, uniforms and funds would be better deployed for men' (p 25). Women's response to this attitude is exemplified by a 1941 letter to the Prime Minister from a Miss Florence Phipps, in which she asserted that 'at this time ... when women are ordered to register for service in Britain ... when Japan is a serious menace ... it is amazing that some members of the Federal Government desire ... to restrict any aspect of women's war service' (p 23). When, in October 1941, women were finally allowed to join the AWAS, they were to be paid less than men and were not to be taught to shoot – this is laughable as many country girls capably handled guns, and it denied women the means to protect themselves should the need rise.

The discussion of women's uniforms provide some unexpected insights. For instance, the first Controller of the AWAS, Sybil Howy Irving, insisted that their hats had soft, wide brims so the women would look suitably feminine. Their khaki shirts didn't fit well because they were tailored for men and the breast pockets were considered highly risqué for women. Underpants were strictly regulated: waist-to-knee drawers in light khaki, and, due to the wartime elastic shortage, fastened at the waist by an unreliable button that could give way at inopportune moment, dropping the pants to the ground.

The government and army bureaucracies also encountered new situations, from determining women's rights to pensions and the service eligibility of married women to procuring vast supplies of sanitary napkins.

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 » We asked little. We gave what we could ‹‹
 

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Sir Thomas Blamey, commander-in-chief of the Australian Military Forces from 1941, was a powerful supporter of women's rights:

I feel strongly that it would be a mistake as far as the army is concerned for women serving in the army to be placed on any lesser status than that of full membership of the military forces (p 45).

Part Two takes up the history of the ex-servicewomen three years after the end of the war and acknowledges the profound difficulties experienced in homes across Australia despite the joy of war's end. The stories here, whether paraphrased by Howard or in their original words of the women, examine what it was like for women to return to 'civilian' life when they were no longer required to perform war work. For many their new role involved caring for the physically or psychologically damaged men who returned home, some of them violent and difficult to handle. It shows that there was no one to care for these carers and the common advice of the day was to simply ignore the damage wrought by the war, keep the house the same, don't speak about what

may have happened and wear a pretty dress.

Howards has created a history that is both social and personal in scope. At times it is patchy, with some chapters being little more than a paragraph to squeeze a different voice or historical fragment into the chronology. The personal aspect is richly conveyed by the numerous personal photographs shared with her. Howard neatly highlights the service history of each woman she mentions by identifying her first by her service number then by her name – a simple gesture that pays respect to their hard-won roles.

The book is not just war stories from a personal perspective; it is a tool for understanding the societal norms and government mindset of the day. It pays tribute to the myriad of ways women served their home and country both during and after the war and gives many of them a voice at last. In the words of Margaret Whitlam who was an active participant during the war, 'We asked little, we gave what we could.'