ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melinda Tognini's feature articles, travel writing and personal essays have appeared in magazines and anthologies in Australia and the US. She completed a Master of Arts in writing, which was the basis for this book. Melinda is passionate about telling 'invisible' stories – those stories absent from or sidelined in the dominant narratives of our history – and empowering others to find their voice. After growing up surrounded by the bush, bauxite and beaches of North East Arnhem Land, she now resides in Perth with her husband and two children.

MANY HEARTS, ONE VOICE

The story of the War Widows' Guild in Western Australia

MELINDA TOGNINI

Foreword by the Hon. Dame Quentin Bryce AD CVO

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CHAPTER 1

WARTIME IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

'Falling in love,' Marjorie Chapple heard Charles Learmonth say. For a moment, she thought he was referring to 'some blonde' he had seen across the dance floor at the Karrinyup Golf Club. 'No, it's you I'm in love with,' he told her.[1]

It was July 1941 and Marjorie and Charles had known each other just over a year. She had always enjoyed his company, but never expected the friendship to become anything more serious. 'I could never understand why he felt happy to invite me to go out with him,' Marjorie reflected many years later. 'I felt more like a sister than a girlfriend. I had no brother and the relationship we shared filled that gap.'[2]

Marjorie Chapple in 1941. On the right Marjorie wears her VAD uniform. (Courtesy of Marjorie Le Souef)

Their friendship was complicated by the circumstances of the Second World War. A trained pilot, Charles Learmonth was a member of No. 14 Squadron based at RAAF Pearce north of Perth, and he was impatient for an overseas posting. Marjorie had recently begun training for the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) at the Davies Road Military Hospital in Claremont. The VAD had been established by the Red Cross during the First World War. Its members were given medical training and they worked in hospitals, convalescent homes, hospital ships and blood banks. Initially unpaid, voluntary aides (VAs) were remunerated for their work from January 1940, and from June 1941, were permitted to serve overseas.[3]

'I loved Charles,' said Marjorie, 'but I had not anticipated marrying him. At that stage, I had volunteered to go overseas with the Voluntary Aid Detachment to join the AIF in the Middle East.'[4]

On 13 November 1941, Marjorie Chapple was posted to the Northam Military Hospital, where she and the other VAs were immunised, issued with kitbags and told to be ready for departure. Foreseeing separation due to their postings, and having doubts about a wartime marriage, Charles considered breaking off the relationship, but he was unable to do so. 'I love her,' he wrote in his diary, 'and always will, more than anyone else in the world.'[5]

In the early hours of 24 November, Charles was called to join the search for the HMAS *Sydney*, which had failed to arrive in Fremantle. As he flew his plane along a stretch of the West Australian coast the following day, he saw a number of seamen on a beach north of Carnarvon. Believing they were survivors of the *Sydney*, he dropped them a pipe and tobacco and was mortified when he later discovered they were in fact from the German raider *Kormoran*, believed to have sunk the *Sydney*.[6] After six days the search was called off and, on 30 November, Prime Minister John Curtin informed the nation that HMAS *Sydney* had been lost, along with all 645 of her crew.

With departure for the Middle East imminent, Marjorie was given embarkation leave on 5 December and spent most of the weekend with Charles. Then came the news that was to change the direction of the war. Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. 'Men and women of Australia, we are at war with Japan,' John Curtin announced in a

national broadcast on 8 December. All leave was suspended. Australian troop deployments to Europe and the Middle East were temporarily cancelled. This brought uncertainty about Marjorie's posting, but she and the other VAs were told to keep their bags packed. Marjorie and Charles discussed marriage and became engaged, but decided not to announce it officially until their postings were more definite and a wedding date could be set.[7] Despite there being no specific departure date, Marjorie attended a farewell party for thirty-two VAs at the Adelphi Hotel on 11 December. Two days later, Charles received a posting as a flying instructor to Nhill, only one hundred miles from his parents' property in country Victoria.[8]

Marjorie and Charles spent Christmas apart. On Boxing Day, Charles briefly returned to Western Australia but the closest Marjorie came to seeing him was when he flew his Hudson plane low over the Northam Military Hospital. 'Everyone thought the Japanese had arrived,' Marjorie remembered. 'Except me of course.'[9]

His Majesty King George VI commented on the separation and suffering the war was producing when he broadcast his Christmas message to the Empire. 'Christmas is the festival of home,' he said, 'and it is right that we should remember those who this year must spend it away from home.' He later added:

> *All those separations are part of the hard sacrifices that the world demands. It may well be that it will call for even greater sacrifices. If that is to be, let us face them cheerfully together. I think of you, my people, as one great family, for that is how we are learning to live. We belong to each other, we all need each other and it is in sacrificing for the common good that we are finding our true life.*[10]

A fortnight later, on Sunday 11 January 1942, Charles wrote to Marjorie's father asking for permission to marry her. Mr Chapple initially replied, 'I'll have to think about it. She's still a bit young.' But, a few days later, he gave his blessing and Charles sent Marjorie an engagement ring. Still in Northam, Marjorie was in sick bay at the time, suffering from sinusitis, but this did not prevent her celebrating

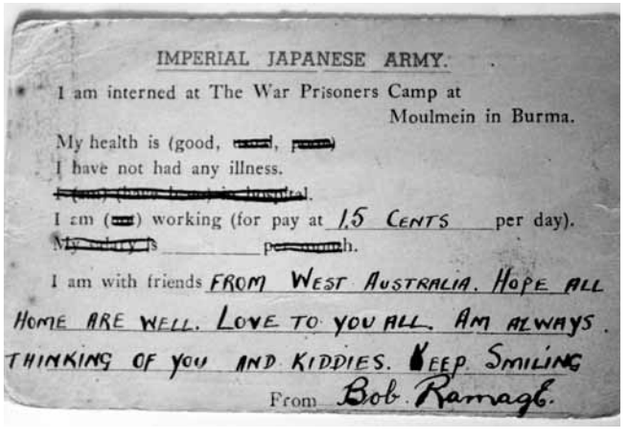
with her fellow VAs and a keg of beer.[11] Marjorie applied for a discharge from the army, so she could join her fiancé in Victoria.

While Marjorie waited for her discharge, Edna Ramage awaited news of her husband, Acting Sergeant George Robert Ramage, more commonly known as Bob. He had been sent with the 2/4th Machine Gunners to join the 8th Division in Singapore. 'We intend to hold Singapore,' British general Arthur Percival declared on 9 February 1942. Less than a week later, on 15 February, Singapore fell to the Japanese.

Then, as Edna endured the uncertainty, the war arrived on the Australian mainland. On 19 February, Japanese planes bombed Darwin. John Curtin told the Australian public he had 'been advised by the Department of the Air that a number of bombs were dropped this morning.'[12] The full extent of the damage and the number of casualties were not made public for some time, the *West Australian* reporting that the bombs had a 'limited range in the death and destruction which they wrought.'[13] The Japanese attacked Broome less than a fortnight later on 3 March, leaving about seventy people dead, then Townsville, Katherine, Derby, Wyndham, Onslow and Port Hedland.[14]

The war was too close for Edna Ramage. What if the Japanese moved further down the coast? What then? Edna contacted her sister, who lived in the gold mining town of Kalgoorlie, 550 kilometres east of Perth. The children would be safer there. Her daughter Laurel, aged ten, complied and travelled to Kalgoorlie to stay with her aunt, but twelve year old Ken refused to go; he remained in Perth to finish school and keep an eye on his mother.[15]

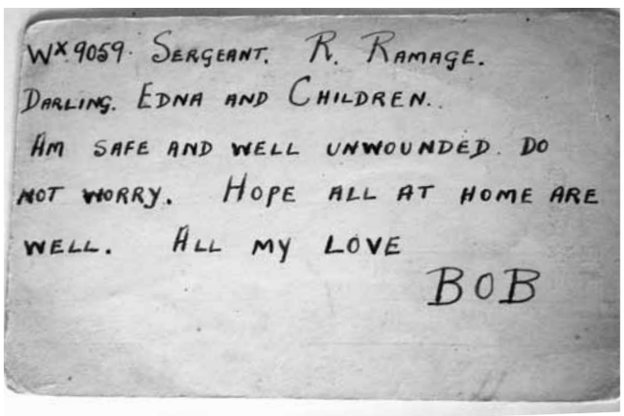
Edna eventually received news that Bob was a prisoner of war in Singapore, and later found out that he had been sent to work on the Burma Railway. Her anxieties were relieved only momentarily by occasional, heavily censored prisoner-of-war cards. She occupied herself by working in a tent-making factory;[16] this helped her feel she was contributing to the war effort, and provided camaraderie during her husband's absence.[17]



IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY.

I am interned at The War Prisoners Camp at Moulmein in Burma.

My health is (good, [redacted], [redacted])
I have not had any illness.
[redacted].
I am ([redacted]) working (for pay at 15 CENTS per day).
[redacted]
I am with friends FROM WEST AUSTRALIA. HOPE ALL HOME ARE WELL. LOVE TO YOU ALL. AM ALWAYS THINKING OF YOU AND KIDDIES. KEEP SMILING
From Bob. Ramage.



WX 9059. SERGEANT. R. RAMAGE.
DARLING. EDNA AND CHILDREN.
AM SAFE AND WELL UNWOUNDED. DO NOT WORRY. HOPE ALL AT HOME ARE WELL. ALL MY LOVE
BOB

Two of the POW cards Edna Ramage received from her husband. (Courtesy of Laurel Taylor)

Marjorie Chapple finally received a discharge from the army in mid-March, but 'no one at Northam had the authority to sign it.' A Roman Catholic army chaplain solved the problem by organising for her to travel to Perth in the back of an ambulance.

> *I had leave for one day – on arrival at Perth, I asked the driver to drop me off at the [Army] Barracks in Francis Street. I knocked on every door until I found someone who had the seniority to give me my freedom.*[18]

Marjorie returned to Northam by a more conventional mode of transport, the train. She presented her signed discharge papers, underwent a medical examination and, by nine o'clock the following morning, she was officially out of the army and headed back to Perth.

> *On arrival at the Perth Railway Station, I left my luggage in the cloakroom and proceeded to my father's office to collect the car. Fortunately, I took a devious route through the shops. At Aherns I bought a blue tweed suit, top coat, a blue dress and coat with a hat to match which I thought I would be able to wear for my wedding. Walking down Hay Street with all my boxes of clothes, I spotted an attractive white evening dress in Shirley's window. It fitted and that added to my trousseau wardrobe. With my father, I collected the army luggage still intact waiting to be unpacked in the Middle East.*[19]

Her father took her home to Peppermint Grove to join family friends who had evacuated from Singapore and were staying with the Chapple family. At midday the following day, Marjorie's friend June Perry phoned to say she was catching the interstate train to Melbourne at three that afternoon.

> *It just didn't dawn on me that I might be on it and it was not until 2.25 pm when my father returned to his office and found the message that I also could have a ticket to Melbourne. Fortunately, the car was at home. We loaded it as quickly as possible with all my Army gear, shopping from the previous day and a trunk my mother had filled with my trousseau … I drove to the station as quickly as possible and arrived just before 3 pm. The station staff were wonderful, unpacked the car, raced down the line with it all and put*

it on the train … I leapt on to the train, as it was about to take off. June and I just looked at one another, neither of us able to believe what had happened.[20]

After a four-day train journey, Marjorie arrived in Melbourne with less than a week to organise a wedding. She married Charles on Saturday 28 March 1942 at St John's Church of England in Toorak. Before long, Charles's squadron was transferred to Richmond, New South Wales, and Marjorie moved with him.[21] Then, in early September, Charles's squadron received its departure orders. He left for further preparations and training in Far North Queensland before finally reaching the war front in New Guinea on 25 November 1942.[22]

Charlotte 'Gloria' Carr had met her husband, Wilfred MacDonald, at Rottnest Island; she was with a group from the Claremont Tennis Club, and he was on an army bivouac. They married on 19 April 1938 and bought a house in Bay Road, Claremont; a son, Alexander, was born two years later on 23 September 1940. An engineer, Wilfred was stationed outside Darwin with the Royal Australian Engineers (RAE), to build bridges. The men camped in a valley near their workplace, with the machinery and other equipment at the top of the hill. On 30 October 1942, an unattended truck rolled down the hill and ploughed through a tent. Ten men were injured in the incident, and Wilfred MacDonald was killed.[23] Soon after his death, Gloria and two year old Alexander moved to live in Dwellingup, where her sister ran a greengrocer and drapery store.

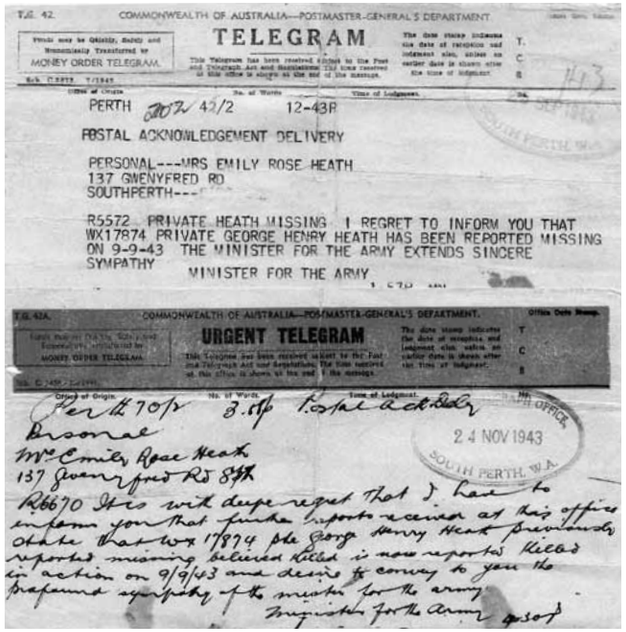
Jean Elsie Ferguson saw first-hand the injuries that war could inflict. In January 1939 she had joined the Australian Army Nursing Service Reserve while training in midwifery at King Edward Memorial Hospital. She then served as a nursing sister in England, Palestine and Egypt before returning to Australia to work at military hospitals in Queensland. She married Captain John Ferguson on 25 February 1943 in Tenterfield, New South Wales. Seven months later, on 7 September, John was stationed in Port

Gloria MacDonald
(Courtesy of Patricia Milne)

Moresby with the 2/33rd Infantry Battalion when an American Liberator bomber, loaded with bombs and fuel, crashed just after take-off from Jackson's aerodrome. John Ferguson was among fifty-nine Australians killed; another ninety-two were wounded.[24] A month later, still raw with grief, Jean Ferguson sailed for New Guinea to work with the 2/11th Australian General Hospital (AGH) at Buna, Madang and Aitape, where malaria was rampant.[25]

Two days after the Liberator disaster, Gwen Forsyth and Rose Heath, whose husbands belonged to the 2/28th Battalion in New Guinea, also became widows. The battalion's orders were to cross the flooded Busu River near Lae. Cables needed to be secured on the other side of the river before the men could cross, and that job fell to Arthur Forsyth. Although an accountant in civilian life, he had been on the professional boxing circuit, and was a strong rower and swimmer. He made the journey once and returned safely to his battalion. But more cables were needed, so again he headed into the river. This time, Arthur was swept away by the strong current, following suspected sniper fire.[26]

Rose Heath's husband, Private George Heath, a stretcher bearer, met a similar fate. It is believed that he was 'hit by enemy fire, and washed down in the river'[27] as he crossed the Busu. Along with at least a dozen more men, Arthur Forsyth and George Heath were



T.G. 42. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

TELEGRAM

MONEY ORDER TELEGRAM

PERTH 2072 42/2 12-43P

POSTAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT DELIVERY

PERSONAL---MRS EMILY ROSE HEATH
137 GWENYFRED RD
SOUTHPERTH---

R5572 PRIVATE HEATH MISSING I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT WX17874 PRIVATE GEORGE HENRY HEATH HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING ON 9-9-43 THE MINISTER FOR THE ARMY EXTENDS SINCERE SYMPATHY

MINISTER FOR THE ARMY

T.G. 42A. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT.

URGENT TELEGRAM

MONEY ORDER TELEGRAM

Perth 70/r 3.15p Postal Address

Personal
Mrs Emily Rose Heath
137 Gwenyfred Rd S'th

R6670 It is with deep regret that I have to inform you that further reports received at this office state that WX 17874 Pte George Henry Heath previously reported missing believed killed is now reported killed in action on 9/9/43 and desire to convey to you the profound sympathy of the minister for the army

Minister for the Army 9.50p

2 4 NOV 1943

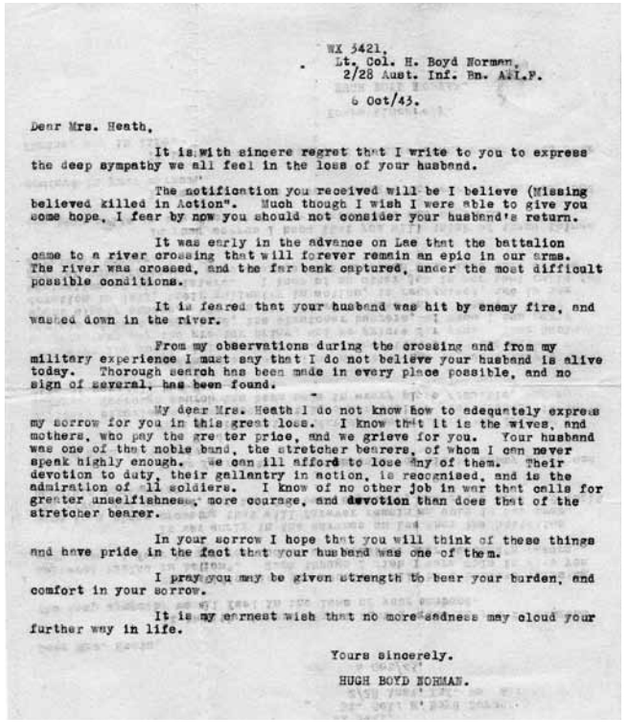
SOUTH PERTH, W.A.

Telegrams Rose Heath received after her husband went missing while on active service in Papua New Guinea.
(Courtesy of David Heath)

reported 'missing, believed killed in action.' In official records, the crossing of the Busu has been described as 'a remarkable achievement and must rank as the highlight of the Lae Campaign.'[28] But it was a costly achievement.

Gwen Forsyth's youngest son Alan met his father only twice, shortly after Alan's birth when Arthur was on leave from training in Northam, prior to his deployment to New Guinea. Rose's son David has no memory of his father either, although her daughter Maureen recollects standing outside their house at the age of four or five, when a man in uniform walked into view and she was told to run and greet him.[29]

After having almost been killed on his first operation, when his Boston was hit by anti-aircraft fire, Charles Learmonth survived



WX 5421.
Lt. Col. H. Boyd Norman,
2/28 Aust. Inf. Bn. A.I.F.

6 Oct/43.

Dear Mrs. Heath,

It is with sincere regret that I write to you to express the deep sympathy we all feel in the loss of your husband.

The notification you received will be I believe (Missing believed killed in Action". Much though I wish I were able to give you some hope, I fear by now you should not consider your husband's return.

It was early in the advance on Lae that the battalion came to a river crossing that will forever remain an epic in our arms. The river was crossed, and the far bank captured, under the most difficult possible conditions.

It is feared that your husband was hit by enemy fire, and washed down in the river.

From my observations during the crossing and from my military experience I must say that I do not believe your husband is alive today. Thorough search has been made in every place possible, and no sign of several, has been found.

My dear Mrs. Heath I do not know how to adequately express my sorrow for you in this great loss. I know that it is the wives, and mothers, who pay the greater price, and we grieve for you. Your husband was one of that noble band, the stretcher bearers, of whom I can never speak highly enough. We can ill afford to lose any of them. Their devotion to duty, their gallantry in action, is recognised, and is the admiration of all soldiers. I know of no other job in war that calls for greater unselfishness, more courage, and devotion than does that of the stretcher bearer.

In your sorrow I hope that you will think of these things and have pride in the fact that your husband was one of them.

I pray you may be given strength to bear your burden, and comfort in your sorrow.

It is my earnest wish that no more sadness may cloud your further way in life.

Yours sincerely.

HUGH BOYD NORMAN.

Rose Heath received a condolence letter from her husband's commanding officer.
(Courtesy of David Heath)

almost a year in the tropical jungle of New Guinea, leading his team in numerous bombing and strafing attacks on the enemy.[30] In September 1943 he was promoted to Wing Commander and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). He was then granted leave on 15 October 1943, followed by a new posting as Commanding Officer of No. 14 Squadron at RAAF Pearce, north of Perth.[31] Marjorie and Charles were reunited, albeit in wartime Perth and living on base.

On 5 January 1944, Marjorie uncharacteristically begged Charles not to fly the following day. She'd had a premonition. The next morning she again asked him to remain grounded. As he was leaving their quarters on the RAAF base, she suggested he take

the afternoon off, but he wouldn't hear of it. 'Look, Darl,' he said, 'don't worry. I'll call you on the phone when I get back in a couple of hours.'[32]

The phone call never came, and late in the afternoon the Pearce station commander, Group Captain Stan Brearley, appeared with his wife at Marjorie's door. It was a moment Marjorie would remember for the rest of her life. 'There's been an accident,' Captain Brearley informed her.[33]

While flying near Rottnest Island, Charles's Beaufort plane had plummeted into the sea, splitting in two upon impact. The Beaufort planes had been plagued with malfunctions and accidents, involving fatalities, but no cause had ever been found. Charles Learmonth would be remembered as a hero because his quick thinking led to an understanding of the problem. 'Sorry chaps,' Charles radioed as the plane went down, 'can't get her out, trim tabs appear jammed. This looks like it.' There were no survivors, and no bodies were found, despite rescue crews being nearby.[34]

Marjorie returned to her parents' home in Peppermint Grove until March 1944, when she accepted an invitation to visit Charles's parents, Noel and Edith Learmonth, at Carramar, their home in rural Victoria. The 1200-acre property, which had been in the Learmonth family since the 1800s, was twenty miles east of Portland, and two miles north of the small town of Tyrendarra. The smell of baking emanated daily from the weatherboard homestead, and tea and cake were served each afternoon. Marjorie helped where she could. At night, she listened to the radio and read from a collection of old classics by the light of a kerosene lamp.[35]

One day in May 1944 Marjorie answered a phone call from the local postmistress; a telegram had arrived from the Minister for the Army, Frank Forde, to say that Charles's brother John had died in a German prisoner-of-war camp on 10 May. Noel and Edith Learmonth had now lost not one but two sons since the beginning of the year. Marjorie remained with her parents-in-law until accepting a position as a hospital visitor for the Red Cross at Heidelberg Military Hospital in Melbourne.[36]

Like the Learmonths, thousands of families received news of the loss of a loved one via telegram. The telegram that Phyllis Thomas

opened informed her that her husband Albert's plane had been shot down over Germany. There was uncertainty as to whether he was dead, or had survived and become a prisoner of war. Only after months of living in limbo came the terrible confirmation that he had indeed been killed in action.[37] Compounding her grief was the fact that many of the items returned with her husband's kitbag did not belong to him. The night he died had been chaotic, both in the sky and at the base. Personal belongings of those missing and presumed killed were scooped into the nearest bag to clear the way for new arrivals. Albert's watch was returned, but the face and glass were missing. There was a signet ring but it was plain gold, whereas his bore an onyx stone. Phyllis was also distressed over a pair of small wooden clogs she had given him for good luck. She discovered too late she was only supposed to give away one; the other was to be kept so that he would return to reunite them.[38]

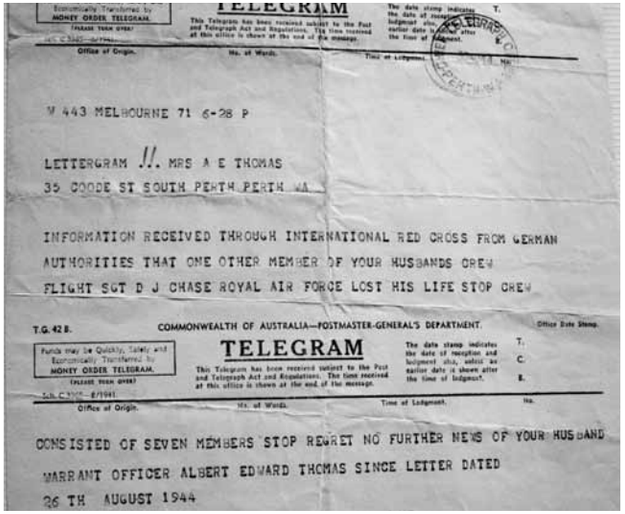
Many years later, Phyllis wondered how her husband would have adjusted to the mundane job of newspaper proof reader if he had ever returned. Some ex-servicemen had suffered horrific injuries, yet when they arrived home, they were expected simply to adapt to civilian life.[39] She thought about how war must change a man, but her thoughts could never be more than speculation.

Jessie Mary Vasey waited apprehensively at her country property, Wantirna, at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria. Her husband, Major General George Alan Vasey, was en route to take command of the 6th Division in New Guinea, and had been due in Cairns around 4 pm on Monday 5 March 1945. It was now 7 pm; she should have received word by now. Perhaps Beryl Riggall, whose husband Bill was with George, had heard something. Jessie dialled Beryl's number.

'Beryl, have you heard anything – that they've arrived?'

'No.'

'I've got this feeling … I don't like it, something's wrong.' Jessie hung up, unable to shake her uneasiness.[40]



TELEGRAM

W 443 MELBOURNE 71 6-28 P

LETTERGRAM MRS A E THOMAS
35 COODE ST SOUTH PERTH PERTH WA

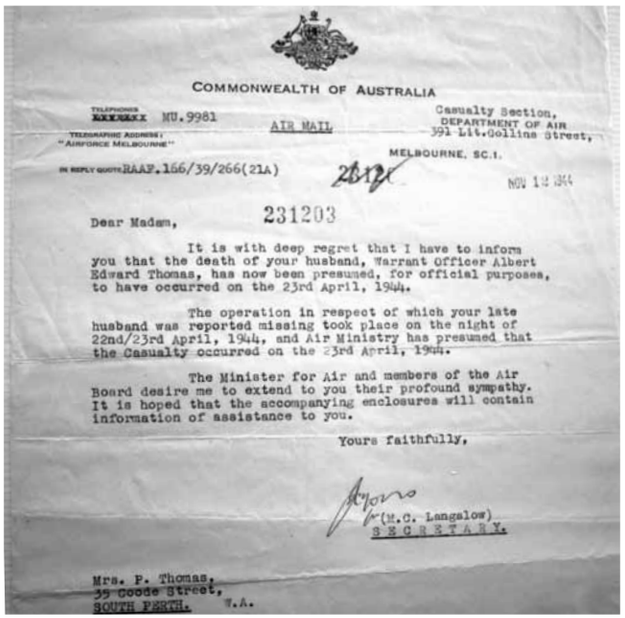
INFORMATION RECEIVED THROUGH INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS FROM GERMAN AUTHORITIES THAT ONE OTHER MEMBER OF YOUR HUSBANDS CREW FLIGHT SGT D J CHASE ROYAL AIR FORCE LOST HIS LIFE STOP CREW

T.G. 42 B. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT.

TELEGRAM

CONSISTED OF SEVEN MEMBERS STOP REGRET NO FURTHER NEWS OF YOUR HUSBAND WARRANT OFFICER ALBERT EDWARD THOMAS SINCE LETTER DATED 26 TH AUGUST 1944

The telegram sent to Phyllis Thomas after her husband's plane was shot down.
(Courtesy of Patricia Milne)



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

TELEPHONES MU.9981 AIR MAIL

Casualty Section,
DEPARTMENT OF AIR
391 Lit.Collins Street,
MELBOURNE, SC.1.

IN REPLY QUOTE RAAF.166/39/266(21A)

NOV 12 1944

231203

Dear Madam,

It is with deep regret that I have to inform you that the death of your husband, Warrant Officer Albert Edward Thomas, has now been presumed, for official purposes, to have occurred on the 23rd April, 1944.

The operation in respect of which your late husband was reported missing took place on the night of 22nd/23rd April, 1944, and Air Ministry has presumed that the Casualty occurred on the 23rd April, 1944.

The Minister for Air and members of the Air Board desire me to extend to you their profound sympathy. It is hoped that the accompanying enclosures will contain information of assistance to you.

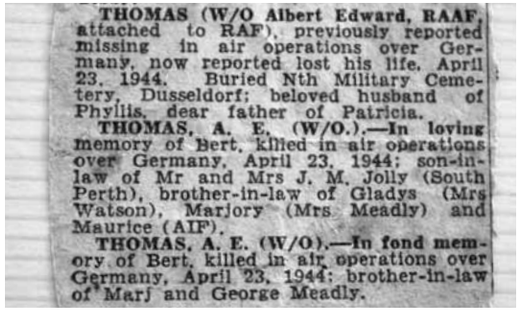
Yours faithfully,

for (M.C. Langslow)
SECRETARY.

Mrs. P. Thomas,
35 Coode Street,
SOUTH PERTH. W.A.

Phyllis Thomas had to wait several months for the letter confirming her husband's death.
(Courtesy of Patricia Milne)

Phyllis Thomas (left) with her daughter and a friend.
(Courtesy of Patricia Milne)



THOMAS (W/O Albert Edward, RAAF, attached to RAF), previously reported missing in air operations over Germany, now reported lost his life, April 23, 1944. Buried Nth Military Cemetery, Dusseldorf; beloved husband of Phyllis, dear father of Patricia.

THOMAS, A. E. (W/O.).—In loving memory of Bert, killed in air operations over Germany, April 23, 1944; son-in-law of Mr and Mrs J. M. Jolly (South Perth), brother-in-law of Gladys (Mrs Watson), Marjory (Mrs Meadly) and Maurice (AIF).

THOMAS, A. E. (W/O).—In fond memory of Bert, killed in air operations over Germany, April 23, 1944; brother-in-law of Marj and George Meadly.

Notices in the *West Australian* for Bert Thomas, including one from his wife, Phyllis.
(Courtesy of Patricia Milne)

The evening before Jessie farewelled her husband they had dined with friends. She would miss him terribly, but understood his desire to be with his men again and did not begrudge him that. Conversation turned to the other men who had enlisted. Major General George Alan Vasey, known in some military circles as 'Bloody George' for his robust language, had been concerned about his men and their families at home from the time he spent fighting in the First World War. '[The men] come to me … time and again, Jess … especially before a show,' he said, 'and say … "Sir, if anything happens to me you'll see that my wife and kids are all right?" And I tell them …"Yes, you know bloody well I will."'[41]

After a battle, he paid attention to the families of the men who had died. 'The first thing I do is call for the casualty list,' he once explained to nurse Ruth McLennan while recovering from polyneuritis. 'It weighs heavily … to realise … you have no option but to be responsible for creating all these widows, fatherless children, these mothers robbed of sons.'[42]

For her part, Jessie had helped establish the AIF Women's Association in Melbourne in 1940, becoming its secretary at the inaugural meeting. She met a number of widows through her work there, and did what she could to support them. As early as 1941, Jessie petitioned Prime Minister John Curtin, proposing that a furniture grant be given to war widows. Although a £75 grant was provided the following year,[43] overall, Jessie felt 'very despondent' about the 'desperate position' of these women, how little assistance she was able to offer them and the lack of interest shown by the rest of the community.[44]

'Stick to it,' George encouraged. 'After this is over, you will have all the help I can give you.'[45] On the morning of his departure, he said, 'Now don't forget, look after the war widows because the bloody government won't.'[46]

Now, with both her sons away, one working for Ships Water Transport and the other boarding at Geelong Grammar School, Jessie waited alone for confirmation of George's arrival in Cairns. At 10 pm, a car appeared in the driveway. This could only mean bad news. Jessie opened the door to Major General Charles Lloyd and Bishop John McKie, who confirmed her fears. The RAAF Hudson in which General Vasey was travelling had crashed just outside Cairns Airport. There were no survivors.[47]

Jessie maintained an air of calm, but later she broke down.[48] She and George had been married for twenty-three years. Despite his active service overseas, they had shared so much: their sons George and Robert, their travels to India, the Depression, their home Wantirna, and a concern for the women widowed by war. How could she continue without his encouragement and practical support? And their sons? How was she to break the news to them?

A search of the crash site had failed to find the men before nightfall,[49] but salvage operations continued for several days. The search team eventually recovered Major General Vasey's body, along with those of Major General Downes and Lieutenant Colonel Bertram, but the bodies of three others were never found. In the days and weeks after her husband's death, Jessie received hundreds of condolence letters. Those offering their sympathies included Prime Minister John Curtin, Major General Akin of the US Army, General Vasey's fellow soldiers, Ruth McLennan, who had once nursed him back from near death, and the army drivers who had transported him wherever he needed to go. The letters expressed admiration for both his leadership capabilities and his approachability. As was typical of condolence letters of the day, many suggested that Jessie should find 'comfort and satisfaction' that her husband was a 'fine man' who had done a 'splendid job'.[50] The fact that he had 'rendered such wonderful service to the Empire' ought to provide consolation in her time of 'great sorrow'.[51] Archbishop Booth wrote of Jessie's 'innate courage' that General Vasey 'would have loved to see taking foremost expression at a time like this.'[52] Jessie replied, 'For myself, I find it almost easy to be brave, but nowhere can I find peace or comfort.'[53]

Unable to cope with returning to her work at the AIF Women's Association, she wrote:

> *After so many long years of anxiety my husband's death finds me very weary. I hope you will not feel that I am deserting the Association … but I am very sad that I never did accomplish the thing I hoped most to do, establish some form of special help for war widows.*[54]

Major General Vasey had promised support and assistance upon his return. His wife, who had worked so hard during the war to help war widows, had now become one of them.

In June 1945, a different group of service wives and children, married not to Australians but to visiting American servicemen, began the long journey to their new homes in the United States. At the time, Marjorie Learmonth was still working for the Red Cross at Heidelberg Hospital, and the organisation asked her and two other women to chaperone 108 war brides and 38 babies from Melbourne to Sydney. There the number swelled to 279 women and 85 children before the group travelled on to Brisbane. Marjorie thought the war brides were wonderful girls, and a great loss for Australia:[55]

> *We didn't hear one complaint although the conditions in which they were travelling must have been from out of the ark because most of the railway carriages had been in museums … I had two workers with me and we literally didn't sit down between Melbourne and Brisbane. We were on the job the whole time.*[56]

In Brisbane, Marjorie and the other Red Cross workers transferred the women and children over to the care of the American Red Cross, who embarked with them for San Francisco aboard the SS *Lurline* after an introduction to the American tradition of coffee and doughnuts.[57] Marjorie returned to Heidelberg Military Hospital for a time before moving back to her parents' house in Perth.[58] It was here in her childhood home that Marjorie heard the news that hostilities had ceased.

With John Curtin's untimely death in July 1945, the duty fell to newly appointed Prime Minister Ben Chifley to address the nation on 15 August: 'Fellow citizens, the war is over.' Finally, after almost six years of war and four days of speculation and premature celebrations, peace was official. In Western Australia, the local newspapers captured images that have become part of popular memory: a throng of people

descending on the centre of Perth; men in suits, and women and children, crowding into St Georges Terrace, William Street and Hay Street; a man raising his hand, his fingers forming the V for victory; a group of young people walking arm in arm, holding souvenir flags declaring 'VP Day'; the Union Jack hanging from the second storey of a city building. Seven thousand servicemen and women marched along the Terrace and down to the Esplanade to participate in a thanksgiving service.[59]

But not everyone joined in the city's festivities. Marjorie Learmonth woke on VP (Victory in the Pacific) Day to the whistles of steam trains sounding continuously. Instead of joining the crowds in the city, she spent the day at home, thinking about Charles and all that she had lost.[60] It is unlikely that Gwen Forsyth felt like rejoicing either. Left with two young boys to bring up alone, she probably wondered what the future held.

For Edna Ramage and her children, VP Day was filled with sadness after hearing that her husband and their father would not be returning home. Whenever Edna's brother had heard of a train or ship arriving, he went to meet it, asking for any news of Bob Ramage. Eventually, he had come across a man who had been in the same prisoner-of-war camp and recalled a September night in 1944 when fellow prisoners brought Bob into the camp after a long day on the Burma Railway. Suffering from dysentery, he died soon afterwards. Edna had received a card from Bob that same month.[61]

Similarly, after three-and-a-half years of uncertainty, Madge Anketell finally received official notification that her husband had died from his wounds. Madge's husband, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Anketell, commanding officer of the 2/4th Machine Gunners, was wounded just days before the fall of Singapore, and although she had been informed of his injuries, she had heard nothing further since then.[62] Even now she received conflicting information. The *West Australian* reported that he was killed when the Japanese bombed the hospital in which he was being treated.[63] In fact, he had been shot in the thigh and seriously wounded on 12 February 1942. He had been evacuated to hospital and underwent surgery, but never recovered.[64]

Kathleen Marguerite Kuring, Rita to those who knew her, would never have certainty as to her husband's fate. On a windy day in

September 1941, Lieutenant Colonel Herman August Kuring had disappeared off rocks at Rottnest Island. Stationed there as the commanding officer of the 10th Garrison Battalion, he had left his driver and car to walk the last half mile to Wilson's Bay. A search of the area failed to find him, but his hat was discovered floating in the ocean. Rita found herself alone with two children to raise, amid rumours that her husband was a German spy. The speculation was fuelled further by the sinking of the *Sydney*, despite a thorough investigation concluding that he had fallen from the cliff and drowned.[65]

Sheila Barron too was grieving. In 1927, she had married Robert Marriott, but was widowed two years and two children later. Nine years on, she met and married Norman Barron. They ran an orchard in Forrestfield and Sheila gave birth to two daughters before the outbreak of the Second World War. Like Gwen Forsyth's husband, Norman Barron joined the 2/28th Battalion. This was earlier in the war; while Arthur Forsyth served in New Guinea, Norman went to Tobruk, where he survived for six months before being killed in action. Just before her thirty-eighth birthday, Sheila was widowed for a second time.[66]

Marjorie Learmonth, Edna Ramage, Madge Anketell, Rita Kuring, Gloria MacDonald, Gwen Forsyth, Jean Ferguson, Rose Heath, Phyllis Thomas, Sheila Barron and Jessie Vasey were just a small number of some ten thousand war widows[67] across Australia for whom VP Day was tainted by grief, the hopes and dreams for their post-war futures dashed.

CHAPTER 2

THE WAR WIDOWS' GUILD BEGINS

After VP Day came repatriation, and the men adjusting, with varying degrees of difficulty, to being husbands, breadwinners and fathers. The federal government aimed for full employment for the male population, with priority given to ex-servicemen. It offered assistance in the form of retraining or study through the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme and incentives to take up land or build houses through the War Services Home Scheme. Married women, many of whom had joined the workforce during the war, were expected to return to full-time domestic duties.[1] But the traditional role of wife and mother was not possible for everyone; war widows faced an uncertain future.

A widow's grief was exacerbated by the fact that the allotment given to her from her husband's pay was cancelled upon his death. The basic pension of £2.10 per week paid to the wives of men killed on active duty[2] was less than half the basic wage, although even this was more than twice the pittance offered to widows of civilians. Furthermore, there existed in the Repatriation Act a morality clause which could see a war widow's pension cancelled altogether if authorities deemed her 'immoral'.

A war widow with children needed to be both breadwinner and nurturer. Some managed to juggle the two roles. In Perth, Gwen Forsyth returned to nursing to support herself and her boys. Rather than undertaking hospital shift work, she made home visits on behalf of several GPs, fitting them in around her sons' routines.[3] For many war widows, though, this flexibility was not available; they faced a choice of living in poverty or finding work and being an 'absent' mother. On top of this was a sense of isolation and loneliness, as others welcomed home