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Jess Prain, one of the first WRANS

by
Carrol Miller



*Monograph Number Sixteen
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Jess Prain, one of the first WRANS

The establishment of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service during the Second World War was a milestone for women in the military in this country. That the WRANS came into existence at all at this time was due to the foresight, patriotism and persistence of a dynamic woman – Florence Violet McKenzie – who would come to be affectionately called “Mrs Mac” by the earliest WRANS.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P01262.001

*Florence McKenzie (1890-1982)
in her Women's Emergency Signals Corps uniform*

Florence McKenzie was the first female university qualified electrical engineer in Australia who, amongst many other achievements, established the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps (WESC) in 1939, to train young men who wished to enter the defence forces in the skills of telegraphic and visual signalling¹. All the instructors at the WESC were young women who had been trained by the redoubtable Mrs Mac. These young female instructors were so proficient that Mrs McKenzie believed they would be more than capable of filling the role of shore-based telegraphists in the Navy, which was suffering a significant shortage of such personnel as the war progressed.

¹ Huie, Shirley Fenton, *Ships Belles: The story of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service 1941-1985*, Watermark Press, Sydney, 2000, p. 20.

So ensued, across 1940, many months of letter writing by Mrs McKenzie to various cabinet ministers and, in particular, the Minister of the Navy, Billy Hughes, and later Norman Makin, all to no effect. The breakthrough came when the Naval Board in Melbourne accepted Mrs McKenzie's invitation to send an officer to Sydney to test the ability of her young female instructors. The visit took place in January of 1941, when Commander J.B Newman, Director of Signals Communications, visited and tested a number of female instructors and students in wireless telegraphy and visual signalling. To his astonishment, the women were highly proficient, with the Commander adding in his report "Almost as good as men, in fact."² The Naval Board were convinced, and the first women were enrolled in April 1941, with Mrs McKenzie and fourteen young women travelling in their forest green WESC uniforms to Harman Wireless/Telegraphy Station in Canberra, all with the agreement that there would be no publicity surrounding the formation.³

Jess Prain was one of these young women who had joined Mrs McKenzie's WESC, after completing her education at the selective St. George Girls' High School. Her personal recollection of these events was succinct and prosaic: "Finally they sent somebody up and they tested us on a Thursday, we had our medical examination on ANZAC Day and we were in the Navy on Monday."⁴ Such was the speed of the enlistment that the heading of Jess' Service Record has the words "Petty Officers and Men" ruled through, and the words "Women's Royal Australian Naval Service" written neatly by hand above. Jess' enlistment number was WR/8.⁵

Despite disquiet around fraternisation, the first WRANS settled into life at W/T Harman quickly and well. They impressed senior officers immediately with their self-discipline, dedication and even their ability to march in step.⁶ Jess recalled that there was genuine concern that the men at Harman should not come into contact with the women when off-duty on any account. In an interview for the Sydney Morning Herald in 1986 she stated, "When we first went to Canberra there were cottages rather than barracks. The CO [Commanding Officer] was so scared of having fourteen women in a whole crowd of men that, rather than adopt the usual practice of a knock on the door to wake the next watch, he had alarm clocks ordered so we wouldn't be touched by males in any way."⁷

² Ibid, p. 21.

³ Ibid, p. 24.

⁴ Ronai, Robyn, 'A WRANS Pioneer recalls the struggle to convince men', *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 22, 1986, p. 7.

⁵ NAA: A6769, Prain J S, p.3..

⁶ Huie, Op. Cit., p. 27

⁷ Ronai, Loc.cit.



*WRANS at Harman in 1941 wearing their original WESC uniforms
- Jess Prain is third from the left*

With highly proficient skills and true leadership ability, Jess' career in the WRANS throughout the war was impressive. In December 1941, she was the rating who despatched the message to all ships from Harman W/T Station that Australia was officially at war with Japan.⁸ Made a Petty Officer in 1943, she was selected for officer training at *HMAS Cerberus*, attaining the rank of Third Officer in 1944.⁹ She served at both Harman, the telecommunications nerve centre of the naval war in the Pacific, and *HMAS Rushcutter* until 1946, just after the completion of World War II and three years before the WRANS were disbanded in 1949.

In 1951, with the Korean crisis looming, Jess was invited back to the WRANS with the rank of Second Officer. Her appointment was Officer-in-Charge, WRANS at the Naval Training Establishment at Flinders Naval Depot. With her strong administrative and managerial skills, Jess began to re-establish the Administration, Recruit and Officer training programs which set the foundation of training in the first years, and established the service as a permanent and integral part of the Royal Australian Navy. In 1954, she was offered the position of Director of WRANS, but

⁸ Huie, Op. Cit., p. 46.

⁹ NAA: Op.Cit., p. 6. /

because of a family illness felt it her duty to return home. She retired with the rank of First Officer.



Senior members of the WRANS at HMAS Harman Naval Wireless Station on the fourth birthday of the service. Jess Prain is seated in the front row, extreme right

After leaving the service, she was employed as publications manager with the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in the late 1950s, working with various voluntary groups of that organisation. Later, motivated by her service background, she joined Sydney Legacy in the early 1960s as their Director of Appeals, a position she held for seven years, throughout which time Legacy's fundraising income rose substantially. In 1969, she was invited by the president of the Post Graduate Medical Foundation to raise funds to build The Sir Victor Coppleson Post-Graduate School of Medicine at Sydney University.

Throughout her post-service years, Jess maintained an active connection with the WRANS, being on the committee of the Ex-WRANS Association from its inception in 1961, representing the association in many capacities. As the senior officer in Sydney, she also led the WRANS contingent every year in the ANZAC Day march.

Her final service to the WRANS was in the enormous work she undertook directing the WRANS Window project, with the aim to complete a stained glass window in the Garden Island Chapel in time for the 75th anniversary of the RAN in 1986. It was Jess' vision to found a permanent memorial to all women who served in the WRANS, and her drive and organisational skills proved to be tireless in this job. Creating and

leading a committee of nine WRANS, she oversaw the fundraising, the choice of stained glass artist, and she gave input into the design. Her vision was that the window must represent every WRAN, irrespective of rank or branch.¹⁰ The window was unveiled at the Garden Island chapel on September 21, 1986 by Rear Admiral Sir David Martin, who would later give the eulogy at Jess' funeral in 1988.

Although in her interview with the Sydney Morning Herald in 1986 Jess said, "... we didn't feel like pioneers of liberation at the time,"¹¹ she and all the early WRANS were trailblazers for women's service in the Royal Australian Navy. Jess served her country well and was very proud to have done so. A wing at *HMAS Harman* is named in her honour.



The WRANS' window in the Chapel at Garden Island

¹⁰ Huie, Op. Cit., p. 244-245.

¹¹ Ronai, Robyn, 'A WRANS Pioneer recalls the struggle to convince men', *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 22, 1986, p 7

*Appendix*Table of Ranks of the WRANS

Rank :	equivalent RAN
Chief Officer :	Commander
First Officer :	Lieutenant Commander
Second Officer :	Lieutenant
Third Officer :	Sub-Lieutenant
Chief Petty Officer :	Chief Petty Officer
Petty Officer :	Petty Officer
Leading WRAN :	Leading Seaman
WRAN :	Able Seaman

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Carrol Miller holds a Master of Arts in History from the University of Sydney. She taught History and English for many years in a number of Independent schools in Sydney. Currently the archivist at Meriden School, she also volunteers as a librarian at the RUSI Library in the Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park.