

## WARTIME FOR AN A.W.A.S. IN THE TROPICS

Jean Smith (formerly Wilkin)

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I joined the AWAS after my first husband, Leslie Clifton Wilkin was killed at the age of 21 years whilst serving in the Army in North Africa in April 1941 just four months after we were married in the Collins Street Baptist Church. We met aged at about 12 in the Junior Christian Endeavour Society of that Church. My father, also in the army, had fought at Gallipoli and France during WW1 and my brother-in-law was a POW in Changi and later Thailand - thus I had several reasons for joining the Army.

What an exciting adventure it was going to Rookie School at Darley! I think most of us were from a somewhat sheltered and comfortable background and some of the young women were somewhat startled and unable to comprehend the vast changes to life in the Army and found difficulty in adapting to the regimentation. I enjoyed it from day 1 and, although I wanted to join transport (I really wished to learn to drive), because of my advanced typing and shorthand skills I was posted to administration at Victoria Barracks, first working for Brig Binns and then Lt Col Kathleen Best, a fine nursing sister who had returned from service in the Middle East.

I was then posted to the Physiology Department of Melbourne University being one of the first AWAS to join the Australian Research and Experimental Section, later called 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Field Trials Company RAE. This was a most secret unit and when we moved to Innisfail, North Queensland our mail was censored and we were unable to tell our next-of-kin exactly where we were going or what the Unit was involved in doing. I well remember the excitement before joining the Troop Train at Spencer Street Station - we had been told we were going to North Queensland (a trip which took about 6 days). We felt that we could really do something to assist the war effort.

Apart from the monotony of the food (hot sausages, lots of bread and rather awful "M&V", the trip was highlighted by the changing countryside, some beautiful scenery and the cheerful and willing station staff, although we had to accept the joking and sometimes ribald comments - "Women in the Army"! I remember some of the smaller, more agile girls endeavoured to sleep in the luggage racks - we were all very thankful to arrive at Innisfail then on to our camp on the banks of the South Johnstone River a few miles out of Innisfail - a very beautiful spot. It was a large North Queensland house which contained laboratories, offices and sleeping quarters for several senior officers and many smaller houses used for the troops with cooks, mess huts, transport, meteorological and radio shacks etc nearby. I well remember after one Saturday evening when we had been permitted to attend a dance in Innisfail, in the early hours of Sunday morning an inebriated serviceman somehow found his way into the base. News got around next day that two AWAS, including myself, had thrown him out of their hut. In actual fact, I telephoned the Adjutant and "men on white horses" came to <sup>oh</sup> aid from all directions. In the middle of a pitch black North Queensland night in 1944, ~~it~~ caused a bit of excitement.

The Laboratory Assistants, who were all young men and <sup>mainly</sup> women from Melbourne and Adelaide Universities, had really responsible and important work to do, especially after the Unit had many volunteers who took part in exercises on the assault course and went into the gas chamber, which was also on the base. ~~We girls were~~ <sup>I do not</sup> permitted to enter the gas chamber for a very short time and ~~most of us~~ did develop small vesicles afterwards, although these healed very quickly. We took part in other minor experiments in the Laboratory and in several trials, which were conducted, on a small island off the coast. This was an extremely exciting time for us all.

I was one of the clerical staff, at first as Stenographer/Typist, for one of the Senior Physiologists and later on a roster basis with another AWAS member for the C.O., LTCOL F. S. Gorrill and 2IC Major David Sinclair, both of whom were Doctors and members of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Before one of the trials, we were camped in tents on Hinchinbrook Island for about five days. The conditions of course were very rough and I can remember the inky blackness at night with the rather eerie sounds made by the trees rustling in the wind and the surf pounding on the shore. On another of the trials, we were anchored off the coast of Brook Island in one of the LST landing craft when another AWAS and myself were violently seasick and had to remove our respirators - apparently we were "green". However, I was still able to take shorthand!

On another occasion when we were en route to a trial, about fifteen members of the services were involved in an accident when the axle of a 15 hundredweight covered army truck broke and, in a split second, the truck landed upside down in a swollen creek. This could have been fatal except that a jeep containing officers travelling in front of us (who were off the jeep before it had stopped apparently) pulled us all out - covered in silver mud, saturated and, although a couple of girls suffered slight concussion and a cut forehead, we were all extremely fortunate just to suffer from shock. I will never forget the kindness of the Tully Country Women's Association who took us in, wrapped us in towels, sheets and blankets and comforted us with hot tea and coffee.

Another time, when we were all dressed in two layers of neck to ankle impregnated protective clothing, which was very hot and uncomfortable, a trial was cancelled. We were taken to Mission Beach where we could see Dunk Island. Standards of behaviour in 1944 meant that the boys went to one end and the girls some distance away. How great it was to swim and splash about quite naked in the lovely sea off Mission Beach. In 1944 some members of the Unit were transferred to a new, very modern, camp at Gunyarra some miles south of Proserpine, North Queensland where the trials were continued in somewhat very different country than the jungles and rainforest area around Innisfail. Although many of us felt a little sad to leave Innisfail, everything was

new and glamorous compared to our old base and the Laboratory was air-conditioned which was of great assistance to the scientists and technicians.

Several funny incidents occurred whilst the Unit was at Gunyarra, including a ~~trial~~ which set fire to the surrounding bush causing some consternation for a few hours. Obviously this trial was not repeated. Another incident occurred when, to celebrate a birthday, a group of servicemen and women decided to go on a picnic one night and became completely ~~lost in~~ <sup>the</sup> blackness of the thick bush. When the very relieved group finally found their way back to camp at first light, the Adjutant fortunately only reprimanded them.

*[Indeed it was very memorable and somewhat emotional in October 1996 to attend the unveiling of a plaque at Gunyarra. Seven members participated - three men and four women - and it was a great thrill after more than fifty years to meet up again. We were very sorry that more ex-members were unable to attend this Ceremony organised by the Proserpine <sup>Historical Society</sup> and the Proserpine RSL Ex-Service Club.]*

In conclusion and as an Epilogue to this true war-time story, to put it simply, the Unit was formed to test mustard and other gases on equipment, uniforms and surroundings, then on volunteers as early tests showed that these gases were up to four times more powerful under tropical conditions. I am aware, of course, that some of the volunteers who served with the Unit over a period of time suffered burns ranging from relatively minor to more serious. However, since 1975 I believe (and have written many letters in defence of the Unit, some of which have been quoted in the press) that when the unit was in the planning stages and formed in 1942/1943, the Second World War both in Europe and South East Asia was only half over. I can categorically confirm that the senior personnel involved (both in Innisfail and later when the Unit moved to Gunyarra including English, Australian and American Army Officers and many senior civilian scientists from England and Australia) worked long hours with tremendous dedication in order to obtain the knowledge to safeguard Australian, British and American troops

fighting in the South West Pacific Area. The Royal Australian Air Force also played a significant role in the Trials that took place as they provided meteorologists, aircrews and aircraft. A very brave WAAAF Section Officer, Moira Shelton (who is now deceased), and a WAAAF Sergeant were also attached to the Unit.

Captain Howard Skipper of the American Chemical Warfare Service, Edgewood Arsenal, USA, was a member of the Unit and was able to procure, from Cairns, four landing craft and drivers for the Brook Island Trials.

In retrospect, I believe everyone in the Unit worked extremely hard in the North Queensland sub-tropical heat and wet season. It was very hot and enervating, especially when it was necessary to wear the double layer impregnated protective clothing and a respirator.

For some years after World War II, I kept in touch with several friends from the Unit, from Adelaide and Melbourne. During the last 10 years, I have made contact again with several men and women from Brisbane and the Atherton Tableland. However, over many years, I have maintained a close friendship with Sylvia Stoltz who wrote the booklet "Australian Service Women in Mustard Gas Field Trials in North Queensland." Many members from various States have been in contact for over 50 years and this has given them much enjoyment, friendship and support.

I am quite certain that I am not alone in remembering how important and interesting working in this Unit was for many men and women and the camaraderie we all experienced. I deem it a privilege to have been a member of the Australian Research and Experimental Section known as the Chemical Warfare Unit.

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