

# Susie Struth

Susie Struth joined the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC) at a time when the gay and lesbian movement was becoming increasingly visible and it looked as though social reform in civilian society might eventually be possible. Within the military, though, LGB men and women were coming under increased pressure and scrutiny. While she did not come to realise her sexuality until she had served for some time, she was made to leave in 1977 after it was exposed. The increased awareness of homosexuality in civil society, coupled with a widely reported case of lesbianism in the Women's Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF) in 1973, meant that those who were identified as gay had little option other than to leave the services. Just as a number of other men and women who feature in this book went on to forge successful careers after their military service, Susie also established a new career post-WRAAC. Towards the end of her interview, she emphasised a point that was very important to her. She wanted people to know that 'We did serve prior to 1992, that there were lesbians and gays in the military before then and even way before I was in, and that we all served with distinction and we cared very much about what we did.'

Susie was born in Warrnambool in country Victoria in 1954, the oldest of five children and the only girl. She was raised in a 'very Catholic family' and attended the local convent school. She remembers a 'really fabulous childhood'; growing up in a rural area made for a 'free, easy life. I could go anywhere, do anything, so long as I was back by whatever time Dad and Mum said'. She was in close contact with nature. She and her best friend each had a horse, and were allowed to roam far and wide. She also learned to 'fish, swim, row, and shoot an air gun – everything'.

Susie's mother used to buy the *Australian Women's Weekly* every week and, when she was 13 or 14, Susie remembers seeing an advertisement for the women's services: 'There was one for the Navy, one for the Air Force and one for the Army and I just thought, "Wow! That looks fantastic."' Her preference for the branch she pursued ended

up being somewhat arbitrary: 'I didn't want to join the Air Force because you had to be 18. I didn't particularly want to join the Navy, because that was training in Melbourne, but I thought the Army would be good because I like green and they are in Sydney. It was a simple as that.' Historian Janette Bomford has noted that the WRAAC was producing advertisements to attract new recruits in the 1960s that emphasised the 'vitaly important' job that women could perform in the services.<sup>1</sup>

Susie's story echoes that of many ~~of the~~ other women. The advertisements she saw about the military hinted at a life that was far more appealing than the limited career options she saw available to the women around her. She says:

I wasn't great at school; I knew I'd never go to uni and it didn't interest me. I didn't want to be a teacher. I didn't want to be a nurse. I didn't want to be a secretary. I didn't particularly want to work in a shop, and I wasn't pretty enough to work in the chemist, which was pretty much what was open to girls in the '70s from a country town. So that's why this whole world opened up to me when I saw this ad, and I just went: 'Yeah, that's me.'

After completing Year 11, Susie left school. Although she was only 16 and the age for joining the WRAAC was 17, Susie was still so keen she sent off an application. They wrote back, pointing out that she was short of the age of enlistment. Susie marked the time until she could sign up by working in a local department store. Then, on her birthday, the very day she was eligible to enlist, Susie again sent off an application to the WRAAC. She received a quick reply within a couple of weeks. Her interview was scheduled for Melbourne, where she did the various tests that were required. Susie eventually received a letter, letting her know that she had been accepted and was scheduled to begin recruit training in September 1971. While a military career had been a goal of Susie's and a simple choice, it took her parents a little longer to adjust to the idea that she was leaving. She reflects: 'I think Mum and Dad were really pleased but really shocked that this all happened really quickly.'

Susie left home and headed to WRAAC School in Sydney for recruit training – 'and so began my new life.' She met probably around 40 or 50 other women on the same course who came from all over Australia. It was an empowering experience for someone

who had been led to doubt their ability through the schooling system. She says, 'I discovered that I wasn't as dumb as I thought and that, because I wanted to do it, nothing was too hard. No amount of military law or anything they threw at us was difficult. It was just, like, easy. So I really, really loved it.'

Susie was allocated to Signals after her recruit course, and she remembers: 'To get into Sigs was pretty cool so I was really thrilled that I did.' The next course did not start until January 1972, so in the meantime Susie was sent to Puckapunyal in central Victoria to be a stewardess 'just to fill in a bit of time but its also a good training thing. It also teaches you all sorts of things'. While she remembers the experience as being hard work, she still had fun. Susie stayed at the barracks with a group of women, which is where she met one particularly lovely woman living in the Corporal's hut, while 'I was in the slackers privates hut.' Susie became part of a group of friends who 'knocked around together'. Puckapunyal, as Susie describes it, was a 'dry dustbowl of a place'. When the group had time off, 'We used to come into Melbourne and go and see shows or we'd go down to my parents' place.' Susie adjusted easily to the military life and enjoyed her time at Puckapunyal. She says:

It was just a really good fun, carefree kind of existence, without the pressure of having to have been anything yet. So you're still sort of finding your feet in the Army and working out who was who and all that sort of stuff. For me, that came really naturally. I never had any problem with authority, with discipline, with any of that. It was just like somebody told me to do it, say jump and I'd just say how high. It was never ever an issue, because it was what I wanted to do and I just thought I'm just going to be the best I can be. So it was good.

In January 1972 Susie was posted to School of Signals at Watsonia in Melbourne for a three-month course. Fax machines had only just become available in Australia, and the Army had the first ones. She remembers this as a period where she was finding her feet, making new contacts, studying hard and living in the barracks again. The course itself was pretty good, and after completing it in March or April 1972, Susie received her first posting to 5 Sig Regiment in Sydney. Susie remembers being 'thrilled to be going back to Sydney'. She lived at the barracks in Dundas, 'just because you could'. It was expensive

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living elsewhere, and ‘there was no need to live out, so I lived in and just went to work every day and just learnt and practised my craft and learnt from amazing people’.

One of the best elements for Susie was that she was surrounded by a lot of strong female role models, whom she describes as ‘just fantastic’. While discrimination was still rife – both in the civilian world and within the military – she felt that the base supported gender inclusion. Rank was more important than whether you were male or female. Susie says, ‘[I] really loved it and I really liked working there. I worked at Kissing Point Road in Dundas where the barracks were and there was a big signal centre there. I also worked at Vic Barracks in Paddington’. For Susie, it was still a ‘very carefree, easy existence’ where she was finding her work easy. Even the most complex tasks did not seem difficult at all.

The girl who had grown up in the country adjusted well to life in the city. Susie got a licence and bought her first car before she turned 18. She drove around Sydney, and remembers: ‘I knew the place really well. It was again a very carefree existence.’ Although the legal drinking age was 21, Susie discovered that because she was in the military, she was able to drink at 18 at Leagues Clubs. She says, ‘Because we were in the forces, we just flashed our cards and we could go in as 18-year-olds.’ For Susie, ‘a lot happened in that first year, so it was just amazing and I just grew so quickly’.

During this time, Susie saw a lot of men returning from Vietnam: ‘some came back wrecked and some came back fine. That’s just the way it was’. Although Australia’s war had mostly ended by this point, anti-war sentiment was strong. Susie remembers being told not to wear her uniform out – a trope common among Vietnam veterans’ memories. She remembers being asked questions by civilians such as “‘What are you doing going over there fighting a war that we’re not part of?’” and all that sort of stuff.’

While Susie was enjoying the time in Sydney, she was thrilled when she received an offer for a posting to 9 Sig Regiment in Singapore. The overseas posting that Julie Hendy’s group had pioneered in 1967 (see pXX) had opened up overseas service opportunities for women in the WRAAC. Still, this was an unusual opportunity and one Susie was keen to take up. First, though, as she was still young, she had to ring her parents and ask permission. To her disappointment, her mother and father told that she

was too young to take up the posting. Susie did her best to argue: 'I said: "Mum, this opportunity doesn't come along".' Her mother responded by saying, 'Well, too bad; I'm not going to let you go.' Without ~~the~~ their parents' signature, Susie had to turn down the opportunity. Fortunately, six months later, she was offered the posting again. ~~And~~ This time around, her mother gave her permission to go.

In April 1973, at the age of 18, Susie set off for Singapore. While Julie had gone to her posting aware of her lesbian identity, Susie embarked on her journey thinking she was heterosexual. It was Susie's first trip overseas, and she remembers it as 'the dreamiest dream posting in the history of anything ever'. The allowances paid to the servicewomen were generous and there were many places in Singapore to explore. Singapore was a paradise for shopping, as it was 'still a duty-free hub and you could get all your good stereos and that sort of stuff. All the big beautiful hotels, we used to go in there and posh it up and drink'. She also enjoyed exploring the local scenery, visiting small villages like kampongs, where Susie noted 'there was a lot of jungle there. I did Taekwondo at a local place.' She purchased a car with another girl, a 1954 MG Magnette, to get around and explore.

Susie remembers having a 'great expat's life, and being in the barracks with the girls from New Zealand and England was fabulous as well'. As there were big naval docks, visiting ships used to come in regularly and submarines also came to port. When the fleets came in, Susie remembers, they used to ring up the barracks, inviting women to cocktail parties. They'd be told:

There's a cocktail party tonight at 5. Dress cocktail and we'll send cars around to pick anyone up that is interested at such and such a time. So the word would go out, everyone would put on their finery and you'd get ferried off down the dock, piped on board, treated like royalty and just had a good time with the boys and it was fantastic. We had a really good time. We really led the life of bloody Riley!

After 18 months, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam recalled the women home several months earlier than expected. Before returning to Australia, Susie went to London on a holiday and 'did the old Contiki trip and all that sort of stuff that everybody did'.

While she was based in Singapore, Susie met a man, John, who was a petty officer in the Navy. The two got on very well and a bond formed. When Susie returned to Australia in September 1974 after her London holiday, she was posted to Sydney and John was posted to Canberra. She recalls: 'We used to see one another a lot and, you know, he was the first boy I ever took home to meet Mum and Dad and all that sort of stuff. So that was a big deal.' She remembers being amazed at how much she had seen and done by being in the WRAAC, compared to many of the girls she had grown up with.

I'd discovered that the girl who was in my class, who was the brightest and most amazing, the prettiest... the one with the most potential – the year after I left to join the Army she'd gotten pregnant and had given all that amazingness away... ~~you~~ You just can't pick it really, can you?

Just as Susie had introduced John to her family, he also introduced her to his. Susie spent time with his sister, who lived in Thredbo, and Susie thought she was 'just a really lovely, lovely woman'.

-One night Susie went out for a dinner with John's sister and her friends, who were all women. She remembers: 'I didn't really think anything of it except that I really enjoyed their company and I felt very comfortable with them.' Her ease around women tapped into something else that had been niggling at her since her time in Singapore. One of the gay women on the base pulled her aside late one night and said, 'What is it with you, Struth?... The way you walk, the way you dress – you should be a lesbian.' Susie responded by saying, 'I'm not. I think you've got it all wrong,' but the woman insisted, 'Well, we reckon you are.' Susie said, 'You can reckon whatever you like, but I'm not.' Susie was not offended by the discussion. Nor did she feel that the woman was making a pass at her, so Susie dismissed the conversation as a drunken chat. Susie was aware that there were gay women on the base and never made any judgement about it.

After Susie returned to Sydney, she went on to do a junior non-commissioned officer (NCO) course at WRAAC School. She told John that she would not be able to visit him during this period. There were around 25 other women taking the course. Susie began the course as a Private and then halfway through it, she was promoted to Lance

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Corporal. She explains: 'When you first get promoted, you don't sew any of your stripes on; everybody does it. So we had a big night of everyone sitting around in my room sewing my stripes on, which was awesome. It sounds quite naff but you actually can't explain how incredible that was.' Quite a few of the other women on the course were gay, and one Saturday night they asked Susie if she would like to accompany them to a dance. The women were allowed out on the junior NCO course, so Susie responded with a yes.

Susie cannot remember if the other women told her that the dance was an all-woman event. In any event, Susie went along. As she recalls, by 1974, Sydney used to have 'fabulous' dances. Some would have all women or all men, or they would be mixed but be events for gay people. She remembers: 'They used to change the location because the cops would raid them every week.' Susie cannot remember the location of her first dance, but she does remember walking in and there were 'probably about, I don't know, 300, 400 women there and it was fabulous'. The development of this scene has been captured beautifully by historian Rebecca Jennings.<sup>2</sup> Susie remembers walking in to see 'every sort of woman there you could imagine: tall, short, fat, skinny, scary, dykey, full-on-butch – across the whole thing'. She continues: 'I just went, "Oh my God! This is amazing" and had the best night. It was such a good night. We went to a couple more and really, really enjoyed it.'

Susie's enjoyment of the dances, coupled with the comfort she felt around women and the words she had heard from the gay woman in Singapore, were all weighing on her mind. After Susie got promoted on her course, she went back to her regiment and then went down to meet John and spend time with him and three or four other couples. On that weekend, Susie realised that she did not want to be touched by him anymore. She explains: 'Not because I didn't like him, but because I just went: "Oh, I don't think I want to go down this path"'. Susie ~~points out~~indicates that she had not actually had any sexual contact with a woman at this point, but clearly she was coming to a realisation about herself. When she realised she needed to break up with John, she told his sister first, who was supportive. She says, 'So I wrote to him, I did, I literally wrote him a Dear John letter. I just said, "Look, it's not going to work."' After this, Susie 'hooked up with a few of the girls from the course and just started to explore a whole other world, which was really good'.

In 1976, Susie was again posted to Watsonia in Melbourne and was promoted to full Corporal. Her role was as an instructor at the School of Signals. Susie had wanted to be a recruit instructor because she had been so inspired by the women who had taught her, but officials informed her that she was too young. Instead, she instructed 'basic trade training courses and I really enjoyed it – because I liked signals'. As she describes: 'I liked my job and I was good at it, so I was passing that knowledge on. I rewrote some of the manuals because they were outdated and I just liked the discipline.' It then became time for Susie to consider doing the courses required for promotion to Sergeant.

By this time Susie was in a relationship with another woman, Trish, who was at 6 Sig Regiment on the same base. The two women had been at 5 Sig together, Susie's first posting in Sydney in 1972. Before being stationed at Watsonia together, Susie had been over in Singapore while Trish had been in Canberra and had married. Trish's husband, who was in intelligence, had been posted to Melbourne, which was how she ended up there. Both women were corporals and Susie remembers: 'It was really good to have a friend and what have you.'

The two women used to go to jazz ballet once a week in the city and afterwards have a toasted sandwich somewhere. After a time, Susie says, 'We kind of fell in love I suppose – because we'd been really good friends for a while, from Sydney days. It was a natural extension.' While Susie had been with other women, it was a new experience for Trish. She left her husband and the two women moved into a flat together, just up the road from Watsonia. Susie does not remember feeling particularly anxious about being exposed as a lesbian. She had known many gay women in the services and had not really heard anyone gossiping about their sexuality. Susie focused on her job and kept her private life to herself.

One morning, in March 1977, she was made brutally aware that her sexuality had been noticed. The two women woke up and saw that Trish's car, which had been parked out the front, had been spray-painted with 'poof or fag or something'. She continues: 'To this day, we don't know who did it, but that was pretty upsetting'. The women tried to move past this incident. They were both cryptographers with top-secret clearances who were doing well in their careers. Trish received a promotion and had her 'dining-in' night

at the sergeants' mess, which is a big deal'. Susie was at home while this was occurring but was excited to see Trish when she came home. After the excitement of this, the two women woke the next morning to a knock on the door.

Susie describes her experience:

We had a two-bedroom apartment. The next morning there was a knock on the door at 8 and I opened the door and there were two military police there. I said, 'What are you doing here?' and they said, 'Oh we've come – we want to take you in for questioning.' I said, 'Beg your pardon?' It was like – if you've ever been blind-sided or king-hit or anything, this would be the equivalent because it just came from completely nowhere. No warning, nothing. Just opened the door, two red beret people are standing there.

The two women were taken to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Military District Headquarters for questioning and were separated from each other. Susie remembers a barrage of queries: 'It was like, "Are you gay? Are you a lesbian? Are you in a relationship?"' She responded by asking, "What business is it of yours?". Susie tried to find out what was happening and what had prompted the investigation. Susie says that 'the details of that day are very hazy, except that we were there all day and I can't remember why. It was quite intimidating. If intimidation was the factor, then it worked'. Finally, in an effort to arrange their release, they were able to call a friend who also happened to be gay: Trish's Commanding Officer (CO). The CO came, 'but she was really wary and she just said to us on the quiet, "Whatever you do, don't say anything about me. Please don't say anything about me."' But she was there in her capacity as captain and as CO, not as another lesbian'. This woman did manage to arrange for Susie and Trish to be released from interrogation: 'So she got us out basically and then came back to our place. The four of us just talked it through a bit and then it was like nothing kind of was going to happen.' On Monday morning, Susie went to work 'as though nothing had happened' on the sergeants' course at Watsonia. She was about two or three weeks into the 12-week course, which was one of the first integrated courses of its kind with two girls-women and 28 men undertaking it.

The matter had not ended, however. Susie was called into the CO's office and was told that she was to go to Victoria Barracks in Melbourne to talk to the intelligence people. She remembers: 'A car came to pick me up on Wednesday. I got time off the

course, no questions asked.' Susie describes an interrogation at Victoria Barracks that was intense and unrelenting.

[I] went into this room and there was me and a Lieutenant whose name escapes me, but it was – you imagine a single light bulb on a desk; that was it. He said, 'So, Corporal Struth we want you to name every other lesbian that you know.' I just looked at him and I said, 'Oh, I don't think I can do that, Sir.' He said, 'No, we want you to.' I said, 'No, I think you taught me better than that.' I said, 'I'm not going to give that away. Sorry.'

As other stories reveal, men and women who were suspected to be gay or lesbian and interrogated were put under immense pressure to name others. Susie remembers: 'So that's essentially what they wanted me to do, was to name names.' Susie refused but was compelled to return each week for further interrogations from this Lieutenant. At one point, in frustration, Susie pointed out the way the military's treatment of homosexual people was forcing out some of its best. She said, 'You want to really think carefully about this because you are going to lose some really good people if you keep doing this.' Susie now believes that there was a witch-hunt in Victoria in 1977, and other oral histories support this.

Female homosexuality was still treated as a medical pathology to be corrected in the military and in wider society in the 1970s, and authorities sent Susie to a psychologist. In fact, in 1977, the year Susie's sexuality was exposed, a British Army consultant psychiatrist cautioned the Australian Army that 'most normal women did not consider service life attractive ... Australian servicewomen would show a similarly high predisposition towards anti-social or deviant behaviour and, hence, towards homosexual activities'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this assessment contributed to an increase in investigations of women in the Army.

While Susie was undergoing her interrogations, she was still completing her course and doing well. She finished in the top four. She was still living with Trish, who had denied being a lesbian. When Susie is asked if she wishes that she had denied her sexuality, she answers, 'Yeah, I thought about that very question, and I thought if I had, I would have been looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life, and I thought, "No, I

don't want to do that". After Susie finished her course, she went back to her unit, the School of Signals, and asked her CO if there was any way of fighting what was happening to her. He advised her that she would not be able to fight the charges, saying, 'It's like trying to fight city hall. We can't do it'. Susie asked what it was that she had done that was so wrong. 'I said, "I'm not pregnant. I haven't busted up any marriages." I said, "I haven't cost the Army any money. I haven't brought the Army into disrepute." I said, "Tell me what I've done wrong."'

The decision was already made, though. Susie explains: '~~by~~ By then, they'd given me the option of being dishonourably discharged, not suited to being a soldier, or serving out my time to September [1977]', which was when her enlistment period ended. Susie had already engaged for another term, but 'I sort of reneged on that and just said, "No. I want to get out."' For anyone watching Susie's career, it would have simply appeared as though she had decided not to re-engage. Susie says, 'If I knew then what I know now, I would have fought and kicked and bucked every step of the way, but I didn't. I was so passive I think, very passive, and I went without a fight, which was interesting.' Susie expands on the reasons why she did not fight harder: 'I felt like I had no choice because I was so used to the discipline and so used to saying yes and not questioning anything. That was my mistake.' Furthermore, when all this happened, she was still very young: 'I just sort of blindly accepted it. I was still very young; I was only 23 when I got out.'

It most likely would not have made a difference if Susie had spent more time challenging her treatment. By 1974 the military had developed a policy on homosexuality which applied to men and women. It formalised the discrimination and practices that had existed previously and made it impossible for LGB people to serve openly. By the time Susie's sexuality came to official attention, there was a well-practised policy of removing lesbian women from the WRAAC quickly and discreetly, despite the personal cost of doing so.

Knowing her discharge was impending, she wrote to the ABC and managed to get a job that began immediately after her time in the WRAAC ended. It opened the door to a career in film and television as a script supervisor that has given her much satisfaction. She has worked as a script supervisor on some of Australia's most loved films including

*Red Dog* and *The Dressmaker* and television series including *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, *Seachange* and *Marco Polo*, a huge undertaking that saw her filming in locations like Budapest, Slovakia and Malaysia. She says, 'In hindsight, it was the best decision I have ever made. I've gone further now than I ever could have in the Army.' Her relationship with Trish ended 'not long after we got out of the Army. The strain was too much.' At the time of our interview, Susie had been in a relationship for 27 years. It was with the lovely woman she had met and enjoyed spending time with at Puckapunyal way back in 1972. The two women reconnected in 1987 and began a relationship in 1990. Susie is now 'very open about her sexuality'.

Susie has also reconciled her relationship with the military to a large extent, although she still justifiably feels let down by what happened to her. She has been to two WRAAC reunions, 'which were just fantastic'. She loved being in a room full of women who served, and she even signed up for a tour to revisit the WRAAC barracks. Although the famous Kathleen Best gates have gone to Duntroon, the original buildings are still there and 'the shape of the place is the same'. Susie describes how a cadet band had been arranged for the reunion, and those who were physically capable marched.

So we went around the back of the area and we did a bit of a drill. There was a woman there who was a Sergeant Major and she just gave us a bit of a drill and addressed us and 'attention' and 'stand at ease' and all that, and everyone just kind of remembered. We were laughing our heads off and then eventually we all got serious. So then all the girls who couldn't march were around the front, near the gun bays, so we marched around from the back through what would have been the gates with a band playing 'Soldiers of the Queen' on the parade grounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Bomford, *Soldiers of the Queen*, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Jennings, *Unnamed Desires*.

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<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col G.F. Boileau, 'Security – Homosexuals', 8 September 1977, in NAA, A4090, 537/6/19.