

Julie Hendy

On 14 December 1967, 21 year-old Australian Corporal Julie Hendy arrived in Singapore. She was part of a small and select group of ten women who were making Australian history. They were the first members of the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC) to serve in an overseas theatre since the formation of the Corps in 1951. So momentous was their posting that the Minister for the Army, Malcolm Fraser, issued a press release for the occasion, and photographs were taken of the women exploring Singapore.¹ While Julie was clearly considered one of the best and brightest in the women's services, her time in Singapore and in the WRAAC ended suddenly and dramatically in 1968 when her sexuality was discovered. She was quickly sent back to Australia and discharged in a matter of days with a certificate stamped 'Retention in the Military Forces not being in the interests of those Forces'. While prejudice meant the WRAAC lost her considerable talents, her remarkable personal resilience meant she was subsequently able to establish a highly successful life and career after the WRAAC. Julie's story captures the way lesbian women were stigmatised within the services in the 1960s. It also demonstrates the contribution that lesbian women have made to Australia's military history in capacities yet to be fully acknowledged.

Julie was born in the Sydney suburb of Burwood in 1946. She had a pleasant and peaceful childhood, with a younger brother and loving parents. Her father, who had served in Palestine and the Middle East during the Second World War, 'was a very easy-going, placid sort of man'. When Julie was around seven, he built the family a house at Homebush, which was where Julie grew up. Her father worked at the gasworks and her mother, a bright woman, 'ran a little shop as a tailor'. She was a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, although Julie's father was not. Julie remembers such a lovely childhood and family environment that it was not until much later in her life, when she grew to know more about other people's childhoods, that Julie realised that not all families were as happy as hers.

Julie was not terribly interested in school. Because she was bright, though, she managed to fudge the things that she could do very well and made 'my way through school' until she was able to leave at the age of 15 'because I wasn't the least bit interested'. She managed to obtain a job in the taxation department sealing envelopes, but found that 'terribly dreary'. She elaborates a little more: 'I went and got a job, as a girl did in those days, you got a job, put things in your glory box and got married. Only I didn't.' Instead, in late 1963, in a significant departure from what was expected from young women at that time, she began the process of applying to join the WRAAC.

The idea of enlisting came from a friend Julie had in the taxation department, whose mother had been in the women's services during the Second World War. The two friends discussed joining either the WRAAC or the WRANS together. As Julie was prone to seasickness, they ruled out the WRANS as an option, leaving the WRAAC. She says, 'So we were going to join together. And so it was very much somebody else's idea but it captured my imagination because Seventh-day Adventists really, if you didn't get married you had to be a nurse or a doctor.' Neither of these options held any appeal for Julie: 'I wasn't going to be a doctor because I couldn't do school, and I didn't want to clean other people's bottoms. And I certainly didn't want to be a missionary. So that was about it. So the Army was a terrific idea.'

The WRAAC, like the WRANS and the WRAAF, operated as a separate female-only branch of the Australian military until integration occurred from the 1970s onwards. As historian Janette Bomford has pointed out, in the climate of the late 1940s and early 1950s, a separate women's corps segregated from men 'was the only way women would be accepted into the army'.² Its formation in 1951 had primarily been intended to address the shortage of male service personnel during the Korean War. During the 1960s, the Australian government undertook actions that increased the strategic importance of the women's services and saw women in the WRAAC undertake increasingly important work. In 1964, the Menzies Government reintroduced national service. In 1965, it expanded the commitment of Australian troops to Vietnam. There was a growing need for women who could enhance the capabilities of the forces at a time when servicemen were deployed overseas.

Before Julie could enlist in the WRAAC, there were some challenges that had to be negotiated. Perhaps the most substantial was convincing Julie's mother to let her join the WRAAC. As Seventh-day Adventists, Julie's mother and her mother's family 'were opposed to the Army and opposed to war; they're pacifists'. Julie had to engage in 'a bit of a twisting of an arm to get into the Army. But as all my friends said, my parents never said no'. The other challenge was negotiating the WRAAC's enlistment process. In 1961, the WRAAC had lowered the age of entry from 18 to 17, and growing numbers of young women were waiting for general entry.³ In December 1963, Julie successfully completed the aptitude, the IQ and the psychological testing required. She was accepted into the WRAAC and assigned as an Operator in Signals Corps. In January 1964, Julie began her training as a recruit at WRAAC School.

Historian Ruth Ford has pointed out that there was a major witch-hunt conducted to expel lesbians in the WRAAC in 1964–65, at the very time that Julie was going through WRAAC School and later learning signals. When she signed up, though, she was still not fully conscious of her sexuality, and was not aware of this purge. The WRAAC School, where recruits were trained, was based at Georges Heights, Mosman, a beautiful location overlooking Sydney Harbour. There was little time to appreciate the splendour of the scenery. Training was 'quite formal', teaching the new recruits 'how to march, how to understand military stuff and to acculturate you into the system'. While Julie initially found the formality and ranking quite amusing, by week five, the severity of some of the sergeants had 'terrified the bejesus' out of her.

Having grown up in a loving and close home, the move into a hierarchical and rigidly controlled environment must have been somewhat challenging. Julie recalls that, initially, she was 'always getting into a little bit of trouble'. It was not intentional; it was just that Julie was imaginative and 'a bit dozy'. She remembers: 'I got extra duties because I'd done something wrong. And I was always being yelled at on the parade ground because I was going in the wrong direction.' Her infractions were always minor and she never attracted serious disciplinary action.

During the recruit period, Julie was still not really cognisant about her sexuality. Reflecting today, she remembers accruing some knowledge about homosexuality

growing up. As a child aged around ten, a book had mentioned the topic, though this knowledge faded away with puberty. She does laugh, remembering the other recruits at WRAAC School complaining about being away from men and being locked in with women, while she thought, 'Oh, I don't mind.' She elaborates: 'The penny hadn't really dropped still because until you actually fall in love with a woman, you still think, oh well, maybe I'm just a slow developer – because I was always thought to be a little bit of a goose at that age. I was naïve to the extreme.'

After finishing her basic training, Julie was sent to Kapooka as a mess stewardess to wait for the next Operator Keyboard and Radio (OKR) signals course to start in Mount Martha in Victoria. It was at this point that she made a spontaneous decision to go AWOL. She describes herself now as a 'silly goose' for doing this, saying that 'because someone else was going, I thought: "Oh, I'll go too. That sounds like fun"'. She reached 'somewhere or rather in the middle of New South Wales' before she thought 'Oh, I'm being naughty here; I shouldn't do this' and turned herself in to the police. She was disciplined for this, confined to her barracks for two weeks and 'I think docked five pounds or something'.

Julie's brief misadventure made her focus much more intensely on doing well in the WRAAC: 'I thought, well, better pull my socks up now. I better behave myself.' This decision to refocus meant that she put a considerable amount of effort into the six month OKR course at Mount Martha: 'I tried really hard. And it was the first time, because I never tried at school. And suddenly I was top of the class all the time and doing very well indeed.' This filled Julie with a sense of confidence that she had not gained through her schooling. She remembers the work as 'fascinating. I loved it, yes'. She learned 'how to do Morse and how to transmit information via teleprint'.

The time at Mount Martha was also significant for another reason, as it was here that she first became truly aware of her sexuality when she 'fell madly in love' with another woman who she knew was a lesbian. She remembers:

I was mad about her, and you have to look at yourself and think about that. And I realised that's that, and I was very comfortable with that. And I had, I wasn't going

to question it. It was me. I knew also that the Army didn't approve, so you'd be in deep shit if anyone found out, so you had to keep it under wraps.

When asked how it was that Julie came to know the WRAAC's policies against homosexuality, she does not remember it being raised during her initial training, 'but you certainly knew. There was no question about knowing that you'd be out on your ear. Yeah'. She also emphasises that women could be discharged for many reasons in this era.

You'd be out on your ear if you got pregnant, if you were seen fraternising, well caught in bed with a man, all these, they were really. They couldn't work out whether we were prostitutes or saints. They didn't know whether to protect us from the men or the men from us. But it was something like that. It was always very much anything sexual and they'd go very strange.

In the previous chapter, Carole and Christina were able to leave the WRAAF without being issued dishonourable discharge certificates stating, 'Retention in the military forces not being in the interest of those Forces'. When they revealed their relationship, they were instead issued certificates that stated they had left 'On Request'. They believe that different discharge certificates were issued across the services, with dishonourable discharges more common in other branches. Ford has also suggested that during the 1950s and 1960s, women of higher rank were sometimes able to avoid discharge and instead were transferred to different locations to detract attention from their sexuality.⁴

The broader context of the era is important in understanding Julie's experience. Bomford has argued that during the 1950s and the 1960s, the military wanted to avoid any suggestions the environment was conducive to lesbianism.⁵ This was a continuation of official anxieties about the women's services during the Second World War. Therefore, in the post-war period, when women were forced out because of their sexuality, it appears that the military tried to keep these cases very quiet. Paperwork rarely mentioned the reasons the women had been forced out. Ford has argued that 'the official silence indicates the deep fear of publicity about lesbians in the military', as it was believed public knowledge would adversely affect recruitment and undermine the construction of the forces as 'more and noble – and asexual – the nation's best, defending and making sacrifices for the nation'.⁶ It was not until 1974 that the three servicesforces, both male and female, adopted a consistent policy on homosexuality. Despite this, Ford

has argued that during the 1950s and 1960s the women's services engaged in a pattern of witch-hunts, persecution and pervasive attempts to ensure that lesbians did not serve in the military in the post-war period.

While the military maintained an official silence about lesbian women during the 1950s and 1960s, it is clear that the institution was increasingly influenced by medical discourse coming from the United States and the United Kingdom, which diagnosed homosexuality as a psychological, or a pathological disorder.⁷ Women who were suspected to be homosexual were not engaging in criminal activity, which was quite different to the situation of men. Instead, it was argued that lesbian women were 'defective' and posed a possible threat to camaraderie and morale. Furthermore, it was claimed that they could be subjected to blackmail. As a result of these views, women whose sexuality was discovered and were labelled as 'untreatable' homosexuals were unable to serve in the Australian military in the 1960s and 1970s. Evidence suggests that in the post-war period, the military was more concerned about lesbian women than gay men. Ford has also argued that unlike men, women in the military who were accused of same-sex activity could not be court martialled and were thus not provided with an opportunity to defend themselves or counter evidence documented by witnesses.⁸

When she was at Mount Martha, though, Julie became aware that, despite military prejudice against homosexuality, there was a network of lesbian women who were serving, though 'it was very complicated too because you had to suss it out'. Once 'you got to know someone in the circle, they would say "There's so and so and there's so and so." And you get to know who's around'. She laughs as she remembers some of the stereotypes she had in her head at this time about lesbians.

And I was so glad I was in 30 WRAAC and not 31 WRAAC because apparently 31 WRAAC in Melbourne had some serious heavy-duty numbers. And I was thinking, 'Oh that's very frightening.' But of course they were just girls like me, really. It was just all in my imagination.

She knew that she had be careful not to be caught. She describes one incident which she believes could have been an attempt to catch her with another woman.

I was in 30 WRAAC Barrack and I was actually having an affair with someone in this particular room, and a corporal came past and we'd been in the room alone together for some time, but I had actually, and they— The room had a sink in it, and I had actually gone over to the sink for some reason and she was way on the other side of the room. But this corporal burst into the room, and there was only one possible explanation for that: she was hoping to catch us out.

Julie knew that the woman she had fallen in love with at Mount Martha, who was a few years older than her, was interested in someone else, but Julie was still determined to pursue her. This pursuit was made even more difficult because the object of Julie's affection thought Julie was inexperienced and 'didn't want to corrupt' her. As it happened, another woman was interested in Julie at the time, so Julie 'let her chase me and let her win so that I would be corrupted. And then I could say, "Oops, now I'm corrupted. How about this?"' In the end, Julie did end up having a 'fling for a minute' with the woman she was originally in love with. She remembers that it all had to be clandestine and 'we had to be fairly closeted. You'd get thrown out. But you work that out'.

This first relationship that Julie had pursued so determinedly came to an end when she was transferred to Cabarlah outside of Toowoomba in Queensland to continue her work in signals. It was a prestigious posting but the relationship breakup was devastating. Julie says, 'You know, it broke my heart at the time.' She describes receiving the letter which ended their relationship at lunchtime. While heartbreak is always difficult, given the position of the WRAAC towards lesbianism, she knew she had to conceal her emotions: 'I've got the big letter and just walked away and stood under a tree and just thought: "I've just got to not let anyone notice." So you learn how to just control it. Nobody would've guessed.'

Cabarlah had few diversions: 'It was a pub and a post office. That was Cabarlah.' Julie was part of a group of around five or six women who were the first to go there because 'This was an elite place for very fast Morse people.' As it was the time of the Vietnam War, 'boys were going and we had to fill in the gaps'. Julie concentrated on her work because 'These were straight women and I had enough sense not to go there.' As she was enjoying the job, there was little time to feel isolated: 'The work was fascinating.

I had to learn how to do a whole bunch of stuff up there and I was loving the work.’ The other women, although straight, ‘were lovely and I just got on like a house on fire with them’.

Julie managed to conceal her sexuality from others in the military by making it appear that she was actively dating men. She says, ‘I always had a bloke as cover. I had no trouble attracting them; the business was getting rid of them. And I had several who desperately wanted to marry.’ While this was necessary at the time to avoid social pressure and scrutiny, she does harbour some regrets about her involvement with one man in particular. She actually became engaged to him when he went to Vietnam.

Then I had to send him a ‘Dear John’. I was terribly cruel, and I recognise it now. And I knew at the time, but I had to do it, I felt. I couldn’t just sit and stay at home, and in those days that was about all you could do as an option. You, either did that or go out with the boys or go down the pub and drink with the boys, but then you’d attract a boy. And I never seemed to have any trouble attracting them, I think probably because I didn’t care. And I think that probably made me attractive.

In Queensland, Julie was promoted to a Lance Corporal and then Corporal. She had experienced some difficulty shaking off the earlier image she had been labelled with by some WRAAC officials as ‘the slacker person always in trouble’. Consequently, ‘they promoted me via Lance Corporal, which almost never happens. So I was a Lance Corporal for about a year or so, and then they had to make it full Corporal.’ With the posting at Carbarlah, Julie had been recognised as one of the most talented women in Signals. While Julie may have been ‘a bit sloppy and the last one on the parade and all that stuff’, the military had acknowledged she was ‘an exceptional Morse operator. I passed all the Morse warrant officer qualifications on my first go’. These remarkable talents were about to become increasingly valuable.

As more Australian servicemen were posted over to ~~serve in~~ Vietnam as Australia’s involvement in the conflict escalated, a growing number of opportunities were opening up for women in the WRAAC. Female signallers had been a critical asset during the Second World War and Defence again recognised their potential. Colonel Dawn Jackson, the Director of the WRAAC, had been lobbying strongly for the overseas posting of

women since 1964. Defence refused to send women from the WRAAC to Vietnam, a place of active combat. In 1967 though, it was finally agreed that a select group of women from the WRAAC would be deployed to Singapore.

Julie's role as a pioneer was cemented when she was selected as one of seven women from 7 Signals Regiment in Carbarlah who were to be sent to Singapore to serve in 121 Signal Squadron with the Far East Land Forces. They were accompanied by Captain Heather Gardner, Lieutenant Pam Smith and Warrant Officer II, Mary Bulmer. The women prepared to leave for Singapore on 15 November 1967. This was an extraordinary moment in Australian military history, as they were the first to serve outside Australia since the WRAAC had been established. The posting was so prestigious that news of the women being sent overseas was published in Australian newspapers.⁹ Interestingly, the increased focus on servicewomen meant that the issue of lesbian women in the WRAAC was raised publicly that year. Colonel Jackson told the *Australian* newspaper in an interview that 'with the number of women we have, lesbianism must exist. Our officers are trained to watch for it, and we have methods of dealing with it. Doctors and padres play an important role here.'¹⁰ While Jackson had driven the overseas service of WRAAC women, she was very traditional in other ways. Lorna Olliff has asserted that Colonel Jackson 'insisted that members of her Corps were women first ... and soldiers secondly'.¹¹

Julie spent just over ten months in Singapore. The high-level work that women in the Australian military performed in the 1960s is often not acknowledged. Julie did not disclose specific information about the work she had performed in Singapore. She reminded us that she had signed the *Official Secrets Act* and that she would always honour this. Her particular training as a signals operator and posting with the 121 Signal Squadron provides some indication of the type of work she was engaged in.

While Julie took her work very seriously, she also found ample opportunities to meet and socialise with other lesbian women. She laughs as she tells just how many other lesbians there were in Singapore. The Australian servicewomen had been sharing a base with the British and 'there were 104 other ranks. And at least 30 were out lesbians and another 20, if you talked to people, they had had a dabble. So there's 50 women'. As a

young woman exploring her sexuality and determined to enjoy her overseas posting, Julie laughingly recalls, 'I went mental.'

Julie knew the British Army was prone to witch-hunts. She says:

Prior to my being caught, they came through on the big hunt. They'd been through the barracks at Hong Kong and got some letters and they kept trying to find someone in some letter had referred to someone by a nickname and they kept asking who this nickname was. It was one of those generic nicknames that didn't actually apply to anyone in particular. So it would have been an internal shorthand. But anyway, they were SIB [[Special Investigation Branch](#)], I think they were called. And everyone was on tenterhooks about being called up before SIB because they would investigate fairly thoroughly, but they weren't going to touch me because I was Australian Army. So until I bloody gave it away completely, yeah.

Julie's sexuality was exposed in October 1968. During a relationship with a British servicewoman, Julie and the other woman had fallen 'asleep and they did a bed check and there we were ... So I was sprung, seriously stark naked, in bed with another girl, stark naked'. She remembers that 'the British were quite used to' this sort of thing happening and that it took them about a month to send the British servicewoman home. For Julie though, 'I was out within a week. And it was shocking, yeah.' She remembers the 'stunned silence' that followed when she had to tell the other Australian servicewomen in Singapore why she was being sent back. They were heterosexual and Julie had been very discreet about her relationships with British servicewomen.

In aftermath of the incident, Julie had to appear before the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Singapore base, a British Sergeant Major. She remembers that her relationship with this Sergeant Major had always been positive but the dynamic altered dramatically as 'suddenly it turns out that I'm this depraved horrible thing'. The Sergeant Major told Julie she would have to 'write and say how many [women she had slept with]. You slept with 16 here and 14 there'. She continues:

And I had to say, 'Ma'am, I'm not an animal.' I remember saying that: 'I'm not an animal', which is pretty provocative for a little nice girl like me. And, I wrote I think a two-page letter, and she said, 'Now detail all the names of the people.' And I just refused. Death before dishonour. But I did say how I was and what I'd done.

Officially, as someone with a high security job, the military's position was that Julie's homosexuality made her vulnerable to blackmail. She remembers:

The whole point about being a lesbian in the Army was they used to say, 'Well you're subject to blackmail.' You're only subject to blackmail 'cause they make it illegal. But I had already confronted that idea. And I already knew that if anyone ever did try to blackmail me, in the remote chance someone tried to blackmail me, there's no way I'd betray my country. You'd have to have rocks in your head really. And I would just front up to and say, 'Look this is happening and it's because of ...' and I would've been discharged. But it's much better than the horror of going down in the other path. I'm just not a moral coward.

She also remembers feeling concerned that the military may have attempted to make her undergo psychiatric treatment for her homosexuality, although she thought, 'I don't want to be fixed. I'm happy the way I am'. This, coupled with the loss of her security clearance, left her with little choice but to accept the official process that unfolded.

Despite pressure during interviews from officials, Julie refused to name any other lesbians that she knew in Singapore. She was sent back to Australia so rapidly that the paperwork surrounding the incident had not yet reached her superior when she arrived back in Australia. The Assistant Director asked what had occurred, and Julie told her that she 'was caught in an invidious situation' before expanding to outline the circumstances under which she had been caught with another soldier (not divulging the sex). There was about a month left before Julie's service period was due to end, and the Assistant Director sent her home on leave for most of this period. Three days before the period was up, her leave ran out and Julie returned:

... so I rocked along again thinking: 'Oh well, I'll do my three days.' And she said, 'What are you doing here?' And I said, 'My leave ran out, Ma'am.' She said, 'Go home. Come back on' whenever it was. So she was very gracious. By then she would've known.

There was no option for Julie to continue to serve in the WRAAC, and she was issued with a discharge certificate. This certificate noted the reason for her discharge was that her 'Retention in the military forces not being in the interest of those Forces'. Julie contrasts her experience with that of another woman she knew who had served and had

been caught in bed with a man, noting that this woman had been discharged at her own request. This was a substantial difference from Julie's certificate, which made it clear that leaving the military had not been of her own choosing. While the overt expression of heterosexual sexuality was not encouraged, it was not stigmatised and punished in the severe way that lesbianism was. Expressions of sexual desire between women were pilloried and brought unique risks. Julie remembers the message conveyed to her through her entire experience of being identified as a lesbian was that 'I'm in total disgrace, yes and I've betrayed the country. And I have to be sent home in disgrace.' It would have been exceptionally difficult for anyone to avoid internalising and absorbing this message to some extent.

Towards the end of our interview, Julie reflected on just how long this message had stayed with her after her discharge. She drew on the language of psychiatry towards homosexuality that was prevalent at the time: 'Well, I had two odd years where I actually did believe I was defective.' She struggled with having been a high achiever who was then treated appallingly: 'When you've been top of what you're doing and they send you over to Singapore and then they say, "Oh clearly no, you're rubbish," and get rid of you'. Julie emphasises that an experience like this 'makes it pretty clear that you're not quite right'. She points out:

And it was a mental illness and blah, blah, blah until 1973. So I believed it. And it wasn't for a couple of years that I began to slowly piece together the fact that no, I'm actually quite a nice person. And, but it's still, there's residual scars, I think, if I look at it.

During this part of the interview, Julie noted that she felt the impact of her discharge with ongoing scars. She was also keen to draw attention to her coping skills and resilience, noting that many women would not have dealt so well with the experience emotionally: 'I would imagine that some people would've been devastated by it. I would imagine that some people would've found that really, particularly if you had invested a lot in the career side of things. But it's certainly not how I am.'

On her return back to her family, Julie decided not to divulge to her parents what had happened in Singapore, instead telling them that 'the heat got to me'. She

remembers: 'I'm sure my mother suspected something amiss, but if I wasn't going to tell her, she wasn't going to ask.' With some money saved up, Julie decided to spend some time in England with the British Corporal with whom she had been caught.

I'd always wanted to go to the UK. That's what we all did in those days. Everyone wanted to go to the UK. And now I'd saved up a gazillion amount of money in Singapore because we didn't get taxed the same way and I wasn't spending it; it was very cheap to live there. Very cheap, and the NAAFI was cheap booze and all they did was drink beer. And also I wanted to go out and live my life. I hadn't been at home for a long time. I couldn't stay at home, I couldn't hide from my parents in that way. I had to get out somewhere. And [the woman she was caught with] and I were still on together. And so I thought, well I'll fly over there, we'll get together.

Later in the interview she returns to this memory, noting that her time in England 'was a complete break. And I was humiliated enough to want it to be that way'. The relationship lasted about a year and during this time, Julie was able to establish a life outside the WRAAC. She enjoyed the vibrant gay and lesbian scene that was emerging in London at the time. The relationship with the British Corporal did not last, but Julie found other ways to make the most of her time overseas. As someone still in her early twenties, 'We were all just experimenting really – experimenting with life.' A lot of the British women she had met in Singapore eventually came back to London after they were discharged, which increased Julie's social circle. She describes a rich world of gay bars and socialising that opened up to her in London, 'And they knew the scene and we would go down to the Robin Hood Club, Gateways, and what was the other one? The Rehearsal. And, but mostly Gateways, that was the big lesbian place and I remember one time I suddenly realised I'd been down 11 nights in a row, I thought I'd better take a night off.' Julie remembers this as a 'fabulous' time. Having been stigmatised as a result of her sexuality, she was determined to embrace it: 'Every night we'd go down there and we'd drink and we'd smoke and that's when I – 'cause I'd been thrown out for being a degenerate. And so I was going to live the life of a degenerate.' Soon enough, though, she discovered that 'my idea of being a degenerate was to smoke cigarettes, drink beer and stay up 'til midnight.' The time reinforced her growing belief that what she had been told

by the military was wrong: ‘So it took me a couple of years to realise I was, actually, I’m not that bad. Yeah.’

Julie notes that during this time of her life she had nothing to do with the Australian women she had served alongside in Singapore: ‘Oh no, no, no, no ... I had nothing to do with any of the girls from 7th Sig Regiment or Singapore group ... I had no idea how they would respond to me, and I didn’t want to go there’. Ironically, in ‘an unexpected twist’, Julie even undertook some work at Australia House for the Australian Army. She would go out with some of the British Army lesbians she had met in Singapore all the time – they were her best friends. After just over two years in England, Julie returned home with a British partner, though this relationship came to an end back in Australia.

While the experience of being discharged was undeniably traumatic, Julie referred throughout the interview to her easy-going personality and the way this helped her to cope with what she went through. The time spent in England after her discharge also provided a different environment to explore herself, which perhaps helped her manage this major and unanticipated life change. Furthermore, the skills she had learned in the WRAAC helped her to obtain employment back in Australia. She initially got a job at Ansett Airlines as a teleprinter operator, essentially data processing, ‘because that was one of the things I’d learnt in the Army’. Although she was highly skilled at Morse code, she soon found that sexist perceptions in the civilian world made it impossible for women to gain this type of work: ‘Morse code you couldn’t do in private life without a penis. I don’t know why.’ Julie moved away from data processing into reservations, which she found much more interesting.

Like so many Australians in the 1970s, Julie was a beneficiary of [Prime Minister Gough Whitlam](#)’s introduction of free tertiary education. She remembers ‘he also introduced something called the NEAT scheme where you got paid to go to university. And there was an early leaver scheme. So the stars just lined up.’ Just as Julie was exploring these options, she met someone through the magazine *Nation Review*: ‘One day there was this delightful ad and it really was so well worded I had to answer it.’ This correspondence led to a relationship with a woman who was attending university to study psychology. The two women developed a relationship and Julie moved into her partner’s

‘lovely house in Carlton, beautiful big palatial house. Shared with a bunch of women and people’.

After sitting a qualifying exam, Julie ended up studying psychology and behavioural biology. Her studies – which included an undergraduate degree and a Masters degree in neuropsychology – her relationships and her success in an intellectually demanding field helped to negate the WRAAC experience somewhat. Julie has lived in various parts of Australia, establishing a highly successful career as a neuropsychologist and gaining international recognition for her work. She was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 1993 to study the consequences and management of traumatic brain damage in children. She is justifiably proud of her work in this field.

Julie has now retired and lives in an Australian coastal town. Her brother lives nearby and she has found a community she can be involved with. Her life is rich and full with a variety of pursuits. She is a talented artist, enjoys music, is engaged in politics and is even working on a book. She has long accepted her dismissal from the WRAAC as something that allowed her to move on and attempt different career options. She looks back on her discharge in a positive light: ‘All the cards have fallen my way, and I’m very much aware of it.’ At the close of the interview, Julie concluded by putting her WRAAC experience into context.

Of course that while the Army was a very exciting time for me and I did stuff that I’m not allowed to talk about because of the *Official Secrets Act* so I really thought I was special, but I ended up with another job that was equally as riveting and as exciting, and so it’s not as if I look back on that as the most, peak of my life. It’s not. It’s not; it was exciting and it was fun and I had a terrific youth, but I had a terrific middle age as well and I’m planning on a terrific old age.

Julie’s contribution to Australian military history is significant. Her Singapore posting challenged perceptions that women should only serve in Australia. While prejudice meant the WRAAC lost her considerable talents, her remarkable personal resilience meant she was subsequently able to go on to establish a highly successful career in another field. Other women who experienced her treatment might still be dealing with the experience, yet her resilience and the joy she found from another career have allowed her to move

beyond this. She showed exceptional courage and awareness in the 1960s when she resisted the efforts of the Army to stigmatise her and treat her sexuality as a psychiatric disorder.

Julie points out that her WRAAC career was something that began more than 50 years ago and that she has led a long and happy life outside the military since. She is a resilient and highly intelligent woman, adaptable with a keen sense of humour. Her story is an important one because it not only captures the stigmatisation of lesbian servicewomen within the services in the 1960s, but it also demonstrates the contribution that lesbian women have made to Australia's military history in capacities that are yet to be fully acknowledged.

¹ 'First WRAAC to Serve Overseas', Statement by the Minister for the Army, the Hon. Malcolm Fraser, M.P.,

<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/HPR10009420/upload_binary/HPR10009420.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22media/pressrel/HPR10009420%22>, accessed 30 January 2018.

² Janete Bomford, *Soldiers of the Queen: Women in the Australian Army* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press), 2001, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴ Ford, 'Disciplined, Punished and Resisting Bodies', 60.

⁵ Bomford, *Soldiers of the Queen*, 55.

⁶ Ford, 'Disciplined, Punished and Resisting Bodies', 65.

⁷ Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer*, 12-20.

⁸ Ford, 'Disciplined, Punished and Resisting Bodies', 55.

⁹ *Canberra Times* (29 November 1967): 8.

¹⁰ *The Australian* (7 September 1967): 9.

¹¹ Lorna Olliff, *Colonel Best and Her Soldiers* (Sydney: Oliff Publishing Company, 1985), 103.