

# Carole Popham and Christina Dennis

Carole Popham and Christina Dennis served in the Women's Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF) during the 1960s. While it is a time that they both look back on with varying emotions, the greatest legacy they have taken from their time serving is their enduring relationship. Knowing that they risked being posted apart – or being forcibly discharged if their relationship were discovered – they opted to leave the WRAAF of their own volition, making the decision to reveal their relationship to officials. Leaving together proved to be the right decision. This year marks their 50-year anniversary as a couple. Their story is a remarkable one, a moving account of a shared life. It shows how women were able to find both opportunity and each other in the services at a time when civilian lesbians struggled with isolation and invisibility, but also brings to light the risks that a relationship posed to career advancement and military retention and the sacrifices that had to be made to stay together.

## Carole

Carole was born in Sydney in 1942 as the last of four children, with two older sisters and an older brother. Although she was born in New South Wales, she grew up in Townsville, in north Queensland. As military historian Douglas Gillison has noted, during the Second World War, Townsville's population expanded rapidly as the town became home to Australia's biggest Air Force base, with both Australian and US troops. During this era, military personnel outnumbered civilians at a rate of three to one. Carole remembers the military presence meant it was very common for locals to host servicemen: 'We had an American, an Englishman and an Australian young lad and I can remember them being at home quite a bit, so there was that military presence around.' After the war, the RAAF

presence continued. With a wry smile, Carole notes her older sister 'married a RAAF bloke' which meant for her, there was no escaping the military presence.

As a child, Carole was 'probably a bit of a tomboy ... there were no pressures to conform as far as childhood went'. Once she reached her teenage years though, 'they start thinking that maybe you should start settling down but we were all encouraged to try and do whatever we wanted to do and be whatever we wanted to be'. Growing up in north Queensland in the 1950s and early 1960s, she remembers career options were limited:

The other thing is, at that time, we were talking '50s and basically, '50s and early '60s, if you grew up in the country, you weren't exposed to a lot of the things that you could be, so, your career horizons focused on the doctor, the dentist, maybe an editor of a newspaper, because there was usually a local newspaper, but they were very sort of ordinary things, and it's not until you actually got away from up there you realised what a range of occupations were open.

Despite the limitations of a small town, she 'always had a sense there was something more to life, but it wasn't going to be up there'.

Growing up in a military town, in the aftermath of the Second World War, it is perhaps not surprising that the services were attractive to many of Carole's generation. Women had obviously served in the auxiliary services on the home front as well as serving as nurses, and a female school friend had raised enlistment as a career option: 'At primary school there was a group of us who used to knock around together, and [a friend said], "When we grow up, we should all join the services"'. Initially, Carole thought the Navy was an attractive option but later on 'I realised that the Air Force was probably better'. She thinks it is possible she made this conclusion because one of her sisters married a Flight Sergeant who was a signaller, and 'I thought he was pretty cool'. Furthermore, 'there was a certain romance that came out of the Battle of Britain' and growing up, men who served in the Air Force were everywhere in Townsville.

Carole did not enlist immediately, however. After finishing school, she began a degree in pharmacy in Townsville: 'The first year was fun, had a whale of a time'. This was also a time when her sexuality crystalised. It was not entirely unexpected, as she had experienced a number of crushes on female friends growing up. At university she 'was

fairly serious in a minor sort of way' with another girl. Her 'most magnificent' father, who must have sensed something happening between the two women, tactfully made sure he coughed loudly at the back door if he saw Carole's motor scooter parked with two helmets: 'I'm sure it was to give us a chance to sort ourselves out if we weren't exactly the way we should have been.'

While her personal life was proceeding well, Carole was starting to have doubts about pharmacy as a career. During the second year of her course, she spent three months in Brisbane, before coming back to Townsville. She found that the occupation of pharmacist was evolving to require those who undertook the profession to act 'more like a storekeepers' than undertaking the scientific, compounding role the profession had traditionally demanded. At this point, when she was questioning whether pharmacy really was the occupation for her, Carole had taken apart her Vespa, then putting it back together she decided to take it out for a spin.

On what turned out to be a fateful test run in 1962, she passed 'the recruiting office in Townsville, and I just pulled over and went up, and I was absolutely covered in grease and I walked into the recruiting office and I said, "Have you got the papers? I think I might want to join the Air Force"'. During this era, until 1977, women who wanted to join the Air Force served separately from men in the WRAAF. The Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC) and Women's Royal Australian Navy Service (WRANS) would continue until 1984 and 1985 respectively. The male Squadron Leader recruiting officer gave Carole a look, which suggested he did not believe she would be back, but still gave her the forms. However, she went home, determinedly 'filled out the papers and I said to Mum and Dad, "You can either sign them now, or I'm going back to uni and as soon as I turn 21 in August, I'm out of here"'. Her parents did sign the forms, and Carole then underwent the testing process to find out what occupation in the WRAAF she would best suit.

She did so well at her initial testing that she was capable of being allocated to any occupational branch. 'At that stage, they were short of service police, cooks and psychology', so they decided Carole should undergo further testing, possibly for commissioning. Once she arrived, she was warned that psychology was 'dead-shit

boring' so turned down the role for education 'because I certainly wasn't going to be police or cook'.

Carole was officially sworn in on 8 January 1963. Her recruit training took place at Point Cook in Victoria in January and February of that year. From the start, it was made clear that homosexuality in the WRAAF was not permitted. Carole remembers receiving a lecture as a rookie on sexuality, warning the servicewomen 'not to have anything to do with anybody who's gay, that was not on, in fact you have to report them, because it's tut, tut, tut'. In fact, she actually received a warning herself on her recruit course as suspicions had been raised about a close friendship she shared with another recruit from north Queensland. Although there was nothing more than friendship between the women, she was told 'you're not to associate with her anymore', which Carole thought 'was pretty bloody pathetic'.

## Christina

Christina grew up just under 350 kilometres north of Carole, in Cairns. She was born four years later, in 1946. She remembers a 'pretty ordinary sort of childhood, really'. She had two brothers and lots of cousins. It was a happy family life. Being based further north than Carole in Cairns, Christina was further removed from the military presence that dominated Townsville. Both her parents had left school at relatively young ages. Her father served during the Second World War but it was not something he discussed. Exposure to the broader world was somewhat limited: 'Back then, in the '50s and even into the mid '60s, you had radio, but you didn't have any television up there ... and you just weren't exposed to all those sorts of things out there in the world'. While she remembers her childhood as a fairly typical one, she remembers the WRAAF and the military held appeal as a way of leaving Cairns, 'a fairly small town back then'.

While Christina did not question her sexuality growing up, she remembers thinking that:

There was something more to life than just getting married and working in a bank or whatever, and that was really the reason I joined the Air Force. I just knew there was something else out there, and I just didn't want to be like my girlfriends at school

who were married by the time they were 17 or 18, and kids and that sort of stuff, that didn't interest me at all.

From around the age of 16, Christina had thought of joining the services when she reached the age of enlistment as a career option. At the age of 17, while she was working in the post office as a telephonist, she had the opportunity to participate in an exchange to Launceston with another girl from Cairns. The two went to Tasmania for six months while two girls from Tasmania were sent to Cairns: 'I think that was when I really decided, "Yeah, I've got to get out of Cairns, there's more to life than just being here."' "

When she returned to Cairns, aged 17 Christina was eligible to join the WRAAC but felt the WRAAF was a 'better option'. This meant she had to wait until she was 18 to enlist. As soon as she reached this age, she arranged for her parents to sign the papers. They were supportive, both thinking 'that it was a good opportunity to get out and see the world, and do things'. Although she had been working as a telephonist, Christina was keen to take on new employment opportunities in the Air Force, aiming for a position as an aircraft plotter, monitoring aircraft movements. She was told that she had missed her chance as there would not be another course for another 12 months but she could enlist straightaway as a telephonist and re-muster later as an aircraft plotter. This was somewhat misleading though, as telephonists were always in heavy demand in the WRAAF and it was extremely difficult to re-muster once you had been allocated an occupation. Nonetheless, in August 1964, the year after Carole had joined the WRAAF, Christina was also serving.

While service in the WRAAF did open up wider employment avenues for women, WRAAF servicewomen were still treated very differently to the men who served in the RAAF in terms of opportunities and pay. Carole points out that:

Things are very different, if you look back at what the service was when we were in. The women's service was restricted to certain musterings, and that's it, there was really just support staff. Being a WRAAF officer meant that you were just either behaving like an administrator, or a wet nurse to a whole heap of females.

There were further limitations. It was not until 1969 that women in the WRAAF could continue serving after marriage and 1974 that pregnant women were permitted to remain in the services.

After completing her recruit training, Carole was posted to the Base Squadron Education Section at Point Cook in Victoria. Her initial posting should have been to Headquarters Operational Command Education Section. However, the Recruiting Officer made an error and failed to apply for the appropriate security clearance for her. The RAAF addressed the mistake and arranged for the clearance. During this process they did not find out about her sexuality but did discover that one of Carole's 'best mate's father was a communist' which 'didn't go down too well'. Still, her clearance came through and she was moved to Headquarters Operational Command Education Section, which was located in the old Lapstone Hotel in the Blue Mountains. The WRAAF women lived in barracks in Penrith and were bussed to work each day.

When she was based at Penrith, Carole established a relationship with a barmaid at a local hotel. This woman had actually been 'turfed out of the Air Force in one of the early witch-hunts, so that was an interesting relationship for a while'. Remarkably, Carole believes an officer in charge was aware of the relationship and chose to overlook it. As the woman Carole was dating worked at the hotel until 10 at night, Carole would usually drive down to see her after she finished work and return to her base around 2 or 3 in the morning, well past the time that she should have been back at the base. One day, the officer in charge of the WRAAF, 'a young thing', hauled Carole up and said, 'When are you going to get that muffler on your bloody car fixed?' Puzzled, Carole asked why this was an issue. The officer in charge responded, 'because I keep hearing you coming in at all hours of the early morning. It's okay with me but you might be in trouble if someone else hears it. So for God's sake, get it fixed.' Carole points out that she 'knew exactly where I was going and what I was doing'. This woman may have been straight herself but was an example of someone who was 'fairly tolerant' and 'just didn't buy the hype' surrounding homosexuality in the WRAAF.

While there may have been some who kept an open mind about homosexuality, the consequences of the wrong person finding out were severe. Carole knew witch-hunts

were conducted periodically. She laments the depletion of talent that occurred as a result: 'They lost really good people.' There was a somewhat limited pool of women the WRAAF was able to draw on in the long term in this era. Once heterosexual women married, they were not eligible to remain in the WRAAF. There were some career-minded heterosexual women who managed to avoid marriage and discharge. It was lesbians, provided that they were not discharged on the grounds of their sexuality, who were extremely unlikely to marry and thus provided an excellent return on the investment the military had put into their training.

Carole points out that many women joined the WRAAF at an 'age group when people really are starting to question their sexuality, if you're not comfortable being straight'. She notes that the witch-hunts almost certainly caught women who were bisexual or were experimenting with their sexuality, along with women who may have been more certain of their lesbian identity:

If you happen to be in that experimental stage when they decide to do a witch-hunt, you were labelled, and so there were probably a lot of people who really weren't gay, who got the flick because they were supposed to be gay, and it'd be interesting to know what happened to some of the ones who weren't quite as gay as they might have thought they were, because there was no concept back then of bisexuality, you either were one or the other, and I reckon there probably would have been a reasonable number of bisexuals that I encountered along the way.

While she was not based in Sydney itself, Carole did see glimpses of the bohemian and gay scene that was developing there in the 1960s. The colourful tenor of the emerging gay scene is captured in *Camp Nites, Sydney's Emerging Drag Scene in the '60s*. Carole remembers 'the early days of the Purple Onion, and Les Girls, and that sort of stuff'. The scene was mainly in the inner-city area and Darlinghurst. On 'Sussex Street, there were a couple of pubs that were okay'. She remembers Kings Cross was mostly notorious for prostitution and male homosexuality.

Career-wise, Carole was not particularly keen to attain a commission, believing the role of a WRAAF Officer was limited and not what she was looking for in a career. When an opportunity came up to apply, though, she felt compelled to apply for her mother's sake, who had always pressed her to strive to reach the top. She confided in her

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WRAAF officer, who happened to be the woman who had warned her about her muffler, that she really did not want the promotion. Fortunately, from Carole's perspective, her interview with the Commanding Officer did not go well, as it was predominantly based on current affairs such as the Indonesian conflict. His question was so long and rambling that she lost concentration and, after answering the first part of the question, had to look him in the eye and tell him that 'I can't remember the rest of what you asked.' With a degree of satisfaction, Carole notes, 'I didn't get it, which I was quite pleased about.'

In early June ~~of~~ 1964, she was posted to Richmond Base Squadron Education Section. The base was enormous and undergoing new aircraft arrivals. There was an understanding that the Flight Sergeant there needed assistance, and as Carole understood 'what needed to be done and the priorities involved', she was sent there. When she was based at Richmond, on her breaks, Carole used to make regular trips to Sydney's northern beaches to visit her sister and help her with housework, as she had bad asthma and was struggling. On one occasion, a young officer came to Carole and asked if she could give another young officer a lift. Carole was happy to help. On Friday night, as the woman got into Carole's car, the officer who had arranged the lift asked Carole to 'take care of her. She's all I've got'. Carole reflects on this today, thinking that the other officer had worked out Carole's sexuality and had felt she could be open about her relationship with the other woman: 'I guess the gaydar worked a bit.'

Carole notes that lesbian women did not just date exclusively within the Air Force: 'At Richmond, one of the girls there was on with a Navy girl.' The inter-services sporting events were a popular way to meet others. People from other services were often posted on the base for various courses. Stereotypes about each branch of service abounded: 'The impression was that the Army were real butch-dyke types, Navy were less so and the Air Force were fairly discreet. So there weren't many who really got tangled up with the Army girls. They left the Army to themselves. But Navy-Air Force combinations weren't that unusual.'

One incident that occurred at Richmond did have significant implications for Carole. She was working under incredibly stressful conditions, 16-hour days almost seven days of the week with a new Flight Sergeant and Squadron Leader – who both

lacked experience – and only two lads fresh off recruit training as her support staff. One weekend, when she was grappling with this situation, she went to a party and under stress, ‘went off my face at some bloke who was making passes at my bird’. On the Monday, she reported to the RAAF hospital, where the staff told her they thought she would have cracked under the enormous pressure they could see she was under some time ago. As a result of the incident at the party, Carole was sent to an Honorary RAAF psychiatrist, Dr John Ellard, who fortuitously happened to be a trailblazer in the field in Australia.

Carole discussed her sexuality with Dr Ellard, who proved to be a progressive thinker for his time. Upon his death in November 2011, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that ‘for several decades Ellard was a leader of psychiatry. He improved immeasurably community respect for the practice of psychiatry in Australia. The uncommon quality of common sense never left him.’<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s, when most psychiatrists in Australia were treating homosexuality as a medical condition to be fixed, Carole recalls he ‘was really good, because his whole attitude was, “it doesn’t matter who you love, it’s the capacity to love that’s important”’. This statement at a time when homosexuality was rarely discussed – and certainly not considered to be a normal part of human sexuality – must have provided a rare affirmation. From the time with Dr Ellard, Carole remembers: ‘the important thing was being empowered to say “I don’t have to try and pretend I’m something I’m not. I am. This is me. Take it or leave it”’.

After finishing recruits, Christina was posted to Base Squadron Radio as a Telephonist at Richmond, arriving in October 1964. While Carole and Christina got to know each other well enough to ‘say hello’ in passing and lived in the same barracks block, because of shift work, they did not encounter each very much. Carole recalls thinking Christina ‘was that nice young kid from the switch room’. As she worked shifts, Christina used to get blocks of three or four days off, so she would get away from the base and head into Sydney for her leave.

In April 1966, Christina was posted to Base Squadron Radio as a Telephonist in Townsville. By this point, the two women were friendly enough that Carole offered an invitation for Christina to visit her parents for dinner, so that she would have somewhere

to go when she wanted to leave the base. In April 1967, Carole was posted to the Officer Training School at Point Cook to run the Education Section and to assist in training the officer candidates. The Sergeant there was posted to Vietnam, and although it was a male establishment, the Director of WRAAF agreed that Carole should go to Point Cook because none of the male corporals or above were considered capable.

In May 1967, the two women were once again stationed at the same base when Christina was sent to Base Squadron Radio as a Telephonist at Point Cook. When the other women working on switch found out that Carole already knew Christina, they asked what the impending arrival was like. Jokingly, Carole told them she was 'a real dragon', which did mean that the women were 'quite wary and behaved perfectly' when Christina arrived. This time, the two women occupied different blocks and still only knew each other on a superficial basis.

In November 1967, both women were attached to RAAF Base Edinburgh, just outside of Adelaide, to do a non-commissioned officer (NCO) training course. Carole suggested to Christina and another stewardess that they drive to the base in Edinburgh. Christina sat up front with Carole, while the other woman in the back seat fell asleep. Christina and Carole 'got chatting and sort of got to know each other a bit better on the way over there'. When they arrived, they teamed up with two other women they knew from earlier and divided their duties 'so one of us was cleaning all the shoes, the other might have been ironing for all of us'. During the time away, the two women talked often. Carole remembers that when they returned to Point Cook, 'We saw a lot more of each other'. In early December 'the lightning bolt struck and we were smitten'.

Carole notes that forging a relationship with someone in the same service did carry risks, but there were also benefits, including having Christina close to her. No longer did she have to sneak out from the barracks. 'I got a lot more sleep, for starters', she laughs. One of the greater challenges was having to conceal their affection: 'You had to be a bit more careful. It was the hardest thing for me. I come from a very touchy-feely family, and having a relationship with distance in it was not easy.'

While Carole had been aware of her sexuality and had previously had relationships with other women, the experience was new to Christina. She remembers:

I mean, I was never interested in getting married. I hadn't really had a boyfriend before I joined the Air Force, and I was just interested in doing my job, and seeing what was in life ... and it wasn't until after I went to Point Cook and Carole was there, and we went to Adelaide together, on a course, that we sort of got together, so Carole, really, has been my only partner.

We ask Christina whether embarking on the relationship was frightening, given both the stigma that surrounded homosexuality at this time and the risks that women faced if they were caught together.<sup>2</sup> She is quick to respond:

No, I wouldn't say it was frightening, it just seemed natural. I mean, I knew we had to be careful, and we used to go off base, and have weekends off, off base, but, no, I wouldn't say it was frightening, and I really didn't think about it in terms of that we might get caught out or anything like that.

While they had to exercise caution on the base, trips to bed and breakfasts in Melbourne or to the theatre provided opportunities for romance. Carole remembers the two spending weekends in a bed and breakfast in the city where 'two sisters that ran it ... couldn't quite make out what was going on with us. But it didn't bother them anyway.' As it was close to the city, it allowed the two to walk across parks, to the gardens to the city. Carole remembers: 'We had something of privacy there, didn't we?'

In June 1968, the two women arranged to take simultaneous leave, Carole to Townsville and Christina to Cairns. As Carole describes it, 'I conned my parents into a trip to Cairns to meet Chris and her folks.' This family encounter unearthed an unexpected revelation when Carole's mother and Christina's father worked out that Christina's paternal great uncle Joe had been married to Carole's maternal great aunt Annie. Christina spent a week in Townsville before the two women had to return to Point Cook, and it was there that she received a telegram, informing her that she was being posted to Pearce in Western Australia. In late June 1968, she went to Base Squadron Telephone Switch at that location.

While Christina was posted in Western Australia, the two women regularly wrote to each other, coming to realise that their chances of being posted to the same location again looked 'slim to non-existent'. Carole was eligible to leave the WRAAF at the end

of January 1969, but Christina had to serve until August 1970. The two women missed each other terribly, being posted on different sides of the continent. It became increasingly obvious that leaving the services might offer a way for the two women to be together. Carole raised the question: 'Chris, do you want to get out?'

The decision to leave was not one to be made lightly. Carole notes that 'the life, the career suited' her in the WRAAF. Christina agrees: 'Yeah. I liked the life. I enjoyed the services.' Ultimately, though, she wanted to do different things: 'One of my other things was that a telephonist wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of life.' While she was finally offered the chance to train as an aircraft plotter, she had already been a corporal for over 12 months and taking up the option would have meant taking a back step in her career, losing rank and losing pay.

The decision to leave was probably hastened by rumours Carole had heard that the periodic witch-hunts, which dogged lesbian servicewomen, were about to start up again and go through the Victorian bases. She did not want Christina to 'have to go through that'. Sadly, not wanting the letters they had exchanged to be discovered, the two women felt they had to destroy them. Carole remembers:

I said to Chris, 'Get rid of them straight away,' and I used to keep mine while I was still reading them, in the glovebox of my car, I had a lockable glovebox. When I got the hint that things were going to turn, and when we decided we were going to make the break, I disposed of all of those. So that's the sad part for me, is that we don't have that courtship record. But if you had stuff in your room, and you were silly enough to leave it around, they would find it, because they would tear the place apart, absolutely tear it apart, nothing was unturned.

With this in mind, Carole contacted the WRAAF officer and 'came out'. She remembers: 'I actually went into her and I said, "Look, I'm terribly sorry to do this on your watch, but I'd like to get out, and I want Corporal Dennis out as well", and she sort of looked at me, and there was a hint of, "Yeah, I thought so", sort of recognition.' This was 'the only time' Carole had to come out in this way. The women's families already knew about their relationship and accepted it without raising it with them. In an ironic twist, Carole knew the officer she told about her sexuality was also gay, but did not

mention this when she raised her own sexuality. She 'actually apologised to her for doing it on her watch'.

Carole remembers that 'just going in and saying "I'm gay" wasn't enough. You had to prove it, more or less, which is a bit embarrassing'. Often men would sit in for the interview as well. For her exit interview, 'the bird that interviewed me was as camp as a row of tents'. The woman was Dutch and her command of the English language was not excellent. This added a strangely comedic element to an interview that was naturally stressful: 'She wanted to know if we masturbated to organism, and I was just laughing so much inside, that I didn't bother correcting her, and it really was comedic.' Carole emphasises again her belief that 'I had a fair feeling that they were about to start a witch-hunt because, I don't know. You just got little vibes that things weren't too cool.' The service police pressed Carole for information on others who might be gay, and she replied, 'Well, I don't know, because I've never slept with anybody else.' Carole emphasises firmly that 'I wasn't going to shop anyone, no.'

Christina remembers her exit interview being less aggressive than Carole's. Carole had tried to protect Christina from the interrogation she had experienced. Carole recalls: 'I just laid the parameters. I said, "I don't want her grilled, it's sufficient enough that I'm telling you that we're on and that's the end of it.'" As a result, Christina says 'basically, all they asked me was "Who else was gay?" and I said, "I don't know, because I don't know anyone else", and they really didn't push me or anything like that'. Carole's premonition that a witch-hunt was underfoot turned out to be accurate. In 1968 she believes that around a dozen women serving in the WRAAF were forced out on the basis of their sexuality.

One of the benefits of serving in the WRAAF was that the discharge certificates the women were issued simply stated 'On Request'. Carole elaborates: 'The worst discharge, the dishonourable discharge, is "Services No Longer Required". The one that's nice is "On Request"; they just don't bother to say on whose request.' For women in the WRAAC and the WRANS, the discharge given for homosexual conduct was usually 'Service No Longer Required'. Carole notes:

With the Air Force, it was 'On Request', so it was that amorphous thing that didn't mean anything, and you knew that's what you'd get, and it wouldn't really affect your future employment, whereas, 'Services No Longer Required' was a bit of a well, why weren't they required? And ...we knew we'd get an 'On Request' discharge.

Carole was officially discharged on 9 November 1968, which gave her time to rent the two women a flat and obtain some furniture before Christina was officially discharged on 29 November 1968. Christina arrived in Melbourne on the morning of 30 November 1968. Carole 'promptly locked us out of the flat in excitement'.

Both women went on to have successful careers after they left the WRAAF, reinforcing the capabilities they had shown during their time serving. Carole had begun the process of looking for another position before leaving the WRAAF and was offered a role with the CSIRO as a film librarian: 'It was good, because I finished with the military on the Friday, and I started with them on the Monday, which was continuous service, so, I didn't lose any long-service-leave.' Christina initially secured a job quickly as well, as a typist in an accounts department. She went on to serve as Stock Control and Computer Systems Manager for a major oil company. Carole became increasingly involved in the Technicians Association Union at the CSIRO. After ten years of doing work as State Secretary, the Federal Vice President, President and then General Secretary, she decided it was 'full-time or nothing'. So, she 'spent about 20 years with the union, one way and another, and then I went back into CSIRO, because that was only a secondment across, and I retired from there'. Before retiring from CSIRO, she was a Senior Human Resources Management Consultant specialising in policy development and developed the CSIRO relocation policy and produced the Removal Policy and Conditions Manual.

While Carole and Christina describe a relatively easy transition from the WRAAF to civilian society, one where their sexuality did not hold them back and they were able to forge very successful careers, they were all too aware that other women could suffer terribly as a result of their sexuality. Carole notes: 'away from the military, back in the '60s and '70s, a lot of occupations, a lot of employers, if you were gay, that was it, you were out'. After the couple had left the WRAAF, they met a female couple who worked in a lolly factory. One of the women, who was from Tasmania, was illiterate. Carole

stresses: 'they were terrified – and I am not saying worried – I am saying terrified, that they'd be found out because it would be their jobs. And what else could they do? Especially [the woman] who was illiterate. It was really sad'. Christina notes things ended extremely sadly, with one woman committing suicide. Later in the interview, Carole returns to this case, expressing her hope that the contemporary world would have been a much kinder place for the two women: 'I think in this day and age, they would not have gone down the track that they had to go down.'

Carole and Christina continued to forge a life together at a time when lesbians were rendered largely invisible by broader Australia society. They decided to purchase their own home in 1974 and moved in at Easter 1975. There were initial issues in securing a bank loan, as Carole remembers: 'Two single women, they wouldn't talk to us'. In a stroke of luck, it happened that the accountant at the local bank branch was a gay man. He wrote a glowing recommendation for the two women. They were the first single women to gain a bank loan from that major bank. They have been active members of their community and gained unquestioned acceptance and recognition from a wide range of people.

They have never felt the need to particularly announce their sexuality or relationship. Carole tells us: 'You didn't actually tell people. The interesting thing is, we have never come out, because we never were in, we just were'. Christina continues, 'Yeah, people either accepted me the way I was, or they didn't'. In the 1970s and 1980s, even showing public affection could be risky. Carole remembers 'it was a case of it being so severely frowned upon that you wouldn't do it'. They relate an incident where they drove north to Stanthorpe, in the early 1980s, and had pre-booked a double room, but when they checked in the motel owner took one look at two women and instead insisted 'on a single or twin'. While things have changed and the need to be as discreet has shifted, there are still moments when they are reminded there is still a distance to be traversed.

The two women have lived through significant social change in their lifetimes, particularly with regard to the way gay and lesbian people have been treated. Carole emphasises: 'You've got to realise, it's not that long ago since they stopped things like

aversion therapy, and stuff like that. When you look back, that was bloody barbaric, but it was still going on into the '70s'. We ask whether she feels hopeful about the future for LGBT people. 'I think there's always going to be pockets of resistance, particularly from the religious fundamentalists, but there's a much more liberal approach from most people.' Both women's families have been accepting of their relationship, though some things were not spoken about.

As our interview draws to a close, we ask whether the women are happy that the WRAAF was a part of their lives. Neither hesitates in answering 'yes'. For Carole, 'the Air Force brought me back to earth because you had to deal with so many different people. And the other thing was, I think the Air Force is great for discipline. I don't regret it at all.' While there is no regret about leaving, they do not dwell on their time spent in the services. They occasionally attend air shows and keep a watch on what the services are doing.

Yet, there is a distance between their time in the Air Force and the lives they have since led. The services have been slow to recognise their female service members and the Returned and Services League has a reputation for being a very male-dominated environment. For both women, there is also a sense that their time in the services has passed and that there is not much to be gained by dwelling on it. Carole reflects on this.

I think I tend to compartmentalise. When you're done with something, you're done with it, and you can look back on it, but you don't dwell on it, and I think that's a bit of a protection mechanism, I guess, in a way, it sort of locks off any unpleasant experiences, and puts them into a compartment where you can visit them when you want to, but you don't have to be confronted with them all the time.

Christina adds, 'I don't need to keep going back to that'.

When they resigned from the military, neither could have predicted the future of their relationship. Yet, when we spoke to them, they were approaching the anniversary of 50 years together. We ponder the significance of their decision to leave to be together. Carole notes, 'Well, it's interesting that when I trotted into the office and said I want out, [the WRAAF officer] said, "Are you sure about this?" and I said, "I've never been more certain about anything in my life", and I was right.' Christina adds, 'Yeah, I knew it was

serious and it was a life-changing decision, I guess. I guess at that age, I assumed it would be for a long time.’ We ask what has been the key to their relationship success. Christina answers: ‘It’s just give and take and talking. And it’s got to be the willingness to make it work and keep it going.’

Their lives together today are full. There has been travel. Volunteering is a significant component. Carole says, ‘I think it’s just part of life. You’ve got to give back.’ When we spoke, they were enjoying training volunteer guides at the zoo, which allowed them to assist in their shared passion for animal welfare and conservation. They also support both through charities. Christina tells us that they both ‘particularly love cats’ and their cat, Jim, was a delightful presence throughout our interview. They also enjoy culture and visiting art galleries. Carole has found the local library amenable to expanding its collection of lesbian material, which makes it easy to read a reasonable selection of fiction.

As we reach the conclusion of our interview, Carole emphasises her belief that ‘the biggest mistake the Air Force ever made, or the services ever made, is that in the process of getting rid of gays, they got rid of their best operators’. As we reflect on their careers, there is no doubt that this is true. Yes, despite the military’s loss in not accepting its gay, lesbian and bisexual service personnel, Carole and Christina share a story that is extraordinary and touching. They met at a time when lesbianism was heavily stigmatised and when women still had to contend with sexism. Despite the military making it clear that homosexuality was not tolerated, they managed to find each other. They have built a shared life together and they have prevailed.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Wodack, 'Jocular thinker increased standing of psychiatry', *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 November 2011), < <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/obituaries/jocular-thinker-increased-standing-of-psychiatry-20111102-1mvka.html>>.