

The History of the Australian Women's Land Army in Tasmania 1940-1945

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Recipe for a Servicewoman

Take one healthy female of required age and dimensions.

Examine well for flaws and, if suitable, prepare as follows:

Remove to "Rookie" course and trim neatly.

Shape into correct posture by drill and PT until you have head up, chin in, and back straight.

Dress in regulation issue and soak well in "routine orders".

Baste judiciously with equal quantities of Duties, Lectures and Recreation; and sprinkle well with humour to bring out the *Esprit de Corps*.

At the end of one month, Servicewoman should be ready to "serve". Remember?

Tasmanian Women's Land Army

In August 1940 a meeting was held in Launceston to assess the viability of forming a Women's Land Army in Tasmania (WLA) – similar to the one already operating in Great Britain – to overcome the shortage of rural workers, due to the men joining the armed forces at the outbreak of World War Two on 2 September 1939. A committee was appointed with Miss Agnes Hodgson to act as the organising secretary. Agnes later went on to become the first State Superintendent, later followed by Mrs Sheila Hodgman.

Several training camps were arranged throughout the state. Some of the girls who volunteered were only just out of school and came from properties already feeling the effects of the shortage of rural workers.

Lowlands, the Richmond property of Mr CT Jones, was a training ground for a number of the southern girls. Here they were able to experience all manner of farming activities: they learned to drive tractors and care for the farm implements; and stock work included dairy and sheep yards. Field officers from the Department of Agriculture gave lectures; and the girls visited other properties and several rural-based industries.

Another camp held at the St Leonards home of Mrs Olive Ransom offered similar training for twenty girls; fourteen lived in, while the remainder visited daily. This camp was held from 15 to 25 March 1941. Strict rules applied regarding work assignments and timetables for anticipated routine jobs. The main objective was to provide adequate preparation for the challenging work expected of them in the future. And the girls were given the opportunity to gain further knowledge by visiting places such as Lalla Lavender Farm, Hagley Farm School and other properties.

In the north-west of the state, quite a large group of volunteers participated in a range of rural-based activities more or less centred around the Devonport area. The foundation members of this body began their Women's Land Army experience on the property of Mr and Mrs Parsons at Thirlstane; as the girls became more confident, they were sent out to other properties in the district. One large band of volunteers cultivated and sowed down a grain crop on twenty-five acres on an area near The Bluff, land donated to them for the purpose. Many members had had no experience at all of farm

life; others were from properties within the district. Each girl was given a Land Army badge as identification. But they were required to provide all their own working gear, such as overalls and boots; and the uniform of the Tasmanian Land Army which consisted of jodhpurs, khaki shirts, green jumpers, hats and ties. And each wore an identifying arm band bearing 'L.A.' in large letters. Although the Cressy Training School was opened in late 1941, the rural industry remains indebted to all those who had the foresight to realize the need to have an alternative work force and to those who made time and facilities available to train volunteers.

By 1941, it was estimated that there were 200 women working on their home farms throughout Tasmania, and that a further thirty-five trained members of the Tasmanian Women's Land Army were stationed on properties other than their own. Also a number of untrained volunteers, employed as Auxiliaries, agreed to work for a minimum of four weeks in a season; they too were given a badge for identity purposes. Many of these girls managed outside jobs as well and gave up their holiday time to fulfil their commitment to the WLA.

November 1941 saw the opening of the Training School at the Cressy Research Farm. The State Government gave funding for the building of accommodation and facilities to house up to twelve trainees at a time. It had become obvious that the foresight of a group of women in 1940 had proved to be of great assistance to the rural industry in overcoming the shortage of rural workers. Tasmania was the second state to recognize this need, beaten only by Queensland's two-week lead.

Trainees at Cressy were given up to eight weeks of intensive training in all aspects of general farm work. The girls would rise by 6.30 am and report to the farm overseer just before 8.00 am. The rosters were arranged so that all trainees were given the chance to experience every type of work that they may be expected to do upon leaving the school to go out to their assignments. They were taught under the supervision of the men in charge of the various sections. At the end of the training, they were given an aptitude test and assessed by the farm supervisor as to what particular type of work they were most suited for. Only a very small percentage of the girls failed to qualify over the three years the school operated. Lectures were given on three nights a week, and each trainee was rostered to carry out mess duties. This enabled Mrs Sheila Hodgman, the officer in charge of the running the school, to give her own appraisal of the trainees. As with the earlier members, girls still had to supply all their own working gear and uniforms, including the jodhpurs and khaki shirts. The trainees came from all walks of life. Many had left well-paid city jobs, with ninety per cent from non-rural backgrounds.

Australian Women's Land Army

When the Federal Government established the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA), it was Australia-wide; this was in July 1942 and from then on everything changed. Members of the former Tasmanian Land Army were given the opportunity to enrol in the AWLA for a period of twelve months with the option of renewal, or for the duration of the War. Forty-eight individuals, some being foundation members of the TWLA from 1940, agreed to work under the new regulations of the AWLA. The majority of these members did not leave the service until they were demobilized in 1945, thus giving up to five years of service. All members enrolling for the full twelve months, or for the duration of the War, were fully kitted out, as were the other women's services. Everything was included: socks, boots, full dress and working gear; even underwear of the warm and woolly kind. Regulations were enforced as to leave entitlements; sick leave benefits were introduced; and in fact the members were treated in almost the same way as in the other services. Under the new regulations, former members of the Women's Land Army who worked on their own home farms were denied membership and received no privileges. This left only two classes: full-

time members and the Auxiliaries, who agreed to work during the harvest period for a minimum of four weeks, but not up to twelve months.

After the establishment of the AWLA, the Auxiliary in Tasmania suffered diminished numbers. They received no privileges, no training was offered and uniforms were not supplied. However, they were able to apply for a loan of working gear for the period of their assignments. Pay was the same for full or part-time members: 30 shillings plus keep; or 50 shillings if living at home.

Hostel Accommodation

In October 1942 the state's first hostel accommodation was established at Sassafras in the north-west. Initially it was home to eight members, but later this was increased to fourteen. Recruits would go out to their allotted farms each day and return to the hostel after work. The Matron was in charge of all meals, and for the discipline and upkeep of the rules laid down by Headquarters. Girls were rostered to mess duties in the mornings before leaving for the day and were obliged to assist with chores in the kitchen at night. Many lasting friendships were made over the three years the hostel was in operation.

The Scottsdale hostel opened in the showgrounds under the grandstand in January 1944. There were upwards of twenty girls stationed here, most of whom were engaged in the production of vegetables in the district. In October 1943, the first AWLA girls to be employed in this area were Miss M Field, Muriel and Mavis Jacobs and Mrs R Anderson. The hostel closed in September 1945.

Other hostel-type accommodation was established in Deloraine and at Acton in the south of the state. Girls required to pick tomatoes at Ulverstone were housed in a mobile camp held under canvas. Later they moved on to Deloraine to harvest the potato crop. In the south, members of the AWLA were responsible for the harvesting of sixteen tons of small fruit at Gardners Bay before going back to Lachlan to harvest small fruits in that area. Perhaps the girls who were stationed on their own in some of the rather isolated places should be given a very special mention, as they did not have any of the companionship and peer support enjoyed by the hostel girls. Where possible, Headquarters did try to place two girls together, but so much depended on the needs of the employer and also on what accommodation was offered. This is one reason why it was not very often that members of the AWLA were seen in parades in large numbers. They all were so scattered.

Recognition at Last

It was not until 1991 – forty-six years after the end of the hostilities – that permission was granted to join the Returned Services League (RSL). Finally, it was agreed to offer membership to the 2,500 members of the full time AWLA in Australia. And NOW, after fifty years, we are to receive a medal in recognition of our War Service. It all does seem to be a little too late to try to make up for all the put-downs over the years, but ... we can all look back from 1940 and say with pride:

'THAT WE ALSO SERVED'