

= Clare Stevenson =

Clare Grant Stevenson , AM , MBE (18 July 1903 ? 22 October 1988) was the inaugural Director of the Women 's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) . As such , she has been described as " the most significant woman in the history of the Air Force " . Formed as a branch of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in 1941 , the WAAAF was the first and largest uniformed women 's service in Australia during World War II , numbering more than 18 @, @ 000 members by late 1944 and making up over thirty per cent of RAAF ground staff .

Born and educated in Victoria , Stevenson was an executive with the Berlei company when she was appointed Director WAAAF . Initially ranked squadron officer , she rose to become group officer by 1942 . Stevenson resumed her civilian career following her discharge from the Air Force in 1946 . Long active in education and social welfare , she helped form aid organisations including the Carers Association of New South Wales (now Carers NSW) after retiring from Berlei in 1960 . Stevenson was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire and a Member of the Order of Australia for her services to the community and to female veterans .

= = Education and early career = =

Born on 18 July 1903 in Wangaratta , Victoria , Clare Grant Stevenson was the fifth of six children of Robert Logan Grant Stevenson and his wife Ada Pollie , née Griffiths . When Clare was four her family moved to Essendon , where she attended Winstow Girls ' Grammar School and Essendon High School , completing her intermediate and leaving certificates . In 1922 , she entered the Faculty of Science at the University of Melbourne , but switched to education after failing chemistry in her final year . Stevenson was a hockey blue and was active in several campus groups , including the Students ' Representative Council and the Science Club . She became President of the Committee of Melbourne University Women , and graduated in 1925 with a Diploma of Education .

Stevenson began working with the YWCA in 1926 . A strong advocate for continuing education , during her first two years with the association she organised night classes for workers in Sydney . She served as General Secretary of the Rockhampton , Queensland , branch from 1929 to 1931 . In 1932 she took up a position as a training and research officer at Berlei , and from 1935 to 1939 represented the company in London as a senior executive . Stevenson was based in Sydney , supervising product research and the training of sales staff , at the outbreak of World War II .

= = Director WAAAF = =

= = = Appointment = = =

Late in 1940 , Stevenson was nominated to be the first Director of the planned Women 's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) . Although keen to support the war effort in some capacity , she demurred owing to the administrative and social obstacles she foresaw in the role , but her appointment went ahead regardless on 21 May 1941 . The Air Member for Personnel , Air Vice Marshal Henry Wrigley , had recommended Stevenson on the basis of her management background and because she was not a " socialite " . Despite her initial misgivings , Stevenson decided not to fight the appointment , which took effect on 9 June .

Established on 25 March 1941 in response to lobbying by women wanting to serve in the war , and to free more male ground crew for overseas postings , the WAAAF was the first uniformed women 's branch of an armed service in Australia , predating similar organisations in the Army and Navy . Fewer than two hundred personnel had been recruited when Stevenson became Director in June ; this number would grow to around a thousand by the end of the year . For the first three months of its existence the WAAAF had been under the temporary command of Flight Officer Mary Bell , wife of an RAAF group captain and former Australian Commandant of the Women 's Air Training Corps , an organisation of female pilots and ground staff that had been formed in 1939 and had been

providing voluntary support to the Air Force . Bell chose to resign on learning of Stevenson 's appointment , rather than stay on as Deputy Director and report to someone from outside the service fraternity ; she later rejoined on the condition that she would receive no promotion higher than flight officer .

= = = Early challenges = = =

In her role as Director , Stevenson was responsible for training , morale and welfare of all WAAAF staff . Philosophically committed to equal opportunity regardless of gender and social background , from the outset she had to deal with discrimination by government authorities , many of whom had been against the creation of such a service . One @-@ time Minister for Defence , Harold Thorby , declared that " aviation takes women out of their natural environment , the home and the training of the family " , and various senior Air Force officers , including the man subsequently known as the " Father of the RAAF " , Air Marshal Richard Williams , and the Director of Personnel Services , Group Captain Joe Hewitt , also fought the proposal . The Chief of the Air Staff , Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett , a Royal Air Force commander who appreciated how the Women 's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) had proved itself during the Battle of Britain in 1940 , supported its establishment but lost some interest after his preferred choice as Director , his daughter Sybil @-@ Jean , a serving WAAF officer , was ruled out . The Federal government decreed that WAAAF staff would be paid two @-@ thirds of what a male doing the equivalent trade received , while their right of appeal in disciplinary matters and the deference shown to their rank was more comparable to that of " uniformed civilians " than to servicemen . Women were at first enrolled for renewable twelve @-@ month periods rather than enlisted as permanent staff ; only in 1943 did the WAAAF become part of the Permanent Air Force .

Stevenson considered housing , uniforms , and recruit training as her first priorities after taking up her appointment . She said that on arriving at No. 1 WAAAF Depot in Malvern , Victoria , she was " shattered at the prison @-@ like atmosphere of the place " . She drew on her retail experience to both organise the WAAAF and design its uniform . Stevenson was promoted to wing officer on 1 October 1941 , and group officer on 1 April 1942 , which was to be the highest rank attained by a serving WAAAF member . She took an active interest in recruitment , her liberal social outlook evinced by her determination that single women with children should not be barred from entry to the WAAAF . In order to establish high standards , Stevenson personally interviewed all WAAAF officer trainees and briefed as many of her officers as was possible before they were posted to a new job . She also worked to maintain the morale of personnel , encouraging officers to attend group leadership courses and organise leisure and sporting activities for their staff . Colonel Sybil Irving , the head of the Australian Women 's Army Service (AWAS) , who observed first hand the WAAAF 's training methods before large @-@ scale AWAS recruitment commenced , later declared that Stevenson " did the most pertinent pioneering work " in gaining acceptance for women in the armed forces . For her part , Stevenson considered the role of Director " a difficult job and often a lonely one " .

= = = Later service = = =

Early in 1943 a policy change was mooted to remove female officers from the technical musterings they had so far filled in the WAAAF , and substitute male officers in these roles . In opposing this , Stevenson went around the new Air Member for Personnel , Air Commodore Frank Lukis , and wrote directly to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff , Air Commodore John McCauley . She told McCauley , " I contend that it is a waste of money and training to take women cipher officers , women from Signals (S4) and casualty ... when they have learnt their work and substitute these women by men who have to learn the job " , and recommended that he direct the Air Member for Personnel to ensure that female officers continued to be employed in technical positions , and not simply for administration and welfare . McCauley agreed with Stevenson but Lukis appealed to the Chief of the Air Staff , Air Vice Marshal George Jones . Jones backed Lukis ' authority , and the

latter sent a " stinging rebuke " to Stevenson , who was forced to apologize . In the event , women officers continued to be employed in technical positions as the WAAAF expanded over the next two years , peaking in strength at 18 @, @ 667 members in October 1944 . By the end of the war a total of 27 @, @ 000 women had served in the WAAAF , comprising some thirty @-@ one per cent of Air Force ground staff and filling sixty @-@ one trades , all previously occupied by men .

Stevenson continued to lead the WAAAF following the cessation of hostilities , retiring on medical grounds on 22 March 1946 . Suffering reduced muscle function in her left arm and pain on the left side of her face and neck , she was diagnosed with brachial neuritis , traced to typhus , tetanus and smallpox injections received the previous May in preparation for a proposed visit to Manila that never eventuated . In her last annual address to the WAAAF as its Director , Stevenson encouraged its members to make use of their service experience when they returned to civilian life :

These are the things we shall miss ? the comradeship , the knowledge of a common aim , the feeling that one is not alone ? they all make life in the WAAAF very different from life in the outside world ... We must find a common aim ? not of winning a war and working to free our prisoners of war ? but winning something for our district from an unenlightened council or a disinterested public ...

Presented with a jewelled brooch as a farewell gift by her fellow officers , Stevenson asked that its value instead be put towards a scholarship for an ex @-@ WAAAF member to study social work at the University of Sydney . The WAAAF itself , the first and largest of Australia 's wartime women 's services , was disbanded on 30 September 1946 . It was succeeded in 1950 by a new organisation with a separate charter to the RAAF , the Women 's Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF) . WRAAF members achieved a pay scale equal to the male service in 1972 , and five years later were integrated with the RAAF .

= = Post @-@ war work and legacy = =

Following her discharge from the WAAAF , Stevenson resumed her career as a senior executive with Berlei , and remained with the company until her retirement in 1960 . Parallel to her work at Berlei , she was a trustee of the Services Canteens Trust Fund in Melbourne , maintaining her links with the organisation for the next forty years . A founding patron of the Council of Ex @-@ Servicewomen 's Associations , Stevenson was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire in the 1960 Queen 's Birthday Honours for her welfare work on behalf of female veterans . She helped set up the Scholarship Trust Fund for Civilian Widows ' Children in 1963 , and was a research officer with the New South Wales Council on the Ageing (COTA) from 1969 to 1978 . In 1975 , Stevenson was involved in establishing the Kings Cross Community Aid and Information Service , serving for a time as President and as a member of the Management Committee until 1987 .

Stevenson founded the Carers Association of New South Wales , and became its first President , in 1980 . While serving with COTA in 1974 , she had prepared a report titled " Dedication " concerning the levels of assistance given to the elderly by their family and friends . This led to her forming in 1976 a subcommittee of COTA made up of carers , from which she later created the Carers Association as an independent organisation . As President of the association , Stevenson lobbied for the establishment of a Carers Pension in New South Wales , which was legislated in 1985 . She is commemorated at the Carers Association (now Carers NSW) by the Clare Stevenson Memorial Lectures .

In 1984 Stevenson , together with Honor Darling , published The WAAAF Book , a collection of reminiscences by former members of the service . Stevenson was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in the 1988 Australia Day Honours for her services to the community and her welfare work with veterans . Her hobbies included reading , classical music and , in her younger days , surfing . Unmarried , Clare Stevenson died in Mona Vale on 22 October 1988 , leaving her body to the University of Sydney .