

= Mary Bell (aviator) =

Mary Teston Luis Bell (3 December 1903 ? 6 February 1979) was an Australian aviator and founding leader of the Women 's Air Training Corps (WATC) , a volunteer organisation that provided support to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) during World War II . She also helped establish the Women 's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) , the first and largest women 's wartime service in the country , which grew to number more than 18 @, @ 000 members by 1944 . Born Mary Fernandes in Tasmania , she married RAAF officer John Bell in 1923 and obtained a pilot 's licence in 1927 . Given temporary command of the WAAAF on its formation in 1941 , she was passed over as its inaugural Director in favour of corporate executive Clare Stevenson . Bell refused the post of Deputy Director and resigned , but subsequently rejoined and served until the final months of the war . She and her husband later became farmers . Nicknamed " Paddy " , Mary Bell died in 1979 at the age of seventy @-@ five .

= = Early life and WATC = =

Born on 3 December 1903 in Launceston , Tasmania , Mary Bell was the daughter of Rowland Walker Luis Fernandes , an English @-@ born clerk , and his wife Emma . She attended Church of England Girls ' Grammar School , Launceston and St Margaret 's School , Devonport , before commencing work in a solicitor 's office at the age of fourteen . She married John Bell (1889 ? 1973) , a Royal Australian Air Force officer and World War I veteran of Gallipoli and the Australian Flying Corps , at St Andrew 's Anglican Church in Brighton , Victoria on 19 March 1923 . They had one daughter .

From 1925 until early 1928 , the Bells lived in Britain while John attended RAF Staff College , Andover and acted as RAAF liaison officer to the Royal Air Force . Interested in aviation since her teens , Mary learnt to fly in England and in April 1927 qualified for a Grade ' A ' private pilot 's licence . Returning to Australia , she was the first female to gain a pilot 's licence in Victoria , on 20 March 1928 . The following year , she became the first Australian woman to qualify as a ground engineer .

By 1939 , the Bells had moved to Brisbane , where John was Queensland manager for Airlines of Australia Ltd , having left the RAAF in 1929 . Mary became leader of forty or so members of the Women 's National Emergency Legion Air Wing who had volunteered to assist with aircraft maintenance during times of war . Determining that their objectives would not be met in their existing organisation , on 17 July they formed a new paramilitary group , the Women 's Air Training Corps (WATC) , and elected Bell its commander . She soon expanded the WATC into a national organisation , with Commandants leading each state 's chapter , and herself as Australian Commandant . Bell wrote to Air Vice Marshal Richard Williams , with whom she was acquainted via her husband and through aviation circles , advocating the establishment of a women 's branch of the RAAF similar to the RAF 's Women 's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) . Among other things , she pointed out that female volunteers such as hers were already supporting the Air Force in driving , nursing and clerical duties . The WATC was one of several women 's voluntary organisations whose members were keen to support the military , arguing that their personnel provided a ready @-@ made pool of skilled staff for auxiliary services , saving the government time and money training unskilled labour .

= = World War II and WAAAF = =

Australia having declared war on 3 September 1939 , the RAAF Air Board met in November to discuss Mary Bell 's letter , but postponed taking any further action . Bell continued to lobby , as did various women 's groups seeking to support the war effort and free male staff for overseas postings . In July 1940 , the new Chief of the Air Staff , Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett , invited her to produce a proposal for a women 's auxiliary , supervised by her husband John , who had rejoined the Air Force at the war 's outbreak and was now a wing commander in the Directorate of

Organisation at RAAF Headquarters , Melbourne . Mary recommended forming the new service under the Air Force Act to permit women to enlist for the duration of the war under conditions similar to RAAF members , rather than enrolling on a short @-@ term contractual basis , a radical idea at the time which would not be put in place until 1943 . She also suggested a volunteer reserve or ' citizen ' force to augment the enlisted women , effectively the existing WATC , though this was seen as placing too much emphasis on her personal command . Various senior Air Force officers , including the recently promoted Air Marshal Williams , and the Director of Personnel Services , Group Captain Joe Hewitt , opposed a women 's service . Burnett , an RAF member who appreciated how the WAAF proved its worth during the Battle of Britain , championed its establishment as the Women 's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) .

Bell was appointed to the RAAF 's Personnel Branch as Staff Officer (Administrative) with the probationary rank of section officer (acting flight officer) on 24 February 1941 , in order to " get the organisation going " . Formally established on 25 March , the WAAAF was the first uniformed women 's branch of an armed service in Australia , predating similar organisations in the Army and Navy . Bell led the WAAAF for the first three months of its existence , recruiting approximately two hundred women by June ; of the first six officers she appointed , five were former members of the WATC . On 21 May 1941 , Berlei corporate executive Clare Stevenson was appointed Director WAAAF with Bell as her Deputy Director , effective from 9 June . The Air Member for Personnel , Air Vice Marshal Henry Wrigley , chose Stevenson on the basis of her management background and because she was not a " socialite " . Notwithstanding her aviation experience and familiarity with the RAAF , he considered Bell to be " tangled up with the WATC " , where she " waved the flag and obtained a great deal of publicity for herself " . She may also have alienated Burnett by not including his daughter Sybil @-@ Jean , a founding member of the WAAF , among the initial intake of staff .

Bell chose to resign on learning of Stevenson 's appointment , rather than stay on and report to someone from outside the service fraternity ; she later rejoined at Wrigley 's request , on the condition that she received no promotion higher than flight officer . Two of her original officer appointees also resigned when Bell was passed over , later describing her as " a thorough and effective organiser " and the " obvious choice " as Director . After Bell returned to the WAAAF on 5 October 1942 , she served at RAAF Headquarters in various directorates , mainly that of Medical Services . Despite her recommendation in July 1940 that they be enlisted into the WAAAF as permanent staff , women were at first enrolled only for renewable twelve @-@ month contracts ; they did not become part of the Permanent Air Force , with the benefits that entailed , until 1943 . Pay was only ever two @-@ thirds that of male equivalents . The organisation nevertheless grew rapidly , peaking in strength at over 18 @,@ 600 members in October 1944 , or twelve per cent of all RAAF personnel . By the end of the war a total of 27 @,@ 000 women had served in the WAAAF , comprising over thirty @-@ one per cent of ground staff and filling sixty @-@ one trades , all previously occupied by men .

= = Later life = =

Ranked flight officer , Mary Bell was discharged from the WAAAF at her own request on 11 April 1945 . Her husband John was acting air commodore when he left the RAAF on 15 October that year . The WAAAF , first and largest of Australia 's wartime women 's services , was disbanded on 30 September 1946 . The Bells became farmers , first in Victoria and then in Tasmania , before retiring in 1968 . Survived by her daughter , Mary Bell died in Ulverstone , Tasmania on 6 February 1979 . She was buried at Mersey Vale Memorial Park cemetery in Spreyton , near Devonport , beside her husband , who had died in 1973 .