

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

AIRCRAFTWOMAN RENA JUNE PASCOE

WAAAF, World War 2

Young country girl becomes one of first South Australians to join the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force



ACW Rena Pascoe in her WAAAF uniform

Formed on 4 February 1941, the WAAAF set a precedent not just for the formation of other women's service organisations such as The Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) and the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS), but also the employment of women in non-traditional sectors across Australia. The WAAAF was incredibly successful rising to a force of over 27,000 women, allowing men to be re-directed from support industries to serving in combat. Many South Australian women joined the WAAAF. One of those, was Rena Pascoe.

Rena June Pascoe was born on 12 May 1921 in Yorketown on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula. Her parents, Wilfred Pascoe and Christina Park, were hardworking rural people. Her self-taught father was a farmer and a Methodist lay preacher. Due to his religious convictions, he served as a stretcher bearer in the Australian Imperial Force in World War 1 but was severely injured in the leg which restricted his mobility for the rest of his life. Initially completing two years education at Edithburgh, a family relocation elsewhere on the Yorke Peninsula meant Rena had to complete her education via correspondence. She left school at the age of 14 (Year 7) as correspondence schooling was not supported at high school level.

Living with her grandmother in Henley Beach at the start of World War 2, Rena worked as a dress maker. Due to employment restrictions, she initially registered her interest in the Royal Australian Air Force and meanwhile, enlisted in the Women's Air Training Corp in Adelaide, where she trained weekly. She worked at Parafield as volunteer, training Dutch airmen from the Dutch East Indies on how to mend aircraft fabric.

In February 1941, the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) was established but it was not until early 1942 that the WAAAF began recruiting and training in South Australia. In March 1942, Rena Pascoe was called up and enlisted in to the WAAAF at No. 5 Recruit Centre, Adelaide, on 25 March 1942. She undertook the first ever WAAAF training course in South Australia, from late March to 18 April 1942, at

Mount Breckan, Victor Harbor, which had been acquired by the RAAF for the conduct of all initial WAAAF and aircrew training in South Australia. Rena remembered that they wore overalls and as they had no pillows, they had to sleep with their boots in a pillowcase.

Completing her basic training, Rena Pascoe was posted along with the other WAAAF's from the first course to Mallala. Initially, she had to wear male uniforms as the WAAAF uniforms were not available. As a fabric worker posted to No. 6 Service Flying Training School, she initially folded parachutes but then transitioned to painting camouflage on to Avro Anson aircraft. An incident where paint was accidentally sprayed in her face and mouth resulted in her being hospitalized and administered malt extract.

Becoming allergic to paint, Rena Pascoe completed telephone operator training at No. 4 School of Technical Training in Adelaide in 1943 before re-mustering to telephone operator in October 1943. She worked at No. 14 Stores Unit in Adelaide from October 1943 to August 1944 before returning to 6 SFTS at Mallala from October 1944 to June 1945, as a telephone operator. She recalled her time at Adelaide was somewhat easier than the remoteness of Mallala where conditions were more basic; sleeping on straw mattresses in iron beds with simple food.

She was then posted to Headquarters Southern Area, Melbourne, where she finished the last months of the war working in an allied headquarters before being discharged on 25 November 1945, completing three years' service as a WAAAF Aircraftswomen. Her two brothers who served in the army also survived the war.



Rena Pascoe at the RAAF Association 75th Anniversary of the Pacific Ceremony at Torrens Parade Ground in 2019.

After the war, Rena continued her service to her country performing volunteer work throughout her long life. She joined the RAAF Association in May 1951 as part of the WAAAF sub-branch and while initially restricted from joining the RSL due to their male only code, did significant amount of volunteer work for the RSL. She was the 2017 Walkerville Volunteer of the Year at age 96. In recent years, Rena became a popular veteran in the Walkerville RSL and was their last World War 2 veteran.

Rena loved the Air Force and was very proud of her time in the RAAF and would ride around Walkerville with a RAAF Ensign flying from her mobile scooter. She still had her old WAAAF tunic – something she really appreciated noting she could not wear one when she first enlisted. She regularly attended commemorative services in Walkerville and at the Air Force Memorial, Torrens Parade Ground, continuing her long association with the RSL and the RAAF Association.

As a loved and respected member of the local veteran community, Rena, RAAF Edinburgh and the Walkerville RSL were all looking forward to celebrating her 100th birthday in 2021, in the same year as the Air Force's Centenary.

Unfortunately, she passed away in September 2020 just after commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of World War 2.

While not served in combat or overseas, nor honoured with awards for bravery and courage, Rena Pascoe's three years of service in the WAAAF epitomize the vital contributions of Australian women through the war. Between 1941 and 1945, an incredible 27,000 women like Rena Pascoe served in the WAAAF. Together, their contributions were critical to the sustainment of the RAAF and the Australian war effort. Women served in 73 different trades in the WAAAF ranging from non-traditional trades such as mechanical, armament, electricians, aircraft painting and fabric workers, instrument makers and meteorology to more traditional ones such as clerical, medical, transport, catering, equipment and communications. The WAAAF was one of the major successes of World War 2 and established a precedent demonstrating how women could be employed across society beyond their traditional roles. In this respect, women like Rena Pascoe were pioneers.

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