

Picture yourself as a front-line soldier - English, Indian, African or even Gurkha perhaps. You're one of the many units fighting in the tropical jungles of Burma. Enduring the humidity, rain and challenging terrain, you are eventually relieved of duties and moved to the rear.

A few kilometres away, where you still grimace at the sound of gunfire, is a mobile food and beverage van in a clearing. What a welcome sight. Furthermore, it's run by women - *real women*, as one soldier was quoted as saying. (book *Ticket to Burma*)

Ahh, a cup of tea is on offer. There's also cake and sandwiches. How civilised. How very British.

It's bewildering that after the Japanese occupation of Burma, commandant Ninian Taylor was able to convince authorities to allow her to re-launch the Women's Auxiliary Service (Burma) WAS(B).

Commonly known as the Wasbees, which first existed in Rangoon from January 1942, the formation initially provided clerical services.

The Wasbees were mainly the daughters and wives of British officers, civil servants, colonial expats and missionaries. Ninian, for example, was the wife of the colonel of the Burma Rifles. These women were in Burma's capital when it fell to the Japanese forces in March, 1942.

In Ninian's post-war reflection, she said -

*... the girls had shown such courage in carrying out their work during the bombing and machine-gunning in Burma. The girls were launched into battle overnight; there was no time for training. They worked ... providing food and drinks for the troops, tending the wounded, driving transports, helping with the evacuation.*

Ninian, assisted by her deputy, Lois St. John took the Wasbees north from Rangoon over 600 kilometres by train. It was described as 'a journey through hell'. Near Mandalay, they were billeted in a ramshackle house and resumed work.

Further evacuation to India was required and they set up their base in Shillong, in the hills of Assam, where it was relatively cooler.

Ninian, herself, plus five other women, initially ran a mobile food canteen around Shillong and into forward areas. Her further plans were inevitably met with resistance. She, described as 'indomitable', had a 'terrific fight with the powers to be', yet, by May 1943, her set up had expanded to eight canteens and 51 workers.

This group included Australian WW1 nurse, Bernice Loughrey, who had served in Egypt, Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. She was a Wasbee until 1945 during which year she was Mentioned in Dispatches, but soon after, she was killed in a jeep accident. She is one of three Wasbees who died in transport accidents and she is the only Australian woman commemorated on the Rangoon War Memorial.

As part of on-going expansion, Australian - Merle Laundry, was tasked with opening up another canteen, and said -

*Nin gave me confidence with her clear instructions.*

She was not the only Wasbee who excelled expectations. Recruited in 1944, Jesse Nicholson, who had been educated in Perth, was awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM) for meritorious (*pro - merit-tor-ious*) service. The citation read ...

*Throughout the very difficult physical conditions of heavy monsoon, during (military) operations, the breakout of enemy ... in danger of ambushes and booby traps ... the canteen, under the command of this young non-commissioned officer ... operated continually ...*

Early 1945, the Wasbees were operating fourteen mobile canteens, yet Ninian Taylor urged that her service could still do more. By the middle of that year, the government of Burma also realised the extent of major civil and military tasks ahead, as the Japanese were defeated in their country.

Throughout 1945, when the Japanese were being 'pushed back' and then were ignoring Allied calls for its unconditional surrender, Ninian followed a directive from Allied Land Forces Commander South East Asia (ALFSEA) to recruit more Wasbees from India, England and the colonies.

The recruitment drive in Australia, which took place in July 1945, was hotly debated ...

- an ex-servicemen's association advocated that Australian women should be present to support Australians serving and to be present when POWs from the Australian 8th Division were recovered
- but, Australia's adjutant-general strongly recommended that no authority be given to permit Australian civilians to enlist, as women were still required in the services 'at home'.

The solution was to rally expatriate women who had been earlier evacuated to Australia. Prime Minister Chifley, in accord with the Australian army, gave no objections on the grounds of manpower or security to the departure of these expat women from Australia.

Nevertheless, about a dozen women, either Australian-born, or with strong ties to Australia managed to slip through the cracks and served in the WAS(B) between 1942 and 1946.

For example, Robin Walker faked compassionate grounds for discharge from her clerical role at HMAS *Monterey*.

The recruitment drive in Australia was led by Lee Massey, a former school captain of St Catherine's, Toorak. She flew from Burma, where her husband was serving, to cities including Melbourne, where she mustered the support of leaders of the Australian Women's Army Service, the AWAS, to assist with the interviewing process and furthermore, she engaged the Australian media as a communications conduit.

One media source wrote about Massey's uniform, as *one of the most interesting things* about her. Another expressed that she *didn't look tough enough to stand the life - she's much too attractive*.

But, Massey was focused on her task of sourcing women aged between 20-45, preferably former residents of the Far East, because they had experienced its range of customs, dialects and climatic conditions. Some recruits even spoke the local languages of Burmese, Urdu and Hindi. Dorothy Koch of Sydney wrote that she had a good working knowledge of Malayan and understood the idiosyncrasies of the natives.

Primarily, the women had to be physically suited to operate static and mobile food canteens for the occupation armies of South East Asia Command (SEAC). The conditions ahead would be rigorous, notably ...

- Monsoon rains that made waterways unpredictable or turned dusty roads into a quagmire of mud, through which they had to steer 3-tonne Chevrolet (*pro Chev-ro-lay*) vans with drum brakes and manual steering.
- Unrelenting humidity, sleeping on stretcher beds, lifting kettles filled with water from drums, plus sacks of dry goods ... all while enduring the pain and discomfort of a menstrual cycle.
- Not to forget the malarial mosquitoes, leeches, snakes and infestations of rats that made the keeping of foodstuffs challenging.

Someone who knew hardship and harrowing conditions was Elsa Dickson who, by the Autumn of 1945, was recuperating in Sydney after spending three years as an internee of the Japanese.

An article encouraging recruitment to Burma caught Elsa's attention and after arduous boat and train travel, she was in Shillong by October working as a stenographer, before operating a mobile food van in the hills of Mandalay for the troops returning from the front line. It was only last year that the delightful and glamorous Elsa passed away, just short of 100 years-old.

Aboard the same ship was Mary Cameron who was assigned clerical and driving duties in the bombed and burnt out city of Rangoon. There was also Nan Howson who became the photographer for the WAS(B) when she was not working in the canteens.

These new recruits, who were civilians in military employment, had to adhere to rules applicable to British soldiers. They were issued with a kit of staple items and had to visit a local tailor to have their uniforms made.

The khaki dresses and shirts were enhanced by epaulettes (*pro eh-puh-lets*, sporting a black embroiled chinthe emblem. Headwear was a turban-style cloth to wrap up hair during times of food service, in contrast to a jaunty beret for more formal occasions.

They were only given three to four weeks of basic training in driving, cooking, bookkeeping, stocktake and how to shoot a weapon.

They accepted the hessian-shrouded latrines and washing facilities. It is noteworthy that many of these women were from affluent circumstances and had lived in comfort.

- Carlene Reid from Hobart, had previously worked as a confidential secretary for the Deputy Commissioner for Selangor.
- Ruth Rutherford was the daughter of the Governor of Bihar (*pro Bee-har*)

But, in their khaki uniforms and working in a team of six, there was no differentiation, as they operated static or mobile canteens.

The static canteens were based at places of transition - railway stations, airfields, or places of rest - camps, leave centres, dressing stations, convalescent homes and eventually POW reception depots, where they showed the men calmness, dignity and compassion.

Whereas, the mobile canteens drove to gun sites and isolated areas behind the front line. Assisted by drivers from the British Other Ranks and Indian workers, they operated the length of Burma from Myitkyina (*pro Mitch-in-ah*) in the north to Moulmein (*pro Mool-main*) in the south.

Each van had the W A S B acronym painted on its panels. The side panels and sometimes the rear panel hinged out to form a canopy under which the women stood to serve an impressive range considering the circumstances. Aside from hot and cold drinks, there was bacon and eggs, pies and toasted sandwiches referred to as 'char and wads', plus various snacks.

A soldier could also purchase toiletries, washing powder and medicinal items.

Aside from the provision of relative luxuries, the Wasbees were appreciated for their demeanour and conversation that boosted the spirit of the troops. This was evidenced by notices that were left on trees - *Wasbees, please call.*

Post-war, the service and conduct of the Wasbees drew deserved praise. Slim reflected on their devotion and courage during the 1942 retreat from Burma. He said they later devoted themselves with the same efficiency to the troops of the Fourteenth Army.

Mountbatten, commented that by having the welfare of the troops at heart, the Wasbees were able to do much to alleviate the hardship of the campaign.

Further praise came from military leaders, such as Stopford and Mansergh. (*pro Man-ser*)

Six Wasbees were appointed MBEs and thirty had been Mentioned in Dispatches.

In October 1947, Ninian was advocating for service medals for the Wasbees. There was no responding correspondence, however tomorrow at the book launch, a daughter of one Australian Wasbee is bringing her mother's medals.

One crowning glory, was Lieutenant Colonel Taylor being awarded an OBE in 1947, for her work in India and Burma.

The WAS(B) file held at the British Library dated from 1942, lists 243 members.

I propose that this primary source manila folder may not have seen the light of day since it was archived in 1947. By this chapter being included in *In the Fight*, the story of the Women's Auxiliary Service (Burma), and the Australian contribution to it, has been made available to current day history students, admirers of female trailblazers and military experts such as yourselves.