Contingent Women: Gender Rearticulation and the Australian Victory Contingent, 1946

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This article examines women's participation in the Australian Victory Contingent. The Contingent was formed to take part in the Victory Parade in London in 1946. The parade was to celebrate victory in the Second World War. In Australia, the war reconfigured society in many ways; economic, cultural, political, and so on. Part of this reconfiguration was a shift in gender relations across the country. During the war, women undertook work traditionally assigned to men and began to embrace new notions of femininity and sexuality. It was also the first major conflict in which they participated directly as members of the armed services. The following article investigates how women's participation in the Australian Victory Contingent worked to confirm or deny these changing ideas about women's role in Australian society. More broadly, it examines the military as a site where social gender norms are rearticulated and reinforced. In doing so, it argues that the Contingent's organisers worked continually throughout the episode to rearticulate traditional conservative notions of gender difference through the conduit of the Contingent's men and women.

Early in 1946, the Australian Cabinet gave approval to send 250 members of Australia's armed forces to participate in London's Victory Parade, to be held 9 June of the same year.[1] They were known as the Australian Victory Contingent. Of this number, nineteen were women, selected from the various women's branches of the armed services. The parade itself was to celebrate British and Allied victory in the Second World War.

Following communications from the Australian High Commission in London, planning and organisation for the Contingent began in earnest in March of 1946 and, after several difficulties in raising the group, they embarked for England on the HMAS *Shropshire* on 18 April.[2] Just prior to their departure, a number of members refused to board their ship unless a fellow soldier, Sergeant A. Curtin

[1] Francis Forde, Minister for the Army (March 29, 1946), *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Commonwealth of Australia: House of Representatives.
[2] 'War Diary Summary of Events,' *London Victory March Contingent*, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/3.

(who had been denied inclusion on the trip due to his poor marching ability), was granted permission to join them.[3] After more than a month at sea, the Contingent finally arrived at Portsmouth, England, on 30 May.[4] Between their arrival and the date of the parade, Contingent members engaged in practice marches, sightseeing, and meeting British dignitaries – including the Royal family.

London's Victory Parade took place on 8 June and was attended by more than five million British citizens.[5] Contingents were present from almost all the British Dominions and Allied nations. Each Contingent wound its way through the central streets of London before saluting the Royal Family and other British dignitaries.[6] Once their part in the parade had been played, the majority of the Australian Contingent spent the remainder of the month sightseeing around Britain and Europe.[7] On their eventual return journey to Australia the Contingent stopped at a number of destinations. Among these was the port of Gibraltar. Here, a serious brawl was instigated which involved police, civilians, and Australian soldiers; at least one member of the Contingent was imprisoned for the evening.[8] The incident provoked controversy in both the Australian media and in Parliament, where a significant debate took place. Finally, upon their return to Australia, the Contingent met with a muted welcome. Nonetheless, they were widely adjudged to have fulfilled their assignment successfully.

The Contingent performed its function, met with significant controversy and returned to a relatively flat reception in Australia. Yet, their journey encompassed a range of experiences that are emblematic of Australian nationalism, Anzac remembrance, and Australia's relationship to the British Empire. From these myriad stories, however, this article considers the experiences of the Contingent's female members. In taking this focus, it is argued that the experience of these women members, as participants in the parade and as travellers aboard HMAS *Shropshire*, reveals much about the way that the military (in its organisational structure, division of labour, and cultural

[3] 'Refused to Sail Unless Pal Reinstated,' *The News*, April 18, 1946.
[4] 'En route Australia-England,' undated, *Diary of Royal Australian Air Force Victory Contingent travelling in HMAS Shropshire*, National Archives Australia: A705, 226/1/410.
[5] 'Brilliant Display in London – Crowds Rejoice in Victory,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 10, 1946.
[6] Sybil Colonel Irving, 'Report for period 30th May – 13th June,' *Victory March Contingent - AWAS Section,* Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/3.
[7] 'Part VIII – Entertainment and Welfare,' undated, *Diary of Royal Australian Air Force Victory Contingent travelling in HMAS Shropshire*, National Archives Australia: A705, 226/1/410.
[8] 'Australians Fight Battle with Gibraltar Police.' *The Argus*. July 8, 1946.

practices), Australian or otherwise, is a site where gendered social norms are rearticulated and maintained. In Australia, this articulation of gendered norms in the military is particularly significant given the enduring link between national identity, encapsulated by the Anzac legend, and Australia's military history. Furthermore, it suggests how perceived difference between genders is reinforced through segregation and the creation of spectacle, especially in a highly masculinised space like the military.

In making this case, it is important to examine three factors. Firstly, the theoretical relationship between war and gender, and how that relationship contributes to broader social understandings of gender. Secondly, how women's inclusion on the trip led to concerted efforts on the part of organisers to reinforce the gendered divisions between men and women throughout the episode. And finally, how these anxieties around gender division led to the continual positioning of the Contingent's women as spectacles for their voyeuristic male counterparts.

Despite the pomp, controversy and media attention that surrounded the journey of the Contingent, this episode has received scant attention in the histories of the Australian experience of the Second World War and its aftermath. Where it has featured, it has been mentioned only fleetingly as part of some larger narrative. Of course, it could well be argued that gender relations represented only a minor aspect of the Contingent's experience. Although women made up only a small proportion of the group (19 from a total of 250), exploring their experiences as members of the Victory Contingent provides an opportunity to examine how gendered ideals impacted women's lives during the period and how these gendered ideals were constructed, modified and managed during a time of heightened national and international military activity.

Gender and war

Warfare and the production of gender identity are linked inexorably. In war, social notions of gender are expressed, tested and confirmed or reconfigured. Joan Scott argues that the construction of gendered identities relies upon the construction and maintenance of a fixed binary opposition between notions of masculinity and femininity. She argues that these oppositions are themselves reliant on the denial of alternative representations of gender identity.[9] Ross Poole asserts that this process is particularly prominent in the military

[9] Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.' *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 10.

sphere. In doing so, he posits that the military sphere is a context in which the definition of gender roles has been the most consistent across national contexts throughout history.[10] The military, then, is one of the primary sites where gender differentiation is established. Militaries are hyper-masculine institutions where recruits undergo a process of masculinisation and women are defined as others.[11] In this way the military both celebrates and privileges masculinity, and is defined by gender differentiation.[12]

These observations can certainly be applied to the Australian context and the highly gendered remembrance culture that surrounds the Anzac legend. Anzac, in its subject matter and commemorative displays, is a culture which allows only limited spaces for women.[13] Stephen Garton argues that this link between masculinity and Anzac remembrance suggests that war is the primary domain of men. Conversely, this aspect of the legend infers that the home front and domestic sphere are inherently feminine.[14] Carmel Shute notes that Anzac's heavily gendered overtones have been a part of the legend since its inception, wherein men are symbolically positioned as warrior protectors of the nation and creators of history.[15] Women, conversely, are usually positioned as passive subjects, to be protected or to birth and raise more soldiers for the Australian military.[16]

The story of the Contingent, and the Australian women that took part in its journey, holds a particular salience when examined in the context of these observations. Throughout their experience, the Contingent's female participants were continually segregated from their male counterparts and were made into points of spectacle as oddities or entertainers. The effect of this positioning was to reinforce notions of gender identity in which men of the Contingent retained their masculinity and women their femininity. Yet, while this reinforcement certainly took place, these strident efforts to define and maintain gender relations, also demonstrates just how unstable these notions

[10] Ross Poole, 'Structures of Identity: Gender and Nationalism,' *War/Masculinity* (1985): 77.
[11] Francine D'Amico, 'Feminist Perspectives on Women Warriors,' *The Women and War Reader edited by Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin*: 119-125. (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 123.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Adrian Howe, 'Anzac mythology and the feminist challenge,' in *Gender and War,* eds. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 303.
[14] Stephen Garton, 'War and masculinity in twentieth century Australia,'*Journal of Australian Studies* 22 (1998): 86.
[15] Carmel Shute, 'Heroines and Heroes: Sexual Mythology in Australia 1914-18,' *Gender and war: Australians at war in the twentieth century*, eds. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 23-24.
[16] Ibid.

of gender within the military are – these are not essential or self-evident truths, but rather had to be maintained through sustained and repeated performative gestures.

Reinforcing the Contingent's Gender Divisions

Throughout the episode of the Contingent, the divide between genders, and the division between what could acceptably be defined as masculine or feminine, was constantly played out and reinforced. The Second World War in Australia was a time in which gender and sexual identities had been greatly unsettled.[17] Kate Darian-Smith notes that during the period, anxieties around women's sexuality became particularly pronounced in response to a range of factors. These included women's take up of non-traditional working roles, visiting American servicemen, and the general fragmentation of traditional family life that had been brought about by the advent of war. Gendered anxieties had also been exacerbated by women's involvement in the military; female recruits wore masculine uniforms, lived in segregated communities with other women, and gained new social and economic privileges hitherto denied to them.[18] This was certainly true of those women who took part in the Victory Contingent, who had taken up work in the armed services and travelled internationally unaccompanied by family or a partner.

This is not to suggest that Australian women undertaking intercontinental travel was unusual in the period. During the First World War, for example, many women travelled abroad as members of the Red Cross, undertaking what was seen as women's work in support of Australian troops.[19] Similarly, in the interwar period, a number of elite Australian women undertook travel as representatives of national and international women's organisations to attend meetings and speak at conferences in various parts of the world.[20] The Second World War, however, was the first conflict in Australian history on which women had taken an active role in the military as part of the women's services – as auxiliaries to their male counterparts. Taking part in the Contingent

[17] Marilyn Lake and Joy Damousi, 'Introduction: Warfare, History and Gender, *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century,* eds. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.
[18] Kate Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front: Melbourne in Wartime, 1939-1945* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990).
[19] Melanie Oppenheimer, 'Shaping the Legend: The Role of the Australian Red Cross and Anzac,' in *Labour History* 106 (2014): 130.
[20] Judith Smart and Martin Quartly, 'Mainstream Women's Organisations in Australia: the challenges of national and international co-operation after the Great War,' in *Women's History Review* 21 (2012): 63.

then was a symbol of this inclusion to both Australians at home as well as the Victory Parade's international audience. Yet these women's participation in the Contingent did not work to break down gendered norms, but rather provided an opportunity for their reinforcement.

The episode of the Contingent, when read in the context of these observations, was a moment in which the division between genders could be forcefully rearticulated by its organisers. Judith Butler argues that discourses of oppression all rely upon constant rearticulation.[21] This rearticulation, she posits, is an inherently historical process which, through the weight of its discursive power, overwhelms contrary attempts to build alternative social understandings of gender.[22] During the Contingent's journey this rearticulation process took place on a number of occasions that saw the active and material enforcement of gender division among the participants. From the early stages of planning for the trip there was significant anxiety expressed by organisers around the issue of women's involvement.

These anxieties were present from the first stages of planning. In late March, a memo from the Prime Minister's Department advised the Army, Navy and Airforce that with regard to 'the transportation of women representatives, Cabinet decided that the latter should not travel on HMAS *Shropshire*, but in some alternative way'.[23] Between that date and 5 April a flurry of correspondence was exchanged between the various departments of the military regarding the problem of how to transport the women to England.[24] Finally, after discussion with Prime Minister Chifley, it was conceded that the women would travel on *Shropshire*, 'having regard to the fact that no other transport can be arranged in the limited time available'.[25]

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[21] Judith Butler 'Gender is burning: questions of appropriation and subversion,' in *Dangerous Liaisons: gender, nation, and post-colonial perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1997), 389.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Secretary to Cabinet, 'Memorandum in response to Victory Celebrations in the United Kingdom proposal,' March 28, 1946, *Victory Contingent Personnel*, National Archives Australia: MP981/1, 462/201/2451.
[24] Sir Frederick Shedden, 'Memorandum in regards to Victory Celebrations in the United Kingdom proposal,' March 29, 1946, *Victory Contingent Personnel*, National Archives Australia: MP981/1, 462/201/2451; 'Minute Paper regarding movement of female Victory Contingent members,' undated, *Victory Contingent Personnel*, National Archives Australia, MP981/1, 462/201/2451; Sir Frederick Shedden, 'Memorandum in regards to Victory Celebrations Contingent,' 3 April 1946, *Victory Contingent Personnel*, National Archives Australia: MP981/1, 462/201/2451; LG Williams, Navy Department, 'Letter to Minister for the Navy, Norman Makin, in regards to Victory March in London, June 1946,' 3 April 1946, *Victory Contingent Personnel*, National Archives Australia: MP981/1, 462/201/2451.
[25] Minister for the Navy, Norman Makin, 'Memorandum to The Secretary for the Department

The ostensible reason given for servicewomen requiring alternative transportation was a 'lack of suitable accommodation'.[26] This claim seems odd since no surviving documentary evidence from the journey suggests lodgings were cramped or otherwise unsuitable. Evidence does suggest, however, that the presence of women aboard *Shropshire* resulted in anxieties about women and men mixing during the trip. For example, in his recollection of the journey, former seaman Edward Browne recalled that it was 'extraordinary to have women on the ship and we had to be a bit careful what we said and where we went' and that 'they had an area to themselves'.[27] Similarly, Betty Sutton reflected that 'we weren't allowed to go down and mix with the boys, there were just too many of them'.[28] This segregation is emblematic of arguments made by Ruth Ford around anxieties centred upon women's sexual behaviour, and sex segregation policies during the Second World War.[29] Specifically, the enforcement of sex segregation in the Australian military reflected considerable anxieties around the increased visibility of heterosexual promiscuity.[30]

This sex segregation was not restricted to anxieties around sexual contact between male and female Contingent members, it also had a symbolic function. In the organisation of the parade march it was noted on several occasions that female Contingent members should 'march in rear of their respective services'.[31] This point was reinforced by officials throughout the episode on a number of occasions.[32] In this context, Simon Gunn argues that the purpose

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of the Navy regarding the transportation of servicewomen aboard *Shropshire* for the Victory Parade in London,' 5 April 1946, *Victory Contingent Personnel*, National Archives Australia: MP981/1, 462/201/2451.

[26] Department of the Navy, 'Minute Paper regarding movement of female Victory Contingent members,' undated, *Victory Contingent Personnel*, National Archives Australia: MP981/1, 462/201/2451.

[27] Edward Browne, Interview Transcript, Australians at War Film Archive, University of New South Wales, 26 April 2004.

[28] Betty Sutton, Interview Transcript, Australians at War Film Archive, University of New South Wales, 27 April 2004.

[29] Ruth Ford, 'Lesbians and Loose Women: Female Sexuality and the Women's Services during World War II,' *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, eds. by Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 92.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Brigadier Murray Moten, 'Routine Orders – March through Melbourne of London Victory March Contingent,' 17 April 1946, *London Victory March Contingent*, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/1.

[32] Lieutenant-General Horace Robertson, 'Southern Command Special Order No. 1/46 regarding March through Melbourne of London Victory March Contingent,' 16 April 1946, *London Victory March* Contingent, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/3; Major-General Kenneth Eather, 'Narrative of Events: London Victory March Contingent – from its inception till 3 May 46,' 6 May 1946, *London Victory March Contingent - Narrative of events*, National Archives Australia: MP742/1, 55/2/56.

of public rituals, such as parades, is that they express and confirm entrenched social and cultural hierarchies.[33] In the case of the Contingent, the ordering of women participants 'behind their respective Contingent' reflected women's perceived place in the military as well as the Australian social hierarchy more broadly.[34]

This symbolic gender ordering also occurred in the proportion of women chosen to join the Contingent. From approximately 250 Contingent members, nineteen were women.[35] This proportion (7.6 percent) of the Contingent roughly equates to the proportion of women who served in the Australian armed forces in the Second World War.[36] Nevertheless, these figures do not accurately reflect the contribution of Australian women to the Second World War, who on the home front invariably worked in volunteer forces, such as the Women's Land Army, filled the workforce gap left by men at war, and maintained their roles as primary carers in the domestic sphere.

Judith Stiehm argues that this is typical of the armed forces' engagement with their female workforce. She asserts that women who attempt to work with the military are usually assigned auxiliary roles on the home-front or relegated to domestic jobs.[37] Where they are accepted into the military, women are generally exempt from combat, which results in their achievements being more likely to be overlooked.[38] In this instance there were public requests made to include a proportion of the Women's Land Army on the journey. The Country Party leader, Arthur Fadden, questioned Prime Minister Chifley about whether he would include representatives from the Women's Land Army, as requested, on the basis of 'the valuable part it played in Australia's war effort'.[39] In response, Chifley answered that the Contingent had been selected to be 'representative of the three [Defence] services' and that he could not alter the decision to include people in the Contingent 'other than members of the armed forces'.[40] This moment is typical of how military policy-making functions. Specifically, the

[33] Simon Gunn, 'Analysing Behaviour as Performance,' 191-92.
[34] Major-General Kenneth Eather, 'Narrative of Events: London Victory March Contingent – from its inception till 3 May 46,' 6 May 1946, *London Victory March Contingent - Narrative of events*, National Archives Australia: MP742/1, 55/2/56.
[35] 'Details of persons to embark,' 16 April 1946, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/3.
[36] Department of Veterans Affairs, 'Australian Women in World War II Factsheet,' *Department of Veterans Affairs Anzac Centenary Website.*
[37] Judith Hicks Stiehm, 'The protected, the protector, the defender,' in *Women's Studies International Forum* 5 (1982), 369.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Arthur Fadden, Country Party Leader, April 4, 1946, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Commonwealth of Australia: House of Representatives.
[40] Ibid,

active waging of war is seen to be a primarily male domain in which women can play only a minor part.[41] In the context of Australian women in the Second World War, females were only afforded limited opportunities to contribute to the war effort in meaningful ways, and so were denied the opportunity to receive the same accolades as men.

Over the course of their journey, there were a few moments in which the Contingent's women compared their wartime experience with that of their British counterparts. Writing a report for the Australian Women's Land Army (AWAS) on the voyage, Major Kathleen Deasey made note of the responsibilities enjoyed by the British women's Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). She advised that their 'administration and discipline is controlled entirely by their own female officers'. This, she observed, was in stark contrast to the AWAS in which 'the male Commanding Officer must be responsible for discipline'. Upon asking the ATS officer whether this organisational structure created difficulties for the ATS, she was informed that this system 'has always been accepted in the British Army and that the Director and her staff are the ultimate authority on welfare and discipline of the ATS and that women are best administered by women'.[42]

It is no surprise that Deasey was interested in comparing the organisational structure of the AWAS and women's services overseas given that she had been closely involved in the mentorship and management of recruits to the AWAS during its inception in 1941.[43] Other Australian women also noted their envy of British women's direct participation in the war effort. Sergeant Iris Parkes, for example, wrote of a meeting with ATS women that 'they told us stories from the gun sites that made us so envious – of bringing down German planes, of doodlebugs [colloquial term for German V-2 rockets] and of their yearning to make a fresh start'.[44]

These examples demonstrate that despite the focus on the Contingent's women as gendered subjects, segregated and repeatedly figured as novelties in the military sphere, for the women themselves the voyage to London provided an opportunity to see how their work was understood (and perhaps

[41] Jennifer Turpin 'Many Faces: Women Confronting War,' *The Women and War Reader*, eds. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (New Jersey: New York University Press, 1998), 3.
[42] Kathleen Deasey, 'Final report on Australian Victory March Contingent,' 1946, National Archives Australia: AWM54, 88/1/1 PART 45.
[43] Eileen Macintyre, 'Deasey, Maude Kathleen (1909-1968),' Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University.
[44] Iris Parkes, 'Impressions of the AWAS report,' 1946, National Archives Australia: AWM54, 431/12/2.

valued) outside of Australia. It also gave them a chance to contrast the lives of other women who had similarly taken the bold step of taking part in the armed services. For women like Kathleen Deasey and Iris Parkes however, the comparisons they made demonstrated to them the limitations placed on their participation in the war and the lack of participation and self-determination afforded their British counterparts.

Another significant instance of gender identity being rearticulated during the episode of the Contingent was during the 'Crossing the Line' ceremony, which took place aboard *Shropshire* on the journey to England. This ceremony dates back to the sixteenth century and takes place when a ship on a long voyage crosses the equator.[45] Its ritual purpose is to convert inexperienced sailors who have yet to cross the equator (known as 'polliwogs') into experienced seafarers (known as 'shellbacks') through a ritual death and rebirth from which they arise as true seafarers.[46] The process is overseen by a sailor who acts as King Neptune and presides over the humiliation of the uninitiated through various hazing methods such as being 'ducked' in dirty water or covered in kitchen grease.[47]

The ceremony was taken up by the Contingent with great enthusiasm and women members of the group in particular presented a novelty. An AWAS report of the incident noted that 'all members of the WS [Women's Services] were ducked … in the main pool' and some were also hosed beforehand.[48] It was also recorded in the official war diary for the event that 'the women members of the Contingent presented a very bedraggled appearance after being ducked, clothes and all'.[49] The report further noted that 'Men were crowded onto every vantage point that promised a good view of the ceremony'.[50] This last point indicates what a prime spectacle this was treated as, and further suggests that the Crossing the Line ritual on this occasion was about both reinforcing gender divisions among the Contingent, as well as converting male participants into experienced seafarers. Recalling the moment in an interview almost sixty

[45] Keith P. Richardson, 'Polliwogs and shellbacks: an analysis of the equator crossing ritual,' *Western Folklore* 36 (1977): 155.
[46] Richardson, 'Polliwogs and shellbacks,' 154.
[47] Richardson, 'Polliwogs and shellbacks,' 156.
[48] Colonel Sybil Irving, 'AWAS Victory Contingent Report for Period 6 to 20 May,' 25 May 1946, Victory March Contingent - AWAS Section, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/3.
[49] Major-General Kenneth Eather, 'London Victory March Contingent – 4 May 46 to 22 May 46,' 31 May 1946, *London Victory March Contingent – Narrative of Events*, National Archives Australia: MP742/1, 55/2/56.
[50] Ibid.

years later, Betty Sutton recounted that she had initially resisted the ceremony, noting that there was 'so much rubbish, the water was dreadful. I cleared out'. Despite her resistance, Betty was eventually ducked with the rest of the women.[51]

Simon Bronner, in his work on the Crossing the Line Ceremony argues that this sailing ritual works to reject any traces of femininity in a place without women.[52] He asserts that in the ceremony, conflicting gender identities are symbolised and then finally corrected into so-called proper masculinity.[53] In the case of the women on board *Shropshire*, the ceremony appears to have played a somewhat similar role. But rather than rejecting femininity among male shipmates, the ceremony worked as a more straightforward reinforcement of the gender hierarchy. Here women members of the Contingent were, through ritual, playfully marked out as subordinate or second-class individuals aboard the ship and hazed in a manner that drew attention to their gender.

Women of the Contingent as Spectacle

This ceremony did not just reinforce the division of genders aboard *Shropshire*, it also marked the Contingent's women out as points of spectacle, to be enjoyed by a male gaze. This novelty aspect of women participating in the Contingent was firstly apparent from press release documents describing the women's inclusion. It is conspicuous that information provided in the Contingent's press releases for the women's branches of the various defence services were proportionately much longer than those provided for the men's services.[54] These emphasised the novelty of women's work in the defence forces. For example, the press release for the AWAS noted that these women had 'undertaken work hitherto only performed in the Australian army by men'.[55] The same release noted the variety of roles women had performed during the war. Here it stated that AWAS members had been 'Drawn from women of all walks of life', having 'worked as Intelligence and Cipher Officers, as Signalwomen, in Anti-aircraft and Searchlight Units, as Cooks, Orderlies and Transport Driver'.[56]

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[51] Betty Sutton, Interview Transcript, Australians at War Film Archive, University of New South Wales, 27 April 2004.
[52] Simon J. Bronner, *Crossing the line: Violence, play, and drama in naval equator traditions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 24.
[53] Ibid.
[54] 'Public Relations Press Release Documents,' undated, *London Victory March Contingent*, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/1.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

The novelty of women's inclusion in the Contingent no doubt stemmed from the fact that the Second World War was the first war in Australia in which women had been able to serve in the armed forces. Nevertheless, as argued by Joshua Goldstein, seeing women in the military as a novelty is common and reflects the difficulty this male-dominated sphere has with the acceptance of women.[57] There is also a note of paternalism in the press releases. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Nursing Service release noted the considerable contributions made by the Service but states that 'in thousands of flying hours only two of these sisters were lost while on duty'.[58] Expressions like this one fall into common militaristic thinking, which perceives that women in the military should, where possible, be excluded from combat as a way of protecting them from harm.[59] It is also notable that this commentary reinforces gendered notions encapsulated in the Anzac legend by associating men with the sacrifice of life and women with nurturing and support.

The spectacle of women in the Contingent was taken up eagerly by the Australian press. Adelaide's *Advertiser* remarked upon the wartime achievements of women in the Contingent and noted the various ways in which women had undertaken their roles in the Australian military.[60] Yet most articles covering women's involvement in the Contingent incorporated some description of their appearance or their bodies. The *West Australian*, for example, printed a quote noting that 'The Australian servicewomen behaved admirably everywhere, and everyone commented on their smart appearance and dignified bearing'.[61] Another paper noted that English women 'were so impressed with the good manners, charm and nice appearance of the Australian girls in the Contingent'.[62]

Other aspects of the women's femininity were also emphasised. Again, the *Advertiser* noted that 'Much of the spick and span appearance of the servicemen' of the Contingent 'was due to the expert needlework and ironing of the servicewomen aboard' who had been busy 'darning socks … pressing lapels or pockets and starching shirt collars'.[63] These depictions of the Contingent women in the media, which focused on their feminine qualities (in their dress

[57] Joshua Goldstein, 'War and Gender' (New York: Springer Publishing, 2003), 102.
[58] 'Public Relations Press Release Documents,' undated, *London Victory March Contingent*, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/1.
[59] D'Amico, 'Feminist Perspectives,' 123.
[60] 'Women for London – Victory Day Contingent,' *The Advertiser*, April 4, 2016.
[61] 'Victory Contingent – Servicewomen's Stories,' *The West Australian*, August 9, 1946.
[62] 'Princess Royal Talks with Australian Service Women,' *The Advertiser*, June 7, 1946.
[63] 'Distinguished Women Will Attend - Servicewomen Arrive In London,' *The Advertiser*, June 3, 1946.

and their domestic talents) is a prime example of how gender identity is naturalised through repeated expression.[64] In this instance, women's inclusion and participation in the Contingent was reduced to a gendered stereotype. These representations also suggest an uneasiness on the part of the press to report on women taking on roles that would typically be confined to men and demonstrates the press' role in propagating gender norms on a broader level.

Perhaps the most overt example of women being made into a spectacle during the episode of the Contingent can be found in the entertainment aboard the *Shropshire*. Intermittently during the voyage to and from England, members of the Contingent collaborated in the production of live entertainment for the rest of the ship. Early in the trip, a seminar was held to 'ascertain men's views on entertainment'.[65] Here it was noted that 'many men made sensible and useful suggestions' on what the nature of this entertainment should be.[66]

While men aboard the *Shropshire* may have raised the need for on-ship entertainment, women of the Contingent were heavily involved in its execution. The ship's first concert took place on 5 May and included 'members of the Women's Services' who 'sang, and one who played the piano'.[67] A follow up concert took place on 22 May in which the women's efforts were ramped up. This featured 'The Tropettes', a chorus of the six members of the Women's Services' who were 'deservedly popular'.[68] This concert appears to have been at least somewhat sexualised as the Contingent report for the period noted that the women 'appeared in scanty costumes of a flimsy light blue material and enacted a … chorus routine'.[69] This moment, where skimpily clad women were theatrically paraded in front of a ship full of men, was an instance of the male gaze over women as a point of sexual spectacle. Laura Mulvey's work on this topic has argued that in a world characterised by gender imbalance, the

[64] Butler, 'Gender Trouble,' 136.
[65] Major-General Kenneth Eather, 'London Victory March Contingent – from its inception till 3 May 46,' 6 May 1946, *London Victory March Contingent - Narrative of events*, National Archives Australia: MP742/1, 55/2/56.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Major-General Kenneth Eather, 'Narrative of Events: London Victory March Contingent – from 4 May 46 till 22 May 46,' 31 May 1946, London Victory March Contingent, National Archives Australia: MP742/1, 55/2/56.
[68] 'War Diary Summary of Events,' 22 May 1946, *London Victory March Contingent - Narrative of events*, Australian War Memorial: AWM52, 1/11/18/3.
[69] Major-General Kenneth Eather, 'Narrative of Events: London Victory March Contingent – from 4 May 46 till 22 May 46,' 31 May 1946, *London Victory March Contingent - Narrative of events*, National Archives Australia: MP742/1, 55/2/56.

dichotomy of an active male gaze and a passive female subject has come to typify modern sexual and gender divisions.[70]

The women's routine was followed by 'a male chorus attired as females', who cross-dressed in 'an extremely scanty two piece costume, of a yellow material' and then 'in AWAS drill uniform'.[71] While the inclusion of drag might seem socially transgressive, in this instance it was a blatant exercise in the affirmation of gender norms. Richardson, (in the context of the Crossing the Line ceremony) argues that the use of drag does not always subvert gender hierarchies. He argues that these displays can also work to reconfigure gender hierarchies in overtly performative displays to reinforce more starkly the supposed naturalness of a gender order in which men are active and women passive.[72]

This moment should be read in the context of earlier claims that the Second World War was a time which saw considerable anxiety around women's participation in war and the subsequent need to rearticulate gender distinctions. Specifically, it can be read as one of these re-articulations in which women engaged in a new and uncomfortable transgression of the gender order (in joining the military) and were symbolically reinserted into their proper, gendered place. The repeated placement of women as spectacle in press releases, in the media, and on-board entertainment has wider implications for how gendered hierarchies are maintained. Specifically, it shows how women are encouraged into gendered social roles, which in turn naturalise and solidify a gendered hierarchy.

Conclusion

The episode of Australia's Victory Contingent, and the women who volunteered to take part, says much about the ways in which the waging of war and the military sphere contribute to the maintenance of gender norms. In military contexts, gender divisions are constantly given expression, and this is particularly true in Australia (most saliently by the culture of Anzac remembrance). Although the Second World War gave women new opportunities to work in war-related industries and in the military itself, these could often become sites where prevailing gender norms were most forcefully articulated. Certainly, this was the case in the episode of the Victory Contingent whose

[70] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' in *Screen* 16 (1975): 11.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Richardson, 'Polliwogs and Shellbacks,' 159.

women members had taken up non-traditional work as military auxiliaries. The Contingent's organisers, far from celebrating their innovation, instead worked repeatedly to articulate gender norms through the regulation of these women into distinctly feminised roles.

Throughout this episode a constant rearticulation of gender and the gendered hierarchy took place. Through repetition, this hierarchy was given shape and definition, whether through anxiety about women aboard the *Shropshire*, where women should be situated in the parade, or in the Crossing the Line ceremony. Similarly, women in the Contingent were constantly fashioned as novelties; spectacles to be viewed within their assigned gender boundaries. This occurred through women's presentation in press release material, through their depiction in the news, and finally through the entertainment aboard *Shropshire* – again and again, women of the Contingent were configured as spectacles rather than active participants. An examination of the Contingent's women and their experience begins to reveal just how much Australian military culture and normative notions of gender were intertwined during the Second World War. On a broader level, this examination provides a pointed insight into how the military sphere contributes to shaping wider societal notions of gender. Even as the military is a prominent site where these notions are challenged and sometimes reshaped, it is also a locus for the stringent rearticulation of traditional ideas about what it means to be a woman or a man.