During the Second World War over sixty-six thousand women, including nurses, served in the auxiliary services attached to the Australian Navy, Army, and Air Force. Of these women, 26,591 enlisted in the Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force—commonly known as the WAAAF. Throughout their service in the WAAAF, women took on many different duties to enable men to embark on active duty overseas, serving in such diverse roles as flight mechanics, fabric workers, store clerks and typists. After the war, women began to join WAAAF associations to discuss their common experiences. This provided an opportunity for a coherent group memory to emerge, giving rise to a dominant narrative depicting the experience of being in the WAAAF as one characterised by independence, camaraderie with other women, and gender equality. This overwhelmingly positive narrative was evident as early as 1946, when ex-members put together a book about the WAAAF detailing mainly positive memories.

This article closely examines the oral testimonies of three women of the WAAAF: June, who had been a clerk in Staff Officer Intelligence, and Edna and Sheila, who had both been fabric workers. I was able to get in touch with the women through a WAAAF Association for ex-members operating in Melbourne. As well as interviewing these three women, I attended a WAAAF luncheon where I was able to speak with many different women about their experiences. The three women I interviewed had enlisted soon after the creation of the WAAAF and were involved in the organisation for the duration of the war. By using the stories of just three women this article provides a close and intimate reading of their testimonies to illuminate how individuals compose their memories in a collective context and according to a particular discursive framework. This article will demonstrate the ways in which these women composed memories
of their time in the WAAAF according to collective memory, and the ways in which they adhered to the common WAAAF narrative born after the end of the war. This narrative reinforced the camaraderie, independence and gender equality they experienced. Nostalgia for their time in the WAAAF, particularly their experiences of independence and adventure, is a notable feature of their testimonies.

The participation of these particular women in oral history interviews demonstrates their need to have their own stories recorded and remembered; yet the self-deprecating nature of their testimonies also suggests that they were unwilling to appear unique or different from their fellow members. This article will show that although the women have pride in their work, which is still reflected in their lives today, it is through their participation in a group, and their ongoing identification with that group, that their memories are framed.

As the first auxiliary service to be established in Australia, the WAAAF was originally the only choice for enrolment for women who wished to serve in the forces in a role other than a nurse. The service also held attraction because it was associated with the most glamorous of all the Australian services—the Royal Australian Air Force. Women had been arguing for the establishment of a women’s auxiliary service for the RAAF since the outbreak of war in 1939, a suggestion that had been met with heated opposition at every turn. It was not until 1941 that the WAAAF was formed, when the War Cabinet approved the recommendation of the Minister for Air to enlist 320 women for service in the Royal Australian Air Force. This was intended to be a temporary measure to meet a deficiency of male Wireless Telegraph operators, only until such time as men became available.¹ After encountering opposition to its formation, the WAAAF had many restrictions imposed on its structure and procedures to ensure it operated in a way that was ‘fitting’ to the situation at hand. These restrictions affected many aspects of a WAAAF member’s life. For example, men were paid markedly higher rates for doing exactly the same job as their female counterparts. A male officer in the Air Force with one adult and one child dependent received £5.5.0 per week, while a woman in the WAAAF in the equivalent position with any number of dependents received £2.15.0 per week.² This reflected the belief that men were the family breadwinners and

that most women would have a male supporting them. Of course, this was not always the case. Other restrictions included special rules relating to ‘discipline’, which governed the jobs WAAAF members were allowed to do. These rules reflected the concern that women would cause men to misbehave, thus undermining discipline and distracting them from completing the work at hand. Rules were enforced to keep members of the WAAAF away from men’s camps, and regulations stipulated the correct way for members of the WAAAF to address members of the RAAF.\(^3\) Despite these frustrations and gender inequalities, many women of the WAAAF enjoyed their time in the service and found it to be an all-consuming way of life for anything up to six years, until the WAAAF was disbanded in 1947.

**Memory and oral history**

Although they were subjected to strict discipline, most women speak of their time in the WAAAF with great fondness.\(^4\) I interviewed the three former WAAAF members featured in this article in order to obtain a personal account of life in the WAAAF, and to investigate how individuals structured their narratives in relation to the dominant framework. Through the WAAAF association operating in Melbourne, I was able to contact June, whom I interviewed first; I subsequently interviewed Sheila and Edna. Through extensive interviews conducted with the three women, I discovered a common thread in the way they articulated their personal stories: all three women were unfailingly positive about their time in the WAAAF.

Each of the three women were all in their late teens or early twenties when they enlisted, and had been working in other jobs before the WAAAF was established. None of the women had finished secondary school, nor were they living independently when they enlisted, which was a common situation for women to be in before they joined auxiliary services. Edna and Sheila were stationed at the RAAF base at Laverton in Melbourne, while June was first stationed in Sydney. Their very participation in the present-day association is indicative of the warm memories they share, for if they had not had a ‘great time’ it is doubtful whether they would have joined the association or maintained connections with WAAAF women. Nor would they have been so willing to discuss their experiences in an interview. Similarly, the women who have written books


\(^4\) Ibid.
based on their time in the WAAAF relate largely positive experiences. While accounts of negative experiences of the WAAAF do exist, these represent a minority of stories and are not part of the dominant public narrative to which my three interviewees subscribe.

In evaluating the stories these women told, it is helpful to draw on some key texts in the field of oral history to illustrate the distinction between memory and history. In his book *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, distinguished oral historian Alessandro Portelli states that ‘memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory’. He goes on to say that ‘these changes reveal the narrator’s effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context’. This shows that the period in which an interview is undertaken can influence how a respondent formulates their memory of an event or time period. In this case, the three women I interviewed were looking back from their old age with nostalgia to a period of youth and independence. This nostalgia partly explains the uniformly positive attitudes held to their experiences in the WAAAF.

Alistair Thomson found in his interviews with former Anzac soldiers that ‘memories of working-class diggers had become entangled with the legend of their lives, and… veterans had adopted and used the Anzac legend because it was resonant and useful in their own remembering’. While women of the WAAAF do not have any presence in the public and official articulation of the Anzac legend, the similarities in the testimony of the women I interviewed suggested that they too adhere to a common narrative—one of the experience of independence, camaraderie and an absence of prejudice against women, which

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restrained them after they left the WAAAF. While this might not have the same public resonance as that of the Anzac legend, it is clearly a narrative that they have shared with each other and that has indeed become increasingly important to WAAAF members as the years have gone by.

Thomson goes on to say that ‘memories were also reshaped by present-day situations and emotions. Lonely old men were sometimes eager to recall the camaraderie of the AIF or the adventure of the war, and to reassert a proud Anzac identity’. Experiences of the WAAAF were extremely important to the women I interviewed. Sheila and Edna had multiple pictures of themselves in WAAAF uniform around their lounge rooms. These two women, neither of whom had children, tended to conceive of their primary identity as that of an ex-WAAAF member. Sheila was particularly attached to the Catalina planes she had helped to repair, with a large picture of one taking centre stage on her mantelpiece. Sheila stated that ‘I’m coming up to my 69th anniversary of joining the WAAAF, the third of October, and I always have a big champagne party on that day, but all my friends have died! I’m the only one left! So it gets very lonely now, my celebrations’. This shows a continued attachment to her WAAAF background, in that she celebrates it yearly as an important event along with birthdays and Christmas. Sheila went on to say that ‘of course I have girls there that weren’t in the Air Force. I’m the only one here that was in the services, they’re all war widows’, differentiating herself from others that had not shared her experience.

The habit of differentiating oneself from those who had not served was common, and has appeared in many autobiographical accounts of time spent in the WAAAF, as well as in oral testimonies. For the three women, it seemed to reinforce the specialness of having served with the WAAAF. Edna said that ‘you got a different outlook on life than the ones who were never in the war. You became disciplined, and you’re sort of still disciplined in a way’, using her experience of strictly enforced discipline as a mark of difference from other women of her generation, a mark she exhibits more than sixty-five years later. Edna

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9 Ibid., 8.
10 Sheila Newton, interview with the author, 18 August 2010.
11 Ibid.
went on to say that ‘you know it was a healthy life. It was just discipline, and there’s hardly any discipline now’. Edna’s approval of and focus on discipline is an example of how the present is able to inform the past. While Sheila might not have thought much of the discipline while she was in the WAAAF, she now uses it as a marker of difference between the disciplined and healthy wartime period and today, when youth are often portrayed in the media as lacking in discipline and respect. Thomson notes that it is common for older adults to differentiate their lived experience from the present in this way, stating that ‘a common response of older adults to the discomforting present is to compare it with a more comfortable and familiar past or, rather, to render the past in ways that emphasise familiar, acceptable and appropriate behaviour’. In this way Edna’s focus on discipline as a positive force can be seen as a way to help her understand and deal with the present.

One of the first questions that I asked the women whilst interviewing them was ‘why did you want to join the WAAAF?’ In her article ‘Gender and War in the Twentieth Century’, Penny Summerfield states that ‘women generally campaigned for greater inclusion into the war effort because of patriotism and a drive to participate rather than feminist ideals or a desire to change gender roles’. This is to some degree true of the three women I interviewed. When explaining why she joined up, Sheila said

well there was a war on. You sort of felt you should. And when it was open to you, you sort of grabbed it. And of course girls in those days, we never left home. It was a very staid life. And of course me, I liked adventure. That’s why I joined up.

Here patriotic duty was reinforced by the opportunity for greater independence. June had a similar yearning for adventure, although in her case she actively distinguished it from national duty. Asked why she wanted to join, she said:

I was desperate to leave home I guess…I would lie in bed at night and hear the steam trains go through Essendon main line to Sydney…and I would hear the engine whistles go. You know, when you’re young you have all these foibles. I had no doubt that older more sensible girls joined out of pure patriotism, to do the right thing.

13 Edna Trouin, interview with the author, 11 September 2010.
14 Thomson, Anzac Memories, 183.
16 Newton, interview.
17 June Mullen, interview with the author, 16 August 2010.
This statement shows an acknowledgement of the public perception that women joined the war effort mainly as a result of a shared sense of patriotism. Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith, in addressing the Canadian experience, state that the public representation of women’s wartime experience as one primarily identified with selfless patriotism ‘assumes that women’s identification with the work they did was secondary and accepted as unique to wartime necessity’. They felt that amongst the women they interviewed for their project, this generalisation disguised a more common theme running throughout their interviews: ‘pride in, and self-identification with, the process of becoming skilled in an area of work, as detached from its function in relation to the war effort’. This is also the attitude shown by June, Sheila and Edna, who all focused on and showed more pride in the skills they gained during the war, rather than their ability to help the national war effort.

**Pride in wartime work**

All three women were clearly proud of the work that they had done while in the WAAAF. However, none of them were willing to appear unabashedly proud, as they did not want the part they played in the war effort to be seen as anything special with respect to the contribution of other WAAAF women. Indeed, they tended to be quite self-deprecating about the part they had played. When I first spoke to June, she suggested that I speak to Sheila because ‘Sheila had a much more interesting time than me, she was on a station, I just moved around’. This statement assumed greater significance when I found out what exactly June had done during the war. Starting off as a clerk, using typing and shorthand skills, she then moved on to organising the catering for her unit, stating that it involved ‘having a truck and a driver and a general hand every afternoon and going across to Liverpool…They also gave me the job of running the little canteen’. Even here, she minimised the significance of her duties: ‘I was a little girl playing shops. Looking back on it, you know’. June was subsequently posted to Townsville in North Queensland, which was almost the furthest north within Australia that a WAAAF member could be stationed during the war. June continued to say that ‘everybody wanted to go to Townsville, it was quite exciting, I was quite lucky that I got up there, it was very, very good’. June worked as a clerk in Staff Officer Intelligence, which she said was very

19 Mullen, interview.
interesting, downplaying the incredible importance of that office to the war effort.

Although June actively reduced the importance of her involvement in the war by saying that other girls had a ‘more interesting time’, her very participation in the interview indicates her desire to have her experience recorded in history, or at least that she considered her experience as interesting enough to discuss. In interviewing women who served in the Navy and Coast Guard during the Second World War in America, Kathleen Ryan also came across women who insisted that their contribution to the war effort was neither interesting nor important. She asks, ‘do the women really believe they did not do anything important? If so, why do they find it necessary to participate in the very public process of oral history, placing their names and life stories within the historical record?’  

Ryan comes to the conclusion that

the women do not really mean to belittle their life experiences (and military service), but instead are using the phrase as a way to acknowledge society’s expectations. The oral history interview, meanwhile, is used by the women to not only place their experience into the historical record but also to affirm the importance of their wartime work.  

This statement is useful in considering June’s response to the interview. In saying that another woman had a more interesting time, she was making a judgement on what she thought society would expect of her narrative of the war. However, by agreeing to participate in the interview in the first place, June showed a need to affirm the importance of her particular wartime experience.

For other women, judgements as to what did and did not make for an interesting wartime experience proved to be integral parts of their personal narratives. Sheila states:

I joined up as a W/T [Wireless Telegraph] operator… I suppose I stayed there another couple of months, then I thought ‘this is boring, I don’t like this’, so then the opening came for a fabric worker, to join up; so that’s why I happened to be the first fabric worker, because I jumped at it, because I thought that’s interesting, working with the aeroplanes, parachutes.

Throughout her interview, Sheila placed great importance on the fact that she was the first female fabric worker in the war, allowing her to claim a space within the WAAAF’s historical record. She went on to describe the experience of being

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21 Ibid.
22 Newton, interview.
the only woman on the base: ‘thousands of fellows, a huge station, and I was there on my own... And the Mess, where you ate, was huge, huge! Full of fellows, of course, all eating and talking. And I’d walk in, and there’d be silence. So I never used to go and eat!’ She says that ‘about four days went by and the CO came round to ask why I wasn’t eating, and I told him, I was too frightened! It came to the point where, if I got to the door, they put a table just inside the door for me, and they used to bring a meal up for me’. This experience seems to have made quite an impression on Sheila, for she later exclaimed out of nowhere: ‘the silence when you walked into that room!’ This shows a continued focus on this unique aspect of her wartime experience. Nevertheless, while this experience is what she has chosen to focus on in her personal narrative, she expressed no resentment that the men did not make her welcome, nor that she was singled out for special treatment. On the contrary, her testimony suggests that she held affection for the men she worked with.

Gendered memories

Asked if she had ever experienced prejudice or disrespect from the men, Sheila said, ‘no, I didn’t. I think some of the girls later on might have, because it was different people. But when I first went in, WAAAFs were treated like gods’. 23 This strong statement shows a belief that, although WAAAF members were treated differently, they were actually treated with reverence rather than disrespect. Sheila uses this as a marker of her own importance as a WAAAF at the start of the war. Clearly, Sheila took no offence at her different status as a woman at the RAAF base, and the other women I interviewed were also unfailingly positive about their experiences with men around the stations. Edna recalled that the whole time I was in the Air Force, I never saw any men or women treated like different genders. It didn’t enter my mind to even think about it. I had never experienced any of that gender prejudice at all...You just thought the best of people. 24 June contends that it ‘just didn’t occur to most women to think of prejudice in gender relations’. Explaining further, she states, ‘I think when you say “how were we treated?” I suppose you were always accustomed, you grew up accustomed, knowing that you were a female, and different things were expected of you, and you accepted it’. 25

23 Newton, interview.
24 Trouin, interview.
25 Mullen, interview.
The fact that June accepted the different expectations she faced from society as a woman is indicative of the way constructions of gender did not greatly change throughout the war. Lucy Noakes argues that ‘wartime models of femininity had to both allow women to undertake war work, yet at the same time preserve the male/female, public/private dichotomy that was one of the things men were told they were fighting for’.26 Although women were encouraged to work in order to save the nation, as were men, they were also encouraged to retain their femininity and thus see themselves as different from men. Noakes states that ‘women and men, while fulfilling their roles as useful wartime citizens, were expected to do so within existing constructions of femininity and masculinity’.27 Margaret and Patrice Higonnet use the metaphor of a double helix to show that, although gender roles may change in wartime, they remain the same in relation to one another.28 In this way, despite attaining more independence (and great respect from society), women were seeing themselves in the same way they always had and were not able to see the treatment they received as anything other than normal.

Deborah Montgomerie, in discussing the New Zealand experience, states that some women believed men deserved to earn higher wages and receive better benefits. She states that ‘many women believed it was only fair that their war work be regarded as temporary, that they be paid less than the men they replaced, or denied the training they needed for promotion; they took on jobs cheerfully’.29 Whether the women I spoke to believed they had received special treatment as a woman, or believed they were accorded no such treatment, all three were eager to affirm that they did not suffer discrimination. Whether that was the case or not, this view seems to have become embedded in the collective narrative of the WAAAF.

While my three interviewees and the women I spoke to at the WAAAF luncheon were uninterested in stories of gender relations, to a few women such stories formed part of their personal narrative. One woman at the WAAAF luncheon

27 Ibid., 52.
stated that:

there was the man who put his hands up against the walls of the corridor so I couldn’t get past and asked me if I would go out with him. ‘But I’m only 19!’ I said. ‘And you’re married!’ He said ‘would you go out with me if I wasn’t married?’, and I said ‘I’ve never met you when you weren’t married’. 30

Other women who experienced more serious sexual assaults by airmen still recalled these happenings with humour. Beryl Martin states that as well as defending their country WAAAF women also had to defend their honour, labelling one particular event as the ‘Battle of the Buttons’. She relates a situation with her aircraft reconnaissance officer:

our boiler-suits buttoned from neck to crotch and provided easy access. Fortunately it takes two hands to unbutton anything, so he became very angry when I simply began following him down and buttoning them up again. Then I smacked his face. After that I didn’t get top marks in aircraft reccy (aircraft reconnaissance) any more. 31

While these events could have been treated seriously, no published sources focus on this darker aspect of WAAAF life. To some extent, all of them relate the dominant WAAAF narrative, which concentrates on positive experiences. Ruth Ford argues that the male view that servicewomen were sexually available could be due to the images of servicewomen men saw in public. Throughout the war, propaganda and recruitment posters featuring Australian servicewomen routinely portrayed them as attractive and even sexually available. Ford states that ‘the military’s construction of the uniformed woman as feminine, glamorous and heterosexually attractive generated other problems by feeding stereotypes of servicewomen as loose, fast, sexually promiscuous females looking for easy access to men’. 32 The fact that most of the women did not see themselves in this way indicates a disconnect between how women were viewed by the public and how the women viewed themselves.

Both in the interviews and in published memoirs, many WAAAF members agreed that if they experienced any sort of ill-feeling towards them as women, it came from the public and not from members of the RAAF. June spoke of the rumours that were rife at the beginning of the war:

They used to say we were only being taken into the services to be prostitutes,

30 Interview with former WAAAF member, undated.
31 Martin, (1) Beryl (nee Thomas) (2) Peter (First Lieutenant). AWM: MSS1513.
and the wives of servicemen were quite hostile because they were sure their husbands were going to be stolen...but it was utterly ridiculous, because if you’d been a person of low repute you wouldn’t have got into the Services, they were quite selective.33

This again shows the element of pride that women had in being involved with the WAAAF. The idea that women outside of the WAAAF regarded them as women of low repute was a common one among women of the WAAAF—an external denigration that perhaps hardened their sense of collective identity. Many stories with this view were published in The WAAAF Book. Published in 1984 by Claire Stevenson, the book contains stories of different members’ experiences in the WAAAF. One piece stated that ‘I was completely unprepared for the antagonism shown us by the war widows. We were the women who had tried to take their husbands away from them. In vain I told them that women out there in civilian life had far more chance of luring their husbands away’.34

This attitude was similar to some of the views recorded in a 1941 report looking at why enlistment in the WAAAF was slow. The report recorded a female type-setter saying ‘you know why it was first formed—to provide "companions" to men of the Air Force. And so girls are not keen to join’.35 This also shows a disjunction between the ideas the WAAAF women had of their own sexuality and the ideas that members of the public had of them. While the general public during the war focused on the sexuality of WAAAF women, few women have discussed sexual experiences with men during their time in the WAAAF, and it has been clearly left out of the collective narrative.

After the war

For many women, their lives were informed by their identity as WAAAF members. Consequently, many women found returning to normal life after the war to be quite difficult. Nearly one million men and women served in Australia’s armed forces and its auxiliaries by the time war ended in 1945; the process of demobilisation was extensive. Once it was decided that women were no longer needed to free men for combat or overseas roles, women were demobilised at a swift rate. Many women returned to the domestic sphere. Denise Riley states that ‘far from war work serving to revolutionize women’s employment on any serious level, it was characterized as an exceptional and valiant effort

33 Mullen, interview.
35 Report of Prof. A.P. Elkin, PR84/291, 12/8/41. AWM 277/7/208.
from which women would thankfully sink away in peacetime'. Several women noted their bewilderment after demobilizing from the WAAAF so quickly. E.M. Robertson states that:

> it was with reluctant footsteps that I made my way on 19 March, 1946, to No. 1 Personnel Depot for discharge...I felt absolutely lost and homeless, like a sheep straying outside the fold. For more than four and a quarter years the demands of the Service had come first in my life and thought. What of the future?...while rejoicing that there was no further need of such large fighting forces, I was rather afraid of the enormous difficulties ahead.

This was a common view.

While some women were sad to leave the WAAAF, they seemed reluctant to talk about this feeling too much as that would imply they wanted war to continue. Other women approached the end of the war with a firm practicality, mapping out their next moves in this time of uncertainty. Essie Over details her response to demobilization and the end of the war in her book *Ad Astra and all that WAAAF*:

> I was free now, no more Air Force. I felt a bit tearful. 'Have to readjust my sights I guess', I said to myself. 'It's bound to be a bit unsettled for awhile. I'll get a job...until I know what is happening. I might get in the Post Office, as a telegraphist. Have a bit of a holiday first though'.

Many women realised that the end of the war meant a new era of their lives. When interviewing women for her book *On the Home Front*, Kate Darian-Smith said that:

> the women I interviewed recognized and constructed wartime as an anomalous, adolescent and dateable time...while most women constructed wartime as being continuous with their childhood experiences of the 1930s, the post-war period was viewed as a discrete and disconnected time. When I enquired about their post-war life, several women replied, 'Well, that's another story'.

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37 Robertson, *WAAAF at War*, 93.


The post-war experiences of the three women I interviewed contrasted with their positive experiences of the WAAAF. All three encountered difficulties in returning to civilian life. Edna said that it was ‘one heck of a shock’. June said that ‘I was very restless. And I went away up to Nia West picking grapes in grape season’. Sheila said that she felt ‘very restless. Couldn’t settle. I can understand fellows coming back and not settling. I went back to work for a little while, then I got married and that was a different life’. It is understandable that women felt uncomfortable in the post-war period. Lynn Beaton says that once the war ended women were encouraged to leave the workforce and become home-makers once again:

They were told that the men returning from active service needed extra special care and attention and that children would need greater help and guidance to compensate for the traumas suffered in wartime. The whole burden of domestic and psychological rehabilitation was thrown on the women.

This shows that, although women had tasted independence during the war, many were expected to return to the domestic sphere and to their roles as helpers and nurturers, putting husbands' and children's needs in front of their own. While June certainly grew into the role of wife and mother, Sheila and Edna did not have children and so subverted the traditional expectation for women after the war.

Conclusion

The stories of WAAAF life told by June, Edna, and Sheila demonstrate the ways in which their wartime memories have been influenced by their post-war lives and the accompanying discursive frameworks at the time they were interviewed. The positive attitudes exhibited by the three women towards the WAAAF show nostalgia for a time when they were independent, young, and surrounded by other like-minded young women. Their memories also adhere to the dominant WAAAF narrative born after the war: that the WAAAF experience was one of independence, camaraderie and gender equality. Although the women were proud of their contribution, they tended to portray themselves as unexceptional

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40 Trouin, interview.
41 Mullen, interview.
42 Newton, interview.
in comparison with fellow members. However, they did differentiate themselves from those women who did not serve. This differentiation was another trope found in the dominant narrative. The women’s lack of interest in regards to questions of gender prejudice was also reinforced by the lack of space given to stories of gender relations in the WAAAF narrative. It is clear that memories of the war are influenced by the situations the women find themselves in today, while the dominant WAAAF narrative formulated after the war ensured that the stories told would have many similarities in theme. Nevertheless, the stories that women of the WAAAF tell give us valuable material from which to discuss issues of both memory and of gender, as well as the potent role of the collective narrative in shaping individual memory.