Australia is Fighting Mad

For the South must look to herself for strength in the storm that is yet to come—
And is it our fate to wake too late to the truth that we have been blind,
With a foreign foe at our harbour-gate and a blazing drought behind?

— Henry Lawson

In the early days of the war in Europe they called it 'the Cold War' because of a lack of obvious activity. In Australia, women had been waging their own cold war from some years.

Since the first rumour of war in 1938, groups of women had trained with considerable difficulty and expense in order to be ready at a time of national crisis. Signallers, nursing aides, motor-drivers and mechanics were being trained to a high standard of efficiency.

On 27 February 1938, the Minister for Defence, the Hon. G.A. Street, had the following placed on Cabinet Agenda: 'It is considered that the general manpower available for the Armed Forces is sufficient to obviate any great demand for the utilisation of women's services in the way of substitution for men in the early stages of war.

'Women's services, it is thought, should be restricted in the first place to relief and mercy work; canteen work; transport work for these services; and various auxiliary non-Government activities.

'Registration of women, therefore, not being a matter of urgent national necessity, should be maintained on a voluntary footing, guided by the Government... without nullifying the efforts of the several women's organisations desiring of taking part in the work. All women desiring to register would be asked to associate themselves with one or other of these organisations.'

In 1939, the Federal Government, in response to pressure by women's groups, set up a Women's Voluntary National Register as co-ordinating machinery. Because of this, women believed Government recognised the ultimate need of using women's services.

But war came in September that year and the women still waited.

In 1940 there was such demand to assist that the Women's Australian National Services was established in New South Wales, under the
leadership of Lady Wakehurst, ‘to bring the various independent training groups into closer co-operation and to extend general and specialised training over a large area so as to ensure a maximum amount of efficient service’. By co-operating closely with the Women’s Voluntary National Register, the WANS received the approval of Federal Government and a small yearly subsidy from the New South Wales Government. Within this comprehensive organisation, some thousands of young women were prepared for just such a national crisis as was now approaching Australia. They were disciplined and efficient; 90 per cent were wage earners, who willingly gave up their Saturday afternoons and up to four nights a week to training. Similar organisations co-ordinating training were set up in other states and affiliated with New South Wales.

The Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force began enlisting between March and May 1941 – a few only, and those because male recruiting could not provide men to fill certain mustering. By October 1941, recruiting was stopped. The Women’s Voluntary National Register wrote on 28 October to the Hon. F.M. Forde, Minister for the Army: ‘The proposal of the Federal War Cabinet to stop enlistment of women in Service Auxiliaries will bring dismay and keen disappointment to hundreds of women, who at great sacrifice have been trained for such work.

‘The Prime Minister, on behalf of the Government and with full approval of the Commonwealth, has enthusiastically pledged the total effort of this Country to the winning of the War. This would seem to imply the employment of all trained personnel, both men and women, in such a way that the necessary Services, the Army, Navy and Air Force, as well as industrial undertakings, might be given the greatest support.

‘Great effort is being spent on recruiting campaigns to bring men to the Services. The establishment of Women’s Auxiliaries will release all the young and fit men now in routine jobs for the work that they alone can do.’

This letter was received six weeks before the bombing of Pearl Harbour, four months before Australia itself was bombed.

When the Japanese came into the war with their surprise bombing attacks, women were suddenly in demand, this time by industry and in great numbers. At the outbreak of the war with Japan there were 2,755,000 working women over the age of 14 in Australia. Of these 3,600 women were in the Defence Services, 71,200 were in Government, Semi-government, munitions, shipbuilding, aircraft works and defence work in factories.

As well, approximately 128,000 worked in factories not involved with war, but this number was already 21,000 less than when the European war broke out in 1939 and, within the next two years, it would drop dramatically as the country was geared into almost total war effort.

Enlistment records showed that women who were not normally employed now joined the services or war production. The manpower problem was suddenly so acute that it was not a matter of skilled workers being needed but any and all labour. ‘One clear possible source was a more effective use of women...’ wrote S.J. Butlin.

The coming of war to our shores and the need to harness all possible labour did not automatically bring about a change of attitude to women in the workforce. There was the fear that competent and versatile women would be more acceptable to employers if their labour was cheaper than men’s. There were still doubts as to whether women were as ‘strong and reliable’ as men and deep doubts about the dangers of paying women a man’s – that is, an equal – wage. There was a cry for ‘equal pay for equal work’, but an equal cry for the banning of women from certain work or at least for provisions to be made so that women would leave this work immediately the war ended.

It was a dilemma which caused the Labor Party, in power for only one month before the Japanese attacked, to write. On 15 December 1941, one week after Pearl Harbour, Cabinet decided to approve ‘as a war measure’ the principle of the ‘extensive employment of women in industries when men are not available...to attain the scale of production approved as a war objective’. Prime Minister Curtin gave a public undertaking in the name of his Government that ‘all women employed under the approved conditions shall be employed only for the duration of the war, and shall be replaced by men as become available’. He promised that a sub-committee would deal with the matter ‘with full regard to prevention of an invasion of men’s work by cheap female labour’.

On 24 September 1942, John Curtin announced in Parliament that in order to release more men for the fighting services, his Government expected to bring at least 64,000 more women into factory employment during the next six months. ‘We have to ensure,’ he said, ‘that men who are displaced do not have their economic standards eaten into by the incursion of women as a permanent economic feature. But,’ he added, ‘we must also keep faith with the women of this country and ensure that, if they are capable of doing as much war work as men, they should be paid as if they were men.’
The Women’s Employment Board, hedged in with political fighting (the Opposition regarded the Board as a political body), nevertheless assisted the smoother employment of women in war industries, interesting itself in the new problem of the transfer of thousands of women to jobs and industries in which they had not previously been admitted.

All the while, the Curtin Government was forced to reiterate that they would ‘prevent an invasion of men’s work by cheap female labour’. By June 1943 there were 190,000 women in direct war work and, altogether, 840,000 women occupied. A further 127,000 women, who had not been working when Japan attacked, now were either in the services or involved in war work. Forty-four thousand seven hundred were in the defence forces and 39,400 in munitions, ship and aeroplane building.

By June 1943, enlistment in the women’s services had grown to 16,243 WAAAC, 18,210 AWAS, 1,408 WRANS and 8,846 nursing services. As well, by September of that year, the Women’s Land Army had 2,205 women in the field. Almost the whole of the fabric of the nation had been blasted into wartime endeavour within two years.

Paul Hauluck wrote of this period, ‘Only very small numbers of persons “not gainfully occupied” remained to be drawn into useful work (at least if it were assumed that married women could not be called up for national service).’

A resolution carried by the ACTU Conference in 1941 had stated that ‘The federal Labor Women’s Conference required for any section of work in the Army, Navy or Air Force units, that the equivalent male rates shall automatically apply, together with all the privileges and status of the men enlisted for service in the same group, and that no sex differential of any kind be permitted to be introduced into the pay, conditions and privileges of defence force ranks.’

Such brave endeavours remained on paper (although each of the women’s services appears at some time to have brought the matter up). At war’s end, women were getting up to two-thirds of male rates of pay. As for privileges and status, few women then or now could complain: it was all so much more than we had got in the depression years, that it seemed the golden age had arrived overnight.

Before the war, except in some large factories, very few girls were paid the stipulated wage. And in the country, where there were virtually no factories, a girl was lucky to get a job ‘for keep’, which was supposed to...
include 'spending money'. My sister Kathleen 'worked' in the country; there was never a need to say 'housework', just 'work' was enough, when everyone knew that was the only paid job to girls in the bush. In 1937, aged 18 years, her 'spends' went up from 7s 6d a week to 10s 6d with 'live-in'; the last supposedly made the wage up to an acceptable figure. 'For that I worked in the cow shed in the morning from 6 a.m., then indoors washing children, scrubbing on my knees with a bucket, a scrubbing brush and floor cloth, polishing, washing up, washing clothes and ironing until the tea dishes were put away about 6.30 p.m. One day a week – after milking my share of the cows – I was permitted to walk home two miles to spend the rest of the day with my family. Mum supplied my clothes and shoes. Whatever the girls got in the army and factories during the war had to be a damned sight better than we got pre-war, so they would be fools to complain, wouldn't they?'

At the turn of the century, almost 50 per cent of the female working population was engaged in domestic service of some kind. (In the country, the proportion was much higher, perhaps 90 per cent). Between 1933 and 1947 the number of women employed in private domestic service fell from 170,000 to 42,000 and much of that was service in regulated areas, such as hospitals, restaurants, guest houses and hotels. The drudge of the private home had gone forever. Earning a living in ‘work’, became respectable for all unmarried women, widows or the few divorcees. They could claim patriotism as their motive. During the early part of the war, married women were excused from this womanly lapse of decorum but from the day Prime Minister Curtin broadcast the truth of the nation’s peril, ‘It is war to the death... the honeymoon is over’, even married women were permitted by society and anxiously welcomed to help in ‘turning the foe from the door’.

‘No foe shall gather our harvest or sit on our stockyard rail!’

The day had arrived, when girls could leave home, and hundreds of thousands did just that. Much had changed in the attitude regarding the enlisting of women. On 22 February 1942 the Sunday Mail reported: ‘Army Staff Purge Canberra: All physically fit men under 45 at Army Headquarters Melbourne and at the headquarters of all States’ military commands are to be removed from their present positions and appointed to positions in the field. Their places on staff are to be filled by others not physically fit for active service, by older men and by women.’

Army Minister Forde had issued this instruction ‘in view of the serious shortage of manpower. Women appointed to the jobs will be members of the AWAS’.

Officers in each state were working around the clock. With instructions to speed up enlistments they moved from town to town interviewing girls. Dorothia Skow and Hazel Moloney, both captains in the AWAS in early 1942, made what newspapers called ‘whirlwind tours’, as they travelled the vast state of Queensland: Caboolture, Maryborough, Mackay, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Cairns, Southport. In one week, these two officers visited sixteen centres. Their immediate quota was 666.

John Curtin had defied Churchill and ordered our troops back from the Middle East to defend Australia. Faces of waiting mothers, wives and sweethearts tell their story.

Among the 26 applicants for enrolment in the AWAS being interviewed at the YWCA rooms in Brisbane on 3 March were Beverley Bassingthwaighte from a country property, Diamondy, Jandowae. ‘She has been driving for a number of years and is able to carry out running repairs which are part of everyday life in the country, and is a good horsewoman.’ Other women in this batch of volunteers had already served in such organisations as Women’s Auxiliary for the Fighting Services and most had brothers serving overseas in one or other of the services. The fathers of some were serving.

The first batch of ‘women motor drivers’ was already on the road. Aged from 18 to 45 they had been given ‘an intensive course in engine maintenance, map reading, driving and army discipline’. Many were experienced drivers before enlistment. ‘Two earned their living by driving and one had driven across Australia a number of times [no mean feat, considering that the first motor road had been graded across the Nullarbor only a few years previously].

‘One girl has driven heavily loaded wool trucks for months at a time. Others have a detailed and practical knowledge of farm machinery. Each girl must maintain her vehicle on the road and do minor repairs. Night driving is one of their duties. Every girl will release a soldier for combatant duty.’

But already complaints were being made of discrimination against women. 25 February, 1942, Courier-Mail: ‘Eighteen months ago my daughter volunteered to drive motor vehicles if her services were required. Her husband is with the AIF in Malaya, and her only son has just joined up, having reached the minimum age.’ The woman had gone to Victoria.
Barracks, Brisbane, and had been told that married women would not be accepted until all single applicants had been enrolled.

Another wrote: 'My daughter, who is Australia’s first aviatress and cross-country flyer, aged 40, has an experience of motors from her cradle. She can drive any motor vehicle, car or truck, diagnose any irregularities of engine and make the necessary adjustments. But experience evidently does not count.'

Within a week, the Queensland WAYS, Women’s Auxiliary Transport Services (a volunteer group, part of the Women’s National Emergency Legion) were rejected when they applied to train as tram conductresses and drivers. ‘We could relieve a larger number of men. Even if we are not needed now, our members should be given a month’s training so that we can take over in an emergency. It would not be necessary to spend money on uniforms. We have them,’ the State Commandant, Mrs R.C. Philp said. They were rebuffed. However, machinists for tent and tarpaulin making and those having knowledge of factory power machines, were being called for.

The YWCA was beginning to establish hostels for servicewomen. ‘Rat rates of pay for members of the AWAS and WAAC begin at 36½d a day for minnows, and 4s 6d a day for others. If the girls are not rationed and quartered they are allowed an extra 2s 6d a day and if away from their home town maintenance is increased to 3s 6d a day. Girls must balance their budget on £1 9s 6d a week, a convincing argument for the establishment of hostels at reasonable costs. The welfare of the women behind the men in the fighting services is the concern of the YWCA throughout the English speaking nations.’

They would, for the duration of the war, offer bed and breakfast, meals, use of a sewing machine, iron, hot bath, writing tables, home newspapers, cups of tea, radios, lounges, club rooms, games rooms. Girls would be able to bring their men friends in to the club for refreshment and talk. At weekends there was hospitality and entertainment; again, women could bring their men friends in. These YWCA clubs were staffed by voluntary workers.

On 7 April, the Prime Minister ‘told the world “Australia is fighting mad”’. Newspapers reported the following day, ‘That applies to Australian women. For the first time in the history of the Commonwealth women are on the march. They are making history.’

‘Thousands are in uniform,’ said the press. They were between 18 and 45 and now could be married women if they had no children under the age of sixteen. Darwin had been bombed, so had Broome. Army Minister Forde issued a proclamation (15 April) stating that women in the army were now subject to active service discipline wherever they were stationed. ‘All members of the Australian Army are now on active service.’ The whole of Australia and its territories were proclaimed a theatre of war. ‘All the legal consequences of soldiers being on active service now apply.’

Certainly, attitudes had changed. ‘You are part of the army itself,’ General Sir Thomas Blamey told the women the first time he inspected them on parade in May 1942. ‘Every member of the Army is happy to have you coming in to help. You have earned the right to serve, and the greatest thing any person can do is to serve his country ... There will be many more activities for the women’s Army.’

October 1942: Mrs E. M. Blakesham hasn’t seen her son since he sailed away in 1939.

On 31 August 1942, War Cabinet decided that Women’s Auxiliaries were to be established as part of the Forces enlisted under the Defence Act. Earlier that month it had been agreed to prefix the letter F to the army numbers of servicewomen. ‘The moral fibre of society’ and woman’s ‘natural function’ (of being a wife and mother) was to be put in mothballs for the duration of the war while the ultimate survival of society — indeed, of mankind — was in peril.
According to *Truth* (12 April 1943), 'war must be classed as the vilest of evils, but this particular ill wind has blown much that is good in the way of women in Australia'.

Henry Lawson had died in 1922, but prophetically he had written the following lines in "The Storm that is Yet to Come".

> By our place in the midst of the farthest seas we are fated to stand alone —
> When the nations fly at each other’s throats let Australia look to her own.