

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE, 1988

Interviewee: KATHLEEN BLACKETT

Interviewer: Jodie Calvert

Date: 5th July, 1988

Subject of Interview: WOMEN IN NEWCASTLE INDUSTRIES
DURING WORLD WAR II.

TRANSCRIPT

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This is Jodie Calvert interviewing Mrs. Kathleen Blackett at Belmont on Tuesday 5th July, 1988 concerning women who worked in Newcastle Industries during World War II.

Aunty Kath, could you tell us about your work experiences after leaving school up to and including involvement in the industries during World War II.

A - Oh right Jodie. I had to leave school when I was just on 16. My father thought I didn't need an education like a boy. I'd won a bursary to get that far but I had to leave and he got me a job at Elliotts tailoring, which was in those days a well paid job. Seven and sixpence a week even though you paid three and fourpence train fare to get there. Which was a job I hated really because I wasn't interested in sewing, but jobs were scarce and sort of had to do what was there; and after I left my apprenticeship I was married. Married a few months when Charlie sailed overseas, and that year all single women and married women without children had to register to the Manpower to do work, then you waited for your call up. I think it was September I went into Rylands and I think we were about the first to go into the industries because there was a big resentment against us. We couldn't lift heavy loads therefore we only got 75% of the mens wages, which was alright I suppose, but I had a selfish reason I suppose to go into the industries. I wanted to pay my home off, which I eventually did. In the industries we found, as I said, that the men were a little bit resentful because we were taking their mates places I suppose, but he'd gone to the war and rather than leave a hole in the machines, they let us on them. I started off doing wire stitching for aeroplane wings, which was a light load really but we weren't allowed to lift any more than 35lb. which is approximately 16 kilos, therefore we couldn't get our quota out as we had to wait for one of the men on the other machines to help us. But eventually they accepted us and the first month we were there we were called out to the union to see which union we would join. The Federated Ironworkers Union or the AWU, the Australian Workers Union, and they were all saying what they got us, and the Ironworkers won the day with their idea of getting piddle time for the women. (laughs) I better explain that. It meant you started work at 8 o'clock in the morning and at 10 o'clock you had a break, then you had your lunch at 12 and you had your break then at 2 o'clock, but you were given morning tea. That's what it really amounted to. But the men had the same privileges after we were given it.

Q - So you were the first to really introduce morning tea times at the works (KB simultaneously says the last few words)

A - Buses were provided for the women to travel to work which was another resentment from the men, that they had to get there prior to that they got there the best way that they can but really, it was a great thing because petrol was rationed and there was no way the men would have got to work unless they had the buses. They were staggered, different industries had different times. We worked from 8 till 4 in the afternoon, but the

other industries started at 6 and 7 accordingly, so there wouldn't be too many buses on the road (laughs) and they'd have enough buses. Well as I said, the resentment was there but they gradually accepted us and you sort of all worked together. You worked 12 hour shifts and you would have to stay behind for overtime.

Q - Was there initial shift work when you first started?

A - Yes. You were definitely doing the three shifts. That was day work, afternoon shift, and the midnight called dog-watch; and the women worked the same as the men, side by side we stood there. We had to supply the coupons, the clothing coupons, everything was rationed, for our uniform and heavy shoes. They were compulsory. They provided the uniform but we had to buy our shoes. I was fortunate. I had small feet and went and bought boys shoes; there was less coupons, but we had to provide all that. They supplied the uniforms. Everything was rationed.

Q - And what type of work did you do at Rylands?

A - Just the wire drawing on the machines. 18 months later I went to Lithgow to the small arms factory to learn to be a dieluty welder. We were short of welders so they took us up for 6 weeks. It was the middle of winter, you can image what it was like. We were frozen and we slept in everything we had. (KB and JC laughs) Then I took on welding the brenngun magazines, like the brenguns that the soldiers wore. Well, the magazines were welded, and then the Japs come up the Hunter. We were out on the American Invasion Barges welding parts the night that the Japs came through. The shell that went over the office was a dud. Fortunately, they missed the steel works. They didn't get it, the other one was a dud. But there was an explosion, whatever happened, but the main officewas affected but nobody was in it ofcourse, so that's what happened that night; and I thought my husband went to the war to save me (KB and JC laughs)

Q - And how long did you work at Rylands?

A - Oh I left there in April '44 because Charlie had come back from New Guinea after being a paratrooper there and they'd put him into camp at Patrie outside Brisbane and I went up there. Hopped the border, paid the guard 10 pound to hop the border and I was up there for four months while he was there, then he was sent to Borneo. I came back in the August and I was put into the electric lamp works for a couple of months, but I didn't like that so they put me over to Stewarts & Lloyds; which is the Tubemakers now and I was oxycutting. Those thick square billets that they, they'd be atleast 18 inches square, solid steel and you had to put the torch on them and cut through. Well, I stayed there till November '45 expecting Charlie to come home but he didn't get back till the January. The women were generally; we weren't dismissed, don't put it that way. We were sort of just assimilated out as we were assimilated into the works as their husbands came home, or the men came home who'd been to the war could take over. We gradually went out, but we weren't sacked.

That was one thing we can honestly say. They never sacked us. (laughs) Some stayed longer but I come out expecting Charlie, my hubby, to be home but he didn't come back till January. He was very sick so I didn't see him till the January but I think the women did a good job in the industries. They were diligent and I could say they could be alot neater and alot tidier than the men doing things, but, actually, as I said the men accepted us and we had quite a good time working there. Well, I thought we did.

Q - You didn't find the work boring at all or repetitive?

No, it really wasn't repetitive because the machine would break and the wire would spring and you'd be singing out for somebody, and you had to have a cutting oil so the machine wouldn't over-heat, and that got the wire going through. No, nobody ever found it boring. I'm sure we didn't because we couldn't talk, the noise of the machine. That was one thing the women didn't appreciate. We chatted plenty of times in our break, but you couldn't hear one another think for the roar of the machines going through. That kept us quiet. Probably why we did a bit better (laughs)

Q - And what sort of wages did you receive?

A - 3/4 of the mens which would be about four pound, 5 shillings when I first started, and by the time I finished I think I was getting 8 pounds a week. Good money (laughs). And when you were paid overtime you were paid the same rates as the men for overtime. A 12 hour shift was usual, about two or three times a week. Sometimes you'd get the 16 hours then they had to give you a 12 hour break before you went back on, but if there was a rush order you never came home until it was finished and you were very tired, especially dogwatch. By 4 o'clock in the morning you'd want a drink and your stomach was looking one way and you were looking the other. Really, it was a bit tiring.

Q - And did they eventually employ women who had children?

A - Yes, eventually they had to. There wasn't quite enough of the others and alot volunteered. They made sure that the children could be minded by their parents, as you know grandparents mind the children now for the mothers to work, well, in that instance it was the same. They either had to have a relative or they would not let them go into the work unless it was investigated that their children were minded by members of their family. The children weren't just pushed aside. They had to be minded, just as it is today. You go to work and mum minds the kids, well that's how it was then.

Q - I was doing some research in the Newcastle Morning Herald back in 1942, the Co-op Store advertised that many of its departments were going to close down due to Federal Government Saels Restrictions; was this common during the war?

A - Yes, it was very common. We saw alot of shops close for the reason people did not have the money to buy things and we saw that there was an order that if your husband went to the

war you didn't have to pay the things off until he came back. Quite a few would have to take advantage of it. Minding their children, they wouldn't have the money to do anything else Jodie. I think one furniture place asked that you pay atleast 2 & 6 a week till you husband come home, to keep your account viable, but I would say that a woman left on her own. Well, I think you got more with children, but as I said I was paying 30 shillings a week off the house, 10 shillings a week for my furniture. I was only getting 2 pound, 19 from the Government. That was my wages for a fortnight, not a week.

Q - And that was for Uncle Charlie being in the war (KB says the last few words with JC)?

Yes, and he had to give me, I think you gave me 2 shillings a day to make that up; that 19 shillings up. So that's how we managed. I could not have managed to have kept my home and kept myself if I couldn't have worked.

Q - And you actually did end up renting your home?

TA - Yes, through the war my parents had a big home at Wallsend. It was a big 5 bedroom home, big verandahs right around and there was rumours they were taking the biggest homes for the officers. So, your Nan and Pop, that was my sister and brother-in-law; they had your mum at the time; they went out there to live and so did I to help fill the rooms up, and with the house being taken up by your Pap who was in essential services (he was knocked back because he was in essential services. He tried to join the air force and they knocked him back), and I was working essential services and that saved them from taking our parents house. Which would have been very hard for them to get out, as you know that my mum was a semi-invalid and it would have been very hard for her to have to move, so we went back home. That's how I rented my home. I rented it till November '44. The people moved out; they were going back to where they came from; and rather than rent it again 'cause we thought the war was going to finish yesterday as the saying is, and it didn't finish till the next August. Well your Mum, Pap and Nan came and stayed with me till the end of the war and they stayed with me till the end of Movember. We thought Charlie was getting home but he didn't, and that's what happened.

Q - You did mention the rationing. Ofcourse, I know there was a great deal of that, but was there any evidence at all of black marketeering?

A - Definitely. I know my in-laws were English and she preferred a cup of tea. Well you could get; I think you paid a pound for the coupons, tea sugar, whatever you wanted you could get on the black market. Clothing, anything providing you were willing to pay. Which I resented every very much because I felt that the boys didn't go to the war for somebody to make money on things we couldn't get. I was very adamant about it and very forthright in speaking about that. I think it was dreadful.

Q - How did you get onto this black marketeering?

A - Oh, they were everywhere in the works. They'd come along and ask if you'd want any coupons.

Q - Did they used to come into the industries?

A - They were people working in the industries selling them. Well, they'd be approached by people outside and they would have the people on the different shifts and then they'd come around wanting to know if you'd want to buy anything. But, the only thing I ever bought for my mother-in-law just to keep her quiet, was tea (laughs). Because she had to have tea, I don't know why. There was no tea bags to dry in those days the the tea didn't last, but that was the only thing I'd ever accept. I'd rather have gone without. You know everything was rationed; petrol, you name it. You just couldn't get anything.

Q - With the unions in the industries. Were they very active during those years?

A - Yes, very very active. I think there was only one strike and it only lasted a day. They went into the Trades Hall in Union Street and that was on a Sunday morning, and we all sat around. Somebody played a banjo or something and we all sang some songs and waited for the union leader to come. They told us we had to work on the Monday. The Government had stepped on them which was right too. I don't think you should have struck but because we all worked there, we had to come out with the men; whatever their trouble was. They didn't or rather we didn't think it concerned us but we would have been called scabs and they wouldn't have worked with us. And ofcourse, we were very vocal that we thought the men should work. That the men overseas, you were stopping them from getting bullets, or guns that was necessary to keep them alive. I was one of their spokeswomen ofcourse. (KB and JC laughs)

Q - So you played an active part on behalf of the women?

A - Oh yes. Anything that they wanted from the bosses; I'd be one of them. I wasn't the Union delegate. She was appointed long before I went there, but no, I had my say. I hated injustice (laughs), as I always have and I stood by it.

Q - And the Union themselves. Did they or rather were they active in not allowing women into the industries to start with?

A - No, the Unions were the ones who were all for it.

Q - Were they worried about wages?

A - No, they weren't worried because it was accepted Jodie. We couldn't lift any more than 16kg., 35lb. in those days. When that, I started off with a little coil and by the time it was thinned out it'd be weighing 75lb. Well naturally, if a man's got to stop his job and come and do it; they couldn't afford a man to come a ride around; you had to wait for your mate on the next machine. Well naturally, he was lifting heavier loads than us and nobody resent it, or not to my knowledge. We thought we were getting well paid. At first it was said we

we might only get 50% but as it was, we got 75 and we were quite happy.

Q - Yes, I read in the Herald that the WEB became very vocal on women's wages in industry?

Yes, that's right, but the women otherwise. I never heard any complaints. We were quite happy to get that much. Well I was. I don't know about anybody else and it did me (laughs)

Q - And what about finding it hard working shift work. Was it difficult. I know you didn't have children, but...?

A - I found it difficult because not being used to different hours of sleeping. I found I liked afternoon shift as well as anything because you could go shopping, so what you wanted in the morning, go to work, get home about 12 o'clock; that's if there's no overtime; and it was just like going to the pictures and coming home. I liked that shift better than any and I found dogwatch very bad; and day work. You were tired by the end of the day for some unknown reason, but you could get up of a morning, do what you had to do, go shopping and go to town and go to work, and you felt as though you'd only been out for an evening out. But otherwise the other two shifts I found a bit awkward. It might have been different for other people, I don't know.

Q - Getting back to the transport situation. When it was first introduced, it was on behalf of the women; and it was something that did continue after the war?

A - It's still going. You see the Port Waratah bus now. It's still going.

Q - So that was because women actually did come into the industries?

A - And I think too the petrol rationing. See people didn't have petrol for cars. You couldn't get petrol for love nor money; unless you had black market tickets of course; but you couldn't get any. You were allowed so much and you had to have a certificate if it was for sickness or anything like that; to get more petrol you know; so people just didn't bother taking their cars to work. The buses were very well patronised and that's why they were staggered. They never had enough buses to take the personnel at the same time every morning, so I think it was Lysaghts 6 o'clock, Comsteel 7 o'clock and Rylands who were part of the steelworks, 8 o'clock. So that's how they sort of staggered the hours, so they could get the personnel to work.

Q - On behalf of the Management of the Industries; did you find any discrimination?

A - No, no as a matter of fact we didn't. They provided a nursing sister who came around to see if we were tired, if it was getting too much for us. You had to be weighed and I didn't make the weight, so I had lead pellets in the overall pocket (KB and JC laughs) to make it 7 stone 6. I was very slight then (laughs), and no we found the management never resented the women; they sort of supported us.

Q - Well, it got their work done?

A - Well, it kept the wheels of industry going; the women going in. There were crane drivers; there was everything you know. You've no idea what the women did. They, whenever a job was available, they'd try it and had a good go at it (laughs)

Q - It seems to me by what you've said that it was always clean cut. Did you find at any time that there was any harrassment at all between the men and the women?

A - Yes there was. As I say there was rationing and a few of the men tried to give some of their help out. One chappy always said you don't miss a slice off a well cut loaf (KB and JC laughs) but it probably wasn't the right brand or anything. We didn't bother with it but a few of the women were harrassed; but we all ganged together and had a good talk to that chappy. He never tried it again (laughs), as you can imagine. No, there was harrassment from the man.

Q - What about a common enough complaint nowadays, sexual harrassment?

A - Well, that's what I'm talking about. We didn't call it that then Jodie (both laugh) That's what I said, he said you wouldn't miss a slice off a well cut loaf (laughs). Not being the right brand, nobody bothered with it. There was quite a few romances came out of it. Single girls married chaps. Alot of women that were working there got news that their husbands were missing or you know, killed in action; and they'd be away 3 or 4 weeks and back they would come; just to keep the country going; and there was quite a few nice romances. I went to about 3 weddings out of it that I knew, but being an old married woman I was top dog. That lady that wrote to me when Uncle Charlie died, Joan; she married a chap from Rylands, but yes, she was a single girl and got a romance out of it.

Q - And what type of work did they do. You said crane driving, but what else was involved?

A - Oh, there was welding as I say. Well in Rylands it was wire drawing on the different wires, you did that. But there wasn't a job that the men did that the women didn't do. Oh, they drove the little machines around to put the wires on. They were like little trolley things. They had a motor on them and they drove them. Oh, alot of people did office work but even though I had a good education, I didn't want office work and when I went to the Manpower, I never let on I'd been tailoring 'cause then I would have had to go into the clothing factory.

Q - You didn't like it?

A - No, I didn't like it, so I decided to play dumb (laughs) if that's possible and that's how I got into the industries.

Q - You said that women worked in the offices. Were they actually working in the offices because of the war or were they there beforehand?

A - Well, I think they did have an office girl but the men who had been in the office had gone to the war and they sort of took over whole offices, you know. But, there were the men for administration and like you had bosses of the mills. Well they were from the office too, so, that's why I think there was such a good relationship. There was no problem between them; administration, the bosses and the women. I suppose they respected them the same as they did their own wives or mothers and it was a big help. As I say there was only that little bit of harrassment that we put down very quickly (laughs).

It still continues today.

KB - Oh, it will. yes, I mean it's only human nature.

Q - How long did you say that it took for them to actually phase the women out of the industries?

A - Oh, 12 months after the way. The Pacific war ended in the May; the European war rather, and the Pacific war finished on the 15th August, 1945. Well, I came out in the November because, oh you know, thinking that Charlie would be home but I'd say that it would take them 12 months for the men to be back; assimilated back into the work that the women were doing.

Q - And no women were actually retained in the industries at all?

A - Oh, not in the heavy work like in the mills, but they may have been retained in the offices or some other parts, but not or rather I think that sisters or nurses who were there were still kept on for the men's benefit, you know, for the first aid and all that; but I'd say no. I'd say 12 months and we'd have been finished because we weren't put off and we were glad to go to be truthful. Well, I suppose we were you know. Glad to know that the men were coming back and we'd all get back to normal life.

Q - You didn't actually feel that you were loosing your independence?

A - No, we were young. When women got married out didn't work Jodie.

Q - That was Government law was it?

A - No, it wasn't Government law; it was part and parcel of human nature. Most women were trained for housework. I wasn't one of them ofcourse (laughs), but most women did housework and they naturally just. Well, there wasn't jobs available. The Depression had just ended, so there wasn't jobs for married women to do. Some industries, I think the Newcastle City Council, was that you got married, you left work. The same as the Co-op Store and the CWS where your mother worked. If you got married you left and most of them were quite happy to do so. You know, it was just part and parcel of life in those days. Married women

did not work; because of the Depression there wasn't any jobs and afterwards you were quite happy to be in captivity. You didn't want to be liberated (KB and JC laughs)

JC - I think you'd be on the wrong end of the bargain stick after saying something like that of today's woman.

KB - No, I'm saying in those days. It was part and parcel of your life. You know, it's what your parents did and you did the same. Well, I always said I was happy in captivity (laughs).

Q - Virtually you're saying there was no real jobs available for women. Was there a decline in jobs available even in industry for men after the war?

A - Yes, there was really. Most of the industries were doing wartime things and then to go back to peacetime, it took them a while too. I know Charlie started back at Comsteel and found he was put on a job a 15 year old could do. Well, he come back out till he got a job on the buses; a trams in those days; working on the trams. So, it was very hard to assimilate everybody back from wartime to peacetime. It took the industries a long to go back to normal. It must have because every industry was doing war; you know, guns, I mean magazines, you name it, they were doing war things. The same with the clothing industries. They were all doing soldiers uniforms, but that's what it was, you know. Oh, that was another thing the men resented us; getting new uniforms.

Q - Didn't they get supplied with uniforms?

A - No, not in those days. Not overalls until later I think, we were given at Rylands a shirt and slacks, but when I went to Stewarts & Lloyds it was the long coveralls and across the back you had the tailgate that you dropped down to go to the toilet (KB and JC laughs). You know, like the babies you see in that picture; that little fella with his back down, well, that's what the women had. Well you had to otherwise you had to get undressed all the way to go to the toilet, but, they were mainly; they were a good army fit. They fit where they hit. Mine would have fitted Charlie when he come home from the war. That's how big they were on me. I had to take them in everywhere and tuck them in. If they held the back up, my head went in it, but that was Stewards & Lloyds, Tubemakers now. No, I think altogether; I don't think there's too many women would regret having to help in the war. I for one didn't.

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Interviewee: KATHLEEN BLACKETT

Interviewer: Jodie Calvert

Date: 5th July, 1988

Subject of Interview: WOMEN IN NEWCASTLE INDUSTRIES
DURING WORLD WAR II.

SUMMARY

Kathleen Blackett was born on 24th June, 1921 at Wallsend. When she was 16 years of age, her father made her secure a position as a tailoress at Elliotts Menswear as he considered girls needed no form of higher education. In 1941 she married and forfeited her work as this was socially expected during these times, and it was only a few months later that her husband left for the South Pacific and World War II.

The purpose of the discussion was to establish the general opinions held by women regarding employment in a previously male dominated work sector. Like many women during the war, Mrs. Blackett registered with the Manpower and over the next four years worked at various Newcastle industries which included Rylands Bros (Aust.) Ltd., Stewarts & Lloyds (Aust.) Pty. Ltd. and Newcastle Lamp Works. She discusses the initial resentment and occasions of sexual harassment experienced by women, but also states that these were eventually overcome resulting in acceptance.

At the beginning of female induction, only single women and women without children were employed, but out of necessity, women with children were finally used in this capacity, regardless of the lack of child care facilities which required the help of family and friends to look after children. It was felt that women were diligent, alot neater and much tidier than the men, and that work was neither repetitive nor boring.

Mrs. Blackett's first employment was with Rylands Bros and while there she was only to receive 75% of male wages, could only lift 35lb in weight and was expected to join a Union immediately. All types of work was attempted; as she states, "there wasn't a job that the men did that the women didn't do", and that women endured working three different 12 hour shifts which often resulted in added pressures on the homefront. She also gives an account of the night Newcastle was shelled by the Japanese.

Although women entered this type of employment during the war to help their country in times of male labour shortages, Mrs. Blackett had an added incentive. She could not afford to pay off her home as well as keep herself on the Government allowance she received for her husband being in the war. This situation was consistent with many other women. Rationing ofcourse, had considerable effect on many and it was the lack of everyday things that are usually taken for granted that instigated black marketeering, which Mrs. Blackett states was rampant within the industries. It was also the rationing of petrol as well as the women's employment that first helped to introduce the buses servicing the industries; a service that continues today. Women also brought in the continuing practise of morning tea break (crib) and clothing issues, and even though industrial nurses were first introduced to keep an eye on the women's health, they were retained after the war on behalf of the men.

Remarks were also made that women were never actually sacked from the industries and it took a good twelve months to assimilate the men back into the workforce. As this occurred, the women were gradually phased out. She also expressed her thoughts on the difficulties experienced by both people and industries in trying to adapt back to peacetime and was of the opinion that women were pleased to eventually leave the work they had been involved in for the previous three or four years. Mrs. Blackett also felt that most women did not regret doing what was expected of them during the war and that independence was not lost when the men returned.

While interviewing Kathleen Blackett, it became overwhelmingly obvious that she has been a very patriotic person all her life; a fact which contributed greatly not only in her own decision, but all women who participated in this type of employment during World War II. It was this reaction that the Australian Government relied upon in its time of need, and it was not disappointed.

JODIE CALVERT

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Lecturer - Margaret Henry, Thursdays 10 - 12 noon

Paper (Research Project) - Newcastle Women in
Non-Traditional Roles during
World War II.

Due Date: Thursday 8th September, 1988.



Is this war just a newsreel to YOU ?

You can get away from those twisted, lifeless bodies flashing by on the newsreel by just closing your eyes but when that next shot of the war production factory, or of the Australian Women's Land Army girl at her working job follows — then it's time for you to step right up into the picture!

Victory jobs need young, intelligent girls—girls like you. Your Victory job will be far more interesting than the job you're doing now.

Every day of war takes thousands of lives and the faster we can speed up war production the sooner will we end this war—and bring that boy you're waiting for back again.

Come in and talk about your Victory job at the National Service Office. Another woman, specially trained to help you select the right job, will tell you all you want to know about employment in

- *War Production Factories*
- *Essential Foods Production*
- *Australian Women's Land Army*

Newcastle
Morning
Herald &
Miner's Adv.
July, '42

Women and work! A controversial combination and one that has been fuel for debate in Australian society since colonization; when in actual fact, women and work do go and forever will go hand in hand. Unpaid domestic labour performed by women has always been seen to hold supremacy, and its social latency was of great import to the non-participation of what was considered the insignificance of the female paid labour force. During the early 20th century women who were involved in paid work were either single, deserted or economically disadvantaged and if a married woman was to seek employment it was seen to be a negative reflection of a husband's ability to support her.¹ A major turning point in this situation came with the outbreak of World War II where for the first time women were encouraged to enter the workforce.

WOMEN! AUSTRALIA NEEDS YOU TOO! FIGHT FOR VICTORY!² These words became an everyday sight on wartime leaflets, newspapers and billboards, and although this patriotic propaganda often portrayed prestige and glamour, it was in actual fact arduous and back-breaking work which could cause disharmony within the home. Thousands of women were asked to support industries due to male labour shortages, and Newcastle which once held the reputation of being the Pittsburgh of the Southern Hemisphere,³ was no different in its demands.

Newcastle has always been a working class city and its reliance on the coal trade and heavy industry has kept paid employment for women to a minimum. Nearly 3/4 of Newcastle's female factory workers were employed by only four firms and prior to its closure in 1908, the Arnotts Biscuit Factory employed almost 1/3 of these women, with a further 500 being used as shop assistants.⁴ Although the traditional role of domestic labour was available, these positions were limited in a city largely occupied by low wage income earners, therefore when the Manpower Committee⁵ began conscription, it stood to reason that Newcastle would utilize its female workforce in more non-traditional areas of employment.

By 1941, available male labour was all but exhausted in the Newcastle Iron and Steel Industry, and 1942 saw the commencement of women's employment as temporary steelworkers by companies such as John Lysaght (Aust.) Pty. Ltd., Rylands Bros. (Aust.) Ltd., BHP Co. Ltd., Commonwealth Steel Co. Ltd., and Stewarts and Lloyds (Aust.) Pty. Ltd. General store and tally room work, automatic or semi-automatic machine operating and crane driving were among the variety of occupations carried out

1. H. Bevege, M. James & C. Shute (Eds). Worth Her Salt. Syd. 1982. pp.84,85
2. K. Daniels & M. Murnane. Uphill All The Way. QLD. 1980 p. 198
3. S. Gray. Newcastle in the Great Depression. Newc'. 1984 p. 12
4. J.C. Docherty. Newcastle. The Making of an Australian City. Sydney 1983. pp. 51,52
5. H. Bevege, M. James & C. Shute. Op. cit. p.93

by women during this period.⁶ Mrs. K. Blackett, employed by Rylands during World War II stated, "there wasn't a job that the men did that the women didn't do",⁷ but the willingness of women to carry out work in a previously male dominated work sector did not come without the resentment of the continued male workforce.

One cause for resentment was that women in heavy industry were only allowed to lift 35lb. in weight.⁸ Mr. B. Hamilton who was employed by Lysaghts stated that men were expected to leave their own jobs to help the women do the heavier work and if their own work was not completed, it reflected on their individual abilities.⁹ One other resentment and why induction of women was initially opposed by Unions, was the fear of undercut award wages. This prompted the claim of equal pay for women in war-related jobs, and after continued negotiations, the ACTU compromised with the setting up of the Women's Employment Board.¹⁰ The WEB's duties included fixing wage rates and conditions, and although they awarded women 90% of male wages, there were many employers that only paid 90% of the process worker's rate regardless of the operation women were involved in.¹¹ Unfortunately, the WEB rates only affected 90,000 women at the most as those employed in traditional women's jobs still received pre-wartime wages set at 54% of the basic male rate. These were miserable circumstances when one considers that when female employment peaked in 1943, there were more than 800,000 women in the Australian workforce.¹²

Rylands was one such Newcastle company that strongly opposed higher rates for women and enforced their position by presenting the Arbitration Courts with total figures on the considered women's lower productivity. The irony of this attempt was that women had only been employed in industry for approximately two months and the figures did not account for inexperience.¹³ In fact, after an initial period of familiarisation, women were found to operate machines with dexterity and on many occasions surpassed male production levels.¹⁴

Regardless of the resentment men felt towards women in this area, it can not be denied that they have reaped the rewards of women's induction into the metal industry. On 4th May, 1942 special buses were introduced to transport women to their jobs,¹⁵ and the granting of morning-tea break (crib) as well as employment of industrial nurses and clothing issues¹⁶ are all services which men continue to enjoy to this day.

6. W.A. Eather. The Trenches at Home: The Industrial Struggle in the Newcastle Iron & Steel Industry, 1937-1947. Syd. 1986. pp.116-119
7. K. Blackett. Taped Interview. Newc' 1988
8. W.A. Eather. Op. Cit. p.123
9. B. Hamilton. Interview. Newc' 1988
10. K. Daniels & M. Murnane. Op. Cit. p.201
11. A. Summers. Damned Whores and God's Police. Melb. 1975 pp. 414,415
12. H. Bevege, M. James & C. Shute. Op. Cit. p.91
13. W.A. Eather. Op. Cit. p. 123
14. Ibid. p.124
15. Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners Advocate. 30.4.42. p.2
16. K. Blackett. Op. Cit.

Ofcourse, women were not only utilized in metal industry areas. NSW Railways employed an extra 700 women as car cleaners, motor lorry drivers, porters, switchers and ticket collectors, whereas previously 3/5 of the women employed had worked in refreshment rooms only.¹⁷ Unfortunately, opposition in other transport sections was strong. The Tramway and Omnibus Union voted against women, 82-273, being employed in their field as they felt it would cause upheaval, despite their continuous complaints of working as much as 50 hours per week with no days off and no holidays.¹⁸ However, the Minister for Transport, Mr. Sullivan, finally announced that women would be employed as conductors on buses only and on 1st January, 1943 20 women started work in the Newcastle area.¹⁹

Women were also induced to join the Australian Women's Land Army,²⁰ the main aim being to keep the farms going while the men were fighting. Newcastle contributed a great deal to the AWLA and on one occasion 40 women from the region were sent on loan to join the Queensland Land Army girls to tend cottonfields for three months.²¹ In fact, since the end of World War II ex-AWLA members have fought hard for the recognition they deserved. In New South Wales, constant representation to the RSL to gain permission to participate in Sydney's Anzac Day ceremonies were repeatedly denied on the grounds that the AWLA was not an enlisted service. Newcastle was one of four centres which recognised and acclaimed the service of these women and during victory celebrations they proudly marched behind their banners down Hunter Street. Recognition by the city of Sydney came as late as 1985 when at long last they openly laid their wreath on the cenotaph in Martin Place, a public tribute to these 'girls with grit'.²²

These were not the only non-traditional jobs in which women were employed. Shipbuilding, truck-driving and milk-carting were among other areas in which women participated, and it was reported that for the first time in Australia, operations on overhead electric cranes were actually being carried out by female employees at a Northern Plant.²³ However, the fact still remains that although Australian women have supported their country during two World Wars, they have still faced resentment and discrimination for their efforts. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, President of the Council for Women in War Work, wrote in 1943 that in wartime, women are eagerly welcomed as workers, but only as workers of inferior status.²⁴ At the conclusion of the war, women faced the

17. Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate. 29.7.42 p.4

18. Ibid. 30.7.42 p.3

19. Ibid. 2.1.42 p.4

20. A. Summers. Op. cit. p.415

21. J. Scott. Girls With Grit. Sydney 1986. p.135

22. Ibid. p.163 (other centres included Batlow, Griffith and Woollongong)

23. Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate. 13.1.43 p.2

24. P. Adam-Smith. Australian Women at War. Melb. 1984 p.330,331

social pressure of populating the country and those who might have chosen to stay in non-traditional employment experienced continued pressure from unions, employers and ex-servicemen. It was not until the passing of the Anti-Discrimination Act and specifically between the years of 1980 and 1982 that Newcastle could boast that more young females began non-traditional trade training than in any other area in Australia.²⁵

The question of whether women were pleased to leave their war jobs was never an issue for debate. The push to remain in traditional work which instituted either a lower rate of pay or none at all, laid the foundation stone in keeping women where it was felt they should be, which ofcourse was within the home. It has been stated that when women married during these times, it was part and parcel of nature for her paid work to cease and that when the war ended, they were pleased to leave whatever work they may have been involved in.²⁶ Ofcourse, the return of husbands and sweethearts, after years of living in fear for their safety, would have overshadowed any loss of autonomy women may have suffered, and interest would then lie in the thoughts and feelings experienced after 12 months or more when women were once again firmly entrenched in the niche society had allocated to them. Regardless of these sentiments, the reality remains that although women have constantly faced adversity in their work endeavours, for a short period of time they were definitely welcomed into the workforce and were major contributors to the Australian and Allied Force's victory during World War II.

25. J. Waugh. Male Apprentice's Responses to the Presence of Young Women in Trades. University of New England, 1984. pp.1-15
26. K. Blackett. Op.cit.

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