Emma Carson review of Diana Thorp, *Code of Silence: How Australian Women Helped Win the War*

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Diana Thorp's *Code of Silence* was a delight to read and it makes a fantastic contribution to the historiography of Australian women's labour and military participation during World War II (WWII). It is a social history that blends broad summaries of significant milestones for Australia during the war with individual accounts from women who worked in various branches of the Australian Military Forces and organisations abroad, particularly in intelligence, communications and logistics. Thorp's background as a journalist means that the book is not bogged down by unnecessary jargon. It is accessible to a public readership and is a great introductory text for undergraduate students who are studying Australian military history, especially the history of intelligence and communications operations, and how women contributed to the Allied war effort.

The book's novelty lies in its spotlight on previously 'untold' stories, including from women who were sworn to secrecy and only recently had gag orders lifted that prevented them from disclosing their wartime work to their families and the broader public. A significant portion of Thorp's research consists of original interviews that she conducted with 16 former servicewomen. She also examined preexisting interviews with servicewomen held by the Australian War Memorial and the Australians at War Film Archive at the University of New South Wales. In total, Thorp focuses on the experiences of 28 women. She acknowledges that there are, or were, likely many more women who undertook similar work during the war whose stories have now been 'lost' due to death; some of them probably took their memories to the grave, not even confiding in their loved ones once the demand for silence was lifted.

Thorp emphasises that the women in her book are not a 'homogenous group'; instead, they hail from a variety of backgrounds, took on different roles during the war and had individual experiences (p. xiii). There is no clear or strong overarching argument about the women's contributions to the war, although Thorp acknowledges that their work greatly helped the Allied cause and saved many lives.

Likewise, Thorp does not make grand statements about how these individual women's contributions and experiences somehow culminated in a watershed moment in the history of women's liberation in Australia. One only needs to look at rates of marriage, childbirth and employment for Australian women in the postwar years, as Thorp does, to see that this was not a revolution. Indeed, Chapter 9, 'From the Army to the Altar', highlights the romances that some women engaged in with men who they met during

their service, and the final chapter 'What the Women Did Next' demonstrates how women's wartime work often ended when they married, especially if they fell pregnant (p. 193). Although some of the women continued to work, undertaking volunteer positions even once they had children, Thorp notes that others 'embraced full-time motherhood' (p. 198). Without repeating the highly contested narrative about World War II and women's emancipation, Thorp compellingly demonstrates how individual women's lives were changed by their wartime work. For example, some of the servicewomen continued to have fulfilling careers in fields that were rarely—if ever—available to women before the war. And even those who became housewives still carried the pride of their service and the knowledge that they helped Australia to 'win the war'—a point that more sceptical historians (I count myself in this cohort) of women's military service during the mid-twentieth century often overlook or dismiss.

The 17 chapters in *Code of Silence* follow a rough chronology from when WWII began to when Australian women first trained for, and then worked, in communications and intelligence, to the peak of women's wartime participation in 1943 and then to the war's end. Weaved in this chronology are thematic chapters that examine different groups of women who worked in the navy, the army, for other intelligence branches, and in specific locations both domestically and overseas. The book opens with a 'Timeline of the Women's Service', which charts significant dates during WWII, especially in Australia, alongside developments in women's wartime participation, such as the formation of the Women's Australian National Service in 1940 and the decision of the Australian government to approve sending Australian Women's Army Service personnel overseas from 1944 (p. vi–vii). This timeline is followed by short biographies of the 28 women whose experiences inform *Code of Silence*. Some of these biographies simply summarise the work these women did or a key moment during their service, while others include a quotation from their interview or a fond memory: 'Diana Matthews chuckled as she recalled the laundry she and her companions had to do at their army campsite between shifts at the garage' (p. x). Most chapters also open with photographs of the women whose recollections feature in the relevant sections. Although it might have been beneficial for Thorp to include slightly longer biographies outlining who the women were, when they served and what they did, keeping each biography to a sentence or few was a charming way to open the book and gave an intimate impression of each individual.

I am grateful that Thorp has written these women into our nation's military history, and that their contributions and personal sacrifices are finally being recognised. Thorp humanises the women by including their recollections not just of their day-to-day (or night-to-night) jobs but also their anecdotes about sneaking out of camp to attend local dances, frightening encounters with local wildlife, and the importance of female kinship during a time when the mateship of their male compatriots absorbed the public imagination and much of the historiography that has followed. This is an area of research that deserves more attention, particularly with the optimism that Thorp brings to her account of the more clandestine ways that women participated in WWII logistics and communications work.

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