

Wheatley, Alice Jean (1904–1993)

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Alice Jean Wheatley (1904–1993), nurse and air force matron-in-chief, was born on 3 August 1904 at Bridgetown, Western Australia, second child of Western Australian-born parents Robert Wheatley, farmer, and his wife Agnes Forster, née Muir. After spending her early years on her father's property, Silverlands, Jean boarded at Perth College. On leaving school she undertook nursing training at Fremantle Hospital, then at Queen Victoria Hospital, Melbourne, where she qualified in midwifery. She later returned to Fremantle Hospital as a charge sister.

On 4 May 1941 Wheatley joined the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) as a sister. Her first job was on escort duty to the United States of America, sailing with other nurses and hundreds of Australian and New Zealand air crew. On her return she worked in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) section of the 115th Military Hospital, Heidelberg, Victoria, nursing patients from the front line. Promoted to senior sister on 1 April 1942, she experienced her first real engagement with the war in October, when she was posted to No. 3 Medical Receiving Station in Papua. The group of six nurses of which she was in charge comprised the first unit to be posted to that country. The nurses lived in primitive conditions under canvas outside Port Moresby. They had slit trenches and tunnels in a nearby hillside in which to place bed-ridden patients during enemy air raids.

Although Wheatley might have returned to Australia in September 1943, she volunteered to remain in Papua and that month travelled to Milne Bay as sister-in-charge of No. 2 Medical Receiving Station. There she found conditions much better. She was promoted to acting matron in November and transferred to No. 9 (Operational) Group headquarters. In 1944 she was awarded the Royal Red Cross (2nd class) for 'sustained courage and devotion to duty in forward areas in New Guinea' (*Argus* 1944, 6). She was the first member of the RAAF nursing service to receive this award.

In May 1944 Wheatley took up the first of a series of headquarters postings in Melbourne. In 1946 she was one of a select group that travelled to London to represent the RAAFNS in the Victory Parade. On 8 November 1946 she was appointed matron-in-chief of the RAAFNS at RAAF Headquarters, Melbourne. Promotion to temporary (1947) and substantive (1948) principal matron followed. She selected nurses for the Permanent Air Force and capably managed the transition of the RAAFNS to a peacetime service. For her work she was appointed OBE (1951). During most of 1950 she was hospitalised with a serious illness, as a result of which the RAAF terminated her appointment on 12 March 1951.

Returning to Perth, Wheatley was active in the Victoria League, the Karrakatta Club, the Royal Western Australian Historical Society, the Eleanor Harvey Nursing Home, and ex-service institutions. She never married and lived quietly, enjoying gardening, reading, crossword puzzles, and the company of relatives and friends. Wheatley died on 17 May 1993 at Bridgetown and was cremated. She was remembered as a strong and resilient woman, always hospitable, who was held in great respect by her nurses.

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