

## Volunteer Air Observers Corps (VAOC)

The Volunteer Air Observers Corps (VAOC) was established as an approved civil defence organisation under National Security (Volunteer Air Observers Corps). Regulations promulgated in early 1942.



Harold Freedman 1915-1999 artist.

Spurred on by the attack on Pearl Harbour in late 1941, Australia mounted its own defences using volunteer plane spotters. Significantly, most of the volunteers were women. A counterpart of the English civilian organisation the Royal Observer Corps, and formed in December 1941, the functions of the VAOC were:

- 1) to report aircraft and, if possible, to identify hostile aircraft passing over observation points
- 2) to transmit aircraft sighting reports to an appropriate central control post for warning to Defence Services and to the Air
- 3) to report any unusual incidents and supply weather reports to the RAAF

The existing telephone network was used, and teleradio in emergencies. Posts were manned on a volunteer basis through some 34,000 enrolments, applicants having to be 45-60 years of age.

The VAOC was, strictly speaking, controlled by the Air Board but, in practice, came under RAAF Fighter Sector Command and increasing control by RAAF personnel. By June 1945, the VAOC had assisted over 1,870 aircraft throughout Australia. However, the organisation's activities had peaked in 1942 and was disbanded as of 15 May 1946.

Gwen Wheatley's dad was a member of the VAOC in Pemberton and his lookout was the Gardner Tree at Springfield.

### VAOC Bridgetown Branch

Commenced operations in late August 1942 with over 70 members on the Bridgetown roster. Flying Officer Knight was in charge of the VAOC in the South West. By 1944 the Officer in charge of VAOC in WA was Squadron Leader Willmott (from Sydney) and Flying Officer Keith Gollan who was in charge of the South West area.

The Chief Air Observer initially was Mr JE Deacon BA, headmaster of the Bridgetown State school, and the deputy head warden was Rev H Farman.

Apparently the Bridgetown Girl Guide Hall was used as VAOC branch headquarters. Camouflage nets were also made at the hall by members of the CWA Bridgetown.

By 1943 Rev Harry Farman was the Chief Air Observer for Bridgetown and the post had recorded over 1000 hrs of observations.

Ted Sullivan and his Dad were on spotter's duties at Yornup on their farm.

A fundraising concert was held on 28th August 1942 including a one-act play by the Bridgetown Repertory Club and items from children of the local school, followed by a ball in September 1942, to raise money for the VAOC.

By 1944 the Chief Observer of the Bridgetown VAOC was Miss Edna Bartlett.

By the end of the war in September 1945 the Chief Observer at Bridgetown was Mrs CA Palmer.

### **Bridgetown A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) Committee**

Slit trenches were built at the schools (8 at primary school each 20 feet long) and hospital, girl guides hut, and also bakery car park on Hampton Street in March 1942.

At a meeting of the Bridgetown District A.R.P. held on Wednesday, April 28, work was commenced on a complete revision of activities, based on the new Handbook for Wardens.

- The main subject dealt with was "Lighting Restrictions." It was felt that the position needed clarifying, particularly because of apparent inconsistencies in the requirements. The giving of more light from street lamps had led many to believe that the restrictions had been lifted, so that it was not necessary to be particular about the screening of house lights, and anyway, why should we have to "draw our blinds whilst the motorist can have full lights?" For the guidance of the public it was felt that the regulations should be explained in as simple a way as possible.
- Street Lights.—It is permissible to have up to 100 candle power globes fitted provided that the rim of the shade is parallel with the base of the globe in order that all light may be directed downwards, and no light visible from above the horizontal, and sky-glow eliminated.
- In the event of an emergency, street lights can be immediately blacked-out by means of the switch at the power station.
- External lights – These are not permissible on buildings or under verandahs. (The light under the Town Hall verandah is a street light and is controlled from the Power Station.) The reason being that in the event of an emergency it would not be possible to exercise the immediate control possible with street lighting. Therefore, all external lights should be disconnected by the easiest method – removing the globes.
- House Lighting.—The aim of the regulations is to preserve normal lighting in the home, whilst light emitted becomes invisible at a short distance. In the event of an emergency it would be chaotic and create panic if the light were cut off at the source of supply. It could be done. But

the way chosen is to gain the co-operation of all in so screening lights that no direct light shines from any window or opening, and that any indirect light emitted becomes invisible at a short distance.

- Car Lights—Outside a ten-mile limit from the coast masks need not be in place on but must be carried out at all times in the car. Should a car be caught in an emergency, without masks, it should immediately stop, with lights off. That is, if a motorist should suddenly find the enemy to be paying him unwelcome attention, he puts the car in darkness, and stops. The masks should be so made that they can be fitted in a matter of minutes.
- Even though you travel within the 10-mile limit in daylight, a policeman can ask to see your masks if they are not fitted on the headlamps, and if you cannot produce them, order you to IMMEDIATELY have a set fitted.
- General.—The A.R.P. exists to serve you and us all. Any information within its power to give, it will. Not even the A.R.P. likes the lighting restrictions, or the other preparations it has to make. To many it may appear to be a negative side of the war effort, and many even feel that is it not necessary. We wonder what they would say if suddenly they were caught unawares. Probably they would blame the A.R.P. for not giving the appropriate warning and the measure of safety they would immediately seek! Against that emergency (which we trust will never happen) we want your intelligent and active cooperation. You may not be able to join the A.R.P. but you can help those who give their time and thought on preparation to feel that it is worthwhile, because they serve an appreciative people. Remember, we want you to have all the light possible, but not in the way General Tojo wants you to have it. His light is worse than darkness. It suits him, let him have it as for us let us work together and do all we can to help that day forward when the lights shall shine again.

References – all material came from Trove digitised newspapers during the years 1942-46.