

McGOVERN, Lorna Elsie (SF84359 AWAS)



Image 1 © Angela KEANY family collection 2015
Studio portrait circa 1943.

Name	McGOVERN, Lorna Elsie Private AWAS
Service Number	SF84359
Date of Birth	15th September 1924
Died	2nd October 2012
Place of Birth	Victor Harbor SA
Resident	Victor Harbor SA
Cemetery	Not Listed

Lorna Elsie McGovern was born at Victor Harbor on 15 September 1924, the younger of two children of Thomas James McGovern MM (SN/3593), a World War One decorated veteran, and Alice Edith McGovern (nee Jacob). She was educated at the new Coolock Convent of Mercy, Victor Harbor and in 1938, commenced as a boarder at St Aloysius Convent of Mercy in Adelaide. Lorna had almost completed final year studies when the Second World War broke out in September 1939. Her brother Thomas Henry (416269) enlisted in the RAAF in April 1941.

Lorna left school and returned to Victor, where she joined a Voluntary Service Detachment (VAD) group whilst working part-time in her father's office at the Hotel Crown.

Due to Australia's surrender to Japan in Singapore, battles on the Malayan Peninsula and believing that Australia was under threat for invasion by invading Japanese forces, Lorna persuaded her rather reluctant father to let her enlist in the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS). She was only eighteen, and parental permission was required. On 11 January 1943, she was sworn in under strict guidelines set out by the government. Her term of duty was for the duration of the war plus twelve months.

The AWAS training school was located at St Margaret's in Semaphore. The recruits attended classes dealing with the structure, ranks and insignias of the armed forces, as well as first aid, gas mask drill and general army discipline. They had to wear winter uniforms as the summer uniforms had yet to be delivered to the quartermaster's depot. The weather conditions were stifling. Lorna would later recount that despite the heavy thick uniforms, the recruits were expected to keep their uniforms neat and discipline was strict.

At the end of the training course Lorna was posted as a clerk to the 4th Military District Salvage Depot at Keswick barracks in Adelaide.

Lorna recalled: *"There was nothing very glamorous about the job. The Salvage depot was in the Keswick area there were about 14 AWAS on the strength. Some of them had duties in the various sorting area. The Salvage Corps was like a huge recycling depot. There were various areas for intake such as metal, rubber, oil, glass"*.

Many rules were imposed upon the AWAS members.

One such rule was that: '*AWAS must endeavour to attract as little attention to themselves as possible*'.

They were permitted to smoke in restaurants at certain times whilst on duty, but on no account must they smoke on trams and trains or in the street. At first, conductors on public transport refused to grant concession fares to uniformed AWAS, but later the concessions were eventually granted. The girls were to wear make-up in moderation and the only jewellery allowed was a wedding ring. A later concession permitted the wearing of an engagement ring. The AWAS members could drink 'in moderation', and certain hotels near country camps were 'out of bounds' at certain times. Hair had to be short and had to clear the collar by at least one inch (2.5 cms).

It was decided that in the AWAS should learn how to handle light weapons and despite objections by AWAS chief Lt Col May Douglas that AWAS members should not bear arms, the training in the use of firearms went ahead. Lorna was in a group of about 20 AWAS in the training course and they were instructed in rifle drill, marching with a rifle and assembling a mortar. No live ammunition was used during the training.

In late March 1945, Lorna's father received a telegram to say that brother Tom was missing over Germany. Lorna said it was a terrible time for them, not knowing his fate. News from the Red Cross advised that Tom was alive, but a POW. He was liberated near war's end.

On the evening of 14 August 1945, Lorna heard the news that the war (with Japan) was over. Lorna recalled: "We knew that my cousin Howard Nightingale (SX9755) had been taken prisoner by the Japanese and expected him to be liberated too. We found out later Howard had been killed in October 1944, during an air raid".

Lorna was demobilised 27 February 1946. In July 1949 in Victor Harbor, she married John Keany, (116481) who was a former RAAF serviceman. The couple lived in Melbourne, Canberra and overseas, where John served the Commonwealth. There were five children of the marriage. John died in 2005, Lorna died on 2 October 2012.

References:

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Compiled by the Victor Harbor RSL History Research Team, August 2015. Updated by T.Young & M.Young 01/10/2025

Appendix



Image 2 © naa.gov.au 2025
Enlistment photographs



Image 3 © *Angela KEANY family collection 2015*
circa 1943, shows Lorna (centre) and two fellow AWAS members returning from a parade at the Adelaide Oval. They are walking down King William Street heading towards North Terrace. On the left is Pte Daphne Ellis. The AWAS on the right is unidentified. From the Angela Keany family collection.

