

PHYLLIS DOREEN DUNNING

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Phyllis Doreen DUNNING (maiden name HOOPER) was the first South African woman to be called upon to volunteer for full-time war service on 01 June 1940. She was only 22 years old when she became the Officer Commander of the South African Women's Auxiliary Air Force (SAWAAF), with the rank of Major. She was the youngest officer in the British Commonwealth to attain this rank. Prime Minister Jan SMUTS had asked her to join up. On 28 June 1940, the first group of 120 women were taken into full-time service. Five months later there were 800 SAWAAFs proudly wearing the orange flash, signifying they had volunteered for overseas service. Doreen died in Howick, South Africa, on 26 August 2008 at age 91. According to her son, Simon, she died of natural causes.

All SAWAAFs did a three-week basic training course at Valhalla under the command of the SAWAAF Sergeant-Major (Mrs) EDWARDS. The SAWAAF technical personnel did their 1-year advanced training course at the Pretoria Technical College, while other training was done at 73 Air School in

Wonderboom. The first female Physical Training Instructors graduated from the Military College in August 1941. Women who were appointed as non-commissioned officers (NCOs) did their NCO course at 100 Air School in Voortrekkerhoogte.

By June 1942 there were 34 SAWAAF camps in South Africa. SAWAAF pilots flew communication and ferry flights and served as duty pilots and second pilots in the SAAF shuttle service. Special legislation enabled SAWAAFs to be employed on combat duty, serving at ack-ack sites on instruments to direct the guns and as searchlight operators.

In December 1940 the first detachment of SAWAAFs were sent up North with Muriel HORRELL in charge. They went to Mombassa in a troopship and from there by train to Nairobi, where a camp was established in a grey stone building. Soon this became too small and they moved to another camp of wooden huts. In September 1940 the SAWAAFs were sent to the Middle East, where they were housed in a hotel in Cairo.

During the war, the women performed 75 different types of work. These included metal workers, welders, wood workers, fitters and turners, inspectors, armament instructors, stores, clerical, cooks, despatch riders, signals, Link Trainer instructors, lorry drivers, meteorological assistants and observers, developing and printing photos, parachute packers, PT instructors, shorthand typists, and wireless operators.

By 1941, there were 36 A-licence pilots in the SAWAAF, of which Doreen was one.

In 1942 a major re-organization occurred within the SAWAAF. Their administrative functions were amalgamated with those of the SAAF. The SAWAAF directorate remained, but with only a few senior officers serving, their function being to direct the policy of the SAWAAF and to maintain the general welfare and well-being of all the SAWAAFs on full-time service.

After the war, Maj. EGERTON-BIRD was placed in charge of the Women's Dispersal Section of the Directorate of Demobilization. By the end of December 1945, 1955 women had been demobilized. In January 1946 alone, 626 women had been through the dispersal camps. The last SAWAAF camp closed on 01 April 1947.

Assistance was provided to enable women to cope with the transition from war to peace. This consisted of grants for educational and vocational training, vocational guidance officers assisting women to choose training suitable to their capabilities, the provision of courses both full-time and part-

time (two of the most popular were shorthand-typing and nursing), and assistance for those who wished to establish businesses. All the discharge benefits available to men were also provided for those women with equivalent service. Women who had been artisans during the war found it difficult as there weren't sufficient factories in the country to absorb them.

While the majority of women returned to civilian life, a number of the women went into the Women's Auxiliary Defence Corps and were used in the SAAF. An amendment to the Defence Act was made in 1947, allowing women to serve in the military on a voluntary basis, but only in non-combatant roles, with effect from 03 June 1947. The Women's Defence Corps (WDC) was then established on 28 November 1947.

In 1948, with a new government in power, the Minister of Defence, F.C. ERASMUS, asked for a report on women serving in the Permanent Force. According to the statistics provided in the report, the SAAF had four officers and 30 other ranks in the WDC. In April 1949, women were no longer able to drive military vehicles. The following month, the Minister decided that recruiting women for the WDC Permanent Force was to cease. Only female military nursing personnel and medical officers were retained.

Women were kept out of the Forces until October 1972 when the Minister of Defence granted permission for the appointment of women in the Permanent Force again. The first three women to join the SAAF in 1974 as Permanent Force members were trained at the Civil Defence College in George. On 19 January 1974, 33 women began their basic training at the Air Defence School in Waterkloof. On 21 February 1995, an all-women's parade was held at the SAAF Gymnasium in Valhalla to celebrate 21 years of women's service in the Permanent Force.

In 1996, the SAAF recruited the first six women for pilot training. By October 2004, 15 women had received their wings and 13 were still pilots in the SAAF.

All women who served in the South African Air Force, at any time, have much to thank Doreen for.

Phyllis Doreen HOOPER was born in Johannesburg and attended Boksburg Convent School before completing her education under private tuition. She became interested in flying when, aged nine, her parents took her to see a "flying machine" in Barberton owned by Alan COBHAM. People could write their names on the plane's fabric, and Doreen wrote hers.

On the 03 July 1935, soon after her 18th birthday, she started flying lessons

with the Johannesburg Light Plane Club, at Baragwanath. She learnt to fly in a Gipsy Moth (ZS-ADW) and her instructor was Captain Stan HALSE who was a RFC pilot in WWI. After two weeks and 9 hours of flying, she earned her A-licence and decided to make aviation her career.

In 1936 she took second place in the Vereeniging-Durban-Vereeniging air race, flying a Gipsy II Moth. On 30 October 1936 she obtained her B-licence, becoming the first female commercial pilot in South Africa. This was followed by employment with African Flying Services at Rand Airport. In February 1937 she went to England from where she took part in the Oases Race in Egypt. She flew with Captain V. BUDGE in a Miles Hawk and finished 23rd in a field of 40.

In 1938, with Mr. CALDERBANK as co-pilot, and flying a Leopard Moth, she placed 8th in the Governor-General's air race. The same year, she placed 2nd in the Round the Reef air race, again in a Gipsy II Moth.

By July 1937 she was studying for her Instructor's rating and working for the Johannesburg Light Plane Club. She obtained her Instructor's rating on 20 January 1938, becoming the first female instructor in South Africa. A few months later she re-joined African Flying Services, now based at Grand Central. Her wire-haired terrier, Starkey, was a common sight at Grand Central and had about 70 flying hours to his credit!

At the outbreak of WWII, she had more than 2000 flying hours. In October 1943 Lt.-Col. Doreen DUNNING resigned on a point of principle affecting her work. Maj. Muriel HORRELL took over her duties. After Lt.-Col. DUNNING had telegraphed news of her resignation to Maj. EGERTON-BIRD, then stationed in Port Elizabeth, the Major flew to Pretoria to speak to Prime Minister SMUTS. A short while later, the Prime Minister made a public apology to Lt.-Col. DUNNING in the Press.

Doreen was chairwoman of the SAWAAA. She married Edwin Keith DUNNING, who was born in Nigel. He died in Natal in 1968. The couple had four children - Richard Edwin Harris, Simon Edward, Judith and Diana.