

Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE0438

War Widows' Guild of Australia

(1947 -)

Born	19471101, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Community organisation

Summary

The War Widows' Guild Of Australia was established in Victoria by the late Mrs Jessie Mary Vasey CBE, OBE. The broad aims of the Guild were to watch over and protect the interests of war widows. Qualification for membership of the Guild was restricted to widows of men who were killed on active service or whose deaths were accepted as being war-caused and were therefore in receipt of a war widow's pension. Later, widows of interned civilians who received a repatriation war widows' pension were included, as were widows of allied ex-servicemen.

Details

The Guild began in Victoria and was founded by the late Mrs Jessie Mary Vasey CBE, OBE. Her husband, General George Alan Vasey, an army officer, commanded Australian forces in Greece and New Guinea during World War II. While on leave in 1945 he called on the widow of one of his men and was appalled at her living conditions. It was Major-General Vasey's wish that after he returned from the battlefields he, with the help of his wife, would look after the families of the men who were killed while serving with him. On 5 March 1945, aged 49 years, Major-General Vasey was himself killed in an aircraft accident.

Jessie Vasey formed the War Widows' Guild of Australia on 22 November 1945. Qualification for membership of the Guild was restricted to widows of men who were killed on active service or whose deaths were accepted as being war-caused and were therefore in receipt of a war widow's pension. Later, widows of interned civilians who received a repatriation war widows' pension were included, as were widows of allied ex-servicemen.

The broad aims of the Guild were to watch over and protect the interests of war widows. While maintaining that every woman whose husband's death was due to war service should receive adequate monetary compensation from the Government, so that she and her family could maintain a dignified standard of living, Mrs Vasey believed that the surest way to rehabilitation was through self-help. To this end she organised the formation of craft groups. The women involved in these craft activities not only enjoyed the company of others in the same sad position as themselves, but they experienced the thrill of satisfaction that creativity brings and, by the sale of their work, were able to supplement the meagre compensatory pension at the time doled out to them by the Government.

Through Mrs Vasey's leadership, Guilds were formed in all States during 1946-1947 plus the Australian Capital Territory in 1966. All were united in a National Guild over which Vasey presided until her death in 1966. During this time she inspired the respect and devotion of a group of very able women in all States and through her efforts the lot of the war widow became better: many improvements took place in pensions, housing, children's allowances and hospital care. In November 1947 Jessie Vasey called a conference of National Body delegates from all States to meet in Melbourne to form a federal body. While each State body is autonomous in domestic organisation, the Conference achieved unity and biennial congresses have been held ever since.

Motto of the War Widows' Guild

We all belong to each other.

We all need each other.

It is in serving each other and in sacrificing for our common good that we are finding our true life.

(Extract from an Empire Day Message from His Majesty the late King George the Sixth in 1949.)

Kookaburra Badge

The badge, made of silver and designed by Andor Meszaros, was introduced in 1951. The badge featured the kookaburra, an industrious and cheerful bird who mated for life, was fearless and aggressive in the defence of its young and the area of territory it regarded as its own. "The kookaburra goes for what he wants and fights for its family. Isn't that what we are doing?" Mrs Vasey asked her girls. The bird also had a unique call, not a song but a laugh, a chortle of rollicking mirth. It was a call to win the war widow back to laughter.

Published resources

Book

No mean destiny : the story of the War Widows' Guild of Australia 1945-85, Clark, Mavis Thorpe, 1986

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Private Hands (These records may not be readily available)

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Author Details

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Digital resources



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