Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2740

Stumm, Lorraine

(1914 - 2004)

Born	19141016, Charters Towers Queensland Australia
Died	20040128, Gold Coast Queensland Australia
Occupation	Journalist, War Correspondent

Summary

Lorraine Stumm wrote her name in the history books as the first Australian female to cover the Second World War in New Guinea. Her journey into the theatres of war was most unlike that of her contemporaries. While Stumm was an incredibly motivated woman, it was her desire to follow the man she loved – Harley Stumm – that took her from university in Brisbane to London, and ultimately to India. As a war correspondent and a soldier's wife, Stumm's writing provided a rich mixture of human interest stories and hard-line battle updates. She wrote for London's *Daily Mirror* and Sydney's *Woman* magazine.

Details

Stumm's career as a journalist abroad began in London in 1936. Engaged to the love of her life and struggling to make ends meet, she secured employment with London's *Daily Mirror*, having 'crashed in on the night editor and managed to convince him that I was worth a month's trial. I told him that if I was no good he could sack me. He laughed at my cheek and agreed.' [1] In 1938, Harley and Lorraine enjoyed a truncated sojourn at home in Australia. Barely six weeks after their wedding, Harvey was forced to leave his new wife to answer the call of duty and embark on a vessel destined for Singapore on August 29th 1939. For the second time in her life, Stumm was grateful for her father's insistence that she become a journalist as her career choice 'enabled her to sweep away any obstacles that threatened [hers and Harvey's] happiness together.' [2]

Having earned the requisite funds for the boat fare, Stumm was reunited with her husband in October 1939; a time when the war was far from Asian shores. Returning to work as a journalist, she wrote for the *Malaya Tribune*. Such was Stumm's determination to report what she saw as she saw it that her candour almost had her deported with 24 hours notice. The contention was based on her 'defaming' of the Governor Shelton-Thomas who was in violent opposition to the 'Buy a bomber for Britain' scheme; a wartime proposal supported by the *Tribune*. Unwilling to accept the governor's rash decision, Stumm confronted him in a private interview. She managed to retain her tenure, with the governor's acknowledgement that the situation was a private matter between them. Stumm's writing for the *Tribune* continued uninterrupted until 6pm on June 22nd 1941, when she made the journey to Singapore General hospital where she gave birth to her daughter Sheridan at one minute past midnight. Such was her good fortune that Lorraine barely had time to fret over her husband's involvement in an aircraft accident whilst she had been in labour. Harvey Stumm swaggered virtually unscathed into the maternity ward just moments after his daughter's birth.

Almost six months later, on December 8th, Stumm found herself crouched beneath an air raid shelter, Sheridan in her arms. Singapore had become a Japanese target. The day after the air raid, Stumm received a telegram from the *Daily Mirror* in London reading 'Delighted to know you are safe. Can you become our accredited war correspondent and start filing stories immediately?' Stumm seized the opportunity to take an active part in the war effort and rushed to obtain her official accreditation as a war correspondent. She resigned her post at the *Tribune* and offered temporary services in the employ of the British Ministry of Information. The appointment was cut short when she was seen with her baby daughter in her arms and was immediately 'released from duty.' [3]

Early in 1942, Stumm decided that the time had come to take her daughter home to Australia. Escape from Singapore meant a smooth flight to Java where mother and baby spent the night in a dingy, bat-infested hotel room before making the long airborne trek to Brisbane, via some unfriendly accommodation in Darwin and Townsville. Back home, Stumm wrote a number of retrospective pieces illustrating the pre-war situation in Singapore which had since fallen prey to the Japanese. In August of that year, she contacted the *Daily Mirror* with regard to some outstanding payments. She was well-pleased by the

reply which read ‘All delighted you are safe. Money following. Can you represent us at General McArthur’s HQ in Brisbane?’ [4] Not one to refuse a golden opportunity, Stumm hurriedly made the arrangements to have herself re-accredited under the Australian licence system and thus became the only female correspondent based at General McArthur’s Brisbane headquarters. This appointment inevitably led to the chance for another sojourn in the field, but not before her passage to New Guinea had been refused on two occasions. It just so happened that Stumm was present at HQ in Brisbane when General McArthur asked who was willing to cover an attack on the city of Rabaul. Lorraine’s hand shot up in the air, the General smiled at her and said, ‘You can go tomorrow.’ [5] Stumm’s arrival however, was a point of fierce contention for the Australian military authorities who had previously barred the way for her. The acting head of Public Relations, Colonel Rasmussen was shocked to hear of her travel to New Guinea and campaigned for her immediate removal from the front lines and the absolute ban of her writing from any Australian publication. Fortunately there was little that Rasmussen could do to veto the wishes of General McArthur, and Stumm spent her time in New Guinea bunking with US army nurses.

Meanwhile, Harvey had been posted from Singapore to Sumatra then Sri Lanka and India. Making use of professional connections, Stumm was able to arrange for her employment with the British Ministry of Information in New Delhi. She was also determined to travel with Sheridan who, at the age of almost three, had not seen her father since she was six months old. Arranging for passage from Brisbane to Delhi proved problematic for Stumm, who had been warned against making the journey with a small child in tow. At a meeting prior to her departure, General McArthur gave her a final gift: ‘I’ve trusted you absolutely since you’ve been with us and now I’m going to tell you highly secret information that may be of use to you in your new job.’ He told Stumm ‘strictly off the record’ about a projected Andaman Islands campaign designed to free Burma from the Japanese. He outlined the details of the British thrust on Burma and said it was to be led by Admiral Mountbatten. I was amazed to be trusted with this information.’ [6] The family were briefly reunited before Harvey was forced to relocate to Northern India, to fill a Commander’s position. Shortly after he left Lorraine was overcome by a feeling of unease which threatened to swamp her at 5 o’clock one Sunday night. This anxiety did not abate as she arrived at the Ministry on Monday to find a telegram on her desk at 10am. The missive read: Deeply distressed to inform you that your husband Wing Commander Harley Stumm DFC was killed in an aircraft accident while on active service with 45 Squadron at 5pm on 13 May 1945. Years later, Stumm noted in her memoir: ‘I still believe that in his last moments of consciousness Harley was trying to say “Goodbye – I love you”‘. [7]

Following the tragedy of Harley’s death, Lorraine and Sherry based themselves in Sydney where Lorraine’s sister Kate was living with her family. As the war came to an end, Stumm was seconded to serve as a war correspondent once more with her coverage of the Japanese surrender. Her plans encountered a significant setback when she contracted pneumonia and pleurisy. On account of her ill-health, Lorraine missed the Japanese surrender aboard the Missouri by two days. It was, she later reflected, ‘the greatest disappointment of my career as a journalist.’ Nevertheless, Stumm arrived in Tokyo in time to be the first Australian woman to witness the devastation of Hiroshima six weeks after the atomic bomb had been dropped.

Stumm spent a month in Tokyo, and took twice as long to return home via Japan, Okinawa, Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila, Borneo, and finally, Darwin. After the war, she met General McArthur once again when he awarded her the Asiatic Pacific Service Star for services as a war correspondent in New Guinea. As such, Stumm was one of only two women war correspondents to be decorated in the south-west.

This entry was researched and written by Isobel Prowse.

Published resources

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A Handful of Hacks, Sekuless, Peter, 1999

Newspaper Article
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Adventurous mum was first female war correspondent, Dwyer, Nan

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
The Women's Pages: Australian Women and Journalism since 1850, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2008, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html

Author Details
Barbara Lemon

Created 6 September 2007
Last modified 31 July 2015