Entry type: Person
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Riggs, Shirley Patricia (Pat)

(1921 - 1998)

Born	19210221, Neutral Bay New South Wales Australia
Died	19980312, Port Macquarie New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Councillor, Editor, Journalist, Print journalist

Summary

Patricia Riggs became a cadet journalist on the *Macleay Argus* at the age of thirty-five. She went on to win two Walkley awards for provincial journalism and eventually became editor of the newspaper. She was a fighter for Aboriginal advancement long before the cause was a popular one.

After retiring as editor, she became a Shire Councillor in 1983, a position she held until 1991.

Details

In 1985 Pat Riggs, former journalist for and editor of Kempsey's daily newspaper, *The McLeay Argus*, praised the work of the team she used to manage, and the efforts of the regional press in general, bemoaning their lack of recognition by their city colleagues. 'I would say,' she wrote in response to questions from an historian researching the history of the Walkley Awards;

'that this community has been given better information on national stories occurring in its boundaries than any emanating from the metropolitan press. Rural press -responsible rural press – does not engage in top-of-the-head slovenliness. If the editorial team is strong, innovative, co-operative, loyal, honest, self-critical and industrious, rural journalism is a daily challenge to excellence (provided management keeps its interfering claws to itself). In fact, it puzzles me that, when it comes to assessing the role of the country journalist, his peers (read AJA) rate him nil on the Richter scale.'

Pat Riggs was a firm believer in the importance of a strong rural press that was not only relevant to the local communities it serviced but vital to the task of keeping the metropolitan dailies honest and accountable to regional interests. She spent her whole career as a journalist committed to these tasks, never leaving the regional paper she started on. This was not through want of offers; after she won her second Walkley Award for feature writing in a provincial newspaper in 1966 (she won the same award the previous year) the metropolitan papers showed a lot of interest. Pat, however, turned them down, believing, no doubt with some justification, that to accept would be to confine herself to the women's pages, or writing social notes. Men still got the meaty work in the city news rooms. She was happy to stay where she thought the work was more interesting and where she could have a greater impact. Two Prodi Awards for regional journalism (1968 and 1970) and a Rural Press Award (1980) later, along with the numerous awards the paper won when she was editor, and community recognition as the Kempsey Citizen of the Year in 1981, her retirement year, would suggest that her impact was profound.

Born in Sydney in 1921, Pat Riggs was a latecomer to journalism, having had a host of work experience locally, interstate and abroad before starting at the Argus at the age of 34 in 1955. Upon completing secondary school she received secretarial training and used these qualifications to get work at the Kempsey radio station 2KM. After working there for two years, in 1941 she moved to Sydney and worked in the publicity department of the American Film Company, United Artists. When Japan bombed Pearl Harbour, Pat put her age up and enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service. By May 1942, Corporal Riggs was editing the fortnightly paper for army women 'The Weekly Whine' and the monthly army production 'Off Parade'. In August 1944 Lieutenant Riggs was appointed second in command of the army propaganda unit Number 1 Broadcasting Control Unit. As well as managing administrative duties in the unit, Pat was in charge of the women's section, which meant she collected suitable script material, conducted interviews, and wrote, edited and cast the dramatic plays for broadcast. She even acted in and narrated some of the productions. As well as infecting her with the journalism bug, her work in this unit cemented her reputation as a good media performer. After she was demobilised in 1946, she worked on radio in Perth for roughly three years, before returning to Kempsey en route to a two year working holiday in Britain and Continental Europe. Pat returned to Australia in 1953 and took over the running of a newsagency in Bowraville that was owned by her father. When this was sold she had a short stint at factory work before successfully applying for the job of looking after the women's section of the Argus in Kempsey. At 34 years of age, she was the oldest cadet on record. She rose through the ranks to become editor, retiring from this post in 1981 at the age of 60. She continued her association with the paper through a weekly column which ran well into the 1990s. Pat Riggs was nothing if not dedicated to her local paper and community.

Pat appeared to compensate for her late arrival to journalism with an almost obsessive dedication to the task at hand, an obsessiveness that she demanded, some might say unreasonably, from all those who worked with her. Her words of advice to students at Mitchell College are suggestive of the expectations she had for those around her:

'Journalism is a laborious business, one that should be reserved only for those who regard it as a vocation. Every line of your copy, every word, sub-heading and heading and every minute spent preparing the product from the raw material should be handled with anxious loving care, for journalism is a craft and those who practice it must love it beyond all else, even a personal life.'

Not everyone was prepared to forego everything for journalism, and according to one former colleague, Pat could be very hard on those who weren't; she was capable of reducing staff to tears with a single lash of her tongue. She was very competitive and would stop for no-one when on the scent of a story, a quality admired by editors. (She is said to have pushed a male reporter out of a helicopter just before take-off in order to get a view of flood waters one year.) She would weigh up all the available evidence before formulating her views but once they were established, she was unmovable, a characteristic that made her very unpopular with some of her readers and colleagues and nearly saw her lose her job one year. (She decided not to quit because she couldn't imagine life without work at the Argus.) She was quick tempered, did not suffer fools, could be extremely cruel to lesser intellects than her own, was an incredibly hard task master and could be incredibly difficult to get on with. Those who crossed her might well have said that those were her good qualities!

Having said that, Pat was also very loyal to those friends and family in her corner and she was generous to a fault to those in need. She had a wicked sense of humour, no better illustrated than by the April Fools Day joke she played (with the help of editorial staff and local radio station 2KM) on April 1, 1969. At the height of Cold War tensions, Pat wrote a story about the arrival of the ten vessels from the Russian merchant fleet taking refuge at Trial Bay, on the coast near Kempsey. Two hundred of the crew of the ship the Joker had jumped overboard, fearful that Australian authorities would shoot them as spies. Sailors from the pride of the fleet, the Looflirpa, planned to do the same. The story was accompanied by a doctored

photograph that featured pictures of Titanic, the Bounty and other highly recognisable vessels crammed into Trial Bay. Unfortunately for Pat, the trick worked a too well. Concerned citizens from around the district rushed to the scene, with clothes, blankets and food, to provide comfort to the deserters, only to find themselves duped. Representatives of the Salvation Army were particularly peeved to have spent the cost of a taxi fare and demanded reimbursement from the paper. Pat was forced to lay low for a while, but the story made news around the world and was reported in Poland and several South American countries.

Pat's fanaticism may have made her difficult at times but it also produced some excellent journalism. She was the first person to win successive Walkley Awards for provincial news feature writing and, at the time, the only woman to have ever won two awards. Her winning stories 'The world seeks space-age minerals from the Macley' in 1965, and reports on flood mitigation work being undertaken in the region in 1966, focused attention on the problem of balancing environmental issues against the needs of employment in regional Australia, well before these concerns were on the national agenda. Sandmining in the area, for minerals such as rutile and zircon (used in materials developed for spaceflight) would bring extraordinary economic benefit to the community – but at what environmental impact? In a thoroughly researched article, Riggs made the needs of the space-age relevant to the local community. Pat herself said that the 'story became the first comprehensive account of beach-mining, and certainly demolished insularity in this neck of the woods.' As an editor, she continued the task of providing reliable information to the local community. The citation accompanying the 1981 Rural Bank award for leadership and involvement in community affairs claimed that '*The McLeay Argus* illustrates how responsible and vocal journalism can focus attention on important issues, enabling free and reasonable debate to educate the community in the opportunities available to settle a dispute or solve a problem'.

Pat was not only a journalist who could 'do' she was one who could teach. She excelled as a trainer, a fact attested to by her peers and trainees alike. When she retired the president of the northern branch of the Australian Journalists' Association remarked that 'if all journalists were as well trained as those trained by Pat Riggs the news industry would have few problems.' Cadets who came under her tutelage were in demand and she was happy to see them leave the nest, a fact that frustrated her superiors who wanted to get value from them before they left! Tony Vermeer, now editor in chief of AAP was the final cadet she trained before retirement. 'She managed to imbue in the people who went through under her all the best qualities of journalism. She persuaded them to her view that it was a noble profession. She also really believed that the best journalism was practiced at a community level. A journalist or media outlet had to respond and live and breathe in its own community. …I will remember her very fondly; she was a great influence on my career.'

Pat's journalism and personal life reveals a confusing blend of opinions and attitudes. She couldn't abide by girly-girls and secretaries, held generally conservative political views but firmly believed in a woman's right to choose when it came to abortion rights and refused to be silent about domestic violence issues. She never used the label feminist to describe herself, but she lamented that women did not play a bigger role in public life, particularly at a local government level. She was deeply concerned about the state of the local environment but had no time for environmentalists and other 'trendies'. She liked men (was engaged three times but never married) but when it came to their workplace stamina, she thought they were wimps. One thing upon which she was consistently staunch was her attitude to local Aboriginal people, who always knew that they would get a fair hearing from her, as a journalist and local councillor. She used the pages to fight for aboriginal advancement and resigned from the international women's organisation Quota for several years when admission was refused to a respected Aboriginal friend.

Perhaps it was because Pat had always worked so hard that she didn't recognise the signs of her own mortality. Early in March 1998, after taking a walk around the coastal village of Crescent Head, where she lived, she complained that she felt a bit tired. Within days she was in hospital, having been diagnosed with aggressive leukaemia. She died within a week of being first diagnosed, on March 12th 1998. The shock of losing her was enormous to her family, a brother, twin sister and their respective families, and friends. The community mourned a person who would be happily remembered as 'a person who comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable'. A perpetual award for the best cadet journalist in the region is named in her honour.

Events

1965 - 1965
Best Provincial Newspaper Story, Macleay Argus, Kempsey

1966 - 1966
Best Provincial Newspaper Story, Macleay Argus, Kempsey

Published resources

Journal Article
Obituaries, 1998

Book
The Walkley Awards : Australia's best journalists in action, Hurst, John, 1988

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

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Private hands (These records may not be readily available)
Papers of Patricia Riggs

National Archives of Australia, Sydney Office
London and American letters - Women's Session scripts

Women's Broadcast scripts incorporating scripts for the 'Women's Session'

Australian War Memorial, Research Centre
[Broadcasting - General:] Australian Broadcasting Control Unit - "The Service Women's Half Hour"

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