Entry type: Person
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Brebner, Grace Elizabeth

(1914 - 1984)

Born	19140101, Joyce's Creek Victoria Australia
Died	19840704, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Police commissioner, Police officer

Summary

Grace Elizabeth Brebner (QPM) achieved many ‘firsts’ during her policing career, which began in 1942. She was the first police woman to pass her police driving test, the first female detective in Australia, and, in 1973, the first police woman in Victoria to be awarded the Queen’s Police Medal (QPM).

Brebner was Officer in Charge of Women Police from 1956 until she retired in 1974. ‘Policing is not a glamour job,’ she said when she retired, and you ‘need to be able to put things out of your mind after work’, to do it well. But for any drawbacks encountered, she assured that there were many, many rewards. ‘I can’t imagine anything in the way of a job that would have been more satisfying and interesting over the years’.

Details

Born in Joyce’s Creek, Victoria in 1914, Grace Brebner spent her early years in central Victoria before her family moved to a farm near Mildura, in the Wimmera. As a young adult, she moved to Melbourne where she worked in sales and in cafes. ‘I used to earn 12/6 ($1.25) a week. But it was obvious there wasn’t much future in it, even after I became a manager,’ she said. ‘Then I read an article about policewomen. It sounded interesting, so I applied.’ Combined with the encouragement of a policeman and his wife, who she had been boarding with, this was all she needed to set her course. ‘One day I just thought I would like the police life.’

This was in 1939, and there had only been eight Victorian policewomen appointed to this point, with a waiting list of 300 women. It was three and a half years before her application was accepted, but for the 28 year old woman described as ‘5’5? tall with blue eyes, light brown hair, medium complexion, weighing 9 st 2 lb, and of ‘good’ appearance’, the wait was worth it. She became the 14th woman inducted to the Victorian Police service overall.

Brebner wasn’t there long before the praise and commendations started to accumulate. In her first two years she was commended alongside two constables for work resulting in a conviction for a man for offences against the Black Marketing Act. In April 1945 she was commended with 5 other policewomen for having ‘successfully cleared up a bad case of murder’. In 1947, she was commended with four others for the role she played in ‘a delicate investigation’ that resulted in the conviction of two backyard abortionists. She was described as someone who was ‘very adaptable’ and who possessed ‘plenty of initiative and common sense’. Her ‘uncanny ability’ at disguise, and staying undetected during undercover work brought successful conclusions to many a case.

In 1950, Grace Brebner was appointed to the Criminal Investigation Branch (CIB) and one year later became the first female detective in Australia after being first policewoman to qualify at the Detective Training School. She was second in the class: only 1.5 points behind the dux. She was not long in the post when she was required to capture her own quarry! Described by the press as ‘Melbourne’s first “high- heeled” detective’, Detective Brebner was on her way to work at Russell Street Police Station from her home in East Melbourne when she was accosted by an alleged sex offender. She tackled the man, who broke away. After a 400-yards chase during which she caught him again, only to have him break away again, several men intercepted the offender and assisted her in the arrest. She was known to have ‘acquitted herself remarkably well’, while she was in ‘the branch’.

Because she was the only woman detective, naturally, she always worked with male partners, many of whom could not accept the fact of a woman detective and gave her ‘a hard time’. One of those who did enjoy working with her, Reg

Henderson, said that because they both tended to blend into the background, they achieved a lot of success ‘because nobody took any notice of us two in the car’. Henderson and Brebner were often called to duty at functions at Government House, to keep an eye out, as a form of security. She would buy ball gowns and dress like the guests, which was a definite perk of the posting. ‘Often there was a barrister or judge I knew from the courts,’ she said, ‘who would ask me to dance’.

In October 1953, Brebner was appointed to the squad tasked with solving the brutal murder of teenager Shirley Collins, whose body was found dumped at Mt Martha a month earlier. In 2019, the murder remained unsolved. It was the first time in police history that a woman detective had been assigned to a homicide squad to investigate a murder and as such, made the headlines. Many police and members of the public were still of the view that women had no place in investigating these sorts of violent crimes, but the management view was that Brebner’s gift with people and communication suited her to the task of interviewing all of the Collins’ friends and the teenagers she had met at dance parties.

After working as the only woman in CIB for 6 years, Brebner returned to the Women Police Division in 1956, promoted to the position of Sub-Officer-in-charge. Upon arriving back to this Division, Brebner noted that police cars were spare and that policewomen were banned from using them. She sought out procedures for a police driving licence and applied for the test. She later discovered the examiner had been told to ‘fail her if you can – we don’t want any women driving our bloody cars’. She passed, and policewomen have been driving police cars ever since as well as police motorbikes and riding police horses!

In 1957 Brebner was presented with a Chief Commissioners Certificate for her ‘qualities of leadership and her standards of efficiency.’ In 1971 she became the first policewoman in Vic to reach Inspector rank. Two years later she became the first policewoman in Vic to receive Queens Police Medal.

Grace Brebner QPM retired in 1974, and when asked to reflect upon what special qualities were required to be a policewoman she insisted that ‘common sense’, ‘an interest in people’ and the capacity to ‘put things out of your mind after work’ were essential. When asked if being a policewoman made women hard, her response was interesting. ‘No, it is like children watching television,’ she said. ‘They become accustomed to the violence and adjust themselves to it’. An experienced woman police officer, remembering Grace Brebner in 2015, wasn’t so sure that being a trailblazing woman in the Victorian police force didn’t leave her with a hard edge. “She was a bitch, but she had to be,” said the officer, who called Brebner “Aunty Grace”. Policewomen during the 1960s and 70s had close relationships because there were so few of them. The older policewomen without children were often called “Aunty” by those coming up behind. Grace Brebner was one of those Aunties who made sure the next generation of women would be able to take the heat.

Looking forward to having some ‘lazy time’ in retirement, Brebner planned on going for a drive to visit her brother in Queensland. She also planned on staying involved in ‘women’s and children’s welfare and mental health organisations.’ She vowed to ‘write a book, enjoy her house and garden in Mitcham, keep the bird bath filled, read, shop and ‘be available for anyone (at Russell Street)’.

She died in 1984, before she had a chance to write that book. For there to be no biography of someone who so profoundly shaped policing for the women who followed her is a crime worth investigating.

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