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JESSIE MARY VASEY C.B.E. 1897-1966

“Yet it is no mean destiny to be called upon to go on for a man who laid down his life, as Christ did, to save mankind from the power of the Beast. Our husbands fought against hopeless odds and overcame them; we can do the same for, from their sacrifice, will come our strength. It rests with us, the war widows, to make our Guild a power in the land” - so wrote Jessie Mary Vasey, the founder of the War Widows' Guild of Australia, after the death of her husband Major-General George Vasey.

Jessie Mary Halbert was born at Roma, Queensland on 19 October 1897. Jessie was the eldest of three children, all girls.

Her father Joseph Halbert, originally from Victoria, was a pastoralist with a large property at Mitchell where Jessie spent her early years. She shared her father's love of the bush, and particularly horses and in some ways took the role of a son. Jessie was always close to her father, not only did she ride well but was very knowledgeable about horses and learned how to deal in real estate as her father was interested in buying and selling pastoral properties. The family returned to Victoria in 1911.

Jessie's early schooling in Queensland had been as a boarder at the Moreton Bay Girls' High School with particular emphasis on the classics, History, English and Literature. The family were strongly Presbyterian but in 1913 Jessie became a weekly boarder at the Methodist Ladies' College, Kew for a period of three years and was made a prefect in her third year. She matriculated in 1914 and stayed on to do an Honours Course, gaining a 1st class Honours in English and 3rd Class in History.

A little uncertain of her direction after leaving school, she studied English as a single subject at Melbourne University in 1916 and commenced an Arts Course in 1918 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree with 1st Class Honours in April 1921.

The Halbert family lived in Kew just around the corner from the Vasey family, and Jessie met Marjorie Vasey when they were both students at M.L.C., and they remained life long friends. It was through her friendship with Marjorie that Jessie met George Alan Vasey who was attracted by her confidence, intelligence and strong personality. George Alan Vasey and Jessie Mary Halbert were married on 17 May 1921, a month after she graduated from University.

Both George and Jessie were forceful personalities but intelligent enough to respect each other's opinions.

They purchased a 3 bedroom villa in Kew on a War Service Loan and their first child George Halbert Vasey was born in 1925. In 1928 they sold the villa and sailed for India for a 2 year period, returning again to India in 1934. It was whilst in India that Jessie was able to develop her sense of colour and pursue her interest in the exquisite tapestry work of the poverty-stricken women of India. This was to play an important role in her future life.

When the Vaseys returned to Australia in March 1937 they purchased a property at Wantirna, at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges, this property when purchased was without sewerage and electricity. Their second son, Robert, had been born in 1934 and the family settled into a comfortable life of an Army Officer and family in peace time. They were a happy family and the relationship between parents and children was liberal and relaxed.

Her father had died some years earlier and had been ruined financially during the Depression. Her middle sister Doris had married Hamilton Sleigh, owner of the Golden Fleece petrol empire, and her youngest sister, Thelma had not married and had an antiques business in Toorak. Doris had an extensive wardrobe, especially hats, and it was to Doris that Jessie turned when she needed hats for special occasions.

Jessie at 42 is described as a compelling woman--and all woman. A bit above medium height, her stand, posture and walk were regal. People turned to look after her as she went down the street. The strong colours she had grown to love in India dominated her wardrobe whether they were fashionable or not -- she wore purple when no one else did - her hats were always large and eye-catching. These colours accentuated her pale magnolia-toned skin and her eyes were of the deepest blue which reflected every phase of her mood - whilst people differ as to whether she was beautiful, they were consistent in saying she was unforgettable.

During the five years of war she shared her life by letter with her husband and working at home looking after their two sons and taking an active role in the AIF Women's Association. This Association was her first direct involvement with a body designed to serve.

The Legacy Club carried out some aspects of social welfare which would otherwise have fallen to the Repatriation Commission who issued to Legacy the addresses of the newly widowed. Legacy approached the AIF Women's Association to assist with their work. It was in this work that Jessie Vasey had personal contact with these new widows.

Major-General George Vasey and Jessie had often talked of the plight of women in war. Jessie from the angle of the wife left with growing family as well as from the angle of the woman who came to the AIF Women's Association for assistance, George from the angle of men at war, looking back to home and wondering how home things were. Just before General Vasey set off for New Guinea he visited the widow of a man whom he'd known to find her living in 2 rooms with 2 children and incipient tuberculosis. He vowed then, "When we've rid of the yellow men, Jess, we'll do something for these women". He also told his wife that before a show the men come to him time and time again and say, "Sir, if anything happens to me you'll see that my wife and kids are all right?". Another time he said "Jessie, stick to the war widows and when I come back you shall have every atom of help I can give" Major-General Vasey did not come back. Jessie Mary Vasey was now a war widow herself.

Mrs. Vasey believed in self-help, and there is little doubt that the great energy she then displayed in setting up the War Widows' Craft Guild - the original name of the Guild - was part of her release from the depression she felt after her husband's death.

To achieve help for the War Widows Mrs. Vasey knew she would need the support of many. If women were to have impact on government and improvement of their economic status they must firstly be welded together. She was aware of the pressure group of the RSL and what they could achieve and she chose to make her women a pressure group. Any campaign costs money and Mrs. Vasey had friends in high places as well as wealthy friends. She was a strategist and strategically placed to operate; a talent used frequently in attaining benefits for war widows.

There were many areas that needed addressing, housing, but this was a long term goal; economic improvements and benefits. The immediate fight must be for an adequate pension; new skills for widows so that they could supplement their pensions, especially skills that could be utilised at home; and Section 43 of the Repatriation Act, which gave the Board the authority to reject or stop a pension even on the word of one officer, without substantiated evidence to prove such.

The initial move was to apply for registration of the proposed War Widows' Craft Guild with the Patriotic Funds Act - the first application was rebuffed, it took patience, bullying and even a direct volley at a male politician before the approval was given. The patronising politician said 'But dear lady, why should widows need to organise at all?' A. 'Because we believe in self-help' 'But we'll do it all for you....' "And what, snapped Mrs. Vasey, qualifies you to decide what women need? Just as returned men understand each other's problems so do war widows. Only a widow knows what a widow feels'. The man was taken aback and when he looked unconvinced, she added wickedly "I happen to know that you can't even get along with your own wife" Mrs. Vasey had already discovered that not all men, even returned men, saw the widow's plight as her husband had seen it.

There was much preliminary work to be done before announcing a meeting of Victorian war widows to be held in the Assembly Hall, Collins Street, Melbourne, on 22 November 1945. As well as the newspaper advertisements Mrs. Vasey wrote a letter and sent an individual copy to 2400 widows in Victoria, it was a long letter with many points which revealed how thoroughly the subject had been researched. The women were asked to come and speak. Very few of these women had heard of Jessie Mary Vasey until they received that letter. The woman they saw and heard on the Assembly dais that afternoon captured them. She spoke without notes and she instilled in them hope, things would be different if they banded together, sought companionship in their shared experiences, became a sisterhood and they believed her. A motion was carried to form themselves in the War Widows' Craft Guild and Mrs. Vasey be President. They were not a union, nor feminists, they were a group of women, unique in the community at that time, banding together for the common good under leadership. Annual joining fee 1/- and open to every widow of the 1939-45 war and every widowed mother who had lost a son in that war - resolutions were passed for the Guild to be a corporate body under the Patriotic Funds Act.

The War Widows Guild on formation did not include the widows of World War 1 this was to come later when they were admitted as Associate Members - which meant they could not hold office

The Commonwealth Reconstruction Training scheme offered to provide qualified instructors for any select course, training allowances were paid for full time course of 30 hours per week and an allowance for 'tools of trade' - work overalls could be claimed. Her first hurdle was to persuade the Repratriation Commission of her proposal to form a craft guild and establish a school under its auspices was successful. She secured the services of the most highly qualified weaver in Australia, Rachel Grieve. Rooms were obtained and painted and weaving, along with other crafts got under way in January 1946.

It took 9 months of conscientious application for a student to become a proficient weaver. In July 1946 arrangements were made with the Red Cross to help finance a day nursery for children from 2 1/2 to 5 years of age - a small charge was made if the mother did not receive the child minding allowance. When there was enough stock she arranged the first of a number of exhibitions at the Melbourne Lower Town Hall - with other crafts as well as weaving on display. By 1950 the Guild had a craft shop in every capital city of Australia as well as still selling through commercial channels.

Mrs. Vasey was busy on matters such as pensions, or that discriminatory way of paying or not paying deceased solders' accrued recreational leave pay; or arguing the case of a 30 hour against a 35 hour working week for the full-time weaving trainee with children - agreed to by the Rehabilitation Scheme but at first disallowed by the Department of Labour and National Service; or in uncovering anomalies and injustices such as the discrimination between war widows and ex-servicemen and women, training under the Scheme. Under post war reconstruction a war widow's pension of £2/10/- was deducted from her training allowance of £3/5/- which was the same as that given to a single girl. If a married man was receiving a pension this was not deducted from his training allowance. It was the area of benefits and justice that she intended the Guild to be heard and in order to achieve the loudest voice, was already working towards a national organisation. Main objectives of the guild "to watch over and protect the interest of war widows; to promote all those matters which shall contribute to the well-being of war widows and their children."

Branches were formed in all States and then branches within States.

In November 1947 the first Federal Conference was held in Melbourne. A Federal Body to be known as War Widows' Guild of Australia was formed and a Federal Council set up consisting of delegates from the State Guilds. Mrs. Vasey was elected President, a position she held until her death.

In July 1947 in Melbourne a rally was held with over 2000 war widows present where several resolutions were passed. This meeting was held 2 days prior to the visit of Lord Montgomery - however the main Melbourne press was to the meeting of the War Widows and details of Lord Montgomery's visit was in an outer press column. The banner from the meeting "War Widows' Craft Guild" was held from windows of the office and when Lord Montgomery passed and saw the banner he stood up and saluted.

National solidarity meant much interstate travelling and private life, even at weekends, was limited. When the Guild purchased a station wagon Mrs. Vasey visited remotely situated widows.

George was 22 and demobbed in 1946 and living with her and Robert, who was 15, came home from school for long weekends and school holidays. She wanted and needed her sons with her even though much of her mental energy was expended on the needs of the war widows. George and Robert helped her in her campaign and were well known to the women at the office - George was fondly referred to as the only honorary male member of the War Widows' Guild.

In 1948 Mrs. Vasey started to think in terms of a housing settlement - first a tiny cottage on her Wantirna property was repaired and made ready for emergencies, later 2 prefabricated Swedish cottages were acquired by the Guild and erected on the Wantirna property. These cottages offered minimal accommodation with bedroom, living room, cooking and shower facilities. Desperate or sick widows were housed here until more suitable and permanent accommodation could be found. Next venture was land at Torquay to build holiday cottages. Financial help was forthcoming from various sources. Caring for the aged was becoming an increasing problem.

By now Mrs. Vasey was talking of women's rights - war widows' rights. She had been raised to be equal and had an education which allowed her to speak her mind, to pursue her life as she saw it. Until her husband's death she saw no reason to fight for the equality. When she confronted men it was not female against male - it was the call of a human for human rights. She had no need to use her sex as a lever though she certainly used her share of personal charm.

In 1947 the Government changed when Robert Menzies came to power. At this time her son Robert was 17 and matriculated from school and was head prefect. The Repatriation Commission stopped Robert's Children's Educational Allowance without advice of why, she faced the Board of 5 men, not only on her own behalf but on behalf of all widows with children. She learned that this allowance was not a right but was a gift which the Board might or might not confer at its pleasure. As she always fought on the front that their husband's lives had earned privileges, not gifts or charity, for their widows, this was particularly offensive. A resolution at the 1950 Conference called for a review of the methods of this body.

It was not generally known that in 1948 she was approached by the Liberal Party to stand for the Senate - after consideration she felt the proposal could harm her organisation by labelling herself as a 'political aspirant'. Later Mr. Menzies himself asked her to stand for parliament, her answer was that she could do more for widows outside of a political party than from within. This was because she had established a power bloc, nor would she be hamstrung by party politics. A campaign was mounted by the War Widows relating to their pensions and was taken up not only in Victoria but other States. When Robert Menzies was returned in May 1951 it was not known how many and what seats were won or lost due to the votes of the war widows, their relations, their friends and well wishers.

In 1951 well aware of the need of the poor, the ill and lonely widows felt that many of their problems could be overcome by providing a decent home within call of their peer group. Tired of battling both State and Federal Governments to build one-person flatettes or building of flats by the War Service Homes Trust they decided "We'll establish our own housing". Mrs Vasey was years ahead of her time, with no formal training in welfare work she could recognise a need and her quick mind saw the obvious solution - an initial approach into housing rather than on-going care.

With £10 in the bank the Guild purchase a property at Hawthorne for £7000 - again her sons helped with the renovations - George was 27 and had a mechanic's job whilst Robert was 20 and working with Hamilton Sleigh in the marketing department. At the 1952 Conference in Adelaide the Premier of South Australia advised that war widows and widows of ex-servicemen were to be given the highest priority from the S.A. Housing Trust Homes.

In 1954 the Menzies Government announced their Aged Persons Homes Act, this was pound for pound subsidy to those approved organisations that would provide accommodation for people in need aged 60 years and over. Mrs. Vasey immediately applied for a grant and because of this prompt response the War Widows Guild of Australia was the first organisation of its kind to receive such a grant from the Department of Social Services. Mrs. Vasey's own approach to housing had to be an imaginative one as there was no established pattern for organisation or government to follow. Mrs. Vasey saw what was needed, she had influence in the right places, was not ashamed to use her friends and had the personal strength and courage to override obstacles. She also saw the benefit to the Guild of having something more permanent than just membership numbers. Numbers could fluctuate but a property base, with its power, would remain. Interstate branches had also moved into property development for their members.

1955 brought health problems for Mrs. Vasey and was her doctor recommended she reduce her work load, but her slackening of duties was infinitesimal though she sometimes directed the guild's affairs from her bed.

The 10th Birthday of the Guild was also a celebration of Mrs. Vasey's 59th Birthday and the guild made a presentation of jewellery, not just as a birthday gift but as a token of appreciation.

In 1953 Mrs. Vasey represented the Guild at the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth and visited French War Widows' Association for an exchange of information.

1957 saw Mrs. Vasey and 2 members of the Guild visit Rome to attend a conference called by International Union of Family Organisations, under the auspices of the United Nations to discuss the subject of 'Problems of Fatherless Families'. Mrs. Vasey again visited London and was received by Her Royal Highness Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent, Patron of the Guild. She returned to Melbourne in February 1958 with many new ideas for caring for the young, housing for the aged and advice that the housing subsidy had risen from £1 - 2. It was then decided to build new flats rather than renovate old buildings into flats and due to the high cost the widows were asked to contribute £500-600 as a 'donation' or a kind of rental in an advance lump sum.

Legal advice was sought for the mushrooming but non-profit housing venture - a trust was set up to give both Guild members and their assets legal protection, it was to be called 'The Vasey Housing Auxiliary (War Widows' Guild) Limited.

Both George and Robert had married and had families, however, in November 1960 tragedy again struck Jessie Mary Vasey - her elder son George died suddenly of an aneurism, he was 35 years old, married and had three young children, 2 girls 3 and 2 and a baby son 3 months. This was accepted as due to war related causes and his widow received a pension. Despite Mrs. Vasey's desire for Angela to stay in Melbourne she moved interstate. Whilst the children called her Granny she was not a sit-on-my-knee grandmother. George's death saw a change in Jessie Vasey, laughter no longer flowed easily.

She swept on with her task, burying memory and hurt in construction plans. Whilst housing was dominant she ensured that welfare work was not interrupted or neglected. A watch had to be kept on any easing of rules or granting of concessions, she was concerned for the disabled - flats with special fittings, etc. The early 1960's were difficult times, Robert was living in Western Australia and Jessie Vasey was diagnosed as suffering from leukemia. Despite bouts in hospital she kept on working and on a visit to Sydney became ill and spent 5 weeks in Concord Repat. Hospital.

In 1963 one of the staff was talking to Sir Robert Menzies and thanking him for giving his time to attend the opening of buildings and he replied 'I would not have dared not to come - I'm terrified of Mrs. Vasey.'

In 1963 Jessie Mary Vasey was awarded the CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours for her work with the Guild.

At the 1963 Conference Mrs. Vasey gave notice that the Guild must start to consider appointing a new National President - this was a warning as she was re-elected for a further term. Vasey Housing Auxiliary had created £1,000,000 of housing, created and run by women for women - the Guild was the only organisation run by women that had taken advantage of the Commonwealth Government's Age Persons Homes Act. The National Conference in 1965 in Melbourne was Mrs. Vasey's last conference.

In December 1965 Mrs. Vasey was again hospitalised for a short period and on discharge returned to the office. She knew the seriousness of her illness but did not accept this, she fought the illness with the same strength that she always fought for what she believed in life, she did not admit her condition to many people, even her doctor was sworn to secrecy, however, she purchased a plot of ground in the Lilydale Cemetery and made arrangements to be buried beside her son.

Mrs. Vasey visited her son Robert, living in Hobart and accepted an invitation to visit the Queensland Guild, after a holiday at Surfers Paradise. She also declared she would go to Cairns to see her husband's grave, she had never looked at his grave, however, she made no arrangements to put her plan into action. She left Queensland with her sister Thelma to drive back to Melbourne in easy stages, at Maclean near Grafton on 22 September 1966 Mrs. Vasey wakened with a severe headache, an hour later she was dead of a cerebral haemorrhage. Her remains were brought back to Melbourne and following a service in the Toorak Presbyterian Church on 27 September she was buried beside her son George. Her son Robert commissioned a plaque for her grave, it depicts a woman leaning forward to other women who clasp children, and who are bowed with grief.

Her other monuments, at the time of her passing, were the varied Guild housing schemes that flourish in all States giving roof and security, at low cost, to many women. These are a monument in concrete to the founder of the War Widows' Guild of Australia, it is the Guild itself that is the spiritual memorial to the memory of Jessie Mary Vasey.

To-day in New South Wales, Vasey Housing consists of 272 units situated in Concord, Epping, Hunters Hill, Lane Cove, Maroubra and Waitara. Prices range from \$50,000 to \$82,400. Vasey Support Services have entered the field of Community Aged Care in Sydney and provides care and assistance for the frail and aged in their own homes.

A group without a spokesperson is a headless body, and powerless. The same situation would apply to to-days war widows if Mrs. Vasey had not dedicated herself to their welfare. It is because of one woman's vision, the Australian war widow, once she is granted a war pension, has security until the day she dies

Acknowledgements

Mavis Thorpe Clarke *No Mean Destiny - The Story of the War Widows' Guild 1945-85.*

David Murray Horner *General Vasey's War* Melbourne University Press 1992