

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

### LILLIAN MAY ARMFIELD

(1884-1971)

#### Australia's First Policewoman

1884	Born 3 December in Mittagong, NSW to Elizabeth (Wright) and George Armfield, a labourer. She was educated locally
1907-1915	Worked as a nurse at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane, NSW
1915	1 July joined the New South Wales Police Force as Probationary Special Constable
1919	Promoted to Special Constable (First Class)
1923	Promoted to Special Sergeant (Third Class)
1943	Promoted to Special Sergeant (First Class)
1947	Awarded the King's Police and Fire Service Medal
1949	Retired from the Police Force Awarded the Imperial Service Medal
1965	NSW Government granted her a special weekly allowance
1971	Died 6 August aged 86 years

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**Lillian May Armfield** joined the New South Police Force in 1915 after working for eight years as a nurse at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane in Sydney. She applied for one of two new positions created under a war time experimental plan to recruit women as police officers. There were over 400 applicants. Lillian, who had been *...favourably recommended by the medical superintendent for her competence, intelligence, patience, and kindness to patients* was recruited as a Probationary Special Constable along with Maud Rhodes (who had to resign in 1922 so she could get married). Lillian was described by her interviewing officer as *...very intelligent, tactful, shrewd, capable. Character undoubtedly good and a very suitable candidate.* Physically she was tall and strong.

The two women received 7/6 per day, with no overtime or expenses and were not given a uniform (there wasn't one until 1948). As the first women employed for police duties in the Commonwealth, they worked with the detectives in the Criminal Investigation Branch (CIB) in their role as 'social and moral guardians' to women and children.

The grudging appointment of two women to the NSW Police Force had finally come about because of pressure from women's organizations; a rush of policemen to enlist for war service; rapidly increasing problems with young women leaving home in search of good times with glamorous young men in uniform, and a consequent upsurge in crime committed by and perpetrated upon women and children; and a sympathetic forward-thinking Police Commissioner James Mitchell. However, as their recruitment was always considered 'only an experiment', the women's appointment was only as 'special constables'. Women did not gain full police status until 1965!

At the end of her probationary year Lillian was enrolled as a fully fledged member of the Police Force, but only after she signed an agreement which denied her the right to compensation if she was injured while performing her duties or any right to

superannuation upon her retirement! She also had to take out her own life insurance policy. However, she was still expected to work to the same rules as her male colleagues.

She dealt specifically with matters involving the welfare of with women and children, focusing on social and preventative aspects (such as convincing runaway girls to return to the safety of their homes, and warning impressionable young women of the physical dangers of associating with known criminals). However, these associations often led to her involvement in more dangerous work such as murder, rape, drug running, kidnapping etc. and she also worked undercover with the detectives, acting as a decoy or gaining entry to premises subsequently raided by the men. At all times, she was expected to fade quietly away when her role was completed and always avoid any publicity!

Needless to say, promotion was slow. It was eight years before she became Special Sergeant (Third Class), and she did not achieve First Class status until 1943, six years before her retirement at 65. At that time she was also Officer-in-Charge of the Women's Police Section which totalled 31 members.

In 1947 Lillian became the first woman in the British Empire to be awarded the King's Police and Fire Medal for outstanding service. She was a dedicated, courageous and compassionate pioneer in a very challenging field.

When she retired in 1949, after 34 years in the Police Force, the Lord Mayor of Sydney presented her with an illuminated address and £200. The Police Department allowed her £455/6/5 in lieu of extended leave of absence, but she received no superannuation. In 1965 she was granted a special allowance of £3/10/0 per week by the government of NSW but had to give up her 10/- a week old age pension.

Lillian lived at the Methodist Hostel, Leichhardt in her latter years and in 1971 died in Lewisham Hospital aged 86 years. She was cremated, and her ashes placed in the Columbarium at Bowral General Cemetery.

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[www.policensw.com/info/history/h7a.html](http://www.policensw.com/info/history/h7a.html)

Valuable assistance from staff of the NSW Police Association, the Justice and Police Museum, and several current and retired police officers

\*Held in JSNWL

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