

# THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN SKYSISTERS

## **FIRST DESCENT BY A WOMAN.**

The first descent by a woman **from a balloon** in Australia was made at the Newcastle, New South Wales, racecourse on Saturday **8 February 1890** by a member of an American acrobatic company.

She was one of two sisters in the company, who both jumped during their tour of Australia. Their name was **Freitas** but they performed under the name Van Tassell. The sister who carried out the first jump by a woman in Australia was called **Valerie Van Tassell**. Her elder sister, Gladys, made a descent at the Newcastle Cricket Ground two weeks later.

The Van Tassells continued jumping up the east coast of Australia as far as North Queensland.

In Townsville, members of the Queensland Defence Force who were at a training camp in Townsville, together with the commandant of the force, Colonel French, attended a descent at Acacia Vale on Sunday 22 June 1890.

Major des Voeux of the Force presented Miss Van Tassell with a bouquet before her ascent. The Queensland Defence Force band provided accompanying music.

The issues in relation to the descent were discussed in the Queensland newspapers, including the Brisbane Courier, the Townsville Bulletin and the Queenslander, and debated in the Queensland Parliament. What aroused opponents of the spectacle was that it was on a Sunday and the spectators, including members of the Defence Force, paid a shilling to attend.

It seems likely that opposition to the descent was rooted in more than opposition to desecration of the Sabbath by a commercial activity, as this excerpt from the Brisbane Courier of Thursday 26 June 1890 indicates:

“Had the Government dealt wisely with our appeal of a few weeks ago, touching female parachuting in Brisbane, the colony would have been spared the scandal of the Sunday exhibition just made at Townsville.

“The old adage, familiar to our copywriting boyhood, that evil communications corrupt good manners, has seldom been more forcibly illustrated.

“Innocent exhibitions might easily be tolerated on Sunday; yet these are the very exhibitions which would shrink from presenting themselves. Exhibitions on the contrary which are inherently demoralising, and objectionable therefore on any day of the week, are precisely those which come boldly forward to outrage the sacred convictions of the people.”

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### JEAN BURNS.

The first woman to jump **from an aeroplane** on Australian soil was Miss Jean Burns (born December 1919), of Rathdown Street, East Brunswick, Melbourne.

She made her first descent at Essendon aerodrome on **21 November 1937** from the DH4 aeroplane 'Spirit of Melbourne' at a height of **3,200 feet**. She was 17 years old.

The aircraft belonged to Aerat Passenger Flying (Essendon) Pty Ltd and was piloted by Howard Morris. After making the prescribed three freefall jumps she received the approval of the Civil Aviation Board as a parachutist, "provided the parachute is folded by a person who holds a licence for that purpose" (SMH 22 and 29 November 1937; Argus, 22 November 1937 and 19 January 1938).

"Miss Burns had to wait eighteen months before she could gain permission from the Civil Aviation authorities to make a jump. 'They thought I was much too young, and I also found it difficult to get a parachute. They cost about 80 pounds.'" (Argus, 23 February 1938, p.8).

"Miss Burns said that she found the first few seconds after she left the aeroplane were the most exciting. 'There is a wild rush of air on your body as you hurl downwards until the rip-cord is released, and then after a bounce you just float steadily downwards. There is always a bounce when the 'chute opens, owing to the elasticity of the silken cords.'

"During her five previous jumps, Miss Burns has left the plane from heights varying from 3,200 feet to 1,500 feet. After making her last leap she did not pull the rip cord until she had dropped nearly 500 feet, which rather worried some of her spectators.

"'Until I am down to about 200 feet there is a beautiful floating sensation, and then suddenly the ground seems to rush up and meet me. Some parachutists can land on their feet, but usually I take a fall. The landing speed is about twelve miles an hour, and the jar is about the same as you would get if you jumped off a fifteen-foot wall,' said Miss Burns.

'In the air you can lose height more rapidly by pulling a handful of cords which causes the 'chute to sideslip. There are four red cords which you can pull on the ground to spill the air out so you are not dragged too far.'"

"Mr. Felix Mueller, a licenced parachutist, instructed Miss Burns, and supervises the folding of her parachute, which is a very important item - a twisted cord or a wrong fold of silk would probably mean tragedy." (Argus, 23 February 1938, p.8)

Jean Burns also had a pilot's licence and took up jumping to raise the funds to buy an aeroplane.

Other jumpers of the period were Bruce Shipway (1929), Stanley Thomas (1930-32), L G Diamond (1932-33) and Florence Martindale (23) of Dimboola, Victoria, a telephonist at Horsham, who received her parachutist's licence in 1939. She gained her pilot's licence earlier in 1939.