

RED, WHITE AND BLUE DAY - WOMEN IN THE ARMY

Women had served unofficially with the British Army in its modern form since its establishment following the restoration of King Charles II. However, there was substantial resistance to the employment of women in what were perceived to be 'male' jobs.

The work of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War (1854-56) and in its aftermath finally saw the establishment of a military nursing service in 1881. The British Army's experience in the Boer War of 1899-1901 led to the formation of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) with a supporting Reserve service – the Territorial Force Nursing Services (TFNS). Nursing was regarded as a suitable caring career for women who otherwise should be sheltered from the horrors of war. Those making the decision had clearly never worked in a military hospital dealing with badly wounded men – a calling that required considerable courage and stoicism, on top of intellectual ability.

It would take the extremes of the manpower needs of the Great War (First World War 1914-18) to force the British military services to employ women in uniform in non-nursing roles. On the outbreak of the war, many privately raised nursing and medical voluntary organisations offered female labour in support of the war effort. Much of that support was rejected by the military authorities and, consequently, the largely all-female organisations supported allied armies. The Serbians, the French, the Belgians all accepted British women's organisations close to the front. The British Army only accepted the volunteers of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (British Red Cross and St John Ambulance) and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) in support of the nursing and medical services. Other women's organisations were expected to provide their support on the home front.

By 1916 it was evident that the volunteer Army raised early in the war was insufficient to meet the needs of the Army in an extended world-wide conflict. Conscription was introduced, initially for single men but soon after for married men, between the ages of 18-41. These men were to be replaced in the workplace by women, albeit there were exemptions for men with specialist skills. Women stepped into professions and industries ranging from surgeons and bus drivers, to munitions workers and police officers. Organisations such as the Women's Legion were permitted to supply cooks as the Army ran short of males. But there was still resistance to the idea that women might serve in uniform in more traditional 'male' roles.

Persistent pressure from a number of women from the ruling classes – many who had been engaged in the various groups campaigning for female suffrage – helped convince the military authorities that women could usefully serve with the Army. However, it is worth reiterating that the working class women who stepped into some of the hardest manual roles in industry were equally responsible for demonstrating the willingness and capacity for women to take on male roles.

In December 1916 the War Office decided to investigate using women in uniform to replace men in non-combatant roles such as cooks, drivers, clerks and storemen. Finally, on 7 February 1917, Mona Chalmers Watson, the sister of the Director of Recruiting, Brigadier Sir Auckland Geddes, was appointed as head of the new Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). Mrs Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, a scientist but from an upper-class family, was appointed to head of the WAAC in France, on the recommendation of Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson.¹

¹ Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson, CBE was a medical pioneer, a member of the Women's Social and Political Union, a suffragette, and social reformer. She was the daughter of the founding medical pioneer Elizabeth Garrett Anderson – source Wikipedia.

The WAAC came into formal being on 28 February 1917 although the Army still did not recognise the uniformed Corps as soldiers. They were not permitted to wear military ranks, but had equivalent rank designations authorised, and little if no authority over soldiers. The WAAC adopted the niceties of military discipline – saluting and standing for superior officers – even though the male officers apparently found this to be difficult and embarrassing!

Women were recruited for domestic work and cookery, mechanics and drivers, telegraphist and telephonists, postal workers, clerks, typists, accountants, grooms, shoemakers, bakers and to tend graves. Latterly a small number of female linguists were employed on intelligence duties analysing documents taken from German prisoners of war. Unlike many of the voluntary organisations that only recruited women from the middle and upper classes, the WAAC took in all classes of women and promoted on merit rather than by social class.

In France, the women of the WAAC lived in Nissan huts and bell tents throughout the year like their male counterparts. Although none served in front line trenches, they were subject to the same risks of death and injury behind the line in locations subject to artillery fire and air raids. This sharing of the privations and risks with the male soldiers was sufficient to impress the men alongside whom the WAAC served. One commander of a Machine Gun School in France was so keen he taught his WAAC cooks to fire the weapons. Whilst some were unable to cope with the death and destruction, most women 'soldiered on' and a number were awarded the Military Medal for their bravery in the face of enemy attacks.

Despite the social attitudes of the era, and concern that many of the WAAC would be 'taken advantage of', few unmarried WAAC became pregnant. Indeed, military policy was almost enlightened with WAAC and soldiers allowed to mix off duty, play sports together and 'walk out' (date). This comparatively liberal position didn't extend to allowing WAAC and soldiers of different ranks to mix – Private soldiers had to mix with WAAC Workers, and officers with WAAC Administrators.

By January 1918 there were 22,479 WAAC with about 5,000 serving in France. When the last major German offensive (The *Kaiserslacht*) began in March 1918 it was recognised that the sudden removal of the WAAC from the Line of Communications in France would substantially weaken the Army. Large parts of the British front were under pressure and major formations withdrawing at a time that it needed its Line of Communications organisation to be fully effective. The WAAC remained at their posts and performed their duties to the highest standards. On 19 April 1918 the contribution of the WAAC was recognised with the Queen becoming the Corps commandant in Chief. The WAAC became Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC).

The tide of the war turned for the Allies in August 1918 beginning with the battle of Amiens. After the 100 Days campaign the armistice was signed and hostilities ceased on 11 November 1918. 188 WAAC and QMAAC lost their lives whilst serving in uniform. The QMAAC continued to serve into 1919 but, like many other temporary corps and regiments, the Corps was disbanded. Some 57,000 women served in the WAAC and QMAAC over four years. Many returned home and were expected to resume their pre-war roles and to cede jobs back to the returning male soldiers. However, many continued to break into male dominated civilian professions and trades. Limited female suffrage was granted – this step towards full voting rights for women was in great part down to the role played by women in all parts of society in winning the war.

With the growth of Fascism and the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, it became apparent to many that a second war on the European continent was highly likely. Many of the former leadership of the WAAC and QMAAC started organising a new women's voluntary unit as early as 1934. However, despite the overt policy of appeasement of Neville Chamberlain's government, the War Office restored the women's services in preparation for the outbreak of

war. On 9 September 1938 the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) was formed. Once again the organisation was to be a non-combatant corps and therefore not permitted to carry or fire weapons. Consequently the role of women in the armed forces would initially be restricted to the roles undertaken in the First World War.

The 20,000 women recruited before the war were soon to be joined by volunteers after war was declared. This time the Army was not quite prepared for the new intake of females – they had no specific roles and jobs to go to, and often sleeping accommodation had to be improvised. One unlucky group ended in a hotel that had been condemned because of an insect infestation – the ladies were initially suspected of having measles because of the bug bites. Many of the women had never been away from home and found it something of a shock to be sharing barrack rooms with many other women, doing physical training, and learning to love Army food.

Despite the initial disorganisation, the first ATS arrived in France with the British Expeditionary Force in early 1940. They were mainly drivers but also included bilingual telephonists, clerks and administrators. As the bulk of the British Expeditionary Forces was evacuated via the beaches of Dunkirk from 27 May to 4 June 1940, ATS personnel worked on in Paris. They eventually escaped the capital as German forces entered the city, and were eventually evacuated from St Malo in Normandy. Back in the United Kingdom the ATS endured the Blitz with the remainder of the military and civilian population. ATS drivers worked with the men of the bomb disposal units, and women joined the searchlight units of the Anti-Aircraft Artillery.

This early work led to the full incorporation of women into the Army on 10 April 1941, followed by a decision to conscript women into the forces for the first time from 5 March 1942. By the middle of the war the ATS expanded to 214,420 officers and soldiers, and was the largest of the women's services. The roles in which they served expanded with ATS becoming armourers, fitters, military police officers, signallers, radio mechanics and technicians alongside those taking 'traditional' roles as cooks, domestic staff and clerical staff. A number served with the Intelligence Corps including many posted to the, now famous, Bletchley Park Government Code and Cypher School. ATS were responsible for the transport of the Nazi Rudolf Hess to his place of imprisonment after he flew to Scotland. Others took the shorthand notes of his interrogation.

Some 56,000 ATS served alongside the Royal Artillery on Anti-Aircraft (AA) gun batteries – the closest women in the non-combatant Corps were permitted to get to offensive action against the enemy. When the Allies landed in France in 1944, ATS travelled with the AA gun batteries to Europe sharing the risks of the final advance to victory with their male colleagues. The mixed batteries of male gunners and female target markers proved to be particularly effective teams with the ATS being technically adept at using the predictor instruments to plot the course, height and speed of the target aircraft for the male gun teams.

Unlike their predecessors in the WAAC, the ATS also served in the Near, Middle and the Far East where they also faced the risks of tropical diseases. One unit of ATS were engaged in managing the rats that were used to manufacture the vaccine to combat scrub typhus. Others managed the reception and processing of thousands of refugees from the war zones, whilst another group became dog handlers.

The Colonel-in-Chief of the ATS from 1938 was Queen Elizabeth (later the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother), the wife of King George VI. The King's sister, Princess Mary (the Princess Royal) joined the ATS in October 1938 and she became Honorary Chief Controller in February 1940. Once she was old enough, the current Queen, patron of ABF, The

Soldiers' Charity, was commissioned on 5 March 1945 as a Subaltern (Second Lieutenant) with the motor transport branch of the ATS.

The ATS suffered 405 casualties of whom 67 were killed in action and nine died of wounds. Like their predecessors, they had proven their ability to share the risk and dangers of warfighting with male soldiers, and to perform in the most testing of circumstances. After the war, it was decided to retain a women's Corps in the Regular Army establishment. The Army establishment finally conceded parity of rank and the Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC) replaced the ATS on 1 February 1949.

Since the Second World War officers and soldiers of the WRAC have served across the world alongside their male colleagues. This included involvement in the various 'small wars' across the British Empire as it reinvented itself as the Commonwealth of sovereign states. Women routinely deployed to Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles. Very gradually the barriers to service in traditional male roles in the Army have been broken down. Initially women marrying had to leave the service on marriage. Later married women could serve on, but had to leave on becoming pregnant. Where once men and women competed on separate promotion boards, they eventually competed against each other for promotion. There were still notable efforts to characterise some roles as only suitable for female soldiers. For example, officers in training at the WRAC college at Camberley were taught flower arranging.

Eventually the decision was made to disband the WRAC and integrate women into the other Corps and Regiments of the British Army. From 1 April 1992 the WRAC ceased to exist. Whilst women were initially still barred from combat roles – infantry and armoured regiments – in recent years they have been admitted to roles that have taken them closer to the front line. This has included serving as the Special Forces soldiers, as attack helicopter pilots with the Army Air Corps, and as bomb disposal specialists with the Royal Logistics Corps. In 2006 during the campaign in Iraq, nineteen-year-old Lance Corporal Michelle Norris of the Royal Army Medical Corps became the first woman to be awarded the Military Cross for bravery. One hundred years after the formation of the WAAC, and 25 years after the disbandment of the WRAC, women will be for the first time admitted into any Regiment or Corps of the British Army including infantry or armoured regiments. Women will serve their nation on the same terms as their male counterparts.