Women at War

VE Day

May 2020 is the 75th anniversary of VE Day where across the country we will celebrate this momentous occasion.

Victory in Europe Day, generally known as VE Day, is a day celebrating the formal acceptance by the Allies of World War II of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender of its armed forces on 8 May 1945.

Women's Role in WWII

Women in the Second World War took on many different roles, including as combatants and workers on the home front. The Second World War involved global conflict on an unprecedented scale; the absolute urgency of mobilising the entire population made the expansion of the role of women inevitable, although the particular roles varied from country to country. Millions of women of various ages died as a result of the war.

Pte Elizabeth Gourlay transmitting a radio message.

Queen Elizabeth in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, April 1945.

A machinist talking with Eleanor Roosevelt during her goodwill tour in 1942.

When Britain went to war, women were called into the factories to create the weapons that were used on the battlefield. Women also took on the responsibility of managing the home and became the heroines of the home front. Many thought, this industrial employment of women significantly raised women's self-esteem as it allowed them to carry out their full potential and do their part in the war. During the war, women's normative roles of ‘house wife’ transformed into a patriotic duty. The roles of women shifting from domestic to masculine and dangerous jobs in the workforce made for important changes in workplace structure and society. During the Second World War, society had specific ideals for the jobs in which both women and men participated. When women began to enter into the masculine workforce and munitions industries previously dominated by men, women's segregation began to diminish. Propaganda was indeed targeted at women to do the jobs previously dominated by men, mainly because they were paid significantly less than men.

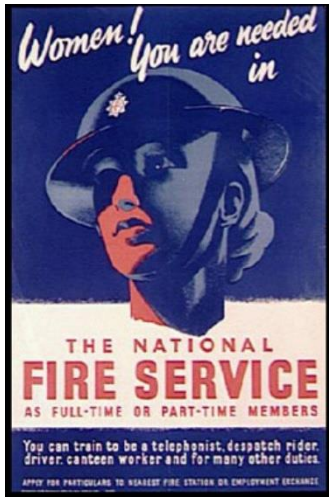
Home Front

In Britain, women were essential to the war effort. The contribution by civilian men and women to the British war effort was acknowledged with the use of the words '**home front**' to describe the battles that were being fought on a domestic level with rationing, recycling, and war work, such as in munitions factories and farms and men were thus released into the military. Women were also recruited to work on the canals, transporting coal and munitions by barge across the UK via the inland waterways. These became known as the 'Idle Women', initially an insult derived from the initials IW, standing for Inland Waterways, which they wore on their badges, but the term was soon adopted by the women themselves. Many women served with the Women's Auxiliary Fire Service, the Women's Auxiliary Police Corps and in the Air Raid Precautions (later Civil Defence) services. Others did voluntary welfare work with Women's Voluntary Services and the Salvation Army.

Women were ‘drafted’ in the sense that they were conscripted into war work by the Ministry of Labour, including non-combat jobs in the military, such as the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS or ‘Wrens’), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF or ‘Waffs’) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). Auxiliary services such as the Air Transport Auxiliary also recruited women. In the early stages of the war such services relied exclusively on volunteers, however by 1941 conscription was extended to women for the first time in British history and around 600,000 women were recruited into these three organisations. In these organisations women performed a wide range of jobs in support of the Army, Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy both overseas and at home. These jobs ranged from traditionally feminine roles like cook, clerk and telephonist to more traditionally masculine duties like mechanic, armourer, searchlight and anti-aircraft instrument operator. British women were not drafted into combat units, but could volunteer for combat duty in anti-aircraft units, which shot down German planes and V-1 missiles. Civilian women joined the Special Operations Executive (SOE), which used them in high-danger roles as secret agents and underground radio operators in Nazi occupied Europe.

Propaganda

British Women's Propaganda was issued during the war in attempts to communicate to the housewife that while keeping the domestic role, she must also take on a political role of patriotic duty. Propaganda was meant to eliminate all conflicts of personal and political roles and create a heroine out of the women. The implication with propaganda is that it asked women to redefine their personal and domestic ideals of womanhood and motivate them go against the roles that have been instilled in them. The government struggled to encourage women to respond to posters and other forms of propaganda. The encouraging message of these sorts of posters and films was ‘There's Not Much Women Can't Do’.



Military

The most common role of women in active service was that of a searchlight operator. All of the members of the 93rd Searchlight Regiment were women. Despite being limited in their roles, there was a great amount of respect between the men and women in the mixed batteries. While women still faced discrimination from some of the highly stereotypical older soldiers and officers who did not like women 'playing with their guns', women were given rifle practice and taught to use anti-aircraft guns while serving in their batteries.

The **Monument to the Women of World War II** is a British national war memorial situated on Whitehall, London. It was sculpted by John W. Mills, unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II in July 2005.

Three quarters of women who entered the wartime forces were volunteers, compared to men who made up less than a third. Single or married women were eligible to volunteer in WAAF, ATS or WRNS and were required to serve throughout Britain as well as overseas if needed, however the age limits set by the services varied from each other. Generally women between 17 and 43 could volunteer and those under 18 required parental consent. After applying, applicants had to fulfil other requirements, including an interview and medical examination; if they were deemed fit to serve then they were enrolled for the duration of the war. WRNS was the only service that offered an immobile branch which allowed women to live in their homes and work in the local naval establishment. WRNS was the smallest of the three organizations and as a result was very selective with their candidates. Of the three organizations, WAAF was the most preferred choice; the second being WRNS. ATS was the largest of the three organizations and was least favoured among women because it accepted those who were unable to get into the other forces. ATS had also developed a reputation of promiscuity and poor living conditions, many women also found the khaki uniform unappealing and as a result favoured WRNS and WAAF over ATS. Over 640,000 British women served in various auxiliary services of the British armed forces.

Dorothy Gale

WWII WAAF uniform.

WNRS

Officer Uniform.

Margaret Bagley

Intelligence work in the ATS.

Limitations

Whilst women were limited in some of their roles, they were expected to perform to the same standard as a male soldier performing the same role, and although they could not participate in frontline combat, they still manned anti-aircraft guns and defences which actively engaged hostile aircraft above Britain. Women went through the same military training, lived in the same conditions and did almost the same jobs as men, with the exception of not being able to participate in front-line combat. This important distinction meant that women did not tend to be nominated for medals of valour or bravery, because they were only awarded for 'active operations against enemy in the field', which women could not take part in.

Women were also distinct because of the titles by which they were addressed in the army, although these tended to be no different from their male counterparts. They wore the same rank insignia as their male counterparts. Many members of the ATS were respected by the units they were attached to despite their different insignia. The only major difference between an ATS member and a male member of the Regular Army was discipline: a woman was not allowed to be court marshalled unless she herself chose to be. The women in the service were also under the authority of the

female officers of the ATS, instead of the male officers under whom they served directly. This meant any disciplinary action was entirely in the hands of the ATS, removing male influence from the process.

Volunteers

Despite their obvious distinctions from men, women were eager to volunteer. Many of the servicewomen came from restricted backgrounds; therefore they found the army liberating. Other reasons women volunteered included escaping unhappy homes or marriages, or to have a more stimulating job. The overwhelming reason for joining the army, though, was patriotism. As in World War I, Great Britain was in a patriotic fervour throughout World War II to protect itself from foreign invasion. Women, for the first time, were given the opportunity to help in their native land's defence, which explains the high number of female volunteers at the beginning of the war. Despite the overwhelming response to the call for female volunteers, some women refused to join the forces; many were unwilling to give up the civilian job they had, and others had male counterparts that were unwilling to let them go. Others felt that war was still a man's job, and not something women should be involved in. Similar to the men's forces, women's forces were mostly volunteer throughout the war. When women's conscription did come into effect, however, it was highly limited. For example, married women were exempt from any obligation to serve unless they chose to do so, and those who were called could opt to serve in civil defence (the home front).

Civilian pay scales

Although many women were doing jobs that men had previously done during the war, there were still pay distinctions between the two sexes. Women's pay was significantly lower than men's pay. Equal pay was rarely achieved as employers wanted to avoid labour costs. Skilled work was often broken down into smaller tasks and labelled skilled or semi-skilled and then paid according to women's pay rates. Women who were judged to be doing ‘men's work’ were paid more than women who were thought to be doing ‘women's work’ and the employers' definition of this varied regionally. Women were receiving closer wages to their male counterparts; however despite the government's expressed intentions, women continued to be paid less than men for equivalent work and were segregated in terms of job description, status, and the hours they put in. In 1940 Ernest Bevin persuaded engineering employers and unions to give women equal pay to men since they were taking on the same tasks that men previously had; this became the *Extended Employment of Women Agreement*. Women’s hours were still regulated because of their perceived responsibilities to take care of their family and household.

Post-war

Post-war, women turned to marriage or to civilian jobs. The Army returned to the male-dominated field it was before the war. As Carol Harris said in her book, *Women Under Fire in World War Two* 'It was a big disappointment to a lot of us. It was an awful and wonderful war. I wouldn't have missed it for anything; some of the friends we made were forever' after being dismissed from service to return to her normal job. Married women were released from service sooner at the end of the war, so they could return home before their husbands to ensure the home was ready when he returned from the front. Despite being largely unrecognised for their wartime efforts in the forces, the participation of women in World War II allowed for the founding of permanent women's forces. Britain instituted these permanent forces in 1949, and the Women's Voluntary Services are still a standing reserve force today.