

Women in World War Two

Most women who volunteered before the war went into civil defense or the Women's Land Army. The main civil defense services were Air Raid Precautions (ARP), the fire service and Women's Voluntary Services (WVS). Initially, the women mainly carried out clerical work, but their roles expanded to meet demand, and female pump crews became commonplace. The WVS was the largest single women's organization at this time. It was formed to support civil defense and to provide services not provided locally by other organizations, and had over one million members. Typical WVS contributions included organizing evacuations, shelters, clothing exchanges and mobile canteens.

The Women's Land Army/Scottish Land Army was reformed in 1938 so that women could be trained in agricultural work, leaving male workers free to go to war. Most WLA members were young women from the towns and cities. Annice Gibbs, who worked for the WLA Timber Corps, remembers an encounter with Italian prisoners of war (POWs).

A woman's place

In the 1930s, social roles were clearly defined. A woman's place was in the home, a man's place was out at work. It was acceptable for women to work outside the home if they had no family to look after, but they were paid less than men were - even when doing the same jobs. Before the war, nearly five million women in the United Kingdom had paid employment, but most would have expected to leave as soon as they married, or when they had their first child.

With the onset of war, everything changed. Fathers perhaps joined the armed forces, or were sent away to do vital civilian work, so mothers often ran the home alone - and had to get used to going out to work, as well. Young single women, often away from home for the first time, might be billeted miles from their families.

Flexible working hours, nurseries and other arrangements soon became commonplace to accommodate the needs of working women with children. Before long, women made up one third of the total workforce in the metal and chemical industries, as well as in ship-building and vehicle manufacture. They worked on the railways, canals and on buses. Women built Waterloo Bridge in London.

Trousers made quite an impact on women's fashion. Military styling and lines influenced fashions at the start of the war. Women often wore trousers, or a one-piece siren suit (so-called because it could be pulled on quickly when an air raid warning siren sounded). Headgear became practical, seen as a means of keeping hair out of the way rather than as a fashion statement. Large handbags - to carry all the family's ration books - were also practical rather than fashionable accessories. Knitting became a national female obsession. Various schemes gave advice on recycling or making clothes last longer, two of these were the Make Do and Mend, and Sew and Save, schemes. Leading designers worked on the Utility scheme, aiming to make the best use of materials to produce functional clothing. Hair was worn long, but off the face. As war drew to a close, women adopted the 'Victory Roll', where the hair was rolled up tightly, fixed in place, and topped with a swept-up curl. Longer hair, like red lipstick, was thought to add to a woman's glamour. The popular wisdom was that such feminine touches boosted morale, both for women and for the men around them. The practical demands of wartime changed social customs beyond all recognition. People enjoyed far greater social freedom than before, with more opportunities for encounters with members of the opposite sex, and a sense that normal rules did not apply in the face of so much imminent danger.

The drawback to such new opportunities was the increase in numbers of people with venereal disease, Being, or having an illegitimate child were socially unacceptable then, but even so, there was a huge increase in the number of children born to single mothers during the war. However, increasingly explicit sex education did mean that people

ended the war far better informed about this topic than they might have otherwise have been.

A global response

The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) was formed in 1938. Its initial plan was to recruit 25,000 female volunteers for driving, clerical and general duties. In 1939, however, it was in action in France with the British Expeditionary Force.

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The vast majority of women in the ATS served in anti-aircraft command, on searchlights - the 93rd Searchlight Regiment were all female. They also worked in mixed batteries on anti-aircraft guns, but were not officially allowed to fire them. The Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) was reformed in the spring of 1939. Women aged 18-50 and living near naval ports could apply. The WRNS maintained ships of the Royal Navy and were involved in some of the most secret planning for D-Day. Gwyneth Verdun-Roe was in the WRNS in 1943-7. In her letters home, she often mentions her brother and her father, both serving in the Royal Navy. On 15 June 1944 she wrote:

The Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) was created in July 1939. Among other duties, they boosted the numbers in the Royal Observer Corps, and in maintaining and flying barrage balloons.

Some, mainly from the voluntary First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, worked with the Special Operations Executive, dropping into enemy territory and working as saboteurs, couriers and radio operators.

Elsewhere overseas, female nurses in military field hospitals worked near the front line of battle, and many served with allied forces such as SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces). Women also came to Britain as members of other Allied forces - such as the Women's Australian Air Force, and its Canadian and American equivalents. Others came from across the then British

Empire to serve in the ATS. At its peak the British auxiliary forces consisted of nearly half a million members.