The revival of the British women’s auxiliary services in the late nineteen-thirties

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Abstract
Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War the women’s auxiliary services were revived in Britain. Disbanded in the aftermath of the First World War, they were re-formed in the late nineteen-thirties as the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force and the Women’s Royal Naval Service. These organizations were to undertake ancillary tasks for the army, R.A.F. and Royal Navy in time of war. This article investigates the re-establishment of the women’s services and emphasizes the role women themselves played in gaining re-admittance into the servicemen’s sphere.

In the late nineteen-thirties the women’s auxiliary services, which had been disbanded at the end of the First World War, were revived in Britain. These organizations – reconstituted as the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force and the Women’s Royal Naval Service – were to perform a range of non-combatant functions in support of the army, R.A.F. and Royal Navy in the event of war. During the course of the Second World War approximately 600,000 women served with these bodies and Churchill himself contributed a daughter to each of them. Although military historians have written a great deal about the armed forces’ preparations for war in the inter-war period, this work has, perhaps understandably, focused almost exclusively on the male services. Much less attention has been paid to the ‘girls behind the guns’. This article traces the process by which the women’s services were re-formed at the end of the nineteen-thirties.

During the First World War various independent women’s organizations assisted the armed forces. These included such bodies as the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.), which ran an ambulance service, and the Women’s Legion, which deployed cookery and motor transport sections. Faced, however, with a manpower crisis as a result of the casualties on the western front, the military authorities were forced to establish their own official uniformed women’s auxiliary services with the aim of combing out non-combatant servicemen who were fit for frontline service.

1 Strength and Casualties of the Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services of the United Kingdom 1939 to 1945 (Parl. Papers 1946 [Cmd. 6832], xv), p. 2; P. Scott, They Made Invasion Possible (1944), p. 31.
The Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (W.A.A.C.) was established in March 1917, the Women’s Royal Naval Service (W.R.N.S.) in November 1917 and the Women’s Royal Air Force (W.R.A.F.) in April 1918 – the latter being created on the same day as the R.A.F. The members of these women’s services retained their civilian status and performed mainly ‘feminine’ roles, such as domestic, clerical and telephonist work, in support of their male ‘parent’ forces. Some 95,000 women served in these organizations at home and overseas.3

In the immediate aftermath of the war there was some discussion in military circles over whether the women’s services should be retained as part of the permanent strength of the armed forces. But against a backdrop of contracting defence spending, as well as an anti-feminist reaction in some quarters towards women in uniform, this was not considered a priority by the male service establishment. The W.R.N.S., the W.R.A.F. and the W.A.A.C. (which had been re-named Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps) were thus disbanded during the period 1919–21.4 The creation of a women’s reserve organization might have been a cheaper and less contentious alternative. In 1920 a war office committee under Major-General Basil Burnett-Hitchcock put forward proposals for the establishment of a ‘Queen’s Reserve’ of women which would be affiliated to the Territorial Army and act as the cadre for an expanded women’s service in time of war. The army council concluded, however, that such a body was ‘not desirable at the present time’ and let the matter drop.5 Although the F.A.N.Y. (which increasingly became a general transport unit rather than a purely ambulance corps) and the Women’s Legion (whose motor transport section remained active) continued to offer a quasi-military role for a few middle- and upper-class enthusiasts in the post-war years – both bodies turning out to support the army during the general strike of 1926 and receiving formal recognition from the military authorities – no official women’s service existed.6 Women were once more excluded from the servicemen’s sphere.

The first tentative steps that would eventually lead to a revival of the women’s auxiliary services were taken in the early nineteen-thirties. The initiative came from the marchioness of Londonderry, the renowned political and society hostess, who had


founded the Women’s Legion in 1915 and continued to preside over it after the war. Londonderry was anxious about growing tensions in Europe and the need for women to prepare for a role in national defence in a future conflict. She was also agitated by the formation of a new rival paramilitary women’s organization: the Women’s Reserve. The brainchild of ‘Commandant’ Mary Allen, a former wartime policewoman and jackbooted fascist sympathizer, this shadowy enterprise was intended to combat left-wing subversion and threatened to undermine the marchioness’s own body as well as the F.A.N.Y. As a result of these concerns Londonderry, whose Unionist husband was serving in Ramsay MacDonald’s cabinet as secretary of state for air, sought the approval of the service ministries in late 1933 for a new and expanded Women’s Legion under her presidency. This would act as an umbrella organization for the established independent women’s bodies and provide a national pool of trained women who could be mobilized to perform ancillary tasks for the armed forces in an emergency.\(^7\)

The military authorities could see the advantages of dealing with one representative organization and gave a guarded welcome to the (new) Women’s Legion.\(^8\) But it became apparent that the individual services had different conceptions of the role of this body. The air ministry – unsurprisingly – was the most enthusiastic department. It envisaged that the new legion would train women to undertake specified duties for the wartime R.A.F. and that a grant would be required from the air force vote to cover the costs. The war office was more cautious. It contemplated that the organization would merely register women who would be ready to serve the army in an emergency and no call would be made upon army funds. As for the admiralty, it developed grave doubts as to whether the scheme could fulfil any useful purpose for the Royal Navy. It also questioned the political expediency of endorsing an initiative that could be interpreted as an early public preparation for war.\(^9\) As a result of the impasse the marchioness’s enterprise began to run into the sand.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1934 Londonderry approached Dame Helen Gywnne-Vaughan to work under her as chair of the new legion. Gwynne-Vaughan, professor of botany at Birkbeck College, and a former deputy head of the W.A.A.C. and head of the W.R.A.F. during the First World War, agreed to take on this role. It was, however, an uneasy partnership. According to her biographer, Molly Izzard, the new chair was not accustomed to running other people’s ‘shows’ and carried with her the professional woman’s resentment of prominent society ladies, like the marchioness, who received all the plaudits for their patriotic endeavours but seemed

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to do little of the hard work. She also disliked Londonderry’s close friendship with MacDonald whose anti-war stance during the previous conflict made him a thoroughly discredited figure in her eyes. These irritations, and a lack of worthwhile activity for the new legion, encouraged her to consider setting up her own organization.10

The upshot was that Gwynne-Vaughan developed the idea of forming an officers’ training section within the legion. This would provide a much-needed pool of trained officers ready to lead any women’s auxiliary services that might be required in wartime.11 Early in 1936 she submitted her plans to the war office and the air ministry; the admiralty was no doubt regarded by this stage as an unlikely participant.12 In a letter to the adjutant-general, Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Knox, she envisaged the training of ‘daughters of senior officers and so forth – who may have inherited some of their fathers’ qualities’.13 Knox was sympathetic to the proposed scheme, but could not resist a little gentle teasing of the redoubtable Dame Helen: ‘You very rightly have a great regard for the qualities of senior officers’, he replied, ‘but I trust that some of their daughters have not inherited quite all the qualities of some senior officers whom I have known. If they have, it may be a source of trouble to you!’14

In the interim the question of the (new) Women’s Legion had been referred to a women’s reserve sub-committee of the committee of imperial defence (C.I.D.). Chaired by Sir William Graham Greene, a former permanent secretary of the admiralty, this reported in the spring of 1936. Having investigated the requirements of the armed forces for women in the early stages of an emergency, and contemplated the administrative chaos that was likely to arise by involving an independent, amateur body in the machinery of government, the committee concluded that the creation of a women’s reserve organization was ‘not desirable’; that no public money should be made available to any independent scheme that might be set up for this purpose; and that in the event of war the ministry of labour was the proper authority to whom the service departments should turn for womanpower.15 Only the air ministry seems to have regretted this verdict. It faced the prospect of immediate air attack on the outbreak of war and believed that Londonderry’s enterprise could best provide the categories of trained women that it would require at a few hours’ notice. This view remained a minority one.16

The C.I.D. committee’s ruling in effect killed the (new) Women’s Legion: later that year it was wound up, the F.A.N.Y. and the (old) Women’s Legion continuing as separate entities.17 A lifeline was, however, offered to Gwynne-Vaughan’s officers’ training section. It was recommended by the Greene committee that the service

11 Gwynne-Vaughan, p. 78; Izzard, p. 263.
12 T.N.A.: P.R.O., CAB 57/18, H. Gwynne-Vaughan to war office and air ministry, 5 Feb. 1936.
15 T.N.A.: P.R.O., CAB 57/18, committee of imperial defence, sub-committee on man-power, women’s reserve sub-committee, minutes of meeting, 10 Oct. 1935; T.N.A.: P.R.O., WO 32/10652, committee of imperial defence, sub-committee on man-power, women’s reserve sub-committee, report, 12 May 1936.
departments should have discretion to provide limited assistance to organizations such as hers that might be of value to them in preparing women for duties of a ‘supervisory capacity’. As a result, in the summer of 1936 her section was reconstituted as an independent body and renamed the Emergency Service: a title designed to avoid any overtly warlike connotations since indications of belligerence were still regarded as politically undesirable. Dame Helen served as chair and Viscountess Trenchard, an old friend and wife of the ‘father’ of the R.A.F., as vice-chair. The duchess of Gloucester agreed to act as patron.

Membership was by personal invitation and Trenchard’s daughter, Belinda Boyle, did much of the early recruiting by simply leafing through her address book for suitable candidates. Most of those who joined had service connections and the ‘cadets’ came to include Lady Olive Newall, whose husband was chief of the air staff, Lady Dorothy Bowhill, who was married to the air member for personnel, and Lady Dorothy Jackson, wife of the general officer commanding-in-chief, Western Command. Among the less judicious enrolments was that of Unity Mitford, the pro-Nazi daughter of Lord Redesdale. Her extreme political views threatened to harm the reputation of the organization and deter others from participating. When rumours began to circulate that she intended to become a German citizen Gwynne-Vaughan asked her to leave. Obligingly Mitford withdrew.

Training of the recruits was soon underway. Evening classes on officership were conducted by members with previous service experience at Regent’s Park barracks and the headquarters of 601 squadron in London, and the war office and air ministry provided lectures on aspects of military administration. An annual camp was also held at Abbot’s Hill school in Hemel Hempstead at which the ‘cadets’ did ‘physical jerks’, practised drill, took it in turns to give each other orders, and prepared unappetizing meals using the manual of military cookery. ‘Most of our friends and relations’, recalled Boyle, ‘thought us not only mad but bad’. Altogether some 400 women received training as potential officers.

While the Emergency Service was establishing itself, ‘Commandant’ Mary Allen reappeared on the scene. In the autumn of 1936 she managed to secure an interview with the minister for co-ordination of defence, Sir Thomas Inskip, to discuss the role of her Women’s Reserve in national defence. To assist the minister in responding to Allen the home office compiled a confidential report on her previous activities. It transpired that after the First World War this maverick figure had headed the Women Police Service, an unofficial body intended to train women for the police forces, and in 1921 she had been fined ten shillings for wearing a uniform resembling that of the police. Her organization had subsequently been renamed the Women’s Auxiliary

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18 T.N.A.: P.R.O., WO 32/10652, women’s reserve sub-committee, report.
19 Gwynne-Vaughan, p. 79; Izzard, pp. 267–8.
23 Quoted in Gwynne-Vaughan, p. 81.
24 Gwynne-Vaughan, p. 80.
Service and she had visited Berlin in 1929 and Rio de Janeiro in 1931, in connection with women’s congresses, where she had apparently posed as chief of the British women police. This masquerade had led to complaints about her behaviour from the National Council of Women of Great Britain. In 1933 she had formed the Women’s Reserve and been roundly condemned in the press by Londonderry for creating an avowedly militarist organization that would lead to overlap and confusion with other bodies.25 Most damningly of all, New Scotland Yard confirmed that she was a ‘secret adherent’ of Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists and likely to use her contacts to provide information for the B.U.F.26 Predictably Allen was politely informed that a C.I.D. committee had ruled on the issue of a women’s reserve and her services were not required.27

At this point Lady Margaret Loch entered the fray. Loch, the wife of Major-General Lord Loch, headed the Women’s Legion flying section, a branch of Londonderry’s organization that had been established in the early nineteen-thirties to train pilots and ground crew.28 In the summer of 1936 she approached the war office about the possibility of the Women’s Legion selecting a small number of suitable women to be trained for ‘supervisory work’ with the armed forces in time of war. Loch, who had no connection with Gwynne-Vaughan’s Emergency Service, was advised to consult the ministry of labour. The ministry took the view that her proposal was chiefly a matter for the service departments. In the spring of 1937 she contacted the army authorities again. The war office was by this stage concerned about the possibility of confusion and overlap between Loch’s venture and the Emergency Service. As a result, it was suggested to the ministry of labour that there would be administrative advantages if it co-ordinated the provision of officer personnel in the same way that it had been tasked by the C.I.D. committee to oversee the supply of other ranks. The ministry responded that it had in fact interpreted its role as applying to all classes of women required by the services and it would undertake to furnish officers. In order to effect this, it was proposed that on the outbreak of war the ministry would commandeering the membership records of the various women’s organizations. These files would indicate which women had the requisite qualifications and training to make suitable officers.29

On the basis of these discussions General Knox wrote to Loch and Gwynne-Vaughan in the summer of 1937. He informed them that in a national emergency the war office would obtain all its women personnel, including the ‘supervisory class’, from the ministry of labour and to facilitate this process that department intended to take over the records of the women’s bodies at the appropriate time. Although reassurances were given that assistance would continue to be provided in the form of military lectures, he bluntly told them that ‘we at the War Office shall have no direct dealings with any women’s organization in future as regards the supply of personnel’.30 Loch passed the letter to Londonderry. The marchioness, still smarting over the recent

26 Douglas, p. 126.
30 T.N.A.: P.R.O., AIR 2/2694, H. Knox to Lady Loch and Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, 4 Aug. 1937.
demise of her (new) Women’s Legion at the hands, she was convinced, of the ministry
of labour, sent a stinging response to the war office. She complained that the
involvement of the ministry would lead to the break up of trained units such as her
Women’s Legion motor transport section; that the right type of women would not
be recruited through labour exchanges; and that it was ‘ridiculous and wasteful’ that
organizations intended for military service should not have a direct connection with
the war office.31 Despite her protests, she was told that the matter could not be
reopened.32

Over the winter of 1937–8 the war office began to reconsider its position in regard
to a women’s reserve. By this stage the storm clouds in Europe were gathering and
the army needed to put itself on a war footing. All possible measures had to be
adopted to make the most efficient use of its trained manpower.33 There was also a
change of personnel on the army council. Knox was replaced as adjutant-general by
Lieutenant-General Sir Clive Liddell, who seemed more receptive to the need for a
national pool of trained women.34 Meanwhile the well-connected members of the
women’s bodies relentlessly lobbied service officials to persuade them of the military
utility of their organizations. Gwynne-Vaughan and her supporters were tireless in
seeking opportunities to press the case for the Emergency Service.35 Lady Jackson, for
example, buttonholed the secretary of state for war, Leslie Hore-Belisha, when he
inspected her husband’s command.36 Londonderry and the countess of Athlone,
president of the F.A.N.Y., were indefatigable too in promoting their respective
enterprises. A beleaguered Hore-Belisha reported that these two women were ‘always
at him about their shows’.37

Against this background the army authorities revisited the issue. Not only did it
seem invidious on reflection to rebuff the women’s bodies (‘class corps’ as one
member of the army council described them) by compelling their well-to-do
membership to report to labour exchanges on the outbreak of war, but it also came
to be recognized that there were practical weaknesses in the ministry of labour
scheme. The ministry held no general register of available women and when demands
were suddenly received from the service departments for a certain category of
women it would be dependent on those who happened to be registered as
unemployed at its labour exchanges, or on volunteers, to meet the demand. The
problem was that those registered as unemployed varied according to boom and
slump conditions in industry and might not be available in sufficient numbers.
Volunteers would no doubt come forward but they might not offer their services
quickly enough or be of the right type. It was also evident that a large number of
well-qualified women were reluctant to go anywhere near a labour exchange and

31 T.N.A.: PR.O., WO 163/47, informal army council, précis no. 5, ‘Supply of women for supervisory posts
in war’, by H. J. Creedy, 6 Nov. 1937; Gould, p. 366.
32 Gould, p. 367.
33 Cambridge, Churchill College, Churchill Archives Centre, papers of I. L. Hore-Belisha (hereafter Hore-
Belisha papers), 1/5, diary entry, 14 Jan. 1938; Hore-Belisha papers, 5/17, ‘The organisation of the army for
its role in war’, cabinet paper by L. Hore-Belisha, 10 Feb. 1938; T.N.A.: PR.O., WO 277/6, ‘The auxiliary
35 Izzard, p. 271.
preferred to deal directly with the war office. Clearly the system had a number of shortcomings.

As a result Hore-Belisha – who, it might be noted, had recently joined Londonderry’s weekly social circle, the ‘Ark’, under the animal pseudonym of ‘Leslie the Lion’ – concluded that the best course of action was for the war office to rescind the C.I.D.’s decision and form its own official women’s reserve. This would build on the achievements of the existing women’s bodies and ensure that on mobilization the army would have at its disposal a group of enrolled women who had already been allotted to certain posts and who were fully conversant with the duties they were to undertake. In the spring of 1938 a letter was despatched to the C.I.D. informing it of the army’s decision. The ministry of labour representative on the C.I.D.’s sub-committee on the control of manpower, who had in fact sat on the women’s reserve sub-committee two years previously, recorded his strong disapproval of the war office’s executive action on this matter without any consultation with the relevant authorities. ‘This was’, he protested, ‘a most unusual way of conducting Government business’. But there was little that could be done to halt what was effectively a fait accompli.

During the early summer the war office drew up plans for a women’s reserve in consultation with Gwynne-Vaughan of the Emergency Service (which had belatedly received formal recognition from the military authorities), Londonderry of the Women’s Legion and Mary Baxter Ellis, commandant of the F.A.N.Y. The air ministry and the admiralty were also approached with a view to their inclusion in the scheme. The R.A.F indicated its desire to participate (with Loch’s Women’s Legion flying section being quietly sidelined in the process) but the Royal Navy declined to become involved.

The new organization, as Burnett-Hitchcock had proposed some twenty years earlier, was to be affiliated to the Territorial Army. The volunteers, who would wear a khaki uniform but remain civilians in the eyes of the law, were to undertake non-combatant duties as cooks, clerks, orderlies, storewomen and motor drivers. They were to be organized as companies on a county basis under the direction of county commandants. Training evenings would be held in local drill halls and an annual camp organized. The three recognized women’s bodies were to form the nucleus, with the Emergency Service serving as an officer training unit and the Women’s Legion and F.A.N.Y. supplying drivers. The scheme would be administered in the war office by

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39 Hore-Belisha papers, 1/5, diary entry, 12 Jan. 1938.
40 T.N.A.: P.R.O., WO 32/10652, minutes of a meeting of the co-ordinating committee of the army council, 1 Apr. 1938.
42 T.N.A.: P.R.O., CAB 57/27, committee of imperial defence, man-power sub-committee, sub-committee on the control of man-power, minutes of the 4th meeting, 12 May 1938.
the department of the director-general of the Territorial Army (D.G.T.A.). The nomenclature of the enterprise engendered a good deal of discussion. It was originally titled the Women’s Auxiliary Defence Service but as no woman wished to be known as a W.A.D. this was deemed unacceptable. The name was thus changed to the less offensive Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.).

In the autumn of 1938 the Munich crisis blew up and war seemed imminent. As public anxiety grew large numbers of women besieged local authority offices clamouring to undertake some form of national service and the war office was under pressure to provide an outlet for their endeavours. Moreover, as Viscountess Trenchard pointed out to Hore-Belisha, who at one time had sought to appoint her husband as an unofficial adviser in his dealings with the general staff, if the military authorities did not move quickly to establish the new organization then many of the best qualified women would take up other forms of war work. In these circumstances, and before the details of the scheme had even percolated down to many Territorial Army units across the country, the B.B.C. announced the formation of the A.T.S. on 27 September. A new women’s auxiliary service thus hurriedly came into being as the anti-aircraft guns were set up on Horse Guards Parade in anticipation of the impending German onslaught.

The early weeks of the A.T.S. were predictably chaotic. The Territorial Army adjutants, who were busy embodying their own male recruits, were often at a loss as to how to deal with the women who flocked to the drill halls wishing to join up. Many of the new A.T.S. officers were no wiser about the service. The presidents of the Territorial Army associations were given the task of appointing the county commandants and, inevitably, tended to approach the local ‘great lady’ to fill this role. The county commandants, in turn, were required to nominate the junior officers and usually plumped for leisured acquaintances who had the spare time to devote to the service but were often woefully ignorant about their responsibilities. This was a cause of frustration to Emergency Service women who believed that they were much better qualified to take on these posts. Nevertheless, by the outbreak of war 17,600 women had been enrolled in the A.T.S. and most of the companies were nearing full strength. Some male units quickly accepted the women and gave them what assistance they could in matters of military instruction. But many were unconvinced by their sisters in arms. As one A.T.S. officer, Leslie Whateley, frankly recalled: ‘The regular soldiers, and even the Territorials, were, for the most part, really sceptical as to how much use a woman’s army could be to them in wartime. We heard a number of insinuations that our help would be a hindrance.’

It was not until the spring of 1939 that the war office gave serious consideration to the appointment of a ‘head woman’ for the A.T.S. Up to this point it was thought that a relatively junior male staff officer in the D.G.T.A.’s department could oversee

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48 Terry, pp. 95–6.
49 Izzard, p. 281.
53 L. Whateley, As Thoughts Survive (1948), p. 15.
the service. It became clear, however, that with the announcement of the doubling of the Territorial Army the D.G.T.A.’s branch would be fully occupied with the new male intake. Furthermore some of the feminine matters with which the hapless D.G.T.A. officer had to deal, such as the relative merits of a brassiere and suspender-belt as opposed to a corset in the A.T.S. pattern uniform, did not fall within the competence of the average male staff college graduate. Indeed, the ubiquitous Viscountess Trenchard apparently advised Hore-Belisha that the organization would only be successfully managed once a woman was put in charge. As a result the army authorities began to look into the possibility of appointing a female director to administer the service under the D.G.T.A.

Gwynne-Vaughan had long coveted such a role and she wrote to county commandants to canvass opinion on the question of a ‘head woman’. Her position was that the women’s service, however essential, would inevitably be a ‘background affair’ and that the war office ought not to divert a valuable male staff officer to running a ‘women’s show’ with which he would have little empathy. She was also concerned that he would not be taken seriously by his peers: ‘other men’, she opined, ‘don’t think very much of a man who is doing a women’s job, whereas they are prepared to like and respect women who can do it’. One commandant, Miss Justina Collins, J.P., replied that she was opposed to the appointment of a female chief because it would lead to greater self-governance for the A.T.S. and undermine its relationship with the Territorial Army. ‘You will perceive’, she concluded, ‘I am not a feminist’. Gwynne-Vaughan responded that she too would be opposed to any woman who acted independently of higher authority but that it would be ‘a waste’ to use a first-class combatant officer to run their organization: ‘So perhaps’, she countered, ‘I am not a feminist after all in the usually accepted sense!’ In the summer of 1939 Gwynne-Vaughan, whose cousin the earl of Munster had recently joined the war office as parliamentary under-secretary of state for war, was duly appointed as the director of the A.T.S. (D.A.T.S.).

The appointment of Gwynne-Vaughan brought to the surface a simmering dispute with the F.A.N.Y. This body was drawn from what Roy Terry has described as the ‘mink and manure set’ and considered itself the elite women’s organization. It was determined to retain its distinctive identity within the A.T.S. and tended to hold itself aloof from the new women’s service. In particular, it continued to exercise its own informal style of discipline which involved all ranks messing together off-duty and countenanced F.A.N.Y. other rank drivers socializing with male officers at the end of the working day. The drivers, for their part, revelled in their status as ‘gentlewoman rankers’ and regarded A.T.S. officers – whose role they contemptuously dismissed as ‘counting A.T. knickers and making sure they hadn’t got nits in their hair’ – as little more than trumped up social workers. The independent behaviour of the F.A.N.Y. was anathema to Gwynne-Vaughan, who embodied the hierarchical disciplinary conventions of the regular army, and on becoming D.A.T.S. she was determined to

55 Izzard, pp. 284–5.
56 Izzard, pp. 277, 285.
57 Gwynne-Vaughan papers, 9401-253-861, H. Gwynne-Vaughan to Mrs. Ross, 28 Apr. 1939.
58 Gwynne-Vaughan papers, 9401-253-890, Miss Justina Collins to H. Gwynne-Vaughan, 2 May 1939.
59 Gwynne-Vaughan papers, 9401-253-891, Gwynne-Vaughan to Collins, 3 May 1939.
60 Terry, p. 102; Izzard, p. 295.
bring it into line with other parts of her service. This led to a virtual ‘war’ with Baxter Ellis, who commanded the F.A.N.Y. motor companies and had been opposed to Gywnne-Vaughan’s appointment, and to a great deal of friction between her F.A.N.Y.s and ‘interfering’ A.T.S. officers. Although it was inevitable that the big battalions of the A.T.S. would eventually assimilate the F.A.N.Y. – with the special concession that they could wear a F.A.N.Y. flash on the shoulder of their A.T.S. uniforms – it was not until the replacement of Gywnne-Vaughan as D.A.T.S. in 1941 that relations between the parties began to improve.\(^{61}\)

As part of the air ministry’s participation in the A.T.S., it was agreed that separate R.A.F. companies would be formed with their own distinctive badge. The members of these companies, however, soon began to clamour for a much closer association with the R.A.F. than they were able to achieve through their Territorial Army affiliation. At the same time it became apparent that a shortage of suitable accommodation meant that it was unlikely that the R.A.F. would be able to absorb large numbers of women in the early months of a war. As a result, in late 1938 the air ministry decided, in consultation with the war office, that the R.A.F. companies would be linked to local Auxiliary Air Force units and that they would become officer and N.C.O. producing companies to provide the cadres around which future expansion could take place. It was also understood that the R.A.F. authorities would assume responsibility for these companies.\(^{62}\)

Despite these modifications the A.T.S. scheme remained unsatisfactory from the air ministry’s point of view. The R.A.F. companies continued to be subject to army administrative procedures that differed from those of their own service. Moreover the training requirements of the R.A.F. companies, which were now composed of potential officers and N.C.O.s, were at odds with those of the other A.T.S. companies that were to serve with the army and catered mainly for other ranks. In these circumstances the air ministry concluded in the spring of 1939 that it had no choice but to withdraw its R.A.F. companies from the A.T.S. and set up its own independent women’s auxiliary service. The war office was reconciled to this and on 28 June the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (W.A.A.F.) came into being.\(^{63}\)

The W.A.A.F. was to be organized on a county basis with its companies grouped together under area controllers. The trainee officers and N.C.O.s in these companies were to wear an air force blue uniform and, like the A.T.S., retain their legal status as civilians. They were to undertake mainly administrative training to prepare them to supervise women in similar trades to those of their former service: cooks, clerks, orderlies, equipment assistants and motor drivers (fabric workers being added for companies attached to balloon squadrons). The air member for personnel was to oversee the service in the air ministry and a female director of the W.A.A.F. (D.W.A.A.F.) was appointed to advise him. She was Jane Trefusis Forbes, who had

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served with the Women’s Volunteer Reserve (a similar body to the F.A.N.Y. and Women’s Legion) during the First World War, built up a successful dog-breeding business during the inter-war years, and been one of Gywnne-Vaughan’s stalwarts in the Emergency Service.\textsuperscript{64}

The first public appearance of the W.A.A.F. came at a parade of all the national service organizations in Hyde Park a few days after its inauguration. One of its N.C.O.s, Felicity Peake, was thrilled at the prospect of representing her service at this event smartly attired in its new blue uniform: ‘My high spirits were soon crushed, however, as I edged my way to a seat on the bus and one of the passengers asked me for a ticket!’\textsuperscript{65} The W.A.A.F. had little time to bed in before the outbreak of war. There was no opportunity to appoint area controllers and most of its companies were closed down for leave during the months of July and August. This meant that instead of preparing for the impending mobilization of the W.A.A.F. the 1,700 women enrolled in the fledgling force were enjoying their summer holidays.\textsuperscript{66}

The admiralty’s view was that the ministry of labour would provide it with womanpower in the event of war and no useful purpose would be served by establishing a peacetime women’s reserve. However, it came under increasing pressure to revise its position. During the autumn of 1937, and again in the spring of 1938, Dame Katharine Furse, the head of the W.R.N.S. during the First World War, wrote a series of harassing letters to the naval authorities (with similar missives being sent to the prime minister’s private secretary) enquiring about their policy on the matter. She informed the admiralty that in view of the deteriorating international situation former members of the W.R.N.S. were clamouring to serve with the Royal Navy and wished to know what steps were being taken to employ women in place of male personnel. A series of stalling replies was sent to Furse, explaining that the question was under review and no plans could be drawn up at present, but clearly the naval authorities were now in the firing line on this issue.\textsuperscript{67}

In the spring of 1938 the admiralty decided not to join the war office and the air ministry in the A.T.S. scheme. It was thought desirable, however, to ascertain the likely requirements of the Royal Navy for womanpower in wartime and to prepare the skeleton outline of a women’s organization. It was also deemed prudent to invite Dame Katharine to offer her advice on such an enterprise. During the summer the


\textsuperscript{65} F. Peake, Pure Chance (Shrewsbury, 1993), p. 23.


commanders-in-chief of the home commands were asked to estimate their requirements for women and, in consultation with Furse, discussions began on the structure of a naval service. In the wake of the Munich crisis in the autumn, which added a new sense of urgency, a draft scheme was agreed which established the framework of such a service and acknowledged that some women would have to be recruited and trained in peacetime if they were to be efficient enough to replace naval personnel on the outbreak of war.68

In the meantime the C.I.D. had recommended that a ministry of labour handbook should be issued to the public in which the various forms of national service would be outlined. Government departments were invited to contribute relevant sections to this publication. The admiralty drew up a statement for inclusion in which it was indicated that a limited number of women would be employed for duties in naval establishments in place of male ratings and that further particulars would be available from the secretary of the admiralty. The handbook was published early in 1939 and created an avalanche of correspondence in the secretary’s office from women eager to join a naval service. Within a few weeks some 15,000 applications for further particulars had been received and many women who applied believed that they had actually enrolled in the organization.69

Faced with this stampede, the naval authorities decided to take the plunge and introduce a peacetime women’s auxiliary service. Vera Laughton Mathews, who had served in the W.R.N.S. during the First World War and been prominent with the Sea Ranger movement in the inter-war years, was appointed as its director. ‘I cannot help feeling’, Mathews dryly observed, ‘that knowledge of the 15,000 unanswered letters was a spur in urging very busy men to action’. ‘What they were looking for’, she believed, ‘was someone on whom they could dump the whole thing and leave her to get on with it’.70 The new director obligingly got down to dealing with the vast backlog of applications and finalizing the details of the organization. On 12 April the Women’s Royal Naval Service (W.R.N.S.) – the only women’s service to revive its First World War title – was announced to the public.71

The W.R.N.S. was to be based around the major home naval ports, under port superintendents. The volunteers (known as Wrens as they had been during the previous war) were to sport a navy blue uniform and, like their sister services, retain their legal status as civilians. They were to undertake work as cooks, clerks, stewards, motor drivers and communication workers. Regular drills were to be held at local port depots. The head of the civil establishment branch in the admiralty was to assume responsibility for the new service and the director of the W.R.N.S. (D.W.R.N.S.) was to administer it under him.72

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71 Mathews, p. 61; Mason, p. 37.

The W.R.N.S. did not get off to the most auspicious of starts. At the national service parade in Hyde Park the admiralty, seemingly oblivious to the existence of its new women’s service, forgot to include D.W.R.N.S. among the naval dignitaries to be presented to the king. While Gwynne-Vaughan and Trefusis Forbes were introduced to the monarch as the proud directors of their respective auxiliary services, Mathews was relegated to taking part in the march past with her Wrens. Nevertheless, despite the institutional incognisance of hard-pressed male naval officials, by the outbreak of war port superintendents had been appointed, 1,000 women had been enrolled and some preliminary training had been carried out at the ports.

In explaining the revival of the women’s auxiliary services in the late nineteen-thirties the manpower requirements of the armed forces were clearly of central importance. After the experience of the First World War, it never seemed in doubt that in another major war the service departments would need to employ women in auxiliary roles in order to free up their male personnel for combatant duties. As the threat of war loomed, especially in the wake of the Munich crisis, the armed forces were compelled to make contingency plans in peacetime to ensure that they would have a trained pool of womanpower available to them on the outbreak of hostilities. The war office and the air ministry were in the vanguard over this, but even the admiralty, which was less enthusiastic, came to recognize the necessity of such measures.

But what was also important, and what can be contrasted with the predominant focus on the anti-militarist activities of women in the inter-war years, was the part women themselves played in pressurizing the armed forces to readmit them into their sphere. In this respect the ‘enthusiastic ladies’ of the women’s bodies, as the air member for personnel termed them, played a key role in persuading the service authorities of the military utility of women auxiliaries and in keeping the issue on the ‘rearmament’ agenda. Indeed, Group Officer Constance Woodhead, the author of the air ministry’s internal history of the W.A.A.F., argued that ‘it was the enthusiasm of the various women’s organizations which before 1939 overcame governmental and departmental resistance and finally brought the women’s services into existence’. At the forefront of this effort were Londonderry and Gwynne-Vaughan (with Furse playing a similar role in relation to the Royal Navy). Before the First World War both these figures had been active suffragists who had campaigned for the political rights of women. Now, as a new war approached, they used their formidable lobbying skills to press for women’s military rights. But this was to be a battle fought

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73 Mathews, p. 68.
76 R.A.F.M., papers of C. Woodhead (hereafter Woodhead papers), X002 5638, draft of A.H.B. W.A.A.F. history, ch. iii, p. 4.
77 Woodhead papers, X002 5638, draft of A.H.B. W.A.A.F. history, ch. ii, p. 5.
78 A. De Courcy, Circe: the Life of Edith, Marchioness of Londonderry (1992), p. 80; Urquhart; Londonderry, retrospect, p. 104; Izzard, pp. 87–91, 109, 126; Creese. It might be noted that Mary Allen was a former suffragette who had been a member of the militant Women’s Social and Political Union. She had been imprisoned several times for her suffragette activities. Vera Laughton Mathews had also been a member of the W.S.P.U. and in the inter-war years was chair of St. Joan’s Social and Political Alliance (formerly the Catholic Women’s Suffrage Society) (see Douglas, p. 16; Thomas; and Mathews, pp. 28–9, 45).
from the sofa rather than the soap box. As Mollie Izzard notes: ‘they attacked on a broad front at the luncheon and dinner table, and harassed by means of the telephone’. What sealed the matter were the hordes of patriotic women who clamoured to undertake national service at the time of Munich, and thereafter, forcing the service authorities to act. Felicity Peake of the W.A.A.F typified their attitude: ‘Like so many others’, she stated, ‘I merely wanted to serve my country’. It would not be long before she was doing her duty in the ‘frontline’ at Biggin Hill during the Battle of Britain.

79 Izzard, p. 271. In the mid 1930s Londonderry had written admiringly of Hitler but also pressed for the utilization of women in the armed forces. It seems likely that, like her husband, she believed that making friends with Germany and rearmament were, as Ian Kershaw has noted, ‘complementary strands of the same policy’ (see I. Kershaw, Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and Britain’s Road to War (2005), pp. 155, 340; and M. Pugh, ‘Hurrah for the Blackshirts!’: Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars (2005), p. 271).

80 Peake, pp. 18, 33–49. The W.A.A.F section officer played by Susannah York in Harry Saltzman’s 1969 film The Battle of Britain was based on Peake.