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## INTRODUCTION

THE history of women at war is long but disconnected. There exists no tradition of women as soldiers. Between the exploits of the Amazons of the ancient world and the regimentation of the modern girl, part of whose exploits are so well depicted in this book, only a few bright and startling figures have dared to encroach on the toughest province of man. When they have done so they have generally been more religious, as in the case of Joan of Arc, than martial; and more domestic, as in the case of Florence Nightingale, than destructive. In Britain Boadicea appears to have been the only woman to have led armies into battle. And though others exercised in war a nice power as politicians, most of them have been concerned with war more out of protest than co-operation. Until the emancipation of women in the 20th century there was, in fact, nothing to disrupt the rule that in war men must work and women must weep. Women made no contribution to war, as a sex, other than nursing, tears, and the handkerchief waving goodbye.

But in the age when suffragettes began to chain themselves to iron railings in London streets, contemptuous and comic figures as they then seemed, all this began to be changed. Women then began hammering at the gates of every province, domestic, social and political, that had been kept exclusively masculine for thousands of years. They began demanding equality; they asked for votes. They were already in industry, supplying cheap labour, and they already rode bicycles, in some quarters a scandalous thing, and played dangerously energetic games like tennis. Their demands today seem very modest. They mostly asked for legal rights in their own possessions and they wanted the law changed so that they could keep their own earnings. They wanted—if they were ladies—some other professions than medicine, education and the arts. A few demanded—and of course they were not ladies—some freedom from the tyranny of sex.

All these demands are interesting. But it is the things that were not demanded, and were never dreamed of being demanded, that are a hundred times more interesting today. If the pictures in this book could be taken back fifty or sixty years and shown to the most rabid Victorian feminist, two things are certain. The woman of 1870 would not understand the simple details of

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more than a fraction of them ; and she would certainly not believe that the trousered, dungareed, sea-booted figures in them were the descendants of her fight for emancipation. It is possible that she might not even believe they were women at all. Indeed if she could have been informed in 1870 that there would be born, within fifty years, such a race of young girls as you see in these pictures her dreams of final emancipation might have died through her own horror.

Yet they are the result of her dream. Equalities which she never dreamed of demanding are theirs when they are born ; and the most extraordinary equality of all—that of entering military service at the same age as a male—is theirs before they are eighteen years of age. And no one is shocked because they wear trousers.

All this, viewed in the light of past history, is astonishing, and has happened very quickly. Before 1917 there never had been in England, and never seemed likely to be, a women's army. It would have seemed an outrageous if not ludicrous thing. In 1917 the formation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was the natural, if quite indirect, result of nearly fifty years of feminist agitation. Even to the Navy, still perhaps the most exclusively male province of all, the formation of the Women's Royal Naval Service was an acceptable necessity. And in 1918, when the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service were merged to form the R.A.F., it was equally natural that a Women's Royal Air Force should also be formed.

The women of these services still wore skirts. The final invasion into the province of male attire had not been made. But the intrusion into male's trades had begun. The Air Force trades open to women of that day were ceasing to be domestic. Already there were women drivers, orderlies, store-keepers, clerks, typists, telephonists. Women were already in technical trades. They worked in aircraft factories as riggers, fitters, acetylene welders and vulcanisers. They were magneto repairers, carpenters, general electricians. They worked in fabric and dope shops, they tested guns and tended carrier pigeons.

Twenty-five years later the W.R.A.F. was re-born. By a Royal Warrant of 1939 the W.A.A.F. was formed. It offered recruits a choice of five trades.

Even then there were still sceptics : " As an officer of 26 years service " said a Group Captain, " I sincerely believed that war was not a job for a woman. In war, women could tackle the more quiet and comfortable civilian

jobs, and leave it to the fathers and brothers and cousins to fill the fighting services. Then at the beginning of the war came the news that we of the Royal Air Force were to have women—women in our operations rooms, women driving our transport and operating our teleprinters, women in our offices and manning our signals, even invading our messes. Petticoats in the R.A.F.”

There was good reason for this horrified scepticism. The war of 1939 was to be different from all other wars. The front line, which in former wars had been hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles away, was now to come down to the front door of every home. For the first time for three centuries a battle was to be fought in England itself: in full view of the inhabitants. The citizen was to be under fire. The W.A.A.F. telephonist and the W.A.A.F. cook were to be at a post as dangerous as the outpost of an infantry front line. And since even men sometimes behave badly under fire it was quite obvious that the Group Captain had every reason for believing that women would behave oddly too.

They did in fact behave oddly. All through August, September and October of 1940, during the period now known as the Battle of Britain, they behaved so oddly as to convert this same Group Captain into declaring: “I have cause to thank goodness that this country can produce such a race of women as the W.A.A.F. of my station.” During all these harrowing days they remained sternly at their posts. The Luftwaffe mercilessly and successfully bombed the stations in which they worked. But in Operations Rooms and Signals Rooms, the heart and nerves of any station, the W.A.A.F. went on with its work, declining to panic. Some were killed; but they, with others, helped to win the battle. Without the cool and courageous work of these girls, plotting the courses of incoming raiders, it would undoubtedly have been impossible for the R.A.F. with its limited fighter resources to have dispersed its squadrons to meet the invader successfully. The pictures you see here of girls plotting the courses of aircraft, looking so much like female croupiers at a new kind of casino, are among the most important in the book. They are the pictures of how a victory was won.

But there was still another victory to be won, and it was to be more important still. The second Battle of Britain, opening in September 1940 and ending in May 1941, was fought at night. It is not too much to say that it was fought under greater difficulties, at greater odds, and was more narrowly won than the first. In the first battle we had adequate aircraft, if in limited

numbers, to meet the attacker ; we had an adequate system of radiolocation ; we had skilled pilots and tacticians. When the night battle began in September we had no adequate night fighters ; we had no trained pilots ; we had no system by which a night pilot could be informed of the presence of an enemy aircraft and be placed close enough to it—as close as a hundred yards—and shoot it down. The radiolocation system of warning is very desirable in aerial warfare by day. But for aerial warfare at night *it is absolutely essential*. Unfortunately, in September 1940, the system was far from being perfected.

The struggle to perfect it, which went on all through the dark winter of 1941, was necessarily highly secret. The W.A.A.F. were chosen to be part of that secret. It is popularly supposed that women cannot hold their tongues, but the W.A.A.F. members of radiolocation staffs smashed another legend. They held their tongues so well that a W.A.A.F. cook, hearing of “ the young women engaged in this terribly hush-hush job ” and expressing a great desire to be transferred to the station where they worked, was astonished to learn that she had been working in just such a station for eighteen months without even suspecting it.

When the figures of enemy aircraft destroyed by night began to rise from 4 in February 1941 to 112 in May 1941, the month in which the night offensive was at last defeated, the W.A.A.F. had the satisfaction of knowing that they had helped also to win the second Battle of Britain—a battle still regarded in some quarters as more important than the first.

By that time the W.A.A.F. had more than sixty trades to offer. They were not all very secret, nor very spectacular. But most of them would have astounded the ardent feminist of 1870. She might, too, have frowned on the trousers in which more and more of them were performed. And it is certain that Tennyson’s “ sweet girl graduates with their golden hair ” would have wondered greatly at the young girls, seen in these pictures, who are scrambling about gigantic flying boats, hauling balloons, testing plugs, refuelling aircraft, greasing truck-wheels, packing parachutes, assembling engines, and in fact generally taking the place of men. Most of these jobs would have seemed to them a short way of killing a young girl.

Some of them are, indeed, extremely arduous. The job of maintaining a balloon barrage has never had the romantic secrecy of radiolocation. It is simply hard and often dangerous work : part of the elaborate organisation necessary to keep a balloon barrage in the air. It is not enough to fill a large gas bag with hydrogen and pay out a cable so that the balloon may rise. The

huge envelopes must be constantly inspected, kept gastight, often repaired. The wire and cordage of the balloons must be watched and maintained ; the balloons themselves moored and made fast. The W.A.A.F. does all this ; and women balloon operators and fabric workers must master thirty varieties of splicings and whippings in the course of the work.

But the work of the W.A.A.F. is not all mechanical, any more than it is all domestic. A great part of it belongs, as the work of women always has, to the tradition of pure service : service to the sick and to those in danger. There are many jobs, shown in these pictures, in which women are doing the work for which they are naturally fitted. Look at the pictures. It seems right that women should work in those air ambulances of which the public hears all too little. But it seems equally right that they should pack the parachutes—so like long Victorian dresses of creamy silk—that will save lives ; the dinghies that will rescue crews ; the rations that will keep flying crews awake and sustained on long operational flights in the darkness. It is right that even in a war where women, in clothes and habits and occupations, naturally tried to emulate men, there should still be work that seems more naturally done by women's hands.

If you look at the pictures again you will notice something else. They have one important thing in common. The women in them, though a little differently dressed and coiffured than Tennyson's golden haired graduates, are still unmistakably feminine. Neither a war nor a uniform nor an era of emancipation has destroyed their charm. They still have an eye for a young man, they still demand time to dance, to knit, to sew, to curl their hair and go courting. The recent exhibition of W.A.A.F. handicrafts and arts in London was a very revealing thing. Its hundreds of paintings, embroideries and toys, its craft in silk and satin, were more than the result of a sideline. They showed better than any words how intensively, among all the grease and oil and masculinity and mechanisation of modern war, a women's army had struggled to cherish its feminine identity.

It is right that this should be so. It is also right that in a war of ideologies, in which the common man and woman seek to keep the elemental privilege of free expression, the W.A.A.F. should be drawn from all classes. The girls you see in these pictures are not drawn from a privileged class ; nor are they conscripted from an unprivileged one. They have a common privilege, which is service ; and a common right, which is democracy. And since neither service nor democracy are exclusively British virtues, it is also right that these

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girls should come from all parts of the civilised world. They have come not only from Great Britain ; and not only from the Empire. They have come from Belgium, Czecho-Slovakia, Holland, Denmark, France, Norway, Poland, Eire, the Channel Islands and even Spain ; they have come from as far off as Chile, Brazil, Venezuela and Malay. And the province of their service, like the province of the R.A.F. of which they are part, grows as wide.

H. E. B.