

1 REVIVAL

The First World War and Its Immediate Aftermath

During the First World War, various independent women's organisations assisted the armed forces. These included such bodies as the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), 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. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was established in March 1917, the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) in November 1917 and the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) in April 1918 – the latter being created on the same day as the RAF. 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 organisations at home and overseas.¹

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 which associated them with 'unnatural' masculine traits, this was not

considered a priority by the male service establishment. The WRNS, the WRAF and the WAAC (which had been renamed Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps) were thus disbanded during the period 1919–21.² The creation of a women's reserve organisation 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 would 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.³ Although the FANY (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 – no official women's service existed.⁴ Women were once more excluded from the servicemen's sphere.

The (New) Women's Legion and the Emergency Service

The first tentative steps that would eventually lead to a revival of the women's auxiliary services were taken in the early 1930s. 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 organisation: the Women's Reserve. The brainchild of 'Commandant' Mary Allen, a former wartime policewoman and jackbooted fascist sympathiser, this shadowy enterprise was intended to combat left-wing subversion and threatened to undermine the Marchioness's own organisation, the Women's Legion, as well as the FANY. 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 military authorities in late 1933 for a new and expanded Women's Legion under her presidency. This would act as an umbrella organisation for the established independent women's bodies and



Figure 1.1 The Marchioness of Londonderry in the uniform of the Women's Legion, 1918 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

provide a national pool of trained women who could be mobilised to perform ancillary tasks for the armed forces in an emergency.⁵

The service ministries could see the advantages of dealing with one representative organisation and gave a guarded welcome to the (new) Women's Legion.⁶ But it became apparent that the individual services had different conceptions of the role of this body. The Air Ministry – perhaps unsurprisingly – was the most enthusiastic department. It envisaged that the new legion would train women to undertake specified duties for the wartime RAF and that a grant would be required from the air force budget to cover the costs. The War Office was more cautious and contemplated that the organisation would merely register women who would be ready to serve in the army in an emergency with no call made upon army funds. As for the Admiralty, it had grave doubts as to whether the

scheme could fulfil any useful purpose for the Royal Navy and questioned the political expediency of endorsing an initiative that could be interpreted as an early public preparation for war.⁷ 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 Gwynne-Vaughan to work under her as chairman of the new legion. Gwynne-Vaughan, Professor of Botany at Birkbeck College, and a former deputy head of the WAAC and head of the WRAF 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 chairman was not accustomed to running other people's 'shows' and carried with her the professional woman's resentment of prominent society ladies, such as the Marchioness, who received all the plaudits for their patriotic endeavours but seemed 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 Gwynne-Vaughan to consider setting up her own organisation.⁸

The immediate consequence was her proposal for 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ 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!'¹²

In the interim the question of the (new) Women's Legion had been referred to a women's reserve subcommittee of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID). Chaired by Sir William Graham Greene, a former Permanent Secretary of the Admiralty, this reported in the spring of 1936. Having investigated the armed forces' requirements 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 organisation 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

The CID committee's ruling in effect killed the (new) Women's Legion: later that year it was wound up, the FANY and the (old) Women's Legion continuing as separate entities.¹⁵ A lifeline was, however, offered to Gwynne-Vaughan's officers' training section. It was recommended by the Greene committee that the service departments should have discretion to provide limited assistance to organisations such as hers that might be of value to them in preparing women for duties of a 'supervisory capacity'.¹⁶ 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 as appeasement unfolded. Dame Helen served as chairman and Viscountess Trenchard, an old friend and wife of the 'father' of the RAF, as vice-chairman. The Duchess of Gloucester agreed to act as patron.¹⁷

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 likely candidates. Most of those who joined had service connections and the members 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.¹⁸ 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 organisation and deter others from participating. When rumours began to circulate that she intended to

become a German citizen, Gwynne-Vaughan asked her to leave. Obliging, Mitford withdrew.¹⁹

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 drills, took it in turns to give each other orders, and prepared unappetizing meals using the manual of military cookery.²⁰ 'Most of our friends and relations', recalled Boyle, 'thought us not only mad but bad'.²¹ Altogether some 400 women received training as potential officers.²²

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 Inskip, the Home Office compiled a confidential report on Allen's 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 organisation had subsequently been renamed the Women's Auxiliary Service and, in connection with women's congresses, she had visited Berlin in 1929 and Rio de Janeiro in 1931, 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 formed the Women's Reserve and had been roundly condemned in the press by Londonderry for creating an avowedly militarist organisation that would lead to overlap and confusion with other bodies.²³ 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 this organisation.²⁴ Predictably, Allen was politely informed that a CID committee had ruled on the issue of a women's reserve and her services were not required.²⁵

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 organisation that had been established in the early 1930s to train female pilots and ground crew.²⁶ 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 the ministry coordinated the provision of officer personnel in the same way that it had been tasked by the CID 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 that it would undertake to furnish officers. In order to effect this, it was proposed that on the outbreak of war the ministry would commandeer the membership records of the various women's organisations. These files would indicate which women had the requisite qualifications and training to make suitable officers.²⁷

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 female personnel, including the 'supervisory class', from the Ministry of Labour and in order to facilitate this process the ministry intended to take over the records of the women's bodies at an 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'.²⁸ Loch passed the letter to Londonderry. The Marchioness, still smarting over the recent 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 'class of person' recruited through labour exchanges would be 'totally unsuitable' for the army;

and that it was ‘ridiculous and wasteful’ that organisations intended for military service should not have a direct connection with the War Office.²⁹ Despite her protests, she was told that the matter could not be reopened.³⁰

The Auxiliary Territorial Service

Over the winter of 1937–8, the War Office began to reconsider its position in regard to a women’s reserve. By this stage, events in Europe were becoming increasingly ominous and the army needed to put itself on a war footing. All possible measures had to be taken to make the most efficient use of its trained manpower.³¹ To this end, the Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha suggested that ‘There is no reason why women should not be engaged forthwith as part of the Army Reserve, so that on the outbreak of hostilities they can release individuals, and even the bulk of certain units, for inclusion in active formations’.³² 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.³³ Meanwhile, the well-connected members of the women’s bodies relentlessly lobbied service officials to persuade them of the military utility of their organisations. Gwynne-Vaughan and her supporters were tireless in seeking opportunities to press the case for the Emergency Service.³⁴ Lady Jackson, for example, buttonholed Hore-Belisha when he visited her husband’s command.³⁵ Londonderry and the Countess of Athlone, president of the FANY, were also indefatigable in promoting their respective enterprises. A beleaguered Hore-Belisha reported that the two women were ‘always at him about their shows’.³⁶

Against this background, the army authorities revisited the issue. Not only did it seem invidious on reflection to rebuff the women’s organisations by compelling their well-to-do membership to report to labour exchanges on the outbreak of war, but it also came to be recognised 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 personnel, it would be dependent either upon those women who happened to be registered as unemployed at its labour exchanges, or upon volunteers, to meet the demand. Those registered as unemployed varied according to boom and slump

conditions in industry and might not be available in sufficient numbers. And while volunteers would no doubt come forward, they might not offer their services quickly enough or be of the 'right class'. It was also evident that a large number of well-qualified women were reluctant to go anywhere near a labour exchange and preferred to deal directly with the War Office.³⁷ 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'³⁸ – concluded that the best course of action was for the War Office to rescind the CID's decision and form its own official women's reserve.³⁹ This would build on the achievements of the existing women's organisations and ensure that on mobilisation the army would have at its disposal a group of enrolled women already allotted to certain posts, who were fully conversant with the duties they were to undertake. In the spring of 1938, a letter was despatched to the CID informing it of the army's decision.⁴⁰ The Ministry of Labour representative on the CID's subcommittee on the control of manpower, who had in fact sat on the women's reserve subcommittee two years previously, recorded his strong disapproval of the War Office's executive action on this matter, enacted without any consultation with the relevant authorities. 'This was', he protested, 'a most unusual way of conducting Government business'.⁴¹ 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, Londonderry of the Women's Legion and Mary Baxter Ellis, commandant of the FANY.⁴² The Air Ministry and the Admiralty were also approached with a view to their inclusion in the scheme. The RAF indicated its desire to participate (with Loch's Women's Legion Flying Section quietly sidelined in the process) but the Royal Navy decided not to become involved.⁴³ The new organisation, as the Burnett-Hitchcock committee 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 organised 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 organised. The three recognised women's bodies were to form the

nucleus, with the Emergency Service serving as an officer training unit and the Women's Legion and FANY supplying drivers. The scheme would be administered in the War Office by the department of the Director-General of the Territorial Army (DGTA). The nomenclature of the enterprise engendered a good deal of discussion. It was originally titled the Women's Auxiliary Defence Service but as no one wished to be known as a 'WAD' this was deemed unacceptable. The name was thus changed to the less offensive Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS).⁴⁴

In the autumn of 1938, the Munich crisis blew up and war seemed imminent. As public anxiety grew, large numbers of women converged on local authority offices clamouring to undertake some form of national service and the War Office was under increasing pressure to provide an outlet for their endeavours.⁴⁵ 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 organisation, then many of the best qualified women would take up other forms of war work.⁴⁶ In these circumstances, and before the details of the scheme had even percolated down to many Territorial Army units across the country, the BBC announced the formation of the ATS on 27 September.⁴⁷ 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 ATS 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 descended on the drill halls wishing to join up.⁴⁸ Many of the new ATS officers were no wiser about the service. The presidents of the Territorial Army associations were given the task of appointing the county commandants and 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.⁴⁹ This was a cause of frustration to Emergency Service women who believed that they were much better qualified to take on these posts.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, by the outbreak of war, 17,600 women had been enrolled in the ATS and most of the companies were nearing full strength.⁵¹ 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 ATS officer, Leslie Whateley (who was later to be head of the service), 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.'⁵² The War Office admitted that in these early days, 'the Army did not then understand or appreciate the employment of women on a duty which, in peace, had been regarded as essentially a man's job'.⁵³

It was not until the spring of 1939 that the army authorities gave serious consideration to the appointment of a female chief for the ATS. Up to this point it was thought that a relatively junior male staff officer in the DGTA's department could oversee the service. It became clear, however, that with the announcement of the doubling of the Territorial Army, the DGTA's branch would be fully occupied with the new male intake. Furthermore, some of the feminine matters with which the hapless DGTA officer had to deal, such as the relative merits of a brassiere and suspender-belt as opposed to a corset in the ATS pattern uniform, did not fall within the competence of the average male staff college graduate.⁵⁴ Indeed, Viscountess Trenchard apparently advised Hore-Belisha that the organisation would only be successfully managed once a woman was put in charge.⁵⁵ As a result, the War Office began to look into the possibility of appointing a female director to administer the service under the DGTA.

Gwynne-Vaughan, who coveted such a role, canvassed county commandants on the question of a 'head woman'.⁵⁶ Her position was that not only were there many 'purely feminine questions' arising out of a women's service that needed to be handled by a senior female figure, but also that such an organisation, 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 understanding or 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 woman's job, whereas they are prepared to like and respect women who can do it'.⁵⁷ One commandant, Miss Justina Collins, JP, responded that she was opposed to the appointment of a female head because it would lead to greater self-governance for the ATS and undermine its relationship with the Territorial Army. 'You will perceive', she concluded, 'I am not a feminist'.⁵⁸ Gwynne-Vaughan countered 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 organisation: ‘So perhaps’, she countered, ‘I am not a feminist after all in the usually accepted sense!’⁵⁹ 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 ATS (DATS).⁶⁰



Figure 1.2 Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, Director of the ATS 1939–41, inspects members of her force (Fox Photos/Hulton Archive via Getty Images)

The appointment of Gwynne-Vaughan brought to the surface a simmering dispute with the FANY. This body was drawn from what Roy Terry has described as the 'mink and manure set' and considered itself the elite women's organisation. It was determined to retain its distinctive identity within the ATS 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 FANY 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 ATS officers – whose role they contemptuously dismissed as 'counting Ats' 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 FANY was anathema to Gwynne-Vaughan, who embodied the hierarchical disciplinary conventions of the regular army, and on becoming DATS she was determined to bring it into line with other parts of her service. This led to a virtual 'war' with Baxter Ellis, who commanded the FANY motor companies and had been opposed to Gwynne-Vaughan's appointment, and to a great deal of friction between her FANYs and 'interfering' ATS officers. Although it was inevitable that the big battalions of the ATS would eventually assimilate the FANY – with the special concession that they could wear a FANY flash on the shoulder of their ATS uniforms – it was not until the replacement of Gwynne-Vaughan as DATS in 1941 that relations between the parties began to improve.⁶¹

The Women's Auxiliary Air Force

As part of the Air Ministry's participation in the ATS, it was agreed that separate RAF 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 RAF 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 RAF 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 RAF companies would be linked to local Auxiliary Air Force units and that they would become officer and NCO (Non-

commissioned officer) producing companies. These companies – which the RAF authorities would assume responsibility for – would provide the cadres around which future expansion could take place.⁶²

Despite these modifications, the ATS scheme remained unsatisfactory from the Air Ministry's point of view. The RAF companies continued to be subject to army administrative procedures that differed from those of their own service. Moreover, the training requirements of the RAF companies, which were now composed of potential officers and NCOs, were at odds with those of the other ATS companies that were to serve with the army and which 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 RAF companies from the ATS 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 (WAAF) came into being.⁶³

The WAAF was to be organised on a county basis. The trainee officers and NCOs in its companies were to wear an air force blue uniform and, like the ATS, would 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 WAAF (DWAAF) was appointed to advise him. She was Jane Trefusis Forbes, who had served with the Women's Volunteer Reserve (a similar body to the FANY and Women's Legion) during the First World War; built up a successful dog-breeding business during the inter-war years, and then acted as one of Gywnne-Vaughan's stalwarts in the Emergency Service.⁶⁴ There were, however, elements within the RAF who plainly had little time for the new airwomen. Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert, a former Inspector General of the RAF, admitted that 'a very high percentage of the regular RAF officers regarded them as an unmitigated nuisance and gave them no help'.⁶⁵

The first public appearance of the WAAF came at a parade of all the national service organisations in Hyde Park, a few days after its inauguration. One of its NCOs, Felicity Peake, smartly attired in the new blue uniform, was thrilled at the prospect of representing her service at this event: '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!'⁶⁶



Figure 1.3 Jane Trefusis Forbes, Director of the WAAF 1939–43 (Plt. Off. Stannus/IWM via Getty Images)

The WAAF had little time to bed in before the outbreak of war, as most of its companies were closed down for leave during the months of July and August. This meant that rather than preparing for their impending mobilisation, the 1,700 women enrolled in the fledgling force were instead enjoying their summer holidays.⁶⁷

The Women's Royal Naval Service

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 WRNS during the First World War, wrote a number of 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 WRNS were eager to serve with the Royal Navy and wished to know what steps were being taken to facilitate this. 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.⁶⁸

In the spring of 1938, the Admiralty decided not to join the War Office and the Air Ministry in the ATS 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 organisation. It was also deemed prudent to invite Dame Katharine to offer her advice on such an enterprise. During the summer, the naval 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.⁶⁹

In the meantime, the CID 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. 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 organisation.⁷⁰

Given these circumstances, the naval authorities decided to take the plunge and introduce a peacetime women's auxiliary service. Vera Laughton Mathews, who had served in the WRNS during the First World War and played a prominent role in the Sea Ranger movement in the inter-war years, was appointed as its director. 'I cannot help feeling', Laughton 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'.⁷¹ The new director obligingly got down to dealing with the vast backlog of applications and finalising the details of the organisation. On



Figure 1.4 Vera Laughton Mathews, Director of the WRNS 1939–46
(© National Portrait Gallery, London)

14 April the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) – the only women's service to revive its First World War title – was announced to the public.⁷²

The WRNS was to be based around the major home naval ports. The volunteers (known, as they had been during the previous war, as Wrens) 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, writers, 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 WRNS (DWRNS) was to administer it under him.⁷³ Laughton Mathews's early interactions with naval colleagues were, however, not always easy. While seeking to lay down some rudimentary regulations for her new service, she recalled that 'More than once I was told that I flouted the opinion of an Admiral of thirty-five years' experience. I hung on, miserable but dogged.'⁷⁴

The WRNS did not get off to the most auspicious of public 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 DWRNS among the naval dignitaries to be presented to the King. While Gwynne-Vaughan and Trefusis Forbes were introduced to the monarch as the directors of their respective auxiliary forces, Laughton Mathews was relegated to taking part in the march-past with her Wrens.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, despite this oversight, by the outbreak of war, some 1,000 women had been accepted into the organisation and some preliminary training had been carried out at the ports.⁷⁶ The three women's services were up and running.