

WW1 WOMEN IN THE SERVICES

WOMEN'S AUXILLIARY ARMY CORPS (WAAC) 1917 – 1918 QUEEN MARY'S AUXILIARY ARMY CORPS 1918 – 1920

In January 1917, discussions began about the role and status of uniformed women. Even Sir Douglas Haig believed that women could play a vital role in the British army although he had reservations about their physical strength. 7th July 1917 saw the creation of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. It had no officers (only men could hold commissions) but appointed controllers and administrators, while NCOs were called forewomen. The War Office insisted that any job given to a WAAC had to release a man for front line duties. More than 50,000 women served in the WAAC and by the end of the war were working in France, Belgium, Italy and Greece in many role, including as despatch riders. In 1918 the service became Queen Mary's Auxiliary Army Corps until 1920.

WOMEN'S ROYAL NAVAL SERVICE (WRNS) 1917 – 1918

The Women's Royal Naval Service was formed in October 1917 to carry out shore based duties. The recruitment posters encouraged women to 'Free a man for Sea Service'. Originally, the Admiralty aimed to recruit 3,000 women as cleaners, cooks and waitresses. There were two classes, 'Immobile' who were only prepared to work near home and 'mobile' who would serve anywhere. Eventually there were 5,000 members (of which 500 were officers) and many were now working as telegraphists, clerks and drivers.

WOMEN'S ROYAL AIR FORCE (WRAF) 1918 – 1920

Originally there were 2,000 women serving with the WRNS but supporting the Royal Naval Air Service. When the RAF was formed, there was concern that the specialised skills of these women might be lost and the WRAF was founded on 1st April 1918. Women in the WAAC and the WRNS were given the choice of transferring to the new service and 9,000 did so. Civilian enrolment swelled WRAF numbers. Despatched initially to RAF bases in Britain, by late 1919 they were serving in France and Germany. WRAF personnel served in four categories – clerks and storewomen, household (cooks, cleaners etc.), technical and non-technical and numbered 32,000 by the time they were disbanded in April 1920. Technical skills included tinsmiths, fitters and welders, but by 1920 over 50 trades were open to women including tailoring, photography, pigeon keeping and driving. The minimum age for joining was 18 and medicals were rigorous. Like the WRAF, there were two classes, 'mobile' and 'immobile'. 'Those from educated upper class families were enrolled as officers; the majority became 'members'.

FIRST AID NURSING YEOMANRY (FANY) (PRINCESS ROYAL'S VOLUNTEER CORPS) 1907 –

It was founded in 1907 as an all-female mounted charity to be a first aid link between the field hospitals and the front line, rescuing the wounded and giving first aid. Women were also trained in signalling and provided an intelligence role. Initially scorned by the British Army, they ran hospitals and casualty clearing stations for the Belgian armies. By the armistice they had many decorations for bravery.