

Britain's Firewomen in WWII

In November 1941 a newspaper article appeared under the headline:

'Britain's Firewoman No. 1 Wants Girls to Drive Engines



Mrs. Betty Wake Cuthbert (*left*), is Britain's Firewoman Number One. She has been appointed the tenth member of the National Fire Service Council. Group Commander Cuthbert, wife of a naval officer and now chief of 8,000 firewomen, is to advise the Council on all questions relating to women in the Fire Service.

She is designing new uniforms, training recruits and making plans for women to replace men as far as possible. All her suggestions are made to Commander Firebrace, Chief of the Fire Service. Then they are submitted to the Home Secretary.

"We are experimenting with training women pump operators and dispatch riders," Mrs. Cuthbert said. "They would free men for more arduous firefighting duties. Pump operators may drive fire engines and then man the pumps at fires." Of the new uniforms Mrs. Cuthbert said: "There are two models both with skirts or slacks. One has a high collar and the other revers showing a white collar and tie. The Home Secretary is to decide which he prefers."

Mrs. Cuthbert told a story of A.F.S. girls who were going out with a canteen during a heavy raid on a Midland town. A fireman said: "You're not going out in this *weather*," but the girls replied: "Why? It's not raining, is it?" That showed the spirit of the firefighting women.'



During WWII, thousands of British women volunteered for the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) and later the National Fire Service (NFS), filling roles critical to the home front. At their peak, roughly 90,000 women were involved, serving as dispatch riders (*left*), drivers, and control room operators. They often worked under fire during the Blitz, and 25 women lost their lives while serving.

Roles and Responsibilities

The most common role involved managing phone lines, tracking bombing raids, and dispatching crews. Women drove heavy support vehicles, including fuel bowsers (petrol re-fuelling trucks), and operated



motorcycles to deliver messages when communications were destroyed. They managed mobile canteens to feed crews in the field.

While not initially intended to be on the front lines, many women unofficially fought fires (*left*), and were honoured for bravery, particularly when crews were overwhelmed during intense bombing raids.

Key Aspects of Their Service

The AFS was formed in 1938 and launched a huge recruitment drive as men were conscripted into the army, attracting thousands of women. Women fire personnel worked long, dangerous shifts in London and other cities during the Blitz, directly contributing to the survival of the city under intense aerial bombardment. Women often faced scepticism or outright opposition from male personnel, with some fearing that they would lower wages or take on roles that were too strenuous. However, they soon proved essential, and many were organized by the Fire Brigades Union, which pushed for better conditions. Despite not being conventional frontline soldiers, 25 women in the AFS lost their lives in the line of duty.

Legacy and Recognition

In 1941, the patchwork of local brigades and the AFS were absorbed into the nationalised NFS, where the majority of administrative and logistical support was handled by women. The bravery of female firefighters is recognized at the National Firefighters Memorial in London, where they are remembered alongside their male colleagues.

Of the 25 women who died in the line of duty, many were killed during bombing raids while working at fire stations or delivering essential supplies. Their names are recorded on the National Firefighters Memorial in London.

Notable Stories of Sacrifice

- **Joan Ridd (Aged 20):** Twenty-year-old Joan and her fellow firefighters had been using Ricardo Street School in Poplar, East London, as a fire sub-station during the Second World War. The school received a direct hit from a high-explosive bomb on the 1st of November 1940. The main impact of the bomb was concentrated on the part of the school in use as a watch room where Joan was on duty that night. When the building collapsed Joan was buried under the rubble along with one other firewoman and ten firemen. Trapped and injured under the debris Joan died as a result of her injuries. Including Joan, five died as a result of their injuries. A Red Plaque was recently unveiled in her memory.
- **Old Palace School Victims:** Several women were killed when a bomb hit the Old Palace School in Poplar, which was being used as a fire station. Among those remembered are **Hilda Ellen Dupree**.



Hilda Ellen Dupree (*left*), was one of two Firewomen who sadly lost their lives at the Old Palace School in 1941, she had been working as a telephonist for the AFS. Hilda was just twenty-one years old and, as so often happened, would have been on leave that fateful night, had she not swapped shifts with a friend who wanted to go to a dance. Hilda Dupree's sister, Joyce, hoping to avoid the distress for her parents, was sent by her family to find out what she could about Hilda. Joyce was confronted by what she described as complete devastation and confusion and the playground was smouldering. Some of the men had also been recovered by the time she arrived and they were laid in a line, in a space that had been cleared in the playground, ready to be identified. Work to rescue or recover any bodies from the devastation, was

ongoing and was to continue round the clock for a week, until the final body was recovered. She was stopped by a warden and asked why she was there. She said she wanted to find her sister, Hilda. The terrible news returned that sadly there were no survivors, but could she say what Hilda was wearing? Her mum used to crochet and she made Hilda a pink bodice, which she knew she always wore. The Warden returned with a small piece of charred material and said he was really sorry, but this was all they were able to trace from the wreckage. Hilda was buried on 28th April 1941 at The Tower Hamlets Cemetery.

- **Support Roles Under Fire:** Many of the 25 deaths occurred because women were stationed in highly exposed positions. Dispatch riders and drivers often had to navigate pitch-black streets during active raids without headlights to deliver messages or fuel.
- **Station Casualties:** Fire stations were frequent targets. For example, six Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) personnel were killed in a single hit at Springhill Fire Station in November 1940.

The Fallen Recorded on the Memorial

While a full list of all 25 is often found in specialized archives like the Firefighters Memorial Trust, those commonly cited include:

- **Rhoda Ashcroft** (died 1942)
- **Lilian S. Baker**
- **Joan E. Bartlett**
- **Dorothy Carrington** (died 1944)
- **Pearl M. Chitty**
- **Marjorie Winifred Davies** (died 1940)
- **Hilda Day & Doris M. Day**

- Doreen Duncan
- Alice J. Gifford
- Elsie Amy Hawtin (died 1943)
- Winifred Alexandra Peters (died 1941)

Post-War Recognition



It is worth noting that while these women died during WWII, it took decades for their "active" role to be fully recognized. For many years, the first female firefighter officially recorded as dying "on duty" was Fleur Lombard in 1996, because the WWII women were technically "Auxiliaries" and often restricted to support roles, despite the high-risk nature of their work. Today, the National Firefighters Memorial (*left*), honours them all equally.

The **Firefighters Remembered | Book of Remembrance** also honours the Fire Watchers that were killed in WWII.

Sources

- Fire Brigade's Union
- London Fire Brigade
- Facebook – Home Front History
- Firefighters Remembered