

Women and the Home Guard – By David Gray

Newspaper article May 1942:

'Thousands to Volunteer

Women for the H. G.

The Home Guard is to have its own Women's Auxiliary Service. An appeal has been made by the War Office to voluntary organisations to cooperate with local commanders.

It is suggested that they should be recruited as canteen attendants, messengers, telephonists and other "non-combatant" tasks. Many thousands of women are likely to take up this work.

No Special Uniform

They will not, however, be allowed to wear any special uniform, but some sort of badge is under special consideration. Their recruitment will relieve many members of the Home Guard of clerical and transport duties.'



Prior to this announcement, the "Women's Home Defence" (WHD) was an unofficial organization founded by Labour MP Dr. Edith Summerskill in 1940 to enable women to receive weapons training during WWII. Initially opposed by the War Office, the group grew to claim 30,000 members and eventually led to the formation of the Women's Home Guard Auxiliaries in 1943, though women were limited to non-combatant roles in the official military structure. Summerskill was a prominent feminist who pushed for greater equality and armed roles for women, advocating for an armed women's militia alongside the men's Home Guard.

W.H.D. Founding and purpose

- **Founder:** Dr. Edith Summerskill, Labour MP for Fulham West, founded the WHD in June 1940.
- **Goal:** To provide women with the opportunity to receive weapons training and have an armed role in national defence, similar to the Home Guard.
- **Initial Opposition:** The War Office refused to officially recognize the WHD, citing that it was socially unacceptable for women to train as combatants.
- **Growth:** Despite official opposition, the movement gained significant traction, reaching around 250 units across Britain by December 1942 and claiming 30,000 members by April 1943.

Training and roles



- **Training:** Members (badge left), underwent rifle and other weapons training, often practicing with local Home Guard units.
- **Unofficial roles:** While official military rules prevented women from joining the Home Guard in combat roles, some units, at the discretion of their commanders, allowed women to train alongside them.
- **Official recognition:** In 1943, the WHD was reluctantly recognized by the War Office as the Women's Home Guard Auxiliaries, but women were restricted to supportive, non-combatant roles such as clerical work and driving.

Legacy

- **Pioneering effort:** The WHD was one of the largest women's organizations to campaign for armed roles for women during the war.
- **Continued advocacy:** Summerskill's efforts helped challenge the notion that women were not physically or mentally capable of bearing arms.
- **Disbandment:** The organization was eventually disbanded in December 1944, continuing on as the Women's Rifle Association.



Dr. Edith Summerskill (left), was a relentless campaigner for women's rights. Her pre-war activities saw her at the forefront of several feminist causes, such as abortion reform, equal pay and equal rights for women in work and marriage. Summerskill's pursuit of equality for women in the Home Guard was similarly dogged. She constantly interrogated the War Office on why women had been banned from participation in the Home Guard in 1941 and heckled Sir. Edward Grigg, Secretary of State for war, during his speeches in Parliament.

Despite the ban many local H.G. units still utilised the services of women and, aware that their prohibition was having little affect, the government was forced to back down in 1943. The government's acceptance of 'nominated women' in the Home Guard was qualified

however, they were still not to be trained in the use of firearms and were to wear a 'brooch' (right), instead of a uniform. Summerskill continued to fight for equality on this slight to female members but the war ended before the issue was resolved to her satisfaction. Nonetheless, it is because of Summerskill and other campaigners, such as Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, that women were recognised at all. Summerskill and Gwynne-Vaughan successfully managed to secure a letter of thanks from King George VI that was similar to the one male members received on standing down in 1944.



As stated, some Home Guard units were quite happy to give women training in the use of weapons and other armed combat training.



The Streatham Hill Section of the W.H.D. were given a great deal of training by their local Home Guard unit as can be seen *left*. The two women closest to the camera are using two older types of Enfield rifle, the two at the back are using old German army rifles. These were all presumably weapons left over from WWI.

Not all training was restricted to firearms. Some much less “ladylike” activities were practiced (below left), which may have been more akin to the type of “socially unacceptable” roles the War Office was keen to avoid for women.



The rifle drill below would have seemed so much more desirable. These ladies are using “dummy” rifles.



Newspaper article, Daily Mail, 13th July 1942:

‘Women for the Home Guard – Whitehall Changes its Mind

The War Office has changed its mind and decided to draft women into the Home Guard. An official announcement is expected within the next few days. But it has not yet been decided whether women H.G.s shall use firearms.

Senior Regular Army officers have reported that A.T.S. girls serving on A.A. batteries are as cool and brave under fire as the men with whom they work. This, it is believed, has caused the War Office to alter its opinion of the efficiency of women. The senior officers also reported that women master technical details more quickly than men, and that girls on the anti-aircraft devices are better at the job than the men. They remain quite steady and efficient under fire.

“Still Feminine”

When the officers began their investigation, the women were confident of the result. The part of the report that has pleased them most is the statement that despite the “hardening process” women remain distinctly feminine.

Recruitment of women will help fill the gaps in the Home Guard caused by the calling-up of men for Army service, and also by the transfer of men to the A.A. units. An appeal will be made shortly for recruits, who will be trained as cooks, caterers and orderly room assistants and for duty on communication and intelligence work.

A number of women trained in these duties will be attached to each platoon. Unofficially, one or two special duty sections of the Home Guard have already recruited women, who are now undergoing preliminary training. Women Home Guards will have a special uniform but its design has not yet been finally approved.’

Newspaper article, Daily Mail, 14th October 1942:

‘Women Home Guards – Non-Combatants

Women are to be enrolled in the Home Guard. The number required is not known at present, but will depend on circumstances. The decision has been made largely as the result of pressure on the authorities by women’s organisations and also because it is recognised that there is work for them to do.

It has been laid down definitely that they will be enrolled for non-combatant duties only. These duties will include cooking, receiving and sending messages by telephone and telegraph, and clerical work. At the moment, women who join the Home Guard will not be given uniforms. They will be allowed to wear an armband.

The authorities are now considering a proposal to recognise men who joined the Home Guard immediately on its initiation as the Local Defence Volunteer movement and who are still serving with it. The proposal is that they should be given a star to wear on their sleeves.’



The two ladies *left*, training with MkI and MkII Sten guns, would not have been happy to be restricted to cooking and clerical work!

Newspaper article 21st April, 1943:

‘30,000 HG Women Ready – “Fully Trained”

Women are now to be officially admitted into the Home Guard to take over such non-combatant duties as clerical work, cooking and driving. They will not fight, and no uniform will be issued, but they may wear a badge.

Sir James Grigg, Secretary for War, announced this in the House yesterday in reply to a question by Dr. Edith Summerskill (Lab., Fulham).

It had been decided, he said, that a limited number of women proportionate to the strength of the Home Guard might be nominated for service as auxiliaries. Women between the ages of 18 and 65 will be eligible, but instructions have been issued to Home Guard battalion commanders to give preference to those over 45, or to women who are not eligible for direction to other work.

The War Secretary's decision means that 30,000 members of the Women's Home Defence, the organisation founded by Dr. Summerskill, who have unofficially helped the Home Guard for many months past, have finally been given official status.

They will provide a pool of women already highly trained in various non-combatant duties, as well as musketry, from which local Home Guard commanders can draw when the need arises. Women who do not belong to the W.H.D. but who wish to join the H.G. as auxiliaries should apply either to H.G. headquarters in their district or to the Women's Home Defence, Victory House, Leicester Square, W.1.

When I talked to them yesterday at the House, Dr. Summerskill and the secretary of the W.H.D., Miss Yvonne Moss, admitted that they were not sure on one or two points. One for instance, is the exact number of women allowed to enrol. Another is the question of rank. At present there is no ranking in the W.H.D.

Dr. Summerskill told me that each of her 30,000 Home Defence women had taken a course in musketry and that "75% of the women when matched with Home Guards prove better shots." They also have been trained in signalling and intelligence work and armoury instruction.

The women auxiliaries are likely to get the same subsistence allowance as the Home Guard, and will probably gain exemption from fire watching.

Guardswomen will be expected to put in not fewer than 48 hours a month on H.G. duties, though the actual decision will be left to the local commander.

Dr. Summerskill declared that her organisation will continue to train women "to defend their homes."

"Our aim is to teach women to shoot as a defensive measure and one day, who knows, the War Office may decide to issue them with guns."