

Women of Britain in WWII – David Gray

An Official Explanation of Registration and Compulsory Call-Up, 22nd February 1942

There had been a lot of talk about women being called up for one thing and another and an explanation was published in the press to let women know exactly how they stood. No matter whether they were 18 or 60, married or single – no matter whether women had children or a husband in the Forces – they were still affected by the various Government orders.

Registration

Every British woman in Great Britain, whether married or single, had to go to a local office of the Ministry of Labour on the day that their age group was called, to give certain facts about themselves. There were a few exceptions such as women already in the Women's Auxiliary Services. This information was used by the Ministry of Labour to decide what women were available to go into war service.

Women born in the years 1908 to 1921 were registered by 7th February 1942, and it was then announced that women born in 1907, 1906 and 1905 would register fortnightly beginning on 21st February.

What happened after registration?

Registration was normally followed by an interview. The only women who were not called for interview were those with children of their own under 14 living with them, and those already in important work. Everyone else was called for interview beginning with those who were not in jobs. Even though a woman may have been performing an important job, she could be interviewed with a view to arranging for an older woman to take her place, releasing her for more active work.

What was Compulsory Service?

Compulsory service took one of two forms:

- Compulsory call-up to the Women's Auxiliary Services (commonly called conscription).
- Compulsory call-up to work in industry (commonly called direction).

The compulsory call-up to the Women's Auxiliary Services applied only to single women and widows without children.

A compulsory direction required a woman to do to any civilian job. If she disobeyed, she was liable to prosecution.



Munitions Factory Work

Women were asked to say whether they would prefer the Services, whole time Civil Defence or war industry. A decision would depend on the national need at the time. Women who opted for the Services would then have to wait to be called-up. Those who chose industry would probably be directed into a Royal Ordnance filling factory, or might be able to get into other munitions work, training or engineering, agriculture or hospital work depending on if they were specially suited for it.

Women had to be prepared to leave home and go where they were sent. Women could volunteer for nursing work at any time before they received a call-up notice or direction.

Volunteering

Whatever a woman was thinking of doing, whether volunteering for the services or any job, she always had to consult the Employment Exchange first. A woman between 20 and 31 years of age had to get her job through the Exchange.

If you were in a job

If a woman who was already in a job volunteered for the Women's Services or Civil Defence, the Exchange always asked the employer whether they wanted to make a case for keeping her because of the importance of her present work. But it was only if her work was very important that the Exchange would refuse her application to join up on these grounds.

If her job was covered by an Essential Work Order, she could not leave it to volunteer, or for any other reason, without the permission of the National Service Officer of the Ministry of Labour.

Appeals

Anyone in the 1920 or 1921 age group being called up could appeal to an independent tribunal on grounds of conscience or exceptional hardship. Anyone in the older age groups could appeal to an independent board against compulsory direction.



Women's Land Army

Mothers of Young Children

If a woman had a child of her own under 14 living with her she could not be called up for the Women's Services and would not even be asked to attend an interview after registration. She could still volunteer as many women did, for war work or Civil Defence. She could look after her neighbour's children during the day so that she could go into munitions work. She might want to take in war workers as lodgers, or part-time work might be available in her district, either in a munitions factory or some other important work. For example, she might be able to work during the rush hours at a shop, thus releasing someone else to go full-time into a munitions factory.

Wives whose husbands were at home

Although these 'housewives' had to register, they could not be called up into the services. They would be interviewed and dealt with as a single woman of her age group with due regard for her 'domestic responsibilities', but she would not be asked to leave her home. She could be sent to work within daily travelling distance only. The same went for the wives of men in the services and merchant navy. All other married women were treated the same as single women.

Women who married after joining the Services could not leave without permission.

Services and War Work for which women were wanted:

Services

- Women's Auxiliary Services
- Civil Defence
- Nursing Services
- Women's Land Army
- Navy Army and Air Force Institutes (N.A.A.F.I.)

Industrial Jobs

- Munitions (including iron and steel, chemicals, radio and electric cables)
- Light alloys
- Timber production
- Post Office engineering
- Domestic work in hospitals, canteens and hostels for munitions and armament works
- Transport service, including maintenance.

Women's Services in World War Two (Compiled from the 1943 wartime press)

I thought I would compile a more detailed list of services and groups in which women were able to serve their country during the Second World War. This comes mainly from a series of articles in a wartime newspaper which was published in 1943. There may have been other groups established post 1943 but the information below gives a good indication of the invaluable work carried out by women that helped to win the war.



Ambulance Drivers

A.R.P., Fire and Ambulance Services

- **Air Raid Precautions:** There were something like 1,500,000 or 1,750,000 A.R.P. workers, of whom a large proportion were women. They served as wardens, fire-fighters and ambulance drivers.
- **Auxiliary Ambulance Drivers:** The women drivers were trained to drive in the dark and in gas-masks. They knew the way to all the hospitals in their district and they had a course of first-aid training. In London alone more than 4,000 vehicles were needed, in addition to a similar number of private cars used to transport sitting casualties. Many of the drivers were women.
- **Auxiliary Fire Service:** Over 5,000 women were attached to fire stations in London alone. Mrs. Koster is Commandant for South of the Thames, and Mrs. Rosemary Marshall for the

North. Women helped the firemen all over the country. They were trained in watch-room work, fire-fighting and anti-gas. They did clerical work, drove cars and towed pumps.

- **The Women's Land Army:** From the outbreak of war up to the end of November, 1939, 3,500 women received Land Army training at Government expense, and 2,800 volunteers were placed in agricultural employment. The demand at that date was not very great, as a comparatively small number of men had been called up off the land. Lady Denman was Honorary Director.
- **Women's Auxiliary Police:** Borough and county Police Forces had in some cases recruited women to release men from clerical work, the telephone and car driving.
- **Women's Voluntary Service:** Half a million voluntary workers recruited by the Dowager Lady Reading were placed at the service of local authorities all over the country. They were invaluable in dealing with evacuees and A.R.P. work.



Women Auxiliary Police

First Aid, Nursing and Ambulance Services

- **First Aid:** A trained nurse was in charge of each first-aid post, with auxiliary nurses to help her. These posts were set up in every town and village, as part of the A.R.P. scheme.
- **Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service:** H.M. Queen Mary was President and Miss B. M. Martin, R.R.C., was Matron-in-Chief of the nurses of the Navy.
- **Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service:** The army nurses also had Queen Mary as head, and Miss C. M. Roy, R.R.C., M.M., as Matron-in-Chief.
- **The Royal Air Force Nursing Service:** The Princess Royal was head, and Miss E. M. Blair, R.R.C., was Matron-in-Chief.
- **The Territorial Army Nursing Service:** Miss A. M. Phillips, R.R.C., was Matron-in-Chief.
- **Nurses' Department of the Red Cross and St. John War Organisation:** The department supplemented the nurses of each service. Dame Joanna Cruickshank, D.B.E., R.R.C., was Matron-in-Chief.
- **Emergency Medical Service of the Ministry of Health:** Miss K. C. Watt, C.B.E., R.R.C., was Principal Matron. By the end of September the Central Emergency Committee of Nursing



had enrolled 15,000 trained nurses and 20,000 auxiliary nurses who had completed training. The Committee accepted for training as auxiliaries 76,000 women.

- **River Ambulance Service:** Three trained nurses and about ten auxiliaries took 24-hour shifts on Thames steamers fitted up as hospital ships. Two Sea Rangers acted as messengers and signallers.

Other War Services

- **Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS):** Women between the ages of 18 and 43 years were recruited to release men in the Army from cooking, orderly duties and clerical work, telephoning, store-keeping and driving. The Queen was Commandant-in-Chief, and Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, G.B.E., Chief Controller.
- **Women's Auxiliary Air Force:** Thousands of women worked on R.A.F. stations all over the country as cooks, orderlies and clerks, telephone operators, transport drivers and instrument mechanics. The Queen was Commandant-in-Chief, and Miss K. J. Trefusis Forbes was Director.
- **Women's Royal Naval Service:** Women relieved men of shore jobs at the ports and naval establishments. They did decoding as well as driving, clerical work, store-keeping, cooking and stewards' work. The Queen was Commander-in-Chief, and Mrs. Laughton Matthews was the Director.
- **Y.M.C.A.:** The National Women's Auxiliary of the Y.M.C.A. ran canteens for the troops throughout the country, which were open day and night. Princess Helena Victoria, the President, took an active interest in the work.
- **Y.W.C.A.:** Canteens and recreation centres for Service women were provided and staffed.
- **Salvation Army:** Salvation Army women officers helped to run canteens for the troops at 40 camps. They assisted with canteens at railway stations.
- **Entertainment:** Gracie Fields led the way in entertaining the troops. Her concert in France on November 15th 1939, was such a tonic that entertainment parties were hastened off to the front. Violet Loraine sang "The songs I sang to your fathers." Myra Hess Organised luncheon-hour concerts in London.

