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PROLOGUE

When you see a girl in khaki or air-force blue with a bit of ribbon on her tunic – remember she didn't get it for knitting more socks than anyone else in Ipswich.[1]

At 1.00 am on 31 May 1940 twenty-nine-year-old Corporal Daphne Pearson, a medical orderly in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and former manager of the Ditton Court farm shop near Maidstone in Kent, was asleep in her bunk in the women's quarters at RAF Detling. Suddenly she was woken by the noise of an Avro Anson – of Coastal Command's 500 Squadron – returning from operations. Although she was accustomed to the drone of these aircraft, the tone of the engines indicated that something was wrong. Instinctively, Pearson pulled a jersey and pair of trousers over her pyjamas and, clad in tin hat and wellington boots, rushed outside in time to see the stricken Anson crash-land in flames in an adjacent field. Ignoring calls for her to keep away, she scrambled through a ditch of nettles towards the red glow of the crash site. On arriving at the scene, two of the injured aircrew had managed to extract themselves from the aircraft, but the pilot, Pilot Officer David Bond, was more seriously hurt. Although the Anson was ablaze, and there were fuel and bombs on board ready to detonate, Pearson courageously stood on the burning wreckage, roused the stunned pilot and assisted in getting him clear. When Bond had been moved some thirty yards away from the aircraft, a 120 lb bomb went off and Pearson threw herself on top of the pilot in order to protect him from the splinters and debris of the explosion. The blast was so strong

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that others arriving to assist were said to have been blown over like tents in a gale force wind. After helping Bond onto a stretcher, and despite the risk of further detonations, Pearson returned to the Anson to search for the missing wireless operator, but found him dead. She then helped to remove fragments of metal from the injured airmen in a makeshift operating theatre at the base before they were transferred elsewhere. Having snatched a few hours sleep, she calmly reported back to the sick bay at 8.00 am to resume her normal duties. In recognition of her role in helping to save Bond's life that night, Pearson was awarded the Empire Gallantry Medal. The following year she was presented with the George Cross, which had superseded the EGM. She was the first woman to receive the GC: the nation's highest civilian award for gallantry and equal in status to the Victoria Cross.[2] 'The bravery of Corporal Joan Daphne Pearson', wrote one wartime commentator, ' ... has become a matter of national pride.'[3]

During the Second World War approximately 600,000 women were absorbed into three British women's auxiliary services: the

Figure P.1 Section Officer Daphne Pearson with her George Cross after her investiture by King George VI at Buckingham Palace, 1941 (PNA/Hulton Archive via Getty Images)

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Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). At their peak strengths, the WAAF numbered 182,000, the ATS 213,000 and the WRNS 74,000 (see Table 1 in appendix).[4] Women from all parts of the United Kingdom, and beyond, served in these forces. In the ATS, for example, of the approximately 208,000 auxiliaries embodied at the end of 1943, 162,900 had been born in England, 25,700 in Scotland, 7,300 in Wales, 1,900 in Northern Ireland, 3,000 in Eire and 3,500 in India, the Dominions or the British colonies. An additional 1,300 personnel were of British nationality born outside the British empire and a further 2,200 were of foreign nationality (chiefly German, Polish, Austrian, Czech and Russian).[5] These servicewomen were generally young in age. Of the 445,200 female personnel across the three women's services in the summer of 1943, over half were aged twenty-two or under. A quarter were twenty or under.[6]

The WAAF, ATS and WRNS performed a variety of military functions in support of the RAF, army and Royal Navy, both at home and overseas, and in many cases women served alongside men. The jobs they undertook ranged from cooking, typing and telephony, to stripping down torpedoes, overhauling aircraft engines and operating the fire control instruments in anti-aircraft gun batteries. Some 1,500 women died during their war service.[7] Churchill himself contributed a daughter to each of these forces – Sarah to the WAAF, Mary to the ATS and Diana to the WRNS[8] – but perhaps the most notable recruit was the King's elder daughter: eighteen-year-old Princess Elizabeth. She joined the ATS in early 1945 as No. 230873 Second Subaltern Windsor and was trained as a driver, and in vehicle maintenance, at No. 1 Mechanical Transport Training Centre in Camberley. Although the heir to the throne could never be just 'one of the girls', and returned to Windsor each night to sleep, she reminisced that it was the first time in her life that she had been able to measure herself against her contemporaries in any collective activity.[9] The ATS provided a contingent for the guard of honour at her wedding in Westminster Abbey in 1947.[10]

This book is intended as a contribution to the historiography of the wartime British armed forces. Military historians have, perhaps understandably, concentrated their attention on the male services.[11] The aim here is to investigate their female counterparts. A number of valuable historical studies have been published of these forces during the war, but they have tended to focus on individual services,[12] or on

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Figure P.2 Princess Elizabeth undertaking ATS training in vehicle maintenance, 1945 (Bettmann via Getty Images)

particular servicewomen, such as the much-publicised ATS 'gunners' (of whom Mary Churchill was one) who helped to engage German aircraft and flying bombs over Britain.[13] This volume deals with all three services and investigates a range of aspects of service experience, in the hope of broadening our understanding of these wartime auxiliary institutions and the integration of women into the British armed forces. Drawing on a variety of sources, it begins with a discussion of the re-establishment of the three women's services shortly before the outbreak of hostilities. It then moves onto an examination of the wartime history of these forces. This is explored in a series of thematic chapters covering various features of service life during the conflict. It ends with the creation of the permanent regular post-war women's services which, for the first time, offered a career for women with their 'parent' armed forces.

At the end of the war, Flight Officer Daphne Pearson (as she then was after receiving a commission in 1940) was demobilised from the WAAF. After a period as an assistant governor at H. M. Prison, Aylesbury, she joined the staff of the Herbarium at the Royal Botanic

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Gardens, Kew, and established her own plant nursery and shop in the village. In the late 1950s Pearson, who was not in the best of health, moved to Australia. There she worked as a horticulturist for the Department of Civil Aviation and helped create international-standard gardens around the new Tullamarine (Melbourne) airport. She, however, returned to Britain regularly for reunions of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association and in 1995, during a visit to take part in the commemorative events to mark the fiftieth anniversary of victory in Europe, enjoyed an emotional meeting with the family of Pilot Officer Bond. After the conflict, Bond had founded what would become the world's largest civilian helicopter group with its headquarters in Aberdeen. Although he had died in 1977 without having had the opportunity of seeing Pearson again, his sons, who had seen pictures of her in the press being presented to the Queen Mother along with the story of her award, wished to thank her in person for her part in saving their father in 1940. They therefore arranged to fly the eighty-three-year-old wartime heroine up to Scotland for a special celebratory lunch at the Raemoir House Hotel in Banchory.[14] 'We owe a great debt to Daphne', they later wrote ' – our very existence'.[15] For her, it was an equally memorable occasion: 'I just wanted to cry when they got in touch with me. I have found a whole new family.'[16]

In 2000 Daphne Pearson passed away. Her GC is now among the collections of the Imperial War Museum, as is Dame Laura Knight's evocative wartime portrait of her. This picture was painted for the Ministry of Information's War Artists' advisory committee during the height of the Battle of Britain in late August and early September 1940.[17] During the sitting, Pearson, who was 'full of conflictions' because she was absent from her RAF station while the battle was raging, stayed at the British Camp Hotel at Wynd's Point near Malvern and it seems likely that the picture was painted in the nearby garden of Sir Barry Jackson, a close friend of Knight and her husband. A sun-burned Pearson reported in a letter to her mother that Knight had initially depicted her holding a rifle which, in tandem with the tin helmet perched on the back of Pearson's head like a woman's bonnet, would make 'a good line'. Pearson was much in favour of this combative portrayal: 'If Germans kill women and children deliberately in their homes and in the streets, machine-gunning – then the women must be prepared to kill to protect their children'. But such an image was controversial since airwomen were not permitted to carry arms and she admitted that 'the Air Min. will be furious'.[18] In the

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end, a respirator was inserted in place of the rifle. 'The irony of the gun was over-ruled by using a gas mask', recalled Pearson, '[but] in truth no way would one open up a gas mask in such an artistic manner.'[19] The replacement of a rifle with a respirator – the apparatus of life over that of death – tells us something about the gender tensions surrounding the service of women with the British armed forces during the war and the challenges they faced in entering the male military bastion.

Figure P.3 Dame Laura Knight's portrait of Daphne Pearson, 1940 (© Imperial War Museum)

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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

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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

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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

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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 Gywnne-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

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