

Combatant Status and Small Arms Training: Developments in Servicewomen's Employment

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the recognition of servicewomen as combatants in the late 1970s and the introduction of small arms training in the early 1980s. Using archive material, documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and recollections of senior officers, it reveals external pressures and issues within the Ministry of Defence that led to new policies. Preliminary steps in widening servicewomen's employment, they made a greater impact in the Royal Air Force than for the Women's Royal Army Corps, while the Women's Royal Naval Service continued to lag behind developments.

Introduction

In 1974, Captain Gael Hammond of the Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC) assisted with the evacuation of civilians from Cyprus during the Turkish invasion. She recalled:

'... on one occasion I was attacked and held up against a wall with a knife against my throat. Fortunately Colonel Leo Macy, the paymaster, walked in at that moment and from then on I had an armed guard with me all the time. ... Had I been trained in arms I could have looked after myself.'

She needed a male soldier to guard her because it was Ministry of Defence (MOD) policy that servicewomen were not combatants and could not be armed, even for self-defence.

¹ Brigadier Gael Ramsey (née Hammond) quoted in Roy Terry, *Women in Khaki: the Story of the British Woman Soldier*, (London: Columbus Books, 1988), p.216.

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Concepts and language used in connection with servicewomen's status and employment varied over time and between the Services. From the re-introduction of women's auxiliary Services in 1938/39, women were described as non-combatants. Exclusion from combat roles of seagoing, land warfare and flying was justified on this basis, with no explanation of the term 'non-combatant' or definition of 'combat role' being necessary. Wartime expediency allowed for wide interpretation that sometimes stretched logic, the most widely known example being women in the Auxiliary Territorial Service who worked in anti-aircraft artillery batteries. Officially, they could aim but not fire the guns. At a time of national emergency, it was simpler to say that this was not combat because women did not fire the weapons rather than debate what constituted combat and whether it was right for women to be involved. The principle that servicewomen were not combatants continued with the introduction of regular service in February 1949.

Combatant status was not defined in law and 'combat role' remained a fluid idea. Service personnel had primary peacetime roles (for example: seamen, infantry, aircraft technician) and additional duties (for example: guard duty). Furthermore, personnel or units were earmarked for wartime roles. These were normally related to the peacetime primary role but could require deployment to a theatre of war. Men's primary duties may not require them to be armed (for example: sailors, engineers in repair depots, aircraft technicians). However, the combatant nature of men's employment was underpinned by their liability in the last resort to take up weapons and face the enemy. But being eligible to carry arms did not necessarily imply a person had combatant status. Medical personnel, non-combatant with protected status under the Geneva Conventions, were entitled to be armed in order to defend themselves and their patients.²

While men could be unarmed combatants or armed non-combatants according to primary role, the situation in respect of women was dictated by gender. Whatever work they were employed to do, they had non-combatant status and their roles were not described as combat, even if it involved the same primary function as that of male colleagues. Nor could women be trained to use small arms. Although arming women for self-defence was discussed in the War Office in the late 1940s, Lucy Noakes explained that it was rejected both on principle (arming women was something that

² www.icrc.org, Articles 22 & 24 to the First Geneva Convention 1949 Accessed 16 Apr 2010. Female doctors were not members of the women's Services but joined the medical corps of the separate Services. They are not considered in this article.

communists did) and on practicalities (no suitable weapons and a waste of ammunition). Also, it was asserted that the public would be against such a policy and young women themselves might not join the Army if they were obliged to handle weapons.³ Likewise, neither the Admiralty nor the Air Ministry armed women on the establishment of regular service.

Designation as non-combatants had important consequences for women's careers. It governed the number that could be recruited, roles they could be trained for, postings, promotion prospects, pay and pensions. The 1948 agreement to pay women 75% of the rate paid to single men hinged upon the point that women had no liability to take up arms against an enemy.⁴ Being non-combatant also affected their status in the eyes of servicemen. Men were assigned to guard women if their duties exposed them to risk, as Gael Ramsey recollected. The status of servicewomen remained unchanged until the late 1970s with recognition that, as members of the armed forces, they were 'combatants' with the right to take part in hostilities. However, they were still excluded from roles described as combat. Small arms training was introduced for women in the Army and the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1982. However, the Navy thought it an unnecessary development for the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) at that time.

In scholarly accounts of women's roles in the armed forces in the late 20th century, changes in status in the 1970s and the introduction of weapons training in the early 1980s have merited only brief mention as steps towards the later widening of women's military participation.⁵ This article explores why these changes came about, how the Services differed and the significance for servicewomen's status and career prospects. What emerges is the imperative within the MOD not to describe women's roles as 'combat' and the continuing importance of organizational and operational differences between the Services. Nevertheless, as this article argues, recognition of combatant status and arming began the process of reducing the gap between servicewomen and servicemen's careers. With the concession of combatant status, debate in the MOD

³ Lucy Noakes, *Women in the British Army: War and the Gentle Sex, 1907-1948* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.149-52.

⁴ The National Archive [henceforward TNA]: CAB I28/I3, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 9 Dec 1948.

⁵ For example: Christopher Dandeker and Mady Wechsler Segal, 'Gender Integration in the Armed Forces: Recent Policy Developments in the United Kingdom', *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol.23, No.1, Fall 1996, pp.29-47; Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter, *Sexing the Soldier: The Politics of Gender and the Contemporary British Army* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.31.

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moved on from a general statement of exclusion to a more particular case-by-case examination of what roles were acceptable for women to undertake.

Archival material for the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s has been slow to reach the National Archive even under the former 30-year rule. It is supplemented here by documents released under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and the recollections of some senior officers.

Regular Servicewomen to the 1970s

From 1949 to the 1970s servicewomen retained a foothold in each of the armed forces in Britain without making many inroads into the exclusions established at the outset of regular service. After most of the wartime generation had left, the women's Services formed a small percentage of the overall strength of the armed forces. Figures for 1952 give the WRNS at 3.2%, the WRAC at 1.4% and women in the RAF as 3.7% of total personnel, excluding nurses who were in separate Services. The Army percentage was affected by the large number of national service men. At the end of the 1970s these percentages had increased to 4.5%, 2.8% and 5.7% respectively.⁶

The WRNS was created as a shore-based support service, separate from the Royal Navy (RN), but described as part of the country's naval services. Women did not come under the Naval Discipline Act and so, in law, were civilians with a voluntary code of conduct. Depending on standpoint, staff in the Naval Department of the MOD described women as releasing men for more important work in ships or blocking shore jobs needed to give men respite from seagoing. Initiated because of the 1974 Defence Review, a report published in November of that year listed four main factors in favour of the WRNS. Well-qualified female recruits were available and filled roles for which male recruiting was difficult or, if there was no seagoing equivalent work, not required. Women were cheaper to employ than sailors. Servicewomen could be posted to isolated locations where it was difficult to recruit civilian support staff. Finally, they were a loyal workforce at a time when reliance on potentially militant unionised staff was seen as a risk.⁷ However, seagoing was not to be opened to women and so careers remained limited.

⁶ *Annual Abstract of Statistics*, No.93, (London: HMSO, 1956), Tables 136 and 137 and No.117, (London: HMSO, 1981), Tables 7.4 & 7.8.

⁷ TNA: ADM 105/99, WRNS Study Group Report, Nov 1974. Servicewomen were paid less than men until 1991.

Unlike in the WRNS where women were employed in a separate service, female soldiers were part of the Army and came under military law. However, while men were recruited into corps or arms according to intended employment, women joined a gender based corps – the WRAC. Its purpose was to ‘provide replacements for male officers and men in such employments as may be specified by the Army Board of the Defence Council from time to time.’⁸ Thus women could work within the WRAC (ironically called ‘mainstream’ appointments) or be farmed out to work within men’s corps. The WRAC was designated a non-combatant corps. In Army usage, this limited female officers’ powers of command in the same way as the powers of male officers in various support corps were not as extensive as those in arms explicitly seen as combatant.⁹ Female officers’ powers of command were restricted to the WRAC and non-commissioned men. They could only command male officers who were directed to work for them.¹⁰

In the late 1970s, the majority of female officers were employed on WRAC duties and the remainder with a variety of men’s corps where they compensated for shortfalls of men.¹¹ This was described as expediency manning. If men’s recruitment or retention improved, jobs for women were cut. Career management was undertaken by the WRAC and women who aspired to senior ranks had to make their careers in WRAC employment rather than by working with other Army corps.¹² Non-commissioned

⁸ TNA: WO 163/756, AB/P(77)8, The Future Employment of the WRAC, 14 Jun 1977.

⁹ This terminology was acknowledged as unhelpful following the extension of combatant status to various corps during World War II. Eight papers on the subject of powers of command went to the Army Board between 1945 and 1958 seeking to clarify policy. These haggled over which men should have universal powers of command. WRAC officers’ limited powers were not reconsidered.

WO 32/13155, Powers of Command, 3 Nov 1959.

¹⁰ TNA: WO 32/13155, Powers of Command, 3 Nov 1959 & ECAC P(63)5, Powers of Command – Officers of the Services, 11 Feb 1963. Discussion on men’s corps centred on whether officers could take command of a military operation or on the parade ground. The distinction also affected selection for staff college training, staff appointments and distinguishing features on uniforms such as scarlet gorget patches.

¹¹ Figures for 1981 showed that of 403 WRAC officers, 313 were employed within the mainstream WRAC, 49 were in the Royal Army Education Corps and 41 were described as permanently employed by other corps. National Army Museum [henceforward NAM]: 1998-11-54-10, WRAC Annual Conference, Apr 1981.

¹² The Royal Army Education Corps was an exception. It directly employed women from 1953. NAM: 2001-05-593, RAEC, 4 Aug 1977.

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members of the WRAC were also employed with men's corps. Due to high turnover in the WRAC, they benefitted from earlier promotion than men. However, in some employment categories where they worked alongside men they could not progress beyond the ranks of sergeant or staff sergeant.¹³

For a posting to be opened to a woman, she also had to be able to fulfil its war role. If a unit was earmarked for deployment to a corps area in war, then it was deemed unsuitable for women. This meant that women were excluded from nearly all jobs with I British Corps in West Germany. The main operational exception was in Northern Ireland. From the early 1970s members of the WRAC were employed on search duties at vehicle check points and for covert surveillance.¹⁴ Northern Ireland was an exception in another interesting way in that local women were admitted directly to the Ulster Defence Regiment from 1973. These women, mostly employed on part time terms, were not members of the WRAC.¹⁵

From the outset of regular service on 1 February 1949, women joined the RAF. The Air Ministry pursued a policy of integration. 'Women's Royal Air Force' (WRAF) was an administrative term, not an organization like the WRAC or the WRNS.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it retained some of the characteristics of an organization. It had a female Director supported by some administrative staff, a remit for women's initial (though not specialist) training, and responsibility for discipline and welfare issues. To some extent, it retained a sense of identity carried over from the wartime Women's Auxiliary Air Force with airwomen being colloquially referred to as 'waafs'.

Women were excluded from nearly all aircrew duties, from the RAF Regiment which was akin to an infantry regiment, and from various ground based trades where the training was deemed to be too long and expensive or the work too physically

¹³ NAM: 1998-11-54-7, WRAC Annual Conference, Mar 1977, speech by Director of Manning (Army).

¹⁴ WRAC employment in Northern Ireland was formalised in 1972. (TNA: DEFE 70/149, Brigadier Thursby, 16 Oct 1972).

¹⁵ TNA: DEFE 70/148, Enlistment of Women into the Ulster Defence Regiment, 3 Aug 1973. Women were not to be trained to use weapons (Ibid, Question & Answer Brief, 8 Aug 1973).

¹⁶ TNA: AIR 30/281, King's Order, 10 Jan 1949.

demanding.^{17,18} In most ground-based work, women were interchangeable with men except that they were unable to undertake armed duties, a policy enshrined in the RAF's Queen's Regulations. However, war roles associated with peacetime postings could be defined in such a way as to exclude women from jobs because they could not be armed or oversee men who were armed. Commanding officers of RAF stations manipulated their establishments in favour of men by claiming not to have accommodation suitable for women. This was done to safeguard the availability of sufficient men to form the armed guard force necessary in war, emergency or to counter the threat from terrorist attack.¹⁹

Legal Standing & Combatant Status

With the status of the WRNS due to come under Parliamentary scrutiny in the quinquennial review of the Armed Forces Act, the 1974 study into women's naval employment made what was seen by Admiral Sir David Williams (Second Sea Lord) to be a contentious recommendation to replace the voluntary code of discipline with the Naval Discipline Act (NDA).²⁰ Voluntary discipline was a matter of pride for the women's Service, signifying its superiority over the WRAC and WRAF which relied on military law. Male and female senior officers described the voluntary code as the 'basis of [the] special relationship' between the WRNS and the RN. It was linked with 'the widely held view that the WRNS [had] remained a "feminine" organisation'.²¹ The introduction of the NDA for women was thought to be a slight on the current generation, a judgement that they had been found wanting in comparison with their predecessors who had maintained their discipline without recourse to military law.²²

¹⁷ From 1957 a small number of women were employed as air quartermasters in a role similar to steward aboard passenger aircraft. This work was given aircrew status in 1962. (TNA: AIR 2/16320, Flying Duties as Air Quartermasters, Sep 1962).

¹⁸ For example, engineering apprenticeships were closed due to the cost of training (TNA: AIR 20/6538, S11 to DWAAF, 5 Mar 1947) and women could not be employed as aerial erectors or firefighters on the grounds of strength required. Air Commodore R. M. B. Montague, 'Women in the RAF', in Tony Ross (ed.), *75 Eventful Years: A Tribute to the Royal Air Force* (London: Lockturn, 1993), p227.

¹⁹ TNA: DEFE 71/226, Annex B to Draft Air Force Board paper, 6 Sep 1978.

²⁰ TNA: ADM 167/178, Minutes of Admiralty Board, 13 Feb 1975.

²¹ TNA: ADM 105/99, WRNS Study Group Report, Nov 1974.

²² House of Commons Parliamentary Papers On-line: Report from the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, evidence from Commandant Margaret Drummond, 28 Jul 1966 (<http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk> Accessed 1 Mar 2010).

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However, the study made a strong case for the NDA. Legal experts advised that using the voluntary disciplinary code for civil offences had no foundation in law and that, if challenged, punishments could not be enforced. Such challenge was likely now because of 'the willingness of young people to question the basis of authority exercised over them'.²³ The positive case for its introduction was that women's status would be improved. They would command men by virtue of their own authority rather than by delegation from a male superior. Weight was also given to the idea that equality of opportunity for women should come with equality of obligation.²⁴ It would 'stretch the goodwill of the RN' to extend women's employment if the degree of separateness indicated by different disciplinary codes remained.²⁵

Discussion at the Admiralty Board focussed on the legal position. Frank Judd, Under Secretary of State for the Navy, summarized three options: a civilian code of conduct could be introduced; women could come under the Army Act as Royal Marines did when ashore; or they could apply the NDA.²⁶ Commandant Mary Talbot, Director of the WRNS, was invited to give her opinion. She had been against the NDA as it would 'appear to strike at the heart of the WRNS system of voluntary discipline'.²⁷ However, she accepted new advice that the disciplinary code needed to be regularised. She rejected a civilian code on the grounds that 'with no more disciplinary sanctions than could be applied to the civil service, [it] would wholly undermine the position of the WRNS as a uniformed Service'.²⁸ She suggested women would 'feel their status had been significantly eroded' under a civilian code.²⁹ Her preferred solution was the NDA. The Board agreed. However, they wanted to avoid linking it to a promise of wider opportunities as these might not materialise.³⁰ Parliament agreed to the extension of the NDA and the law came into force on 1 July 1977.

Bringing the WRNS under NDA authority was a genuine increase in naval women's status. Although not universally welcomed in the WRNS, fears of mass resignations by

²³ TNA: ADM 105/99, WRNS Study Group Report, Nov 1974.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ TNA: ADM 167/178, Admiralty Board Minutes, 13 Feb 1975.

²⁷ Ibid, Admiralty Board Minutes, 3 Mar 1975.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

offended women proved groundless.³¹ Protest apparently amounted to female cadets under training at Dartmouth wearing black armbands for the day.³² With female officers now holding the Queen's commission, saluting them became mandatory for junior men rather than voluntary as previously. Commander Jackie Mulholland, at the time a junior WRNS officer, recollected:

'We were walking down the road in Yeovilton and sailors would be diving into bushes - anywhere to avoid saluting these awful women, you see. But after a few months it all became the norm. And things eased down. But that was a bit of a culture shock for everybody to get used to'.³³

More importantly, the incidence of desertion declined. Under the previous voluntary code, women could not be held to their employment and 'desertion' was a concern. Statistics from Naval Home Command reported 100 female deserters in 1974 (before the NDA came into force), 31 in year ending 31 Mar 1978 (the year in which it came in) and 9 cases from 1 Apr – 20 Nov 78.³⁴

The issue of combatant status was clarified in international law in negotiation of additional protocols to the Geneva Conventions. The text stated that, with the exception of medical personnel and chaplains, all members of armed forces were combatants, defined now as having the right to take part in hostilities.³⁵ Britain signed the Protocols in December 1977.³⁶ The revision to the Geneva Conventions was given as a reason for a change in status for the WRAC. Referencing the imminent new

³¹ Analysis of WRNS entries in *Navy Lists* of the period show no indication of unusual patterns of leaving.

³² National Museum of the Royal Navy [henceforward NMRN]: *Naval Review*, 'View from the Nest', by 'Snapdragon', 75th Anniversary issue, 1988, p.38. This is a subscription publication. Pseudonyms are commonly used when serving officers submit articles. This article was written by a female officer and covered the role and history of the WRNS.

³³ Commander Jackie Mulholland, interviewed by author, 14 Nov 2011, transcript p.16. Prior to 1977, female officers held an Admiralty Board commission and saluting them was not mandatory.

³⁴ NMRN: 1988.350.28.23, Senior Women Officers' Conference, 20 Nov 1978.

³⁵ www.icrc.org, Article 43 to Protocol I to the Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949, dated 8 Jun 1977 Accessed 18 Jul 2007.

³⁶ TNA: DEFE 24/1301, Brief for Secretary of State's meeting with the Swiss Defence Minister, Mar 1978.

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Protocols, the fact that nothing in UK military law prevented women from having combatant status, and the work of the wartime ATS, a 1976 report on women in the Army recommended that the WRAC be described as a 'combatant corps'.³⁷ It also proposed that women could be armed for self-defence. A paper went to the Army Board the following year. Although combatant status for the WRAC would imply women could command men by right, described in the minutes as an emotive issue, the Board accepted the recommendation.³⁸ Given that the Service Chiefs had agreed the new Protocols to the Geneva Conventions and internal legal advice that nothing in law prevented the change, it is hard to see how the Board could do otherwise.

While the idea of arming was sent back for further work, the Board agreed that the role of the WRAC should be updated and convey more explicitly that women were part of the Army.³⁹ The text subsequently agreed described the WRAC as:

'... organized and trained, as an integral part of the Army, to carry out those tasks for which its members are best suited and qualified, so that it will contribute to the maximum efficiency of the Army as a whole'.⁴⁰

This new definition moved away from the message of the earlier text that women were only employed when manpower was deficient.

Although combatant status was conceded, combat roles were not. The MOD had its next line of defence against the expansion of women's employment already prepared through its negotiation of exemption from the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Forestalling any potential move to include the armed forces in the scope of the Anti-Discrimination Bill, the MOD sent a paper on roles of servicewomen to Lord Royle, Chairman of the House of Lords committee overseeing the preparation of legislation. It set out its case against extending women's employment on the basis of the short period of women's service compared with men's, public opinion being against women in combat roles, the harsh nature of field conditions, women's lack of physical strength,

³⁷ NAM: 2004-09-157-1, Report by the Working Party into the Future Employment of the WRAC, Nov 1976.

³⁸ TNA: WO 163/756, AB/P(77)8, The Future Employment of the WRAC, 14 Jun 1977 & Minutes of the Army Board meeting held on 30 Jun 1977. Because women were integrated from 1949, the issue of powers of command of female officers did not need to be addressed in the RAF.

³⁹ Ibid, Minutes of the Army Board meeting held on 30 Jun 1977.

⁴⁰ NAM: 1192-11-98-30 DWRAC Newsletter June 1980.

cost inefficiency and assumed problems in maintaining morale and discipline in combat units if women were present. The key argument was that combat was men's work not women's.⁴¹ But the paper made insufficient distinction between the Services and, with an emphasis on field deployments, presented an Army-centric position. It failed to do justice to the integrated pattern of employment in the RAF as it described all servicewomen, including the WRAF, as 'solely employed in separate women's Services'.⁴²

The committee accepted the MOD's argument and the armed forces were exempted from the resulting Sex Discrimination Act (1975)'s employment clauses. Combat roles were described as having a genuine occupational requirement for men to be employed.⁴³ Exemption being based on combat as men's work meant that subsequent widening of women's roles had to be defined as 'non-combatant' whatever the failings in logic that that implied. It was feared that concession of the word 'combat' would undermine the exemption. Removal of the exemption might lead to the inability to exclude women from any role. The question of arming servicewomen provided the first test of this new climate.

Arming

In the late 1970s the armed forces were short of people. Establishment cuts, which followed from the 1974 defence review, had masked disturbing trends in recruitment and retention. Higher than planned outflow of trained personnel added to recruitment targets that were not being achieved. This was a time of exceptional inflation in Britain. Government policy restrained public sector pay, with increases well below the rises in prices of essential goods. The apparent lure of better pay and conditions in the private sector resulted in significant increases in people applying for release from their commitment to serve or choosing to leave rather than extend their service. Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Neil Cameron (Chief of the Defence Staff) wrote to Fred Mulley (Secretary of State) saying that the armed forces had a crisis on their hands and that Mulley was not reflecting the 'considerable anxiety' of the Chiefs of Staff in his correspondence with the Prime Minister.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Parliamentary Archive [henceforward PA]: ROY I/3, House of Lords Select Committee, Anti-Discrimination (No 2) Bill, memorandum by the Ministry of Defence, Oct 1972.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ PA: HL/PO/PU/4/212, Sex Discrimination Act 1975, clause 85.

⁴⁴ TNA: DEFE I3/I287, CDS to Secretary of State, 6 Apr 1979.

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The 1974 defence review cut uniformed personnel in part by the transfer of work to civilian staff who were directly employed or contractors. As a consequence, the number of men available to undertake duties such as armed guarding fell. The threat from Irish Republican terrorists made such duty a real issue, not simply a theoretical shortfall that would be solved by the call up of reserves in the event of war. Air Commodore Joy Tamblin, Director of the WRAF, was frustrated by women's exclusion from weapons' training. She recollected that some station commanders believed security and guard duties 'fell very heavily on the men because the women couldn't do armed duties'.⁴⁵ During visits to RAF stations Coltishall, Waddington and Boulmer, Tamblin encouraged commanders to raise the issue through their chains of command.⁴⁶

Change was in the interest of RAF station commanders. Stations were tested against their war roles and the career prospects of commanding officers depended on the outcome of such evaluations. However, peacetime establishments were lower than those planned for war. Operating at a level below war establishment, flexibility was further hindered by airwomen not being available for armed duties. The case of RAF Boulmer, a UK air defence station, exposed the anomalies in women's participation in hostilities. Women were employed in fighter control work and so were responsible for 'fighting the tactical air defence battle and for ordering fighters to shoot at and destroy enemy aircraft'.⁴⁷ Supporting arming, senior (male) officers at Boulmer thought that 'There appear[ed] to be little moral difference between giving an order to kill and carrying out the killing ... the effect of a female Sector Controller ordering a wing of fighter [aircraft] or a SAM [Surface to Air Missile] section to engage [the enemy was] infinitely greater than the damage that [could] be done by the same individual using a sub-machine gun'.⁴⁸

In April 1978, taking up the arming issue 'As part of our general review of "sex-equality" questions ...', the Air Member for Personnel's department sought the views of policy areas.⁴⁹ In response, Air Commodore Reed-Purvis (Director of Security) offered three categories of combat: offensive action in which personnel would seek and destroy the

⁴⁵ Air Commodore Tamblin, interviewed by author, 26 May 2009, transcript p.3.

⁴⁶ TNA: DEFE 71/31, Group Captain Mackintosh to Air Commodore Tamblin, 1 Nov 1977.

⁴⁷ TNA: DEFE 71/226, Annex B to Draft Air Force Board Paper for Air Member for Personnel, 6 Sep 1978.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ TNA: DEFE 71/31, Arming of WRAF Personnel, Mr West (Head of S10 Air), 21 Apr 1978.

enemy; defensive action where weapons would be used from prepared positions near the place of work; and self-defence actions in which the individual would react to being confronted by an enemy. Of these, he accepted that women could undertake the third task but not the first two. He argued that, as it was anticipated that not all airmen would be capable of operating effectively in action, '... it was unrealistic to imagine that all airwomen could be expected to react as combatants when under fire. To plan otherwise in peace would be to court disaster in war'.⁵⁰ He thought that the most that airwomen could be expected to do was to act in self-defence, to which he added armed guard duty.⁵¹ Air Commodore Parkinson (Director of Training) refuted a description of armed guards as 'non-combatants', saying 'we need[ed] to be completely honest in this matter'.⁵² He argued that if the intention was to improve operational effectiveness then 'armed women [would] be combatants in the same way that all male RAF personnel ... already [were]'.⁵³

In November 1978, Air Marshal Sir John Gingell (Air Member for Personnel) took his recommendation in favour of arming women to the Air Force Board. In support, he cited shortages of personnel, a difficult recruiting climate and attitudes towards sex discrimination. He thought commanders would be willing to accept more women if they could be armed. He quoted the new Protocols to the Geneva Conventions and he produced evidence that arming servicewomen was commonplace in NATO and Commonwealth forces. Agreeing the recommendation, the Air Force Board saw the proposal 'not [as] a matter of "women's lib" but of practical advantage'.⁵⁴ Although concerned about possible adverse public opinion, it agreed women should be armed to '[defend] themselves, others and Service property' on a trial basis.⁵⁵

A change in women's employment of that magnitude needed to be shared with the other Services through the Principal Personnel Officers' Committee. Air Commodore Reed-Purvis' view that women could undertake armed duty but not be regarded as employed in combat was similar to the Army's position on how to better utilise the WRAC. It proposed describing women as 'combatant but non-belligerent', with female

⁵⁰ TNA: DEFE 71/226, Director of Security, 25 May 1978.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid, Director Training (Ground), 17 Aug 1978.

⁵³ Ibid, Director Training (Ground), 2 Nov 1978.

⁵⁴ TNA: DEFE 71/31, Air Force Board Paper, Arming of WRAF Personnel and Extract from Air Force Board Conclusions, 9 Nov 1978.

⁵⁵ Ibid, Air Force Board Paper, Arming of WRAF Personnel and Extract from Air Force Board Conclusions, 9 Nov 1978.

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soldiers to be trained to use 'defensive weapons' for self-defence purposes only.⁵⁶ The Navy was opposed, its official position was that naval operations rarely required men to be armed and so there was no need to extend arming to women. Lack of arming was not a barrier to women's employment.⁵⁷ However, Vice Admiral Sir Gordon Tait (Second Sea Lord) more vehemently expressed fears that the decision would 'give rise to vociferous demands from vocal minorities for other and wider changes in the employment of servicewomen'.⁵⁸ His remarks were made in the context of an ongoing study into whether women should serve at sea, an idea that was firmly resisted at the time.⁵⁹ Indeed, it was this lack of sea service that stymied women's careers, not the issue of small arms training.

Successive Directors of the WRNS in the late 1970s and early 1980s were also against making women's roles more military. Commandant Vonla McBride (Director WRNS 1976-79) was strongly opposed to women in combatant roles. She regarded fighting as men's responsibility. She castigated American servicewomen at a NATO Headquarters for their 'jungle green fatigues' and boots, saying she was relieved to see her women 'all looking like Wrens in their uniforms'.⁶⁰ Her successor, Commandant Elizabeth Craig-McFeely, also prioritised the maintenance of femininity, remarking that 'Our infiltration into the male world must be gradual. If we are to go to sea, fly or be armed then it must be in selected jobs where needed, and NOT [original emphasis] undertaken as a publicity stunt'.⁶¹

General Sir Robert Ford, the Adjutant General, was more supportive of the Air Force Board's intentions. The Army Board faced similar issues of shortfalls of men. Its

⁵⁶ Ibid, Draft Air Force Board Paper, 6 Sep 1978.

⁵⁷ Freedom of Information [henceforward FOI] documents from Air Historical Branch [henceforward AHB]: ID3/110/21 Women's Services, VCDS (Personnel & Logistics) to Secretary of State, 15 Oct 1979.

⁵⁸ TNA: DEFE 71/31, Principal Personnel Officers' Committee Minutes, 13 Dec 1978.

⁵⁹ This study led to a recommendation that, as a trial, eight women be permitted to serve in a support ship that was not yet built. The idea was dropped. TNA: DEFE 69/689 DUS(Navy) to Under Secretary of State (RN), 8 May 1978.

⁶⁰ NMRN: Judith Sherratt Collection, 2009.103.14, recording of a speech by Commandant McBride, 14 Oct 1978. 'Wren' was the colloquial term for members of the WRNS.

⁶¹ NMRN: 1988.350.28.24, Senior Women Officers' Conference, 5 Oct 1979. The idea that extending women's employment could simply be a publicity stunt derived from the ongoing study into whether or not women should serve at sea.

unwillingness to recruit more readily available women was dictated by its self-imposed geographic restrictions on women's deployment. Although it was undertaking a review of all Army posts at that time to determine which could be annotated as suitable for either gender, the initiative was stalled by the principle that if a job was to be opened to women, then they must be capable of filling it in war as well as in peacetime. As women were excluded from serving forward of I British Corps' rear boundary in war, this effectively blocked the widening of jobs for women in support roles. Not only did it keep jobs in Germany closed, but also those in the UK land forces and the Territorial Army if they were earmarked in war plans to deploy to the Corps area. The Headquarters of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) complained that there were already insufficient junior rank men to undertake armed duties. Employing more women would therefore seriously degrade defence plans. As an example, if there were more female data telegraphists at Headquarters, then there would not be enough men to send forward to operational formations in the event of war.⁶²

Four months after the Air Force Board decision, Robert Ford took his proposal on arming female soldiers to the Army Board. He acknowledged that women serving with the Royal Military Police and some women in Northern Ireland were already trained to use weapons. However, his main argument centred on the efficient use of personnel. There were insufficient men to divert from their primary duty to the job of protecting servicewomen. He hoped that arming women would enable more jobs to be opened to women and so have the dual benefit of easing the shortage of men and improving women's career opportunities. The Board agreed the proposal to arm women for self-defence but referred back to BAOR the subject of how far forward women could be employed.⁶³

Implementation of Arming Policy

The Army and the RAF initially undertook small scale trials of weapon training for women. Meanwhile, Frances Pym (Secretary of State) feared 'strong and vociferous opposition' from the public.⁶⁴ However, such evidence as there was of public opinion pointed more towards indifference, or surprise that women were not already armed. A senior civil servant pointed out that there had been 'a distinct lack of excitement in

⁶² NAM: 2001-05-593, The Wider Employment of the WRAC, Col Swinburn (HQ BAOR) to MI(A) MOD, 18 Nov 1977.

⁶³ FOI document from MOD: AB/P(79)13, Wider Employment of the WRAC, 16 Mar 1979 & TNA: WO 163/758 Army Board minutes, 30 Mar 1979.

⁶⁴ FOI document from AHB: ID3/110/21, VCDS (Personnel & Logistics) to Secretary of State, 5 Jun 1980.

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March [1979] after various Press articles on the subject'.⁶⁵ The arming trial apparently generated only ten letters to the Prime Minister and these were of divided opinion.⁶⁶ In response to ministerial aspiration to stimulate debate, Ian McDonald in the public relations office offered to try to 'plant a question in Any Questions Radio Programme and ... introduce the subject into the Jimmy Young Show'.⁶⁷ He was not optimistic of stirring interest as 'the Press regard[ed] the issue as stale and the public never seem to have caught on at all'.⁶⁸ The Parliamentary response had also been low key.⁶⁹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Beetham (Chief of the Air Staff) thought this lack of interest was good news, as full implementation could therefore proceed.⁷⁰

Airwomen were to be armed for the purposes of self-defence, defence of property and defence of others. Again cautious about public reaction, women were not to be used as perimeter guards, only at internal points on RAF stations. The policy was not contentious in the RAF. Initially it was voluntary for women already serving. However, its introduction was hindered in the RAF's operational command because of the outbreak of the Falklands war in April 1982. Resources could not be easily diverted to the initial weapons' training of airwomen.⁷¹ In addition, because they were unclear about the implications of this change to their conditions of service, fewer women volunteered than anticipated. Female officers and senior NCOs were urged to lead by example. Following this stuttering start, compulsory training for all female recruits was introduced from 1 April 1984.⁷²

Army implementation was more piecemeal and initially more limited than the RAF's. Women were not to be employed to guard bases, but only to be armed for self-defence.⁷³ In order to avoid wasting weapons, ammunition and instructors, commanders of units were to make their own decision on whether or not women

⁶⁵ TNA: DEFE 71/226, Arming of Servicewomen, Mr Boardman, 14 Jun 1979.

⁶⁶ FOI AHB: ID3/110/21, VCDS (P&L) to Secretary of State, 5 Jun 1980.

⁶⁷ Ibid, Arming of Servicewomen, McDonald to PS/Secretary of State, 4 Jul 1980. 'Any Questions' was a BBC Radio 4 programme. The 'Jimmy Young Show' was broadcast on BBC Radio 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid, Arming of Servicewomen, McDonald to PS/Secretary of State, 4 Jul 1980.

⁶⁹ Ibid, Arming of Servicewomen, Vice Chief of Defence Staff (Personnel and Logistics) to Secretary of State, 5 Jun 1980.

⁷⁰ Ibid, handwritten note appended to McDonald's letter of 4 Jul 1980.

⁷¹ Ibid, Arming of WRAF Personnel, Note by AMP, 30 Sep 1983.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ NAM: 1192-11-98, DWRAC News Bulletin, March 1982.

were to be trained based on their own assessment of the requirement.⁷⁴ It was not introduced into initial training until July 1988, when it was made compulsory for new recruits.⁷⁵ The following year also saw the introduction of arming for the WRNS.⁷⁶

Implications of Policy Changes

One immediate consequence was a pay increase for all servicewomen, whether or not they took up weapons training. The mechanism for paying women less than men was enshrined in a supplement to basic pay, known as the 'X-factor'. This was an addition to pay in recognition of the extra commitments made by service personnel compared with civilian employment. One of the key factors in men receiving a higher X-factor than women was their liability to take up arms if the need arose. With that policy now changed, there was a case to increase women's X-factor although one civil servant in the Air Force department argued against a pay rise. He suggested that arms training would not have 'any radical effect on the day-to-day duties of those WRAF who [were] trained' and that bearing weapons would be a 'minor rather than a major change in role'.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, this was the basis on which airmen were considered to have combatant roles. The civil servant was overruled and the MOD put forward a case to the Armed Force Pay Review Body (AFPRB). In 1982 servicewomen's X-factor was increased from 5% to 7.5% of basic pay. Men's rate remained 10%.⁷⁸ In acceding, the AFPRB was careful to avoid overstating women's new responsibilities, saying that women were 'not trained to undertake a combat role' and they did not serve as pilots in the RAF or go to sea in the Navy.⁷⁹ There was an obvious, but overlooked, implication of that definition of combat for the RAF, namely the majority of men also did not fly. However, they were regarded as having combat roles.

⁷⁴ FOI MOD: Army Board P(79)13, Wider Employment of the WRAC, 16 Mar 1979 & TNA: WO 163/758, Army Board Minutes, 30 Mar 1979.

⁷⁵ Liddell Hart Archive: Meechie papers, Box 3, *The Lioness*, Vol. LXII, No.1, 1989.

⁷⁶ Members of the WRNS serving in Northern Ireland with the Royal Marines were trained to render weapons safe from 1986 (AFPRB *Seventeenth Report*, Cm. 357, (London: HMSO, 1988), p.13). Arming of the WRNS was approved in 1988 and introduced from 1 Apr 1989. (Defence Council Instruction RN 369/88). The author has been unable to trace why this change of policy came about at that time.

⁷⁷ TNA: DEFE 71/226, Arming of WRAF Personnel - X-Factor, Taylor (F2 Air) to S10(Air), 5 Jun 1979.

⁷⁸ AFPRB *Eleventh Report*, Cmnd. 8549, (London: HMSO, 1982), p.8. A differential continued to be justified on the grounds that other terms of service for women were more favourable than those of men.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.8.

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With women in the RAF now able to fulfil war roles on the same basis as male colleagues, a barrier to employment was removed. Female officers could be appointed to running station administration, the war role of which was to take charge of the defence of the station in war. In 1982, Group Captain Joan Hopkins took command of RAF Neatishead, Strike Command's control centre for the air space of southern Britain and its sea approaches.⁸⁰ In the non-commissioned ranks the trades of WRAF Administration, previously responsible for women's accommodation and welfare, and RAF Administration, responsible for station guardrooms, were merged in 1984. This led to the appointment of Jenny Winspear as the first female Station Warrant Officer.⁸¹ The new attitude towards airwomen was most apparent in a 1988 two-paragraph memorandum by Air Marshal Sir Laurence Jones (Air Member for Personnel). In response to growing concerns in the MOD about the reducing pool of young people entering the job market (the 'demographic trough'), he informed his Air Force Board colleagues that he had increased the quota for female recruits to ground-based trades from the then prevailing 7% quota to 10%.⁸²

While employment prospects for airwomen improved following the introduction of small arms training, developments in the Army were more piecemeal. Nevertheless, as part of a drive to widen opportunities, a limited number of jobs in support of infantry battalions, Royal Engineers and the Royal Artillery were opened to women on a trial basis, including some postings to BAOR. Non-commissioned ranks served in roles such as clerks, medical assistants and drivers, while female officers typically served as assistant adjutant to a battalion.⁸³ These women were on headquarters' staff and would not have deployed forward with companies in the event of war. There remained an imperative to avoid having Army women in combat areas where they were assumed to be at too great a risk of capture or where their safety was perceived as a potential distraction to men's ability to carry out their duties. The utility of the WRAC was still determined by geography. By 1988, the WRAC amounted to 3.1% of the strength of the regular Army.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ *RAF News*, 19 Nov – 2 Dec 1982 issue, p.1.

⁸¹ Beryl E. Escott, *Women in Air Force Blue: The Story of Women in the Royal Air Force from 1918 to the Present Day* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Patrick Stephens, 1989), p.261.

⁸² FOI AHB: ID6/1006, Force Mix - Ground Airwomen Element, 30 Aug 1988.

⁸³ Liddell Hart Archive: Meechie Papers, *The Lioness*, No.2 1981 & No.2 1983.

⁸⁴ National Audit Office, *'Ministry of Defence: Control and Use of Manpower'*, (London: HMSO, April 1989), p.24.

Conclusion

Until the late 1970s, servicewomen's exclusion from roles was justified on the principle that they were non-combatant. No further explanation was necessary. The Protocols added to the Geneva Conventions in 1977 necessitated recognition of women's combatant status, defined as the right to take part in hostilities. However, combatant status did not imply employment in combat roles. In order to safeguard the exemption from the Sex Discrimination Act, combat roles had to remain men's work. A concession that women were employed in combat roles might weaken the grounds on which women were excluded from the main military functions of seagoing, land warfare and flying.

Nevertheless, arming for self-defence was conceded. Reductions in the numbers in personnel brought about by defence reviews brought pressure to bear on restrictions in employment. Excluding women from armed duty, at a time of growing threat from terrorism, was a self-inflicted inefficiency. The new description of women as 'combatants' and the example of allied nations contributed to a climate for change. Importantly, pressure was exerted by commanding officers who needed to make full use of all their personnel. The language to describe this development was carefully chosen to maintain a distinction between servicewomen's liability to take up arms and that of men. Thus women were not 'belligerents' and weapons they used were for 'defensive' not 'offensive' purposes. Men could be employed in 'direct' combat, seeking out and killing the enemy. Women could be armed to defend themselves, and in the case of the RAF, property and others as well.

The Services' responses to legal and policy changes mirrored their organizational and operational differences. The Navy department remained aloof to the arming initiative of the other Services. However, the status of women in the WRNS ceased to be the previously ambiguous 'civilians in uniform'. Women now came under the Naval Discipline Act. But without seagoing being accepted, women's careers remained limited. Combatant status and arming was the start of a gradual process of change in the Army. By permitting rather than mandating arming, employment policy was inconsistent. Still constrained by deployment rules, there remained considerable opposition to widening women's roles. While there was a growth in opportunities for permanent employment within some support corps, jobs within the WRAC were still described as women's 'mainstream' employment. Rather than mainstream, women in the WRAC remained marginal to the operational Army in the early 1980s. In the RAF, women could now fill war appointments associated with career-enhancing postings. In ground-based work (the majority of the RAF), airwomen became fully interchangeable with airmen as had been intended since 1949.

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The early 1980s saw policy changes that resulted in a greater percentage of women being employed, more roles opened, more postings available, better pay and, from that, better pensions. Nevertheless, they remained excluded from the main combat roles. These policy changes were a necessary step along the way to narrowing career differences between women and men. Key decisions concerning seagoing and flying were to follow at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s. For land warfare, the debate on the extent of women's combat employment continued until July of this year when Prime Minister David Cameron announced that infantry and armoured corps roles would be opened.