

When the Park trained women for war

By Michael Davison

If 1916 saw some of the grimmest struggles of the First World War at the Somme and Verdun, 1917 brought no let-up in the terrible loss of life, causing serious concerns about the shrinking number of soldiers available to carry on the fight.



To relieve the situation, the government came up with a scheme to release more men from 'soft jobs' by recruiting women to replace them in certain roles.

Formed in January 1917, a new voluntary service, the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), trained women to serve as clerks, telephonists, waitresses, cooks and driver-mechanics. One of the earliest WAAC units served in Richmond Park.

Although the women who enrolled did not have full military status, they were given titles corresponding to military ranks: officials (officers), forewomen (sergeants) assistant forewomen (corporals) and workers (privates). In April 1917, in recognition of the service by the women volunteers both at home and in France, Queen Mary was made Commandant-in-Chief of the WAAC, known thereafter as Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps. More than 57,000 women served in the Corps before the Armistice.

For service abroad, members of the WAAC were put under the command of a Chief Controller (Overseas), Helen Gwynne-Vaughan. Although not on combat duties the volunteers had to endure shelling from heavy artillery and bombing raids by German aircraft. During one attack in April 1918, nine WAACs were killed at the Etaples Army Camp. British newspapers protested against this 'German atrocity', but Helen Gwynn-Vaughan pointed out that as the WAACs were in France as replacements for soldiers, the enemy was quite entitled to try to kill them.

In the Second World War, Richmond Park was again the scene of service by pioneering women. The anti-aircraft battery at Sheen Gate was the first in the country to employ women of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) in the role of range-finders and plotters. In the words of Sir Frederick Pile, General Officer Commanding Anti-Aircraft Command: 'They became one of the wonders of the world. Women marching, eating, drilling and working with men!'

*Photo of Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in Richmond Park, 1917
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