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THE WORK OF THE WOMEN'S AUXILIARY AIR FORCE IN THE WAR

By AIR COMMANDANT K. J. TREFUSIS FORBES, C.B.E.

On Wednesday, 11th February, 1942

AIR MARSHAL SIR LESLIE GOSSAGE, K.C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O., M.C., in the Chair.

THE CHAIRMAN, on introducing the Lecturer, said that during the last war Air Commandant Trefusis Forbes was engaged in driving for certain voluntary organizations; subsequently she was Chief Cadet in the Women's Emergency Service—the only organization recognized by the War Office before this war for the production and training of future women officers. Later she became Chief Instructor of the A.T.S. School where officers destined for the R.A.F. Companies of the A.T.S. were trained. At this School practically all the present senior W.A.A.F. officers passed through her hands, and here, too, she worked under the direct influence of Dame Helen Gwynne Vaughan to whom we in the Royal Air Force owe a great debt of gratitude for the work she carried out in the last war.

During my time as Air Member for Personnel at the Air Ministry in 1940, Air Commandant Trefusis Forbes served under me as one of my Directors, and the foundations were then laid for the great development of the W.A.A.F. which has taken place since. My thanks are due to her for all the help she then gave me.

Apart from my association with the early development of the W.A.A.F., I have had the benefit of their services on a considerable scale practically ever since. When I was commanding No. 11 Group—part of the defence of London—my operations room was one of the first in which W.A.A.F. personnel were employed. The suggestion that women should be employed in this sort of work was first made to my knowledge about three years before the war started, and was then regarded as quite impossible. At that time the trade of plotting was looked upon as "black magic," upon which only the highest grade of Air Force clerk could be employed. About a year before this war we began taking on Volunteer Reserve plotters on a part-time basis, but still only men were employed; but once it had started women came to be employed in ever-increasing numbers. They showed a particular aptitude for the work and could do it admirably with only about a fortnight's training.

To-day I have the privilege of carrying out the scheme for what is possibly the largest employment of airwomen in the Royal Air Force, namely, as balloon operators. The fact that we have already over four thousand airwomen, either actually on balloon sites or in training, and that we have only just started on the job, will give you some idea of the magnitude of the task. These airwomen live in small communities of about twelve and are in absolute charge of their own balloon. This, in itself, is no mean achievement when one bears in mind the professions from which a large number of these airwomen are drawn. Amongst them is a high percentage of nursemaids, shop assistants, machinists and those previously in domestic service. My admiration is particularly extended to the W.A.A.F. N.C.Os. in charge of the balloon sites, who are responsible not only for the discipline and welfare of their crews, but also for maintaining and using efficiently the expensive and valuable pieces of equipment which a balloon, its winch and its associated gear constitute.

I have recently visited balloon sites in the North of England. There I found W.A.A.F. balloon crews thriving and getting on with their job, almost completely indifferent to the conditions of snow and ice about them.

Nevertheless, I cannot close my introductory remarks, which have been mainly about the W.A.A.F. balloon operators, without paying tribute to the airmen who did

the preliminary work in the Balloon Barrage, particularly the officers and men in the Auxiliary Air Force of which the Command was originally composed. It was only through their efforts in overcoming initial difficulties that balloon handling has been simplified and made possible for women. Now we have warm and comfortable huts on all the balloon sites, and most of the sites have been adopted by local residents who ask the airwomen in during their time off, and arrange for them to have baths and so on; but the airmen who were out with the barrage during the winter of 1939 had very few amenities of that nature and had a very tough time.

In concluding these remarks may I, on behalf of the Royal Air Force, say how much we welcome and admire our W.A.A.F. for all the help and support they are giving us, for their comradeship and for their invariable cheerfulness in overcoming such difficulties as they have had to meet.

LECTURE

IT is difficult to know where to start in telling you about the Women's Auxiliary Air Force but, perhaps, I had better begin by telling you how it came to be part of the Royal Air Force.

First, I must remind you very briefly of the constitution of the R.A.F. It is organized on a functional and not on a territorial basis, and in this respect is very different from the Army which is mainly organized in geographical groupings, *i.e.*, Northern Command or Southern Command. In the Air Force the chief operational Commands, such as Bomber Command or Fighter Command, are spread all over the country, and each Command is organized in Groups which are also functional and not regional, and each Group has within it a number of stations extending from North to South and East to West of Great Britain.

On 27th September, 1938, the A.T.S. was formed. The R.A.F. companies followed a month later—in October. These companies were formed under the jurisdiction of the Territorial Army and Air Force Associations and consisted of drivers only. They were organized on a regional basis and were administered through their own officers by the Country Commandants of the A.T.S.

Shortly after their formation the R.A.F. companies of the A.T.S. were expanded to include five trades: drivers, cooks, clerks, equipment assistants, and orderlies. A year later, on 28th June, 1939, the King, by Royal Warrant, approved the formation of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force as a separate organization. The original R.A.F. companies of the A.T.S. formed the nucleus, but they were still administered by the A.T.S. commandants on the old territorial basis. On 24th August, 1939, a radical change was made, and the W.A.A.F. was reorganized on a functional basis with an establishment drawn up to allow for the substitution of airwomen in place of airmen in the R.A.F. For the first time the W.A.A.F. was being definitely considered as part of the Royal Air Force.

On 28th August, 1939, the W.A.A.F. was mobilized; but there were still only five trades. The first signs of any extension came from the Signals branch who maintained that they could employ W.A.A.F. teleprinter operators. Twenty clerks were accordingly chosen, re-mustered and trained for those duties. They formed the first foundations of the present large body of W.A.A.F. Signals personnel. Almost at the same time women were accepted as plotters in operations rooms.

Next came the question of radiolocation. The R.A.F. said that women would be good at it and women they would have. It was indeed a startling development to have women responsible for so much, but the R.A.F. accepted them as a matter of course.

All sorts of recruits applied, and large queues formed daily in Kingsway. In addition, we received innumerable applications by post. During the winter of 1939/40 the W.A.A.F. were often short of uniform and other equipment, and their strength of character was often tried severely during this, the coldest winter for forty years; but whatever they lacked it was not "guts." They served on many stations under very trying conditions, and you can imagine the many and varied problems which had to be solved. Many a station commander was perplexed by the invasion of his station by women, but not least perhaps the station commander who had a W.A.A.F. cook on his station, paid at 1s. 4d. a day, who asked for an interview with the station commander. This was granted. "I wish," said the airwoman cook, "to bring my two hunters to the station." As the airwomen proved their worth, trade after trade was opened to them, and in each one the R.A.F. accepted them with implicit faith in their ability to make a success of it. Balloon fabric workers, telephone operators, pay clerks—all were proud of this faith in them and strove to justify it. W.A.A.F. officers too were entering new branches, becoming Code and Cypher Officers, Equipment Officers, Catering Officers, etc.

By April, 1940, a radical change had occurred. Uniforms had come through, establishments had been settled, the ranks of officers and N.C.Os. brought into line with the R.A.F. The policy of the W.A.A.F. Administrative Branch had been formed and agreed to by the Air Council. The W.A.A.F., in fact, was substituting for the R.A.F. From the outset we had been paid the great compliment of being given the same badges of rank and the same uniform as the R.A.F. We were serving under the same conditions with the same equipment, passing through the same tests, being reclassified and remustered in the same way as the ground staff of the R.A.F. In fact, the full foundation of the W.A.A.F. as an integral part of the R.A.F. was laid.

Nevertheless, we had not yet faced enemy action. I do not want to go into details about the Battle of Britain, but I would remind you that only a year after airwomen had first been accepted in operations rooms they were given very great responsibilities, and the efficiency of our fighter force depended to a large extent on their coolness and reliability. It was then that the C. in C. of Fighter Command sent a message to the W.A.A.F. on several of these operational stations in which he said: "My confidence is abundantly justified."

During the period of the Battle of Britain, all trades of the W.A.A.F. played their part. No small credit is due, for instance, to the cooks whose task has often been dull, but who have never failed to serve something hot even when their cook-houses have been damaged by enemy action. It is just when things are at their worst, as you know, that a hot meal is so cheering; and the cooks have responded nobly to the demands made on them.

I do not think I have given a very good idea of how the Royal Air Force, which, as you know, is expanding very rapidly, has coped with the expansion of the W.A.A.F., but these facts stand out very clearly. In September, 1939, we had five trades, we now have over fifty. This expansion has not been easy. It has meant a lot of training and a good deal of experiment. One could not, for instance, be sure beforehand that airwomen would be successful as flight mechanics, and yet when the first experiment was tried with an equal number of men and women, the first four were women. In fairness, I must add that the last were also women! It is interesting to note that the airwoman who passed out top had been, until she became a flight mechanic, a silk textile weaver. In addition to flight mechanics we have cine-

operators, instrument mechanics, electricians, wireless operators, Morse slip readers, photographers, M.T. mechanics, radio telephonists and many others.

To-day we are over fifty times the strength we were in September, 1939. This, is, I think, the biggest expansion of any service over so short a period and we are now the largest of the women's services. This expansion has called for a large amount of organization on the part of the Air Ministry. It is not easy to equip so many women as well as the W.A.A.F. is equipped, in the space of a few months. I wonder whether the Contracts Department would have believed a few months ago that they were going to be involved in providing so many thousands of pairs of grey stockings, for example.

There are, of course, very many varied problems to be solved before airwomen can be substituted for airmen. The Medical branch, the Establishment branch and many other branches have to decide the ratio of substitution, and whether one airwoman can be a substitute for one airman or whether two are needed. In fact, of course, there are very few trades in which women substitutes exceed the numbers of men they replace.

On the accommodation side also there have been many problems to be solved—showers, for instance, have had to be altered so that women, with their longer hair, do not get it wet, and you can imagine for yourselves that there have been many similar difficulties.

But in spite of the difficulties, the W.A.A.F. has continued to grow and has become, we are proud to say, more and more an integral part of the Royal Air Force. There is, however, one great difference between the W.A.A.F. and the R.A.F.: although airwomen are being substituted for airmen and W.A.A.F. officers for R.A.F. officers, they have their own administrative branch. This is based on the experience gained in the last war in the W.R.A.F. It was then agreed that women officers must officer women. This principle was followed when the W.A.A.F. was formed in 1939 and has been adhered to ever since. The Royal Air Force think highly of our administrative branch, or W.A.A.F. (G) Branch as it is now called, and give great weight to the advice of the officers and airwomen in it. Thus we find W.A.A.F. officers and airwomen on the various R.A.F. stations all over Great Britain, but at each formation—*i.e.*, at each Station, Group, Command, and at the Air Ministry—there are W.A.A.F. (G) officers who are responsible to the senior R.A.F. officer at the respective formations for the welfare, well-being and discipline of all W.A.A.F. ranks within that formation. It was in April, 1940, that this policy was brought up to date by the Air Council and the W.A.A.F. (G) Branch thoroughly launched in its progress. In spite of this one difference we in the W.A.A.F. consider that we are part of the R.A.F., and we are proud to know that the Royal Air Force think so, too. The R.A.F. have demanded much of us, as they have of themselves during many difficult months, under difficult conditions in difficult places; but whatever the future holds we will face it proudly and gladly with them.

The customary votes of thanks to the Lecturer and Chairman were carried by acclamation.