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South African Soldier Experiences
of the Second World War

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Editor

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'THIS GREAT ADVENTURE': WHITE WOMEN IN THE UNION DEFENCE FORCE, 1939–1945

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The outbreak of war in September 1939 created the need for white women to take up positions in the auxiliary services. The exodus of white men to the frontlines – the only group allowed into combat – meant that women were expected to fill certain positions in industry and in the military. They played support roles as clerical workers, transport drivers, cooks, nurses and mechanics. There were five auxiliary services for these women under the Women's Army Defence Corps.¹ These were the Women's Auxiliary Army Services (WAAS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), the South African Military Nursing Service (SAMNS), the South African Women's Auxiliary Police Force (SWAMPS) and the South African Women's Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS). Those women not enlisted in these services often worked in the South African Women's Auxiliary Services (SAWAS), which was a voluntary organization that set up leisure and social activities and aided in conscription campaigns. It consisted of up to 65 000 women.²

White women in South Africa had many complexities underlying both their enlistment in the military as well as the character of their military service. This paper uses both official and personal sources to gain a perspective on the participation of these women in the war – the reasons for their enlistment, their experiences and their expectations of military service. Official sources such as *The Women's Auxiliary* allow for an understanding of the way in which the military portrayed a particular vision for women's war work and these sources provide the framework for this paper. These sources are complemented by the personal testimonies of women in the form of interviews that were conducted with Beth Anderson, Jill Boucher, Mary Kent and Edith Kimble.³ Included too are autobiographies by women who went on to become prominent activists, such as Helen Joseph and Mary Benson, as well as by women serving during the War, Sampie de Wet and Lucy Bean, a leading figure and founding member of SAWAS.⁴

The official magazine of the SAWAS, *The Women's Auxiliary*, was published monthly for the duration of the war, with its first issue in September 1940 and its final issue in June 1945, making a total of approximately 58 issues. Articles ranged from the purely domestic such as recipes, to fashion and hairstyles, as well as addressing deeper concerns regarding the new roles of women in war society as well as their post-war expectations. Its regular publication means that the contemporary reader can trace the changing perceptions and portrayal of women in military service in South Africa. For the duration of the War three broad trends were clearly apparent in the magazine, dividing the war into three phases – the onset of the war and recruitment, the malaise of 'war weariness', and preparations for the end of the war. These phases were indicated by the clear differences in the way in which the magazine portrayed the roles of women in the auxiliary services as well as the expectations placed upon them.

THE ONSET OF WAR, 1939–1942

The first phase of the war lasted roughly until May 1942. This phase marked the transition from peace to war and was characterised by an ambiguity around the changing roles of women brought about by the exigencies of war. Ideas of the ‘proper’ roles for women that had their origins in the nineteenth century were used in the official war discourse and attempts were made by *The Women’s Auxiliary* in this first phase to fit the war work of women within this already existing framework. This was played out in the magazine through depictions of women in mothering/nurturing roles, which had historically been viewed as being inextricably linked to their biology, and concerns with the control of single women living in barracks. In South Africa before 1939 women had both challenged and worked within these roles of ‘proper’ femininity. This was evident in the way in which Afrikaner women participated in the South African War as well as the role played by the suffragette movement in South Africa, where the demonstration of white unity remained paramount. Prior to the outbreak of the war, Lucy Bean and a number of like-minded women established the South African Women’s National Service Legion that provided women with skills in nursing and the repair of automobiles – and knitting socks. By April, five months before war would break out, they claimed a membership of 4 000 women. This Cape Town organisation and other similar groups around the country would form the core of SAWAS.⁵ There was thus clearly an early interest in war service – albeit of a voluntary nature. The emphasis was initially on domestic duties, but performed within an atmosphere of female camaraderie which also served the additional function of keeping these women distracted from the plight of their husbands and sons on the distant frontlines.⁶ When the war broke out and various troop ships stopped at the South African ports, SAWAS members took on the role of ‘hostesses’, providing entertainment in the form of dances and setting up canteens for Allied sailors and soldiers.⁷

Women’s war service was initially based on existing preconceptions and this is evident in the inaugural issue of *The Women’s Auxiliary*, which contained an article titled ‘They are Carrying on the War Work of Men’. The title suggested that the work of women in auxiliary organisations was a continuation of the earlier ‘pioneering’ role played by them, supporting men as they took part in the conflicts which shaped the country’s history, as well as being a product of an ‘innate characteristic of women – service to others’.⁸ The motivation of women was claimed to be a selfless spirit of sacrifice for their children:

Spurred on by that great ideal of wanting to prepare a better world for their children, no obstacle has proved insurmountable, no sacrifice too great.⁹

Here the women of the auxiliary services remained inextricably linked to their family and home – to their role in the domestic sphere as the nurturers of their children. The impetus for their service was believed to have come from the desire to create a 'better world', a safe haven for their children. This is a strong theme that forms the backbone of the inaugural issue of the magazine. Another article describing the traffic control duties of female auxiliaries who had recently replaced men emphasised their duties in school districts states: 'What an excellent idea to have women controlling the children ... I wonder why someone didn't think of it before'.¹⁰ A few months later this connection between women and their nurturing duties, especially as these related to children, was made even more explicit with the description of the activities of the Auckland Park Canteen. Here SAWAS women voluntarily served refreshments to troops, helped in providing entertainment and special mention was made of them taking care of the children of troops. Despite this activity being given only a short paragraph in the article, it became part of the title itself, 'They Prepare Babies' Bottles as well as Feed the Troops', making it more integral to their duties than it actually was.¹¹

This depiction of women as being linked to the mothering/nurturing role had its origins much earlier in South Africa, as well as Britain and the United States and 'Auckland Park Canteen – They Prepare Babies' Bottles as well as Feed the Troops' draws upon this image in its portrayal of women in the Auxiliary Services. The ubiquitous notion of women as mothers and nurturers had taken on a new impetus in the nineteenth century, working as it did with women's role in the reform movement. This period was one where the suffragette movement reached its height, largely as a product of the adverse conditions brought about by the industrial revolution. The conjunction of poor living conditions for the working class, societal ills such as alcoholism and prostitution, as well as the rise of the suffragette movement, led to a proliferation of reform movements in which these early feminists played key roles.¹²

This wave of feminism used the Victorian middle-class ideals of morality, purity and the role of women as the guardians of these of these values, but it extended their role from the private to the public sphere.¹³ Yet the ideology behind this remained constant and these middle-class women were still perceived to be the custodians of society's morality, forming a counterpoint to the ills of industrial capitalist society. As well as being played out on the societal level, a similar process was evident in the home.¹⁴

As evident in *The Women's Auxiliary*, then, the portrayal of women's war service was to initially create a continuum between women's roles in the home, taking care of men and raising children, with their new roles in the South African Women's Auxiliary Services, lessening the disruption to the gendered order.

However, for the women auxiliaries of the Union Defence Force, military service meant living not in the home but in the barracks. Historically, army barracks were considered the least appropriate place for young women and were subject to intervention under Victorian ideas of morality and control of sexuality. In Michel Foucault's analysis of the history of sexuality, he traces a development in attitudes towards sex and sexuality in Europe from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, where the earlier period was marked by a degree of openness which narrowed, becoming more rigid in the Victorian era. The nineteenth century created clear norms of sexuality. It was seen solely as the domain of the married couple for the sole purpose of procreation and its opposite was all other forms of sexuality, which were considered 'deviant'.¹⁵ In this atmosphere of a narrowly defined sexuality and an emphasis on domesticity, the military came to be seen as a site for intervention because of the unsettled lifestyle of soldiers, the high preponderance of single men in the barracks, with its connotations of 'illicit' sexuality in the form of prostitution and homosexuality, as well as the accommodation of married soldiers and their families with the single men.¹⁶

Thus it was somewhat ironic that the various branches of the auxiliary services utilised barracks for women serving in the military; however, these were extremely tightly regulated, taking on the characteristics of boarding schools. Even within this space of military regulation, domesticity reared its head, as evident in a description of the barracks of the Women's Auxiliary Army Services:

Despite its air of military efficiency and smartness there is a delightfully homely atmosphere at the barracks ... flowers are sent every week from the Government House gardens ... A committee of Pretoria women is busily engaged making curtains and supplying comforts of various kinds.¹⁷

Despite the attempts to create a sense of continuity between the perceived conventions of women's pre-war lives and their new roles for the duration of the war, there was nevertheless the necessity to adapt to an extent to a military way of life as well. The article 'An Airwoman on Full-Time Duty – Impressions of a "Rookie"' details the transition from civilian to military life with the young recruit adjusting to life at the barracks. It describes the minutiae of drill, the adoption of the proper attire and the many facets of daily life which distinguished the military world from the civilian:

The intricacies of folding blankets as they are done in the Air Force and the spit and polish required to give one's shoes that extra shine were among the many things demonstrated in the business of becoming a soldier; while mastering the mysteries of 'Leave' books ... the mental arithmetic needed to turn one minute to twelve into 23.59 hours and acquiring that self-confidence that enables one to walk up the street and salute a superior officer.¹⁸

Yet, by the end of it, according to the article, the recruit was left feeling herself a soldier, establishing a camaraderie with those with whom she trained, accustomed to the daily routine and enthusiastically embracing the esprit de corps of the WAAF.¹⁹

Life in the barracks allowed for this formation of female camaraderie. For young single women such as Beth Anderson, living in barracks and not tied down by the accoutrements of their gender, it became possible to maintain close ties with other women which lasted long after the war. These ties were based on their shared experiences, even if these experiences were not as intense as those of men on the frontlines:

You got to know people better somehow or other, but you see I'd been at boarding school so I know, I know what it's like, but those girls who had never lived away from home must have got to know people in a much closer way than they, you do in the ordinary course of life, you know, what I mean, 'cos you work with them all day, on shift with them and then off duty with them, in fact, you know, you spend your life with them in fact.²⁰

The equation of life in the barracks to that of a boarding school was a strong theme particularly in the use of propaganda to create a vision of the auxiliary services as being akin to a 'finishing school'. Yet the metaphor of boarding school also implied restrictions over the movement of women who were no longer under familial control. Much of the free time of the women was occupied with organised recreational activities in the camp such as working the library, attending lectures and putting on plays.²¹

In the case of women who were not yet wives or mothers, an important societal concern was their supervision. Many of these women found themselves away from home facing new living conditions in these barracks, where the emphasis was on military discipline. Janie Malherbe recounts the living conditions and supervision of female recruits in the barracks in her letters. In a letter sent to the *Die Transvaler* in 1942, she addressed the concerns of young women living on their own in barracks by emphasising military supervision and control over their movements, in a similar fashion to the way in which their parents or spouses would do at home:

Girls in the services are **not** sent to troop camps ... except in connection with daily clerical and other services. In the evening they return to efficiently run and supervised women's barracks. In such barracks the girls are far more strictly supervised than the thousands of working girls who stay in boarding establishments in the cities and towns, and whose coming and going is questioned by no-one. No member of the W.A.A.S. or W.A.A.F. may stay out of barracks unless she is married, or has permission from her parents and guardians to do so.²²

Those women, fraternising with male officers and going out, were subject to stringent controls and curfews, which meant that women who returned after 10 pm would be disciplined and ‘confined to barracks’.²³ Mary Kent perceived this to be for the benefit of these women, the authority exercised by the military standing in for the patriarchal authority of the family, ensuring the virtue of these young women and preventing abusive treatment and sexual violence from their male companions:

A lot of it was for the protection of the girls you see because, you know, they used to go out and when I worked ... in the DWAF which was the Directorate of the Women’s Air Force and the reports that used to come in from there, from the air stations of these girls that used to be, you know, go out with these chaps and they would be molested and raped and they would have a dreadful time, and you see this was more or less a protection. If they didn’t come in, then we had to find out where they’d gone and what happened to them and so on, it was a sort of a protection for us while we were there. They looked after us very well, I must say, it was very well.²⁴

This introduces the idea of the kinds of interaction between men and women in the military – perhaps the most conventional of which is the role of women as being the pretext or the reason behind men fighting and sacrificing themselves in war. The allocation of white men to the key combatant roles where they were subject to the worst ravages of war and considered to be making the greater sacrifice evoked in women a sense of guilt. This guilt was used by official publications such as *The Women’s Auxiliary* towards the end of the war to contain the empowerment experienced by many women because of their independence for the duration of the war. Simultaneously there was the stereotypical image of men going off to fight in defence of the home, of women and children. This was a theme propagated by men themselves, who subordinated service to the nation to the protection of the family and of women.²⁵

This was in no small part responsible for the guilt felt by women and these repercussions were particularly acute near the front lines of battle. In Mary Benson’s description of her experiences as a ‘Waasie’ in Egypt, she related the role played by women, who served as a kind of haven for men, providing a welcome distraction from the experiences of war and of combat:

Whenever the fighting halted, exhausted, strained, sweating men poured into Cairo, wanting to forget what they’d just left, forget that they must soon return. Bathed and shaved, they turned up, boldly or timidly, at our barracks. When we arrived back from work in the evenings we found them waiting there, eager for female company. Even the least attractive among us was invited out night after night.²⁶

For many women this was the opportunity to experience an exciting social life free from the restraints of the home front, being close to the action in an exotic location

and the subject of admiration by young men.²⁷ However, it was the sacrifices made by these men which provoked women into feeling that they had a sense of obligation to provide this distraction to the war: 'In face of all they were enduring, it seemed unpardonable to frustrate their desire for sex'.²⁸ Benson's reluctance to meet the insistent demands of men led to her being described as 'fit for a frigid clergyman'.²⁹

Generally, life in the auxiliary services and the limited independence it implied for women in uniform, evoked a new-found camaraderie with men based on service to the nation. This served to alienate these women from those who had not enlisted, prompting the latter's resentment. However, serving in the auxiliary units also took on a more negative note, with the perception of these women as being 'loose'. This is evident in Kent's account: 'We had been in the WAAFS – they just thought ah, these two have been in the WAAFS, good, they are free and free for all, you know, and this is...what they thought we were'.³⁰

Men, too, were influenced in their perception of women by this association of women in the military with loose morals and a freedom from restraint. This was evident in relatively mild incidents viewed in a light-hearted manner such as soldiers following women around singing 'Kiss Me Goodnight Sergeant Major'³¹ to the perception of these women as being sexually promiscuous, as evident in George Henry's description of the WAVES as 'We are Virgins Except Saturday', even as he reiterated the respect with which men were expected to treat women.³² For women in military service, then, the notions of independence and a life of excitement and glamour perpetuated by propaganda and the sense of adventure and taking part in a great historical moment, were offset by men using their war experiences and the understanding that they were making the greater sacrifice to exert pressure on these women. The ambivalent attitude of these men towards women in uniform was an uneasy balance between respect for women as moral guardians, wives, sisters and mothers, but associating this same freedom and independence with promiscuity that also led, in some instances, to physical molestation and rape.³³

The perception of promiscuity on the part of these women was a significant concern addressed in recruiting drives carried out by Janie Malherbe. Married to EG Malherbe, who would become the Director of Military Intelligence during the war, and working as a freelance journalist, Janie Malherbe and her husband volunteered immediately after the declaration of war and she was heavily involved in recruitment, travelling the country in order to recruit Afrikaner women in particular.³⁴

To garner Afrikaner support for the War – which was ambiguous at best – these recruiting efforts made use of seminal events in Afrikaner nationalism such as the re-enactment of the Great Trek in 1938 – itself a commemoration of the Great Trek of 1838.³⁵ The use of descriptors such as 'Steel Commando' and 'Air Commando' also

drew upon an existing ‘martial and social tradition’.³⁶ Janie Malherbe also addressed civilian concerns regarding living conditions in the military and, in particular, the potential pitfalls that awaited young women sans parental supervision, pointing out that, while these moral lapses were likely to occur in most social groups, they were so uncommon in the military that undue attention was paid to them when they did occur.³⁷ Her address occurred within the context of the perception of the molestation and ‘promiscuity’ of women in uniform.

Once the women enlisted, war work provided the opportunity for them to acquire skill and competence in waged labour and acquire some measure of financial independence. Yet this suggestion of change was still placed within a conservative and ambiguous framework regarding the position of women in the military. In May 1942 a male drill instructor, responsible for training SAWAS women in Durban, pointed out that drilling enhanced rather than detracted from women’s femininity, making these women more appealing to the opposite sex:

Mr Storey thinks that a course of parade drill gives a girl more ‘sex appeal’. ‘There is one thing I have noticed,’ he says, ‘and that is the drill has improved the girls tremendously physically. And it has given every one of them a very much improved carriage. The result is that they are women now who command attention by their fine bearing and physique.’³⁸

The message was clear – it was no longer the army that made a man out of you but, for a woman, too, military service could only make her more of a woman. This served as a means of allaying the fears of those who believed military service would lead to women aping the masculinity of men. It was a fear that periodically resurfaced in *The Women’s Auxiliary*, hence the ambiguity present in the first phase of the war.

For Janie Malherbe in an article appearing in *The Outspan*, the war work done by women was a temporary aberration, a simple extension of their roles as wives, mothers and supporters of men and, as such, any payment at all was simply the ‘generosity’ of the state. She could not envision a scenario where women received equal pay to their white male combatants who, after all, were making the far greater sacrifice.³⁹ From the perspective of a woman who played a significant role in female recruitment, then, any sense of the long-term independence or empowerment of these women was curtailed from the outset.

But to read recruitment attempts solely within a conservative framework is to do an injustice to what could possibly be considered genuine, albeit limited, steps forward regarding the perception of women’s roles in the public sphere. From the outset the war was perceived as the opportunity for women to prove themselves. In an editorial penned by Brigadier General FH Theron in October 1940, he refers to the auxiliary bodies, giving more significant roles to women who were employed to take

on positions previously held by men, releasing the latter for combat, than the largely voluntary and social activities of SAWAS. The women here in organisations such as the WAAS were, according to Theron, 'anxious to prove that they are in no way second to the men whose places they are taking', ultimately believing that 'their sex [was] "on trial"', a view which he strongly espoused.⁴⁰ He concluded with a strongly optimistic view of women as having undergone a permanent change:

The time when women were regarded as fragile beings unable to do a day's work is long past. The women themselves have given it its death-blow. You will stand shoulder to shoulder with us – our worthy comrades and equals – in this prelude to the victory that is coming.⁴¹

The comment demonstrated a significant lack of acknowledgement and of the value of women's pre-war roles, suggesting that all women had previously embodied the middle-class, idealised vision of women at leisure, while many women who engaged in war work were not actually engaged in waged labour for the first time. There was nevertheless an intimation that women had themselves changed the public perceptions of them by answering the call to war, redefining themselves as equal citizens in a post-war society.

Yet the mobilisation of women for the Second World War was based upon women's existing societal roles.⁴² For Afrikaner women this was in the area of social work – the work of women in the home was extended to the public sphere, which became an extended home, and was the means by which Afrikaner women entered politics:

Women from varied political persuasions all 'exalted [sic] women's capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance and morality'. Maternalist politics 'extolled the virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women's public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, marketplace...'⁴³

There was a notion that women could bring their brand of morality into the public sphere and play this role in politics in a way that men could not – as it was in the arena of the moral that women were understood to hold the higher ground.⁴⁴

The interwar period also saw an opening of various opportunities for waged labour for women in secondary industries and as white-collar workers. However, these job opportunities did not challenge the perception of women as nurturers – they were very much in line with the characteristics attributed to women:

Women workers became clustered in particular areas of employment, which could be seen as extensions of their domestic roles and did not conflict with established views about their 'natural' abilities. Thus in the professions, they were concentrated in the 'nurturing' realms of teaching and nursing; in business, in

service and supportive roles as secretaries and sales women; in industry, in food processing and textile concerns, and, of course, in domestic service.⁴⁵

The mobilisation of women during the war included them participating in new activities in industry and the Auxiliary Services, which had previously been the domain of men. Yet the rationale behind it remained the same. The new activities of women in war were linked to their ‘natural’ qualities as caregivers, which was evident in military nursing, as well as supporting men by carrying out non-combative duties on the home front. This was the way in which they were expected to contribute to victory and the speedy return of the men to the front lines. Even in the realm of the suffragette movement, white South African women were not radicalised. Enfranchising women was not seen as an important issue in the South African Parliament in the 1920s – even men like Smuts, who favoured extending the vote to white women, was not passionate about it: ‘If it [the Bill to extend the franchise to white women] does not win this session, it may win the next session, or the session after’.⁴⁶ For Parliament it was infinitely preferable to extend the franchise to white women over black men and, in 1929, extending the vote to white women formed the basis of Hertzog’s re-election campaign, which returned him to power. The enfranchising of white South African women, coming a decade later than the enfranchisement of women around much of the world, was not because of any particular commitment on the part of Parliament to women’s rights, but to allay the threat of enfranchising an overwhelming African majority. For Hertzog it was merely a means of achieving an end and he did not believe that the enfranchisement of white women would cause any major social upheaval in gender roles.⁴⁷ It is within the context of the conservatism of the South African suffragette movement that women were mobilised for the Second World War. It is thus safe to assume that Parliament believed that allowing women new forms of work in the Auxiliary Services and in industry for the duration of the war – as was being done all over the world – would be unlikely to have lasting repercussions or create social upheaval.

For the women who volunteered for the auxiliary services, they did so for a number of reasons from the platitudinous ‘For King and Country’⁴⁸ to following the example set by other female family members and friends.⁴⁹ Motivations were based on a combination of the personal and the patriotic, the individual and the social, epitomised by a sense of guilt over the sacrifice made by men and the accompanying need to provide support:

You know why I joined, because I used to get so depressed and so worried when the troop ships came in and the men were going up north. And I just couldn’t take it and I thought, no, I’m going to get away from this ... we used to go and we’d meet up with the chaps and we’d bring them home ... while they were in port, and they’d come and have supper with us and our parents ... And then they’d go off and then the next thing you hear that their ship had been

torpedoed or that they ... were in Dunkirk or they were in Tobruk and all these places, and it just got on top of me.⁵⁰

Yet, individual motivation remained a strong factor – the desire ‘to take part in this great adventure’.⁵¹ Along with this desire was the knowledge that the war was a moment that would come to define their generation and one from which they did not want to be excluded:

...my generation were all in the war and I didn't want to be out of things, I mean – not because I was being brave or anything, I certainly didn't ever think I'd be sent up north or anything but, I mean, most of our generation were – all over the world almost all were involved and you were missing something if you didn't go into it and I've certainly never regretted it.⁵²

This desire to participate in the ‘great adventure’ of the Second World War predisposed many women to volunteer for service in North Africa where the war was actually being fought and Mary Kent and Jill Boucher were disappointed at having to serve within the Union:

Closer to the operational areas, you know, you felt you needed that to really feel that you were benefiting the whole country. But just to be and to feel more part of the whole thing was what we fancied...I mean there was still fighting in the Western Desert when she [her sister Kate] was up there – you know that was going through Egypt and through Tobruk and all those areas which was very close to Cairo and we felt, you know, we could have been sitting in Durban typing our own little invoices out here – where we were in Pretoria.⁵³

Well, that was ... where the war was. I mean we were there to fight a war, not to sit in a base camp and must, you know, play around. You know to us, what we were doing here was mundane...We were not close enough to the actual action of what was going on and we wanted to get closer and they [Kate] were closer.⁵⁴

This personal desire to play a more significant role in the war corresponded with changes in propaganda – evident in the second phase – where emphasis was placed on the glamorous nature of military service for women, catering for their individual needs of excitement and adventure, making them little different from their male counterparts. This sentiment would be echoed a few years later by SAWAS member Sampie de Wet who, while part of a contingent of SAWAS members sailing to Italy as a ‘hostess’ for an officers’ club, was faced with the possibility of encountering hostile Japanese submarines in the Gulf of Aden. Her response was that ‘It was exciting to know that we were in real danger’ and she and a companion subsequently kept watch.⁵⁵

The initial phase of the war from September 1939 to May 1942 as dealt with in *The Women's Auxiliary* conveyed some indecision about the new roles for women in the

auxiliary services and in industry where women had taken positions previously held by men. The demands of the war in terms of labour power came into conflict with pre-existing societal assumptions about the appropriate positions for women. This was highlighted by their service in the military – discipline, the donning of uniforms and life in barracks – and brought to the fore concerns about the crossing of gendered boundaries, blurring masculine and feminine roles. Visions of newly empowered women existed uneasily alongside feminine stereotypes, marking the transition from peacetime to war. However, within two years the expectations of a long-term war rather than a short-term conflict pointed towards a new approach in official attempts to construct an appropriate identity for women.

WAR WEARINESS, 1942-1944

June 1942 heralded the first mention in *The Women's Auxiliary* of what was described as 'war weariness'. The year marked a turning point in support for the war. The confluence of a lessening of the initial enthusiasm about a war with no endpoint in sight and the less than ideal conditions on the home front brought about by the high state of alert of a country wracked by dissent, rationing and many women's new and pressurised roles as sole bread-winners led to a drastic decline in the support for the war. This manifested itself in a recruiting shortfall.⁵⁶ On the war front the fall of Tobruk was a major setback, initiating a new propaganda campaign and negatively affecting many women who had had male relations either killed or taken prisoner, bringing with it uncertainty and pessimism.

In June 1942 Colonel GCG Wermuller, the Director of Recruiting, made a statement in the magazine appealing to women already enlisted in the Auxiliary Services to address the recruiting shortfall by actively attempting to get more recruits and, more significantly, not to speak ill of their military service, but to represent it in a positive and optimistic light:

Every woman who is now playing an effective part in the W.A.A.S. is a shareholder in her country's security. As such she is an active partner in one of the greatest organisations this country has ever known. Every word she speaks in praise of that vast organisation heightens its good reputation among those who as yet have not joined it. Every time she airs her grouses and grumbles in public she damages that reputation and, consciously or unconsciously, discourages some other woman from joining it and contributing towards its further success.⁵⁷

By 1942 it had become necessary to put a positive spin on military service for women. Wermuller went on to liken the military to a vast organisation where each member had an equal stake in its representation and was thus responsible for giving it their

wholehearted support, sacrificing their personal considerations for the greater good, which was the ultimate victory that would ensure South Africa's safety.⁵⁸ Werdmuller also made mention of what were presumably women's complaints regarding military service – the lack of domestic pleasantries, a far cry from the domestic-themed picture painted of life in the barracks – and weighed this up against the positive benefits, 'the companionship, the sense of achievements, the knowledge that you are doing a good job,' with, needless to say, the latter taking pride of place.⁵⁹ What this article does suggest was that, by 1942, women were not embracing military service as wholeheartedly as had been portrayed by official sources from the onset of war and, to address this drop in morale and enthusiasm, other strategies, some subtle and others less so, were employed in *The Women's Auxiliary*.

Women too were apparently demanding greater roles. A piece appearing in the same issue is titled 'Johannesburg Women Want to Shoot' and described the efforts of the SAWAS women of Command 14 in Johannesburg, who wished to be allowed to be given weapons training. The article itself, while not acknowledging any authorship, conveyed the perspective of these women and used historical precedent to give their claims validity, arguing that, 'It is a tradition of South African women to know how to load a gun for a man, as they did in the days of the *laager* when war was fought against the native hordes'.⁶⁰ Their argument constructed a specific kind of identity in two ways – the first was that it was an Afrikaner one as it made reference to the pioneer past, evident in the use of *laager*, from which English women were generally excluded; significantly it was also a specifically white identity defining itself against 'the native hordes', still confining the latter to an adversarial category. Ultimately the outcome of the article was indecisive; there was no subsequent mention of arming these women and the request apparently petered out, at least on the part of the magazine. Yet there was a clear shift in the way in which women's war work was portrayed. Greater emphasis was placed on larger roles for women in combat-related activities. Articles were written detailing the work of their British counterparts who, in response to the more direct effects of war in that country, were involved in expanded roles. Detailed descriptions were made of the WAAF mechanics who worked and flew alongside regular male RAF pilots. The young woman mechanic flying with a male pilot instructor was portrayed as intently dedicated to her work, refusing to be distracted by the view in front of her. Her reward was a job perfectly performed and the brief praise from the pilot, 'Good job,' leaving her, 'eager, happy, proud of her work and proud of her instructor'.⁶¹

The Women's Auxiliary published features on female pilots who could possibly soon have been taking on the role of bomber pilots. It also focused on the British women of the Auxiliary Territorial Services who worked alongside men in assisting with the firing of the anti-aircraft guns. They did all the tasks including aiming, but were not

allowed to engage in the actual firing, which was the line on which the state and conventional perceptions of gender stood firm:

Well, our job has been to release men to do that. Killing – as that must be – is the man's job. We've tried to keep a balance. Giving life is the woman's job. She is the creator. It is dangerous to play with her fundamental role in life. We have to protect that vital role as much, and for as long, as we can. We have to think about after the war.⁶²

The interviewee in the article was herself in charge of the ATS and her position gives her voice authority regarding the appropriate roles for women in the war. Although the branch was the one which allowed most combat-like roles to women as well as the opportunity to work alongside men, building a close camaraderie, there was still a strong conservatism regarding the appropriate roles for women. This reflected the convention that they were the bearers of life and hinting at a similar role at the end of the war. Yet the appearance of these articles in this issue catered to an audience of women who were not necessarily content to simply engage in clerical work or as volunteers structuring social events for male troops.

Although the war was portrayed – in many instances by propaganda as well as those involved – as a united effort where all were equal in the fight against fascism, other distinctions nonetheless arose, particularly in the different branches of the auxiliary services. In a similar vein to the expressed desire of many women to work as close as possible to the front, work in the Special Signals Services allowed women to take a more active role in the war. This went beyond the mere clerical work and allowed these women to work in closer proximity to men. Moreover, the expertise required in Signals necessitated recruiting women who were highly educated. There were social class connotations implied as well and all these factors were seen as making Special Signals an elite branch of the service:

I would not have joined the W.A.A.S. nor the W.A.A.F. Signals was a select unit, a specialised course. It had a sort of 'snob' value – 'nice' girls joined it – or that was our impression at that time. The entry qualification for the South African Corps of Signals was fairly high – originally one had to be a University graduate but later this was lowered to Matric. I had my Matric. We were very proud not to be attached to the W.A.A.S. or the W.A.A.F.s, Signals was the only women's unit attached to a men's unit.⁶³

The post-war era was also imagined as offering women the opportunity to utilise the training and education that they had received during the war, giving them an equal role to play in peace time, and one which made the most of their abilities in a way that pre-war society had not:

Here, as well as in England, girls have equal education facilities with boys, and show equal aptitude for intelligent subjects. Must the average South African woman's adult life be a continual repression of those faculties which she has begun to develop at school, or will she continue to use her brain and intelligence to help the men organise the peace?⁶⁴

Yet, along with the carrot attempting to increase recruitment by emphasising the new opportunities available to women, came the stick – the not-so-subtle threat of the repercussions of their lack of support, in this case Nazi domination, which would be a major setback for equal rights for women. A German victory would have, in fact, greater repercussions for women than for men, hence making women's role in defending the country seem even more vital:

Psychologically, women know that by the victory of the Nazis they would lose everything. They would become once more – perhaps for a thousand years, hard-driven chattels and despised playthings. This is their war, in a stronger and even deeper sense than it is a man's.⁶⁵

When this failed to adequately address the problem, from 1943 a new tack was initiated to increase the shortfall in recruitment. Begun by Werdmuller, the emphasis was on a glamorisation of women's war work when sacrifice and duty were insufficient incentives. In an article penned by a female recruiting officer and aptly titled 'The Recruit is Precious', women who decided to enter military service were, from the outset, portrayed as being at the centre of attention, particularly at parties. They would be subject to the constant, kind, paternal, caring and rapt attention of men assisting the somewhat helpless female by carrying her bag and even helping to find her luggage – an attention that was contrasted with the lack thereof that she experienced at home.⁶⁶

Military training would serve as a 'finishing school', transforming the young, awkward girl from the *platteland* into a mature woman, ready to assume 'a sane, happy and respected life' in post-war South Africa.⁶⁷ Even SAWAS leader, Lucy Bean, was not immune to 'war weariness' and welcomed a break in the 'monotony' when she was given an opportunity to serve in Italy.⁶⁸ Yet women's war service was not simply motivated by superficial concerns. While stationed in Italy in 1944, Sampie de Wet was unhappy at not having a clear purpose or sense of making a contribution to the war effort. This was compounded by encountering the aftermath of the depredations of war. The opportunities for socialising and fraternising were little compensation: 'we were gay all the time, and I have never been able to stand an overdose of gaiety'.⁶⁹ Their experiences near the frontlines would also belie the notion of glamour. De Wet encountered a sixteen-year-old South African soldier suffering from a serious head wound at a British hospital in Arezzo. Asked to write a letter on his behalf to his mother, she found the task especially difficult as there was little she could do to allay the fears of the distant parent.⁷⁰

'DON'T ROCK THE BOAT', 1944-1945

While there was no clear-cut boundary between the periods, the issues of the magazine in the latter part of 1944 and early 1945 marked the initiation of the third phase of the war, at least on the part of women. This was the stage that required them to prepare for the return of the men. It was quite clearly a return to conservatism. With the end of war in sight, there was a desire to restore the status quo and 'normality' after the temporary aberration of war. By 1945, in a speech by Jan Smuts to the SAWAS in Pretoria, it was clear that post-war South African society would return to its pre-war state in terms of gender roles. Men were ideally 'politically and business minded', the hallmarks of participation in the public sphere. Women, on the other hand, were idealised as having 'noble' qualities suiting them for 'the spiritual uplift of South Africa'.⁷¹ Women were once again envisaged as the spiritual and moral guardians of society, a return to both their pre-war status and the earlier images of womanhood of the nineteenth century. It became a means of curtailing their potential empowerment during war service.

The article 'When Husbands Return' appearing soon after Smuts's speech addressed the issue of men returning home from the frontlines. While acknowledging women's need to adjust to a changing domestic situation and a possible loss of independence, the article emphasised the new role of women in creating a safe haven for their traumatised spouses as well as the importance of their reproductive duty to redress the impact of the war.⁷² The desires of the individual would be subsumed to meet the needs of society:

For a few months, perhaps even for a few years it will be necessary to sacrifice financial, mental and social independence in order to contribute to the welfare not only of the returned soldier, but also, ultimately, to the community.⁷³

The article suggests a concern on the part of the military and the state that the initiation of some form of empowerment and independence for women during the war would not be so easy to rein in once the conflict had ended, and hence more conventional and conservative gender roles would be advocated by officialdom. A similar dilemma arose in other Allied countries such as Britain, where 'Their [women's] accomplishments in their jobs or their participation in the services ... provoked continuing challenges to the idea that after the war women and family life would go on as though the war had not happened'.⁷⁴ Not only would men benefit from the safe haven created by their wives, but women would also be relieved of the financial responsibilities and associated anxieties of maintaining a home and family.⁷⁵ Ironically, in a post-war world, women would once again be relegated to auxiliary roles – for

which they seemed ideally suited, 'At heart most women are "yes women" and this is the one occasion when wives can fulfil the role of comforter. Their own worries must wait till he is at peace'.⁷⁶

The psychological condition of the returning soldier was a dominant theme in this period, particularly as it dealt with the appropriate behaviour for women. After the euphemisms and silences which had hitherto characterised men's experiences of war for the benefit of the home front, this was the first time that women were given an inkling of what men had gone through:

Probably you think of war in terms of Ouma's Gifts and Comforts and of the enviable treat he had during 10 days of leave in Rome when his letters were full of the pleasure of staying in a first-class hotel ... These and many pleasant little inconsequential things of service and the thoughts of you at home were what he usually wrote about. He never mentioned the dirt and terror of the front line, trying to sleep in the sleet and the snow, nor the time his platoon was isolated for two days and nights by a curtain of heavy fire, unable to withdraw or get rations up.⁷⁷

Yet *The Women's Auxiliary* too had colluded in representing the war in a manner which was designed to promote recruitment, so for the women who had believed this representation, the articles that appeared as the war neared its end must have been a major shock. And this ultimately was the aim – to shock women into returning to a conservative and pre-war mindset. The article used the guilt inspired by the knowledge of men's experiences to call on women not to 'rock the boat' by making individual and 'selfish' demands on those who had made far greater sacrifices. The article went on to describe in detail the everyday discomforts of a soldier's life, drawing comparisons with the perceived pampered domestic existence of women, making light of, or in some cases rendering invisible, their own struggles to come to terms with the changes wrought by war on the home front. Another theme was the possibility of post-traumatic stress syndrome, or as it was described in the article 'the shock of war [which] has left scars on his mind', experienced by many men in combat and the antidote was deemed to be the patient nurturing care of their spouses engaging in what was now termed their 'great war job'.⁷⁸ These revelations worked in concert to attempt to subdue the desire among women to preserve the independence afforded them by war in a post-war society.

In the light of this, for some of these women the war was understood as a temporary deviation. It was life-changing in terms of the experiences they had had, but did not mean that their lives in the post-war era were transformed in any way that would have been different had they not been in military service. When asked about the nature of her own experiences of the Second World War, Beth Anderson's response was to foreground instead the experiences of her husband Paul:

Not at all for me. It must have been terrible for Paul ... he kept things to himself very much ... you know he was in a camp of an airfield ... in Lincolnshire. He said one night they had this hut with four pilots sleeping in it. They went out on a raid one night ... and he was the only one to come back. The other three had all crashed, probably been killed ... they had terrible losses ... he must have been very terrified every time he took off I should think.⁷⁹

Despite her husband's silence about his emotions during the battle, Beth surmised his fear and later blamed the onset of Parkinson's disease on the tension to which he had been subjected during the war. At the end of her war service they were married and, while she worked for a while after that, once her children were born, she did not take employment until they were older and had gone off to boarding school. Then she returned to her tertiary studies which she had abandoned in 1939, eventually obtaining a postgraduate degree. Throughout this period, however, family obligations and her role as mother and care-giver predominated: 'my mother was ill and when the children came home, I stopped working'.⁸⁰ Her war work itself – the independent life she had led away from family, the camaraderie she had experienced and the skills she had learned – was still portrayed within a framework of patriarchal control. She emphasised that their roles were limited in comparison to those of the men and that these women were not as 'aggressive' as women tended to be at present:

[N]one of the girls were among the qualified officers who looked after the radar sets and was in touch with the powers that be and so on. No, we were all humble people, all of us, even the officers. I mean we [were] really only officers over our own sex if you know what I mean. That's how things were. It's very different now. In fact I think women have become a bit too aggressive now, they've gone to the other extreme which is typical of human nature of course.⁸¹

For Beth Anderson the work done by white women in the military during the Second World War was thus necessary in the spirit of patriotism and to prevent the spread of the evil of Nazism. It was not, however, necessarily seen as a stepping stone towards greater independence and a change in gendered roles for women. Even for women like Mary Kent and Jill Boucher, who did not have the benefit of a tertiary education and had to take up waged labour at the end of the war prior to getting married, waged labour was seen as a temporary situation until they took up their rightful positions as mothers:

[Y]ou went from one job to another in those days, it wasn't like today. No, you only left when you had babies ... You got married and then you just kept on working then you fell pregnant, you resigned, you know.⁸²

However, at the end of the war both women were involved with the Torch Commando, attending meetings and supporting the ideals of democracy:

[W]e joined up and we went to listen to the talks and the reasons they were holding the torch parade ... and they against the apartheid era ... and the sanctions, of the way the Nats were doing. And maybe like the Ossewabrandwag, this was the way they felt that they could fight the Nats and just through blocking the odd thing and strengthening the things which they thought was right and seeing that those things got through ... they had seen what real war was like and they had seen what the Nats were doing was not right and they were trying to make them see things in a different light.⁸³

This involvement with the Torch Commando was the extent of their participation in political activism in the post-war era and, for many of that organisation's members, this participation ended with the failure of the Torch Commando to successfully thwart the path taken by the apartheid state. The immediate post-war era in South Africa was thus characterised by a failure to implement the ideals for which the war had been fought. This failure was based in part upon the disillusionment felt by white and black soldiers because of the unfulfilled promises of Smuts's government and the lack of a united and effective front to oppose the rise of the apartheid state. Meeting the material needs of the returning ex-servicemen took precedence over strengthening democratic ideals. Permanent social change was thus not apparent in terms of ending racial discrimination or leading to a shift in the status of white women. These women, in most instances, returned to a pre-war way of life.

Yet for a minority the war served as a means of radicalizing them. White women found their conventional understanding of the status quo in South Africa challenged by their war-time experiences. In the case of women such as the activist Helen Joseph there was the sense that her life had little meaning prior to her signing up and was characterised by ambiguity.⁸⁴ It was the war and her participation in it gave her a sense of purpose and it also helped resolve a contradiction. During her time as an information officer she gave lectures to other women on liberal issues:

Our first official mandate was 'to inculcate a liberal and tolerant attitude of mind' ... I lectured on a wide range of subjects: local and parliamentary institutions, Nazism, democracy. I studied all sorts of subjects: the franchise, division of land, housing, malnutrition, education – and the discrepancy between what was being spent on White and non-White education. How could I help but come at last to the realisation of the inequalities of this land?⁸⁵

Her work during the war influenced her activism for equal rights in which she was to engage after the war. It helped resolve the contradiction between the white middle-class woman and the campaigner for equality. At the same time there was a sense that the mobilisation initiated by the government was not solely within the government's control. Her lectures on democracy led to her questioning the situation in her own country. At the end of the war she did not return to her pre-war existence, but began a new life as a result of this mobilisation. She divorced her husband and embarked

on a life of political activism.⁸⁶ The opportunities afforded her by the war created a permanent change in her life and her empowerment did not simply cease in 1945.

Simultaneously, however, military service for women did not necessarily play a major role in their later decision to engage in political activism. Following the end of the war, Mary Benson joined a unit in Germany responsible for overseeing refugees, those whose lives had been uprooted by the war such as concentration camp survivors as well as those children whose parents had been killed during the conflict.⁸⁷ Coming into contact with the worst repercussions of the Second World War had a tremendous impact on her, and she was unable to continue her work, feeling herself to be 'inadequate [and] ineffectual'.⁸⁸ Yet, despite this, it did not dawn on her to draw parallels between the repercussions of the Nazis' notion of the 'superior race' and the situation in South Africa where blacks were discriminated against on the same basis. This came only with hindsight:

While working for the UNRRA it never occurred to me that millions of my fellow-citizens were treated like Displaced Persons in the country of their birth. When it came to racial prejudice I remained a typical white South African, little changed from my nineteen-year-old self travelling by Greyhound bus from Kansas City to Albuquerque and furious when a Negro had the 'cheek' to sit beside me. Or the twenty-year-old in Cape Town disgusted by the sight of Maori officers dancing with white girls.⁸⁹

Benson's radicalization came from a different source, largely through her friendship with Alan Paton and, through him, the anti-apartheid activist and Anglican priest, Michael Scott.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

Official and often societal beliefs about the idealised woman auxiliary underwent tension and revision during the course of the war. In *The Women's Auxiliary* it was apparent that the expectations of women in the military varied according to the constraints of war. In the initial period appeals to women to throw their support behind the war effort displayed an ambivalence about the conservatism of women's pre-war roles and the new demands made upon them in the public sphere, with an uneasy line drawn between the two. The middle period of the war, initiated by setbacks such as the fall of Tobruk, suggested that older appeals to duty and sacrifice were no longer sufficient and this period marked the most interesting one in the depiction of women. Along with a glamorisation of military service was an indicator of more prominent and challenging roles for women in the military, acknowledging greater equality. The experiences of these women in war were thus defined by a conjunction of a sense duty and the requirements of the war effort with their own

individual needs and desires. That these women were not simply passive participants in officially defined experiences of the war is evident in the changes in the official portrayal of military service, particularly during the period of 'war weariness'. However, as the war neared its end, there was a gradual but almost inexorable closing down of opportunities for women. To be good citizens, wives and mothers they were required to put aside these individual needs for the sake of the 'greater good', ushering in an era of conservatism where the potential for change created by 'this great adventure' ultimately came to little and was largely relegated to the realm of memory.

Endnotes

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- 2 Bryant, *As We Were: South Africa 1939-1941*, p 59.
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- 4 My thanks to Professor Ian van der Waag for his invaluable suggestions in this regard.
- 5 Lucy Bean, *Strangers in Our Midst* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1970), pp 18, 19, 22.
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- 21 Mary Kent in an interview with Mary Kent and Jill Boucher conducted by S Chetty and S Sparks, 29 May 2004.
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- 28 Benson, *A Far Cry*, p 26.
- 29 Benson, *A Far Cry*, p 26.
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