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## Women in Combat

Gender and the Armed Forces in Great Britain and Japan  
during the Second World War

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to explore the gender problems raised by the mobilisation of women in the wartime services in Great Britain and Japan during the Second World War. Both countries faced the threat of land invasion and introduced women into the armed forces. In the case of Britain, while young single women were conscripted as regular members of the military, they were not qualified as combatants. In Japan, towards the end of the war, the government prepared for 'decisive battles' by organising combat forces under the direction of the regular army, which included women as well as men. These combat forces were actually formed in some regions. Their members, including women, were not considered regular soldiers, but they were supposed to be given the status of combatants. On the contrary, the British government, which tried to maintain male supremacy in the military, strictly prohibited women from undertaking combat missions. However, it was not very easy to draw a clear boundary between combat and non-combat actions because the difference between defence (air defence) and offence (counter-attacks) had become paper-thin. Women who were assigned to anti-aircraft units quietly encroached on the intended gender barriers in the military, which presented a challenge to the conventional gender norms.

KEYWORDS: The Second World War, Great Britain, Japan, women, military

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## Introduction

During the Second World War, many countries introduced women into various wartime industries to cover the shortage of manpower. The mobilisation of women was a necessary response to the demands of total war. It was imperative that women not only undertake some of those civil jobs previously performed by men, but also serve in the military to support male soldiers. Whether women serving in the armed forces were given combat roles depended on the gender norms and practical needs of each country.

This paper explores the gender problems raised by the mobilisation of women in the military in Britain and Japan during World War II. As island nations, both were faced with the threat of land invasion. In Britain, around 500,000 women, out of a female working population of seven million, joined the women's auxiliary forces organised for the support of the regular forces.<sup>1</sup> Some women were called up under national service legislation that made war service compulsory for single women. In contrast, at the beginning of the war, the Japanese government excluded women from the army completely. However, when the threat of mainland invasion grew more serious, the National Volunteer Combat Force (NVCF) was organised, which included female combatants under the direction of the Japanese regular army.

The registration and conscription of women undermined the prevalent notion that it was the man's role to protect civilian and non-combatant women by taking up arms. The disruption of traditional gender roles prompted considerable controversy. What were the main issues when the mobilisation of women into the armed forces was discussed in parliament? How were the gender boundaries in the military, threatened by the women's presence, maintained? How did Japan and Britain differ in terms of their approach to the mobilisation of women for military service? The Second World War has been called a total war. The sacrifice it demanded from nations meant that women were involved in warfare to an unprecedented degree – a fact that led to social and ethical conflict over traditional gender roles in many countries. This conflict can be explored by using Britain and Japan as case studies.

### 1.

The integration of women into the military in Britain had already begun before the outbreak of the Second World War. After the occupation of Austria in March 1938, Germany began to prepare for an invasion of the Sudetenland in what was then Czechoslovakia. Adolf Hitler claimed that the German inhabitants of this region were being oppressed by

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<sup>1</sup> Penny Summerfield, "She Wants a Gun not a Dishcloth!": Gender, Service and Citizenship in Britain in the Second World War', Gerard J. DeGroot and Corinna Peniston-Bird (eds.), *A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000, p. 119.

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the Czechoslovak government. In response to the increasing threat of war, the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), initially a women's volunteer service supporting the British Army, was formed on 27 September 1938. On 29 September, the Munich conference was held by representatives from Germany, Britain, France, and Italy. The Sudetenland was ceded to Germany on the condition that Germany would not invade the remaining territory of Czechoslovakia.

The Munich Agreement seemed to have averted the threat of war. However, in March 1939, Germany violated the agreement, invading the whole of Czechoslovakia. This action spurred the formation of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in Britain.<sup>2</sup> During the First World War, female branches of the military forces had been established in Britain and disbanded immediately after the war. The expertise acquired during that time was applied to the formation of new organisations that would make the best use of personnel. Prior to the declaration of war against Germany in September 1939, Britain had already prepared for the possibility of war and British women were smoothly mobilised into military forces.

When the Battle of Britain began in July 1940, fear of German invasion rapidly spread throughout British society. It was true that island countries like Britain and Japan, which were surrounded by large bodies of water, were more easily defended against foreign invasion as compared to countries with land borders. However, in the Second World War, the massive improvement in the performance of combat planes and the carrying out of air raids on big cities gave the island countries a more realistic fear of invasion.

On 25 April 1941, Defence (Women's Force) Regulations were introduced in Britain, requiring all women between eighteen and fifty years of age to register for wartime services.<sup>3</sup> The prospect of female conscription sparked considerable debate in Parliament but most MPs accepted the need for female conscription as long as married women were excluded from compulsory service.<sup>4</sup> In December 1941, a male MP insisted that female conscription was the logical consequence of women's suffrage and that serving in the military was women's civil duty. There were, however, a few who objected to female conscription. The Labour MP Mrs A. Hardie argued as follows:

I do object to women being conscripted for National Service. My point is that war is not a woman's job. In spite of the feminist attitude—and I am as good a feminist as anyone—I say they have no

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<sup>2</sup> Beryl E. Escott, *The WAAF: A History of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in the Second World War*, Oxford: Shire Pub. Ltd., 2003, pp. 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Cooper, *The Gentle Sex*, Hailsham: J & KH Pub., 1999, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Noakes, *Women in the British Army: War and the Gentle Sex, 1907–1948*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 113.

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right to conscript women for war. It has been a tradition for many generations that war is a man's job, that women have the bearing and rearing of children and should be exempt from war. Some men and women say, "You ask for equality. Therefore, women as well as men could be prepared to take part in war." That seems to me a funny argument, because we have not equality. We have no equality in wages, no equality in the opening-up of various services and so on.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs Hardie objected to female conscription, because she believed that the proper place for women was the home and that home-making was the paramount duty for women. She also emphasised gender inequality in the military, in order to refute the idea that female conscription was the basic duty of women.

On 18 December 1941, the National Service (No. 2) Act was enacted, which, in addition to raising the upper age limit for men from forty-one to fifty, made women in their twenties and thirties who were single and childless liable for conscription to wartime industry, civil defence or the armed forces. Married women and women with young children were exempted. Under the National Service (No. 2) Act, 125,000 women were drafted into the military over the next three years, and another 430,000, including married women, volunteered.<sup>6</sup>

The National Service (No. 2) Act was the first attempt by the British government to introduce compulsory military service for women. The enforcement of this act ensured that the ATS, the WAAF, and the WRNS, initially formed as volunteer corps, were formally incorporated into Britain's regular forces and gave women official military status commensurate with that of men. Female officers held a full King's commission. For the first time, women in the military left behind the demeaning term 'camp follower' they had carried in the First World War.<sup>7</sup>

Rights, however, are accompanied by obligations, and female members of the military would be subject to military law and to such penalties as might be prescribed.<sup>8</sup> They would not be free to decide which services they would join or leave at will. They were required to obey official appointments, including those that would send them overseas. Moreover, there was an appreciable difference between men and women in the military. Unlike their male counterparts, female military members were neither trained nor qualified as combatants. They were strictly prohibited from combat missions. There was also a wage difference between men and women in the military. Women serving in the ATS, the WAAF, and the WRNS were paid two-thirds of the equivalent male wages and pensions, and their rations

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<sup>5</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 376, 2 December 1941, cols. 1079–1082.

<sup>6</sup> D'Ann Campbell, 'Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union', *The Journal of Military History*, 57:2, 1993, p. 306.

<sup>7</sup> Noakes, *Women in the British Army*, pp. 114–115.

<sup>8</sup> Escott, *The WAAF*, p. 6.

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were four-fifths of what men received.<sup>9</sup>

In the House of Commons, on 3 August 1943, Edith Summerskill, Labour Party MP for Fulham and a leader of fourteen wartime female MPs, objected to the wage differentials between men and women as follows:

The United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics are paying their women in the Services and in industry at the same rates as men ... The argument is that women [in the British armed forces] are regarded as non-combatant and, therefore, have to be paid at a lower rate than the men. If that is so, what about the men of the Royal Army Medical Corps and the Pioneer Corps who are non-combatants but are paid at the same rate as combatants? ... In war-time does the degree of danger determine the rate of pay? If we argue that it does and that women should be paid more cheaply, we must argue that a private in the front line in Sicily should be paid more than a general in Whitehall.<sup>10</sup>

Summerskill severely criticised women's non-combatant status as an excuse for gender-based wage differentials.<sup>11</sup>

The ATS, the WAAF, and the WRNS were formed in order to release as many men as possible from day-to-day tasks in the military to the front lines. Thus, women were only employed in non-operational support positions as clerks, telephonists, cooks, drivers, and orderlies, with duties that were not directly related to military tactics and considered in line with the accepted definition of femininity. However, some women in the military became involved in a wide variety of more masculine jobs, such as mechanics, wireless/radar operators, code-breakers, and intelligence personnel. Many of these assignments were kept secret and the women engaging in such works were required to sign the Official Secrets Acts, which forbade them from speaking of their duties for many years to come.<sup>12</sup>

As the threat of air raids and invasion grew, the sphere of women's activities expanded even further into the previously male-only space. After the beginning of the London Blitz, air defences in Britain were short by about 20,000 men. Although women were still prohibited from serving in battle, WAAF and ATS members took part in air defences. Some members of the WAAF controlled barrage balloons, which were huge bags of gas operated in high winds and anchored to the ground. They were loaded with high explosives along their cables to deny enemy planes low-level airspace. There were 257 barrage balloon operators in May 1941. By 1943, many balloon sites were managed by all female-crews and forty-seven per

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<sup>9</sup> Escott, *The WAAF*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>10</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 376, 2 December 1941, cols. 2113–2114.

<sup>11</sup> Edith Summerskill, 'Conscription and Women', *The Fortnightly*, vol. 151, March, 1942, p. 207.

<sup>12</sup> Escott, *The WAAF*, p. 19.

cent of Balloon Commands were retained by women.<sup>13</sup>

On 25 April 1941, regulations were adopted which were to permit deployment of women in anti-aircraft (AA) batteries for intercepting enemy planes in flight.<sup>14</sup> On 21 August 1941, the mixed anti-aircraft (AA) batteries became operational. The batteries were composed of members of the ATS and the British Army Royal Artillery. The mixed AA batteries, however, did not equalise the roles of men and women. Women were given the Royal Artillery grenade badge, and corporals were called 'bombardiers' and privates 'gunners', though they officially belonged to the ATS and not to the Royal Artillery.<sup>15</sup> However, the units of AA batteries were commanded by men, and the official function of ATS female officers was limited to supervising the behaviour of the enlisted women.<sup>16</sup>

The strength of the AA Command gradually increased, and by 1942, more women were working on AA sites than men were, and nearly fifty per cent of new ATS recruits were to work as members of the mixed AA batteries. By September 1943, over 56,000 women had joined.<sup>17</sup> The women of AA Command reportedly maintained good composure when discharging their duties. General Sir Frederick Pile, Commander of Britain's AA defences, remarked in his memoir published four years after the end of the war: 'December 8 [1941] was the first time the battery had been in action. Beyond a little natural excitement and a tendency to chatter when there was a lull, they behaved like a veteran party, and shot an enemy plane into the sea'.<sup>18</sup> Vera Robinson, a former member of AA batteries, recalled in her autobiography as follows:

[Women never] showed any fear whatsoever while a raid was in progress when on duty on the Command Post. Guns could be thundering beside us, the enemy threatening in the skies above us, but so totally immersed in our individual tasks were we, that the only emotion felt by us was a desire to destroy that which we had been trained to destroy as quickly as possible.<sup>19</sup>

When the National Service (No. 2) Bill was under consideration in the House of Commons,

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<sup>13</sup> Escott, *The WAAF*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Gerard J. De Groot, "'I Love the Scent of Cordite in Your Hair": Gender Dynamics in Mixed Anti-Aircraft Batteries during the Second World War', *History*, 82:265, 1997, p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> Gerard J. De Groot, 'Combatants or Non-combatants?: Women in Mixed Anti-Aircraft Batteries during the Second World War', *Royal United Services Institute Journal*, 140:5, 1995, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell, 'Women in Combat', p. 307.

<sup>17</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, 'Whose Finger on the Trigger? Mixed Anti-Aircraft Batteries and the Female Combat Taboo', *War in History*, 4:4, 1997, p. 436.

<sup>18</sup> Sir Frederick Pile, *Ack-Ack: Britain's Defence against Air Attack during the Second World War*, London: George G. Harrap and Co.Ltd., 1949, p. 193.

<sup>19</sup> Vera Robinson, *On Target*, Wakefield: Verity Press, 1991, p. 198.

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whether or not women should be compulsorily assigned to anti-aircraft sites was a significant point of contention.<sup>20</sup> The activities of the AA batteries were the closest to actual battle conditions that women would experience. Most MPs were reluctant to implement compulsory enlistment in AA batteries for women, which they considered to be in conflict with maternity protection. Mobilising women in such a way as to put them in harm's way and making them take the lives of sons born of other mothers was absolutely offensive to the prevailing gender beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

It was eventually decided that women could join the AA batteries on a volunteer basis. Prime Minister Winston Churchill noted: 'Women will have the right to volunteer, but no women in the ATS will be compelled to go to the batteries ... I want to make it clear that a woman may be compelled to join the ATS, but only volunteers from within the ATS will be allowed to serve with the guns'.<sup>22</sup> Women volunteers in AA Command worked as radar operators, height finders, spotters, predictors, and locators on the sites, but only men were allowed to load and fire the guns. Despite the fact that women working on AA command assisted in the targeting and shooting down of aircraft, they were still officially considered 'non-combatants'. Though women could not be forcibly assigned to the mixed AA batteries, men could. Thus, the final barrier between male combatants and female non-combatants was theoretically maintained.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between combatants and non-combatants in the AA batteries was based on whether a person pulled the trigger or not. Moral objections to arming women were widely promulgated. The general opinion was that women, whose role was to give birth to and raise children, were unsuited to taking a person's life. The pulling of a trigger was correlated with and symbolised killing, and killing was the men's job. The 'trigger principle', by which the line between the sexes in the AA batteries was drawn, was endorsed by public opinion.

While Sir Frederick Pile wanted to promote the extension of women's tasks in the AA batteries, he understood that the majority of the public regarded the trigger as sacred. Pile recalls in his book: 'As a matter of fact, I could see no logical reason why they should not fire the guns ... However, I was not going to suggest going as far as employing them on lethal weapons. I was quite aware that there would be struggle enough to get their employment through in any operational form at all'.<sup>24</sup>

Eleanor Rathbone, a prominent feminist and independent MP for the Combined English

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<sup>20</sup> The National Archives (TNA), LAB 76/3, Wages Policy in the United Kingdom in the Second World War, p. 108.

<sup>21</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 370, Woman-Power Debate, cols. 325, 351–353.

<sup>22</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 376, 2 December 1941, col. 1038.

<sup>23</sup> Noakes, *Women in the British Army*, p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 186.



Universities, insisted that depriving women of combatant status was discrimination. She claimed that women displaying ardent patriotism and abilities should be allowed to fight as combatants in AA batteries.<sup>25</sup> It was absolutely unreasonable to deny those women who spotted targets and helped aim the guns the power of pulling the triggers. As Pile argues: '[T]here was a good deal of muddled thinking which was prepared to allow women to do anything to kill the enemy except actually press the trigger'.<sup>26</sup> There was not much essential difference between finding the height of a plane and firing at a plane because both were parts of the same operation against an enemy. In practice, some female gunners testified that they received rifle instructions, supposedly in preparation for the threat of an invasion. One of these women, Vera Robinson, recalled the day when she was assigned rifle practice for the first time: 'Our glory was short-lived for that was the only time we handled a rifle in our army career'.<sup>27</sup> Rifle training was popular among female members because it was seen to represent their unique status as a regular soldier of the army.<sup>28</sup>

If the AA batteries could not achieve their ultimate purpose, that is, keeping the enemy from landing, female members of the batteries were to be evacuated immediately. The presence of women in the batteries was only justified under the assumption that German invaders would respect the non-combatant status of women and therefore not take them as prisoners.<sup>29</sup> Summerskill told the House of Commons in 1943 that this was 'a ludicrous piece of wishful thinking ... Surely nobody here thinks for one moment that the Germans will treat women on gun-sites as non-combatants'.<sup>30</sup>

One might well wonder how the women who volunteered in the AA batteries felt about the combat taboo imposed upon them. G. Morgan, who served as a young ATS private in the 573rd Heavy AA Battery, noted in her memoir: 'We have learned to do every job in camp except fire the guns and I bet we could do that too if we were allowed'.<sup>31</sup> With this exception, there are few remarks on the exclusion of women from combat in books or memoirs written by female members of AA batteries. G. J. DeGroot, corresponding with some former members of ATS, argues that most women in the mixed AA command seem to have given little consideration to the matter. For instance, Elizabeth Lapham, with whom DeGroot corresponded by letter, said: 'I do think it was stupid ... We were (and now are) just as able to

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<sup>25</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 376, 1941, col. 1087.

<sup>26</sup> Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 193.

<sup>27</sup> Robinson, *On Target*, p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> Tessa Stone, 'Creating a (gendered?) Military Identity: The Women's Auxiliary Air Force in Great Britain in the Second World War', *Women's History Review*, 8:4, 1999, p. 617.

<sup>29</sup> DeGroot, 'Whose Finger on the Trigger?', p. 444.

<sup>30</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 391, 3 August 1943, col. 2114.

<sup>31</sup> Imperial War Museum, ref. pp/MGR/115, G. Morgan, personal memoir.

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use firearms as the men ... [but] I don't think it bothered us too much at the time. We just accepted it'. Jacqueline Foster, another of the women serving on an AA battery, said: 'I do not remember thinking at that time about the fact that women were not allowed to fire the guns ... Nor do I know the reason for this rule'.<sup>32</sup> Though the combat taboo was imposed upon women in order to preserve the "male-only" space in the military, women excluded from combat roles do not seem to have been conscious of their situation. The line drawn between combatants and non-combatants was not so clear in the AA batteries, because they had both defensive and offensive roles. The 'trigger principle' could not constitute an insuperable barrier between the sexes in the armed forces.

### 2.

In addition to the AA batteries, a volunteer corps for national defence was organised in Britain during the Second World War. In May 1940, the Local Defence Volunteers was established in response to the advance of German troops, changing its name to the Home Guard in June 1940. It was an armed, volunteer defence force of men between the ages of seventeen and sixty-five who were not already in the military service. The National Service (No. 2) Act in 1941 introduced the conscription of men to the Home Guard. Men from the ages of eighteen to fifty-one, who were not already in the armed forces, could henceforth be compelled to serve part-time in the Home Guard.<sup>33</sup> The organisation was under the direction of the War Office, and the number of volunteers reached over 1.5 million at its peak.

Women were excluded from the Home Guard until 1943.<sup>34</sup> Although the guard was dependent on volunteers and chronically short of manpower, women who wanted to join were rebuffed for the three years during which the threat of invasion was greatest. In November 1941, when the National Service (No. 2) Act was being debated, RAF Squadron-Leader Eric Errington, Conservative MP for Bootle, advocated the introduction of women to the Home Guard:

I have had an opportunity of speaking to a number of women of different classes, and they all ask what they can do if the invader comes ... They are asking what they should do if a German came to their door. [An Hon. Member: 'Shoot him'.] But they have nothing to shoot him with, and the women are not to be trained ... I wish, and I am sure everyone wishes, that women and children could be kept completely out of this war, but I do not believe that to be possible. In Russia, women are right in the war. Why should not our women be taught the use of hand-grenades and revolvers

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<sup>32</sup> DeGroot, 'Whose Finger on the Trigger?', p. 447.

<sup>33</sup> Summerfield, 'She Wants a Gun not a Dishcloth!', p. 123.

<sup>34</sup> Summerfield, 'She Wants a Gun not a Dishcloth!', p. 120.

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with which they could protect themselves? Most people take the view that they would like to kill at least one German.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the growing sense of crisis and the impending enactment of the National Service (No. 2) Act, women were not permitted to join the Home Guard. This was in part because the Home Guard, a secondary defence force, could be called upon to accomplish a combat mission in case of German invasion. However, this was not the only reason. Most people considered war to be a primarily masculine affair. While the Home Guard was an armed force, it did not conform to the same standards of masculinity as the regular forces. Most members were too old or too young to serve in the regular army. Because of their ineligibility, members of the Home Guard already felt that their masculinity was being questioned; the presence of women in the guard would only further erode the masculine image of the Home Guard, and so women were excluded.

In the House of Commons, MPs like Mavis Tate, Eleanor Rathbone, and Edith Summerskill attempted to promote women's eligibility for membership in the Home Guard.<sup>36</sup> They met fierce opposition from the War Office and could not overcome it. As a counter-measure, the Women's Home Defence (WHD), a voluntary armed force to support the Home Guard, was developed under Summerskill's direction in June 1940. In March 1942, there were about 10,000 WHD members in London alone. Thirty WHD units were formed in January 1942 and by December 1942, there were said to be 250 such units.<sup>37</sup>

The WHD was not only 'unofficial' but also technically illegal, because it provided women with training in the use of rifles, and hence the organisation constituted a private army outside the authority of the Crown. The WHD broke the combat taboo by offering women the opportunity to practice with firearms. A leaflet about the organisation explained that its objective was to train 'every woman in the country to be of maximum use in the event of an invasion'.<sup>38</sup> References to the WHD appear in the War Office files from December 1940; however, no legal proceedings to stop WHD activities were taken so as to avoid protest.<sup>39</sup>

Summerfield and Peniston-Bird argue that the gender boundary around the Home Guard had been also breached. 'Women were joining Home Guard units and training with their male members, at least some of whom evidently did not subscribe to the taboo deeply embedded in

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<sup>35</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 376, 13 November 1941, col. 109.

<sup>36</sup> TNA, WO 32/9423, Letter from Marvis Tate to Anthony Eden, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1940, *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 362, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1940, col. 281.

<sup>37</sup> *Hansard, House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 385, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1942, cols. 1413–1414.

<sup>38</sup> TNA, WO 32/9423, Letter from Summerskill to P. J. Grigg, 29<sup>th</sup> March 1942.

<sup>39</sup> Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, 'Women in the Firing Line: the Home Guard and the Defence of Gender Boundaries in Britain in the Second World War', *Women's History Review*, 9:2, 2000, p. 235.

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the thinking of the political leaders'.<sup>40</sup> Yvette Bayes, a former member of a Home Guard unit, recalled that the unit was formed in 1941 or 1942 in the Birmingham munitions firm where she worked as a secretary, and that the men wanted women to help them with clerical work. However, she was to find that gender boundaries in the unit were not effectively working. She wore a uniform that her mother had modified from a male uniform, and participated in combat training with the male members.<sup>41</sup>

As the combat training of women came to be commonly practiced, the War Office finally sent an order to all Home Guard units that such training had not been authorised: 'Weapons and ammunition in the charge of the Army or of Home Guard units must not be used for the instruction of women.' Although manpower shortages in the Home Guard were serious, it was not until April 1943 that women were officially admitted into the Home Guard as auxiliaries.<sup>42</sup>

By 1944, there were more than 32,000 women in the Home Guard.<sup>43</sup> Women eligible for recruitment were between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five, preferably over forty-five, and they were not to wear uniforms except for plastic badges. They did not receive weapons training, but were to perform non-combatant duties such as clerical work, cooking, and driving. They were not granted the status of soldiers, but were still considered civilians. Thus, full equality was not given to women in the Home Guard, because it was incompatible with the persistent gender norms.

In fact, it would seem that the Home Guard had opened its doors to women in large part for the sake of restoring the gender order disturbed by the WHD. Women who joined the Home Guard as auxiliaries were not permitted to carry weapons or wear uniforms, and gender inequality in the Home Guard was reinstated. Once the threat of a German land invasion subsided, the gender boundary weakened by the WHD was reinstated.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the new roles that might have been created for women by the state of total war were stifled by the preservation of conventional gender roles.

### 3.

In December 1941, the Pacific War broke out. In the early stages of the war, Japan successfully occupied Hong Kong, British Malaya, Java, and the Philippines among others. However, as the range of operations rapidly expanded, Japan gradually became inferior in

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<sup>40</sup> Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, 'Women in the Firing Line', p. 237.

<sup>41</sup> Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, 'Women in the Firing Line', p. 248.

<sup>42</sup> Summerfield, 'She Wants a Gun not a Dishcloth!', p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, 'Women in the Firing Line', p. 244.

<sup>44</sup> Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, 'Women in the Firing Line', p. 238.

military strength. After losing command of the sea following their defeat at the Battle of Midway in 1942, Japanese troops were compelled to retreat from territories under occupation. From 1944 to 1945, there were some decisive battles at Saipan, the Philippines, and Okinawa. The results of these fierce battles caused additional concerns for a Japanese government responsible for deploying sufficient numbers of combat units to defend the mainland.

During the Second World War, national defence consisted of a positive defence and a negative defence. The former was accomplished by intercepting enemy planes and blocking aerial navigation. The latter included restrictions on lighting, compulsory evacuation, firefighting, and creating a fire protection area.<sup>45</sup> While Britain organised the system of air defence with the most advanced radar in 1940, Japan lagged behind the allies in technological development for air defence. Although the Japanese government predicted that the U.S. military would attack big cities with incendiary bombs, they were unable to prepare sufficient number of military units for air defence. The Japanese urban structure was such that wooden houses were built closely together, rendering them vulnerable to air raids, especially attack by incendiary bombs.

In 1945, the U.S. military changed its strategy from high-precision bombardment against limited targets to low-altitude incendiary bombardment. They carried out several devastating air raids to burn down principal cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, and Kobe. The Japanese army was forced to make preparations for land invasion. The government adopted the tactics of restricting air defence and retaining military strength for the upcoming decisive battle. Until the Battle of Okinawa broke out, positive air defence by the military had hardly begun to operate.<sup>46</sup>

On 23 March 1945, just before the Battle of Okinawa began, the formation of the National Volunteer Force (NVF) (国民義勇隊 *Kokumin Giyūtai*) was agreed upon by the cabinet.<sup>47</sup> Up until this point, there had been scarcely any examples of women entering the army, one exception being the Women's Communication Corps (女性通信隊 *Jyosei tsūshintai*) formed within the Air Defence Intelligence Corps (防空情報隊 *Bōkū Jyōhōtai*) of the Army Eastern Military Command (東部軍 *Tōbu Gun*) in 1943.<sup>48</sup> The NVF was composed of men

<sup>45</sup> Jun Yanagisawa: *Nihon Rikugun No Hondo Bōkū Ni Taisuru Kangae To Sono Bōkū Sakusen No Ketsumatsu*, 11, 2008, p. 92. (柳澤潤「日本陸軍の本土防空に対する考えとその防空作戦の結末 (The Japanese Army's Mainland Air Defence Policy and Its Outcome in the Pacific War)」『防衛省防衛研究所戦史研究年報 (NIDS Military History Studies Annual)』第11号, 2008年, 92頁.)

<sup>46</sup> Jun Yanagisawa, *Nihon Rikugun*, pp. 97–99.

<sup>47</sup> Yū Koide/Masanao Kurahashi: *Aich Ni Okeru Kokumin Giyūtai, Rekishi Hyōron*, 556, 1996, p. 63. (小出裕・倉橋正直「愛知における国民義勇隊 (The National Volunteer Force in Aichi Prefecture)」『歴史評論』(Historical Journal) 556号, 1996年, 63頁.)

<sup>48</sup> Yōko Sasaki: *Sōryokusen To Josei Heishi, Seikyūsha*, Tokyo 2001, p. 81. (佐々木陽子『総力戦と女性兵士 (The Total War and Female Soldiers)』青弓社, 2001年, 81頁.)

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and women who had completed their primary course at a national elementary school as long as the men were under the age of sixty-five and women forty-five, though invalids and pregnant women were not allowed to join. Different units were formed for each region and for each function. The corps' objective was to enhance Japan's defence by increasing food supplies and military provisions. Its operations included air defence, fire protection, repairing damage from air raids, setting up wartime factories to disperse production, transporting supplies, and jobs relating to food production.

On 13 April 1945, the cabinet decided to form the National Volunteer Combat Force (NVCF) (国民義勇戦闘隊 *Kokumin Giyū Sentōtai*) for the purpose of 'forming a one-hundred-million-strong force that would drive forward the destruction of the enemy'. It was agreed that should the necessity arise, the NVFs stationed in the regions that had become part of the battlefield would be placed under the command of the army and 'shift' to becoming a combat force (NVCF), and its members would accordingly be obliged to undertake defence and combat missions.<sup>49</sup> Following the cabinet's decision, the Volunteer Services Act (義勇兵役法 *Giyū Heieki Hō*) was enacted on 22 June 1945. A large-scale reform of the military services followed. Men between the ages of fifteen and sixty, and women aged seventeen to forty, excluding those who were already conscripted and army and navy students, were designated as members.<sup>50</sup> All of its members were legally considered combatants.<sup>51</sup> Those eligible to enlist were required to report to their local NVF unit, and those who neglected to do so would be fined. Thus, the overall percentage of Japanese citizens who were combatants rose to forty per cent of the total population. The forces that were positioned in preparation for decisive mainland battles comprised 2.25 million naval servicemen and 1.3 million army soldiers. Therefore, the NVCF, which had a membership of 28 million, came to account for a staggering proportion of Japan's defence force.<sup>52</sup>

While NVCF members were not considered regular army soldiers, they were entitled to act as combatants. If the situation required them to take up arms, NVCF members would

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<sup>49</sup> Jōkyō Kinpaku Seru Baai Ni Ōzuru Kokumin Sentō Soshiki Ni Kansuru Ken, in Shirō Akazawa (ed.): *Shiryō Nihon Gendaishi 13 Taiheiyō Sensōka No Kokumin Seikatsu, Ōtshuki Syoten*, 1985, pp. 527–528. (「状況緊迫セル場合ニ応ズル国民戦闘組織ニ関スル件 (The Case of the National Combat Force in the Emergency)」赤澤史朗他編『資料日本現代史13 太平洋戦争下の国民生活 (Archives of Contemporary Japanese History, 13, the Life of the Citizens during the Pacific War)』大月書店, 1985年, 527–528頁.)

<sup>50</sup> Chikako Nakayama: *Kokumin Giyūtai To Kokumin Sentōtai*, Ritsumeikan Heiwa Kenkyū, 1, 2000, p. 72. (中山知華子「国民義勇隊と国民義勇戦闘隊 (The National Volunteer Force and the National Volunteer Combat Force)」『立命館平和研究』(The Ritsumeikan Journal of Peace Studies) 1号, 2000年, 72頁.)

<sup>51</sup> Nakayama, *Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 67.

<sup>52</sup> Koide/Kurahashi, *Aich Ni Okeru Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 75.

be awarded military decorations, and should they fall in battle, they would be honoured at Yasukuni Shrine and their families would receive a pension. By the same token, those who contravened military regulations would be punished by senior officers such as the District Officer (地区司令官 *Chiku Shireikan*) or the Commander of the Combined Volunteer Combat Forces (連合義勇戦闘隊隊長 *Rengō Giyū Sentōtai Taichō*). There was no distinction between army and navy, nor were there any ranks. NVCF members were divided and put under the direction of group leaders, and separate NVCF units were formed for men and women. These units were mustered on an ad hoc basis. Military uniforms were not provided. Members were simply required to wear a white patch of cloth six centimetres high and seven centimetres across which would display the character 戦 (combat) and the person's name. The group leaders would also wear an armband displaying their role.<sup>53</sup> Although there are examples of the army providing arms such as rifles to the NVCF, it was not feasible to provide weapons to every member.<sup>54</sup> Thus, many members had to rely on makeshift weapons such as sickles, hatchets, knives, and hammers.<sup>55</sup>

The nature of the NVF and NVCF varied widely according to region. For example, in coastal regions with high concentrations of munitions factories and where the fear of an imminent U.S. land invasion was particularly palpable, preparations for 'decisive mainland battles' and 'arming of the general population' were advanced with a heightened sense of urgency. One such region was Aichi, where the age cap on female membership was raised to sixty, and the volunteer force was organised with a strong combat element. In April 1945, in the Tōkai Army Area (which comprised six prefectures, including Aichi), the Student Volunteer Force (学徒義勇隊 *Gakuto Giyūtai*), which was designed to be a combat-ready force, was set up within the NVF. The Student Volunteer Force also provided combat training for female students. One teacher and one student from every girls' school and youth school in the six prefectures would be nominated, and then a week's worth of training would be provided. The instructors included seven officers and non-officer soldiers, and five army hospital nurses. These instructors provided training behind the lines, and performed support duties such as first aid, and the distribution of boiled rice. Combat training such as grenade-throwing practice was also provided.<sup>56</sup>

However, the government and the army were not eager to 'shift' the NVF units towards

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<sup>53</sup> Nakayama, *Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> Akio Satō: *Hondo Kessen To Tōkai Gakuto Giyūtai: Tyūgakusei No Gyokusai Yōin Zukuri, Rekishi Hyōron*, 556, 1996, pp. 48–52. (佐藤明夫「本土決戦と東海学徒義勇隊—中学生の玉砕要員づくり—(The Decisive Mainland Battles and the Student Volunteer Force in the Tōkai Region)」『歴史評論』(Historical Journal) 556号, 1996年, 48–52頁.)

<sup>55</sup> Nakayama, *Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 74.

<sup>56</sup> Satō, *Hondo Kessen*, pp. 54–55.



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becoming a combat force (NVCF).<sup>57</sup> Chikako Nakayama, examining the formative process of the NVF and NVCF, points out that similar organisations were formed in local areas before the NVF plan was announced, and that the priority seemed to have been combat training. In the winter of 1944, in an aircraft-building company in Chiba Prefecture, ‘intensive training during breaks’ was provided in which ‘male members would practice with bamboo spears and female members would practice with pole swords so that for every one member, ten enemies will fall’. However, Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki considered such bamboo spear training ‘excessive’ and he requested that it be discontinued, arguing that the NVF they were envisaging was to make defensive preparations while engaging in production and to carry out production while making defensive preparations.<sup>58</sup>

According to Koide and Kurahashi, who both observed the NVF in Aichi, the principal aim behind the formation of the NVF was to quell the public chaos that would be likely to follow an American land invasion and to guide public opinion.<sup>59</sup> Until the Japanese army ceased organised resistance on 23 June, the total number of military and civilian casualties was over 120,000 in Okinawa, but the number of citizens being protected by U.S. army was as high as 220,000.<sup>60</sup> In other words, those citizens in Okinawa who faithfully followed their own country’s army were vastly outnumbered by citizens who surrendered independently and thereby survived. There were fears that if the fighting reached the mainland, many Japanese citizens would act with similar autonomy and be a great encumbrance to the Japanese army.<sup>61</sup> The only way to prevent such a situation would be to evacuate citizens from potential conflict zones, but this was not a realistic option.<sup>62</sup> Means of transport were limited, as were evacuation destinations and food supplies. Furthermore, a considerable decline in workforce productivity would be inevitable. Therefore, arming the citizens who were forced to remain in the conflict zones and incorporating them into the army structure was essential, not only in terms of augmenting the regular army forces, but also as part of the efforts to forestall the

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<sup>57</sup> Hiroyuki Matsumura: *Kokumin Giyūtai Shōron, Rekishigaku Kenkyū*, 721, 1999, p. 4. (松村寛之「国民義勇隊小論—敗戦と国民支配についての一断章 (The Essay of the National Volunteer Force)」『歴史学研究』(Journal of Historical Studies) 721号, 1999年, 4頁.)

<sup>58</sup> Nakayama, *Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Koide/Kurahashi, *Aich Ni Okeru Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 59.

<sup>60</sup> Nakayama, *Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 72.

<sup>61</sup> Tadahide Hirokawa: *Kokumin No Haisen Taiken*, in Akira Fujiwara/Seiichi Imai, *Jūgonen Sensō Shi, Aokishyoten*, Tokyo 1989, p. 63. (広川禎秀「国民の敗戦体験 (The Experience of A Defeated Nation)」, 藤原彰・今井清一編『十五年戦争史 (The Fifteen Years' War)4』青木書店, 1989年, 63頁.)

<sup>62</sup> Yoshio Chaen: *Hondo Kessen Nihon Naichi Bōeigun*, Fujisyuppan, 1986, p. 422. (茶園義男『本土決戦日本内地防衛軍 (The Defence Force for the Decisive Mainland Battles)』不二出版, 1986年, 422頁.)



chaos and confusion that was expected to follow a land invasion by enemy forces.<sup>63</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The U.S. land invasion of Okinawa forced the Japanese public to ready themselves for actual fighting on the mainland. German air raids sparked the fear of land invasion in Britain. In both Japan and Britain, there were women who were prepared to fight in the Second World War's 'decisive battles'. In light of the prevailing attitudes towards gender at the time, these 'fighting women' inevitably caused profound social friction.

How, then, did Japan and Britain differ in terms of their approach to the mobilisation of women for military service? While in Japan, at the early stages of the war, women were completely excluded from the armed forces, in Britain, women had been systematically mobilised as early as before the outbreak of the war. It is significant to note that the British had already experienced large-scale mobilisation of women during the First World War, which affected the lives of the people completely. This suggests that it is necessary to reconsider female mobilisation during the Second World War in relation to the experience during the First World War.

In the case of Britain, while women had been conscripted as regular soldiers, they were not treated as combatants. In Japan, at the beginning of the war, women were excluded from the armed forces completely. Towards the end of the war, as the Battle of Okinawa intensified and a full-scale air raid campaign was launched against mainland cities, Japanese leaders strove to prepare the country for decisive battles by enhancing productivity, organising defence forces, and influencing a shaky public opinion. While the NVF, which was supposed to shift to a combat force at the time of invasion, gave their women the status of combatants, the women who volunteered for the Home Guard in Britain were treated as non-combatants.

Although the degree of urgency was considerably different, female mobilisation was accompanied with gross deviation from conventional gender norms in both countries. It was on the home front that the gender order was disrupted more easily than on the front line. The deterioration of the war situation, especially the change of the home front into a battlefield, eventually forced governments to embark on the introduction of general mobilisation. It led to the adoption of female conscription in Britain and the formation of the NVCF in Japan.

The critical difference between Japan and Britain, both of which were faced with the threat of land invasion, was in whether or not the country actually suffered such an invasion. In Britain, the prevailing view that a woman's main role should be that of a mother meant that married women were excluded from conscription. In Japan, however, women were forced to enter the NVF, whether they were married or not. Japan's approach to the mobilisation of

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<sup>63</sup> Nakayama, *Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 72.

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women was different from Britain's, a fact that also marked a clear break from Japan's past policies in this regard. With the threat of a U.S. land invasion becoming increasingly real, and with a clear shortage of troops prepared to fight decisive mainland battles, Japan had no choice but to dissolve the military/civilian distinction and institute universal conscription. The NVCF, which also targeted women for enlistment, was not so much a means of augmenting the troops, but one of public control.<sup>64</sup> The underlying objective seemed to be the prevention of civil chaos 'when that day [came]'.

Wartime Britain was desperate to supplement its manpower, which was insufficient to cope with what had become a protracted and large-scale conflict, and so it mobilised women for military service on a scale far beyond that of the First World War. Although Parliament did not easily come to an agreement upon the approach to be taken concerning the mobilisation of women, it did generally agree that large-scale mobilisation, including conscription, was unavoidable. Questions remained as to who should be enlisted (age, married/unmarried, with/without children), and what their role would be. The idea that women's maternal duties should have primacy became the major premise for the debates that ensued in the House of Commons.<sup>65</sup> The argument that women should not pull the trigger of a gun met with no resistance, not even from feminist MPs who had argued in favour of gender equality in the army.

Great pains were taken by the government and the army to maintain the gender status quo in the armed forces. Consequently, there were several gender-based discrepancies in wages, rations, pensions, duties, and training. The greatest priority was placed on preserving a 'male-only' space within the armed forces. It was the trigger that served as the final symbol of division between men and women. No matter how proactively women sought to fulfil their duties within the military, they were considered non-combatants unqualified to pull the trigger of a gun, and as such, their value was securely positioned below that of their male counterparts. This 'trigger principle' represented the last defence of women's maternal nature, which the establishment intended to preserve even in the event of an emergency. In the end, male supremacy was restored within a redefined gender hierarchy by women's continued subordination to men.<sup>66</sup>

However, maintaining the gender status quo in the army by decreeing who could and

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<sup>64</sup> Koide/Kurahashi, *Aich Ni Okeru Kokumin Giyūtai*, p. 65.

<sup>65</sup> Penny Summerfield, "The Girl that Makes the Thing that Drills the Hole that Holds the Spring...": Discourses of Women and Work in the Second World War', Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds.), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> M. R. Higonnet explains why the changes in women's activities during wartime did not improve their status by using the metaphor of the 'Double Helix', its structure of two intertwined strands. Margaret R. Higonnet, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, London: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 34.

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who could not pull the trigger was not an easy task in such a high-tech war. Rapid advances in air defence technology and increasing sophistication and systematisation meant that in the combat zone, the question of who pulled the trigger no longer held the same importance as it had in the past.<sup>67</sup> The difference between defence (air defence) and offence (counter-attacks) had become paper-thin. For this reason, the boundary between combat actions and non-combat actions became blurred, and this presented a challenge to the intended gender barriers within the armed forces. Some women in the armed forces assisted in the shooting down of enemy planes, carried the guns, and pulled the trigger in rifle practice. They were quietly crossing the gender boundary that politicians and military commanders had tried so ardently to defend.

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<sup>67</sup> DeGroot, 'I Love the Scent of Cordite', p. 83.