



BRITANNIA'S DAUGHTERS

THE STORY OF THE WRNS



URSULA STUART MASON
FOREWORD BY HRH THE PRINCESS ROYAL

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The story of the WRNS
by
Ursula Stuart Mason

with a foreword by
HRH The Princess Royal



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BUCKINGHAM PALACE

It has been said that members of the Women's Royal Naval Service are a special breed and although I could be accused of being biased, I like to think that they are.

From their World War One role of releasing a man for sea service by taking over shore jobs, and their original motto of 'Never At Sea', they have progressed through World War Two in which there were some 74,635 of them, many engaged on work never before undertaken by women, some of it so secret they do not even talk of it today, to becoming full, operational members of the Royal Navy. Now they too go to sea as part of their service, just like their male counterparts and they have the same categories and titles. Those who were serving before September 1990 and who did not volunteer for seagoing appointments, continue to work solely ashore. But all Wrens, not only contribute something constructive and positive to the Service, but that something special as well. 'Never At Sea' now means 'Never At A Loss'.

This is a comprehensive history, written by an ex-Wren, which owes much to the recollections, memories and observation of 'Wrens' of all ranks and rates and of some five different generations - from those whose badges, categories and ranks were shown in blue to those who now wear the red and gold badges and the gold lace which the first Director, Dame Katharine Furse, thought "the prerogative of the men".

Future editions of their history will no doubt record how the Women's Royal Naval Service rose to these new challenges.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It was Dr Christopher Dowling of the Imperial War Museum who suggested that I should amplify, up-date and re-write – in part – my 1977 book, *The Wrens 1917-1977* in the light of developments in the WRNS. This received the official blessing and fullest co-operation of the Chief of Naval Personnel and Second Sea Lord (Admiral Sir Brian Brown, KCB, and his successor, Admiral Sir Michael Livesay, KCB) and of the Director, WRNS (Commandant Anthea Larken, CB and her successor, Commandant Anne Spencer). I am grateful to them all, those mentioned in the Acknowledgements, and many more for much encouragement and help. This is not a 'history with footnotes' but one largely in their own words of women who have served and are serving in the WRNS.

At the time of publication, the WRNS has been almost totally integrated into the Royal Navy, and its separate existence, 'a Service within a Service', is unlikely to last much beyond the 75th anniversary of its formation. The present Director is likely to be the last of her line.

Let us never forget what has made this unique Women's Service what it has ever been.

U.S.M.

I

In the Beginning

1917-1919

Most people think that the Women's Royal Naval Service began in 1939. In fact it started in November, 1917, and its birth certificate is, to all intents and purposes, a letter from the then First Lord of the Admiralty to the then Sovereign, King George V, a professional Naval officer, dated 26 November, 1917:

Sir Eric Geddes, with his humble duty, begs to inform Your Majesty that the Board of Admiralty have under consideration the possibility of substituting women for men on certain work on shore directly connected with the Royal Navy, and as a result of full enquiry, it is recommended that a separate Women's Service should be instituted for the purpose.

It is submitted for Your Majesty's approval that the Service should be called THE WOMEN'S ROYAL NAVAL SERVICE, and that the members of this Service should wear a distinctive uniform, details of which will be submitted to Your Majesty for approval in due course.

The Service would be confined to women employed on definite duties connected with the Royal Navy and would not include those serving in the Admiralty Departments or the Royal Dockyards or other civil establishments under the Admiralty.

At the request of the Board, Dame Katherine Furze [*his spelling*], GBE, has accepted the position of Director of this Service, and she will be responsible under the Second Sea Lord for its administration and organization, including the control of the members when off duty, and the care of their general welfare.

It is humbly submitted that your Majesty may be pleased to express your approval of these proposals.

Rubber-stamped in red on this is *The King has signified his approval*, initialled EHB in pencil, dated 28 November, 1917.

On the same day Sir Oswyn Murray, Secretary of the Admiralty,

minuted to the First Lord: 'The King has now signified his approval and the notice is being issued to the Press. The Fleet Order and Office Memorandum may therefore also be issued.' It had all been done with speed in the event, although the original idea had been mentioned as early as April.

On St George's Day Lady Rocksavage (later the Marchioness of Cholmondeley) had invited Sir Eric Geddes to drinks. He was desperately worried about the deteriorating manpower situation in the Navy. She said to him 'Why don't you use women for shore jobs such as driving and typing? The Army does – why not the Navy?' Sir Eric 'looked stunned. I don't think it had occurred to him before'.

Already women were doing men's work in factories and dockyards, and the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps was providing 'female substitution' to relieve soldiers for fighting duties. Sir Eric had asked if the Navy could share the WAAC, but no decision had been reached. By the autumn he decided that the Navy must move on its own to set up its own women's corps, and he sought the best possible leadership for it. It was common knowledge that Dame Katharine Furse, who had gained her GBE for her Red Cross work, was about to resign, because of irreconcilable differences, and that many on the staff at Red Cross headquarters in London would be resigning with her. One of her friends and colleagues on committees was Mrs J. Chalmers Watson, Controller of the WAAC, and a doctor's wife from Edinburgh, who was also Sir Eric's sister. On November 11 she telephoned Dame Katharine at her brother's request and the latter was invited to lunch at his house, 30 Queen Anne's Gate, at one o'clock that day (a Sunday). Dame Katharine's note of this call read: 'She told me he wished me to take on a Naval organization of women.'

Sir Eric was blunt: 'He thought the best cure [for the War Office's tardiness] would be a "bombshell" from the Navy. He was going to tell the Adjutant General that he could not wait any longer and that he intended immediately setting up a competitive organization of women for service with the Navy.'

Dame Katharine thought competing organizations wrong; co-ordinating women's groups to work with the Government would be better. Another Geddes, Sir Auckland, was Minister of National Service, and wanted to 'get powers' to do this and 'to insist upon all recruiting being done through National Service.' She added: 'If we started now we could later be brought under the bigger scheme. I told Sir Eric and Mrs Chalmers Watson that I must leave myself in their hands as I was only anxious to help where I could help most.' Sir Eric promised to see the Second Sea Lord who would get in touch with Dame Katharine: 'I liked Sir Eric tremendously and felt that he was really powerful and would get good work out of one.'

In her autobiography (*Hearts and Pomegranates* , published in 1940) she wrote of her first interview:

I saw Vice Admiral Sir Herbert Heath, the Second Sea Lord at the Admiralty, on the 12th, finding Rear Admiral M. Culme-Seymour, Director of Mobilisation, and Sir Oswyn Murray, as well as an officer of the RN Air Service, with a scheme for the use of women in air stations.

Sir Herbert outlined the Admiralty proposals, telling me I should be a 'director' which was a Naval term; we discussed details relating to terms of service for women, and I was asked to 'put in a scheme'.

Before leaving I asked for a book to help me to learn Naval organisation, of which I was ignorant, though I had just managed to learn something about the Army. My question evoked great puzzlement, but a messenger was sent to fetch a Navy List, which they handed me solemnly.

Knowing the book... in my midshipman stage as a child, I realised it would not be much help at this juncture, when my need was to learn Naval organisation, terms, customs, traditions, etc., to say nothing of regulations.

Walking up Waterloo Place afterwards I went into Hugh Rees's bookshop which produced *King's Regulations for the Navy* and this solved my difficulty and became our 'bible' for the WRNS.

While she was in a bookshop, the Second Sea Lord was at a committee where it was decided to approve the formation of a Naval unit on the lines of the WAAC. He was asked to make the necessary arrangements for establishing the Service, and arranging accommodation for its Headquarters staff.

Dame Katharine noted that no more than 10,000 women would be required and these would be mainly cooks, clerks, writers, and painters for trawlers:

They did not propose to touch the dockyards but would want women for sail-making, wire netting, etc. They said there would probably be a good deal of opposition and told me that one of my duties would be to go round and see where women could be used as they thought one could probably find a lot more openings than were admitted by the officers in charge.

They were extraordinarily nice.... The pay officer who had been taking notes during the meeting ran after me afterwards and begged me to give him notes which he could write up as he had not been able to understand anything that was going on.

She wrote to Sir Eric Geddes on 13 November, 1917, that she had promised to help:

Having just learnt something of the Army I will do all I can to learn something of the Navy, but it is very like starting on a new language, and I may be slow to take it up. Thank you for giving me the chance.

Sir Eric replied on 14 November, 1917:

No question of the advancement of the women's cause, or anything of that kind, affects me in the slightest.... I and the Second Sea Lord are sure we shall benefit by your help, and I am quite sure you will find him anxious to help you in your task in every possible way.

That day Dame Katharine formally resigned from the Red Cross. Her criticisms of the living conditions for VADs attached to temporary military hospitals had not been well received by her superiors. She dealt, with great dignity, with letters published in *The Times*, and consequent distasteful publicity, and spent the few days between her Red Cross and WRNS appointments in planning the latter.

On 17 November, 1917, she left some questions for the Second Sea Lord. Was it possible to have a pass to the Admiralty? What is a director? Is the head of the women's organization to have this rank and how does it compare with those with whom she will be working at the Admiralty?

May two or three of us decide upon what we consider to be a suitable uniform for the officers of the new organization in order that we may get it immediately? May we adopt Naval buttons and badges or must this question wait for further discussion and approval? In drawing up the scheme, may we improve on WAAC conditions to ensure greater welfare for the women? When shall we be actually required to take up our duties? Will it be possible to have a car attached to our office?

Three women – Dame Katharine, Mrs Tilla Wallace and Miss Edith Crowdy – spent some days working on draft regulations. Dame Katharine went on her first visits to Naval establishments – the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, which had requested fifty waitresses, and the Crystal Palace where it was thought the first training centre might be set up. On 23 November, 1917, she was appointed Director.

By now the agreed title for the Service was the Women's Royal Naval Service, and already people were referring to it as the Wrens. Some of the other suggestions for a title make one shudder to think of the sailors'

reactions: the WANKS or Women's Auxiliary Naval Corps; WNS or Women's Naval Service; WANS or Women's Auxiliary Naval Service; and RNWS or Royal Naval Women's Service. At first the Admiralty demurred at 'Royal' but later agreed to it. Choice of uniform was important because what one wears is important for a woman. Certainly the first Director, and those who helped her, designed well, for the basic officers' uniform of her day is still that of today, and has formed also the basis of the modern ratings' wear. The Treasury forbade the WRNS to wear gold lace 'because of the wasting of gold' and this was accepted 'because gold lace is definitely the prerogative of the men'.

'So,' wrote Dame Katharine, 'we chose a royal blue lace and adopted the curl in the shape of a diamond, and the three-cornered velour hat we had tried to get for the VADs before the war.' It was edged in black Naval braid and bore a Naval badge embroidered in blue. Lady Cholmondeley vowed that they copied a hat she had bought in Paris and often wore.

Eventually Susan Barter, kitted up as a rating in a long, shapeless dress, tied in the middle, with a small version of a Naval rating's collar, pudding basin hat, thick black stockings and heavy footwear, and the Director in the officer's dark navy suit, white shirt, black tie, tricorne hat and leather gloves, went round to the Second Sea Lord for approval. He took them to Sir Eric Geddes, who examined every detail. He pointed to the Director's buttons. 'She's got Admiral's buttons,' he said. 'Why?' Admiral Heath explained that she was equivalent in rank to a Rear Admiral and therefore ought to wear the buttons with a laurel wreath round the anchor. Upon this they were approved. The Deputy Director, who ranked as a Commodore, also wore these buttons with great pride.

Many from the Red Cross joined the WRNS as opportunity arose, among them Mary Cane and Winifred Dakyns as Assistant Directors. Isobel Crowdy came with Edith, but Rachel, the third sister, stayed with the Red Cross. Ethel Royden, who was to do much for ex-Wrens in later years, was also one of the first to join. Women doctors were on the staff – Dr Annie Forster to April, 1918, then Dr D. C. Hare as medical director, and Dr Bell as assistant. Lady Cholmondeley (who was still Lady Rocksavage at the time) was told that a typist was needed. Although she had never touched a typewriter and had no office experience she agreed to help.

On 29 November, 1917, the Admiralty issued Office Memorandum no. 245 announcing the setting-up of the WRNS, that accommodation had been provided in the Admiralty for the Director, and that recruiting for officers was under way. Recruiting of all women who wanted to join the WRNS had to be through the local employment exchange (a deterrent to many) and there was a WRNS officer on the interview panel. Many of those who applied did not reach the standards set by the Service and were turned down, although

they were eligible for other work. Later on, when the WRNS had a recruiting drive, the Civil Service women representatives on the panels complained at the maintenance of these high standards and asked – in vain – for them to be lowered.

The first WRNS officers knew how important it was to establish the Service's reputation; compromise was not possible. Their insistence meant that maintenance of standards was a cornerstone of the Service, and one which has continued to influence recruiting of all ranks and ratings to this day. The Navy can be thankful for this. To understand why the setting of standards was so important one must try and understand the way in which our society was organized in 1917 – a completely different world from the one we live in.

It had been permissible for some years for some women to earn their living in office work, and for a considerably longer period women had been working in industry, often under appalling conditions as cheap labour; they had been in domestic service, in nursing or engaged in 'cottage industries' – sweated labour – in their own homes. It had not been considered 'quite the thing' for a middle-class woman, however well educated, to earn her living at anything, although some had broken through and qualified as doctors against considerable opposition and there were some distinguished teachers. It was certainly *not* 'the thing' for an upper-class or aristocratic woman to do so.

A good many women had been involved in the pre-1914 campaign to gain the vote. As soon as war broke out the Suffragettes publicly announced that all their energies would be devoted to winning the war – the Scottish Union of Suffrage Societies, for instance, changed themselves into the Scottish Women's Hospitals Organization. Women from 1914 on were able to find work in engineering, the public services, in factories, in munitions, and other occupations not normally designated as 'women's work'. They surprised men by their high pitch of excellence.

By contrast a minority of women refused to change their way of life. An advertisement in 1916 was headed: *Buying this coat helped the Germans*. The material had been shipped from abroad using space that should be set free for food and other necessary imports, its making-up had used skills which would be better used on war work, and the cost of it – £100 – would have been money better spent on munitions.

Women like Dame Katharine Furse who were fully engaged in war work were incensed by those who still spent a day shopping in town, gossiping, idling – not a day of leave from war service and a respite from hard work, not even a few hours spent away from a young family, but simply the unproductive (as it seemed in the light of war) way of life they had always pursued.

There were three midwives at the birth of the WRNS – Sir Eric Geddes,

Sir Herbert Heath and Dame Katharine Furse. Sir Eric was a strong personality with a lively business background who became Controller of the Navy in the spring of 1917, was elected MP for Cambridge in July and in September became First Lord and a Privy Councillor. The rise was meteoric, the capability enormous and the efficiency staggering.

The Second Sea Lord, Vice Admiral Sir Herbert Heath, was fourteen years older than Sir Eric and the son of an Admiral. He had commanded cruisers at the Battle of Jutland, been Admiral Superintendent of the Dockyard at Portsmouth, and was made KCB in 1917. Although he was the father of two daughters, his background was hardly that of an ardent feminist.

The most important, perhaps, was Dame Katharine, another strong personality. She had a good brain and a clear mind with a grasp of detail, and was a good organizer. She was determined, she knew what was wanted, and went for it. She was the fourth daughter of John Addington Symonds, the writer and poet, who had hoped for a son, so that she grew up as a boy until her teens, and she married Charles Wellington Furse, the painter, who shared her love of mountains and walking. They had two sons, and when the younger was only a few days old she was tragically widowed, Charles Furse dying after an illness through which she had nursed him.

When her boys were older she joined the Red Cross, throwing herself into VAD training. Later she wrote: 'My experience taught me many lessons as we (in the WRNS) passed through the stage of having little sense of discipline and *esprit de corps*, I, for one, being a complete individualist, never having been a member of a team before.'

There was an element of masculinity in Dame Katharine's make-up, but with it was a gentle femininity and a charm which not only made the women who worked under her her warmest admirers, but also enabled her to gain maximum co-operation from Naval officers and civil servants alike. They were not all easily won over; one was heard to say, 'There's a woman called Furse downstairs – get rid of her'.

She gained her DBE in June, 1917, but had been reluctant to accept it, partly because she felt honours in war should go only to those who had earned them through bravery, and partly because she knew she could not continue in the Red Cross.

Her sons had no inhibitions. Peter, already a Midshipman, wrote 'Congrats old Bird!!!!!!' while Paul, who was to become a Rear Admiral, wrote: 'Hereby I wish to convey my heartiest appreciation and congratulations of your being made a Dame'. Lizzie, the family cook, did not at all like the title 'because she often used the term "an old dame" in disparagement'. Dame Katharine's own reactions were down-to-earth. 'When I give it in a shop I am often asked "Mrs or Miss?" What I like best is the use of the Christian name and few things are more irritating than being

addressed as “Dame Furse” by people who would never think of saying “Sir Smith” to a man’. In a short while it became GBE and she received the insignia – the collar (to be returned on her death), the investment badge and the star (to be retained by her relatives).

Her reaction to Sir Eric Geddes has already been noted, and of Sir Herbert Heath she wrote: ‘He was our immediate senior and delightful to work with, being like a boy in the way he appeared to enjoy life, but taking full responsibility. He helped us in every way he could and always supported us when convinced that what we aimed at was right. He did not take this for granted, but when agreed he left the administration to us.’

The scheme for training of officers and women of the WRNS was a masterly document, especially when one realizes that none of the women who drew it up had much experience of organizing large numbers of people, or of business administration. Quick and adequate training was necessary, they said, if the substitution of women for men was to be effective, and they recommended that during training women should live in hostels or camps:

In addition to their technical training they will be learning discipline, general efficiency and smartness as well as becoming acquainted with the Standing Orders and Regulations of the Service.

Many of the women who enrol in the WRNS may be unused to working with others and have but little realization of the very real necessity for discretion and prompt obedience.

It was considered essential for officers to be in a Receiving Depot hostel during their training:

The success of the work of the WRNS will depend very largely on the finding and training of capable officers.... The training course should be of at least two or three weeks’ duration, and enrolment should only be completed at the end of this period, when it is considered that the ladies who have been through the course are shown to be suitable in every way.

The course should include lectures on the clerical work required, official correspondence, forms, indenting, returns, systems of accounts, etc.

Naval officers lectured them at first (although the very first trained with WAAC officers and learnt mainly about Army Regulations), but later WRNS instructors took over. An examination, said the scheme, should be held at the end of each course and, on the results of this and a character assessment, candidates would be graded as Principals, Assistant Principals or Quarters

Supervisors. Chief Section Leaders and Section Leaders (or subordinate officers, known as CSLs and SLs) might be trained with the 'forewomen WAAC'. They learnt the theory of their category work, the use of forms, discipline, hygiene, management of women, drill, games and were to be 'imbued with the necessity for tact and courtesy when dealing with the women working under them, as well as with the men with whom they would be working.'

Those chiefly required were cooks, waitresses, laundresses, book-keepers, telegraphists, telephonists, wireless operators, motor drivers and other technical experts. The training of drivers would be in two courses, a short one in mechanics for those who could already drive, and one of three weeks on driving and mechanics for those without previous experience. Two courses were planned also for cooks. Two weeks for those with a knowledge of cookery, in the use of large quantities and the best use of rations, and one of a month for those without previous knowledge. Laundresses would need seven to ten days' training and this could be done while actually doing camp or hostel washing, while waitresses could also be trained on the job:

It should be made clear when the women are enrolled in the WRNS that those who fail to come up to the standard either in domestic or technical training will be required to serve in a lower grade than that for which they have been training.

All women under training would have WRNS officers in charge of them, and these officers would work to the Assistant Director, WRNS Training. WRNS officers were to be selected by a board consisting of the Assistant Director WRNS Personnel, and not less than three WRNS officers, of whom the Director or Deputy Director would be one.

The WRNS College was set up for officer training at Ashurst, near Crystal Palace, with Miss Thomson as principal. A new entry establishment for ratings, and a WRNS unit with stores ratings, writers, despatch riders, and drivers, were established at Crystal Palace, in South London. The officer in charge was Vera Laughton, a young journalist, the daughter of Sir John Laughton, the Naval historian. She was to exercise a lasting influence on the Service.

II

Arrangements

On 4 February, 1918, Admiralty Fleet Order 414 *Women's Royal Naval Service – Arrangements* appeared, embodying much of the scheme.

Originally it had been thought that ratings would be immobile, living at home, in or near a port, but there was a need for mobile ratings and many volunteers from areas nowhere near a port had offered their services. It was an early duty of newly appointed officers to find buildings suitable to accommodate mobile ratings – at Portsmouth, for instance, the Lion and Miller's Hotels were taken over. Immobiles had to have a mess-room or similar accommodation near their work. Mobile and immobile officers were accepted, but Directors, Principals and Quarters Supervisors could only be selected from the former.

An earlier statement about not recruiting from women already employed in offices and dockyards by the Navy was ignored: 'Women engaged for Naval duties before the formation of the WRNS will be gradually absorbed into that Service.'

Pay was set. The Director got £500 per annum – and Dame Katharine said: 'I remember feeling so wealthy, when first appointed, that I promptly had lunch and half a bottle of Chianti at a restaurant near Victoria to celebrate the occasion. The sudden addition to one's income was very pleasant.'

The Deputy Director was paid £400, Assistant Directors £300, and Assistant Deputy Directors £250. Divisional Directors were paid £250, Deputies £200 and quarters.

Ratings were paid weekly. The highest rates were Superintending Section Leaders or Chief Section Leaders in a number of categories who got 45s a week. Unskilled categories were paid at a lower rate. All mobile ratings got a gratuity, paid in arrears, at 13s a quarter. Learners in all categories were paid 25s or less. Deductions were to be made from pay for absence without leave, or excess of paid leave ('being adrift') of one day's pay for each day's absence.

Immobiles living in their own homes would find their own board, lodging, service and washing. All members of the WRNS accommodated in hostels or lodgings would have a deduction at a fixed rate (15s 6d a week for officers,

14s a week for ratings) if their conditions of service did not include free board, lodging and washing. Rations were allocated, and such matters as transfers, discharges, casualties, redress, leave and so on were dealt with in precise language. So was travelling: 'Officers of the WRNS will travel first class, and women third class.' And 'the concession enabling a standard meal at a cost of 1s to be obtained at railway refreshment rooms applied to the WRNS.'

On enrolment forms was printed 'You are hereby warned that if, after enrolment, it is found that you have wilfully given a false answer to any of the questions, the Board of Admiralty or any person duly authorized by them retains the right to terminate any contract that they may have entered into with you.'

The first headquarters was in a small office in Central Buildings, Westminster, but this rapidly became too small, and 15 Great Stanhope Street, a corner house, was taken. It opened on 7 January, 1918.

Their Lordships approved the appointments of the Director, Deputy and two Assistant Directors on 17 December, 1917, and officers' training having officially started on 7 January, 1918, the next important date in WRNS history is 18 January, 1918, when the first officers were appointed to bases and stations. There were Divisional Directors in London, Portsmouth, Chatham, Devonport, Edinburgh and Cardiff, with Deputies at Immingham for the East Coast, and at Harwich. A Principal, acting Deputy Divisional Director, was at Liverpool. By 18 March, 1918, the number of ratings already on duty or reporting that week totalled about 850 in England and Wales, and about 200 in Scotland.

A Division was made up of twenty or more Sub-Divisions each under an officer called a Principal. A Sub-Division included two or more Companies under Principals or Deputy or Assistant Principals, and in some cases Sections under Chief Section Leaders (like later Chief Wrens). For instance, the London Division included the Depot; Crystal Palace Company; Officers' Training Hostel; Greenwich Company; Wormwood Scrubs (RNAS) Company; Admiralty Garage Company; Hotel Cecil (Air Board) Section; Deptford offices of *HMS President* Company.

Headquarters was headed by the Director, with the Deputy immediately below her. The Assistant Director Recruiting was Muriel Currey, who at a later date became responsible instead for Demobilization. The Assistant Director for Personnel was Mary Cane, the Assistant Director (Administration) was Winifred Dakyns and Isobel Crowdy was Assistant Director for Inspection and Training.

From the beginning everything connected with the Royal Naval Air Service was kept separate. The formation of the Royal Air Force (by merging the RNAS and the Royal Flying Corps) was already planned and from early

in 1918 the Women's Royal Air Force (then Women's Auxiliary Air Force) had its own Director. It was officially constituted on 1 May, 1918, (although it existed from 1 April, 1918) and WRNS serving on RNAS stations in Britain were to be transferred, completing by 1 July, 1918.

However, the hand-over seems to have been delayed, for WRNS Acquaint memorandum 144 of 8 November, 1918, listed stations being transferred as late as October and November.

WRNS had been asked on joining if they would be prepared to transfer when the time came. Those who had agreed duly handed back their WRNS uniform and put on the new WAAF one. Those who wished to stay in the WRNS were moved at the earliest moment to a Naval establishment. The separate records were easily available to the new Service and the change-over seems to have gone smoothly.

One only has to read their letters, look at their photographs and talk to them to know that the first WRNS were a lively generation. They must have been quite difficult to weld into a cohesive unit wherever they were drafted. The task cannot have been made easier with so many living at home and treating the whole exercise as a kind of normal job which helped the war effort and meant wearing a uniform (which gave them a certain status).

Their motives for enlisting were frequently misunderstood. In a letter of 11 February, 1918, the Director told the Second Sea Lord that there had been scandal in the WAAC with allegations of immorality and there had been bracketing of the Wrens with the WAACs. She wrote:

It is desperately hard on the WRNS that we should be involved in the WAAC trouble....What seems to be the best preventative of rumours in our own Service is to run it on very considerate, human lines.

The War Office is apt to run things on rule of thumb lines and I don't believe this is possible where women are concerned....I am impressing on my officers the immense importance of winning the women's confidence by explaining the conditions to them...and that we shall care very seriously for their proper well-being.

If we can secure a nucleus of good and serious women and if we can make them proud and content to wear our uniform, they and their friends and relations will put up the best barrage against slander which can be provided.

Can you help us by issuing an order or appeal or something to all Naval officers asking them to talk to the men to get them all to realize that they must help and protect the women and their reputation?

Admiral Sir Herbert Heath issued a letter to Commanding Officers on the 20th on 'the use of women' ending with:

May I therefore ask you to use your personal influence in assisting all concerned in viewing this effort on the part of the women in the right light.

That is to say, that they are endeavouring to help the country to the best of their ability and that they ask only to be treated with that courtesy and respect which their sex demands.

In her autobiography Dame Katharine wrote that the WRNS had very few cases of pregnancy or VD:

In the former we discharged the women on benevolent grounds, but saw them safely through the process of child-bearing.

In the latter we ensured treatment for them but did not discharge as our Medical Directors and I agreed that we should do more to maintain a moral code by humane treatment than by punishment, and the response certainly justified this belief.

Writing after the war, Dr Dorothy Hare, Medical Director of the WRNS, said:

A special hostel was opened for [Service] women with VD, including those with pregnancy. Only one case occurred to my knowledge among the WRNS, but the difficulty of finding suitable residence for this girl where treatment would be available was so great it brought home to us the problem involved. Together with the co-operation of the Royal Free Hospital, doctors, almoners and ex-Wren officers, the special hostel was opened with an experienced nursing sister as matron, and staffed by nurse assistants.