"This Great Adventure": White Women in the Union Defence Force, 1939-1945

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 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 comprised up to 65 000 women.[2]

White women in South Africa had many intricacies 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 the 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 provides the framework for this paper. This is complemented by the personal testimonies of women in the form of interviews that were conducted with Betty Addison, June Borchert, May Kirkman and Edith Kimble. Included too are autobiographies by women who went on to become prominent activists such as Helen Joseph and Mary Benson.

[1] Jennifer Crwys-Williams. *A Country At War, 1939-1945: The Mood of a Nation.* (Rivonia: Ashanti Publishing, 1992) p223 and Margot Bryant. *As We Were: South Africa 1939-1941.* (Johannesburg: Keartland Publishers, 1974) p65.
[2] Bryant. *As We Were: South Africa 1939-1941.* p59.

The official magazine of the South African Women's Auxiliary Services, *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 fifty-eight issues. Articles ranged from the purely domestic such as recipes, to fashion and hairstyles, as well as deeper concerns regarding the new roles of women in war society as well as their post-war expectations. Its regular publication meant that the reader can trace change over time in terms of the official perceptions and portrayal of women in military service in South Africa. For the duration of the Second World War three broad trends following each other 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 preparation 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 in terms of its portrayal of women in the magazine lasted roughly until May 1942. This phase marked the transition from peace to war and was characterised by a great deal of ambiguity around the changing role of women brought about by the exigencies of war. As this section will show, 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 historically had 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.

The inaugural issue of *The Women's Auxiliary* 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".[3] 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.[4]

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.[5] Their impetus 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 with the quote, "'What an excellent idea to have women controlling the children…I wonder why someone didn't think of it before.'"[6] A few months later this connection between women and their nurturing duties, especially as it 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 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.[7]

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

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[3] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "On Full Time Service – They are Carrying on the War Work of Men" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* September 1940, Issue 1, p11.

[4] "They are Carrying on the War Work of Men" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* September 1940, p11.

[5] As I demonstrate in later chapters however, many of the women drawn into military service were young and unmarried which brought with it a whole new set of concerns regarding adequate supervision of their movements on the part of the military.

[6] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "Ready to Replace Men – Versatile Women in Civic Service" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* September 1940, Issue 1, p25.

[7] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "Auckland Park Canteen – They Prepare Babies' Bottles as well as Feed the Troops" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* April 1941, Issue 8, p27.

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 feminists played key roles. [8]

This wave of feminism used the Victorian middle class ideals of morality, purity and the role of women as the guardians of these, but extended their role from the private to the public sphere.[9] Yet the ideology behind this remained constant and these middle class women were still perceived to be the receptacles 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.[10]

As historians studying gender relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have shown, upper class women and through the gradual diffusion of this ideal through churches and popular institutions to the working class, "virtuous womanhood", was associated with nature, instinct, and nostalgia for the past as a reaction to the changes wrought by modernity. White men, on the other hand, were linked to culture and progress, reason and rationality.[11] This was exemplified in the distinction between the public and the private, nature and culture, where all cultures create a distinction between "culture" (acting on the environment) and "nature" (given by birth). [12]

Women were linked to nature due to their biology and related biological functions such as bearing children in a way that did not apply to men. Aspects of female physiology such as menstruation and childbirth, bringing with them pain, discomfort and even death, tied women more closely to biology than men, leaving the latter free to engage in more cultural

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[8] Cherryl Walker. "The women's suffrage movement: The politics of gender, race and class" in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*. Cherryl Walker, ed., (Claremont: David Philip Publishers, 1990) p319.
[9] Walker. "The women's suffrage movement". p319.
[10] Chetty. "Gender Under Fire". p5.
[11] Anne McClintock. "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family" in *Feminist Review*. A. Whitehead, C. Connolly, E. Carter and H. Crowley, eds., Issue 44, 1993. p66.
[12] Sherry B. Ortner. *Making Gender – The Politics and Erotics of Culture.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) p25-26.

pursuits while confining the former to their biological role to a greater extent.[13] The biological role of bearing children became a social one of raising children. After giving birth she was additionally tied to her offspring by lactation. The bond between the two was then extended after weaning where women were expected to play the greater role in raising children emphasising her "place…in the home". [14]

The biological and social functions of women were thus closely intertwined – the social role followed from the biological, thus linking them with the instinctual and the natural. To return to *The Women's Auxiliary,* the effect of the article "Auckland Park Canteen – They Prepare Babies' Bottles as well as Feed the Troops" and others like it, was to 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 was considered the least appropriate place for young women and was 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 solitary purpose of procreation and its opposite was all other forms of sexuality considered "deviant".[15] In this atmosphere of a defined sexuality and an emphasis on domesticity, the military came to be seen as a site for intervention due to 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]

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[13] Ortner. *Making Gender.* p28.
[14] Ortner. *Making Gender.* p31.
[15] Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987) p3-5.
[16] *Cf.* Myna Trustram. *Women of the Regiment: Marriage and the Victorian Army.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

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 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 life and their new roles for the duration of the war, there nevertheless existed 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 W.A.A.F.[19]

Life in the barracks allowed for this formation of female camaraderie. For men like Guy Butler the war allowed for the formation of male camaraderie, one of the most positive aspects of wartime experience, yet this "authentic" form of camaraderie was not extended to women and, according to Butler, "Women achieved it far less frequently – particularly if they

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[17] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "Women in Barracks – The Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* October 1940, Issue 2, p19.
[18] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "An Airwoman on Full-Time Duty – Impressions of a 'Rookie'" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* September 1940, Issue 1, p26.
[19] "An Airwoman on Full-Time Duty" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* September 1940, p26.

are living with their parents, or lumped together in digs or boarding houses, or imprisoned by their children."[20] Yet for young single women such as Betty Addison, 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 beyond their war. These ties were based on their shared experiences, even if these experiences were not as intense as that 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.[21]

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. [22]

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 an emphasis was on military discipline. Janie Malherbe considered the living conditions and supervision of female recruits in the barracks, evident 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

[20] Butler. *Bursting World.* p152.
[21] Interview with Betty Addison.
[22] May Kirkman in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.

> 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.[23]

Those women, fraternizing with male officers and going out, were subject to stringent controls and curfews where women who returned after 10 p.m. would be disciplined and "confined to barracks". [24] May Kirkman perceived this to be for the benefit for 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 on the part of the male companions – which the military, as I will show subsequently, was limited in its ability to do:

> 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.[25]

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 the official publications like *The Women's Auxiliary* towards the end of the war to contain the empowerment experienced by many women's independence for the duration. Simultaneously there existed 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 a protection of the family and of women. [26]

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[23] Killie Campbell Africana Library (KCAL). E.G. Malherbe Collection. Letter sent by Lieut. (Mrs) J.A. Malherbe to *Die Transvaler* 1 May 1942. KCM 56975(1077)b, File 447/6.
[24] May Kirkman in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[25] May Kirkman in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[26] A.C. Eason. "This Round I Fought for You" in KCAL. Diary of Gert Spencer Dreyer, "Prison Camp II". KCM 65263.

This was in no small part responsible for the guilt assumed by women and these repercussions were particularly acute near the front lines of battle. In May 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.[27]

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.[28] 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…"[29] Benson's reluctance to meet the insistent demands of men led to her being described as being "fit for a frigid clergyman".[30]

Generally, life in the auxiliary services and the limited independence it implied for women in uniform, suggested a new found camaraderie with men based on service to the nation. This served to alienate these women from those who had not enlisted, invoking 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 Kirkman'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…"[31]

On the part of men in uniform there existed a profound ambivalence in their treatment of women in uniform. Men such as Herbert had been raised in a climate where women were placed on a moral pedestal and respect towards these women was a key component of

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[27] Benson. *A Far Cry.* p25.
[28] Benson. *A Far Cry.* p25.
[29] Benson. *A Far Cry.* p26.
[30] Benson. *A Far Cry.* p26.
[31] May Kirkman in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.

gentlemanly behaviour: "…we were brought up to look up to women, treat them like ladies…and we treated them as though they were in glass cages…we took off our hats and saluted…"[32] Yet, simultaneously, men were influenced in their perception of women by this equation 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"[33] to the perception of these women as being sexually promiscuous, as evident in Godfrey Herbert'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.[34] For women in military service then, the notion 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's use of their war experiences and the convention of them making the greater sacrifice to exert pressure on these women. The ambivalent attitude of these men towards women in uniform struck an uneasy balance between respect and viewing this same freedom and independence as being associated with promiscuity that also led, in some instances, to physical molestation and rape.[35]

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 E.G. 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. She wanted the full experience of military service and volunteered as a private for the transport service.[36] Following transport work, she was transferred to military intelligence as an officer where she was one of the editors of the "Ic Digest", a monthly magazine published in military intelligence, as well as the editor of *Complex Country.*[37] She

[32] Interview with Godfrey Herbert.
[33] Interview with Betty Addison.
[34] Interview with Godfrey Herbert.
[35] May Kirkman in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[36] E.G. Malherbe. *Never a Dull Moment.* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins (Pty) Ltd, 1981) p211.
[37] KCAL. E.G. Malherbe Collection. "A Day in the Life of a Woman Transport Driver" in *Libertas,* December 1942, p51. KCM 56949/95, File 142/1.

was heavily involved in recruitment, travelling the country in order to recruit Afrikaner women in particular.[38]

These recruiting drives were an attempt by the Union Defence Force to mobilize Afrikaans support for the war. To do this, they drew on symbolic moments in Afrikaner nationalism, such as the commemoration of the Great Trek in 1938, "The recruiting campaign attempted to tap into the upsurge of Afrikaner nationalist sentiments as refracted through the commemorative celebration of the Great Trek in 1838."[39] Further attempts to garner Afrikaner support were also evident in the use of the "Steel Commando" and "Air Commando" recruiting units traveling the platteland. The use of *Commando* was significant as these terms were designed to mobilize Afrikaners based on an already existing "martial and social tradition".[40] Malherbe was a significant speaker on recruitment tours to the *platteland* for the Women's Auxiliary Army Services. She addressed the concerns of civilians which hindered the recruitment of women such as the poor conditions of accommodation and food in the military. A considerable and ubiquitous concern raised here was the possibility of immorality on the part of young women without parental supervision:

> No effort was made to make out that **no** cases of moral misbehaviour occur. It was however pointed out that such cases would occur among any group of over 9,000 women (3 services combined) collected anywhere in the world – that they occur in any community, even in congregations, but we don't blame the town or pastor concerned – that such ones were rare among Army women, and therefore apt to be overemphasized…[41]

Here, Malherbe emphasizes that, although there were instances of "moral misbehaviour", it fell within the boundaries of any similar group of women and was not confined to military women in particular. She adds instead that it was the rarity of such behaviour amongst military women that led to such focus being placed on it when it did occur. This speech occurs within the context of the molestation and perception of "promiscuity" of women in uniform.

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[38] KCAL. E.G. Malherbe Collection. Janie Malherbe. "General Report: Recruiting Tour Undertatken Through Northern and Eastern Transvaal by Lieut. (Mrs) J. Malherbe", 18 December, 1941. KCM 56992(16), File 143/2.

[39] Neil Roos. "From War to Workplace: Class, Race and Gender Amongst White Volunteers, 1939-1953". (Mafikeng: University of the North West, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2001) p96.

[40] Roos. "From War to Workplace". p96.

[41] KCAL. Janie Malherbe. "General Report: Recruiting Tour Undertaken Through Northern and Eastern Transvaal by Lieut. (Mrs) J. Malherbe", 18 December, 1941.

Once enlisted war work provided the opportunity for women 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…[42]

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.

Janie Malherbe for instance had a narrow conception of the potential for a change in women's role, holding fast to ideas of domesticity which sat uneasily with her idea of the "modern woman". For her, woman's true place lay in the home as the wife and mother.[43] In an article written for *The Outspan* where she debated the issue of equal pay in the military for men and women, she ultimately giving white men pre-eminence in the war, "In this article Janie Malherbe argued that women should not get the same salary as men…men should be paid a higher salary as they voluntarily gave up their life for their country."[44] For Malherbe, women's role in the war was simply an extension of their role as wives and mothers, providing support to the key roles played by the men in war and, as such, not necessarily deserving of remuneration, "She reminded the women that they were volunteers and implied that the state was generous enough by giving them any payment at all".[45] Thus, although heavily involved in recruiting for women, Malherbe did not envision the roles

[42] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "A Male Drill Instructor Thinks – "Drilling Makes a Girl More Attractive" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* March 1942, Issue 19, p7.
[43] Dunlevey. "Janie Antonia Malherbe". p26.
[44] Dunlevey. "Janie Antonia Malherbe". p43.
[45] Dunlevey. "Janie Antonia Malherbe". p43.

played by women in war as being permanent or as serving as a form of empowerment or even independence. Their work occurred within the framework of wives and mothers.

But, to read the magazine 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 F.H. 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.[46] 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.[47]

The quote demonstrated a significant lack of acknowledgement and value of women's pre-war roles, suggesting that all women previously followed the middle class, idealised vision of women at leisure when 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.

Moreover the quote does not take into account the roles played by women in previous conflicts, both in South Africa and internationally, for much of the early decades of the twentieth century. For instance, in the South African War, British actions, particularly their attacks on civilian targets and subsequent incarceration of Afrikaner women and children in concentration camps, were an important motivating factor in Boer perceptions that the

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[46] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. F.H. Theron. "Women on Active Service – 'Proving their Worth up to the Hilt'" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* October 1940, Issue 2, p3.
[47] "Women on Active Service" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* October 1940, p3.

British were a threat to their very way of life[48]. Yet Afrikaner women played a far more active role than that of camp internees. The threat posed by British troops and the nature of guerrilla warfare meant that women could not remain isolated from the war. [49] Afrikaner women visited men in the field although this was frowned upon and later prevented by commanding officers. Like the British and Zulu military systems, the presence of women was discouraged from the all-male world of the commando in the belief that they would be an unnecessary diversion, drawing the attention of men away from the war. [50]

It was this very perceived distraction of which the British made use by sending Afrikaner women to their husbands on commando in order to persuade them to cease fighting. It was not the first time, and it would not be the last, that men's links with the home would be used to encourage or, in this case, dissuade men from fighting. However these women were not simply the pawns of British military authority. Whereas some did as they were told, many Afrikaner women did the opposite by spurring men on.[51] They used their own positions as wives, mothers and daughters to argue that it was the duty of Afrikaner men to protect them and their homes from the ravages of British troops, "Deserters were not merely faithless: they were accomplices to murder, cried one woman to her republican 'sisters'. The imperial army was about to lay waste to 'our country, our houses and also us and our daughters'."[52] Even those women who were taken prisoner along with their children and held under horrendous conditions in concentration camps, refused to submit to the British forces and encourage Afrikaner men to surrender. On the contrary they remained defiant:

> Yet most women with men on commando clung to one tenet. Male surrender improved children's life chances. But most refused to ask their own menfolk to 'hands-up'. They mobilized gender differences to denounce traitors who 'did not deserve the name of *man*'.[53]

A decade later, at the outbreak of the First World War, women were once again part of the motivation for enlistment. For Private F.C. Cooper, his decision to leave for the battlefields of the First World War was in no small part motivated by his desire "'to sooner face a

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[48] Fransjohan Pretorius. *Life on Commando During the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902.* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 2000) p166, 177.
[49] Denys Reitz. *Commando: A Boer Journal of the Boer War.* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1929) p179.
[50] Pretorius. *Life on Commando.* p301.
[51] Pretorius. *Life on Commando.* p303.
[52] Bradford. "Regendering Afrikanerdom". p211.
[53] Bradford. "Regendering Afrikanerdom". p215.

German bullet than the scorn in a girl's eyes"'.[54] To an extent, this latter motivation bore similarity to the situation in Britain where young women handed out white feathers as a symbol of cowardice to men who appeared in public sans uniform.[55]

The mobilization of women for the Second World War was, in a sense, based upon the way in which women had been a part of society previously.[56] 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 "exhalted 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…"[57]

There was no movement to overturn the perceptions of gender in terms of the characteristics attributed to men and women – instead women were to bring their attributes and their domesticity to the public sphere. This is evident in metaphors using housework which were employed to describe the role of women in political life:

> It seems to me that the need to work certainly exists; when a woman, an ordinary normal woman, notices disorder, she wants to tidy up. Disorder doesn't bother men as much; unconsciously they suffer from a disordered condition, but they don't manage to deal with this…[58]

There appeared to be in operation the 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 held the higher ground.

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[54] James Ambrose Brown. *They Fought for King and Kaiser: South Africans in German East Africa, 1916*. (Johannesburg: Ashanti Publishing, 1991) p40.
[55] Martin Middlebrook. *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984) p22-23.
[56] *Cf.* Chetty. "Gender Under Fire". p62-64.
[57] Marijke du Toit. "The Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism: A Social History of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging ca 1870-1939." (University of Cape Town, Cape Town: Unpublished PhD dissertation, 1996) p207.
[58] Du Toit. "The Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism". p215. This quote originally appeared in an article in *Die Burger* titled "Wat kan ons doen?" on August 26, 1924.

The interwar period also saw an opening of various opportunities for waged labour for women in secondary industry and as white-collar workers. However these job opportunities did not challenge the perception of women – they worked very much in line with the characteristics given 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.[59]

The mobilisation of women during the war included them participating in new activities in industry and the Auxiliary Services which had been the previous 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 men from 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 vehement 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."[60] 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 the world, was not due to 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.[61]

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[59] Cherryl Walker. "The women's suffrage movement: The politics of gender, race and class" in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*. Cherryl Walker, ed., (Claremont: David Philip Publishers, 1990) p331-332.
[60] Walker. "The suffragette movement". p333.
[61] Walker. "The suffragette movement". p336.

Hertzog's beliefs were well founded – the entire suffragette campaign never presented a threat to gender roles as it subscribed to the notion of inherent differences between men and women that in turn implied keeping intact "the existing division of labour between the sexes".[62] It is with the conservatism of the South African suffragette movement that women were mobilised for the Second World War. The aims of the suffragettes were not radical, the waged labour done by women fell within their "natural" abilities and even the entry of women into politics was based on the perception of their essential natures as mothers and moral guardians. 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. The mobilization of women proceeded from existing roles of women in the public sphere, which were themselves based on earlier essentialised differences between men and women.

Bertha Solomon, in the fourth issue of *The Women's Auxiliary*, argued specifically for a greater role for women in the public sphere. Her own role as the MP for Jeppe and one of the first women in Parliament in no small way contributed to her outlook. In addition Solomon was, as a member of Smuts' party, very much linked to official government and military views regarding the appropriate roles for women during the war.[63] For Solomon, the new roles that women took on were only a recognition that gendered work was a social construction dependent on physical and mental ability: "…there is…no such thing as a man's job or a woman's job, but only a job which has to be done according to the physical and mental capacity of the person doing it."[64] Yet there were limits to Solomon's understanding of the possibilities opening up to women with her conclusion that, even though the war would significantly alter women's participation in the public sphere, they would nevertheless return to their homes at the end of the war and play a greater role in social welfare and the community. This was a vision of moral guardianship little different from the outlook in the nineteenth century:

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[62] Walker. "The suffragette movement". p337.
[63] Alan Paton. *Hofmeyr*. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1964) p200.
[64] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. Bertha Solomon. "From the Parliamentary Front – The Wider Outlook of Women's Interests" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* December 1940, Issue 4, p5.

> …as citizens they will have a job to do in the peace that is to come no less important than their present job in the war, the job of helping to create that new social order which we hope for from the war, an order which will put an end once and for all to poverty and starvation in the midst of plenty…[65]

For women themselves, the decision to enlist in the various branches of the auxiliary services was based on a convergence of the personal with the wider motivation circulating through society, particularly through the media of propaganda – that of duty and patriotism. For June Borchert, "patriotism" was her first response to the question, followed by a tongue-in-cheek "for King and Country", suggesting that she saw this emphasis on patriotism in an almost farcical light.[66] Her actual reason was less assertive, "Oh, I just joined up because I thought – you [her twin sister May] were there, Kay [their older sister] was there…it just sounded like a good idea."[67] For her, it was a case of following in the footsteps of her sisters, which happened to coincide with the patriotic feeling within the country. Although this implies that, in this instance, personal motivations took precedence in these women's decisions to enter the war, the boundary between the personal and the societal was blurred to some extent. This is evident in one of the reasons put forward for joining which was based on being unable to deal with the likelihood of watching men leave for "up north" and possibly never returning. This was accompanied by the idea that men were making the greater sacrifice, the corollary of which was that women had to play some part as well:

> 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…[68]

Their decision to enlist was also based on following in the footsteps of other women or signing up with friends suggesting the influence of peers or family members, "Persuaded to do so by a friend, Elsie Manley…She was joining the Signal Corps and encouraged me to do so too."[69] In some instances these personal relationships made the transition between home

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[65] Solomon. "From the Parliamentary Front" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* December 1940, p7.
[66] June Borchert in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[67] June Borchert in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[68] May Kirkman in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[69] KCAL. Edith Mary Kimble Interview conducted by Joan Simpson, September 1990. KCM92/4.

and the auxiliary services less of a complete break as women enlisted with friends or family, maintaining these ties.

Yet, there existed still individual motivation, and the strongest of these was "to take part in this great adventure".[70] Betty Addison felt the war to be a key historical moment, a narrative from which women were unwilling to be excluded, and military service gave them this opportunity to participate in this historical event, the defining event of an entire generation:

> …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.[71]

This desire to partake 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 May Kirkman and June Borchert 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 Kay] 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…[72]

> 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 [Kay] were closer…[73]

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 individual needs of excitement and adventure, making them little different from their male counterparts.

The initial phase of the war, lasting from its outset in September 1939 to May 1942 as presented in *The Women's Auxiliary,* presented some indecision regarding the new roles for

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[70] Benson. *A Far Cry.* p22.
[71] Interview with Betty Addison.
[72] June Borchert in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[73] May Kirkman in an interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.

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 - brought to the fore concerns about the crossing of gendered boundaries, blurring the masculine and the feminine. Visions of newly empowered women existed uneasily alongside feminine stereotypes, marking the transition from peacetime to war. However, within two years, the effects 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 with a war with no endpoint in sight, as well as the less than ideal conditions on the home front brought about by the high state of alert of a country wracked by dissidents, rationing and many women's new and pressurised roles as sole bread-winners, led to a drastic decrease in the support for the war. This manifested itself in a recruiting shortfall.[74] On the war front the effects 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 G.C.G. Werdmuller, 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

[74] *Cf.* Suryakanthie Chetty. "Gender Under Fire: Interrogating War in South Africa, 1939-1945." (University of Natal Durban: Unpublished MA dissertation, 2001)

> reputation and, consciously or unconsciously, discourages some other woman from joining it and contributing towards its further success.[75]

By 1942 it had become necessary to put a positive spin on military service for women. Werdmuller 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, ultimately, was the victory that would ensure South Africa's safety.[76] Additionally Werdmuller made mention of what presumably were 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 it 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.[77] What this article does suggest was that, by that time, women were not as wholeheartedly embracing military service 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 S.A.W.A.S. women of Command 14 in Johannesburg who wished to be allowed to be given weapons training. The article itself, while not acknowledging any authorship, portrayed 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."[78] Their argument contended for 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 to an extent excluded. Significantly it was also a particularly white identity defining itself against "the native hordes", still confining the latter to an adversarial category. Ultimately the outcome of the article was indecisive, no

[75] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. G.C.G. Werdmuller. "Fighting Hitler with a Full Team" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* June 1942, Issue 22, p5.
[76] Werdmuller. "Fighting Hitler with a Full Team" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* June 1942, p5.
[77] Werdmuller. "Fighting Hitler with a Full Team" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* June 1942, p5.
[78] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "Johannesburg Women Want to Shoot" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* June 1942, Issue 22, p35.

subsequent mention was made of arming these women and the request apparently petered out, at least on the part of the magazine.

Although little can be drawn from the short piece regarding the weapons training of Johannesburg women, an interview with the Director-General of the Auxiliary Territorial Services appearing two years later – which I discuss in greater detail below – detailing the work of the ATS in Britain, makes a tentative suggestion regarding the arming of women and potential roles for them in combat:

> Thus, so far as can at present be foreseen, there remains scarcely any other combatant job from which they [women] can release man-power in the army, short of their being armed…I have seen it suggested that we should now take a still farther step and train and equip our women to use arms.[79]

Greater emphasis was placed on larger roles for women in combat-related activities. Articles were written detailing the work of their British counterparts who, due to the more direct effects of war in that country, were involved in expanded roles. Detailed descriptions were made of the W.A.A.F. mechanics who worked and flew alongside regular male R.A.F. pilots. The young woman mechanic flying with a male pilot instructor was portrayed as intent and 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."[80]

Along with this article, the issue carried features on female pilots who could possibly soon have been taking on the role of bomber pilots. It also focused on the 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

[79] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. An interview with Jean Knox, Director-General of the Auxiliary Territorial Services conducted by John Cashel. "Britain's Girl Combatants" in *The Auxiliary Services,* July 1942, Issue 23, p30.

[80] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. Marion Slater. "British Women Fly with R.A.F." in *The Women's Auxiliary,* July 1942, Issue 23, p28.

> protect that vital role as much, and for as long, as we can. We have to think about after the war.[81]

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 existed still a strong conservatism regarding the appropriate roles for women. This held true to the convention of them as 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 play the role of auxiliaries in its most run of the mill form by engaging in clerical work or volunteers structuring social events for male troops, evident in the drop in recruits. These expanded roles, although largely a British phenomenon, attempted to address the shortfall in recruitment by appealing to a sense of adventure and the greater possibilities of equal responsibilities for women, albeit within limits.

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 preference of many women to working 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. This entailed class connotations 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.[82]

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[81] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. An interview with Jean Knox, Director-General of the Auxiliary Territorial Services conducted by John Cashel. "Britain's Girl Combatants" in *The Auxiliary Services,* July 1942, Issue 23, p30.

[82] KCAL. Interview with Edith Mary Kimble.

Edith Kimble's perception of Special Signals in conjunction with the desire to serve in North Africa suggested that combat and the role of white men on active duty on the front lines were viewed as the apex of military service and other branches were ranked in a hierarchy based on their proximity to this.

The post-war era was also imagined to be the opportunity for women to utilise the training and education that they had received during the war, giving them an equal role to play in peace, 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?[83]

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, a greater repercussion for women than men, hence making women's role in defending the country 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.[84]

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 aiding the somewhat helpless female by carrying

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[83] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. Ruth Adam. "Changed Attitude and Future Outlook" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* December 1942, Issue 28, p30.

[84] Phyllis Bottome. "Women in Wartime Must Work". Excerpt appearing in *The Women's Auxiliary,* December 1942, Issue 28, p11.

her bag and helping find her luggage – an attention that was contrasted with the lack thereof that she experienced at home.[85]

Military training was portrayed as being akin to a "finishing school" where the recruit would learn "the poise and self confidence", making them capable and assured young women. A vignette is given of a young girl from the *platteland* with the small town outlook – naiveté, shyness and awkwardness. Her first comfort was being placed with other like-minded recruits and their subsequent experiences of companionship and camaraderie based on their participation in training, sport and social activities. After weeks of lectures, learning military etiquette and the advice of older women, the ordinary girl was transformed into a mature, capable and responsible woman. This was a far cry from her previous persona – a transformation that would prepare for "living a sane, happy and respected life" in post-war South Africa.[86] Here, military training was portrayed as the key to a healthy, happy and fulfilled life, and one from which women would be infinitely more rewarded than if they had not answered the call.

"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 period of the war, at least on the part of women. This was the phase preparing them for the return of men. It was quite clearly a return to conservatism. With the end of war in sight, there was a subsequent desire to restore the status quo and the "normality" after the temporary aberration of war. In January 1945 Smuts, addressing the SAWAS in Pretoria, marked a return to the spiritual role for women envisaged in a post-war South Africa, moving away from the appeals to greater job opportunities and glamour which were a hallmark of the attempts by propaganda to counter "war weariness". According to Smuts, men were "politically and business minded", suiting them for the public sphere, whereas the "noble"

[85] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. E.V. Wroughton. "The Recruit is Precious" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* February 1943, Issue 30, p13.
[86] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. "A Rookie's Life Leads to Poise and Self-Confidence" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* March 1943, Issue 31, p32-33.

qualities for women suggested a different calling – "the spiritual uplift of South Africa".[87] This raised again the spectre of the spiritual and moral role most suited to women which held such a strong hold on the public imagination in the nineteenth century and again was a feature of the ambiguous first stage of the war. This drew on earlier imaginings of the idealised role of women in the private sphere as mothers and nurturers and was one of the features of this return to conservatism envisaged for the women who had contributed to the war effort.

The article "When Husbands Return" appearing a month later raised the burning issue of women's reaction and adjustment to their husbands returning from war. Women's apprehension was defined as a loss of independence as well as the "physiological and psychological demands of marriage", particularly that pertaining to men who themselves were permanently changed by their experience of war.[88] Additionally it was seen as necessary for those couples who had not done so before the war, to "start a family", drawing upon the natural reproductive role of women to compensate for society's post-war needs. To do this it was once again necessary for women to forego their own needs for a greater good:

> 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.[89]

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 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] 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."[90] The expected role of the post-war women was to create a haven in the home, making it a centre of calm as a buffer to the turmoil and strain of the outside world. The main benefit accrued to women for this

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[87] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. Jan Smuts. "The Greatest is Yet to Come" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* January 1945, Issue 53, p5.

[88] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. S. Kachelhoffer. "When Husbands Return" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* February 1945, Issue 53, p 29.

[89] Kachelhoffer. "When Husbands Return" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* February 1945, p29.

[90] Sonya O. Rose. *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p287.

sacrifice would be to relinquish the tension and worry that came with their war-time independence – concerns about running a household without support as well as the financial constraints and anxieties stemming from being single parents.[91] Women too, had to be supportive of their husbands, allowing them to recuperate from the trauma of war by providing a stable and nurturing environment which, after all, was what they were deemed to be best at.[92] Furthermore, asking all this of women was seen to be part of their nature, something for which they were biologically and socially suited, making them naturally acquiescent, "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."[93]

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 euphemism and silences which had hitherto characterised men's experiences of war for the home front, this was the first time that women were exposed to 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.[94]

Yet *The Women's Auxiliary* too had colluded in representing the war in a manner which was designed to further recruitment so, for the women who believed in this representation, the articles as the war neared its close must have been a major shock. And this ultimately was their 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 for women to not "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 or, in some cases, rendering invisible, their own struggles in coming to

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[91] Kachelhoffer. "When Husbands Return" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* February 1945, p35.
[92] Kachelhoffer. "When Husbands Return" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* February 1945, p70.
[93] Kachelhoffer. "When Husbands Return" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* February 1945, p35.
[94] Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. John Hays. "War Leaves its Scars, Sister" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* April 1945, Issue 56, p21.

terms with the changes wrought by war on the home front. Another theme was of 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".[95] These revelations worked in concert to attempt to still the desire in women to carry on the independence afforded them by war to a post-war society.

In light of this, for some of these women, the war was 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, Betty Addison's response was to foreground instead the experiences of her husband Pat:

> Not at all for me. It must have been terrible for Pat…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…[96]

Despite her husband's silence on his emotions during the battle, Betty surmised his fear and later blamed the onset of Parkinson's disease on the tension which he had been subjected to during the war. At the end of her war service she and Pat Addison were married and, while she worked for a while after that, once her children had been born, she refrained from work until they were older and had gone off to boarding school. Thereafter she returned to her tertiary studies which she had abandoned in 1939, earning 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…"[97] 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

[95] Hays. "War Leaves its Scars, Sister" in *The Women's Auxiliary,* April 1945, p45.
[96] Interview with Betty Addison.
[97] Interview with Betty Addison.

comparison to men and that these women were not "aggressive" as women tend to be at present:

> …none 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…[98]

For Betty Addison 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 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 May Kirkman and June Bouchert 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:

> …you 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.[99]

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

> …we 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.[100]

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 was thus characterised by a failure to implement the ideals for which the war was fought in South Africa. This failure was based upon the disillusionment of white and black soldiers due to the unfulfilled promises of

[98] Interview with Betty Addison.
[99] Interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.
[100] May Kirkman in interview with May Kirkman and June Borchert.

Smuts' government and the lack of a united and effective front opposing the rise of the apartheid state. The material needs of the returning ex-servicemen took precedence over 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 the 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 like the activist Helen Joseph there was the sense that her life had little meaning prior to her signing up and was based on ambiguity.[101] 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 fellow 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?[102]

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.[103] The opportunities afforded her by the war created a permanent change in her life and her empowerment did not simply cease in 1945.

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[101] Helen Joseph. *Tomorrow's Sun – A Smuggled Journal from South Africa.* (London: Hutchison and Co., 1966) p34.
[102] Joseph. *Tomorrow's Sun.* p36.
[103] Joseph. *Tomorrow's Sun.* p36.

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.[104] 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".[105] 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 only came 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.[106]

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.[107]

Ultimately the experiences of war service were as varied as the participants themselves. 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 ambiguity between the conservatism of women's pre-war roles and the new demands made upon them in the public sphere, toeing an uneasy line between the two. The middle period of the war, initiated by setbacks such as 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. This however was undone by the return to

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[104] Mary Benson. *A Far Cry.* (London: Viking, 1989) p41.
[105] Benson. *A Far Cry.* p43.
[106] Benson. *A Far Cry.* p43.
[107] Benson. *A Far Cry.* *Cf* Chapters 3 and 4.

conservatism towards the end of the war when, faced with the influx of men returning from the frontlines, appeals were made largely on the basis of guilt to encourage women to return to their homes and take up the pre-war domestic roles.

The personal testimonies of the participants demonstrate the disjuncture between state expectations and their own aspirations and experiences where official and often societal beliefs of the idealised woman auxiliary underwent tension and revision during the course of the war. The experiences of women in the military presented a departure from that portrayed in the official sources emanating from the military, while simultaneously, in some ways, holding true to these official sources. The similarities of their experiences to the official perspective came in the form of the military playing chaperone to young, single women living away from home. It was further evident in the degree of control exerted over the movement of these women that substituted for the patriarchal authority of the home, where life in the barracks created not only the image of the boarding school, but also the control of one, with the implementation of curfews and senior female officers placed in charge of these women. Yet, somewhat ambiguously, there existed too the glamour and excitement associated with military service, particularly for those women serving "up North". This indicated a desire on the part of these women to free men to fight but also to be close to the action and the warfront. The independence and glamour of military service for women propagated by official sources and, to an extent, experienced by women themselves, created a more negative image of promiscuity. This generated a climate of harassment and pressure placed on these women by white combatants who used their own harsher experiences of war in combat to enhance the sense of guilt felt by women. The experiences of these women in war were thus defined by a conjunction of duty and the requirements of the war effort with individual needs and desires. That these women were not simply passive recipients of official 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 "greater good", ushering in an era of conservatism where the potential for change created

by “this great adventure” ultimately came to little and was relegated to the realm of memory.