

UNIT 3 : The Development of Warfare c.1250 to the present day

How has the role of women in warfare changed over time?

MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN PERIODS : c.1250s-1700s

The Medieval Period

In the late Middle Ages women had **a limited role in war**. They worked **as camp followers** e.g. carrying and repairing equipment, cooking or nursing injured soldiers: all essential for the effective functioning of an army. A few women took part in battle. In 1329-30 Joan of Arc led the French army against the English and, Margaret of Anjou led Lancastrian troops at the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471.

WELSH EXAMPLE : *Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, married an Irish princess, Eva MacMurrough. With lands in Wales and Ireland Richard was constantly on the move between the two countries, protecting his possessions. In his absence Eva was known to lead his troops into battle.*

The early modern age

During this period, many women continued to work as camp followers, while others **organised the defence of castles** during sieges e.g. Lady Arundel at Wardour castle in the civil war. Some disguised themselves as men in order to join up e.g. "Private Clarke" who served for nine years alongside her husband and was only found out when she fell pregnant, or "Mother Ross" who fought in many battles in Europe. So many did this that Charles I made it illegal for women to wear military uniform. During the civil war Parliament employed nurses at three military hospitals in London, but this stopped with the end of the war.

Even though women's role in warfare was not official, if a soldier was married, then his wife was listed as part of the regiment's strength. She could draw rations but was also subject to the same discipline as her husband e.g. being flogged for disobeying army rules.

WELSH EXAMPLE : *Being a camp follower had its dangers. After the Battle of Naseby, 100 Welsh female camp followers were killed by Parliamentary soldiers who mistook them for Irish Catholics.*

INDUSTRIAL PERIOD : c. 1750s - 1800s

The 18th and early 19th centuries

Until the mid-19th century there was **little change** in women's role in war. Any contribution was essentially **unofficial** (as camp followers, nurses and cooks etc.). Some still took part in fighting (like those who were only discovered as women when they came to be buried after Waterloo). There were also exceptional individuals like Margaret Ann Bulkley who, as Dr James Barry, became Inspector General of British military hospitals. Her actual sex was only discovered after her death in 1865.

WELSH EXAMPLE : *In 1797 when French troops landed near Fishguard, Jemima Nicholas led out a group of local women to confront them. It is said that Jemima captured seven using her pitchfork.*

The late 19th century

As in other areas of warfare, **the Crimean War** was a turning point. Despite initial opposition, **Florence Nightingale** and the other nurses who went to treat the injured proved their worth. In **1881 the Army Nursing Service** was established, the first official recognition of the role of women in the armed forces. Its role expanded in the Boer War. In 1902 the service and its reserve became the QUAIMNS (Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service). In 1907 FANY was founded (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) - providing first aid between fighting units and field hospitals, as well as driving ambulances, providing soup kitchens and canteens.

WELSH EXAMPLE : *Betsi Cadwaladr, originally from Bala, was one of several nurses who went to the Crimea, at the age of 65.*

MODERN PERIOD : c.1900s-present day

World War I

The role of women expanded considerably during World War I.

- Many joined the workforce on the home front, in traditionally male-dominated industries, replacing men who went to war. Nearly 1 million worked as **"munitionettes"**. By 1917 80% of munitions were being made by women.
- Over ¼ million worked the land, including **the Women's Land Army**.
- Women served as **nurses** in the QUAINS, often just behind the front lines. Others enlisted in VAD and FANY, helping in hospitals and driving ambulances.
- For the first time, women also joined the armed forces though not in combat roles. 100,000 served in uniform as drivers, clerks, telephonists etc.
- Women also featured on the home front in propaganda, encouraging men to join the forces. Many took part in voluntary activities – especially after the creation of the WI, and its focus on food production.

World War II

- In 1939 women again replaced men and did vital work in munitions. By 1943 90% of single women and 80% of married women were working.
- From 1941 women, were also conscripted for war work – as mechanics, engineers, air raid wardens etc. Eighty thousand joined the Woman's Land Army.
- Over 640,000 women joined the armed forces including the ATS (army), WRNS (navy) and the WAAF (airforce). Some flew aircraft for the ATA (Air Training Auxiliary) while a few enlisted in the SOE, for operations behind enemy lines.
- The WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) helped to keep Britain ticking over e.g. helping victims of the Blitz, while women in general also had to contend with rationing, recycling, mending and growing food in back gardens.

WELSH EXAMPLE : *Large numbers of Welsh women worked in munitions factories in both wars – in places like Pembrey in World War I and in Hirwaun, Glascoed and Brigend in World War II. By 1943, 55% of Welsh war workers were women.*

The post- war period

Since 1945, women's roles in the forces have expanded. In 1949 there came the first recognition of women's roles as a permanent part of the armed forces. 1991 saw the first deployment in combat units in the Gulf War and in 1992 they were integrated into regular army units. Since 2016, women have been able to serve in combat roles alongside male colleagues; since 2018 they are on an equal footing with men, with all roles open to women, including special operations.