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Whose Finger on the Trigger? Mixed Anti-Aircraft Batteries and the Female Combat Taboo

Gerard J. DeGroot

Until recently, most industrialized societies have held to the sacred tenet that women should not engage in combat. They might work as typists, nurses or drivers in the military; they might make shells in munitions factories; but they should not actually fight. The female combat taboo was a widely accepted benchmark of civilization. The British, who considered themselves the most civilized people on earth, were particularly sensitive to the moral pitfalls of women in combat. In a July 1940 memo setting out the reasons why women should not be more fully integrated into the army, the Adjutant General warned: 'once we take the step of enlisting women for Army Service there will no longer be any bar to the employment of women for definitely combatant duties . . . Apart from the Russians no civilized power has yet resorted to the practice.'¹ The fact that the Russians were employing women as ruthlessly effective soldiers and pilots was the exception which proved the rule: the Russians were uncivilized, extremely desperate, or under the influence of communist devilry. But during the Second World War the British found that moral standards are a luxury when backs are against the wall. Labour shortages pushed the acceptable limits of women's work outward, to the frontiers of active combat. In 1941 General Sir Frederick Pile, commander of Britain's ground anti-aircraft defences, persuaded the government to deploy women in AA batteries. The development seems monumental – perhaps a significant step toward the combatant roles women in the British military assume today. But, in fact, mixed batteries had strikingly little impact. Both the combat taboo and strictly defined gender roles survived the war. Civilization, as the British knew it, did not crumble.

There has recently been a surge of interest in the subject of women in combat, especially in the United States. Cynthia Enloe briefly discusses

¹ D. Sheridan, 'ATS Women 1939–45: Challenge and Containment in Women's Lives in the Military during the Second World War' (MLitt. dissertation, Univer. of Sussex, 1988), pp. 16–17.

the combat taboo in *Does Khaki Become You?*, but since she is concerned mostly with women in present-day military forces, she does not adequately analyse the historical foundations of the taboo. She argues, convincingly, that the great problem with the taboo is the lack of a rigid definition of combat; military officials have engaged in 'intellectual acrobatics' in order to exclude women from combat status even though they might be, to all intents and purposes, participating actively in the killing process.² But Enloe ignores an important example of that phenomenon, namely the deployment of women in British gunner units during the Second World War.³ Jean Bethke Elshtain briefly discusses the combat taboo in her articulate and intelligent *Women and War*, but fails to provide any real illumination and does not mention women gunners.⁴ The great problem with much of the feminist and postmodernist studies of women and war is their tendency to impose complex deconstructionist analysis upon essentially simple issues, in the process obscuring their essential simplicity and forcing the past into a theoretical cloak which does not fit. This is the fault of Margaret Higonnet's *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, an abstract and often impenetrable collection of essays which obscures more than it illuminates.⁵ Less rarefied, but also less rigorously researched, is the article entitled 'Great Britain and the World Wars' by Nancy Goldman and Richard Stiles in *Female Soldiers: Combatants or Non-Combatants?* edited by Goldman.⁶ Interviews with women from mixed batteries are contained in works by Eric Taylor, Shelley Saywell and Margaret Goldsmith, and the subject is discussed briefly in an article on women in combat by D'Ann Campbell.⁷ A few memoirs refer to the mixed batteries, in particular those by Frederick Pile and Vera Robinson.⁸ But mixed batteries have yet to be examined in detail, nor has anyone analysed how they affected the women concerned and society as a whole. It is the aim of this article to carry out such an analysis and, ultimately, to explain why mixed batteries did not challenge the female combat taboo.

The process of integrating women into AA batteries began before the outbreak of the war, when Pile asked Caroline Haslett, an engineer and expert on women's labour, to advise him on whether women might

² C. Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?* (London, Pluto Press, 1983), pp. 149–59.

³ An example of the faults of a rather strange book in which the historical analysis is in some places impressively deep and in others shockingly thin.

⁴ J.B. Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York, Basic Books, 1987), pp. 171–80.

⁵ M. Higonnet et al., eds, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT, Yale UP, 1987).

⁶ N. Goldman and R. Stiles, 'Great Britain and the World Wars', in Goldman, ed., *Female Soldiers: Combatants or Non-Combatants?* (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1982).

⁷ E. Taylor, *Women Who Went to War* (London, Robert Hale, 1988); S. Saywell, *Women in War* (Wellingborough, Grapevine, 1988); M. Goldsmith, *Women at War* (London, Drummond, 1943). See also D'Ann Campbell, 'Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union', *Journal of Military History* LVII (Apr. 1993), pp. 301–23.

⁸ F. Pile, *Ack-Ack* (London, Harrap, 1949); V. Robinson, *On Target* (Wakefield, Verity Press, 1991).

replace men in the gun crews. She reported that women could do everything except the heavy work involved in loading, manoeuvring and firing the gun 'As a matter of fact', Pile later commented,

I could see no logical reason why they should not fire the guns, too. . . . However, I was not going to suggest going as far as employing them on lethal weapons. I was quite aware that there would be struggle enough to get their employment through in any operational form at all.⁹

Deferring to Haslett on the physical-strength argument allowed Pile to avoid an acrimonious debate over the merits of the combat taboo.

On 25 April 1941, regulations were passed which permitted the employment of women in AA units. In the following month the first mixed unit was formed, and on 21 August 1941 the first mixed batteries became operational. The typical mixed battery consisted of 189 men and 299 women. Eventually, fully 70 per cent of all ATS recruits went into mixed batteries, with a peak of 57 000 employed in operational duties in 1943. By late 1944 there were more women in AA Command than men. Operational service in AA units remained voluntary for women, even after the introduction of female conscription. An amendment to the Conscription Bill stated that 'No woman should be liable to make use of a lethal weapon, unless she signifies in writing her willingness to undertake such service'.¹⁰ But, contrary to the wording of that amendment, the combat taboo had not been nullified. Women in mixed regiments were employed as spotters, predictors, height finders, radio locators and radar operators. They were also active on searchlights and in hit confirmation.¹¹ But men alone loaded and fired the guns. Because women did not pull the trigger, British society pretended that no moral threshold had been crossed. A male gunner was a combatant, the woman next to him was not.

Women assigned to mixed batteries were allowed to wear the RA grenade badge on their blouses and the AA Command formation sign on their sleeves, and the white gunner lanyard instead of the ATS one. ATS sergeants, like RA sergeants, sewed the gun-badge above their chevrons. Corporals were addressed as 'bombardier' and auxiliaries (privates) as 'gunner'. These identity symbols delighted the women, but in truth they did not belong to the Royal Artillery. The enlightened Pile favoured complete absorption into the RA, but more conservative minds within the ATS prevailed. Instead, female gunners remained members of the ATS, under the authority of ATS officers and subject to a different set of rules from male colleagues. The Defence (Women's Forces) Regulations of

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 186.

¹⁰ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 17.

¹¹ Women also performed their more customary tasks as cooks, clerks, typists, drivers and domestic workers in the mixed regiments. This explains why the total number of ATS women in these regiments always exceeded the number who were operationally employed.

1941 rendered ATS personnel subject to some penal sanctions of the Army Act, but the army's actual authority was limited, in keeping with the widely held desire that women should not experience the full rigours of army life. This same desire led to the insistence that 'The standard of accommodation laid down for Service women [must be] . . . better than that for the men'.¹² Women got a half holiday on Sunday which men did not get. They were also initially given a 'female diet' with less meat, bacon and bread and more milk, eggs, fresh vegetables and fruit.¹³ (This practice was stopped in AA regiments after it was discovered that female gunners were perpetually hungry.) Women could be released from service if family problems necessitated their presence at home. Because women were 'non-combatants', they were not eligible for the VC, DSO, MC or DCM, which were only awarded for 'active operations against the enemy in the field'. Yet male colleagues on the gun-sites, being 'combatants', were eligible for these medals.¹⁴ The same reasoning was used to justify the lower pay of female gunners, which was two-thirds of what their male colleagues received.

ATS officers assigned to mixed batteries had no operational remit. They were instead responsible for the administration of ATS units, namely, physical training, hygiene and health inspections, recreation, discipline and pay. Though they assumed some operational training functions late in the war, the administrative remit remained the rule. After finishing top in a radar course, Diana Hewitt eventually became a radar instructor. Isobel Murdoch was the first woman to act as a tactical control officer at an exercise. But neither woman was permitted to use her expertise in combat.¹⁵ The chief obstacle to the operational deployment of women officers was not the army but ATS senior commanders, who were worried about losing control over their officers. This was an enormous waste of talent, as many were highly educated women capable of handling the technical side of commanding a battery.

Thus, women were restricted to a specifically female enclave within a strictly male environment. But gender apartheid did not breed contempt between men and women. For instance, the Markham Committee, established in 1942 to examine welfare issues in all the women's services, found that

soldiers accepted [the] better standard [of accommodation] for the auxiliaries not only without resentment but with active goodwill. The soldiers, who sometimes were called upon to vacate comfortable barracks for less attractive quarters, often helped the women by con-

¹² *Report of the Committee on Amenities and Welfare Conditions in the Three Women's Services*, presented to Parliament Aug. 1942. Cmd. 6384, para. 24. Hereafter cited as the Markham Committee Report.

¹³ Sheridan, 'ATS Women', p. 22.

¹⁴ *Hansard*, 28 Mar. 1944.

¹⁵ S. Bidwell, *The Women's Royal Army Corps* (London, Leo Cooper, 1977), pp. 127–8.

structing paths and the provision of minor comforts they had not troubled to provide for themselves.¹⁶

Most of the women who contributed to this study were struck by the respect which male colleagues paid them. Granted, male respect did not arise from a sense of equality; instead, the gunner unit resembled a family where paternalistic and protective older brothers looked after young sisters. 'They would clean our shoes and all were friendly,' Mary Gerrelli recalled, 'but they were old to us 19 year olds.'¹⁷ 'I think they worried about us more than anything. . . . they got bothered if somebody got sick, would take over your duty for you,' Joan Cowey remarked, but added that 'when the alarm went, that was a different thing. We were all the same when the alarm went, and they expected us to do our jobs and not let them down.'¹⁸

Concerned about the sexual dynamics of the batteries, Pile at first decided to deploy older married men. But they found the young women 'a bit tiresome', making camaraderie more difficult to establish. Younger men were more amenable, though admittedly more prone to sexual misbehaviour. Junior officers were 'hand-picked with meticulous care . . . We tried to find men who had run civilian "shows" in which men and women had worked together.' Aware of the importance of group dynamics in combat, the army had the sense to assign only newly conscripted men to the units: 'it was believed that men who had known no other army life would not find the atmosphere of a mixed battery so hysterically unorthodox.'¹⁹ Cowey appreciated the wisdom of this approach. Sent to the Continent late in the war, she found that seasoned army veterans 'felt badly about having women stationed with them. You can understand that. There were some veterans of the Middle East, of big battles, and it must have been a comedown for them to be serving with women.'²⁰

To the considerable amazement of senior commanders, the development of cohesiveness and camaraderie was at least as impressive as in male-only combat units. 'Ack ack were together the whole time, like a regiment, like a male regiment abroad, or an RAF crew,' Robinson recalled. 'because [we] thought [we] were as good as the men, and . . . were trained like the men, that bond . . . stayed.'²¹ Opponents of women in combat have traditionally argued that the bonding essential to combat morale is by definition a male phenomenon and that the presence of women erodes aggressive masculinity.²² To this day, for instance, it is argued in some quarters that male fighter pilots will lose their effective-

¹⁶ Markham Committee Report, para. 24.

¹⁷ Correspondence with the author, 14 Aug. 1995.

¹⁸ Saywell, *Women in War*, pp. 28–9.

¹⁹ Official History of AA Command (draft), p. 255. Royal Artillery Library, Ref. C3/53, p. 255.

²⁰ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 27.

²¹ Vera Robinson, taped interview, Imperial War Museum, ref. 12988/2.

²² A point discussed by R. Holmes in *Firing Line* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987), pp. 100–06.

ness if forced to fly into combat with female pilots. Bonding is assumed to arise out of ritualized behaviour between males which is inhibited if females are present.²³

But these reservations were rendered moot (at least temporarily) by the evidence of men and women working in harmony together. According to the official historian of wartime AA:

Broadly speaking the men are left with the heavier and dirtier work; but even this has not led to sex-antagonism. Human nature is not always as ungenerous as cynics claim; far from resenting the ATS, the men in the mixed batteries show a very real pride in the girls' work and are the first to defend them against their critics.²⁴

'Loyalty means loyalty in a mixed battery and "devotion to duty" has a more definite meaning than it has had,' Lieutenant Colonel J.W. Naylor, one of the first commanders of a mixed regiment, argued, adding: 'Isn't a woman's devotion more sincere and lasting than a man's?'²⁵ Granted, one finds inevitable hyperbole in wartime accounts, especially since mixed batteries were of such symbolic importance to the nation's morale. But the evidence suggests that the propaganda image was not far removed from reality.

It was also widely feared that sexual distractions would be corrosive of soldierly camaraderie. Emotions which might otherwise foster close ties between men would instead inspire romantic relationships between men and women. If two men found themselves attracted to the same women, dangerous antagonism might develop. As with other fears, this one was exaggerated. 'I don't know where people get this idea that men and women should not be stationed together,' Cowey argued.

It's just fear of sex. I'm sure it was going on, but so what. Anyway, most of the time we were filthy, hadn't taken off our clothes for days and were exhausted. When we were off duty we were too tired to go anywhere or do anything or even think. . . . Nothing ever happened.²⁶

'Generally, morals and morale were pretty high,'²⁷ Monica Jackson felt. All of the women interviewed for this study confirmed that rumours of rampant promiscuity on the gun-sites were untrue. In any case, one important function of ATS officers was to do their best to make sure that romances did not take hold: 'if you were caught with a fellow more than twice they'd think something was going on and post you.'²⁸ Relationships did develop, but in general the gun-site experience demonstrated that

²³ This issue is discussed in relation to the Tailhook scandal in J. Zimmerman, *Tailspin* (New York, Doubleday, 1995).

²⁴ AA Official History (draft), p. 107.

²⁵ J.W. Naylor, 'Mixed Batteries', *Journal of the Royal Artillery* LXIX (1942), p. 206.

²⁶ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 29.

²⁷ Taylor, *Women Who Went to War*, p. 65.

²⁸ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 29.

men and women can form close bonds without inconvenient romantic complications.

Gun-site harmony arose in large part because, despite the important distinctions separating women from men, and the intransigence of ATS senior officers, women genuinely felt part of the battery. Upon her arrival at camp, Robinson was inspired by her commanding officer's speech: 'He had lit a spark among us . . . He had given us equal status as gunners alongside men and we were determined to prove that we were capable of all he expected of us.'²⁹ Symbols of identity – badges, uniforms, titles – were extremely important, as was the feeling amongst the women that they had satisfied male standards:

We were trained by men, so we considered ourselves in the Royal Artillery . . . and we were allowed, very proudly we wore this, we were allowed to wear the white gunner's lanyard of the Royal Artillery. That showed that we were on anti-aircraft, and we had the anti-aircraft flashes on our uniforms just the same as the men. The steel helmets were just the same as the men.³⁰

'You had to prove yourself,' Robinson argued; 'so you had to be as good as them, on the parade square, everywhere, so everybody was striving to do their utmost.'³¹ 'It was a matter of pride for the girls of a mixed battery to do well in everything,' Commander Ruth Jewell argued. 'It was all part of this feeling of belonging to a unit of which they were proud.'³²

So impressed was General Dwight Eisenhower with British mixed batteries that he suggested to General George Marshall that the United States should imitate the experiment with American female reservists. The Americans eventually found that their mixed batteries had high unit cohesion and bonding, performing better than all-male units.³³ Senior British officers noticed similar results. 'Height-takers are always good, and in my opinion are better than men,'³⁴ Naylor wrote. One corps commander told Pile in February 1942 that the mixed battery experiment had been

an unqualified success. Probably the thing that impressed all observers immediately is the tremendous keenness and enthusiasm displayed by the ATS in assimilating their operational duties. They learn quickly, and once having mastered the subject very seldom make mistakes. Generally speaking, their work is accurate and speedy – both these qualities being essential. Contrary once again to expectations, their voices carry well and can be clearly heard in the din of gunfire.³⁵

²⁹ *On Target*, p. 30.

³⁰ Vera Robinson taped interview.

³¹ *Op. cit.*

³² Taylor, *Women Who Went to War*, p. 67.

³³ See Zimmerman, *Tails핀*, pp. 158–9.

³⁴ Naylor, 'Mixed Batteries', p. 200.

³⁵ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 192.

The MP Edith Summerskill, a member of the Markham Committee, recalled one 'old regular officer' who took her aside and said: 'I know you champion women. In the old days I thought women had only one place, but I would not change the women on my gun-site for any men you like. They are brilliant, they have first-class brains, do good work and are very easy to get on with.'³⁶ During the war, Naylor confessed that he tried hard to get out of the assignment to a mixed battery. 'But now I have joined this battery . . . I can say I have never been happier than I am now. My officers and NCOs are first class. My men and girls are great.'³⁷

The women's courage and endurance (qualities heretofore considered quintessentially male) were the most important characteristics which influenced their acceptance by men. 'While there were many doubters in the early days, the mixed units proved a triumphant success,'³⁸ Pile concluded.

The girls lived like men, fought ... like men, and, alas, some of them died like men. Unarmed, they often showed great personal bravery. They earned decorations and they deserved more. As a partial solution to our man-power problems, they were grand.³⁹

Women, conditioned to believe themselves the weaker sex, were often surprised at their own courage. Robinson was amazed that a woman like herself, who was 'terrified of moths and spiders', never

showed any fear whatsoever while a raid was in progress when on duty on the Command Post. Guns could be thundering beside us, the enemy threatening in the skies above us, but so totally immersed in our individual tasks were we, that the only emotion felt by us was desire to destroy that which we had been trained to destroy as quickly as possible.⁴⁰

Female casualties on the gun-sites enhanced the heroic image of the women in general. The first to be killed in action was Private Nora Caveney, a predictor in the 148th regiment. Despite being hit by a bomb splinter, she maintained a hold on the target until she collapsed and died. Royal Artillery public relations specialists made much of the way the spotter in Caveney's unit, G. Keel, calmly stepped in (as trained) so that firing was not interrupted.

While male officers did praise female gunners, they were nevertheless quick to point out how feminine foibles prevented them from being anything more than ersatz soldiers, an attitude exemplified by the gun-site poet Lieutenant E.S. Turner, a frequent contributor to *Punch*:

³⁶ *Hansard*, 3 Aug. 1943.

³⁷ Naylor, 'Mixed Batteries', p. 206.

³⁸ F.A. Pile, 'The Anti-Aircraft Defence of the United Kingdom', *London Gazette*, Part 18th (Dec. 1947), p. 5981.

³⁹ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, pp. 227–8.

⁴⁰ *On Target*, p. 198.

I still don't know them all. My soul desponds
 Sometimes, when I survey the little pets;
 For still brunettes come back from leave as blondes,
 And blondes report for duty as brunettes.
 I like to think I've learned their names aright.
 But leave plays havoc . . . and it got me down
 When Private Brown came back as Private White,
 And Private White came back as Private Brown.⁴¹

Naylor complained about 'the amount of "chatteration" that goes on, in say a predictor or height-taker team . . . It takes quite a long time to stop it, and they just don't seem to realize that they are doing it!'⁴² There were also complaints that women were susceptible to foot trouble – 'probably due to the shoes worn in civil life.'⁴³ Spotters were, according to Naylor, 'rather slow in picking up targets and seem to find difficulty in the recognition of aircraft. This is quite understandable as women have never shown anything like the same amount of interest as men have in types of aircraft.'⁴⁴ The explosion of guns brought 'gasps and muffled shrieks from the girls'.⁴⁵ A potent wartime rumour held that women radar operators on gunsites ceased to have periods and became sterile. 'They are apt to get depressed when they find technical matters facing them', one officer commented; 'brusqueness with them . . . result[s] in tears and despondency.'⁴⁶

Much of the praise accorded women gunners has about it an air of astonishment. The following event would surely seem mundane if the soldiers in question had been men:

By their presence of mind when a bomb fell on their mixed heavy anti-aircraft site on the north-east coast early on Friday, two members of the ATS, Private Emily Wallcott (22), of Cardiff, and Private Elma Mills (19), of Fife, averted danger to a detachment. They were both engaged on secret equipment during the raid. When bombs fell, they were knocked to the ground by blast but remembered, as they got up, to switch off the electric current.

The battery commander said the girls on the predictor and other instruments carried on although they were covered in mud from head to foot. And throughout the raid the guns did not cease to fire.⁴⁷

Male gunners sung the praises of Corporal A.E. Brown, a cook who, after a V-1 devastated her site, produced the midday meal from her damaged cookhouse exactly on time.⁴⁸ 'The bad weather we experienced a few

⁴¹ Lt E.S. Turner, 'Very Mixed Battery', *Punch*, 1 Nov. 1944.

⁴² Naylor, 'Mixed Batteries', p. 200.

⁴³ Maj. D. Rees Williams, 'The Gunner-Girls', *Spectator*, 24 Apr. 1942, p. 396.

⁴⁴ Naylor, 'Mixed Batteries', p. 200.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 201.

⁴⁶ Rees Williams, 'Gunner-Girls', p. 396.

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 29 Apr. 1942.

⁴⁸ Bidwell, *WRAC*, p. 130.

weeks ago does not seem to have affected the women to the extent that might have been expected,⁴⁹ wrote one male officer with perhaps more surprise than was warranted. Even ATS officers seem to have expected their recruits to conform to dominant images of weak and timid women who would wilt at the first hint of danger. Controller Jean Cowper was pleasantly surprised to find that women of the 93rd Searchlight Regiment 'soon lost their nervousness of the dark.'⁵⁰ During the V-1 campaign, women had 'the additional trial of living under canvas on the desolate mud flats of Essex and Suffolk throughout a cold and rainy autumn'. Yet their morale did not collapse, despite the appalling weather and stressful work. 'Auxiliaries proved able to accomplish the task in all circumstances and the work was well suited to their patience and delicate touch,'⁵¹ Cowper wrote.

This evidence contradicted widely held assumptions that women had to be provided with better living conditions than men, an assumption which was behind so much of the army's policy toward them. As the Markham Committee explained:

A woman who elects to serve with the Armed Forces voluntarily accepts a rougher and more adventurous career than the woman in civilian life. Compensation for physical hardship is found in closer association with the war effort and the comradeship which obtains in a well-run camp. But the auxiliaries of today are the wives and mothers of the future and satisfactory as is the standard of health in the services, no one desires to apply a wholesale hardening process to the young women who are serving their country effectively and well.⁵²

'The welfare of these women was one of the considerations which was uppermost in all our minds,' Pile explained, 'and this had a considerable effect upon the areas in which they were deployed.'⁵³ Women were confined to Heavy AA batteries which fired 3.7 inch, 4.5 inch and 5.25 inch guns. These batteries, because of their permanence, afforded a higher level of comfort for women. Women were thought unsuitable for light AA units since those units were mobile, with personnel predominantly housed in tents. Tents were inappropriate not only because they violated the accepted standard of female accommodation but also, and probably more importantly, because they offered insufficient security from prowling, sex-starved men. Pile commented:

What had been good enough for men was very far from good enough for women, on whom the eyes of every politician, every Mrs. Grundy, and every proud parent were challengingly fixed. ATS quarters had

⁴⁹ Rees Williams, 'Gunner Girls', p. 396.

⁵⁰ J.M. Cowper, 'The Auxiliary Territorial Service' (War Office, 1949). PRO WO 277/6, p. 49.

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁵² Markham Committee Report, para. 25.

⁵³ Pile, *London Gazette*, p. 5982.

not only to be superior to but at a modest distance from those of the men.⁵⁴

It is a measure of how shaken British authorities were by the flying-bomb menace that, late in the war, when almost all the AA batteries were moved to the coast, restrictions upon housing women in tents were relaxed – but not without an anguished outcry in Parliament and the press.⁵⁵

Pile also had to ‘make sure that women would not find themselves in the path of an invading army’.⁵⁶ No matter how important the ‘gunner girls’ were to Britain’s anti-aircraft defences, regulations stated that they would be evacuated if the Germans invaded. This was a direct response to another of the traditional arguments against a combat role for women: the fear that they might be taken prisoner and, inevitably, raped by their captors. The British nevertheless presumed that, if a women gunner managed to get herself captured, her non-combatant status would be respected by German invaders, who would not take her prisoner. This ‘was a ludicrous piece of wishful thinking’, Summerskill told the Commons: ‘Surely nobody here thinks for one moment that the Germans will treat women on gun-sites as noncombatants.’⁵⁷

The fear that women might be captured and the concern for their accommodation standards restricted their deployment on searchlight units. Theoretically, searchlights should have provided an even more fruitful area for female substitution than the gun batteries since searchlights are not lethal weapons. But, as Pile explained, ‘Owing to the impossibility of mixing the sexes in small detachments, any such units had to consist wholly of women.’⁵⁸

There were all sorts of horrid doubts confronting us. For girls to work together in large communal camps was one thing. To place a dozen girls in some bleak and desolate spot, five miles or more from the nearest town with night-sentry duties to carry out in a countryside abounding in noises eerie to a townsman was another. How would they deal with possible intruders, with saboteurs, with all the sudden imponderables inherent in the rural life?⁵⁹

The army eventually accepted that these worries were unfounded; women proved just as hearty as men. But the problems did not end there. Unfortunately, the generators on the searchlights used early in the war were started with a hand crank, which required some physical strength to turn. Rather than deploy one sufficiently strong woman, the Royal

⁵⁴ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, pp. 190–91.

⁵⁵ See e.g. *Hansard*, 14 Nov. 1944.

⁵⁶ Pile, *London Gazette*, p. 5982.

⁵⁷ *Hansard*, 3 Aug. 1943. Summerskill often alleged that the government stuck to the non-combatant status of women to justify their lower pay. See also *Hansard*, 24 Jan. 1945.

⁵⁸ Pile, *London Gazette*, p. 5982.

⁵⁹ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 226.

Artillery assumed that a man was needed. Pile therefore resorted to subterfuge:

We had to keep very dark about the fact that on most of these sites, in the early days of the experiment, there lived in a tent a solitary and carefully chosen gunner. It can be imagined what play could have been made by the more prurient sections of the Press with the fact that among these unchaperoned young women lurked a solitary male soldier. . . . We never had any trouble from these solitary gunners, and as the matter never reached the ears of the politicians all was well.⁶⁰

Eventually the generators were fitted with self-starters, but that did not really solve the problem of women-only units. Only one searchlight regiment, the 93rd, was formed. Pile 'was dissuaded from extending the experiment' because 'searchlight sites were normally provided with Light Machine-Guns for local air and ground defence, and women, however willing to do so, were not allowed to handle guns of any kind'.⁶¹

The 1938 Royal Warrant which prohibited women from using any weapons in combat had some absurd implications, as Robinson noted:

the ATS did all the Prowler Guard duties on F site armed only with a pick axe handle and a whistle. We did two hour shifts in pairs, the whistle for emergency we hoped, would be heard by the sentry on the main gate. The men were armed with rifles and there were four of them, understandably we were a little uneasy.⁶²

'They didn't trust us with rifles but they obviously trusted us to guard the camp,' Roberts noted.⁶³ Mary Gerrelli always felt a bit vulnerable on what she and her comrades called 'stick picket'. She would call out 'Halt! Who goes there?,'⁶⁴ painfully aware that her stick was hardly likely to deter a resolute intruder.

Women in the 93rd Searchlight Regiment likewise felt the need of weapons. 'We did feel we should have been issued with one rifle, at least,' Hill confessed.⁶⁵ Yoxall related:

We felt a bit like sitting ducks waiting for enemy aircraft to come firing down the beam. When the men manned the sites there were Lewis guns there, when we took over the guns were removed. . . . [I] did feel that on isolated S.L. sites we should have been trained to use the guns they thought the men should have.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 227.

⁶¹ Pile, *London Gazette*, p. 5982.

⁶² *On Target*, p. 78.

⁶³ Therese Roberts, transcript of oral interview, Imperial War Museum, ref. 11786/1, p. 14.

⁶⁴ Gerrelli correspondence.

⁶⁵ Joan Hill, correspondence with the author, 16 Apr. 1995.

⁶⁶ Genevieve Yoxall, correspondence with the author, 25 Apr. 1995.

Robinson recalled one strange day when a group of women in her unit were given rifle practice: 'Our glory was short-lived for that was the only time we handled a rifle in our army career. No other section marched to the Armoury. We never did find out why and it was not because we had done badly on the Firing Range, far from it.'⁶⁷ Others remembered receiving some rifle instruction, supposedly to prepare them for the threat of an invasion. But since all the women were told that they would be evacuated if the Germans invaded, the point of the exercise remained a mystery.⁶⁸

Some women did resent being excluded from firing the AA guns. 'It seemed illogical that women could direct . . . the guns, and yet stop short of actually pulling a trigger,' Morgan argued. 'We had proved ourselves steady in action so presumably someone must have considered that it would have been unfeminine for us to have taken the final step.'⁶⁹ One suspects that few women were troubled by moral distinctions over who was and who was not killing. 'I never worried about killing when I was on the guns,' Joyce Carr confessed; 'I wasn't actually killing the Germans, I was killing those that were flying with their bombs. I thought that was good, I really felt that.'⁷⁰ Mollie Ritson agreed: 'You get immune to feelings about killing other people. I mean, I don't think if we were faced with a man we could kill him, but a plane up there that was about to drop bombs, you don't think about his life. I certainly didn't.'⁷¹ Many women were drawn to gunnery units in the first place because they wanted to do something more active than making shells, typing forms or peeling potatoes. 'I only want to have some Germans to fight and I should die happy if I could take some of them with me,'⁷² Violette Bushell confessed at the time of her enlistment. 'The thing uppermost in my mind was . . . having a go at the enemy,' Robinson confessed.⁷³ Indeed, an ATS recruiting poster appealed to this desire: 'If you want the honour and thrill of active participation in bringing down the Nazi raiders, here is your job!'⁷⁴ One woman, whose home had been bombed before her enlistment, was motivated to volunteer out of a sense of personal revenge. 'Well it was shooting something down from the sky . . . that was my way of getting back.'⁷⁵ 'A lot of the boys I went to school with were killed at Dunkirk,' Cowey explained when asked her reasons for volunteering. 'The whole idea appealed to me. I would have loved to be a guerrilla fighter.'⁷⁶ Some women, posted to sites well removed from the

⁶⁷ *On Target*, p. 40.

⁶⁸ G. Morgan, personal memoir, Imperial War Museum ref. pp/MCR/115, p. 58.

⁶⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁷⁰ J. Carr, 'Just Like William', in M. Nicholson, ed., *What Did You Do in the War, Mummy?* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1995), p. 112.

⁷¹ Mollie Ritson, interview with the author, 12 Sept. 1995.

⁷² Taylor, *Women Who Went to War*, p. 66.

⁷³ Vera Robinson taped interview.

⁷⁴ Sheridan, 'ATS Women', following p. 17.

⁷⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 37. To her great regret, the woman in question was prevented on health grounds from being posted to a gunnery unit.

⁷⁶ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 11.

regular German bombing routes, felt frustration that their aggression found no outlet. 'Although I was pleased that by service I must have helped in some little way,' Mills wrote, 'I felt I had not contributed very much as I had such a quiet war.'⁷⁷ Clearly, the great attraction for many women was the prospect of combat. This explains why Mills was 'a bit resentful' at being prevented from firing the guns – 'maybe more than a bit for there was a time when we were trained to manhandle the shells and load but that was as far as we were allowed. One officer told us the guns were too heavy.'⁷⁸

That women on their own could handle AA weapons effectively was ably demonstrated by the Russians. Over 300 000 women were employed in air defences around Moscow, Leningrad and other major cities, in mostly women-only units.⁷⁹ 'I do think it was stupid,' Lapham remarked of the combat ban. 'We were (and now are) just as able to use firearms as the men.' She nevertheless confessed: 'I don't think it bothered us too much at the time. We just accepted it.'⁸⁰ Indeed, most women appear to have given little consideration to the nuances of the combat taboo. 'I do not remember thinking at that time about the fact that women were not allowed to fire the guns,' Foster wrote. 'Nor do I know the reason for this rule.'⁸¹ There was wide acceptance of the official logic that heavy AA guns were too cumbersome for women to operate. 'Honestly . . . the thought of women not firing the guns has not entered my head. . . . Just to swivel those huge guns round, on target!! I'm sure we would have missed,'⁸² Carter argued. Marjorie Huggett commented: 'I realized women could not fire the guns, as the shells were too heavy for us. Our first guns were 4.5s, then other sites were 3.7s. (A 4.5 round weighs 84 lb., a 3.7 round weighs 49 lb.) I think all ATS realized this and we accepted it.'⁸³ 'I think the work would have been very heavy for women,' Jewell argued. 'There was never any feeling about this and I don't know the official reason.'⁸⁴

There were nevertheless myriad contradictions to the physical-strength argument. In staffing his units, Pile was allocated the weakest male specimens; the healthy, strong men were sent abroad. Yet, since mixed batteries were the nexus between the least important male jobs and the most important female jobs, he was ironically given first call on the best female specimens amongst ATS recruits. Nor did women find themselves totally excluded from heavy work. 'It is a common sight to see girls work-

⁷⁷ Pauline Mills, correspondence with the author, 17 Mar. 1995.

⁷⁸ *Op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Goldman, *Female Soldiers*, p. 35. See also J. Erickson, 'Night Witches, Snipers and Laundresses', *History Today*, July 1990, p. 33.

⁸⁰ Elisabeth Lapham, correspondence with the author, 24 Apr. 1995.

⁸¹ Jacqueline Foster, correspondence with the author, 3 Feb. 1995.

⁸² Beatrice Carter, interview with the author, 5 Mar. 1995.

⁸³ Marjorie Huggett, correspondence with the author, 29 Aug. 1995.

⁸⁴ Ruth Jewell, correspondence with the author, 6 Aug. 1995.

ing with shovels clearing snow from a gun-site, filling sandbags, etc.’⁸⁵ one female gunner wrote. Shortly after Cowey arrived in Belgium,

One of the first things we had to do was to build a road. Mud was everywhere. They thought the only way to do it was to go down to the [Antwerp] docks and get rubble from the bombed-out building. . . . We had to gather the bricks and bring them back to camp. The girls did this because the men were manning the guns.⁸⁶

‘All of us had to be instructed how to wield picks, shovels and heavy long handled hammers,’ Robinson recalled.

It is difficult to believe that if women had been allowed to fire the AA guns, gender divisions would have instantly dissolved and society would have been thrown into troublesome flux. AA batteries were not the threshold of a brave new world of total gender equality, but merely a small step toward that elusive and illusory prospect. As has been seen, status-conscious men remained very proficient at finding symbols of female inferiority and male exclusivity. And no matter how important the deployment of women in mixed batteries was to the progress of gender relations, the fact remained that their service released men for more important combat overseas, work from which women were still excluded. ‘We are here to relieve men for more important jobs, and we therefore have to work like men,’⁸⁷ one woman told Pile. Women’s contribution, and therefore women’s status, remained inferior even though the nature of what they did during the war changed radically.

British society was extremely adept at containing the after-shocks of the mixed battery tremor. In their spare time, and particularly after the pace of war slowed for the AA batteries, gunner girls were given training in household management and nursery care, in order to prepare them for the postwar world and to remind them of their real mission in life.⁸⁸ Late in the war, Turner made a tongue-in-cheek reference to this policy:

We have not fired in wrath since – when?
 We may not fire again – who knows?
 In spite of which our girls, our men
 Are worked much more than you suppose.
 Behold how flatteringly glows
 The sun on burnished boss and shaft!
 What happens when the whistle blows?
 The girls fall in for Mothercraft.⁸⁹

In what seems a determined effort to turn back the clock, a significant number of single women were sent on domestic-service courses so that

⁸⁵ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 193.

⁸⁶ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 26.

⁸⁷ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 193.

⁸⁸ See Diary of A. Laws, Imperial War Museum; A.A. Collins, ‘Four Years in the ATS’, *Army Quarterly* XLVI (1943), p. 204.

⁸⁹ Lt E.S. Turner, ‘Ballade of the Forgotten Gun-Site’, *Punch*, 13 Sept. 1944.

they would be employable when war ended.⁹⁰ Cowey (who was immediately transferred to secretarial duties after the war) was astonished at how quickly army and society moved to absorb and neutralize the change that women like her had experienced. 'Me and my girlfriend used to think then, is anybody ever going to recognize that we are soldiers.... It seemed we were the forgotten ones, once the war was over, and all these office girls were walking around, looking great.'⁹¹

In its report, the Markham Committee proposed that some servicewomen should stay behind to help with the reconstruction of postwar Europe, rather like charwomen sweeping up the mess men had made. The recommendation had about it an air of atonement for the unfeminine and unpleasant tasks women had been called upon to perform during the war: 'To associate women with the task of reconstruction in Europe, to call upon them to share in a work of healing and mercy would . . . bring their war duties to a noble conclusion.'⁹² Beyond this recommendation, the Committee had little to offer in the way of concrete suggestions about what to do with women soldiers: 'The war over and the immediate task of substitution finished, are the auxiliaries to vanish from the scene and be lost in the shadows of demobilization?'⁹³ As far as the women of the mixed batteries were concerned, that is exactly what happened. Robinson wrote:

Mixed batteries were no longer required, so we were to be disbanded. The blow had fallen, after living together in all sorts of conditions as a closely knit unit for three and a half years it was over. No farewell speeches, no end of term party. The army had its traditions but no room for sentiment . . . We were still in the army and would serve wherever we were ordered, but the girls felt as if they were being thrown on the scrap heap. The day we had to hand in Ack Ack kit to stores was like being stripped of our battle honours. No choice of jobs, the talk of re-training had been just empty talk. An inglorious end for 536(m) Heavy Ack Ack Battery Royal Artillery, so thought the girl gunners.

'You could say that the forgotten army was not the one in Burma, but the one in skirts,'⁹⁴ another woman thought. 'No one knew us then, and they still don't, generally speaking,' Lapham felt. 'We are the "didn't know you existed" female army.'⁹⁵

It is a measure of the stability of British society, not to mention of gender divisions, that the participation of 60 000 women in combat operations had virtually no effect upon the postwar social fabric. The British put the episode safely behind them, as if it had never happened. 'You

⁹⁰ See *Hansard*, 3 Aug. 1943.

⁹¹ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 34.

⁹² Markham Committee Report, para. 222.

⁹³ *Op. cit.*, para. 216.

⁹⁴ Saywell, *Women in War*, p. 2.

⁹⁵ Lapham correspondence.

wanted to tell people about what had been the most important time in your life . . . [but] of course they didn't want to hear,' wrote Cowey. For most women, the experience had little relevance to everyday life. Many women gained confidence from active service, but that confidence provided no escape route from 'normal' life. When the war ended, the idea of being a woman soldier lost its logic. 'I didn't think about the ATS after I was demobbed,' recalled Ritson. 'I came home and said, that's that, tossed my cap over the Waterloo Bridge and, as it floated down the Thames, said "Well, that's over, now I start again."⁹⁶ Official opinion agreed with this reasoning: 'The Army is very unlikely in the future to provide a permanent career for women,'⁹⁷ the Markham Committee concluded in a statement which served as both prediction and proviso. There was no headlong rush to integrate women more fully into combat roles. The army which had removed gender barriers with such apparent ease in 1941 returned as easily to the status quo in 1955, when all mixed batteries were disbanded. It would be difficult to establish a connection between the mixed batteries and the current deployment of women in operational capacities in some branches of the British military.

As with gender stereotypes, the combat taboo emerged from the war virtually unscathed. The British were able to convince themselves that nothing revolutionary had happened – an impressive feat of 'intellectual acrobatics'.⁹⁸ It was pure sophistry to claim that women who spotted targets and helped aim the gun were not actually killing because they were not pulling the firing lever. Pile admitted that 'there is not much difference between manning a G.L. set or a predictor and firing a gun: both are means of destroying an enemy aircraft.'⁹⁹ As the war progressed, more advanced guns were essentially fired by remote control when on target. Since women on the command post brought the gun to target, it was absurd to claim that they were not actually firing it. 'If what we did was not accurate, then the guns were not accurate,'¹⁰⁰ Pat Gibson wrote. An inaccurate gun did not kill. But despite this blurring of responsibility, the division between female technicians and male killers was maintained. Even during the campaign against pilotless V-1s, women were not allowed to 'kill' inanimate missiles.

That women should not actually kill was a deeply held but seldom discussed doctrine. Silence makes analysis problematic: it is difficult for the historian to assess the strength of the combat taboo since a thick smokescreen of practical considerations precludes an examination of its essence. In other words, the fact that women were sufficiently strong to operate light AA guns was immaterial since, it was argued, they were

⁹⁶ *Op. cit.*, Ritson's remarks bear a striking similarity to those of other women (in particular, Russians) who have experienced combat. See Elshain, *Women and War*, p. 177.

⁹⁷ Markham Committee Report, para. 50.

⁹⁸ See n. 2, above.

⁹⁹ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 186.

¹⁰⁰ Pat Gibson, correspondence with the author, 31 Aug. 1995.

insufficiently hardy to endure the living conditions of mobile units. Likewise, the issue of whether they should fire the Lewis guns employed on searchlight sites was obscured by concerns about the risks to their virtue on those sites. Thus, the safest and most suitable place for women seemed to be the heavy AA batteries where, as luck would have it, their lack of physical strength prevented them from loading and firing the weapons. Women were excluded from combat without any discussion of the moral issue as to whether women should kill.

It is interesting to note how little controversy was caused by the initial establishment of mixed batteries. Hardly a stir was raised in Parliament or the press. This was possibly because it was widely accepted that desperate situations required desperate measures. 'We wouldn't have been on a gun-site if it hadn't been sheer necessity,' argued Ritson, 'and we didn't want to do it, but it was the sheer necessity of it that made us do it.'¹⁰¹ Furthermore, it is possible that British philosophical flexibility placed women gunners in a role not far removed from what had heretofore been socially acceptable. The only permissible form of female violence in a civilized society is that of the mother who defends her home from an intruder – like the lioness who ferociously protects her cubs. An adaptable society perchance saw the female gunner as an acceptable extension of that role, with the British nation the metaphorical equivalent of the individual home. Thus, no tortuous moral gymnastics were required for society to tolerate mixed batteries, especially since women were not actually pulling the triggers.

But the historian should resist imagining into existence a line of reasoning which logic suggests must have existed. Some people in Britain might have derived solace from the above rationale, but it is difficult to measure the timbre of a dog that does not bark. And if the British did think that women gunners were merely defending their home, that suggests that there should have been a huge outcry when, late in the war, the government proposed sending servicewomen to Europe. The proposal should have raised a wholly different moral issue. Women gunners on European soil would no longer be defending their home, they would be invaders. Likewise, since by late 1944 everyone accepted that the war would be won, it was no longer possible to fall back on the 'desperate situation' argument in justifying the deployment of women.

In Parliament, only the Labour MP Mrs A. Hardie objected on moral grounds. 'Any woman will defend her home,' she told the Commons; 'but it is very different when you send her away to other countries.' She added:

war is not a woman's job and never was. I do not know what the modern man is coming to, when we have to send women out to face the horrors of trench life . . . It is a nice new world that some . . .

¹⁰¹ Ritson interview.

picture for the rising generation of women, who now not only have to produce innumerable children but fight wars as well.¹⁰²

In contrast, the great majority of MPs accepted the need to send servicewomen to the Continent, and did not apparently feel that a moral threshold had been crossed. Those who judged the decision momentous in the main welcomed it as a sign of progress. Feminists like Summerskill, Thelma Cazalet-Keir and Eleanor Rathbone decided that a blow had been struck for gender equality. It was not, apparently, the time to mourn the loss of female virtue.

Those who opposed the decision displayed the same remarkable ability to avoid the essence of the female combat taboo by concentrating upon the practical implications of deploying women. They presented similar moralistic objections to those which had earlier been employed to limit the role of female gunners. It was argued that service on the Continent would draw women too far from their families, that distance would destroy promising romantic relationships and that conditions in European billets would offend feminine sensibilities. 'We all hope', argued the Labour MP Mrs J.L. Adamson,

that we shall be able to bring this war to a victorious conclusion at the earliest possible moment and that there will be no necessity to send women overseas to other countries where, perhaps, there are dangers – not dangers of the battlefield, but where the moral standards do not perhaps compare favourably with those of this country.¹⁰³

Besides Hardie, only F.W. Pethick-Lawrence, previously a tireless campaigner for women's suffrage, came close to addressing the female combat taboo:

it is because the essential function of childbirth is so necessary to the preservation of the race that civilized nations have in the past almost invariably excluded women from the danger of the fighting combatant Services.... for the preservation of the race women must not be allowed to face the dangers of war to the same extent as in the case of men.¹⁰⁴

But the main thrust of Labour Party opposition, which Pethick-Lawrence was presenting (albeit in a muddled fashion), was that women should not be conscripted for service on the Continent, but should only be sent if they volunteered. How this would make a difference to the impending demise of the British race was not explained. And, since all female gunners were already volunteers (who had to volunteer again before being sent to the Continent), it is difficult to ascertain what exactly Pethick-Lawrence was protesting against.

Pile was quite prepared to allow women to fire the guns but, as he argued, 'there was a good deal of muddled thinking which was prepared

¹⁰² *Hansard*, 24 Jan. 1945.

¹⁰³ *Op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ *Op. cit.*

to allow women to do anything to kill the enemy except pull the trigger'.¹⁰⁵ Most of the objections to women in combat had been answered by the performance of the mixed batteries, but the one relating to gender roles in a civilized society remained. One likes to think that British society could not tolerate a mixing of the feminine role of mother with the masculine role of warrior. But one is hard-pressed to find contemporaries able to distil the issue to its philosophical essence. In *The Imitation Game*, a Play for Today by Ian McEwan about wartime life broadcast by BBC Television in 1981, Cathy Raines, an ATS recruit, states:

You know, on the anti-aircraft units, the ATS girls are never allowed to fire the guns. . . . If girls fired guns, and women generals planned the battles . . . then men would fear there was no morality to war. They would have no one to fight for, nowhere to leave their consciences. . . . war would appear to them as savage and pointless as it really is. The men want women to stay out of the fighting so they can give it meaning. As long as we're on the outside, and give our support and don't kill, women just make the war possible . . . something the men can feel tough about.¹⁰⁶

McEwan reveals the danger of imposing modern feminist awareness upon women of a different generation. This study found no former ATS gunner who exhibited such a precise sensitivity to the combat taboo, either at the time or since. The taboo was formidable precisely because it was never discussed and seldom even contemplated. By carefully skirting the issue, Britain avoided having to address it. Mixed batteries did not in the end challenge the taboo because the British decided that they would not do so. The issue was not an issue. Women gunners were non-combatants. Nothing had changed.

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¹⁰⁵ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, p. 193.

¹⁰⁶ I. McEwan, *The Imitation Game* (London, Cape, 1981), pp. 173–4.