

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Bianca Taubert, Curator of the Adjutant General's Corps Museum, to discuss the UK's Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in World War I.

BT: The Corps was formed mainly to take over support functions for the army, both in the UK and abroad, mainly in France during the First World War. And this is because after the Somme in 1916, they're so desperate for men to send to the front lines that they do things like consider raising the age of conscription, but then realized not only would that mean there aren't enough men working in the UK, but that it would be probably even more unpopular than the actual conscription at the time. So it was decided, tail end of 1916, to send an officer to the front lines in France to see if there were any roles that women could undertake. And he came back and said, "if we do this, we can probably take 12,000 men that are currently in the lines of communication and actually put them in front line units." So they did mainly sort of clerical, domestic, store work, pretty much anything they felt was a feminine enough occupation that wouldn't put them in too much of a disadvantaged position. So one of the few things they couldn't do is there were tailors, but they weren't allowed to actually do the measurements or the pinning, but they could fix the clothing afterwards. It was thought it wasn't right to have them in an enclosed space with a man alone who would potentially be taking his clothes off. So it's a very interesting sort of disconnect. So you did have female mechanics, everything like that, shoemakers, tailors, ferriers, everything. But then, of course, you have to kind of keep it into something that they felt was already women's work.

AT: That seems a bit odd, because weren't there already women acting as nurses, so presumably in war zones already, where they were in danger and obviously exposed to unclothed men?

BT: By 1907, you had two women's voluntary groups, the Voluntary Aid Detachment and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, who are volunteers. And they're not sort of officially sanctioned by the War Office or the Ministry of Defense, but they were wealthy women who had their own horses, could pay for their own uniforms and were sort of already helping out. By 1915, you have a load of women's organizations in the UK, one of which is the Women's Legion, which basically their cookery section took over a lot of the cooking and waitressing responsibilities in the UK to again free up men for frontline service. But these were things started by women, who then basically the Army said, "actually, this is a pretty good idea, so we'll let you help," where the WAAC is kind of the first one where the Army said, "actually, we need these women." And what's fascinating is most of the military wanted them to be enlisted women, actually enlist them in the Army. But the Secretary of War, Lord Darby was the one who said, "no, we can't do that, they have to be a civilian women's organization and completely voluntary," which really put the women in some ways at a disadvantage.

So it's things like in France, they're taking over from enlisted soldiers, so they're not actually covered by the Geneva Convention. So if they were captured, they would not have been treated like soldiers, they would have been potentially treated as spies, which thankfully that never happened as far as anyone knows. But it also meant that they weren't allowed to use the same

rank structure. The discipline was hit and miss because they weren't actually under the Army Act unless they were in France, in which case they were under the Army Act as camp followers, which has a really sort of nasty connotation to it, as most people associate a camp follower with prostitution. So it's one of those things that the idea was good, but it didn't quite take it, I think as far as it could have. And I think most of the women and probably a majority of the men would have wanted it to.

AT: Well, I do wonder if there was a bit of hesitation there because I know that there was at least one, I think it was a US military entity where the women were enlisted as yeoman (F) for female. So they were technically yeoman, but this subset that allowed them to, I'm assuming get paid less, not get pensions, whatever, they decided that yeoman (F) specifically wasn't eligible for.

BT: It gets really tricky because I suppose to our minds, it would make sense that they're enlisted, where to them this is really sort of the first time anything like this had happened. So I think it is one of those very odd things where I think it's very forward-thinking for the time. But every once in a while, you'll hear something and go, "really?" We're not allowing them to like they didn't salute, things like that. Their rank structure, no one understood, because they were not allowed to use the same terms as men. So it's even, they're not called officers and other ranks. They're officials and subordinate officials and workers. So it did cause some issues with the fact that men weren't sure, "is this person basically an officer, are they not?" And to be perfectly honest, no one understood it except for the WAAC themselves, which did cause issues, especially along the lines of when the men and women would get together, there were very specific rules about who the men could take out and who they couldn't. And it was a very easy system to just say, "oh, well, I didn't realize. She was such a nice young lady that I didn't realize that she must have been an officer" kind of a situation or men trading uniforms to take out a woman who is a much more junior rank, which is kind of funny, which did happen in Leon headquarters in France, which they did get married after the war. But it's again, just such a very odd way of doing it.

AT: I do wonder how much of the reluctance on some people's part to actually make them part of the army was this idea of a bell that you can't unring in terms of, "well, if we let women into the army now, what are the repercussions that is going to have down the road for, do we have to let them stay on after the war, or can we just kick them out?" Whereas if they're just a volunteer civilian corps, there's really not that responsibility to have a long-term plan for the consequences.

BT: Yeah. And I think it also takes some of the responsibility for the women themselves off the army. So it's really down to those in charge to make all the decisions. So it was sort of things like the deputy chief controller, Helen Gwynne-Vaughn, was asked, "when a woman is found to be pregnant, how do we report this? Do we report it as a pregnancy, or do we report it as not yet diagnosed?" And Helen Gwynne-Vaughn said, "no, we are reporting every pregnancy as a pregnancy because that's the correct way of doing it." I think it really helped she was from a military family. So was Mona Chalmers Watson. So some of the women who are in charge

already had an understanding of how the military worked. But it was actually, the fact that they reported pregnancies as pregnancies that ended up saving the reputation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Because of course, rumors started flying about the women in France being recruited to army brothels, the number of women getting pregnant and giving birth, and some of it's the army equivalent of sort of like the locker room joking and boasting. A joke a soldier made to a visiting chaplain. He saw women dressed in black pushing prams in France. And of course, they're French widows, he asked a soldier, "who are those women?" And the soldier went, "oh, yeah, they're the WAAC" and then walked away as a joke. So of course, this man comes back to the UK, starts saying they're prostitutes, they're giving birth left, right and center. And I think some of it, because it was basically the Corps was so helpful, which by this point, there were about 5000 women in France alone, that they think some of it might have been Fifth Column activity by the Germans as well, to sort of spread that "don't let your daughters join this Corps. They'll be sent to a brothel." But then because they had the statistics, they managed to show actually, "we know exactly how many women felt pregnant in France. And that was 21." So out of 5000 women, there were 21 pregnancies. So, the women in charge very much understood kind of what was needed and how to protect the Corps, protect the women themselves for the most part, that really made it as successful as it was.

AT: What was the general sentiment on the ground? Were the soldiers happy to have the help and happy to have British women around to spend time with, or was there resentment and feeling like "you shouldn't be here, you're women"? What was the general vibe, or was it just a whole mix of things?

BT: It was initially quite a lot of resentment and anger. These are women who are "pushing me into the frontline service," which by this point, we've got the mass casualties of of the First World War and the men, of course, you don't want to go into the trenches. So there's a bit of anger and resentment for the soldiers and also for the officers.

One thing that I found is a number of the officials were actually leading suffragettes at the time, so for an officer, it's an alien element in their offices. It's potentially suffragettes who are going to cause problems. And then I think there was the concern about fraternization and "what's this going to cause. But I think very quickly, the women sort of start to endear themselves to the soldiers, so it was the third group of women to go over. It was during the Battle of Arras, and they give up their bedsteads to the local hospital. And their thought was, "well, the men that we've replaced didn't have beds, so we're more than happy to lay basically on the floor on the Army mattress, which they called a "biscuit." So it's basically a camping mat, a 1910s camping mat. So it's not very comfortable, but they thought, "well, the men we've replaced don't have any beds. These bed frames could be used somewhere better to actually help someone." And then the quartermaster quickly replaced them because he really didn't like the idea of women sleeping on the floor. But you get this sort of odd thing of really starting, in some cases, treating the women equally to the men. So at one gunnery school, the Commandant decided the female cooks should also learn how to use the weapons. He was, "well, everyone here knows how to use them. It's only right that they learn how to use them," which you don't actually get that as part of training until the 1980s, or later iterations of the women's corps.

And I think you get the feeling that in some ways it's comforting to the men, these are British women, they remind them of home, they remind them of, wives, sisters, daughters. So you get, it's almost a kind of fatherly or avuncular sort of feeling towards the women. And the fact is they do things like they visit hospitals, they throw tea parties, they're active in sports, they have dances. So were a bit of a boost to morale in some cases. And in other cases, were very much, for some of the men, "this is what we're fighting for, we're fighting for the fact that we don't want these conditions to happen in Britain," because the women put up with pretty much the same amount of danger as any of the men who were working in the lines of communication.

AT: It does sound like there's an element of it's easier to hate a group as an idea than it is to hate them as individuals.

BT: Yeah, very much so. And I think up until this point, you really get the idea of probably the concern being that, "how are the women going to react?" If there is an air raid, of course, this is the first war where you have air raids. And it's, I think it's a testament to the women that during an air raid in Bélon, the signalers got calls through in record time to the point that the officer in charge of signals asked that they be mentioned in orders. And the army's response, "well, we wouldn't do this for a regular soldier and we don't feel we should treat these women any differently." And that's really within the first six months of them being in France, of them impressing someone so much like, "hey, we should do something." And the army going, "well, they're just like regular soldiers." So I think it's even from the idea and from the first time the women are going overseas to, within the first three to six months, I think they really change the mind of a lot of the men.

AT: And the men would have been aware that these were all volunteers. Like, I assume a lot of the men were conscripted. They didn't have a choice in whether to be there. But as you mentioned, the women are also very much in danger. They knew - you would think, you would hope they knew what they were getting themselves into, at least as much as you can be prepared for that. I doubt anyone was telling them it was going to be a resort situation.

BT: Yeah.

AT: And a lot of women did die. It's not just a theoretical danger that we're talking about. Women did die in this service.

BT: Yeah, they did. So there's 185 names of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps on the Commonwealth War Graves registration website. Eight of them were killed in one night. So you had an air raid on Abbeville Camp One. And eight women were killed outright. Another one died later of her wounds. And then there were further seven injured. And then three of the women actually received military medals for the rescue attempts and the efforts of cleanup. But it wasn't the first time that the women were subject to air raids. A few days before there'd been an attack on Camp Two, but no one was injured. It just left the women kind of scrounging for clothes out of their barrack rooms because those had been taken out. But I think it was the first time it was

a mass death of women in a bombing in France. And I think it really hit the men just as hard as the women. So I think one of the interesting things is they were given a full military burial. You had a flyover. The men of the local units had wreaths laid. They followed the gun carriages. And I think it was a real sense of loss for the men as well as the women. As I said, a majority of the women actually died of disease. So they were subject to some of the same issues the men had, which would be things like dysentery and cholera. And it's just the fact that, accidents do happen as well. And they probably didn't think about the danger, but the danger was present. In some cases, the front line was only about five, six miles away from the lines of communication. And especially the German spring offensive, in some cases, the women were only a mile or two away from actual frontline fighting.

AT: And the women were also largely responsible for communications in these battle zones, right?

BT: So you had probably one of the more important roles that they had in France was actually on the signals to the point where they tried to evacuate all the women during the German spring offensive. And the officer commanding signalers in St. Omer said, "no, I can't, I can't spare these women. They have to stay." And it's the fact they tried to move 10,000 women away from the front lines. And then just said, "actually, we don't have enough men to replace them." So they couldn't. It's why they're there in the first place. And it just meant that if they had moved all these, cooks, waitresses, mechanics drivers, if they've moved all these women away or further away from the fighting, then they wouldn't have actually had enough of the support, which I think people forget how important those core support functions are still today to the military. And that would have left the men severely short-handed in fighting because you are going to have to find someone to take the time out to cook food to get the signals relayed and all that kind of thing.

AT: Isn't there a saying that an army marches on its stomach?

BT: Yeah, it very much does. And it's one of the reasons why I think the British Army was one of the few that didn't have any type of mutiny is because the soldiers got paid, their families were taken care of, and they generally had enough to eat. It might not have been the nicest food, but the average sort of calorie intake of a British soldier during the First World War was 3000 calories a day. So it might have been tinned meat and biscuits, but it was enough food to keep you going.

AT: And the Women's Land Army wasn't until World War II, but you did still have a lot of that food back home was also being produced by women.

BT: You do have a lot more women working the land because, again, for all that farming is one of the protected job roles during the First World War, so really things like farming and mining, and then senior munitions workers and things like that. You do have a lot of men leaving the farms anyway to join up in the initial call to war in 1914. And then, of course, 1915, 1916, they bring in conscription, and the rules get a bit looser from time to time because they're just that

desperate for bodies for the front line. So you do have women working the land more, but it wasn't quite as organized as the Women's Land Army, which I think the lessons learned in the First World War really come out to play in the second because it's quite a bit more organized with everything.

AT: When we're talking about how important it is to make sure that the soldiers are getting fed, and you've got women back home largely producing the food, you've got women doing clerical and administrative tasks to help make sure the food gets to where it needs to go, and then you've got the women on the ground cooking and serving the food. An army marches on its stomach - that's thanks to the women.

BT: Yeah, and it's traditionally been the women's role. So when I mentioned camp followers earlier, a lot of them were wives of the regiment, and it's one of the things that if you got to go along with your husband, you were expected as part of, "we have gotten you there, we are feeding you and your children, you do the cooking, you do the cleaning, you do the washing, the sewing, and the nursing," as it's very much a transactional sort of affair. If you are on strength with the army, you are helping, although it is much more of, at that point, a domestic sphere, which, First World War, I think women very much broke out of that. And interestingly, I think what makes it so important is it's less working class women who have always worked outside of the home to more middle class, and in the cases of things like the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, a majority of the women's organizations, they're wealthy upper-class landed gentry women who are taking on these roles. So I think that is the big thing. It's the breaking out of the female middle class, finally getting to leave their homes, even if they're married, even if they have children, it doesn't stop them anymore from doing things like joining joining the WAAC and being sent to France. So you do have married women with children sent overseas.

AT: And I think you mentioned the women of the WAAC were paying their own way, and that was one of the benefits of this structure. So when you're talking about the transactional nature of camp followers, there is still that element of "you have to earn your place here." But unlike the camp followers, I mean, at least they were getting paid.

BT: I mean, they're paid less than the men doing an equivalent job, for the most part, but they are paid roughly what they'd make in the civil world. So a female bank clerk sort of 1914-15 was paid on average 20 shillings a week, a female clerk in the WAAC earned from 20 shillings a week to 30 shillings a week. So it's slightly less than a male clerk would make, but not actually by a significant amount. And they, of course, they were given uniforms, they were fed, they were housed as well, very much along the same lines that the men were. So it's still very transactional in the sense you are being paid to do a job, but I think because it's voluntary, I think for the women, it was much more about service and patriotism. And "our men are doing this, so why shouldn't we?" "And it was very much, women, for the first time, really, total war hits the UK, and it was very much a "right, our men are in this, and so are we, and we need to do our part, and our part is doing something to help the men at the front lines."

AT: And when we're talking about that mindset, I do just want to give a shout out because although the Army was first, the Navy and the Air Force also had their own equivalent programs.

BT: Yes. So you do have the WRENS who sort of shortly followed the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. And I mean, there's something that you see again and again, Second World War as well. So the Women's Royal Naval Service, November 1917, and then you have the WRAF, the Women's Royal Air Force in April 1918. And what I find interesting about the WRAF is basically the Army Air Corps at that point had much quite a lot to do with the Army. It was actually a subsection of the Army, so you had a lot of WAAC were actually already working in it. So they were just then transferred into new service. With Helen Gwynne-Vaughn was told, "oh, you need to do this." And she went, "oh, I really don't want to." And they went, "well, you're going." So she very reluctantly left the WAAC to help form the WRAF. So it really showed what women were capable of, what use they had, especially overseas and at home. And then, of course, so the Navy and the Air Force quickly follow. And then, of course, they have their own services during the Second World War as well.

AT: And since you mentioned Helen Gwynne-Vaughn, I have to say, the women who were in charge of the Corps were just really fascinating individual people.

BT: You have the woman who was originally the chief controller, the first woman in charge was Dr. Mona Chalmers Watson. So she's the first woman to actually get her medical degree from Edinburgh University. In fact, she refused to marry until she got her medical degree. And I mean, she had a very fascinating career. And one of the reasons why she was chosen was because her brother, Sir Auckland Geddes was in charge of recruiting for the War Office. So again, she has a military connection. She did quite a lot previously. And actually quite a lot afterwards, if you think of the time period, there aren't that many women really that you hear about with medical degrees. She did things like founding the Elsie English Hospital for Women, the first president of Edinburgh's Women's Citizens Association. And it's one of those things that I find her sort of fascinating in that sense. But what also is interesting is in the post-war, they produced a little booklet for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, like a little Corps history. And in all of the early documents we have, she's always referred to as Mrs. Chalmers Watson and never Doctor. And it's the same with Helen Gwynne-Vaughn, who was also married. She was Mrs. Gwynne-Vaughn and Mrs. Chalmers Watson. So even though they've done this grand thing, and both of them were doctors in their own right, they referred to as Mrs. Which I mean today, there are women with doctorates and doctors who are automatically thought of as the Mrs and not the doctor. But that's, I think, shows how quickly things sometimes snap, certain societal things will snap back. That always really annoyed me. So I've made it always a point in my notes and anywhere else that she's always Dr Chalmers Watson, because she fought quite hard for that medical degree.

And at the times of war broke out, she was the head of the Department of Botany at Birkbeck College. So, and again, she had been married. She was widowed at this point, came from a military family. And the reason she gets involved in the WAAC is actually because she knew Dr. Chalmers Watson's cousin. So again, it's that you have two women who are in very much a

male sphere anyway, from military backgrounds who actually have a social connection in common, which is very helpful, actually, for the women starting these types of organizations. They know the men, they're related to them. So it really helps kind of push those in because basically you can stay to your cousin, your brother, your father, your husband, "hey, I've got this idea. Let's see what we can do."

But also with Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, she had done quite a bit before the war for the suffragette movement. So she helped co-found the University of London Suffrage Society. And then post-war, was a municipal reform party counselor for Camberwell North. And amazingly enough, basically she impressed the military enough that when they decided in 1938, "we need another women's unit similar to the work that the WAAC did," she was brought in as their first chief controller until 1941, which again, she did her own thing and had a tendency to upset people in the War Office, which for the WAAC, it was to try to make them as military as possible. So she'd do things like salute officers, even though they weren't supposed to. She tried to make it as military as possible to again, I think she realized the importance of the men around these women understanding that these are not just women, they have their military function.

AT: And what about Dr. Laura Sandeman?

BT: I find her fascinating. So they send the women over to France, they realize that actually it might be a good idea to have some female doctors help look after them. The big concern was that a male doctor might give them light duties when it wasn't needed. So a bit like in phys ed class, go "oh, I don't feel well" to a male coach and they let you sit out. It was that kind of concern that some of the women might use women's issues to sort of get out of work or that they might not feel comfortable with a male doctor. So they have two Royal Army Medical Corps auxiliaries. Dr. Laura Sandeman is one of them who's going to be sent over to France. And she actually refuses to go until she's paid the same as a man with her qualifications in similar rank. She ends up winning. So instead of being paid 420 pounds a year, she's paid 700. As far as I can find, she might be the first case of equal pay in the British Army, which I think that's pretty good going given it's 1917. Women are now actually properly fully integrated in the British Army. So I think we're at much better place 100 years, 100 odd years later than they were in 1917.

AT: It's interesting, given the relative scarcity of women doctors at the time in general, that when we say, I mentioned earlier, weren't women acting as nurses, but when you were talking about the Abbeville attack earlier, Dr. Phoebe Chapple was one of the medical personnel sent to the front in France, and she was actually awarded a military medal for her actions during that air raid as well. So clearly there were women doctors in war zones at this time, but they just don't make it into the historical dramas.

BT: No, so you did actually have American female surgeons actually on the western front. So they are there, but I think it's again, it's very easy because there were so few of them in relation to the number of male medical personnel that we think of nurses. It's one of those things with the First World War, we think of women as nurses and as factory workers, and that's about it. When actually you think they took over every job imaginable, to the point you have your first



female police officers. The WAAC had their own sort of police patrol unit, because again, you can't have a man checking a woman, patting a woman down. So they start their own police patrols. It's not only to help keep control of the women who were, for the most part, very, very well behaved, but also to protect the women themselves. So they had a female police officer to talk to if there was an issue of again, it's that time period where you wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable as a woman talking to a man about specific things. So I think it was very much they recognized whether it was the women in charge of the War Office itself, recognizing you needed to have other women to help support the women overseas.

So I find, Dr. Laura Sandeman, really interesting. It's one of those things that I always find slightly annoying that you don't hear about the women other than as nurses when actually they were incredibly important to the war effort, after 1916, especially.

AT: And then when we're talking about the women in charge, there were also Dame Florence Leach and Hilda Horniblow. So what can you tell us about them?

BT: Well, Dame Florence Leach originally volunteered as a cook in the Women's Legion, and then sort of tail end of 1917, Mona Chalmers Watson actually decides to leave the WAAC. And it's because one of her children had become very ill. So she decided to lead to take care of him. It's the reason why she actually never went over to France, was she had children and decided to stay to care for them. So she took over, Dame Florence Leach. And I think she was actually the first woman to be appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. So she eventually became the commandant of the military cookery section for the Women's Legion, which not long after the formation of the WAAC, the cookery section of the Women's Legion transferred over. So it's how you get within three months of the War Office saying, "yes, we're going ahead with this idea," within three months, you have the first lot of women, I think it was about 14 cooks and waitresses, who were originally Women's Legion, they transferred over. And basically Florence Leach was very, very good at her job. So she eventually becomes the controller of recruiting for the Corps and then commander, and then took over as chief controller tail end of 1917, 1918. And then her sister Violet Long was actually one of the women who was killed during the war. So she was on the hospital ship Warilda on its way to Southampton was torpedoed. And she refused to leave the ship until all of her women got off. She was returning on a report to her sister, because the WAAC were sort of loaned to the Americans. Because again, they had a women's unit who were there, but they had issues actually getting them out to France. So they originally had the WAAC in their camps to help more with the the clerical work. So she refuses to leave the ship until all of her women are off, including the nurses and the patients. And then as she's trying to transfer from the ship to the lifeboat, she falls in the water is crushed between the two. They think knocked unconscious and drowned. So she's on, I believe, the war memorial in Southampton for all the people who died on the hospital ship. But so even going over to France was quite dangerous, 1917. And that's simply you have the German U-boats are basically attacking anything that looks like a military ship. So she's the most senior woman to die in the war.

Then Hilda, she took over as chief controller of France in 1917 and then later England from July 1918. Again, she initially joins the Women's Legion looking at kitchens in convalescent camp in

Eastbourne and then helping to run an officer's mess in Kent. She's then deputy to Florence Leach and then promoted to chief controller and sent to France. And then so she's also one of the ones who helps the the thousand women that are attached to the US Army record office in Bourges before being sent back to the UK to help take over the chief controller ship of England after Violet Long was killed. And then it's always fascinating to see what they've they've done after the war. So she's a headmistress of a women's evening institute in London. And then in 1935, staff inspector for women's subjects at technical institutions. So I think the war actually, in some ways changed women's lives, very much so. And even after the war, some of them went back to hearth and home and other ones sort of spread all over the world and did very interesting things afterwards.

AT: So after World War I, the Corps was disbanded in 1921. But of course, they had successors because you can't do war now without women. I mean, you never really could.

BT: It's a bit like, throughout history when you ask the question where the women? Well they're at home taking care of everything so that the men can go and do amazing things. And it was the same with the military.

AT: Yeah, or they're being camp followers, whatever we call it, we seem to be there taking care of the men as well.

BT: Yeah, the women have always been there. It's just that we just don't really talk about them. But yeah, so 1938, it war looks inevitable with Germany at this point. So the War Office decides, "actually, we need another women's corps." And basically, the WAAC did such an amazing job that not only did Queen Mary sort of become their commandant in chief in 1918 and lending her name. So the corps's name changed to the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, the QMAAC. But 1938 rolls around like, "right, we need these women." So a lot of the women's voluntary groups continued on after the war. So you still have the VAD, you have the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, which are called the, unfortunately, the FANY. And then you have a number of other women's voluntary groups. So they decide that they're going to put one together, and they're going to call it the Auxiliary Territorial Service. So it starts off completely voluntary. So women could sign up as early as 1938. And then when war is declared in September 1939, they're called up. But I don't think they were quite prepared. So they didn't have uniforms. They didn't know where they were going to put them. You have stories of women being sent to units and units going, "who are you? And what are you meant to be doing?" And the women going, "we've been sent to help you." But then again, they sort of just grit their teeth and got on with it. And then from 1941, you have conscription of women in the UK. So it was either join one of the services or you had to complete war work. And then if you had served in any of the women's services, instead of a cutoff age of 43, you could actually serve until you were 50, which is quite a big sort of age range, if you think, from 18 to 50. So you do have a number of women serve both in the first and second world war in some capacity. And then I think the ATS will not fully under the Army Act, they have uniforms shortly into the start of the war, they could use the same ranks as men. The officers, that doesn't change until 1950 when they fully come

under, and again, the ATS were all over the world, everywhere from North Africa and Palestine. You had ATS as part of the British delegation in the US before America joined the war. So they're sort of everywhere all over the world. And again, doing particularly dangerous jobs. The majority of women in the ATS actually were anti-aircraft, which you do have a number killed because those are sites that are going to be targeted for air raids. And then again, ATS did such a brilliant job. The Army decided "we need a permanent corps instead of an auxiliary one." So you have the Women's Royal Army Corps formed in 1949, mostly ATS that then decided to stay on transferring in. And then 1991 rolls along. They decide to form the Adjutant General's Corps. Any women permanently attached to a unit, became part of that unit. Everyone else transferring to the AGC when it was formed in April 1992. So within less than 80 years, you go from women as this voluntary organization to actually fully integrated into the British Army.

AT: Forgive my ignorance of the British military, what actually is the Adjutant General's Corps?

BT: So the Adjutant Generals Corps is one of the support corps of the British Army. So they really cover pay administration, education and training, the Military Provost Guard Service. So those are the people on the front gates at military camps and MOD sites. And then you have the Provost branch, which is the Royal Military Police, the military provost staff. So they're looking after the military corrective training element of the British Army, as well as Army law. So it's essentially, it was six antecedent corps. They decided to bung together in 1991, which is, we're the only federated corps of the British Army. So we have our branches that do very, very different things. So essentially, other than like logistics, we sort of cover that support function. And we have, not unsurprisingly, the most women in the British Army serve in the AGC, which they are now from 2017 allowed to join infantry units in all capacity. So they are now completely fully integrated. So you have the first officers, I think last year graduating from Sandhurst as officers in infantry battalions.

AT: And so you mentioned that World War II was a lot better organized on this front because of the lessons learned in World War I. So what were some of the, shall we say, growing pains for this first group of women?

BT: I was looking up something, an inquiry came in about someone whose family member's in the ATS and they're like, "well, how did they get sorted into whatever role they did?" And I was like, "oh, that's a very good question. Let me see if I can find the answer." And helpfully after the war, the War Office printed these red books for every single element of British Army, including the ATS. And it had how women were selected. So they used the same selection tests that were used for the men to sort the women into categories. The only difference was physical. So they did do drill, they did do PT, but the only difference was the physical requirement. But the selection tests, they'd use the exact same ones with the thought that, "well, the women have to do the exact same job. So what's the point in changing that when we've got something that works?" I mean, there were loads of interesting teething problems when you have a bunch of men put in charge of women when they don't understand how anything works. And some of the stories are mildly horrifying. It's even down to just, well, sometimes women might need a bit of

extra time in the bathroom. But then having to do it in such a way that, a man in the 1930s and '40s would not understand menstruation or the fact that they were given like sanitary towels, but the only way you could get a new one from the QM was to show that you had used the old one, much to everyone's horror. I only found out that tidbit because we were doing an oral history. She was very early ATS. She's one of the first ones to be called up in '39. And she actually had the assistant curator turn the recording off. She's like, "I'm happy to tell you this, but I don't want it recorded because I'm not comfortable for a man to hear this." But we're an all-female staff at the AGC Museum. So she told the assistant curator, "you weren't allowed to leave drill." So she goes, "you had women like bleeding through their uniform, and then the male drill instructor's, horrified," and then having to go to the QMs like, "I need another sanitary towel." And the QM's going, "well, I need to know that you've used it." And she's like, "I don't think you do." So that was one of those things that changed relatively quickly. Because it was just, that's what you do in the army. Your boots are worn through, well you take them to the QMs and show them that your boots cannot be repaired. So you get a new pair. So I mean, it changed really quickly, but it's again not, men not understanding or not thinking that women have some physical needs that are very different.

AT: I just wish you could have told them that that's like me having to prove that I used this toilet paper by showing you the used toilet paper before you'll give me another role. What?!?

BT: Yeah, while the rule didn't change, I think the QMs very quickly just went, "yeah, no, here you go." It's just the fact there is that in a way that we're not quite as disconnected today. And bless them, it was never, I think, in any way trying to make women feel bad or feel lesser, it's just the social thinking at the time. But it's even down to, so at the end of the Second World War, you had this massive resettlement program, and there were six or seven syllabi that you could choose from, unless you were a woman, in which case you could only choose from home and health. And that was, how to care for children, first aid, decorating a home. And considering some of the technical roles that women had. I would have thought that was incredibly insulting.

AT: Well, you mentioned some of the more mechanics, I mean, apart from all the medical work that they were doing.

BT: Yes, in the First World War, you had mechanics, and you had women in technical stores, and you had female drivers, and it's the same again in the Second World War, and in the Second World War, a lot of them are doing more technical work. Like I said, so the anti-aircraft, they're a mixed battery, so mixed men and women. And you have stories of the men being knocked out by an explosion. We've got a medal set of a woman who got the British Empire Medal, so her section had been bombed, the men taken out, and she jumped behind the anti-aircraft gun and started firing. And she had been knocked clear, and then just got back up and continued working, and the fact that the work that they were doing, very basic computers, but for all that the official line is, "the women didn't fire a shot," well, we know they did in some cases, but also by the end of the war, so they're tracking the aircraft, but you input the coordinates where you think it's going to be next, and press a button, and it would automatically

center the artillery piece and fire. So they are doing it, it's just, it's a computer, basically a very rudimentary computer actually doing the work of firing, but it's the women themselves that have inputted the information to do it. So it's, again, you have very technical jobs.

Of course, the late queen was part of the ATS to learn how to drive, so her aunt was, again, a bit like Queen Mary, she was chief controller, so she had quite a lot to do with with the Auxiliary Territorial Service, and the then-Princess Elizabeth not only learned how to drive three types of vehicles, she had to learn how to fix them. So there are photographs of late Queen Elizabeth fixing basically a small truck. So she learned to drive an ambulance, a small lorry, and then a saloon car. So she had to learn how to change a tire and all of that, and she was treated the same as any other junior officer, because I think it would get very confusing for her to salute an officer and then be called ma'am. So I think that really helped sort of raise the profile, very much of women in the army, and you hear these fascinating stories of these women who kind of just go on and get things done and then sort of afterwards, slightly forgotten about.

One of the items in our collection, it's our star item in the collection, because it is actually Princess Elizabeth's driving permit from the war, and it is signed Elizabeth, but it does have the, "driving license for HRH Princess Elizabeth," and a lovely photograph album with pictures of her actually having to fix vehicles, which are always just such a lovely thing.

AT: I think we're touching on a common theme that I've noticed in women's history, particularly of this period, where once women know they can do so-called men's work, like they know it themselves, they've proved it, it's really impossible to unring that bell, and it does lead to this greater push to allow women into these so-called men's fields that often are more lucrative, they may be more interesting, they may just be more to that person's particular interests. But it sounds like that was the case with the Corps, because they were doing so many different kinds of work that we know for a fact, they knew, "these were men's jobs, we came in and we were able to do them, so how can you now tell me that I can't do a man's job?"

BT: Yeah, I think it's very much that, and I think, some women in Britain getting the vote in 1920, a lot of that, in my opinion, is due to the amount of work that they did during the First World War of the suffrage movement in the UK decided "we're not going to do any type of protesting, anything like that, we are going to pause for the length of the war," and a lot of them then getting involved in these voluntary organizations. And I think that the women very much proved that they can be level-headed, they can do the same jobs as men, and that while a lot of women ended up having to go back into what was traditionally the female sphere, you do have a number of women who never did, and so I think their work really helped them to get some of the rights that they got in 1920. And then really, it just really proved to the establishment, and to men particularly, that women aren't some hysterical creatures that need to be kept at home, because actually, look at what some of them were doing in France, look at what some of them were doing at home. So I think it's very much kind of hard to put the cat back in the bag, in this case, to unring that bell. And then you just also have a generation of women where there aren't enough men in the UK, so I think it's that terrible thing, they are somewhat helped by the 800,000 deaths of the First World War, because you're missing a generation of young men, and who's going to take over that work, but the young women.

AT: I know a lot of the pushback seems to be, when you've got women doing factory work and saying, "I don't want to give up this well-paying job," and the response is, "well, what about our young men when they come back," but the fact is a lot of those young men didn't come back.

BT: Yeah, so 10% of those who served in the British military died during the First World War, and while that's a percentage, not a very large one, you're looking at the largest number of people serving in the military in history, so it's more people served in the British military in the First World War than the Second. Second World War has a higher casualty rate than the First World War, but the sheer numbers of people who died or who were injured, I think you just you didn't have the same number of people coming home, and even if they came home, they might not necessarily have been able to do a job that they had once done for a variety of reasons, where they might not want to go back to the work that they had done, because it would have been, I think, for everyone involved, a very eye-opening experience, and for some men doing jobs and having opportunities that they didn't necessarily have before the war possibly meant they weren't returning to the same work. But yeah, so it's you don't you don't have the same number of men coming home as what left. And then of course it's women during the First World War, for a lot of them for the first time, don't have that male authority figure telling them what to do, and for a lot of these women, first time they're working and having their own money, and not having to rely on someone else, which is always that that fascinating thing of, well, why did women want jewelry? Well, it's small, it's portable, and it's always worth something, where in this case they actually have their own income.

AT: I would assume it was a pretty big paradigm shift for a lot of women who had just always been taught, "this is the path you will take because that is what women do." Because of course there are always going to be the firebrands who will push back against that because, for me, I'm a contrary person, I always want to know "why, why, why?" But there are a lot of those women who wouldn't necessarily have questioned it unless they were put into this position to begin with.

BT: Yeah, I think it's one of I think the big driving forces behind all these voluntary organizations is very much of "well, we're seeing all this recruiting for men of do your part, you should be here, we should do our part as well." So I've always wondered if it's even less about saying, "hey, I want this opportunity" and more about, "well, why should only the men have to sacrifice? Why shouldn't I do something to help them that's more than just, taking collections to send food to the front lines or a medical aid to the front lines." I think for some of the women, I think, especially the women who were in charge of these organizations saw an opportunity, but I think there's also that sense of patriotism and wanting to do their bit, as well as possibly a bit like, "hey, we can do this now, this is an opportunity to prove ourselves." And it's a very different, I think mindset to today, which, the war was very much supported in the UK. I think compared to what we're taught in history, even a lot of the men fighting in the trenches believed it was a just war that they should be doing this. And for loads of reasons and some of its propaganda and some of its patriotism and all those kinds of things. But I think for the women as well, you're seeing all this recruiting stuff, telling men do your patriotic bit and they're like, "well, what about us?"

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember well-behaved women rarely make history.