



Women at War

Key Stage 2

History:

Chronological understanding

Historical interpretation

Historical enquiry

British History

Key Stage 2

English:

Speaking and listening

Group discussion

Writing

Composition

Planning and drafting

Reading

Understanding texts

Reading for information

Non fiction and non-literary texts

Grantham Museum has exhibits celebrating two famous women: Edith Brown who was the first female police officer and Margaret Thatcher the first woman to become Prime Minister of Britain. This activity explores the roles of women who joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force with the roles of women in the RAF today.

Overview of the activities

Roles for women in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force

Roles for women in the RAF today.

Aims of the session

To explore the role of women in the war

To make comparisons between the working lives of women now and during the War years.

Resources

Background information

Met girls

[Women in the WAAF](#)

[Women in the RAF today](#)

There are some excellent stories in Mavis Nicholson's Book '*What did you do in the War Mummy?*' (Pimlico 1996) This book tells the stories of a wide variety of women who volunteered to become air raid wardens, lumberjills, drivers and it shows how women's lives changed, with many travelling all over the country and Europe.

Venues

Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Museum

Cranwell Aviation Heritage Centre

RAF Digby Sector Operations Room Museum

Grantham Museum

Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre

Metheringham Airfield Visitor Centre

RAF Scampton Historical Museum

Thorpe Camp Visitor Centre.

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RAF Waddington Heritage Centre
RAF Wickenby



Activity 1: Women at War

Introduction

Start this session by asking children to think about what they want to be when they grow up. Give them a couple of minutes to think about what they might like to do and why they would like to do this job.

Plenary

Ask the young people to tell you what they want to be when they grow up.

When they have shared their ideas, talk about the different jobs available to them all. Talk about roles of nurses, engineers, ballet dancers, footballers, pilots and teachers.

Activity

Ask the children to list the skills you might need to be a fire fighter, a doctor, a nurse, to work in retail or to work in engineering. Write the skills down on a white board.

Ask them how might they get the skills and qualifications they might need to get their chosen job.

Ask them to feedback their thoughts.

In the past some of these jobs would have been thought of as men's work or women's work. Explain that most jobs are open to men and women and that men and women are entitled to equal pay for equal work but this has not always been the case.

Next

Explain that at the time of the Second World War many people left school when they were 14 and many didn't have any qualifications at all.

Explain that before the War, women's choices of work were very limited. Women were not encouraged to work especially if they were married. Even if women did work they could only work in roles considered to be suitable for women for example: as secretaries, domestic servants or nurses.

When studying the Second World War, we often talk about the role of women on the Home Front. 80,000 women signed up to join the Land Army but hundreds of thousands of women volunteered for the armed forces. 250,000 signed up to join the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

Roles for women

In the War, things were very different but the War was also responsible for changing attitudes of both men and women in the workplace.

Because men had been called up to fight in the armed forces, women were recruited to take their place. Women worked on airbases as: cooks, clerks, plotters, mechanics, drivers, nurses, ground crew, observers.



Use the Background Information to find out more about life in the WAAF.

Research projects

Young people can use the Background Information in this section or the web links provided in the resources section to find out about the WAAF. Life in the armed forces today is very different from how it was in Wartime.

The RAF has many roles for women as pilots and flight engineers. Jo Salter became the very first woman to fly an operational fast jet. She flew Tornados with 617 Squadron in 1994. Since then many women have flown operationally in Iraq and Afghanistan. Flt Lt Kirsty Moore is the first woman to become a pilot in the Red Arrows.

96% of jobs in the RAF are open to women. They can be fighter pilots, helicopter pilots, navigators and engineers but at the moment they are not allowed to serve in the RAF Regiment and fight on the ground in armed combat.

Activity

The RAF Hendon website has lots of information about the history of women in the RAF and their current roles. Ask children to research a particular facet of women's history on the site such as the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

Ask them to look at the timeline and research some of the women who appear on that timeline.

Activity

Read or share the information about Met Girls

Met girls

In the Second World War, Women could choose from 110 jobs in the WAAF. Meteorological observer was just one of the jobs.

Meteorological observers, or Met girls as they became known, were responsible for gathering information about the weather to create weather maps for pilots and for people planning missions.

Met girls took hourly observations of the weather and drew up weather maps. To do this they had to simply look at the weather, use barometers or send up balloons to measure cloud cover. They assessed visibility. This was very important for pilots. Met girls provided information from 370 stations. The weather maps had symbols giving the wind direction, wind speed, temperature, cloud cover, visibility etc. The Met girls had to draw on isobars and produce these maps twice a day.

The Met girls sent hourly reports to Group Headquarters who would put all the messages together and send them to other stations for the aircrews.

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The Met girls were based in the control towers on airfields. The Met girls could also be drivers on the airbases who went to pick up aircrew when they returned from missions. They had to make observations every hour so often the Met girls were the only people awake on the base during the night.

Ask

Why was this job important?

Who would use the information provided by the Met girls?

How might they use it?

Can they think of a similar job today?

How do we get information about the weather and what do we do with it?

Activities

Here are a few activities related to the weather you might like to try.

Take children outside and on a windy day and ask them to predict what they might see. Look at what happens to trees, leaves, washing, flags when the wind is blowing. See if their predictions are correct.

Ask the children to make a list of words associated with different types of weather and display these in the classroom.

Use the Beaufort Scale to measure wind speed over a period of five days. Ask the children to use pictograms to represent the relative strength of the wind.

Creative writing

Ask the children to write a poem about what it would be like to be the only person awake on an airbase waiting for a mission to return.

Ask them to create a word bank to start off the activity.

To start the word bank ask the children to give one-word answers to a series of questions and write the answers on the white board.

For example

Imagine they are in the control tower of an airbase at night during the Second World War, waiting for a squadron to return from a mission.

(Show them photographs of a Second World War control tower. If you visit Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre's site you will find images on their gallery page that you could show on the whiteboard [Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre Gallery](#))

Ask:

- How might they feel?
- What can they see?
- What can they hear?
- What can they smell?

Write all the words on the Whiteboard and they can use these words in their poems.

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Feedback

Ask the children to read their poems.

Display

Create an illustration of a World War II Control Tower and use this as the central piece to display the poems.



Background information

Before the Second World War life for women was very different from how it is today. They were not encouraged to work after they married. They worked in roles that were thought to be suitable for women such as nurse, secretary, domestic servant. Women were not paid the same amount of money as men.

During the Second World War women were called upon to carry out many roles that would not have been open to them before the War and many seized the opportunity to volunteer or join up to the armed forces. Women signed up or volunteered for many reasons, many thought they should be fighting alongside men. Some saw joining up as a route to adventure and others thought it would give them a bit more freedom.

Many women volunteered to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) which was similar to the Territorial Army today (made up of volunteers). The ATS supported the RAF but in 1939, the Government decided that a separate Women's Air Force was needed, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). Its main purpose was to recruit women who could stand in for RAF personnel when they were called up to fight. The WAAF became part of the Armed Forces in 1941.

The WAAF was operational for ten years and in that time over 250,000 women joined. Many (183,317) were volunteers and 33,932 were called up through conscription (the Government said they had to join) in 1941. Women worked in 110 different trades.

The women did not receive the same pay as men and they did not have the same ranking system. They received only two thirds of the amount the men were paid.

The women in the WAAF carried out lots of different roles. The first female station commander was appointed in 1944.

Women were not allowed to be part of the aircrew but they were allowed to work as ground crew, getting the bombers ready for their missions,

There were some women pilots who flew in the Second World War but they were civilians not military personnel and they worked for the Air Transport Auxiliary. Their job was to deliver aircraft and to qualify for the ATA they had to have many more flying hours (experience) than the male pilots in the RAF.

Women were employed to drive the aircrew to the aircraft and drive them back to their barracks when they returned.

Women also worked as mechanics looking after military vehicles.

The only women from the WAAF who were allowed in military aircraft were nurses. Nurses flew to the battlegrounds to pick up casualties and bring them home for treatment.

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Women also worked as plotters, plotting the movement of enemy aircraft and they even worked as meteorological observers, so they could provide accurate weather reports for the aircrews setting off on bombing missions.