



IN FOCUS:

The Flying Nightingales



This exhibition was held at the Florence Nightingale in 2024. The exhibition coincided with the 80th anniversary of D-Day and the Normandy Invasion, during which the Flying Nightingales were working.



Welcome to the first exhibition of our 'In Focus' series of short displays. We will be exploring lesser-known stories of those carrying on the legacy of Florence Nightingale.

6th June 2024 marked the 80th anniversary of D-Day, the beginning of the Normandy Invasion. This major event of the Second World War saw the allied forces landing in five locations along the coast in Northern France. The aim was to push further inland to liberate France from Germany, and ultimately end the war.

Through this exhibition, we marked this anniversary by exploring a group of women who worked during the invasion and that have been relatively forgotten – The Flying Nightingales.

The Flying Nightingales were women who worked in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and were affectionally named after Florence Nightingale, reflecting her development of military nursing. Many had nursing backgrounds and were working as orderlies (medical assistants), helping to move supplies and servicemen across the country. During the planning for D-Day and the Normandy invasion they were asked if they would go one step further and assist with the evacuation of casualties from Europe.



D-Day and the Normandy Invasion

In the early hours of 6th June 1944, the Allied Forces embarked upon the largest amphibious invasion of the Second World War - an invasion that would be the catalyst for the end of almost 5 years of gruelling battle.

The Second World War began in Europe on 1st September 1939 when German forces invaded Poland. The main combatants were the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) and the Allies (France, Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China) and involved more than 50 nations across the length of the war. The war was fought mercilessly not only across land and sea, but with new technologies, many of the battles fought from the skies.

On D-Day, 6th June 1944, Allied forces launched a meticulously planned combined naval, air and land assault on occupied France. The 'D' in D-Day stands simply for 'day' and the term was used to describe the first day of any large military operation.

To ensure the success of this mission, the invasion was held off until there were perfect sea conditions and decoy information was leaked, resulting in German defences being deployed elsewhere and a reduced defence around the English Channel where the landings were to take place.

To disguise the real information, should any messages be intercepted, codenames were used. The five beaches were given the codenames Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword whilst the invasion itself was part of codename Operation Overlord and D-Day was known as Operation Neptune.

The landings were successful, but at a huge cost to human life and in the months that followed, Allied troops slowly moved inland. By the end of August 1944, Paris had been liberated, marking the successful end of the Normandy Invasion. Across the operation over 320,000 Allied troops had been involved.



Women of the Air Force

The British Royal Air Force (RAF) was founded towards the end of the First World War, creating the first dedicated military branch for flight. Prior to this, the existing military services of the army and the navy had their own flying corps.

Alongside the RAF, the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) was formed. Across the end of the First World War and the year following over 20,000 women were undertaking roles in the UK and abroad.

As well as administrative and domestic duties, some women took on more technical roles, such as electricians and welders. Having been set up during a time of war, the WRAF disbanded in 1920.

As the shadows of war grew ever closer over the 1930s, the government and many other organisations started preparing for the conflict that would eventually break out in September 1939.

The Women's Auxiliary Air Force, known as the WAAF, was founded in June 1939 with women being actively recruited a few months later, from September. Initial recruits enrolled into the WAAF and were free to leave if they wished until the National Service Act of 1941 had been passed. This enforced compulsory employment for unmarried women was initially for those aged 20-30 but this later expanded through the war.

Just like the WRAF at the end of the First World War, the roles that the WAAF could undertake were administrative, domestic, or technical. During their initial training of two or three weeks they covered basic subjects, such as first aid and physical training, as well as preparing them for life in the WAAF and communal living. They would also be assigned to their trade during this time, taking on further training as required.



Depending on their skills and prior experiences, women could become mechanics, barrage balloon operators, meteorological assistants, drivers, and intelligence officers, as well as nursing orderlies, working in dental, clerical and domestic roles.

During a peak in 1943, the number of women employed as WAAFs exceeded 180,000. It is estimated over a quarter of a million women served across the war.

Many women continued with their service following the end of the war in 1945 and by 1949 the WAAF once again became the Women's Royal Air Force, just as it had been during the First World War. It continued as a separate organisation until 1994, when the RAF and the WRAF finally merged into one force.



A group of WAAFs at RAF Biggin Hill, RAF Biggin Hill Museum & Chapel.



The Flying Nightingales

On 13th June 1944, one week after D-Day, three Douglas Dakota planes took off from RAF Blakehill Farm, Wiltshire. Each contained supplies, a crew and one WAAF nursing orderly. They were escorted by a squadron of Spitfires across the channel to Bazenville, near Bayeux.

These flights were to serve two purposes. The first was to deliver much needed supplies, including medical equipment and ammunition. The second was to evacuate injured servicemen back to the UK.

Corporal Lydia Alford, Leading Aircraft Women (LACW) Myra Roberts and Edna Birkbeck were the orderlies in these first three planes.

Once Corporal Alford's plane was unloaded of the supplies it was carrying, fourteen casualties were loaded to be taken back to the UK. Alford was the only one of the three to make it back straight away, Roberts and Birkbeck had to stay in France for a couple of days as the weather prevented their planes from taking off.

Despite the medical purposes of these flights, the supplies taken out contained ammunition and arms. This meant that the planes were unable to display the Red Cross, even for the journeys where they were transporting injured men back to the UK, leaving the planes vulnerable to attack from German aircraft.

Following the success of the initial flights, full evacuation began a few days later on the 18th June.

Sadly, two Flying Nightingales lost their lives while in service – LACW Margaret Walsh and LACW Margaret Campbell. The aircraft that Walsh was travelling in crashed into the sea near Calais, while Campbell's plane was shot down on 24th October 1944, near Dunkirk by a German garrison. All four crew members onboard were killed.



Personal Stories

Corporal Lydia Alford

Corporal Lydia Alford responded to a call for those with a medical background to train for air ambulance duties. While training, she learned how to deal with certain types of injury that may have been sustained in battle, such as burns and missing limbs, as well as giving oxygen and injections. The training also included hours of flying, ensuring she was prepared for the role she had signed up for.

After arriving in France on 13th June, 27-year-old Alford comforted the men she would be looking after on the return journey. She gave them water and tea, while the supplies were unloaded.

As the planes of the first three Flying Nightingales went to take off to return home, the weather took a turn for the worse and only Alford's plane was able to take off. The other two Flying Nightingales would have to wait until the next day to return home. On arriving back at base, Alford was met with a frenzy of press wanting to take her photograph and talk to her. The next morning her family found out from the newspapers what she had done the day before.

Alford continued the flights venturing further and further into Europe throughout the rest of the war. Following the end of the war, she returned to nursing at a hospital in Hampshire.

Corporal Elsie Beer

Corporal Elsie Beer became the fourth Flying Nightingale when she made her first flight to France on 18th June 1944, a few days after the initial flights. She had joined the WAAF in 1940 and by 1944 was stationed at RAF Down Ampney, becoming one of the first air ambulance orderlies based there. On her first flight, Beer was travelling to Beny-Sur-Mer, which at the time was under attack. The aircraft she was travelling in got hit by shrapnel, breaking through one of the windows. The damage was minor though and they landed safely.



As well as some of the horrific injuries the orderlies were confronted with, Beer recalled being given her red cross arm band and parachute despite not being allowed to use them. If their plane was attacked while transporting servicemen, they were required to stay with their wounded men.

During her service, Beer flew across Europe, building up to nearly 400 flying hours, helping to evacuate both British and German casualties to the UK.

Corporal Phyllis Bull

Phyllis Bull joined the WAAF as a nursing orderly in 1940 and very quickly rose up the ranks, becoming a Lance Corporal in 1941 and a Corporal the following year. Following her promotion to Corporal, she was posted to RAF Marston Moor, North Yorkshire. It was here that she experienced the tragedies of war when she witnessed a Spitfire crash during a base sports day. As one of the first people on the scene, she quickly realised that the fire would make it impossible to save the person onboard. Not long after, Phyllis's boyfriend Bernard, a wireless operator and gunner based at another local air base, was also involved in a crash. Bull and her colleagues were due to be part of the first response, as she had been before, but this time she was told not to go, and she then knew what had happened. Some of the aircrew survived this crash but Bernard did not make it out of the plane.





Other WAAF Roles

Ann Galley

Ann Galley worked as a plotter at RAF Biggin Hill between 1941 and 1944 after joining the WAAF aged 18. As a plotter, Ann Galley's role was to track the size and direction of incoming German raids. She received information on German raids from radar stations and the Observer Corps, and raids were tracked using wooden blocks displayed around a large table. These blocks showed the name of the raid and an estimate of its strength, and arrows placed behind each block showed the raid's direction. The blocks were colour coded to indicate how up to date the information was. Galley was also responsible for listening out for codewords through her earphones. In her downtime, Galley and her colleagues would help to entertain the troops at RAF Biggin Hill.

Elsbeth Henderson

Elsbeth Henderson joined the WAAF in January 1940 and was soon posted to RAF Biggin Hill, working as a teleprinter operator. RAF Biggin Hill came under attack during the Battle of Britain, at one time being bombed six times within three days. During one attack, everyone was ordered to leave, but Henderson and her two colleagues, Sgt Helen Turner, and Sgt Joan Elizabeth Mortimer, decided to stay in post and keep in contact with headquarters at RAF Uxbridge while also marking where unexploded bombs had fallen around them.

The operations room where Henderson was working eventually took a direct hit which knocked her down, but she managed to escape through a window. Henderson was awarded the Military Medal alongside Turner and Mortimer in March 1941 at Buckingham Palace. They were the first women to receive this medal.



Noor Inayat Khan

Noor Inayat Khan was born in Russia but grew up in Paris as the daughter of an Indian father and an American mother. As war got ever closer to Paris, the family decided to flee to Britain.

After arriving in the UK, Khan joined the WAAF where she was allocated to the role of a wireless operator, sending, and receiving messages through morse code. Later in the war, Khan transferred over to the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), where she was chosen to become the first female wireless operator to be put behind enemy lines, sending her to Paris to work with the French resistance to send information back to Britain. Khan was chosen due to her knowledge of Paris and the wireless training she had completed during her time in the WAAF. There was little expectation that she would survive more than six weeks.

By the time she had arrived in late 1943, the group she was due to be working with had been broken up by the Gestapo, the secret police of Nazi Germany. Despite being called home, Khan decided that she should stay to maintain that link and was able to send home vital information, all while trying to keep away from the eyes of the Gestapo. Eventually she was betrayed and was arrested. Interrogation and various unsuccessful escape attempts followed but Khan did not give away any information to her captors. She was sent to Dachau Concentration Camp where she was executed alongside three other SOE women on 13th September 1944.

Khan was posthumously awarded the George Cross for her service in 1949.



Following the end of the war in 1945, the women known as the Flying Nightingales received very little recognition for their important and life risking work, despite this they had been hugely successful in the role that were required to fill. More than 50,000 servicemen were evacuated from Europe across the few months they were working, and not a single man died while under the care of their Flying Nightingales.

In 2008, lifetime achievement awards were presented to the seven remaining Flying Nightingales by the Duchess of Cornwall, now HRH Queen Camilla.

On the 80th Anniversary of D-Day we remember not only the remarkable women who flew into the battle zone to help evacuate men, but all others involved in such a huge operation.

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