

Driven to Duty

World War Two gave many women the chance to muck-in and 'do their bit' with services such as the Auxiliary Territorial Service

It is a famous wartime photo – the future Queen in her teenage Princess Elizabeth days, smiling broadly and immaculately uniformed as she poses by the side of an Austin K2/Y ambulance. Elizabeth was the first female member of the Royal family to serve in the military,

training as a mechanic and driver in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS).

The 18-year-old was assigned the service number 230873, with the rank of honorary second subaltern – most officer ranks in the ATS were different to their male army counterparts, with this being the equivalent of second lieutenant.

By the time World War Two ended, she had become a junior commander (captain). The press, however, affectionately dubbed her 'Princess Auto Mechanic'.

By all accounts, Elizabeth rather relished her spell with the ATS. 'One of her major joys was to get dirt under her nails and grease stains in her hands, and display these signs of labour to her friends,' reported the American magazine *Collier's* in 1947. It gave her a rare chance to experience some sort of normality – or at least as close to 'normal' as possible given there was a major global conflict raging.

But for hundreds of thousands of other women during World War Two, the ATS

was their everyday life from 1938 onwards, giving them a chance to serve their country during its hour of greatest need, master new skills beyond their usual sphere, and forge new friendships with those they might not otherwise have mixed with.

For many, it would also offer their

first experience of motor vehicles; the war threw open what had previously been a very male preserve. Women fixed and drove them, as part of their duties. And, when peace returned, a lot would carry on doing so.

It was World War One that demonstrated how vital women were to any war effort, especially one so utterly all-enveloping and resources hungry. At home, they did many roles vacated by men fighting abroad, but new jobs were created such as making munitions.

On the front lines they served as doctors, nurses, cooks, mechanics, drivers and in administration roles – not always officially. In July 1917, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps - QMAAC - from April 1918) was founded, divided into four divisions: cookery, mechanical, clerical and miscellaneous. The independent First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), which dated from 1907, also had volunteers driving ambulances.



RIGHT: One of the more famous ATS photographs: the young Princess Elizabeth clearly relishing the prospect of getting to drive an Austin K2/Y ambulance

'By all accounts, Elizabeth rather relished her spell with the ATS'

LEFT FROM TOP: Jean Knox became the second chief controller of the ATS in 1941 and was a rather more dynamic figure than her much older predecessor. This was her official war portrait; A war portrait by artist Henry Lamb of chief controller Leslie Whatley, who joined the ATS in 1938 as a junior officer and led the organisation from 1943 to 1946; The first chief controller of the ATS, from 1938 to 1941, was Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan. She was, by all accounts, a somewhat forceful character who did not suffer fools gladly

Although the QMAAC was disbanded in 1921, the FANY was not. However, both these organisations – and the activities of their members – helped set the precedent for the ATS when it received its Royal Warrant during September 1938, a year before World War Two would make it an absolute necessity.

By that time, it was grimly obvious that hostilities with Germany were inevitable.



An advisory board had been established containing members of the Territorial Army, Women's Legion and the Women's Transport Service – as the FANY had renamed itself in 1937 (although the FANY acronym remained in common use).

The board decided that the ATS would fall under the auspices of the Territorial Army although, in those unequal times, those serving would only receive

two-thirds of the wages of their male counterparts.

In charge of the new ATS was Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, with the rank of chief controller. A Victorian woman of formidable character, she had considerable ability to strike fear into subordinates. Mary Baxter Ellis, the leader of the FANY, had been offered the chief ATS position but declined so she could

carry on in her existing role.

However, she did offer to supply 1,500 female motor mechanics to serve with the ATS so long as they remained independent. Unfortunately, Gwynne-Vaughan then went back on the agreement and insisted that the personnel be incorporated into ATS.

There was little love lost between the two strong-willed heads, and the resultant

argument must have been an interesting spectacle. However, it was eventually agreed that, while the mechanics would be absorbed into the ATS, they could continue to display their FANY flash. Such members became known as 'Free FANYs' and even had their own London HQ.

While this power tussle was not exactly the most auspicious of beginnings, it did at least provide the new body with an early solid platform of mechanical knowledge and experience. It lacked such valuable expertise elsewhere, with Mary, Princess Royal, writing in her capacity as controller commandant of the ATS that the service 'started with many disadvantages of inexperience, but with the great advantage of enthusiasm'.

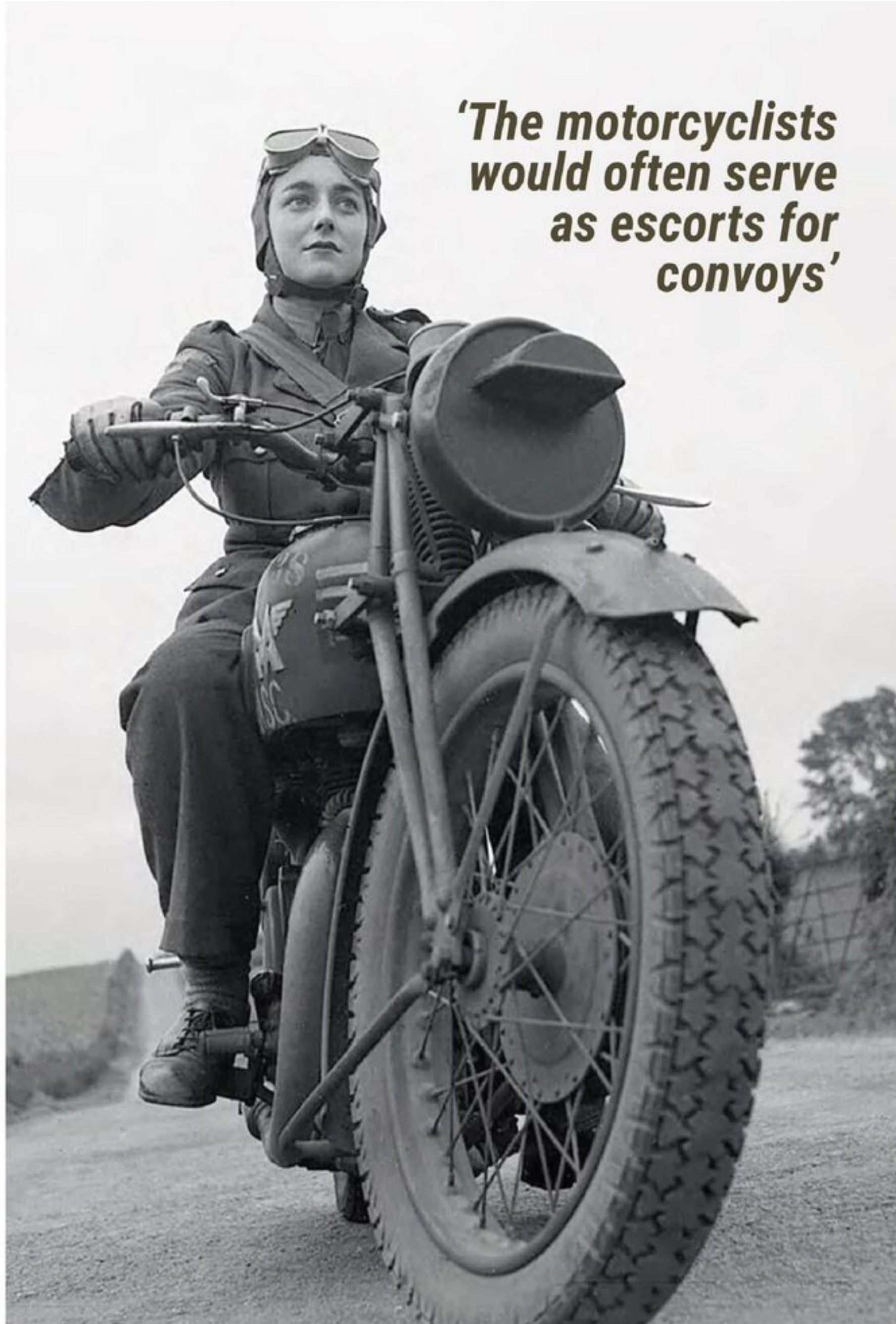
Nevertheless, despite teething troubles, the ATS grew rapidly from its original 17,000 recruits, and by mid-1941, had full military status. This meant it became subject to full military discipline and its officers would be commissioned.

Women between the ages of 17 to 43 could join, although, for those with previous QMAAC experience, the upper limit was extended to 50. Dame Helen retired in July 1941 and was replaced by the senior commander Jean Knox who, being in her early 30s, was somewhat more progressive and presented a younger, more vibrant image than her 'dowdy' and 'severe' sexagenarian predecessor.

Within a few months, ATS numbers had reached 65,000. When the National Service Act was introduced in December 1941, all unmarried women between 20 and 30 years old were called up to serve with the ATS, Women's Royal Naval Service, Women's Auxiliary Air Force or Women's Transport Service/FANY. As a result, membership peaked at over 200,000 in September 1943. By VE Day in May 1945, the ATS boasted 190,000 volunteers and conscripts.

Those joining the ATS had 36 trades and occupations available to them, in

'The motorcyclists would often serve as escorts for convoys'



ABOVE: An ATS motorcycle despatch ride on service in Northern Ireland, September 1941
BELOW RIGHT: An ATS despatch rider in Palestine, where being on a motorbike was probably rather more pleasant than in northern Europe
BELOW LEFT: A Royal Army Service Corps instructor with two ATS riders at York in May 1941



addition to the six specialisms available for those who would be employed in heavy anti-aircraft batteries. Incidentally, women were not allowed to fire the guns. Well, officially. Unofficially, it probably did happen, especially as, on some mixed batteries, the ratio of females to males was two to one.

Among the options open to those who wanted to work with vehicles was logistics, alongside the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC). It operated depots throughout the country, including one at Chilwell near Nottingham that was the primary motor transport and spares store, for everything from motorcycles to tanks.

ATS members received general training at an RAOC school and then underwent further specific training when they reached their destination; in the case of Chilwell, this could range from packing to getting an armoured vehicle ready for overseas.

By 1945, 3,500 ATS women were employed at Chilwell, with another 5,000 at sub-depots. While some performed processing and clerical functions, others collected new and reconditioned vehicles from manufacturers and then delivered them throughout Britain to new bases and ports.

But the opportunity for women to drive didn't just happen outside of the stores; commonly used inside were small Lister 'trucks' used to lug loads around the buildings. Many former ATS girls remembered these small run-arounds as rather fun.

A rather more specialised Chilwell task was waterproofing vehicles for beach landings, something which ramped up considerably as D-Day approached. On something like a tank, it was a demanding job; full servicing would have to be carried out – which involved climbing in, out and around the giant machines – before preservatives would be applied, hatches sealed and gun barrels blocked off.

All army locations that received, prepared, maintained and equipped vehicles – be they with two-wheels, four-wheels or tracked – had ATS drivers. The women had to be taught not just to cope with a variety of different machines (most of which were quite rudimentary with few creature comforts or concessions to making life easier for their drivers) but also to maintain them.

Mastering various non-synchromesh 'crash' gearboxes could be a dark art, even if you were quite familiar with them. When being delivered to new locations, the vehicles often had to be driven long distances in convoy with tight arrival times – and if one broke down and could not be repaired, it could easily hold up others.

The women had to be mechanically competent with the whole gamut of motorcycles, cars and trucks they might find themselves in charge of; a Royal Enfield 250cc bike engine was a somewhat different proposition to a 3,462cc Austin K2/Y ambulance motor. Map-reading was another vital skill, especially in the dark.

Also essential during night activities were bright yellow gauntlets. These were part of the special kit issued to ATS motorbike



A show of ATS driver and mechanic strength in Palestine



Jewish ATF volunteers at the Sarafand al-Amar training camp in Palestine

'ATS drivers were crucial in getting vital supplies and materials through in very challenging conditions'



Behind the wheel during training at the Camberley Motor Transport Company Training Centre in 1942



The 18-year-old Princess Elizabeth was the most famous member of the ATS. Her commission was valuable publicity for both the service and the Royal family



A trainee ATS driver receives instruction at the Camberley Motor Transport Training Centre in 1941



A demonstration of some heavy-duty tyre changing in Palestine

'The resumption of peace didn't mean an immediate end for the ATS'



Oiling an Austin K2/Y at the Camberley Motor Transport Company Training Centre in 1941



An ATS member washes a car at the Auxiliary Territorial Service Driving School at Camberley in Surrey, 1 May 1941



More wheel changing in Palestine



Women working on a Churchill tank at a Royal Army Ordnance Corps depot, possibly Chilwell, in October 1942

dispatch riders which also, naturally, included trousers and boots instead of the usual formal skirted uniform.

The motorcyclists would often serve as escorts for convoys, and the gauntlets were crucial so they could be seen when holding up other traffic or directing convoys during the black-out.

Discipline within the motor transport section was strict, with punishments for transgressions such as not immobilising unattended vehicles by removing the distributor rotor arm or skipping oil renewals.

One ATS girl who accidentally missed the scheduled time to change the oil on a vehicle she oversaw found herself confined to barracks for 14 days, doing latrine duty and peeling potatoes. Another found herself hauled before a military court of enquiry to answer for damage to her motorcycle after she had been involved in an accident.

She had no memory of the incident, after being unconscious for almost two days and suffering a fractured skull and concussion. Eventually, she was cleared by police witness statements that revealed a car had pulled out in front of her.

Despite there being a war on, civilian industrial disputes still broke and there were strikes, even though they had been made illegal under the Emergency Powers Act and Defence Regulations.

For example, in just the first few months of the war alone, there were 900 walkouts across the country. Where transport was affected by the stoppages, ATS drivers would often be drafted in to replace

workers, such as during several dockyard disputes. With 1944 marking the peak of wartime industrial action – the year saw more than 2,000 strikes – the ATS was kept busy not only performing essential military functions but civilian ones too.

ATS women also went overseas, where tasks would entail driving staff cars to ambulances and large trucks in unfamiliar and often hostile circumstances. Several hundred



Two ATS recruitment posters, one (RIGHT) by artist Thomas Dugdale



were sent to France during the early years of the war, only to be forced to flee soon afterwards from invading German forces. One now-legendary ATS tale involved a group hastily exiting Paris in a lorry while German forces were entering from other sides – thus becoming among the last British military personnel to leave France during June 1940.

However, the ATS was present in the Middle East and other theatres throughout the conflict and returned to Europe in the aftermath of D-Day. One, Gwyneth Oughton, found herself in Holland, where



Learning the essential aspects of a truck engine and transmission, Camberley Motor Transport Company Training Centre, 1941

a somewhat unusual order resulted in her piloting a closely-guarded lorry full of cash – possibly black market counterfeit notes, fake sterling produced by the Nazis to try and destabilise the British economy, or obsolete Deutschmarks – to be incinerated. She never did find out exactly what she had helped go up in flames.

The resumption of peace did not mean an immediate end for the ATS – there was still a vital need for transport at home and abroad in a war-shattered world.

For example, the winter of 1947 was especially harsh, with prolonged deep snow and ice being followed by serious flooding. ATS drivers were crucial in getting vital supplies and materials through in very challenging conditions. However, in February 1949, the end finally came when it was disbanded and replaced by the new Women's Royal Army Corps.

Although officially a non-combatant service, 335 ATS members were killed, 94 were reported as missing, 302 and were wounded and 20 were taken prisoner during World War Two. That should never be forgotten.

But despite the circumstances, many who served with the ATS generally seemed to have fond memories of their time. It gave them opportunities to meet new people, learn fresh abilities, discover new talents,

and feel like they were playing a vital role in supporting the country and the men they had seen go off to fight.

They found themselves involved with activities they might never have dreamt of doing. And, post-war, they brought what they had learnt back to civilian life;

it is small wonder that motoring rapidly became much less male-dominated from the late 1940s onwards.

The ATS – and the other all-female organisations like it – helped blueprint a new future for the women of Britain. Including, of course, one future queen... ◀

Princess Elizabeth during her driver training

