

# WRNS100

Celebrating the formation of **The Women's Royal Naval Service**  
and its influence on opportunities for **women in today's Royal Navy**



**Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal  
Patron of WRNS100**

# HISTORY

In 2017 the Naval Service will celebrate the centenary of the formation of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). It will also recognise the supporting role given by the WRNS to the naval service and acknowledge the transition made by women from the separate WRNS into the Royal Navy, and demonstrate the way in which the WRNS helped define the opportunities for women in today's Royal Navy.

The formation of the WRNS came at a fascinating time in our nation's social history. Prior to the start of the First World War, the Suffragette movement had been lobbying the government for greater powers for women, but it was only as the war progressed that the role of women changed.

By 1917 the Royal Navy was faced with a deteriorating manpower situation. The only option was for women to fulfil some of the shore jobs. The Admiralty decided to form a naval organisation for women, under the leadership of Dame Katherine Furse: it became known as the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS).



Previously Dame Katherine had been the Commander-in-Chief of the Voluntary Aid Detachments who had provided field nursing services on the Western Front and elsewhere. She was the ideal candidate to become the first Director of the WRNS; her leadership and example quickly set the tone of the new service.

# WORLD WAR I

It was not long before the members of the WRNS became known as 'Wrens', with ratings often affectionately referred to as 'Jenny Wrens'. The WRNS motto was 'Never at Sea' as the initial intention had been to employ Wrens in domestic or clerical jobs, such as cooks, stewards, clerks, writers and telephonists.

With manpower shortages continuing, the Wrens soon found themselves taking on many more unusual jobs. These included sail-making, driving, maintaining aircraft, signalling and coding. They positively flourished with their newly-found confidence and worth. Some were even lucky enough to find themselves working overseas in Malta, Gibraltar and Italy.

At the war's end in 1918 the WRNS had approximately 5,000 ratings and nearly 450 officers – all had shown how adaptable and capable women could be.

Wherever the Wrens had worked, camaraderie was strong with the women sharing many unique and unforgettable experiences. Strong bonds were retained, just as they were with those who later served in World War II. Even today, at naval reunions, the indelible links formed by women who joined in the post-WWI era remain very evident.



Imperial War Museum



Imperial War Museum

Imperial War Museum



# WORLD WAR II

Competition to join the WRNS was very strong. Even after the National Services Act (conscription) was introduced in 1941, many women wanted to join the WRNS over the other Services.

Like WWI, the aim had been to 'Free a Man for the Fleet' by offering the Wrens clerical or domestic jobs. But technology had moved on, and women knew they were capable of much more. New roles were offered such as Radio Operators, Meteorologists, together with sea-going Cypher Officers and Boat's Crew Wrens. Demand continued to increase, with Wrens undertaking jobs outside the formal branch structures.

Others found themselves working with the Royal Marines - a tradition that continues to the present day - while the Fleet Air Arm particularly sought Wrens out for supply or communications duties. Technical Wrens proved ideal for maintaining the Fleet Air Arm's aircraft and the equipment carried on board.

Some made the ultimate sacrifice, with the greatest single loss of life being on 19 August 1941 when 21 Wrens, twelve of whom had served together in Scarborough, were killed while on board the SS Aguila, heading for Gibraltar. This group of cypher officers and wireless operators had been the first to volunteer to serve abroad. Sadly, the ship was torpedoed and all the Wrens plus a QARNNS nursing officer travelling with the group were killed.



As D-Day drew closer, increasing numbers of Wrens worked in Combined Operations. After the Normandy landings in June 1944, some 500 Wrens went to work in Europe supporting the advancing Allies.

By the end of WW2, approximately 75,000 Wrens had served. They had proved their worth in a strong supporting role and were held in high regard.



# POST WORLD WAR II – EMBRACING CHANGE

In 1949, in recognition of the outstanding service provided by Wrens it was announced that the WRNS would be permanently established. Although it retained a separate disciplinary code, the WRNS became an integral part of the naval service, along with the Women's Royal Naval Reserve (WRNR) formed in 1952. A regular force of 3,000 was retained on the understanding that women would be excluded from seagoing, flying and weapons' training roles.

Despite many of the roles undertaken during the War being placed back in the male domain of the Royal Navy, change was inevitable. In 1970 a female meteorological officer embarked in a helicopter support ship, where she provided advice to flying operations. This event was closely followed by air mechanics who went afloat to support the helicopter squadrons, with other mechanics later taking part in a 'trial' sea deployment.

Formal integration of women began in 1976 with female officer training moving from the RN College, Greenwich, to Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. Five years later, initial ratings' training moved from HMS Dauntless in Reading to HMS Raleigh, Cornwall, where they joined the men. By now, all women had been brought under the

(previously male only) Naval Discipline Act. It wasn't long before men and women trained together on their respective officers' or ratings' initial training courses.

With everyone serving under the same Discipline Act, it paved the way for women to enter another area that had previously been the preserve of men: a major fleet establishment, HMS Mercury, welcomed its first female First Lieutenant in 1979. Eleven years later, a Chief Officer (Commander) was the first woman to take command of the Navy's flagship shore establishment, HMS Warrior at Northwood.



By now, changing employment expectations from both men and women was having an effect on naval recruitment. The watershed moment for women serving in the naval service arrived in the early 1990s. The RN asked existing Wrens (officers and ratings) to volunteer for sea service; the first group joined HMS Brilliant in October 1990.

Prior to the formal disbandment of the Women's Royal Naval Service on 1 November 1993, women had already replaced their blue badges and stripes for the gold worn by the men. At disbandment, 4,535 women were integrated fully into the Royal Navy: their 'supporting' role had finally come to a proud end.

# RIISING TO NEW CHALLENGES

The die had been cast in 1990. A condition of entry for all future entrants, men and women, would be a liability for sea service. For those Wrens who were already serving, some opted to remain non sea-going, but many seized the moment. In that same year the first woman chaplain joined the Naval Chaplaincy Service.

Quickly afterwards the Royal Marines Band Service accepted its first female recruits and the Fleet Air Arm opened up aviator roles to women: the first observer qualified in 1993. By this time women had gained the opportunity to combine a career with family life, rather than having to leave the Service on marriage. In addition, new legislation provided further assistance to women who became eligible for maternity leave benefits. The RN became a modern employer and sought to introduce, amongst other things, creches for naval mothers.



Women swiftly made their mark. In 1997 the first Principal Warfare Officer qualified; a female officer won the Queen's Sword at Dartmouth; and the first woman attained the rank of Commodore in the Royal Naval Reserve. A year later, a helicopter pilot gained her 'wings', and after taking command of their small Fast Patrol Craft, two female names appeared on the sea-going Bridge Card for the first time. The many new opportunities enabled an increasing number of women to begin rising through the ranks, and achieving greater fulfilment.



# FURTHER ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN SINCE 2000

The new Millennium heralded further successes for naval women which their Wren forebears would have been so proud to witness.

Sixty years after the Boat Crews had earned such respect from male seagoers, women achieved command of larger ships: in 2004 a minehunter and in 2012 the first major ship command, a frigate.

In the air, a female helicopter pilot was appointed to the Commando Helicopter Force, referred to as the 'Junglies' squadron: she soon found herself flying missions in Northern Ireland.

A doctor from the RN Medical Branch became the first naval woman to gain her coveted green beret by passing the exceptionally tough All Arms Commando Course in 2007; she went on to provide combat support to front line commandos. Two years later, a medical assistant was the first woman in the Royal Navy to be awarded a Military Cross for bravery during service in Afghanistan.



The first woman to qualify as a Minewarfare and Clearance Diving Officer was in 2010, and in that same year a female pilot was appointed as the first to lead and fly in the RN's Blackcats Helicopter Display Team. Another pilot became the Commander of the Maritime helicopter force, and a similar squadron accolade went to a seaman officer who, in 2012, became the first woman to command a squadron of fourteen minor war vessels.

In 2011 a female officer who had begun her career as a non sea-going, blue badge Wren rating, found herself appointed as the RN's first aircrew Senior Observer. The Fleet Air Arm has also welcomed its first



frontline Air Engineering Officer, and, in 2013, the first fully qualified female aircrew joined the Search and Rescue Air Squadron.

Another former blue badge Wren, who later transferred to the Royal Naval Reserve, was appointed as the first female Command Warrant Officer in 2010, just as the Reserves Diving Branch welcomed its first qualified female diver.

By 2013 Naval servicewomen had established a professional network to inspire and empower women further throughout their careers. The network supports the RN as an inclusive organisation, attracting talented young people, men and women, to continue the best traditions of Service life.



The Submarine Service was created shortly before the WRNS formation, but during both World Wars Wrens worked closely with submariners: they performed tasks such as repairing torpedo nets, maintaining torpedoes and depth charges, or training submariners. It was in 2014 that the first three RN female officers entered the Submarine Service having gained their 'Dolphins', and ratings are now following their lead.



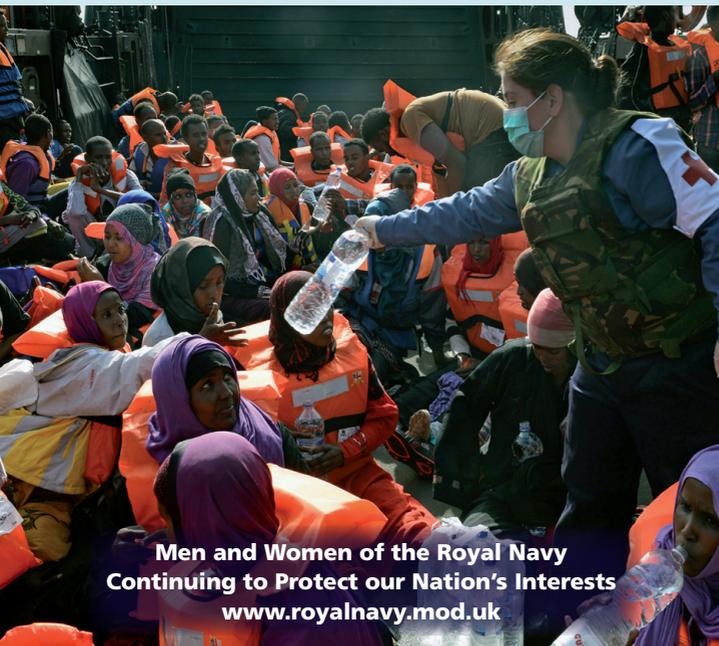
# WOMEN SERVING IN TODAY'S ROYAL NAVY

Since the formation of the WRNS, with its original motto of 'Never at Sea', life for Servicewomen has changed beyond all recognition.

The past century has witnessed changes that the ladies of 1917 could only ever have dreamed about. No longer in a supporting role, today's women of the Royal Navy serve alongside their male colleagues at sea, under the sea, in the air and on land. They have served in conflicts such as the first Gulf War, the Balkans, the 2003 Iraq War and, more recently, in Afghanistan

The fundamental day-to-day role of the Royal Navy has not changed, but today the Service relies equally on the contribution of its men and its women, to protect our Nation's interests.

- The Royal Navy's role is to provide security at sea to protect the UK homeland and international waters, our overseas territories and their citizens. This is done by its ships, aircraft, submarines and the amphibious capability provided by the Royal Marines Commandos.
- While the UK remains dependant on the sea for its future prosperity, it is essential that shipping lanes remain protected so that global trade to and from the UK can flow freely.
- Wherever they go in the world, the women and men of the Royal Navy have a responsibility to prevent conflict and act as a stabilising influence.



**Men and Women of the Royal Navy**  
**Continuing to Protect our Nation's Interests**  
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