

PIONEERS: Female Dispatch Riders of World War II

Discovering the wartime history of The Wrens

When we think of the role of women in World War II (WWII), we often envision factories filled with women wearing headscarves, riveting together airplanes, but across the Atlantic in Great Britain, things were definitely more dangerous for the women that helped with the war effort.



As more and more men were called for active duty at sea and abroad, women were trained for many duties in WWII.



During WWII, women were called up to serve in a number of on-land military roles for the British Royal Navy. One of those roles was motorcycle dispatchers for messages.

By 1939, it was clear that every able-bodied British seaman would be needed to serve on ships so the Royal Navy decided to reconstitute the Women's Royal Navy Service—nicknamed "The Wrens"—which had been disbanded after World War I. Initially 3,000 women were enlisted to perform shore based duties thus freeing up their male counterparts to go to sea. The Royal Navy made the Wren's focus on land-missions abundantly clear using the recruitment slogan "Join the Wrens and Free a Man for the Fleet."



Join the Wrens! Nearly everyone was called to some type of action during WWII, and many women decided to join the Wrens.

The first Wrens were put into positions traditionally performed by non-enlisted women. Jobs like cooks, stewards and typists were commonly filled by Wrens. As the war continued it soon became necessary to increase those roles to include jobs which previously had only been held by men. During the war, the number of Wrens peaked at nearly 74,000, and the number of different jobs they performed increased to more than 200. One of the jobs in which the Wrens received world-wide recognition was that of the motorcycle dispatch rider.



It's a dirty job—but she did it. Wrens were expected to maintain their own motorcycles.

The British Royal Navy wanted women who could not only ride motorcycles, but also maintain their own machines. The first women chosen for dispatch duty were well-known competition riders from local motorcycle race circuits. As war-time need increased, more women were trained, many of whom served with great distinction.



Many Wrens received metals of honor for their wartime effort in ensuring communications were delivered no matter what the circumstances.

An Associated Press article from May of 1942 relates the story of Wren McGeorge who was awarded the British Empire medal for bravery following her actions during a bombing raid on the town of Plymouth.

While carrying urgent messages to her commander, McGeorge's motorcycle was struck by a bomb. Although McGeorge was not injured, the motorcycle was rendered useless. Still determined to get her messages delivered, McGeorge left the wrecked motorcycle behind and ran the remaining half mile back to headquarters with bombs falling all around her. After successfully delivering her messages, she volunteered to go back out into the fray.

Hopefully they found her a new motorcycle for the next run!



Wren motorcycle dispatchers were responsible for delivering messages between station headquarters and embassies.

During the invasion of the Low Countries, the London-based Wrens worked eight-hour shifts, both day and night, to deliver messages between the Admiralty and multiple embassies. Their work throughout the Battle of Britain was highly praised as safe passage through London became increasingly difficult with the German bombing campaign wreaking havoc on the city.



A sisterhood in service—the Wrens rode for freedom through their tireless service as part of the British Royal Navy.

Although they never served at sea, a total of 100,000 women served in the British Royal Navy as Wrens during WWII. Of those, 303 were killed in service to their country. The Wrens continued in active service until 1993,

at which time they were officially integrated into the Royal Navy.

More Photos



Group photo.



Always on duty on the motorcycles.



Riding through town.



Catching the eye of others even then!



Smiles on women riders even then!

