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In 1991 I was leading an oral history project on women's experiences during and after the Second World War.¹ One of the interviewees, Yvette Baynes, startled her interviewer, a student researcher, by saying that she felt that she did more for the war effort as a Home Guard than as a secretary in a munitions factory in Birmingham. Yvette explained that the group of five women with whom she joined made their own uniforms and trained with the men. She thought that they might have been the only women Home Guards in the country since she had never heard of others; nor indeed had the interviewer.² This evidence that women joined the Home Guard needed further investigation, and I planned to return to it after completing the book based on the 1991 project, published as *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*.³ The immediate occasion for further research was my professorial inaugural lecture in 1997, for which I needed a case study of the ways in which twentieth-century wars disturbed gender relations and identities by generating pressures (frequently resisted) for women to take on tasks conventionally done by men.⁴ I wanted to discuss an area that I had not worked on before and on which there was little published work. Women and the Home Guard met these criteria.

Fragments of that history were recorded in existing accounts. It was referred to by the wartime feminist writers Vera Douie and Elaine Burton, who wrote books in the 1940s indicting the wartime Government for failing to use women to the fullest extent possible because of anachronistic prejudices. They stated, briefly and in passing, that the Labour MP Edith Summerskill had formed an organisation called Women's Home Defence, led a campaign for women's membership of the Home Guard, insisted on joining the House of Commons Home Guard herself and eventually

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wrung meagre concessions from a reluctant Government.⁵ But relatively recent histories of the Home Guard written by men (Norman Longmate, Paul MacKenzie) were dismissive of Summerskill, seeing her campaign as an irritant to the Home Guard which the Government rightly resisted.⁶ However, buried in the appendices of a wartime account, Charles Graves's *The Home Guard of Britain* (1943), was evidence that other women were accepted into the ranks of Home Guard units.⁷ In the autumn of 1997 a friend spotted an entry in the personal column of *Saga Magazine*. Mrs Gale Sharp of York thanked women former Home Guards 'who wrote to me giving details of their service' in support of her campaign for a place for women in the Remembrance Day parades. So Yvette's group of five was not alone, and other women who had joined the Home Guard were alive and possibly available to interview. Following a meeting in January 1998, Mrs Gale Sharp kindly forwarded my letters requesting interviews to the women who had contacted her through *Saga Magazine*.⁸ It was apparent that the topic of women in the Home Guard was more than a 'case': here was a hidden history waiting to be researched and needing to be told.

These investigations also suggested that the Home Guard itself was a complex and fascinating organisation. I had met it before, in a much earlier study of education in the armed forces during the war.⁹ Army education, and particularly the creation of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, were informed by the ideas – progressive in military circles at the time – that soldiers should not be 'automata' but should be trained to think for themselves, because modern warfare demanded alertness and initiative. Not only this, but motivation and commitment were important. In other words, soldiers should understand and believe in what they fought for. Wartime military thinkers such as Basil Liddell Hart and Tom Wintringham wrote in this way. Much of Wintringham's writing was concerned with the Home Guard: he argued that it was vital that both the Home Guard and the British Army should develop 'democratic discipline' as forces of 'men who feel free, and feel themselves by natural right the equals of their fellows; men who accept regulations and order ... because they realise the need for these in strengthening their collective actions'.¹⁰ More generally, he argued that soldiers of all sorts 'must be made to feel that their own contribution has value and is accepted, that the war is their war'.¹¹ Army education based on such principles was warmly supported by the military officials responsible for army welfare, but it was regarded with suspicion by more conventional members of the War Office, notably Captain H. D. R. Margesson and Sir James Grigg,

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successive Secretaries of State for War between 1940 and 1945. Later, it was seen as a radicalising factor in the British Army, and was held responsible by some Conservative politicians, including Winston Churchill and R. A. Butler, for the leftward swing that produced the Labour victory in the general election of 1945.

The Wintringham connection raised the question of whether the Home Guard was also a site in which wartime radicalism flourished. References to Wintringham's influence in the Home Guard histories referred to above, as well as in work focused specifically on him, suggest that he made a left-wing challenge concerning the character and purpose of the Home Guard, which the Government opposed.¹² As well as prompting questions about the issues at stake, the possibility that the Home Guard contained radical elements, or that it was important to the Government that it should not, invited further investigation. What did it mean, in the most general terms, for men to be members of the Home Guard? If oral history interviewing was an appropriate way to pursue the women's story, it would also help to answer these other questions. The outline of a research project on the Home Guard, embracing both women's and men's experiences, began to take shape.

In the early stages of research one thing became clear: it was not possible to ask questions about the Home Guard without invoking the BBC television situation comedy *Dad's Army*. Recent historians of the Home Guard (or their publishers) refer to the show in their titles or on their covers, using its popularity to help sell copies, but either shrug it off in their discussions of the force or counterpose their histories to it: their work reveals the 'real *Dad's Army*'.¹³ The growing body of work on popular memory, which informed the analysis in *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, suggested that rather than trying to peel off the *Dad's Army* veneer in this way, it would be more important to understand the powerful version of Home Guard history that it presents. How does this version relate to the way that the force had been represented in popular culture during and after the war? And how has it affected the way both men and women remember their own experiences in the Home Guard?

With this cluster of questions, I started a pilot project with funding from Lancaster University, and then applied to the Leverhulme Trust for more substantial funding covering the costs of employing a research associate for fifteen months.¹⁴ This brought Corinna Peniston-Bird into the project in a natural transition from her previous work on the theme of sexual integration in the military and, specifically, the representation of military women in Hollywood films.¹⁵ From the summer of 1999 we

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engaged in the research together: we explored the political struggles over the shape and character of the Home Guard; we investigated representations of the Home Guard in all kinds of wartime popular culture, and watched all the episodes of *Dad's Army* that we could catch as repeats or buy as video tapes or DVDs; and we interviewed twenty-nine men and women who had been members of the Home Guard, corresponded with others and listened to numerous interviews in the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive. Fifteen months was not long enough to complete all we had planned: in 2001–2 I gained an Arts and Humanities Research Board Research Leave Award and we both obtained further small grants from our (by then) respective institutions, to augment the research and aid the preparation of the materials for analysis and writing.¹⁶ We wrote and published together on various aspects of the project along the way.¹⁷ As far as this book is concerned, I wrote 7 chapters while Corinna drafted 2, and I redrafted and finalised every chapter in the light of extensive comments and further material from Corinna.

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Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders for permission to quote their words; pseudonyms have been used wherever requested.

Penny Summerfield

Notes

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