

New Zealand Women and the war

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My grandmother always had stories to tell of life during World War Two. Unlike my grandfather who would never tell anything but light hearted jokes of his time in the Pacific, she was willing to tell about her days in Wellington. I always knew there were terrible reasons for my grandfather's silence, but was never willing to try and break it. But the experiences of the women at that time I did get some insight into. My grandmother was a young women from the South Island, when she was Manpowered into the Post Office. It made me realise how grim things had become. Women had been forced to move beyond their traditional roles, but only when I researched further, did real respect for the women living through those times emerge.

Compared to the civilians suffering under the Blitz in London, the women of New Zealand were very lucky. Still they had seen sons, brothers, fathers and husbands being shipped off to foreign lands, never knowing if they might not return. And the departure of so many men also meant more practical problems; who was going to run the machines of industry, bring in the crops, and keep the war effort going?

It was an amazing thing to imagine how quickly, and enthusiastically the women took to the tasks left behind. New Zealand was the first nation to give women the vote, but they still found many employment avenues blocked to them, but after the War things would have to begin changing. Women had their first taste of working life, and they liked it.

But they still had charity, and a social spirit shown in the way they responded to others needs. Some sort of empathy must have been felt for those women in London bombed out of their homes, because soon women all over New Zealand were setting to, and making clothes to be sent there. They collected old clothes, and with skilful cutting and mending, unlikely to be found in modern society, produced all sorts of sensible warm clothing. Particular emphasis was put on providing for the children. Within two months more than a hundred tonnes of clothing was on its way to London.

But there were other things they could do closer to home. In their midst there were those far from what they called home, and probably desperately unsure of their fate. These service men, mostly Americans probably thought New Zealand was utterly lacking in civilisation; the movies didn't run on Sundays, the rest of town was completely closed then too, and of course there were no hamburgers to be had. But then, that must have been made up in some part by the hospitality of the people. Many took servicemen into their homes to stay while on leave, or took them in for dinner. And of course there was always dancing, organised by such social clubs as the Spinsters or the Cinderellas. It was a nice change for the women too, for their social lives were pretty barren since most of the men left. Of course there were probably as many scuffles as marriages- but like any other group of young men, some were courteous and some were not.

Auxiliary corps of all sorts were springing up all over the country. The Country Women's Institute and General Service Corp made registers of those willing to help- and the list of things that needed doing was impressive; cooking, driving, caring for children and injured and a thousand other duties. The Women's War Service Auxiliary used other women's organisations already in place to make contact with women at large. Members filled in their details, what sort of work they were willing to do, and if they could do part or full time. And despite parliaments early horror at the thought of women somehow militarised- the WWSA did eventually get a uniform in 1942.

Women soon realised with the rationing there would be very little of any fresh vegetables available. They tended crops both in their own homes, and as in Christchurch in city areas. The 'Beans for Britain' campaign showed that they were thinking about those outside the country as well. The

WWSA took over, and other cities followed Christchurch making use of vacant land, and supplying fresh produce to military camps nearby.

Transportation was vital to the country, and driving a skill highly valued. In Wellington young women with their own transport enlisted in an auxiliary transport group. They learnt first aid, stretcher bearing, motor mechanics and map reading. By 1943 there were 150 members in both Auckland and Wellington, who were engaged in meeting wounded off ships, and ambulance driving. The WWSA stepped in here also and taught general skills for 'emergencies' - in other words invasion. My grandmother was in the Post Office, an area once buzzing with male activity. But now it was transformed into a hive of female work. A lot of the women didn't come from Wellington, and not having any family meant that they lived in boarding houses in the area surrounding the business area. Life long friendships were forged in this new environment, as well as a fresh sense of independence.

For women were out there, in the community, doing things they had never done before. In 1939 there were 180,000 women in the workforce, by 1943 this had risen to 228,000 with another 8000 in the armed forces. And as well as being in shops and factories where they had been before, they were now in the Post Office, banks, railways, the Public Service and hundreds of other places that had previously been off limits. So though while things did not change immediately for women straight after the war, the mood had altered. It might still be strange for a woman to work in certain areas, but it had been shown to be not impossible; ground had been broken. And it's nice to think that all this to come was started because women cared enough to put themselves out for others. There's a beautiful symmetry to that.

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