



FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Violet Long and the *Warilda*

Among the 28 volumes of the Official British *History of the Great War* dealing with the Army's operations in the First World War, none mentions the Women's Services [1], but there is much to be told, and it is in the story of the sacrifice of the Women's Corps that Violet Long's name is carved with pride.

Violet's Family Background

Violet Beatrix Alice Lambton Way was born in Gosforth, Northumberland, on the 30th April 1883, the daughter of Colonel Wilfred Way and Henrietta Way (née Ross). She was a beautiful young lady, boasting a glorious head of long, golden hair and she certainly knew how to look her best, judging by a portrait that exists of her [2]. But she had a heart and soul to match, for she became a heroine of the First World War; from the outbreak she helped with the training of a large number of candidates in the Parish Hall for the examination by the St John Ambulance Society, but greater things lay ahead for her when she was to play a pivotal rôle in the mobilisation of Britain's women in the War. Even their local vicar admired her, reportedly calling her *A splendid specimen of womanhood*. [3]

In 1901, aged just eighteen, Violet married Captain William Long, who was serving in the Remount Service attached to the 4th Hussars. The Remount Service was responsible for the purchase and training of fresh horses for the cavalry and the 4th Hussars, a regiment of light horsemen famous for their charge at Balaclava as much as for their polo team, had just parted with a young subaltern who would become their most illustrious son, one Lieutenant Winston Churchill. At the time of their marriage, Violet had been living with her father, now retired aged just 55, at St Thomas Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire. After they were married, the Longs moved to the fine coastal town of Clevedon in north Somerset, where her husband took a commanding lead in local politics and was Chairman of Clevedon Council for fifteen years, only stepping down in 1923. They had two daughters.

Women in War

Violet's elder sister, Florence, was born in 1875 and the two sisters would work together closely throughout the war, in a challenge that changed the course of history for women in a hidebound society that did its best to keep women in their place. But you don't mess with the determined women of Britain's aristocracy, where sympathy for the feminist movement had all the benefit of social influence. Such a blend can make a strong force for change and it was they who inspired a social revolution with women playing an active part in national life, which saw women equal in all classes working in a man's world of war. It took a huge march in London to make that change happen, when, on the 17th July 1915 [4], something between 20,000 and 50,000 women marched through London with a deputation sent to Lloyd George, for the recognition of a rôle for women in war. A few days later, at Londonderry House in London, Edith Vane-Tempest-Stewart, the Marchioness of Londonderry, formed the Women's Legion, which comprised volunteers who took over much of the Army's work



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with cookery, canteen, clerical and motor transport sections, freeing up male soldiers to fight and support the front line. Their mission:

To provide a capable and efficient body of women whose services can be offered to the State as may be required to take the place of men; to train and provide disabled sailors and soldiers with useful and permanent employment; to organise such industries as may be useful to the State.^[5]

Under special authority granted on the 3rd August 1915, the Cookery Section of the Women's Legion became the first corps of women to be officially employed with the Army during the First World War, and the first group, of twenty women cooks, were sent to Dartford Convalescent Hospital. It was, of course, a success; indeed, it was this section in which Violet and Florence volunteered for the Women's Legion from its very formation, and donned the military-style uniform which saw Violet's cascading hair cut short. She had a job to do.

With the success of the Women's Legion beyond doubt, a conference on *The Organisation of Women employed by the Army (in connection with Compulsory Service)* was held in January 1917; it is the first recorded discussion at the War Office about employing a corps of women in the Army. Eleven men - and one woman, Florence, leading the Women's Cookery and Housekeeping Section of the Women's Legion - attended, and the Adjutant General invited them to put forward their views with regard to the organisation of women employed in the Army, with the specific exclusion of the Nursing Services [6].

The sisters had been indefatigable in their work, as the need for the Women's Legion to support the Army was leading to rumours that they would soon be serving in France; and the rumours were true. In February 1917 Florence was appointed Controller of the cookery and domestic section, while Violet became her Deputy. These may sound strange titles, but there were no officer ranks in the Women's Corps. By now, even the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Sir Douglas Haig, had been persuaded into the belief that women could play a vital rôle in the British Army; in March he wrote to the War Office from his headquarters in France:

The principle of employing women in this country (France) is accepted and they will be made use of wherever conditions admit.^[7]

For all that, the business of changing social attitudes was long, slow and painful, and there remained much resistance to the idea of women in controlling positions; even in positions of equality with men in the workplace. Nevertheless, when change became inevitable, war leaders claimed the idea as their own; Wynn^[8] states that General Sir Henry Lawson claimed it as his plan because too many male soldiers were employed on 'soft', or non-military duties, and that he had persuaded the director of the War Office to approve a new force which would amalgamate the Women's Legion with other Women's corps to form the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), which followed in July 1917, under the command, or rather Control, of a redoubtable Scots doctor, Alexandra Mary Chalmers Watson.



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When the women in the WAAC were first sent to the battlefields in France, there were just 14 cooks; Florence was Controller of the cooks, and Violet would go overseas to gather her reports. By the time of the Armistice, 84 members of the Women's Corps had been killed or died during the war, from German artillery barrages or aerial bombardment and a further 103 died later from wounds or illness [9].

Not long after its formation, in April 1917, Queen Mary became their commander in chief and the name was changed to reflect her patronage [10] when, in 1918, the WAAC officially became Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC) [11], with Dr Chalmers Watson re-appointed as Chief Controller and senior officer. By February, though, her constant struggles had taken their toll and, when her son fell ill after an appendectomy, she resigned as Chief Controller, when she was succeeded by Florence, and Violet became Deputy Controller [12].

Violet and Florence had a great deal to contend with, to deal with prejudice of the seen and unseen, in the Women's Corps. In the last months of 1917, an increasing number of damaging stories and rumours were spreading. A clerk at the Nottingham Employment Exchange reported that three women who had volunteered for the WAAC had withdrawn their applications because they had heard *that the Corps was an organised body of camp followers* [13] – a traditional military euphemism for prostitutes. Indeed, the prejudice was everywhere, and bridged all classes; a Scots Trade Union official claimed that WAAC girls and soldiers were to be seen in large numbers walking together in the principal promenade and other streets in Boulogne as late as 11.30 pm and *for all that he saw there, he would be surprised if there is not some solid foundation for the stories in circulation* [14].

Although non-military, regulations for discipline were strict and breaches could result potentially in civil proceedings in law. Still, between Jan 1917 and Nov 1918, some 57,000 women volunteered, of whom 6,023 were sent overseas, and only 37 were sent home for incompetence or indiscipline, 21 of whom had become pregnant by British or Allied soldiers [15].

In support of the strict discipline that they tried to maintain, Florence had ruled that pregnant women – whether married or unmarried - were to be discharged from the Corps on medical grounds, as soon as a Medical Board had confirmed their pregnancy.[16]

Violet was awarded the OBE in the New Year's Honours List of 1918 for her work; Florence was later made a Dame. By now the Longs had a second property, closer to London in Bedford Park, where Violet could be closer to work, while her husband was serving in Egypt.

Violet's Fate with the Warilda

In the summer of 1918, Violet had taken over a contingent of staff to France to work with the American Expeditionary Forces and was busy gathering information for a report to her sister on how the QMAAC's service with the Allied forces was progressing. With her work



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completed, she managed to get a berth back to England on board a Hospital Ship, the *Warilda*, which was due to sail from Le Havre with wounded soldiers bound for Southampton and the Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley.

The *Warilda* was an elegant passenger liner that was completed for the Adelaide Steamship Company just two years before the outbreak of war. She had to serve the demanding East-West Coast Australia service, so she had to be fast, with a speed of 16 knots, and also had to be luxurious for the competitive run, with twice the capacity for first class than for second class passengers [17]. She was requisitioned for war service as a troopship for the Australian Expeditionary Force and then, in 1916, following the carnage on the Somme and the serious lack of hospital ship accommodation, she was converted to a hospital ship, for which she was well-suited. In accordance with Article 41 of the Manual of Naval War [18], hospital ships, enjoyed full protection from attack:

Military hospital ships, that is to say, ships constructed or assigned by States specially and solely with a view to assisting the wounded, sick and shipwrecked, the names of which have been communicated to the belligerent Powers at the commencement or during the course of hostilities, and in any case before they are employed, shall be respected, and cannot be captured while hostilities last.

To avoid any error by enemy submarine commanders, she complied with the demands set out in Article 41 identifying herself as a hospital ship, with her white superstructure, yellow funnel, green band along the white hull and large red crosses, which gave her the protection of the International Committee of the Red Cross. On the 2nd August she sailed from Le Havre under the command of Captain Sim, with a crew of 115, practically all from Southampton and some 600 wounded [19], with a total of 801 persons on board. It was a trip that they had been well-used to, having made it some 180 times in recent months.[20]

The Australian War Memorial described the night as very dark, but the sea was smooth and visibility was about half a mile, so there could have been little room for any mistaken identity that she was a hospital ship.

Miss Charlotte Trowell of the QMAAC was acting as orderly to Violet on the voyage home. The Daily Mail described her as a smart, well-spoken young lady from Hull [21]. Charlotte spoke to them of her last meeting with Violet, that night:

Soon after I had gone to my bunk Mrs Long came to see me and said, "Are you comfy?" and gave me some chocolates. She had been very kind to me on the vessel.

At 01.35, in the dead of night, Hans Kükenthal was in command of UC-49 when he fired a single torpedo [22] at the hospital ship [23]. He had given no warning. The torpedo hit the ship right aft on the starboard quarter, disabling the *Warilda*'s starboard propeller; but the port engine could not be shut down because the engine room had been flooded, and the steering gear blown away, so the ship continued moving in a circle at about 15 knots, almost full speed. It was a situation that spelt catastrophe for launching lifeboats.



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Miss Trowell recalled her story for the Daily Mail:

I was thrown out of bed by the shock. An American officer who remembered I was there had come down and helped me on deck. As soon as I got there the staircase was blown up. There was no panic whatever.

An American wounded officer and an Australian helped me into the boat, which was filled with wounded men. The boat was lowered by the davits, but as the Warilda was sinking the small boat became so lopsided that a portion of the rope on one side by which it was suspended had to be cut. On reaching the water the boat capsized, and we were thrown into the sea. I clung to some rope and I could feel the cold hand of someone drowning gripping me by the shoulder. I thought the end had come, but I was able to cling to some rope and was pulled into another boat. I shall never forget the heroism and self-sacrifice of the poor wounded men who insisted on wrapping me in their saturated blankets.

The scene is vividly before me now.... Drowning men clung to one another in the darkness, and their groans were to be heard all around. There was a good deal of water in the boat, and one of the soldiers was fixing the plug when someone remarked, "It's a woman!"

Clinging to the boat, I recognised Mrs Long, and I heard her exclaim, "Oh save me. My feet are fastened. I have lost a foot."

Charlotte caught her by her hair – her beautiful hair so well captured in the portrait of her youth – and held on, for someone to help her get her into the boat. All Violet said was, "You are hurting me."

Sapper Foster of the Royal Engineers survived the attack and, as he lay in his hospital bed, told the Nottingham Evening Post of how he saw the crew starting to lower away boats and Mrs Long must have fallen on the gunwale, for she was half in the boat and half out when it swung against the ship's side. The boat crashed down, still in the rope falls that had held it in its davits, as Private Williams of the Welsh Guards added that her legs must have become entangled in the rope falls, and she was crushed, helplessly, against the ship.[24] Charlotte Trowell recalled:

Her feet had become entangled with some rope, and one of them was severed. Her limbs were freed, and a sailor, who belongs to Southampton, tried very hard to get her into the boat, but she collapsed and fell back into the sea and disappeared. I shall never forget her terrible end, for she had been very kind to me.

Characteristically, Violet was the last woman to leave the ship.

Journalism throughout much of the war had been very strictly controlled by the British Government, and the Daily Mail had good cause to print copy that supported morale and anti-German hatred on the Home Front in equal measure [25], but Miss Trowell's account was faithfully researched and confirmed by Samantha Philo-Gill in 2017.[26]



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Post Script

After the end of the war, the Allies were determined that there should be some accountability for war crimes, of which the torpedoing of the *Warilda* is a shocking example. Accordingly, they submitted a list of some 900 names of individuals accused of committing alleged war crimes to the German government – but the Germans refused to extradite any German citizens to Allied governments, on the basis that it would have been unconstitutional and, instead, made a counter-proposal that they be tried in Leipzig under German law; hence, they became known as the Leipzig Trials. By May 1920, though, the list of accused persons had shrunk to 45 and, in the end, only twelve individuals were actually arraigned. Kükenthal had been killed, and no accomplice in the attack on the *Warilda* was ever brought to trial.[27]

Written and researched by volunteer Simon Daniels.

Sources

[1] Mention does occur in the Air Operations section of the Official History; see www.greatwar.co.uk/research/books/british-official-history-volumes.htm

[2] See www.livesofthefirstworldwar.org/lifestory/5145522

[3] Much genealogical research is conducted on-line, thanks to which background information on Violet's life can be found via <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/topic/34362-violet-alice-lambton-long-memorial/>

[4] Often wrongly described as a suffragettes march; but footage exists, see www.player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-womens-march-through-london-1915-online

[5] Gould, Jennifer, *The Women's Corps, the establishment of women's military services in Britain*. A thesis presented for the degree of PhD, University College London 1988. Accessed via www.discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1317607/1/260868.pdf

[6] Gould, Op Cit

[7] See www.thenational.scot/news/15185364.Back_in_the_day__Mona_Chalmers__general_in_battle_with_the_sexists/

[8] Wynn, S and T Wynn, 2017, *Women in the Great War*, Pen and Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley

[9] Wynn, Op Cit

[10] Wynn, Op Cit

[11] See www.qaranc.co.uk/Queen-Marys-Army-Auxiliary-Corps-History.php

[12] For records see National Archives: War Office, *Queen Marys Army Auxiliary Corps, 1918-1920*; War Office, *Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, 1917-1918*; see National Archives WO 398

[13] Gould, Op Cit

[14] Gould, Op Cit

[15] Wynn, Op Cit

[16] Gould, Op Cit

[17] Plowman, P, 2007, *Coast to Coast: The Great Australian Coastal Liners*, Rosenberg Publishing, Kenthurst NSW

[18] *Manual of the Laws of Naval War*, Oxford, Adopted by the International Institute of International Law, August 9, 1913; see <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/1913a.htm>

[19] *Nottingham Evening Post*, 6 August 1918. See www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/

[20] See www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/ss-warilda-troopship-hospital-ship-ambulance-transport-wreck

[21] *Daily Mail*, 6 August 1918; see www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/

[22] He would survive just 5 more days, being killed after attacking, but only damaging, a British steamer on the 8th August. See



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www.uboaat.net/wwi/men/commanders/166.html

[23] The Daily Mail reported eye-witness evidence suggesting that the submarine had fired a second torpedo.

[24] Nottingham Evening Post, Op Cit

[25] For further reading see www.spartacus-educational.com/FVWjournalism.htm

[26] Philo-Gill, S, 2017, The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in France, 1917-1921: Women Urgently Wanted, Pen and Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley

[27] Willis, J, 2014, Prologue to Nuremberg: The Politics and Diplomacy of Punishing War Criminals of the First World War, Westport