

Pida Ripley

THIS YEAR one of Britain's oldest voluntary organisations for women, the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry Corps (FANY), celebrates its 80th anniversary and can reflect, with justifiable pride, upon a long history of impressive service. It is a history which has led its members to become the first women in military uniform — although to this day it is a non-military organisation! Corps activities during both world wars have included driving ambulances and trucks; nursing the injured and supplying nurses for typhoid wards; working in Advanced Aid Stations; serving with foreign armies; working as wireless operators and coders; training as agent-saboteurs; working with the Resistance Movements in Occupied Europe, and in some instances giving their lives in the process.

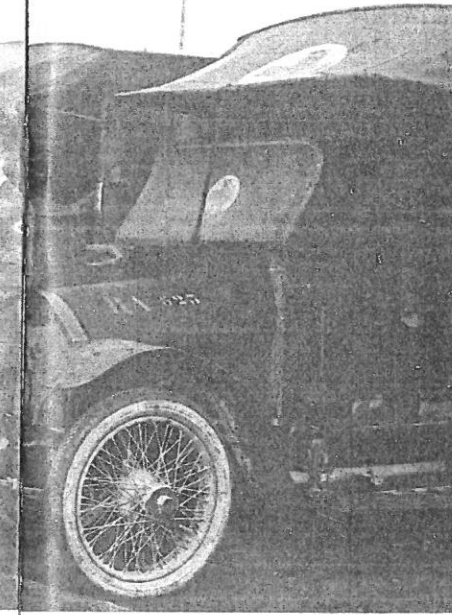
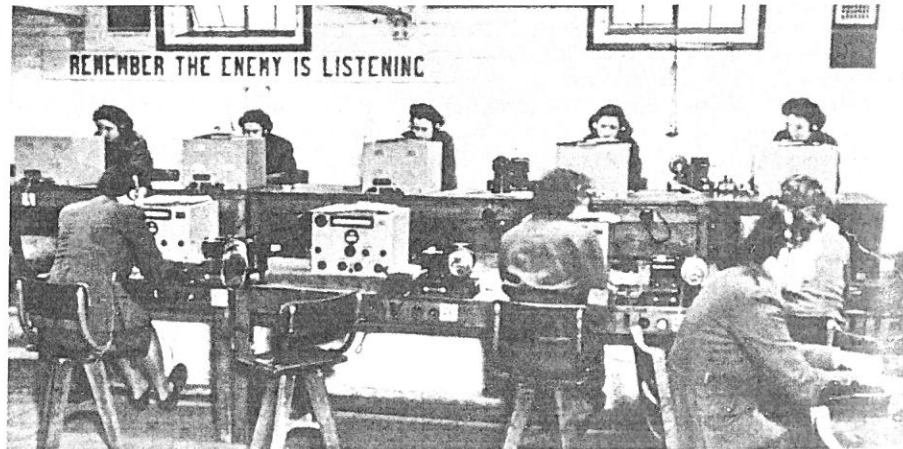
This illustrious Corps was founded by a cavalry sergeant-major who, when injured during Kitchener's Sudan Campaign, had seen that there was a need for a 'Connecting Link' — between the fighting units and the base . . . where nursing services were provided. Nine years later, in the year of Haldane's Territorial and Reserve Forces Act of 1907, Sergeant-Major Baker founded the Corps and placed its services at the disposal of the Government in the event of hostilities. In peacetime adequate and efficient training in various skills would be undertaken by the Corps thus enabling the Government to call upon its service in whatever way may be found necessary in times of national emergency. Members had to pay an enrollment fee, provide their own uniforms and qualify in First Aid, horsemanship, veterinary work, signalling and camp cookery.

Five years later the Corps had parted company with its founder but was receiving substantial support from the Brigade of Guards. The War Office, however, with the outbreak of war in 1914, declined to make use of the Corps and in doing so completely underestimated the resourcefulness of the FANYs for by October these determined young women were commencing their wartime service — working for the Belgian and French Governments!

Working as nurses and drivers, the only women drivers in France, they rapidly established a reputation for doing well at any and every job undertaken. The British Government finally approached the Corps in 1916 and consequently the FANYs, until the Armistice, ran the 'Calais Convoy', transporting the endless stream of battle-field casualties. At Ypres, Flanders, the Somme, under gas attack at Hellfire Corner, in exploding munition dumps and throughout the air bombardment upon Calais 450 FANYs worked alongside the men. A testimonial to their valiant efforts are the 16 Military Medals, 27 Croix de Guerre and various other medals awarded

# FANY

## THE CONNECTING LINK



Above:  
Members of the 'Calais Convoy'  
photographed in 1917.

Left:  
Marble Arch 1910 — Sir Francis Vane seen  
with FANYs during a recruiting drive.

Bottom left:  
FANY wireless operators at SOE.

Below:  
A dispatch rider of FANY's Polish Unit.



in recognition of 'their bravery with disregard to personal danger'.

Such service ensured the Corps emerged from the war as a well-established and highly respected organisation but the inter war years provided a major challenge as, in common with other such organisations, membership declined. The General Strike in 1926 was to afford further and important recognition for the Corps became the only women's organisation to be officially employed by the War Office. The appointment in 1933 of HRH Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone as President, and subsequently Commandant-in-Chief, of the Corps proved to be a turning point for recruitment levels began to rise. The Corps was to receive the unstinting support of their first Royal Patron for 44 years and upon her death in 1977 HRH Princess Anne honoured the Corps by assuming her mantle.

By the late 1930s the spectre of another war was looming large and consequently the Government began developing plans for the creation of a 'womens' service'. The FANYs were seen to be the nucleus for this new service but the Corps, as ever fiercely independent, refused to surrender its identity. The Government applied pressure by warning there would, therefore, be no job for the Corps in the event of a war. A reluctant compromise was reached; the newly founded Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) would receive major assistance from the Corps in the form of raising 150 motor companies and establishing an Officers and NCO's training course at Camberley. These women were to be known as the FANY-ATS and it was they who had the honour of teaching the Queen, then Princess Elizabeth, to drive in 1945.

Government pressure did not, however, persuade all the FANYs to relinquish their freedom by being incorporated into the ATS. Dubbed the 'Free Fany's' a small but steadfast group were eventually responsible for the dramatic renaissance of the Corps.

Following the fall of Poland the remnants of the Polish Army began arriving in Britain. Intent upon forming a new fighting force the Poles faced problems of acquiring vehicles and equipment but their biggest problem was their lack of knowledge of both the country and the English language. The FANYs, to quote a Polish soldier, 'became the first link between ourselves and the country which offered us hospitality at this critical moment'. Fulfilling once again its self-sought role as a 'connecting link' the Corps undertook various support roles, acted as interpreters, taught English, drove ambulances, trucks and cars, ran canteens, trained the Polish women and went on manoeuvres with the Polish forces. All FANYs serving with the Poles wore the Polish eagle on their uniforms. A measure of the respect and affection afforded the Corps by the Polish Forces was evidenced at General

Sikorski's funeral where the FANYs were the only British unit present.

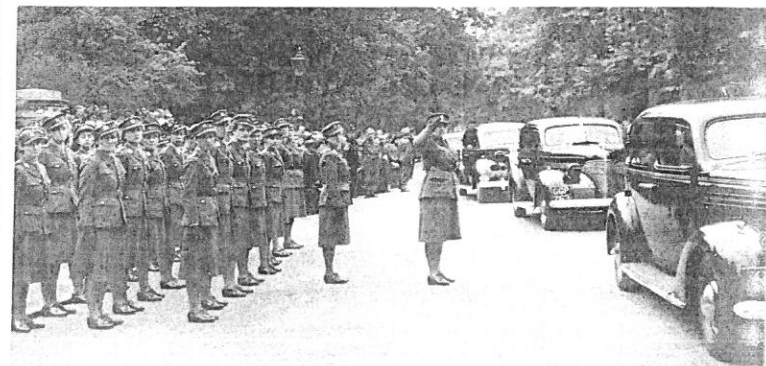
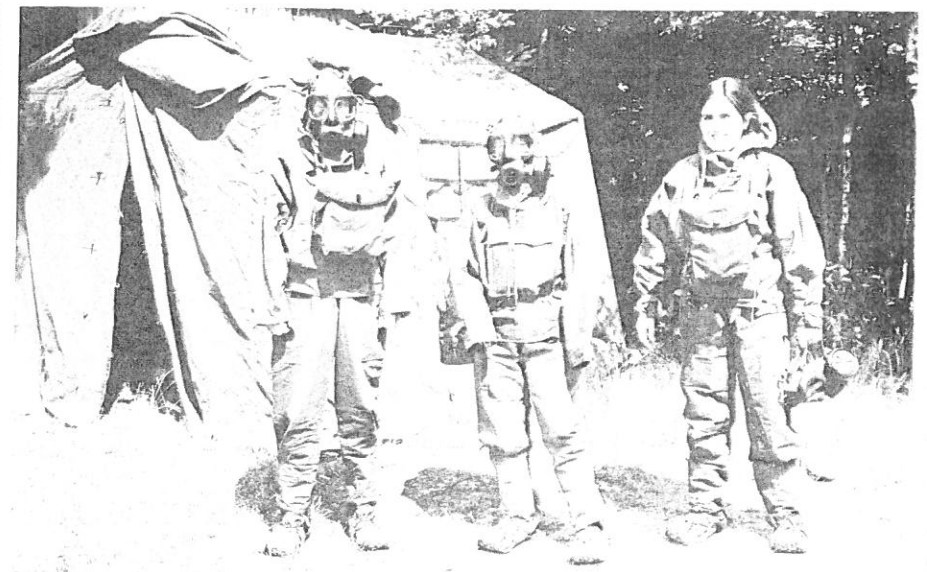
In 1942 a number of FANYs were recruited as wireless operators for the Auxiliary Units — a clandestine army trained to harass the Germans if they invaded Britain. The Corps' unique role, however, was to be with the newly created Special Operations Executive (SOE).

The unofficial status of the FANY Corps meant its members unlike the ATS, were not restricted to non-combatant duties and could, therefore, carry and use small arms. This was seen as a major asset by SOE who, requiring women to undertake all manner of confidential work, saw in the FANYs a logical partner. Eventually some 2,000 FANYs served in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle and Far East, working on Communications. Colin Gubbins, SOE Director of Operations and Training later said, 'wireless was the most valuable link in the whole of our chain of operations'. Once again the FANYs had assumed a role as a 'connecting link'.

Within SOE some FANYs were trained as agent-saboteurs and parachuted into Occupied Europe to help the Resistance Forces. Thirteen of those intrepid women were captured and murdered by the Nazis at the Dachau, Ravensbruck and Natzweiler concentration camps. Their story of bravery and undeniable heroism was finally told at the 1946 War Crimes Trials. Noor Inayat Khan, Yvonne Rudellat, Violette Szabo were some who did not survive. Szabo on her second foray in France ran into an ambush but enabled her companion to escape by maintaining fire until her ammunition ran out. She was executed in 1945 at Ravensbruck and, posthumously awarded a George Cross. Other agents did survive; Odette Sansom, awarded a George Cross, her heroism was beyond compare; Pearl Witherington — so efficient a saboteur the Germans placed a million-franc price upon her head; Lise de Baissac who built a circuit and trained the maquis in weapon-handling and later welcomed the liberating American Forces wearing her FANY uniform thus living up to a World War 1 soldier's comment that FANY really meant 'First Anywhere'.

Hundreds of FANYs served with Force 136 in the Far East and FANY Welfare units were involved in welcoming back to freedom the walking skeletons from the POW camps. Yet again the Corps had rendered substantial service to the Country in its time of need. FANYs served in 44 countries, 52 died and, as in World War 1, a long list of medals were awarded, including three George Crosses and two George Medals.

The postwar years provide yet another challenge for the Corps in their search for a useful role in a nuclear world. Now securely based at the Duke of Yorks Barracks in Chelsea, the Corps still maintains a highly disciplined and multi-talented membership which can undertake a wide range of essential work in the event



of a war or national crisis. Following on their communications work for SOE the Corps has become a Signals Unit. According to the current CO Sheila Parkinson, the aim of the Corps is 'to offer a constructive voluntary service in the field of communication, both from a technical and language aspect, a combination not provided at the present time by any other voluntary organisation.'

Since 1974 the Corps has undertaken a commitment to the City of London Police

Top: FANY-ATS motor companies.

Top right: The Queen visiting Princess Elizabeth at Camberley in 1945.

Above: Tania Szabo, Violette Szabo's daughter with Lord Wavell, in 1948.

Above right: The FANYs were the only British unit present at General Sikorski's funeral.

"WE WILL REMEMBER THEM"

Mrs. M. Borel  
Shot at Natzweiler

Mrs. Eliane Plewman  
C. de G.  
Shot at Dachau

Mrs. Yolande Beckman  
C. de G.  
Shot at Dachau

Mrs. Violette Szabo  
C. de G.  
Shot at Ravensbrueck

Miss Madeline B. G.  
Died in France on 11th



Miss Doreen Bloch  
Shot at Ravensbrueck

Miss Diana Rowden  
Martyred by injection at  
Natzweiler

Miss Vera Leigh  
Martyred by injection at  
Natzweiler

Mrs. Cicely Lither  
Sent to gas chamber at  
Ravensbrueck

Miss Lennox Burrows  
Shot at Ravensbrueck

Miss Joan P. K.  
Shot at Dachau

Photographs of Mrs. Yvonne Reddell and Miss Madeline Darnworth (left) by permission of the FANYs.

to be on call 24hr a day to provide a mobile communications unit in the event of a major incident within the City. An inexplicable headlong crash of a tube train into the buffers at Moorgate Underground station provided the first emergency in 1975. Within an hour the FANYs were on duty, where they remained for four days, operating the Casualty Bureau.

Additionally the FANYs have, since 1983, been trained to work in small Army Communication Centres during times of tension or national emergency when it becomes necessary to operate 24hr a day. In both commitments the Corps is providing that ever vital, ever changing 'Connecting Link' first seen by its founder, Sergeant-Major Baker.

Currently members of this elite Corps can receive training in radio telephony, morse, map reading, advanced first aid, unarmed combat, shooting and parachuting. A typical FANY is considered to be

always an individualist, extremely energetic, self-sufficient, reliable — with a well-developed sense of humour and without doubt, a deep inner strength. Above all there is a passionate commitment to serve fellow countrymen and women and so long as there are wars, disasters and other emergencies, the Corps will ensure there will always be a FANY somewhere, living up to the Corps' motto *arduis invicta* and acting as that ever vital 'Connecting Link'.

Top: Modern FANYs during NBC training at Crowborough.

Above left: Since 1983 FANYs have been trained to work in Army Communications Centres during times of international tension or in a national emergency.

Above: HRH Princess Anne, the Commander-in-Chief, visiting a FANY M/T unit.