

## Same-sex desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939-1945

Britain entered the Second World War on 3 September 1939 following the bitter disappointment of the Munich crisis.<sup>1</sup> Economic austerity caused by the economic downturn of 1929 and public pacifism in the aftermath of the First World War had limited the wholesale modernisation of the Armed Forces and rendered the Army precariously under strength.<sup>2</sup> It was only thanks to a rapid and desperate process of rearmament and mobilisation that Britain was able to face the prospect of war at least partially prepared. Amongst the population there was a feeling of ‘resigned determination’ and little evidence of the popular enthusiasm that had dominated the early days of the First World War.<sup>3</sup> ‘Equality of sacrifice’ was the clarion call of both the press and the government and it seemed to encapsulate a major political shift to the left.

The initial phase of the war, which became known as the ‘phoney war’, tested the resilience of the British populace. Women and children from towns and cities were evacuated into the countryside and blackout restrictions were one of many new regulations and circumstances that altered old rhythms of life. Arms production increased rapidly and the government began to introduce a series of acts that would result in the compulsory conscription of all men between the ages of 18 and 41 and the mobilisation of women on a scale that had never been seen before.

These changes in social context simultaneously disrupted lives and engendered new opportunities, not least for men and women who desired members of the same sex. The aim of this chapter is to focus on the experiences of these individuals, and specifically on those who joined the British Armed Forces during the war. 6,508,000 men and women served between 1939 and 1945 and it is possible that as many as 1,179,000 experienced some form of same-sex intimacy.<sup>4</sup> Indecency, the catch-all term for sexual activity between men, contravened military law and prosecution could result in a lengthy prison sentence and dismissal. In the women’s services, same-sex activity was not illegal but lesbians were overwhelmingly viewed as a dangerous contagion. As this chapter will go on to explore, what is remarkable about the Second World War is that it

exposed a disjuncture between the law and its application and moreover, created conditions in which same-sex expression could flourish.

When the war began in 1939, the medical boards that inspected the bodies of potential recruits did not actively look for signs of queerness. Testing was quick (five minutes per candidate) and unsystematic and even those who displayed evidence of same-sex desire whether actual or feigned, were accepted, which could suggest lack of a policy, general ignorance, wilful blindness, or most likely, a sense that no-one should be exempt from service. At the time, civilian and military society put its faith in the physical and moral redemption offered by the training square. This meant that same-sex desire, viewed as it was as a moral crime rather than an innate condition, could be cured by discipline, exercise and three square meals a day. This, combined with the wartime discourse of 'equality of sacrifice' meant that very few men and women were turned away from service because of the way that they presented their sexuality. One of the only exceptions is Quentin Crisp, the most audacious queer man of his generation and someone who was quick to offer verbal confirmation of the board's suspicions that he was indeed 'suffer[ing] from a sexual perversion.'<sup>5</sup>

Queer personnel that found themselves fit for service were sent for initial training to one of a number of primary training units scattered around the country. It was here that they were moulded into service personnel and forced to create new hybrid forms of family from amongst their peers and superiors. Although many experienced profound dislocation during this period of initial training, others quickly discovered that, in spite of the outwardly heteronormative nature of the Armed Forces and the illegality of same-sex activity between men, some elements of service helped to facilitate a distinct queer subculture. The most useful way of understanding elements of this culture is through John Howard's concept of *homosex*, a term which designates same-sex sexual activity but which makes no assumption about the sexuality of its participants.<sup>6</sup> In the male branches of the services, perhaps the most frequent and widely accepted manifestation of *homosex* was mutual masturbation. Such activity was overwhelmingly viewed as a harmless

source of sexual relief which was simply more satisfying than solo masturbation because the pleasure was controlled and directed by somebody else's hand. In reference to the Navy, John Beardmore, a queer former sub-lieutenant recalled, 'Sailors were a fairly randy lot and masturbation was not at all uncommon. You could go down in the middle watch which was twelve midnight to four and hear a whisper come from a hammock, someone saying "Give us a wank", which was just completely accepted by the lower deck ratings'.<sup>7</sup> On the lower deck, the act of masturbating a fellow sailor was known colloquially in naval slang as a 'flip', a term which suggests that the activity was both understood and fairly commonplace.<sup>8</sup> In the Army too, sex between men was often viewed by officers and other ranks as a legitimate response to the absence of women and the need for safe sexual relief. In summing up homosex between his comrades in the RAF, Frank Bolton observed, 'It went on between friends. There were lots of... liaisons between people who were not naturally queer. They [officers] turned a blind eye because they knew it helped people who would never dream of leaving their wives'.

There can also be little doubt that some of the organisational practices that gave shape to the three forces actually worked to facilitate homosex. In the Army and the RAF the system of employing young boys as batmen who acted as orderlies for their officers was sometimes rooted in sex. Both Richard Briar, who served in the Army, and Dennis Campbell, a former flight engineer in the RAF, described the relationships between officers and their batmen as part and parcel of the system.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, in his history of queer Britain, Alkarim Jivani claims that sexual relationships were 'enshrined in the structure of the Navy' through the 'wingers and oppos' system.<sup>10</sup> 'Wingers' were senior officers who were assigned to mentor new recruits whereas 'oppos' were seamen of a similar age and rank to the new men who were expected to guide the recruits. 'Wingers' sometimes took advantage of this hierarchical, paternalistic relationship (and arguably, the vulnerability of their new crewmates) and conducted sexual relationships with their matelots. John Beardmore joined the Navy as a teenager and almost immediately became a target for young married officers who wanted to become his 'winger'. He also spoke of 'oppos' who conducted affairs with one

another and later went on 'to become godfathers to each other's children'.<sup>11</sup> While there is no evidence to suggest that such relationships were sufficiently frequent to justify Jivani's assertion, it is obvious that senior officers were well placed if they chose to become involved with junior men and that the 'winger and oppo' system could be conducive to such activity. Moreover, the segregation and loneliness which accompanied life at sea could, in Beardmore's opinion, '[bring] on a certain degree of need for love and the expression of that love'.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the most common sexual transactions occurred between ostensibly heterosexual servicemen and their queer comrades. Before the onset of war, homosex between 'normal' men and those who possessed a firm queer identity was widespread.<sup>13</sup> As Houlbrook and Smith point out, the 'normal' men who engaged in these encounters did not conceptualise themselves as abnormal or in any way queer; the difficulty of finding a female sexual partner meant that their encounters represented a practical alternative to female company.<sup>14</sup> While Houlbrook dedicates little attention to the practice and significance of homosex between 1939 and 1945, there is ample evidence to suggest that it continued, legitimated to a certain extent by wartime deprivation.

Richard Briar spoke with great candour about the motivations of his sexual partners, all of whom defined themselves as heterosexual. During his service in the Army, Richard had several relationships with older and more senior-ranked men which began as soon as he arrived at his training unit. Almost immediately, Richard was singled out by a sergeant, along with half a dozen other men who, it was thought, would make suitable partners for senior Army staff back at base.

My sergeant walked me along the platform to the ticket barrier. We were collected together and taken out to outside of the station where an Army lorry was waiting, and what I remember was that my sergeant had developed his manoeuvre on me to the point that he was with me when we were boarding the lorry and he very kindly helped me, very unnecessarily, over the tailboard. He was very attentive and that meant that we were side by side when we were loaded into the back of this three tonne Army truck and driven the short distance to the park where the battalion was in camp. During the drive, I found that the jolting of the lorry was

inclined to throw us together and at first I innocently assumed that it was accidental, but then I discovered that body contact was being made even when the movement of the lorry didn't require it. We were going through the blackout and so there was no possible observation of what was going on and the explicit sexual manoeuvre on me was made during that journey...They had really got this absolutely worked out.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the predatory nature of the incident, Richard described it not in terms of sexual harassment but as a pleasurable and erotic inauguration into the sexual subculture of his unit. He maintained that he was picked off the train by the senior man based on attractiveness and the possibility that he would be a suitable sexual partner rather than because he displayed any indications, sartorial or otherwise, of queerness. He was chosen along with a few other men to be used as what Richard termed a 'receptacle'. The sergeant 'didn't view me any differently from a girl...the only women available to him were whores...and the clincher was that they had to be paid'.<sup>16</sup> It was a 'practical and pragmatic routine' that was replicated each time a new batch of recruits arrived at the unit.<sup>17</sup> Likely looking men were picked out and senior officers, keen to avoid jeopardising their position, would send lesser-ranked friends to proposition potential sexual partners on their behalf. Partners would then be 'passed on' and shared between friends. During his time at the training battalion Briar was 'passed on' to two separate officers. Both of these men were married and preferred to have sex with other men because of the expense of local prostitutes and the threat of venereal disease.

Sexual activity between instructors and recruits was preferable to the heterosexual alternative which was available to them which was women who were whores and carried the increased risk of disease and also cost money. Looking back, I feel absolutely certain that various people in authority must have known what was going on and just chose to let it continue because, for their own reasons, they found it convenient and, after all, as they know from prisons, sexually satisfied men

are easier to manage than sexually frustrated ones and that is a strong argument in favour of tacitly ignoring that it is happening.<sup>18</sup>

The deprivations created by the war legitimated this kind of sexual activity because, according to Briar and others, the absence of disease-free women and subsequent feelings of frustration needed to be overcome. Such liaisons were frequently ignored by the authorities because they were deemed to be harmless activities, devoid of emotion and therefore not indicative of queer identity. Charles Pether, a low ranking airman in the RAF, discovered just how transient these exchanges could be. During the war, Pether had experienced regular physical contact with his comrades, usually in the form of kisses and embraces. Upon bumping into one of his most needy partners on a train after the war, Pether recalled that the man 'couldn't get out of that compartment quick enough'.<sup>19</sup> Seemingly, once the war was over, these interactions were so taboo that they could not even be mentioned. This absence (or at least the fragility) of emotional attachment was also described by Dennis Campbell, a former flight engineer in the RAF, who recalled having sex with married men as an uncomplicated sexual transaction. Some of the men with whom Campbell had sex

[s]imply wanted their rocks off...they had sexual feelings to satisfy...In many places there was not a woman about. What did you do? Stations were usually in isolated places where you did not have access to a brothel or to a nearby city. There were no women available and you're growing up and you're feeling quite randy and quite horny and you need sexual relief and in many cases it was sexual relief rather than actual gayness.<sup>20</sup>

When asked if he ever felt that he was being taken advantage of by the men who initiated sexual contact purportedly out of desperation, Dennis Campbell replied 'I wouldn't have minded being taken advantage of...I don't think I ever was. I was quite happy. I didn't accept every offer that came my way'.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Dennis Prattley, a rating in the Navy, did not frame his role as a sexual surrogate to his heterosexual comrades in terms of exploitation. On the contrary, he was aware

that his operational duties during the day and his sexual activity at night made him an indispensable member of his crew. Moreover, Dennis's performance did not compromise his position nor the cohesion on board his ship; it actually facilitated his acceptance because it resonated with the memories that his comrades had of their wives and girlfriends, thereby providing a familiar, feminised space in which the hardships of war could temporarily be forgotten. The best example that Dennis gives of sexual surrogacy is his recollection that he was told that he reminded one sexual partner 'of my girl back home',<sup>22</sup> an acknowledgment that attests to the crucial emotional function that Dennis fulfilled on board his ship. It was a function that he was proud of, and one that he retrospectively conceptualised through the lens of patriotism. In claiming that he made 'a lot of boys happy' and that he 'did [his] bit for [his] country',<sup>23</sup> Dennis reversed the construction of the effeminate queer man as a disruptive, ineffective, social outcast in peacetime society and military rhetoric and reframed his experiences using discourses of integration and national obligation. This was also the case for John, who fought in the Army during the war and described himself as 'a sort of Evelyn Hove to the boys...comfort for the troops...they didn't confess their homosexuality to me, but they "used" me sexually occasionally'.<sup>24</sup>

Understanding why men like Dennis Prattley and John were protected by their peers and retained within their respective services can be explained through the notion of contribution. It was a powerful force during the war and it conferred a degree of citizenship onto men who were seen as doing their bit, regardless of their sexual identity. Sonya O. Rose, the author of *Which People's War* provides compelling evidence of a wartime perception that real men served their country and unmanly men 'pretend[ed] to believe in "peace"'.<sup>25</sup> On the 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1940, the *Sunday Pictorial* offered a damning indictment of the 'elegant sissies who fester in the restaurants of London, gossiping like girls...they've got more scent than sense'.<sup>26</sup> A week after Dunkirk, the *Sunday Pictorial* pushed its anti-pacifist stance even further with an article called 'Pacifists and Pansies'. The link between service, masculinity and heterosexuality could not be much clearer.

In this way, articulations of wartime masculinity were linked explicitly to military service. The decadent, perfumed 'sissies' who occupied the bars and restaurants of London were accused of gender inversion and by extension, same-sex desire, precisely because they were not fulfilling their masculine obligations to serve and protect the nation. (The same accusations of effeminacy were also levelled at conscientious objectors.) Such an explicit rendering of the connection between 'sissies' and military service, indicates that the fulfilment of military obligation could offer queer men, particularly openly gender subversive men, a point of access into the wartime collective which in peacetime was vehemently opposed to their presence.

This links in with the concept of the good fellow which was a designation that indicated that a person could be relied upon. The benefit of a 'good fellow' status was that once it was imbued, it could override other issues including a recruit's sexuality. In the words of R.C. Bengue, a former major in the Army, 'one was either, within that military context, a good fellow or not. All other considerations were irrelevant'.<sup>27</sup> It could also be argued that self-evident queer men who imbued their performances with elements of femininity could find protection not only because of their difference or their skills but because their gender identity resonated with the memories that men held of their female partners, friends and relatives. They created what Joshua Goldstein has called a 'metaphysical sanctuary' for their comrades.<sup>28</sup> Finally, there was also powerful 'for the duration' discourse during the war. The war was effort was a collective endeavour which amalgamated a diverse cohort of men and women. The armed forces therefore had no choice but to make do and mend; it follows that only those whose behaviour was persistently disruptive would be dealt with. Whether or not homosexual was deemed permissible could depend on a myriad of factors which included location, the conditions in which the unit operated and the willingness of comrades and officers to ignore behaviour in the interests of morale, cohesion and the retention of valuable personnel.

On paper, sex between servicemen was a criminal act which carried severe and often, life-changing consequences. In civil law, buggery and indecent assault were outlawed by the



Offences Against the Person's Act of 1861. This was followed by the section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 which defined any act of 'gross indecency' whether in public or private as a punishable offence. In this way, the services could punish homosex committed by a serviceman under both civilian and military jurisdictions. As a civil offence, homosex was often framed under section 41 of the King's Regulations, which referred to offences punishable by ordinary law. If a serviceman were tried in a civil court for an offence, he would not face a re-trial by a military court. However, a serviceman could be tried by a civil power following a conviction or even an acquittal in a military court.<sup>29</sup>

Under military law and specifically the 1879 Army Act and the 1881 Regulation of the Forces Act, homosex between men in the Army was punishable under section 18 (5) of the regulations by the key phrase 'disgraceful conduct of a cruel, indecent, or unnatural kind'.<sup>30</sup> As under civil law, men could be punished for sexual contact (defined as 'buggery' or any other sexual act between males), any attempts to 'be party to the commission of any act of gross indecency with another male person', attempts to 'procure the commission of any such act [and] to do any grossly indecent act in a public place, or to publicly expose the person, or exhibit any disgusting object'.<sup>31</sup> In the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, the charges were laid in exactly the same terms, although Navy personnel could not be punished under naval law for homosex that occurred onshore.<sup>32</sup> They could, however, be punished under civil law.

Officers discovered committing homosex could also be punished under section 16, that is, 'behaving in a scandalous manner unbecoming the character of an officer and a gentleman'. It was a charge used overwhelmingly against officers who had paid for goods with cheques that subsequently bounced. Couching an act of indecency as scandalous behaviour avoided any association with indecency even if the conduct of an officer was clearly indecent. Such cases are admittedly rare but they seem to suggest a deliberate attempt to avoid the ignominy or disgrace of a charge of indecency. In 1940 for instance, a Captain was registered in the Judge Advocate General's charge book as having stroked the hand of a male soldier and slept in the same bed of

another. In spite of these manoeuvres and their 'indecent' nature, the officer was only charged with scandalous conduct.<sup>33</sup>

An even more ambiguously-worded charge was conduct, disorder or neglect to the prejudice of good order and military discipline. One example of how the charge was used comes from the Army's charge books. On the 30 October 1939, a rifleman was taken to a court-martial charged with conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline because he had entered the bed of a colleague and handled the man's genitals.<sup>34</sup> While the recruit in question was not accused of indecency, it was common for a charge of an act to the prejudice of good order and military discipline to accompany one of indecency.

Unlike their male counterparts, servicewomen could not be punished for same-sex activity under either civilian or military law. In 1943 alterations to military legislation meant that the Auxiliary Territorial Service (hereafter ATS) and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (hereafter WAAF) could be disciplined for all offences outlawed by the Army Act whereas previously they had only been punishable for offences under section 15, the section dealing with absence without leave, and section 40 which covered conduct to the prejudice of order and discipline. (The Women's Royal Naval Service was considered to be a civilian organisation and was therefore entirely exempt from service discipline.)<sup>35</sup> However, lesbianism could still not be officially punished under section 41, offences punishable by civil law, simply because it was not illegal, nor could charges be brought under section 18, (disgraceful conduct of an indecent kind) which was the regulation used to frame offences committed by men.<sup>36</sup>

Although on paper, homosex between men was punished severely, the actual application of the law was reflexive; it was essentially a subjective weapon. Only the most serious offenders whose conduct would impair military efficiency and who could not be usefully rehabilitated or reposted were removed from the services. Moreover the cost and inconvenience of a court-martial meant that they were the last resort, and commanding officers were not averse to disciplining their staff without using them, ignoring activity that was not detrimental to morale and frequently

retaining younger men after a period of detention rather than imprisonment. In this sense, reading the experiences of same-sex desire and queer identity through the lens of its formal disciplinary code fails to acknowledge the complex and often contradictory ways in which legislation was actually applied.

1,813 servicemen of all ranks were tried by courts-martial for indecency in the Army, the RAF and the Navy between 1939 and 1945 and there were 1428 convictions.<sup>37</sup> However, a total of 5, 896,000 men served in the three forces between 1939 and 1945.<sup>38</sup> This demonstrates just how small scale the issue of homosex was, and how it was only very rarely problematised. When it was deemed to have become a problem, there was huge inconsistency in the way that it was disciplined; one man caught for indecency could be sent to a court-martial and imprisoned while another caught for the same offence might be ignored or verbally chastised. The remarkable malleability of the rules is partially explained by the nature of military justice in the Second World War but it also implies a knowingness and a collusion which goes far beyond the turning of a blind eye.

In the Army, officers were warned to watch out for ‘feminine types and confirmed homosexuals’ because it was thought that they possessed ‘psychological characteristics [that may] indicate mental defect or temperamental instability’.<sup>39</sup> Aside from the obvious reference to ‘feminine types’, the instructions that accompany the list reveal the Army’s uncertainty about queerness and their desperation for manpower. ‘Any of the following characteristics may indicate mental defect or temperamental instability...the majority (although not all) of the men showing them will make bad front-line soldiers and will be very liable to break down in action’.<sup>40</sup> The use of the word ‘confirmed’ suggests that incidences were only punished if, firstly, they were repeated, secondly, if they were obvious to a third party or a non-consenting sexual partner and, thirdly, if they were deemed to be disruptive. It is also implied that a ‘confirmation’ of a same-sex identity involved a positive response to the question ‘are you homosexual?’ It is unlikely that many queer recruits answered this line of enquiry honestly. The memo also implies that same-sex incidents constructed as ‘isolated’ or motivated by deprivation might be ignored and, moreover, that the

Army was really only concerned with monitoring ‘true homosexuals’ as opposed to men having sex with one another. Finally, the very last sentence of the memo arguably reveals the most about the service’s attitude towards same-sex desire. It states that ‘the majority [although not all] of the men showing them – that is, the characteristics described – will make bad front-line soldiers and will be very liable to break down in action’.<sup>41</sup> This does not suggest that these should be exempt from front-line soldiering, nor from service in the Army. It would seem therefore that same-sex desire per se was not a primary concern, but whether that it manifested itself or led to other problems such as mental disorders or disciplinary problems. Thus, if sexual orientation became incompatible with military effectiveness, it was dealt with.

In this sense, the Armed Forces were reactive rather than pro-active. They were also surprisingly practical. One unnamed British psychiatrist admitted that during the war ‘the conservation of manpower was an essential priority...it was often considered practical and realistic to post known homosexuals of good intelligence and proved ability to large towns, where their private indulgences were less likely to be inimical to the best interests of their service’.<sup>42</sup> In the long term, it was easier, more cost-efficient and less embarrassing to move queer men into the cities or simply to ignore their behaviour than it was to prosecute them by a court-martial.<sup>43</sup> Serious or persistent offenders could be discharged administratively and there was also the option of a medical discharge which bypassed the courts and allowed men to be ‘quietly invalid[ed] out of the [Army] with appropriate medical advice.’<sup>44</sup> The latter did not leave a paper trail and avoided the humiliation, both on the part of the offender and the military, of parading an offender in front on the general public. It is for this reason alone that the threat of court-martial was a valuable deterrent.

In the Air Ministry, officials were prepared to be lenient in cases of indecency between males in the Royal Air Force ‘if the offender is young and there seems to be a reasonable prospect that he will respond to punishment [in a later revision, this last word is crossed out and replaced by ‘corrective treatment’] and not repeat the offence. Moreover, a comment in the minutes

concludes: 'I am prepared to consider individually those in category A (ii) (a) [homosexuals], provided that they are the passive parties and not the active'.<sup>45</sup> Presumably, they hoped to retain the younger, passive partner in the hope that their same-sex activity was merely a stage of their development and that they could be 'straightened out' by physical training and military discipline.<sup>46</sup>

In both the WAAF and the ATS efficiency became a fundamental benchmark in the identification of, and action against, lesbian servicewomen. In the WAAF, for instance, Violet Trefusis- Forbes, the Director of the service, believed that only lesbians who were disrupting their own work and that of other servicewomen should be dealt with.

In approaching an airwoman or officer who we are fairly convinced is a Lesbian, or in approaching one whose behaviour is such as to suggest she is, we should point out to her that her behaviour is that of a schoolgirl and that these sentimental attachments are not what we expect from airwomen who must necessarily always set a good example to others. That unless she can behave herself as a sensible adult we consider that she will have a detrimental effect on discipline generally [and] we would have to dispense with her services.<sup>47</sup>

This extract alone reveals just how pragmatic Trefusis-Forbes was prepared to be. According to the memo, an airwoman would only be approached if her behaviour was sufficiently "convincing" and if there was ample evidence that it was adversely affecting the discipline of others. As a scribbled note by Trefusis-Forbes on the bottom of the memo attests, such women were classed as 'misfits', that is, recruits who did not fit into life in the WAAF. This emphasis on efficiency was drawn on fairly consistently by Trefusis- Forbes. In one instance, she became involved in the case of two women at RAF Upwood who had been accused of being lesbians after some of their correspondence was discovered by their commanding officer.

In view of the fact that the writers of both letters are obviously in a highly temperamental and peculiar state of mind and are miserable if parted for a few hours at a time leads me to suppose that their work is unlikely to be as efficient as it would otherwise be. Since these two airwomen appear to be unable to behave like grown-up people who belong to a fine service and that their childish conduct cannot be overlooked any longer, they must be separated.<sup>48</sup>

Once again, the root of the issue was not the mere presence of the women but their inefficiency and the detrimental impact of their behaviour on the “fine” reputation of the WAAF. In positioning efficiency as the foremost consideration, Trefusis-Forbes suggested that it was not the presence of lesbians or suspected lesbians that was the problem. All women regardless of their sexual preferences would be retained by the service and their unit if they were sufficiently mature and competent. If they were not, however, they would be separated, not excluded. In the ATS, Letitia Fairfield, a senior medical officer, was asked to compose a memo on lesbianism for senior officers to consult as and when a case occurred. Women ‘sharing an excessive attachment’ were separated by reposting only if they could not be ‘diverted by other interests.’ Moreover the exigencies of war meant that only more serious cases of ‘perverted practices or [women who] attempted [to] corrupt other women by talk or example’ were considered for discharge.<sup>49</sup> Bed sharing was constructed as the norm for working class women and therefore Fairfield reassured officers that it was nothing to worry about.

Crucially, both Fairfield and Trefusis-Forbes encouraged disciplinary action only when the work of a servicewoman was thought to be impaired or if there was evidence to suggest that a suspected lesbian was ‘corrupting others.’ These were stipulations that worked in the favour of women who became involved in relationships with others. In effect, lesbian servicewomen would be ignored on the condition that their conduct was neither deemed to be affecting their ability to work nor viewed as detrimental to discipline and the reputation of their respective service. This is suggested both by anecdotal evidence and discussions between officials in the postwar period, one of whom admitted that the official policy of the women’s auxiliary services during the Second World War was to turn a blind eye to lesbians ‘because it was expedient to do so, in the interests of maintaining maximum womanpower in the Women’s Services’.<sup>50</sup> This remarkable admission sums up the attitude of the Armed Forces during the Second World War. In a time of national emergency, same-sex desire was largely ignored.

## Conclusion

In the widest of senses, the war represents an exceptionally important juncture in the history of queer Britain. It is a moment of both transition and crystallisation; a period when queer sexuality was variously comprehended as both an act and an identity.<sup>51</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, then, that policy makers and senior officers within the Armed Forces were unwilling to classify queer bodies as irredeemable. It was an unwillingness that suggests not only a fissure between sexual acts and identities but a strong belief in the notion that military service would straighten out even the queerest of bodies. For the men who engaged in sex with other men during the war, sexual labels would never again be as indeterminate. After 1945, and without the heightened state of emergency, the Armed Forces were rather less pragmatic. The *laissez-faire* attitude that had prevailed between 1939 and 1945 was replaced with a solid doctrine of treatment and expulsion, a doctrine which was strengthened by the Wolfenden Committee's decision not to recommend the decriminalisation of same-sex acts between servicemen.<sup>52</sup> In British society more widely, the post-war period witnessed what Matt Houlbrook has described as a 'hardening' of 'the boundaries between queer and "normal"'.<sup>53</sup>

For many of the queer men and women who served as part of the Armed Forces, their service was sacred. Richard Briar believed that he developed 'socially and sexually' as a result of the war,<sup>54</sup> and likewise John Booker emerged from his Army service with a better understanding of himself and his sexuality. Without the war and his service within it, Booker believed that he would have 'continued at Cambridge and probably been even more closeted. I developed subsequently'.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, the war played a significant role in accelerating the sexual maturity of my interviewees. They met like-minded people, formed social circles, patronised formal queer spaces together and manufactured their own. They fell in love (and out of it) and some became surer and more secure in their identities. In this sense, Quentin Crisp's lament that the 'the horrors of peace were many' is, an accurate epitaph for end of the Second World War.<sup>56</sup> Demobilised and re-equipped with civvies, servicemen and women returned home and began their post-war lives.

As Dennis Campbell recalled, making the transition from service life to home life could be traumatic. ‘After I was demobbed, I felt kind of lost because I [was] away from this all male environment and back into...family life’.<sup>57</sup> Like Dennis, many had revelled in the opportunity to escape the gaze of their parents and relatives, make new friends and see new places. The end of the war meant a return to an old life and a post-war society that was determined to position the queer men (and to a lesser extent, women) as the antithesis of its plans to reconstruct Britain.

#### References:

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- <sup>7</sup> Transcript of interview with John Beardmore, 3bmtv, *Conduct Unbecoming* (Channel 4, 1996), p.66.
- <sup>8</sup> The National Archive (hereafter TNA) ADM 156/193, W. A. Austin, Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class, C. Price, Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class, enclosure no.1 to Despatches Letter no. E. 623/23, 16 August 1936.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Briar interviewed by Emma Vickers, 9 November 2005 and Dennis Campbell interviewed by Emma Vickers, 22 November 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> A. Jivani, *It’s Not Unusual* (London: Michael O’Mara, 1997) p. 65.
- <sup>11</sup> Jivani, *It’s Not Unusual*, pp.65-6. D. Hallsworth also insinuated that wingers had sexual relationships with one another. See IWM SA, 10702/4, D. P. Hallsworth.
- <sup>12</sup> Transcript of interview with John Beardmore, 3bmtv, *Conduct Unbecoming* (Channel 4, 1996), p.15.
- <sup>13</sup> See M. Houlbrook, *Queer London* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005) p. 170. On the issue of trade see also P. Nardi, ‘‘Anything for a Sis, Mary’’: An Introduction to Gay Masculinities’ in P. Nardi (ed.) *Gay Masculinities* (London: Sage, 2000), p.3 and G. Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p.16.
- <sup>14</sup> Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.171 and H. Smith, *Masculinity and same-sex desire in industrial England, 1895-1957* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Briar interviewed by Emma Vickers, 9 November 2005.
- <sup>16</sup> Richard Briar interviewed by Emma Vickers, 9 November 2005.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Briar interviewed by Emma Vickers, 9 November 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> Richard Briar interviewed by Emma Vickers, 9 November 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> Transcript of interview with Charles Pether, 3bmtv, *Conduct Unbecoming* (Channel 4, 1996), p.5.
- <sup>20</sup> Dennis Campbell interviewed by Emma Vickers, 22 November 2005.
- <sup>21</sup> Dennis Campbell interviewed by Emma Vickers, 22 November 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> Dennis Prattley, Timewatch, *Sex and War*, BBC 2 (1998).



- <sup>23</sup> Dennis Prattley, *Timewatch, Sex and War*, BBC 2 (1998).
- <sup>24</sup> See John's account in J. Weeks and K. Porter, *Between the Acts* (London: Rivers Oram, 1997) p. 178.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Sunday Pictorial* cited in S.O. Rose, 'Temperate Heroes: concepts of masculinity in Second World War Britain' in *Gendering the Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p.189.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> R. C. Bengel, *Confessions of a Lapsed Librarian* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1984), p.25.
- <sup>28</sup> J. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p.96.
- <sup>29</sup> War Office, *Manual of Military Law*, (London: HMSO, reprinted 1939), p.567.
- <sup>30</sup> The Army Discipline and Regulations Act 1879, chapter 33, subsection five, within *The Law Reports: The Public and General Statutes 1881*, vol. xvi (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd), p.116.
- <sup>31</sup> The Army Discipline and Regulations Act 1879, chapter 33, subsection five, within *The Law Reports*, p.116 and War Office, *Manual of Military Law*, p.115.
- <sup>32</sup> TNA ADM 105/104, Homosexuality in the Royal Navy in connection with security and blackmail 1957- 1969, Unnatural offences, circular letter N.L. 5773, 18 December 1913.
- <sup>33</sup> TNA WO 84/55, Judge Advocate General's Office: courts-martial charge books, 1 March 1940-16 April 1940, 6 April 1940.
- <sup>34</sup> TNA WO 164/495 JAG charge book, 30 October 1939.
- <sup>35</sup> V. Laughton Mathews, *Blue Tapestry* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1948), p.117.
- <sup>36</sup> TNA AIR 2/6486, Review of WAAF disciplinary cases in the light of the Markham Committee Report, letter from D. P. S, 16 October 1942.
- <sup>37</sup> See E. Vickers, *Queen and Country: same-sex desire in the British Armed Forces* (Manchester: MUP, 2013) p.108.
- <sup>38</sup> F. Mellor, (ed.) *History of the Second World War: United Kingdom medical series – Casualties and Medical Statistics* (London: HMSO, 1972) p.829.
- <sup>39</sup> Wellcome Library, John Bowlby collection, PP/BOW/C/5/213, Army memo, 1942. Bedwetters, insomniacs and nail-biters were also listed.
- <sup>40</sup> Wellcome Library, John Bowlby collection, PP/BOW/C/5/213, Army memo, 1942.
- <sup>41</sup> Wellcome Library, John Bowlby collection, PP/BOW/C/5/213, Army memo, 1942. My hyphenated interjection.
- <sup>42</sup> J. Costello, *Love, Sex and War: changing values, 1939-1954* (London, 1985), p.164.
- <sup>43</sup> Traditionally, the queer community has always favoured the anonymity and sexual choice of the city. Matt Houlbrook has demonstrated that London drew thousands of migratory gay men onto its streets precisely because of its reputation as a sexual metropolis. New York was also a haven for gays and lesbians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See G. Chauncey, *Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940* (New York, 1994) and M. Houlbrook, *Queer London*.
- <sup>44</sup> J. Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, p.164. See also TNA AIR 2/12407, Government Committee on homosexual offences, Air Ministry evidence, record of discussions in the Select Committee, 17 February 1953.
- <sup>45</sup> NA 2/9485, Discharge of airmen for reasons of misconduct during the war-1940-1950, Air Ministry Draft Confidential Order 7A, A.92339/40/P.I., Discharges in War for Disciplinary Reasons, 1941, p.2.
- <sup>46</sup> This line of thought was pursued by certain eminent sexologists in the interwar period, namely Desmond Curran who in 1938, concluded that doctors should not 'conclude that the case is one of fixed or congenital inversion until at least the age of twenty-five has been reached, and sometimes, until even later...the guiding principle is perhaps that these manifestations [in adolescents] should not be taken too seriously or too tragically...many of the conflicts and fears of congenital inversion may be avoided or overcome by sensible explanation and sexual instruction'. D. Curran, 'Homosexuality', *The Practitioner*, 141 (1938) 285-286.

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<sup>47</sup> RAF Museum, AC 72/17 Box 5, memo on lesbianism from DWAAF to DDWAAF, P and MS, 8 October 1941.

<sup>48</sup> RAF Museum, AC 72/17 Box 8, letter from DWAAF to D.P.S., re a case of lesbianism 2 December 1941.

<sup>49</sup> London Metropolitan Archives PH/GEN/3/19: Fairfield, 'A Special Problem,' 1943.

<sup>50</sup> NA AIR 2/10673, RAF and WRAF-Homosexual offences and abnormal sexual tendencies 1950-68, 'Lesbianism in the WRAF', loose minutes from A.P. Doran, Squadron Leader, 13 October 1971.

<sup>51</sup> This is also the conclusion that is reached by John Howard. See *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: Chicago U.P, 1999). p. xviii

<sup>52</sup> The Home Office, *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* (London: HMSO, 1957), p.53.

<sup>53</sup> Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.270.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Briar interviewed by Emma Vickers, 9 November 2005.

<sup>55</sup> John Booker interviewed by Emma Vickers, 10 November 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Hugh David uses Crisp's quote as the title for his chapter on post-war Britain. See H. David, *On Queer Street*, (London: Harper Collins, 1997) p.152 and Q. Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (London: Fontana, 1977).

<sup>57</sup> Transcript of interview with Dennis Campbell, *Conduct Unbecoming*, 3bmtv, Channel 4 (1996) p.18.