Soldiers' Stories
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To the extent that they were auxiliaries, women were not fully members of the armed forces in the Second World War. Yet the term also clearly has a metaphoric significance—one not lost on politicians at the time—which serves to qualify the potent image of the military woman as a sign of modernity. Feature films, newsreels, documentaries, and recruitment materials relating to the war repeatedly underlined the supportive role of the military woman. From a contemporary vantage point, this coding of the military woman’s agency as fundamentally supportive of male and national endeavors emerges as the key contradiction of the wartime imagery which entreated women to enter the services or gave contemporary audiences glimpses of their lives after enlistment. Put simply, the military woman is cast as a figure of agency and modernity simultaneously framed by traditional, patriarchal cultural assumptions. Thus the modern woman is also in the parlance of the time a “girl.” Consider, for instance, an Auxiliary Territorial Service recruitment poster depicting a young female soldier astride a motorcycle, the text informing us, “The motor cyclist messenger, roaring across country from Headquarters to scattered units is now an ATS girl” (figure 6). Previously, we must assume, such a task would have fallen to a male soldier. The image underlines the novelty of the role and celebrates the uniformed ATS girl—woman calmly conducting her duty under difficult circumstances.

A rhetoric of girlishness works to mediate the shock of the
military woman in such imagery, both infantilizing her and emphasizing her status as not yet a woman. She is not neglecting the responsibilities of adult womanhood, but rather channeling her youthful energies into the (temporary) service of the nation. Such images were produced by teams mindful of a contemporary context in which many responded to the idea of women’s military service with skepticism and even hostility. Some characterized women as unsuitable and unqualified for military duties; others were repelled by the supposedly unfeminine character of such work, whether that was manifest in mannishness or in sexual immorality, both of which were attributed to military women in the U.K. and U.S. at different points during the war. In short the military mobilization of women was regarded by many as deeply problematic, with military women themselves doomed to failure, whether in their performance of soldiering or of femininity, or both. Ambivalent responses to women’s military service were prominent features of the war period in both Brit-
ain and the U.S., informing policy and shaping popular representations in a number of important ways. In the debate over legislation to establish the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), Leisa Meyer reports, “Republican Congresswomen Rogers (Mass.) and Bolton (Ohio) assured their male colleagues that military women would not be usurping the positions of male soldiers. They and other supporters depicted women’s role in the military as one of ‘assisting,’ not ‘displacing,’ those in combat, particularly by filling jobs considered ‘women’s work’ in civilian life.” Such rhetoric underlines the extent to which the work performed by military women and men needed to be distinct in order to maintain sexual difference. To this end, roles such as driver and dispatch rider could be, and indeed were, recast as women’s work, defined as auxiliary to and supportive of the manly endeavors of command and combat.

At issue here is the fundamentally contradictory character of discourses of femininity, discourses in which women are both weak and frivolous figures in need of male protection and yet powerful when supporting men or defending their home, children, or nation. Such discourses allowed politicians to claim that they were “protecting” women’s femininity by denying them the benefits of military status, for instance. In the process, we might argue, policymakers also sought to ensure that women would not gain equality as citizens (or as subjects in the British context) through their service. Equally they allowed advocates of military women to press their case on terms clearly less threatening to male interest and privilege. These contradictions are clearly in evidence in the British short film Airwoman (1941), which depicts the day-to-day work of women in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force; WAAFs are seen working as messengers, drivers, secretaries, and telephone, wireless, and teleprinter operators. They also prepare food for male aircrews who are about to depart on a bombing raid. We see them cooking and waiting at table on the men’s return; in an evocation of more traditional domestic responsibilities, a male voice-over describes this activity as one of the many “worthwhile jobs an airwoman can do: look after those hungry men.” Sponsored by the Air Ministry and the Ministry of Information, Airwoman is organized around the story of one woman and the success of a bombing raid in Bremen in which she has effectively played a part. (“Behind every story,” we are told, lies “woman’s cooperation.”) While the drama of the mission itself is enacted, the WAAFs relax and wait; waiting, as we will see, is a key function for women (both military and civilian) in wartime representations.
The closing recruitment appeal describes the WAAF as a “vital part of the Royal Air Force,” its personnel sharing in the men’s trials and triumphs. In the film’s stirring final declaration, “Airwoman, we salute you!,” the WAAF is lauded and included but also clearly auxiliary to the work of military men, remaining firmly on the ground, never threatening to displace these heroic figures.

In this chapter I consider the representation of the military woman as auxiliary in terms of the rhetoric of support she provides the (male) institutions of the (male) military and the individual soldiers, sailors, and airmen. During the war period such rhetoric is central even when the narrative focuses almost exclusively on the training or work of military women. I also address the construction of military women in supporting roles, focusing in particular on a routine association with romance. In focusing on representations of the Second World War I explore in detail a historical moment associated with unprecedented levels of female military service in both the U.S. and the U.K. I deal directly with the peripheral status of the military woman as enacted on screen, exploring how she is addressed and constructed as war worker, as part of a romantic couple, as a figure who waits, and as one who works close to the field of battle. I consider the alternately, or even simultaneously, celebratory and trivializing or patronizing treatment of military women in recruitment and other film materials, detailing the ways the military woman functions as a contradictory sign of modernity (her public role, the iconicity of women in uniform, the potential for romantic and sexual encounters) and continuity (feminine service, ideologies of romance, military service as a temporary disruption of domesticity). As much as my analysis points to the visual and narrative work put into containing military women within a supportive or auxiliary role, so evident in Airwoman and numerous other instances of representations of the war, I also foreground the aspirational and glamorous connotations of this figure.

Consider in this context the controversial wartime satire The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (1943), in which Deborah Kerr plays three women, each encountered by the protagonist at different stages of his life. One of her incarnations is Angela “Johnny” Cannon, a driver for the Mechanized Transport Corps. Questions of woman’s place in relation to men, the home, and the nation during war pervade Colonel Blimp. In a film that stages the drama of a man (Blimp) who has been left behind by history, Kerr’s three characters function as signs of both continuity and modera-
nity: as a governess in Berlin in 1902 she is frustrated by the limits placed on middle-class women; as a nurse during the First World War she is dreamy rather than feisty; as a driver during the Second World War she is a masculinized and militarized modern woman.\(^6\) Johnny is associated with technology and a novel female mobility: “I never drove before the war,” she remarks. She is also plainly an auxiliary figure, supportive and caring for the sentimental, outmoded Blimp.

*The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* suggests how much can be gleaned from a consideration of military women in such supporting roles; indeed both in cinema and on television military women are frequently found on the periphery rather than at the center of the narrative. A. L. Kennedy writes of the film that Johnny has “taken a male name and does a male job,” suggesting a sort of transvestism.\(^7\) Yet I believe this figure highlights not only the gender confusion that regularly accompanies the military woman (her implicit manliness), but also the extent to which she thematizes and embodies a powerful trope of *transformation*. Before the war, we learn, Johnny was a photographer’s model, a spectacle of femininity; her movement from model to driver is nicely evocative of wartime mobility and of the transformative character attributed to military service. Moreover although Kerr plays Johnny with appropriate military bearing, she is also a vivid, lively figure, dodging furniture in a scuffle, employing exaggerated facial expressions and body language. Johnny signals female mobility at a number of levels: in her role as a militarized driver; in Kerr’s lively performance; and in her construction as emblematic new woman (figure 7). *Colonel Blimp* is both deeply critical of the British class system and marked by a sense of profound loss at its seeming dissolution. Kerr’s modern manifestation as military woman is equally ambivalent, simultaneously a figure of energy and vitality against Clive Candy’s aging body and ideals and a cause for lament.\(^8\) The war has transformed Johnny just as, the film implies, Britain must be transformed and modernized.

In addressing the various ways the military woman is imagined as auxiliary, this chapter lays the groundwork for the analysis presented in the book as a whole. The understanding of the military woman’s role as auxiliary depends on her status as not male and not a soldier, an equation that has been challenged by subsequent demands for armed services that are more equal and effectively integrated but that remains very much in evidence. I address the conundrum of the military woman, the ways in which she poses a culturally troubling figure even when her service is called
for unequivocally. Unsurprisingly that problem of representation centers primarily on gender, but it also turns on other important categories of identity, most particularly class, but also national, regional, racial, and ethnic identity. The chapter begins with an exploration of the imagery and rhetoric of American and British recruitment campaigns directed toward women, analyzing the ways gendered discourses of respectability and duty frame appeals to self-interest and personal opportunity. I then explore themes of transformation through an analysis of films which describe the forging of disparate groups of women into soldiers. Finally I turn to themes of romance, exploring war films that center on a military woman’s developing romance with a military man. Overall I aim to elucidate the ways representations of the Second World War figured the military woman in relation to gendered norms of appropriate femininity.

RESPECTABILITY, OPPORTUNITY, AND DUTY:
RECRUITING WOMEN IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Wartime recruitment materials framed an invitation to and inclusion of auxiliary military women in rather contradictory and intriguing terms. As forms of official discourse such recruitment materials provide insight into the emergence of an institutionalized and culturally acceptable place for military women. The rhetoric of the Second World War insistently
emphasized that the enlistment of women would enable more male soldiers to serve as combatants, thus reinforcing the distance between the roles of male and female personnel. The invitation “Be a Marine: Free a Marine to Fight” typifies this strategy (figure 8). The poster effectively captures a scene of action and movement; under her marine-green cap, the woman’s hair billows out behind her, giving the image dynamism even as the clipboard and pen she holds emphasize the clerical or administrative tasks undertaken by the female soldier. There is a significant distinction between a (military) woman becoming or being a Marine and the male Marines who are “freed” to fight through her work. The imagery and language of substitution and support were also widely used in the U.K. Such appeals clearly imply that women are a temporary and lesser substitute for men. Yet even a cursory look at recruitment materials addressed to women in the war period suggests that a more complex set of appeals is at work. True, recruitment materials appeal to duty and patriotism, but they also promise personal opportunities, speaking directly to the self-interest of potential recruits. While military life is by definition routine and subject to discipline, recruitment materials were not slow to pick up on the adventurous and even glamorous associations of service in the forces. A poster for the Women Appointed for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) from July 1944 prominently features an urban skyline, suggesting a life involving female companionship, smart uniforms, and personal opportunity (figure 9). Such a presentation of service as a route to travel and excitement is indicative. Given the voluntary nature of women’s service, recruitment appeals needed to manage the promise of worthwhile labor and opportunity with some care. (Even under conscription in the U.K. women could opt to work in industry.)

A fascinating insight in this regard is provided by a pamphlet published in 1943, “How to Enlist More Women in the U.S. Navy,” designed to supplement the training of naval personnel involved in recruitment.9 The pamphlet makes explicit use of civilian marketing techniques in the form of “selling psychology.” It includes a summary of the benefits of naval service which the recruiter might offer to her “prospect.” The first of these is, of course, serving her nation and contributing to the war effort. Next in line comes shared responsibility with men, involving an implicit invitation to full citizenship for women. Third is material benefits, and fourth opportunity. The fifth advantage relates again to public esteem: the new recruit will be both recognized and admired. Advantages six and seven
8. For military women, being a Marine means an auxiliary role. An iconography of freedom, service, and support inform this recruitment poster.

9. Recruitment posters frequently emphasized military service as providing women with opportunities for travel, professional training, and advancement, as well as patriotism and duty.
relate to personal development and appearance. Two final and provisional advantages are included, the italicized *may* indicating that these are only possibilities: the recruit “*may* receive valuable technical training” and “*may* be assigned to an exciting, thrilling job.” Recruiters must clearly be careful not to *promise* excitement, but to offer it as a possibility.

Contradictory demands and cultural forces are clearly in play here, since many people believed that women’s military service was simply inappropriate, in part due to the consequent mobility of young women who, away from their families, lived and worked in proximity to military men. (In contrast to military women, the sexual promiscuity of military men was, if not encouraged, at least sanctioned.) In this context Meyer traces the extensive internal conflicts over WAC recruitment campaigns, in which the director, Col. Oveta Hobby, argued consistently that “military service for women should not be portrayed as ‘glamorous,’ but rather as a ‘selfless’ act consistent with women’s traditional patriotic duties.” Hobby’s concerns seemed to stem from personal conviction and also, crucially, from a desire to establish the legitimacy of the WAC, an endeavor for which the patriotic motivation of young servicewomen was vital. By contrast, the advertisers who advised WAC recruiters insisted that “‘duty’ is not an effective advertising appeal.” Meyer consequently reports an effective shift in late 1943 from Hobby’s favored strategy of patriotism combined with guilt to a stress on “the attractive jobs and material advantages women gained joining the WAC.”

An explicit alignment between women’s service and the nation is suggested in a short film produced in 1940 entitled *Britannia Is a Woman*. Sponsored by the British Council, produced by British Movietone News, and distributed in the U.S. by 20th Century Fox, *Britannia Is a Woman* provides an early instance of the themes and images that would become familiar features of representations of the war. As a mediation of the “war effort of British women” aimed at international audiences, the film focuses primarily on the (unpaid) work of the Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS). However, the first section concerns women in the services, including images of ATS, Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS, whose recruits were called Wrens), and WAAF personnel, segueing into the section detailing the work of the WVS serving the “demands of civil defence.” Thus a kind of continuum is established, with military women at one end, uniformed women in various nursing and civil defense duties somewhere in the middle, and women performing voluntary labor at the other
end. With both a national and an international audience in view the film is at pains to emphasize the patriotism, competence, and respectability of British military women who are seen marching, cooking, and typing. (Recall Meyer’s contention, discussed in the introduction, that popular images of British military women proved influential in an American context, providing a reference point for the necessity and value of such service.)

The film’s (male-voiced) commentary underlines the extent to which the training and work of military women allow military men to perform more manly tasks: “This is the object of women’s enrollment in the services: to enable more men to be spared for the sterner duties of war.” It is in this context that women’s supposed feminine frivolity is set aside for the duration; as ATS personnel fall in for drill we are informed that the “khaki uniform replaces the peacetime diversity of fashion,” a comment that nonetheless functions to underline woman’s function as spectacle: while falling in, these women are also, in effect, modeling the uniform for our approval. Britannia Is a Woman concludes its military section with a few brief images of women of the Air Transport Auxiliary. These female ferry pilots are portrayed in an informal group; we see them standing beside their planes, smoking and laughing. They wear boots and greatcoats, but we also see them in full flight gear, ready for duty as the voice-over intones, “[This is] surely one of the most adventurous jobs which has so far fallen to the fair sex.” Here the commentary touches on the possibility of a new role for military women; not only telephony and typing, cooking and cleaning, waiting and supporting, but more “adventurous” work associated with the command of machinery and suggesting the possibilities of movement.

These images of women fliers, framed so explicitly in terms of adventure, are no isolated instance. The best-selling author and creator of the pilot-hero Biggles, Capt. W. E. Johns, created his WAAF pilot character Worrals in response to a direct request from the Air Ministry to aid recruitment of women to the service. Yet young women joining the WAAF would have had almost no opportunity to fly in the manner of Worrals; instead their function was to serve alongside and support the “men who fly.” As Beryl E. Escott writes in her history of the wartime WAAF, its personnel “did not fly (except by luck, accident, or to carry out air checks).” Both the girlish fictional figure of Worrals and the imagery of female ferry pilots celebrated in Britannia Is a Woman exploit the suggestion
that women’s military labors might open up nontraditional avenues. Part recruitment film, part propaganda geared to a United States as yet outside the war, *Britannia Is a Woman* celebrates the modernity of the British military woman, glossing over her exceptional status while exploiting her iconic function.

Aside from highlighting patriotism, economic benefits, and career opportunities, wartime recruitment materials directed at women drew on notions of personal fulfillment. There are opportunities for the individual woman to find or develop herself, whether through travel or acquiring new skills. This emphasis feeds the trope of transformation which is so central to wartime feature films centered on military women. Indeed opportunity and transformation are routinely harnessed together in recruitment films, which use editing and other visual strategies to suggest the positive transition from civilian to military life. Recruitment campaigns thus frequently seek to marry tropes of personal transformation to the themes of supportive female service outlined above.

Where recruitment posters focus on iconic images of women in uniform, the cinema is particularly suited to an evocation of transition and transformation, deploying dissolves and montage sequences within and alongside basic narrative scenarios (the preparations for battle, waiting, and return seen in *Airwoman*, for instance). To illustrate the point I’ll refer to two recruitment films developed in 1943 for the SPARS, the women’s branch of the U.S. Coast Guard, *Coast Guard Spars* and *Battle Stations*. Both films explicitly endorse the military woman as noncombatant replacements for men. *Coast Guard Spars* outlines opportunities for travel through possible postings at a number of American cities, along with the chance to “release a man for the sea.” Two sequences employ editing to enact the transformative character of women’s military service. In the first of these we see massed women transformed in appearance; initially dressed in civilian clothes, the women turn to face the camera smiling, a wipe replacing the image with a shot of the group in uniform. Another wipe replaces this shot with one showing the SPARS recruits marching. The voice-over addresses the potential recruit directly, observing, “You learn to take orders and to carry them out,” thus stressing teamwork and personal development. It is also made clear that pay begins during training, emphasizing the economic rewards of service. Over the elaborate, even elegant drill that follows comes a further endorsement of military life as a route to personal fulfillment: “You acquire new vigor, new confi-
dence. You learn to march with others and to work with others.” The language, dynamic montage, and dynamic movement combine to suggest the active nature of service.

The second evocative image of transformation featured in this recruitment film enacts the trained SPARS personnel replacing men. From a rack holding many Guardsmen’s caps a man selects one; a dissolve now shows a woman stowing her cap among those of other SPARS personnel. Female caps replace male caps and women replace men, effectively visualizing the men’s militarized mobility. Detailing the jobs a SPARS recruit might take on and the training she might receive, the film speculates on her enhanced employability in the postwar workplace (again suggesting personal progression and economic opportunity). The camera closes in tantalizingly on a door marked “Office of the Commandant”; as the image dissolves to a man seated at a desk, a woman at his side, the promise of advancement is both offered and strictly contained: “You won’t get to be an admiral, but you may be the admiral’s secretary.” This endorsement of a traditional female role as a new opportunity, presented with no discernible irony, suggests a need for reassurance as to the continuing validity of gender norms.

Battle Stations, produced by the Office of Strategic Services, maintains the gendered divide established in Coast Guard Spars. In addition to its official, anonymous male voice-over, the film enlists the services of the Hollywood stars Ginger Rogers and James Cagney to speak the parts of a SPARS recruit and a Guardsman. Cagney and Rogers are thus simultaneously extraordinary and ordinary figures, bringing the glamour of celebrity to the work of servicemen and servicewomen. A combination of stock footage, editing, and voice-over constructs a dramatic narrative in which an enemy submarine is defeated by a combination of grounded military women and mobile—in this instance, seafaring—military men. Following the action, the message of separate but equally important contributions and spheres of action is made explicit through dialogue in which Cagney’s Guardsman praises teamwork. The film’s final sequence shows a SPARS recruit running to convey orders to the pilot of an amphibious airplane. While Cagney’s voice-over gives his personal dedication, she watches the plane’s departure, her arm raised and eyes lifted up in an iconic pose of the war. Such an image of the grounded woman watching the skies also concludes Airwoman, underlining the auxiliary, supportive function of the military woman.
Perhaps the key visual element used to portray the transition to military service as transformative is the uniform. As Antonia Lant writes, “The potential for glamour and self-confidence associated with a uniform lent itself . . . readily to screen spectacle.”19 The uniform marks the military woman as a professional figure, potentially erasing other differences between women and allowing mixing across previously clear class (though not racial) boundaries. The glamorous associations of uniformed service are nicely summarized (and punctured) in a short sequence of the extremely popular British film *Millions Like Us* (1943). Having received her call-up, Celia fancifully imagines herself as, successively, a WAAF, a Wren, an ATS recruit, a land girl, and a nurse; in each role she appears to herself as elegant and sophisticated, though the film implies that she is slightly ridiculous, as she fawns at the attentive men who accompany her in these imaginary scenarios. The interview that follows is a disappointment; since she cannot type and does not wish to cook, the WAAF has no openings. The WRNS and the ATS too want only cooks, so Celia reluctantly opts for work in a factory. In a film that stresses ordinary, everyday commitment and sacrifice on the part of British men and women, Celia’s sexualized fantasies of uniformed service as a shortcut to romance and adventure are gently mocked. Moreover the shortfall between the glamorous promises of recruitment posters and the role of typist or cook that the services actually offered women speaks to a cynicism born of experience. Designed to boost recruitment for industrial workers, *Millions Like Us* exploits that shortfall, pointing out that the WRNS and the WAAF are no more fertile grounds for female advancement than civilian service. *Millions Like Us* effectively debunks the recruitment imagery used in posters directed at wartime British women, but this gentle debunking is double-edged; it acknowledges the contrast between recruitment appeals and the reality of military service for women, but it also aligns Celia’s fanciful daydreaming with, and thereby ridicules, a sexual confidence which military women had already come to signify. Bringing Celia back to earth is also about putting her back in her place.

One poster in particular is frequently cited as exemplifying the contested meaning of images of female military service. This is the ATS poster dubbed by the press “the Blonde Bombshell.” Designed by Abram Games in 1941, it was withdrawn by the War Office after debate in Parliament condemned it for its undue glamour (figure 10). To Lant this decision “suggests the War Office’s (understandable) lack of faith in glamorized images
of women for speaking to real women of national need. The risk that a female audience would not recognize itself in this imagery—that it would remain a fantastic, unattainable femininity—was indeed too great.” And yet it was politicians who objected most vocally to the image, and implicitly to the self-confident, modern sexuality it represented. This much is acknowledged in a contemporary cartoon featuring a spoof recruitment poster for the ATS, depicting a large, distinctly unglamorous (even mannish) woman. The cartoon lampoons both bureaucracy and the stuffiness of politicians with regard to the withdrawal of “the Blonde Bombshell.” Its caption reads, “After long and careful consideration this new ATS-recruiting poster has been accepted (‘That’s the stuff . . . ’—comment by Woman M.P.).” That it is a female member of Parliament who voices a critique of female glamour is doubly damning: the joke plays on an assumption that of course such a woman, herself seeking an inappropriate position of power and authority, would appreciate the mannish caricature on display. Ironically the intent behind Games’s poster was precisely to contest the dour public image that had become associated with the ATS. The woman in the withdrawn poster sports a new-style cap specifically designed to “dispel the dowdy image” of the service. Catherine Moriarty comments on the approved poster that served as a replacement: “Lacking the sexuality of Games’ design, it was felt to attract ‘the right sort,’ something Games’ recruit, exhibiting worrying independence and self-assurance clearly was not.”

The controversy over “the Blonde Bombshell” indicates just how contested the image of the military woman was in the war period. The volatility of the military woman as a sign of modernity associated with an unregulated female sexuality functioned as a site of cultural disruption. Attracting “the right sort” of woman to military service involved recruiters in a complex cultural exercise, in which they emphasized the importance of duty as well as the respectability and excitement of military life in differing degrees. It is thus no surprise that posters, recruitment films, and indeed those narrative feature films that center on military women in the war period so explicitly countered widely circulated myths and rumors concerning the effectiveness, femininity, and morality of military women. With respect to their effectiveness, recruitment materials routinely emphasized the equal importance of women’s role in relation to men’s, noting for instance that they would be serving alongside men in furthering important national goals. The implicit equality of such appeals
effectively serves to address women as full citizens, notwithstanding their status as temporary replacements for men. An extension of such professional equality forms an explicit part of other wartime recruitment materials which emphasize the perks, benefits, good salary, and training opportunities as well as the chance to serve one’s country and assist male loved ones. Thus we are told that WAVes will earn the same as regular Navy men, or that the Army and Navy offer a number of different job roles and training opportunities for women.

Turning to cultural preconceptions regarding the femininity and morality of military women, the mobility and opportunities emphasized in some representations of the war read somewhat differently. Traditionalists clearly regarded both the femininity and the morality of military women to be potentially compromised by their labor, mobility, and proximity to men. Maintaining the respectability of the female soldier against assumptions of (hetero)sexual promiscuity or lesbianism was an ongoing

10. Appeals to glamour were contentious in a British context. Abram Games’s “Blonde Bombshell” poster (1941), designed to boost recruitment to the ATS, notoriously fell foul of Parliament.
concern for the British ATS and the American WAC.24 The ATS formed the “prime target for allegations of immorality in the women’s services which swept Britain during the first two years of the war.”25 Meyer details a comparable slander campaign, ultimately traced to male servicemen, in relation to the WAC.26 Both services battled with a problematic public image characterized by a combination of condescension and moral condemnation. Although military women might be admired for their patriotism, suggestive comments pervaded popular discourse, whether in relation to an assumed excessive femininity that rendered them unsuitable for the job, an excessive sexual interest in men that posed a danger for male soldiers (the vamp who spreads venereal disease), or a mannish persona that made their presence in an all-female context suspicious (lesbian). In the aftermath of Oveta Hobby’s first press conference as director of the WAAc, John Costello observes a media “unable or unwilling to resist the temptation to run pictures under captions labelled ‘Whackies,’ ‘Powder Magazines,’ and ‘Fort Lipstick.’” One columnist, he writes, “compared the WAACS with ‘the naked Amazons . . . and the queer damozels of the Isle of Lesbos.’”27 Here the implication of sexual impropriety, excessive femininity, and incompetence are effectively collapsed together. Such salacious coverage provides the context for a WAC poster featuring a smiling silver-haired mother figure standing between her equally beaming uniformed son and daughter (figure 11). In the figure of a mother who equally endorses the service of both her children, the poster speaks to a normalizing of military service for young, white American women.28

Though supporters of the WAC constructed female soldiers precisely in these terms of patriotism and duty, those who sought to denigrate the service saw Army women in terms of deviance from gender norms (mannishness), a deviance also linked by rumor to inappropriate sexuality, whether heterosexual activity or lesbianism. The perceived need to maintain the femininity of female soldiers is a persistent feature of the discourses surrounding military women; it is also evident in internal debates over the styling of uniforms, the moral regulation of behavior, and the appropriate development of physical strength.29 One of the questions a reluctant civilian is envisaged as posing to her recruiter in the pamphlet “How to Enlist More Women in the U.S. Navy” has to do with physical demands: “Is the training strenuous?” The answer suggested is indicative: “Not at all. You keep healthy and fit with moderate exercise.” Not only that, but boot camp, the recruit is promised, “will make [her] feel like a
million.” The Navy, she is reassured, “doesn’t believe in rigorous athletics”: “We don’t want our WAVes to be ‘amazons.’” As this language makes clear, the Navy wanted neither combatants nor lesbians. The Army, as Meyer reports, aimed to screen out women whose behavior “suggested sexual deviance.” Elsewhere in the Navy pamphlet the recruiter is advised to emphasize to the recruit and her parents that members of the WAVes will “lead a normal, religious life.” Toward the end one of an inventory of questions designed to test the recruiter on her skills asks, “Do I and other WAVes in my office attend church regularly and show interest in religious organizations?” A little farther down the list, however, we find a rather different question: “Do I see that the WAVes in our office are seen with attractive men occasionally?” Thus not only is it important to insist on the respectability of naval service, but strategically recruiters must also allow for the opportunity to meet attractive men (occasionally) and the need to insist that WAVes are still women attractive to and attracted by
men. In addressing objections from hypothetical parents, men (whether in uniform or out of it), and the individual herself, the recruiter’s pamphlet makes explicit just how extensive objections to women’s military service were in the U.S. during the war.

In such a context it is not surprising that discernable hierarchies emerged in the war period, effectively distinguishing between approved and culturally acceptable images of the military woman and alternative or disreputable images. Such distinctions were by no means fixed, as the instance of “the Blonde Bombshell” demonstrates; in that attempt to feminize the ATS some believed that the image of blonde glamour carried troubling overtones of sexual freedom, rendering the image disreputable. Distinctions between the services also played a part in regulating military women as appropriately feminine national subjects. That it was the ATS rather than the WRnS that needed a makeover is significant in this context. In both Britain and the United States service in the Navy was widely perceived (and indeed operated) as select; entry requirements were higher, numbers admitted smaller.\(^{31}\) ATS Joan Stewart’s comments point to the class dimensions of the hierarchy between the services in Britain: “People, even soldier friends, begged me not to join, to consider the WRnS or the WAAF. The ATS certainly had a very bad press at the time, though I’m blessed if I know why, unless it was that there were more jobs of a lowly nature to be done.”\(^{32}\) The working-class associations of the ATS (“jobs of a lowly nature”) compared to the WRnS are also clear in another ATS servicewoman’s comment on Princess Elizabeth’s decision to join the service: “I was absolutely staggered because we had all taken it for granted that she would go into the Navy as a Wren.”\(^{33}\) Indeed it seems clear that the unimpeachable class and gender status of the future monarch was effectively deployed to shore up the respectability of the ATS and to signal the hands-on involvement of the ruling elite in the war.

Race figures alongside class to moderate the respectable or disreputable femininity of the military woman. It may be that, as Meyer speculates, the elite status of the WAVes was underlined by not only the higher entrance requirements than for the WAC, but the fact that for most of the war it was an all-white force. (It was not until December 1944 that African American women were permitted to join the WAVes, and then in response to a direct presidential order.)\(^{34}\) This is not to imply that the WAC was particularly welcoming to African American women; as both Brenda L. Moore and Meyer document, its policies with respect to the
maintenance of segregation and the allocation of duties reflected and were structured by the racism of the wider military culture.

Personnel shortages prompted initially reluctant civil and military authorities to back an accelerated recruitment of military women throughout the war period, yet the service of African American women in the U.S. military and black West Indian women in the U.K. seemingly represented an immovable problem of representation. At times the service of such women was actively discouraged. Meyer reports the difficulties faced by African American women seeking to enlist. In a British context, Delia Jarrett-Macauley notes that for a War Office happy to recruit white West Indians, the recruitment of black women was a highly contested question; only the ATS accepted black colonial women.36 Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas recount that the thirty black West Indian women who traveled to Britain to serve in the ATS in 1943 were admitted to service only following a lengthy period of wrangling between the War Office, which was resolutely opposed to their presence, and the Colonial Office, which was keen to avoid the political consequences of such overt racial discrimination.37 Particularly relevant for this study is Jarrett-Macauley’s emphasis on the extent to which white authorities may have understood the issue as one of visibility: “Colonial subjects had played a significant role in the economic development of Britain and were educated to view England as their country. However, attempts to bring them into view alongside white British women or their white peers from the dominions went against the long-held colour bar which placed black people at the bottom of the social pile” (emphasis added).38 Black and Asian colonial women were recruited into separate local units, such as the Women’s Royal Indian Naval Service, formed in 1944; although their labor was required, visualizing these women, or acknowledging their service, was a different matter. Though photographs of the West Indian ATS women were published in the Picture Post on their arrival in the U.K., the women do not appear in films of the period.39 This problem of visibility highlights the ways in which discourses of class and race were used to shore up the supposedly problematic femininity of the military woman, with military leaders drawing on presumptions of the “respectability” of white, middle-class women in defining the “right sort” of recruit.40 Moreover it has a direct impact on the films considered in this chapter, whether produced in the war period or subsequently. Whatever the actual policies of different services with respect to segregation and recruitment of black women, the
military women represented in the narratives of the Second World War discussed in the remainder of this chapter are all white.

Despite her new visibility, the white military woman is in many senses a disruptive figure in wartime culture, requiring regulation. She is not only a working woman, but a woman who works in a sphere of action traditionally reserved for men. Even though her supportive role is repeatedly emphasized in recruitment materials and fictional narratives, representations of the military women stepped into an arena marked as both distinctly female and yet unfeminine, if not implicitly masculine. Moreover it is apparent that questions of class and race play a key part in securing the potentially compromised femininity of the military woman. In the remainder of this chapter I explore the different ways feature films of the period negotiate these contradictions using themes of comradeship, duty, transformation, and romance.

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH SERVICE: FEMININITY, COMRADESHIP, AND THE FEMALE SOLDIER IN CINEMA OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Biographical accounts of women's military service during the Second World War confirm the importance of those elements foregrounded in recruitment materials: teamwork, pride and professionalism, the opportunity to undertake work previously off-limits to women, and the chance (for some at least) to travel and to function independently from the restrictions experienced at home. Such positive perspectives certainly find expression in war films centered on military women; recurrent elements include the formation of friendships, a sense of pride in belonging, and the development of independence, self-worth, and professional skills. Yet as we’ve seen, the military woman is also a potentially disruptive figure in wartime culture, and this too is evident in feature films. This section explores how two films, one British (The Gentle Sex, 1943) and one American (Keep Your Powder Dry, 1945), dramatize the themes of contemporary recruitment campaigns, championing military women as both capable and respectable. Both films deal with the integration of civilian women into military life and the transformative potential of military service for women.

Given its support from both the War Office and the ATS and its stated goal of boosting recruitment for the latter, it is not surprising that The Gentle Sex stages so many of the tropes of contemporary recruitment
The film follows seven recruits drawn from different class, national, and regional backgrounds, demonstrating their ability to overcome conflict and work together as a team. A considerable box-office success in Britain, particularly with women, *The Gentle Sex* was welcomed by critics as both “a well-deserved tribute” and “good entertainment.” The *Star*’s reviewer observed, “Whenever in future I pass any member of the ATS I shall feel inclined to raise my hat respectfully.” The trade press too celebrated *The Gentle Sex* as a testament to British womanhood, describing the film as “a true picture of our women at war” and “a fine and timely tribute to the women of Britain.” Such responses point to the film’s success in documenting and celebrating the work of the ATS. In a fashion similar to the recruitment campaigns it sought to bolster, the film is a tribute, but it is also an assertion directed at those skeptical of the capability of military women and their value to the British war effort. Thus to Lant the film seems “above all . . . to want to speak to men.” To this end it is characterized by a peculiar double address. On one hand *The Gentle Sex* speaks directly to an important domestic female audience, championing the work of the ATS and the strength of women in time of war. Women are shown working in two of the most unfamiliar or nontraditional roles, as drivers and performing anti-aircraft duties. On the other hand the film raises and then counters assumptions of women’s limited potential. Central here is the director Leslie Howard’s peculiarly patronizing and at times intrusive commentary, which is heard throughout the film.

From their initial cramped encounter in a railway carriage, the seven women who represent the “gentle sex” bond, battle, and adapt themselves to military life. Despite the suspicions wartime culture might have attached to a young woman’s desire to join the military, both *The Gentle Sex* and *Keep Your Powder Dry* emphasize the value of female comradeship. Feature films of this period visualize female collaboration and comradeship in two ways. First, the togetherness of military women is portrayed in off-duty scenes where they relax and socialize together, either within the private space of the barracks or in more public social spaces (even bars on occasion). Second, scenes in which military women march and work together underline their shared participation in military life and culture. Both recruitment and feature films regularly deploy scenes of women drilling; such images emphasize women’s newly acquired military identity and their capacity to work effectively together. One former ATS recruit recalls her pleasure in the coordinated movement: “It felt good
to move as one body, each pair of feet doing exactly the same.”48 Drilling serves to foreground unity rather than difference, just as the uniform (potentially at least) serves to erase class differences. In this regard, drilling epitomizes the logic of basic training, which “demands a suppression of individual difference and exacts conformity in all outward actions and dress.”49 The Gentle Sex makes use of both these strategies for showcasing female comradeship, concluding with sequences of professionalized teamwork and shared leisure. We see women working as part of a mixed battery unit, demonstrating their capability under fire during an air raid (figure 12). Following the excitement and tension of combat the film closes with more mundane images of service and companionship, as men and women eat bread and drink mugs of tea in a field, the original group of seven reunited. The easy realist style of these sequences serves the film’s attempt to normalize as well as celebrate women’s military service. In line with recruitment goals, such imagery underscores the vital nature of women’s service while simultaneously foregrounding the pleasures of comradeship.

While the military requires the conformity represented by uniforms and drills, narrative development typically requires conflict and the play of differences. Thus conflict between women forms an important strand within both movies. In The Gentle Sex, Joan is both brusque and ambi-
tious; she rejects the sentimentality of the female companion who sees her off at the train station and is consistently unfriendly toward the other women, exercising petty tyranny once promoted to corporal. At one point she even expresses admiration for Nazi efficiency, producing a scathing and impassioned response from Erna, whose direct experience of fascism has shaped her bitterness and desire for revenge. Ultimately, however, Joan acknowledges her underlying shyness and is admitted into the group, demonstrating teamwork triumphing over individual rivalries. Conflict structures *Keep Your Powder Dry* much more centrally and explicitly; Val Parks (Lana Turner) and Leigh Rand (Larraine Day) take an instant dislike to each other, and their bitter personal feud drives the narrative forward. The two are united, however, in their affection for fellow recruit Ann Garrison and ultimately agree to overcome their differences as a result. The film ends with the three confidently marching together, ready to ship out.

The portrayal of conflict within the group clearly feeds off negative stereotypes which suggest that women are not able to productively work together. At the same time the films draw on what Jeanine Basinger identifies as a basic and highly flexible dynamic of the combat films of the Second World War: a competitive, adversarial relationship between two characters whose “conflict becomes representative of a differing attitude toward combat, toward politics, toward life—whatever.” While recruitment rhetoric and uplifting montage sequences might celebrate the military unit, narrative traces the movement toward that unity, turning the processes by which a team is formed into drama. Thus both *The Gentle Sex* and *Keep Your Powder Dry* use the metaphor of a journey, featuring train stations as points of departure or arrival. Such a scene forms the opening sequence of *The Gentle Sex*, as the women bid farewell to their loved ones and embark on a new adventure. As if he were both a recruiter identifying prospects and a somewhat leering male observer, the director’s voice-over picks out and comments on the seven women whose lives are “about to be turned upside down” and whose stories the film will tell: Betty and her overprotective mother; the colonel’s daughter Anne; thrifty Scot Maggie; Dot, who bids goodbye to her shady boyfriend, talking of her need for a change; Erna, a Czech refugee motivated by hatred; and the seemingly unfeeling Joan, a former dancing teacher who, we are told, looks “pretty hard to please” (and is thus, in the film’s terms, failing in femininity). The late arrival of the working-class, Cockney waitress Gwen completes the group. The first meeting of the three female leads in *Keep
Your Powder Dry—the spoiled heiress Val, the Army brat Leigh, and the military wife Ann—similarly takes place on the station platform, where they assess each other and await instructions. Both groups are visually and narratively in transit, moving from civilian life and preoccupations to a military identity that will define them in new ways.

A narrative trajectory of self-discovery and personal transformation, allied to a realization of the primacy of the group, serves as a defining convention of the war movie during this period. Thus the class, ethnic, and regional diversity of the women in The Gentle Sex, the different backgrounds (though all are white and middle class) of the trio in Keep Your Powder Dry, and the antagonism between individuals in both films are set up in order to be transcended, as the women learn to work together and to sublimate their own desires and emotions to the needs of service. Transformation is evoked by the replacement of civilian clothing with military uniforms (in the manner of contemporary recruitment films, such as Coast Guard Spars). Both films show the women being equipped and trained. In The Gentle Sex they are also assigned to and seen undertaking their duties, both the mundane and familiar and those more removed from their civilian roles. The importance of their work to the war effort is emphasized, as is the active participation of women from all walks of life. Gwen’s dissatisfaction with her initial assignment as a mess orderly (she was a waitress in civilian life and wants to escape this service role) is played for comic effect, but she nonetheless succeeds in qualifying as a telephone operator and joins the other women at a mixed battery unit, suggesting mobility and opportunity.

The Gentle Sex explicitly compares the opportunities and challenges facing the modern woman of the early 1940s with the limited and highly demarcated lives of an earlier generation of middle-class women. Over a sequence showing ATS drivers being transported back to barracks in the cargo area of a train, making their beds as best they can, Leslie Howard’s voice-over addresses the audience directly in these terms: “Do you realize, my friend, that before the battle of Waterloo, the officers’ ladies put on pretty evening dresses and had a ball? That’s as near as they ever got to the war. The soldiers’ girls couldn’t even get as near as that. Now it looks to me as if without the women we shouldn’t carry on at all.” It is the film’s project to both insist on and qualify the nation’s dependence on female labor. As Lant explores in some detail, the ironic evocation and rejection of a nineteenth-century femininity (envisaged as archaic) in the embroi-
dery sampler–style graphics of the credit sequence speaks to a context of profound uncertainty relating to women’s new social role. Thus the first frame reads, “1838. The Gentle Sex. In whatever station in life a woman is placed, a spirit of modesty, humility, obedience and submission will always be required of her,” to be replaced by a new image which frames the film itself as concerned with “the gentle sex” from “1938 onwards.” The war is clearly the marker of a new phase in British women’s lives. Nonetheless the words of the final mock embroidery frame of the credit sequence are “Woman, when I behold thee flippant, vain, inconstant, childish, proud and full of fancies.” It is in many ways the project of the film to challenge such views, to tackle what Lant describes as “the powerful notion of femininity as incompatible with cohesion, rationality, and public dependability.” And yet Howard’s words, not only presented graphically but heard in his distinctive voice-over, seem to simultaneously reiterate this now outdated view of femininity. Indeed Lant suggests that the film as a whole is engaged in spanning that contradictory evocation of embroidery and Victorian ideals of (middle-class) womanhood with the modern military woman who works with weapons and machines. In the process, an insistence on continuing femininity effaces class differences between the women. (Working-class women had a rather different relationship to paid labor, after all.) We might recall here the images of female ferry pilots in Britannia Is a Woman. The commentary (“surely one of the most adventurous jobs which has so far fallen to the fair sex”) is absolutely characteristic of a rhetorical move surrounding military women in a range of wartime materials. The suggestion of innovation and agency is accompanied by an archaic use of visual and verbal language in relation to women and femininity, not simply terms like girl to describe young women—that was after all common usage at the time—but references to the fair or gentle sex, for instance. The rhetoric of recruitment emphasized the positive features of a modern world in which women were free to undertake work associated with men and male privilege. At the same time, however, the culture of the period strongly suggests that change was felt and figured as disconcerting, necessitating a reassuring glance backward in history.

Effectively The Gentle Sex presents as a problem not the capabilities of military women but the attitudes of civilian and military men; at the same time it voices what were widespread concerns about the consolidation of women’s position within the services. In one of the film’s most interesting sequences with respect to its assertion of necessary social change, the
complacent assumptions of two of the ATS recruits (Anne and Maggie) are challenged as they learn of the war work undertaken by a previous generation of women. Visiting Mrs. Sheridan, the mother of her lover, Anne confidently asserts, “Probably for the first time in English history, women are fighting side by side with the men.” Mrs. Sheridan subsequently reveals that she had met her pilot husband during the First World War and that she had been wounded while working as an ambulance driver. The sequence draws out the cultural invisibility of women’s prior wartime work and a new generation of women seemingly complicit in this invisibility. The scene also presents British women’s service in the Second World War as significantly different from that of women in the First, with the older woman endorsing the importance of a postwar change in the opportunities available to women. Of her own generation’s experience Mrs. Sheridan remarks, “We didn’t really know what we wanted, but I believe you do, and I believe you’ll get it.” In this way the war work of an earlier generation is recognized, and an argument about the importance of longer term changes is also advanced. The transformation of women because of their military service suggests a changed place for women in a putative postwar society.

Such generational contrasts are also interestingly foregrounded in Women on the March, a recruitment film produced in 1942 for the Australian Women’s Army Service. In addition to the usual direct-address documentary techniques, the film features a framing device involving a conversation between two women. One is already in the AWAS; the other, Lois, is about to join but is apprehensive about military life. The older hand talks the new recruit through the process, praising the uniform, the “open-air life,” the value of camaraderie, and the importance of the work. A picture of Lois’s great-grandmother as a young woman leads to reflections on the different roles that modern women take on in time of war. “The women in those days were so helpless,” comments Lois, as we cut to a shot of her earlier incarnation, pictured looking down on the parade ground where men in period uniforms drill. “When Grandpa marched off to war all she could do was knit. I wonder how Grandma would feel if she could see the barracks square today?” The camera pans from the Victorian figure on the balcony to the sight of women drilling below, a scene presented as both vital and modern. At the close of the film Lois has set her doubts aside and embraced the opportunity to “do a man’s job.” The photo of her grandmother, adorned in the fashions of a decorative femi-
ninity, dissolves into an image of the younger woman in uniform, marching one among many. In this contrast the new mobility of women is invoked as a benefit of wartime service, substituting the image of a feminized woman spectator with a military woman drilling, taking up her role on a public stage.

Simultaneously looking forward and backward in this manner allows wartime imagery to effectively manage cultural anxieties about the pace of change. As we’ve seen, much anxiety centered on the perception of a potential for immorality associated with military women’s mobility. While *The Gentle Sex* is largely concerned with demonstrating military women’s capability, *Keep Your Powder Dry* seems more preoccupied with picturing women’s service as not only respectable but healthy and moral. Thus the film condenses its acknowledgment of skeptical men to a single sequence in which the recruits fix an incredulous general’s new car. “Amazing—and such pretty girls too,” he blusters to the WAC colonel. Instead the film’s energies are devoted to portraying the military as a site in which women’s bodies and behaviors can be appropriately regulated. To this end it carefully mediates the seeming discrepancy between the female body (feminine, allied with glamour and sensuality) and the military body (disciplined, but potentially masculine or mannish).

Val Parks is introduced in the opening sequence of *Keep Your Powder Dry* in a tracking shot that reveals discarded items of clothing (shoes, luxurious lingerie), halting on Lana Turner’s tousled blonde hair. Hung over, Val recoils at her own image in the mirror, hinting at her subsequent rejection of a decadent (uncontrolled) femininity in favor of regulated military life. We learn that she cannot take possession of a substantial legacy until all the trustees are satisfied that she “is conducting herself in a manner typical of the finest traditions of American womanhood.” Urged to set aside her playgirl lifestyle, Val determines to join the WAC as a testament to her good character, declaring, “Whatever I have to do to get this money, I’ll do it.” Thus equipped with a selfish, financial motivation for service, Val is set up as a character in need of transformation. After a brief scene introducing the virtuous Ann Darrison and her husband (both about to depart for war), we meet the self-defined “Army brat,” Leigh Rand. Her father the general pronounces his view that she will be “the all-fired best soldier to ever wear a skirt,” then adds a quiet warning that she should not try to run things. Leigh does not heed the warning, and her evident enthusiasm for rules and regulations quickly
alienates her from her fellow recruits. Leigh, like Val, emerges as a character with much to learn. On the first night she challenges Val, sneering, “I don’t think you’ll ever survive basic training,” thus providing Val with an additional (though no less self-centered) motivation to stick it out. Ultimately Leigh will learn that leadership must be earned, and Val that duty is more important than personal quarrels or concerns. (Having convinced the trustees of her respectability, she no longer wishes to lead the glamorous life she had sought to fund.)

Lant characterizes the British experience in terms of a “deglamorization of the national heroine” in the context of wartime hardship, reading British realism as explicitly defined against the Hollywood glamour of the sort embodied by Lana Turner in *Keep Your Powder Dry*. British films “worked to redefine femininity,” she writes, “but they had, by their very focus, to dramatize its concurrent disintegration” as women engaged in forms of labor associated with men, machinery, and modernity.54 While traditionally feminine glamour might well be at odds with women’s labors (and their mobility) in the war period, as we have seen, military service and specifically the uniform are frequently represented as glamorous.55 With Val’s glamorous public femininity juxtaposed to Leigh’s militarized tomboy status, the conflict between the two women is thoroughly gendered, enacted in terms of an opposition between feminine glamour and military masculinity. However, although she is defined by her seemingly inappropriate (even decadent) femininity, Val takes to military life almost immediately, excelling in basic training. She is capable of being both a good soldier and a desirable woman, while Army life (and Army clothes) endow her with respectability.

As discussed earlier, gendered discourses of behavior and respectability played an important part in the management of military women’s sexuality in the war period. It is not surprising, then, that in wartime cinema, and indeed popular culture of the period more widely, physical appearance and clothing (just as much as behavior) became established as important mechanisms for visualizing and working through the problematic femininity of the military woman (problematic because, while femininity remained central to contemporary definitions of womanhood, the values associated with it were widely perceived as incompatible with military service). In different ways *The Gentle Sex* and *Keep Your Powder Dry* demonstrate the subjection of women to the masculine regimes of military discipline while assuring audiences of their continued femi-
ninity. Thus as civilian women are transformed before our eyes into military women—through generic scenes of kitting out, mess halls, drilling, and sports—that process is also regulated by the deployment of assumptions to do with femininity.

Val’s redemption comes through a confrontation with her dissolute former friends and a realization that she has developed a new sense of purpose and commitment in the Army. In a scuffle her uniform is torn; knowing that her appearance is a sign of impropriety, Val persuades Leigh to cover for her, convincing her enemy of her sincerity with the plea “Being a WAC means more to me than anything.” The torn uniform symbolizes the intrusion of Val’s former life onto her newly regulated existence. Her aspirations to a glamorous, pleasure-seeking life are firmly rejected in favor of military comradeship. Yet the film does not set aside Val’s (or Lana Turner’s) desirability. Ironically it is Leigh herself who resurrects it in an anguished speech to Ann which reveals the complexity of her feelings (jealousy, desire) toward her rival: “From the first time I ever saw her, she was everything I wanted to be—all my life. A girl in high heels and furs; a girl who knew her power as a woman; the kind of girl who lived in the pages of *Vogue* and *Town and Country*, not in an army camp in boots and breeches. I just couldn’t bear to see a girl from her world make good in mine.” A point-of-view shot makes us privy to Leigh’s first glimpse of Val: a shot of her legs as she adjusts an unmilitary shoe before stepping off the train. Conflict follows almost immediately. In the jostling initiated by Leigh (eager to impress the approaching colonel, she encourages the women to form a line) the heel of Val’s shoe is snapped off; Leigh apologizes, qualifying the gesture by adding, “But, after all, we were told to wear low-heeled shoes.” In this way Leigh attempts to use her conformity to regulations—sensible footwear—against Val’s “high heels and furs.” Although she is by no means mannish, when set against Val, Leigh appears masculine. (Gender is, after all, defined in relational terms.) And while *Keep Your Powder Dry* is concerned to valorize the transformation of civilian women into military women, the mixture of desire, envy, and contempt with which Leigh views Val’s glamorous femininity underlines her own deviant (military and masculine) gender status. As such moments remind us, the indeterminacy of gender identity is repeatedly at issue in narratives showcasing military women.

Lant suggests that it is possible to regard *The Gentle Sex* as “a variant of the cross-dressing genre, that is, of films that probe the rigidity or
flexibility of gender identity by detaching gender signifiers from the expected biological sex.\textsuperscript{56} Though Lant’s point has clear rhetorical power, I am reluctant to construe cinematic military women as cross-dressers, for reasons including the long history of the term in a military context and the continued relevance of gender as a question in relation to military women.\textsuperscript{57} As Pat Kirkham reminds us, while “the wearing of military uniform by women . . . represented a ‘masculinisation’ of female dress,” it nevertheless “remained female dress.”\textsuperscript{58} Yet Lant is certainly right to identify the uncertainties about gender and sexual identity that are associated with military women during the Second World War. Given that the desire to join the services potentially rendered a woman suspicious (as mannish or potentially lesbian), and the fact that military women were not regarded by many (even their supporters) as real soldiers, it is understandable how charged questions such as women’s uniform became and have remained. Writing of more recent negotiations on the style of women’s service attire, Enloe summarizes the contradictory forces at work: “Women in the military must not be mistaken in public for soldiering men. Neither, however, should women in military uniforms be mistaken for bar waitresses or flight attendants. Women soldiers must look like representatives of the state’s military. Women soldiers must be attired in a matter that enables them to do their job effectively for that military. This four-side fashion mantra has not been easy to satisfy.”\textsuperscript{59}

Scenes of women receiving their uniforms and equipment, foregrounding clothes and the body, are a core element of recruitment films and also feature prominently in many fictional narratives concerning military women. Sometimes the process is described at length, as in \textit{The Gentle Sex}, while in other films it may simply be suggested in montage sequences juxtaposing women in civilian clothes and military uniform. Along with barrack room sequences, such scenes show military women in between their two identities, as well as offering the opportunity for glimpses of women in states of partial undress. Writing on \textit{The Gentle Sex}, Lant draws our attention to the film’s frequent scenes of dressing, grooming, and mirrors—“shots show women squeezing in and out of skirts, practicing hat angles, and checking the effects in mirrors”—suggesting that the film “needs to assert over and over again the presence of a female body beneath the uniform.”\textsuperscript{60} It could equally be asserted that the repetition of this imagery enacts the containment of the troublesome female body by the military uniform and the masculine authority it represents. In
either view such imagery points to the perceived contradiction, embodied by military women, between an “unruly” femininity and an orderly yet gender-inappropriate (masculine) service.

A preoccupation with appearance and reflection is, in this context, not surprising. Military women are frequently depicted viewing their reflection in the mirror, an image that suggests female narcissism and a process of transformation in equal measure; the uniformed woman posed before a mirror offers a potent evocation of duty coupled with pleasure. The trope appears in recruitment and feature films, in war and postwar imagery. In Airwoman both uniforms and the mirror device feature prominently in the opening sequence. The credits run over an image of a hat and gloves, panning up to a uniformed woman who reads in the paper a report of a successful air raid and how credit should go to all involved. We cut from a close-up of her face to a shot which centers the woman’s reflected image in the mirror. She looks up at her reflection, saying “Everyone” with evident pleasure at the thought that this category includes her. Thus the WAAF’s seeming pride in her appearance reinforces her professional pride and sense of belonging to the military and the war effort. Mirrors and kitting out scenes continue to feature in postwar recruitment materials, as well as feature films concerning the training of military women. Someone Special, a twenty-minute information film produced for the WRNS in 1966 features a fetishistic tracking shot along a line of stocking-clad female feet stepping into military-issue court shoes. Another shot shows a Wren looking at her reflection in the mirror, while a second, seen in the midground, is shown smiling at the first (and us), complicit in her narcissistic pleasure. The voice-over emphasizes the pride that comes with wearing a naval uniform: “From your smart court shoes to your sailor’s hat, you are a Wren.” As we cut to a close-up of the recruit’s reflection she and we are told, “And to the Navy, you’re someone special.” The uniform brings uniqueness and anonymity in equal measure. For the female recruit, contemplation of her own image is an affirmation; for the audience, it affirms appropriate (feminine) associations with fashion and appearance, mitigating the disruptive aspects of the military woman even while her transformation is foregrounded.

Before shifting from narratives of personal transformation to narratives of romance, it is useful to consider a British film which effectively harnesses both, suggesting the extent to which associations of service with sexual freedom and geographic mobility had become firmly estab-
lished by the mid-1940s. *Perfect Strangers* (1946) commences with the dull routines of married life in wartime as lived by the film’s two dull protagonists, Robert Wilson (Robert Donat) and Cathy Wilson (Deborah Kerr). After Robert departs for the Navy, Cathy decides to ignore her husband’s traditionalist injunction against work and joins the WRNS. Military service is transformative for both parties; living separate, independent, and challenging lives for three years, they vow not to return to their pre-service state and instead to seek a divorce. Ultimately the two are reconciled, their reunion a recognition of the positive transformations undergone by both men and women in wartime. For Cathy it is, significantly, a combination of the uniform, military service, and female comradeship that turns her into a more confident, attractive, even glamorous woman. It is not her induction into military life that we see, but rather the transformation of her appearance, tutored by fellow Wren Dizzy. Dizzy both polices Cathy’s appearance (“You can’t come out looking like that”) and tutors her in glamorous femininity. It is Cathy’s friendship with Dizzy, as much as a developing romance, that enables her to speak her desires, to realize the limitations of her preservice married life. If these comments suggest that only appearance is at stake, it is worth noting that Cathy’s military service, albeit shown only briefly, clearly denotes her new professional confidence: we see her proficiency and bravery as she navigates a launch to deliver a message while guns fire and bombs fall around her. Moreover Dizzy’s appearance is correct within the codes of both the military uniform and womanliness, suggesting once again that the two are, after all, compatible. In a film produced in the immediate aftermath of war, *Perfect Strangers* valorizes military women’s (temporary, auxiliary) service as energizing from a vantage point that assumes it is no longer required. Though both parties have been transformed, the demobilized couple must come to terms with each other in (postwar) civilian life.

**WOMEN AND ROMANCE IN WARTIME: WORKING AND WAITING**

Movies which couple war and romance narratives provide an enhanced role for military women. Romance functions as a generic space within which audiences, whether in the war period or in the years since, might reasonably expect female characters to play a significant part. Romance narratives also cast women in familiar and even traditional terms. But what, if any, is the specific significance of the military woman in romance narratives? I’ve argued that her presence as a figure in uniform, serving
her country, is often explicitly taken as a sign of modernity (as in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*). How is this reconciled with the more familiar, and highly gendered, terrain of romance and couple formation? In both British and Hollywood feature films the work undertaken by military women is often, like the women themselves, both integral and yet in some way auxiliary. Similarly romance narratives function to center the military woman at the same time that they emphasize her distance from what cinema understands as the real work of war: combat. Because military women are defined primarily as noncombatants, whether or not they are near the front, their work is downplayed against the spectacular scenes of combat that showcase the work of military men, who are almost always defined primarily as combatants. In this way the romance plot is contradictory in its effect in films of and about the Second World War. On the one hand it opens up a potentially much larger space for military women as characters; on the other hand that greater presence within the narrative may have little to do, directly at least, with their military status. Indeed the romance plot repeatedly positions military women as women who wait, a passive pursuit primarily associated with civilian women and the home front.

Though routine in peacetime, the formation of a romantic couple provides an unsatisfactory resolution in war films since loving relationships are frequently disrupted by death or duty. “War is never very kind to lovers,” muses Leslie Howard’s voice-over in *The Gentle Sex* as Anne learns that her fiancé is missing and presumed dead; the couple’s romance is emotionally involving, but the loss is no great surprise in generic terms. The juxtaposition of love and death is a recurrent theme in representations of the war. In *Force of Arms* (1951) Sgt. Joe Peterson (William Holden) first encounters WAC Lt. Eleanor McKay (Nancy Olsen) following hard combat in the battle of San Pietro; appropriately enough they meet in a cemetery.63 Set during the Second World War, the film was released during the Korean War, simultaneously looking back while covertly acknowledging the contemporary context of the Korean conflict. The romance in *Marine Raiders* (1944), similarly wrapped around combat sequences (this time in the Pacific), is rather edgier. The couple are not reunited in the film’s closing scenes, as WAAF Lt. Ellen Forster is left to wait and Marine Capt. Dan Craig to fight. Such uncertainty is central to the whimsical film by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *A Matter of Life and Death*, made and released shortly after the end of the war (in late 1946). June, an
American operator makes contact with RAF pilot Peter Carter in what both assume will be his final moments; there is an immediate and intense attraction between the two. Vivid Technicolor juxtaposes Peter in his burning plane with June, who works in a communications tower, her face illuminated by a red glow. June represents life and vitality against Peter’s imminent death. In contrast to the bold color of these opening shots, the film’s bureaucratic afterlife, staffed by women in military-style uniforms, is pictured in austere black and white. Miraculously—indeed by heavenly oversight—Peter survives the crash of his plane; the couple meet the following morning as June bicycles across the sands back to her barracks. The love that develops between Peter and June in *A Matter of Life and Death* is both rapid and intense, a product of the heightened situation in which they find themselves.

In a film lushly celebrating the primacy of love, the relationship between Peter and June is clearly metaphoric for new relations between the U.K. and the U.S. Here the New World is as much temporal as geographic, new not only in relation to Europe, but also to the extent that it functions as a sign of modernity. Newness in both senses is signaled by June in her youth, enthusiasm, and capacity for passion, but also her military status. The couple are brought together through her work as a military woman, aligning the role with intimacy, spontaneity, and romance. She is not only a military woman, but as a radio operator she is a point of contact between land and air. She is both a figure of agency, taking the initiative, and a figure who waits, frozen in time while playing table tennis and, later, as a spectator during Peter’s crucial surgery. Her spirited attitude, her “mobility,” in wartime terms, is in this way explicitly counterposed with more passive constructions of femininity prevalent in the war period (the woman who waits). What is perhaps most striking about representations of military women in the Second World War as both mobile and waiting (with all the connotations of fixity that position involves) is that these qualities rarely generate dramatic conflict; that is, they are not evidently contradictory. The war films explored in this section emphasize the romantic and erotic possibilities of military service, suggesting that the transformative qualities of military life can be recuperated for more conventional postwar domesticity. While such narratives clearly mobilize conventional patterns of femininity, these hybrid films of war and romance also insist on the modernity and independence of the military woman.
*Force of Arms* and *Marine Raiders* are exemplary of such hybrids. Set during the Second World War, both films demonstrate the ways the romance narrative brings the military woman into the action while attempting to deal with the disruption that she represents within this masculine world. Both films open with scenes of combat in which the hero demonstrates his courage, followed by a brief period of leave in which he encounters the military woman with whom he will become involved. In each case the hero is embittered by what he has seen or endured during the recent combat, a fact that makes the couple’s encounter particularly intense. In *Force of Arms* their meeting is antagonistic as a result of Joe’s bitterness following combat, their different ranks, and Eleanor’s reluctance to become sexually involved. By contrast, there is an instant bond between Dan and Ellen in *Marine Raiders*. In line with the generic conventions of romance, both films place obstacles in the path of the couple: misunderstandings, the interventions of well-intentioned friends, sheer physical distance, and of course the different roles they perform as military men and women. *Force of Arms* ends with the couple reunited in a liberated Rome; the ending of *Marine Raiders* is open, with the war in the Pacific continuing in its intensity and the couple uncertain as to their future.

Both films stage the meeting of the romantic military couple away from the fighting at the front, thus reinforcing the contemporary view that military men and women occupy distinct and separate spaces. Yet neither couple meets on home ground (that is to say, in the United States), but abroad—in Italy and Australia—suggesting that the mobility associated with wartime involves romantic potential as well as danger. In effect these movies exploit the very erotic possibilities that so troubled traditionalist opponents of women’s military service, staging opportunities for intimacy between men and women as a consequence of the women’s mobility.

The dangers of the foreign spaces to which women’s mobility leads them are underlined by scenes in which the couples come under unexpected attack from the air. In *Marine Raiders* Japanese planes strafe the beach as Dan and Ellen drive along the coast road, having decided to marry. They dive into a foxhole to take cover together, Dan heroically attempting to take over an anti-aircraft gun and sustaining a head injury in the process. In *Force of Arms* the couple share their first consensual kiss during a bombing raid. The attack serves to remind them of the perils of
war, prompting Eleanor to briefly overcome her objections to a more intimate relationship. Such sequences emphasize the presence of the military woman in a combat zone; though she is a noncombatant, her role places her in danger. Scenes of military women under aerial attack, without the romantic or erotic overtones, also occur in *Flight Nurse* (1953), set in Korea, and in the epic *Battle of Britain* (1969), which goes so far as to display the bodies of WAAFs killed in a German attack (figure 13). Though excluded from the combat portions of war-romance narratives, scenes of military women endangered by enemy action speak to the instability of attempts to secure their distinctiveness through noncombatant status.

In the context of a home front under aerial attack and women’s entry into spheres of work—the services, industry—traditionally understood as both male and masculine, Lant observes a process by which wartime British cinema reinscribes gendered space through an opposition between land and air. This distinction, she argues, is literalized through the use of point of view, such that an “aerial gaze,” contemplating the landscape from above, is “fictionalized as male, in contrast to the land-bound female look, which in so many ways supports the skies as a male preserve.” Lant points to an additional and complementary set of images “of home front women looking toward the sky from the land,” going on to argue that women’s war work is presented as rooted to the earth and the nation, supporting the efforts of military men whether in the air above or overseas.65

In *Airwoman* an image of a WAAF gazing at the planes flying above her accompanies the male voice-over’s final salute to her vital but grounded
work. A comparable image closes *Marine Raiders* as Ellen contemplates the planes taking off from the base where she works. We see her in medium close-up listening to a radio report of the action in which Dan has been centrally involved, anxiety evident on her face. She moves out onto the steps of the Operations Building and onto the airfield, swelling music accompanying the image of her solitary figure watching the planes take off. Her short walk from the building to the strip takes her through shadow and into bright sunlight, from anxiety to hope. She speaks out loud to her distant lover, of her hopes for their reunion and the work that will be required, her words ("You can take it. So can I") suggesting an equivalence between their separate labors (figure 14). In these movies images of the couple under aerial attack serve as an admission that both the male soldier and the military woman are playing an official part in the war. They come together in the context of danger, although the greater danger the male soldier faces is repeatedly underlined by grueling and spectacular combat sequences.

In the context of her comprehensive survey of the combat films of the Second World War, Jeanine Basinger finds *Marine Raiders* to be, in genre terms, “truly a problematic case.” She writes that “the combat film is used as a kind of parentheses around a traditional and detailed romantic love story,” but since the film begins and ends with combat and since “dis-
discussion of war and combat is ever-present,” *Marine Raiders* demands to be included within the parameters of her study. This classificatory dilemma points to the ways the figure of the military woman disrupts genre; she is consistently associated with generic hybridity, whether in the war-romance hybrids considered here, the comedies analyzed in chapters 4 and 5, the boot camp conventions explored in chapter 7, or the thrillers and investigative fictions discussed in chapter 8. Romance in these films is both immediate, defined by the passionate connections of the present, and forward-looking, requiring the possibility of a postwar existence, an end to the circumstances that bring the couple together. Films of war and romance tend to involve two key sources of dramatic tension: How will the couple come together despite the war and their personal histories? And once the couple is established, will the male protagonist survive his return to combat? Love brings both humanity and heightened vulnerability. Thus in *Force of Arms*, having fallen in love Joe is reluctant to take risks back on the line. When his buddy is killed and he himself is injured, Joe clearly blames himself for his hesitation under fire, his fear brought on by contact with the disruptive presence of the military woman. Though assigned to noncombat duties and free to marry Eleanor, he is plagued by nightmares and insists on returning to his unit to prove himself. Injured once more, he is listed as missing and presumed dead. In the final part of the film Eleanor (who is about to be discharged since she is pregnant), refuses to accept that Joe is dead and searches for him across the country. The two are ultimately reunited in Rome, after Joe is released from a POW camp.

In *Marine Raiders*, too, Dan evades the safety of a desk job to return to combat, although since this takes him back to Australia it means a reunion with Ellen. His return to action is also thus a return to romance rather than a departure from the woman at home. Exclusion from combat is represented as *unmanning* the heroes of these films, a process that is linked directly to the presence of the military woman. As will become increasingly clear in the debates concerning women's combat role in the postwar period, the military woman poses a symbolic threat to the masculinity of military men. This sense of an erosion of tradition will be implicitly linked to an emergent feminism in later films such as *Battle of Britain*, which evokes the military woman as an (uncaring) independent woman in a fashion suggestive of contemporary (that is, late 1960s) discourses and debates. Here WAAF Maggie Harvey (Susannah York) tells
her pilot husband, Colin (Christopher Plummer), that she is “just not cut out to wave a wet hankie on sooty stations.” Produced long after the context of war, with its negotiations and accommodations, *Battle of Britain* is open in its misogyny, with the military woman signifying an unwarranted disruption to gender norms. Colin describes Maggie as a “parade ground suffragette,” his anger at her reluctance to seek a posting near his new station expressed in terms of frustration with (implicitly masculine) military women more generally. His bitter assertion that he “never could stand marching women” couples his anger at a personal rejection to a disruptive female independence embodied by his career-focused military wife.

The incorporation of women into the British and U.S. military during the Second World War brought with it questions of women’s status as citizens as well as soldiers, concerns which are also present in the romance narratives explored here. A schoolteacher in civilian life, Eleanor McKay in *Force of Arms* explains her decision to enlist in terms of a desire to play a part in the fight for freedom, for a better future. She wants to return to her small New Hampshire town with the feeling that she has played a part in keeping her world “free and safe.” Since it is never questioned, Ellen does not explain her enlistment as such in *Marine Raiders*. She does, however, speak of her two younger brothers, stationed in Africa; we learn that Ellen raised them herself following the death of their parents and that she has not heard from them in five months, a poignant reminder of wartime loss.

Though Ellen is not called upon to explain herself, the film nonetheless stages a debate on the role of women in war and modern life. When the conversation turns to earlier times, Ellen extols the simple pleasures of the turn of the century, while Dan opts for the here and now. He tells Ellen that she is “too real” for that earlier time, that she “is meant for now when they need fighters,” a compliment that clearly moves her. When Dan is reluctant to marry, as this might be unfair to Ellen, she turns the compliment back on him: “I have my rights, Dan. This isn’t 1900. It’s today. . . . I have a say in my life and I’m going to say it.” It is perhaps ironic that her assertiveness is expressed in pursuit of the traditional goal of marriage, but Ellen’s speech is nonetheless a plea for social inclusion as an equal, in the war and in their relationship, effectively echoing the recruitment slogans which insisted on women’s place in the war effort. Later, in San Diego, Dan will counsel a fellow soldier also reluctant to marry, “You might remember that the girls are in this war too.” Though he employs a
rhetoric of “sides,” emphasizing the differences between men and women, he also makes reference here to Ellen’s words. And though the soldier he counsels is romancing a civilian, the words that Dan uses are those spoken by a military woman, one who lays claim to the citizenship that a military role bestows. Women’s stake in the war is effectively fused here with more traditional entitlements, such as home, marriage, and family.

In line with the themes of female labor as newly necessary so characteristic of official discourse during the Second World War, both Force of Arms and Marine Raiders suggest that women’s military service is generated by, and feeds, a changing society. Both films also clearly register the gender trouble associated with the military woman, the disruption to social hierarchies and conventional formulations of male and female, soldier and civilian. In Marine Raiders Ellen displays a passion for speed, initiating an extravagant (in the context of wartime restrictions) expedition by car, a directionless expression of action and energy that leads the couple first to a liaison on the shore (a physical intimacy that is subsequently legitimized by the decision to marry) and then into danger (the attack in which Dan is injured). Following the couple’s marriage there is a moment of comic disquiet as Ellen tells Dan that he looks “beautiful” in his uniform. Bashful, Dan reminds her, “A Marine can’t look beautiful,” the point being of course that Marines are men. (The introduction of female Marines, in a comic vignette discussed in the introduction, comes somewhat later in the film and goes unremarked by Dan.) Later Ellen must leave Dan’s bedside to go on duty, another instance of her association with work as much as with waiting.

We might contrast the film’s attempts to convey a modern military woman as a figure of movement and vitality with the first part of Marine Raiders, set in Guadalcanal at the beginning of the Japanese campaign. Here the conventions of jungle combat are fully on display. Dan expresses his distaste for night fighting and for the waiting involved in this kind of warfare: he is a man of action and waiting is associated with women. He briefly talks to another soldier, who speculates on life as a process of waiting, whether for Japanese attack, for manhood, or for marriage. Uncomfortable with waiting and repelled by an enemy constructed as entirely other, Dan is a “restless soul,” requiring a partner who can match as well as complement him. Ellen’s toughness, so explicitly marked as necessary in the “here and now” of wartime, does not make her any less female; yet many of the films discussed in this chapter show traces of an anxiety that
such toughness might erode the critical, newly precarious difference between women and men. *Force of Arms* takes the theme of women’s usurping male authority somewhat further through overt jokes (and evident male discomfort) about female manliness. In this context its release in 1951 is perhaps significant; the “battle of the sexes” rhetoric increasingly central to postwar comedies (including those featuring military women) is now firmly in evidence. Equally the postwar future of the couple forms a more significant concern of this film as it draws out potential tensions as male citizen soldiers and newly mobile women accommodate themselves to each other.

At their first meeting Eleanor rejects Joe’s offer of a drink, which he interprets as a judgment about rank (she is a lieutenant, he a sergeant). The following day Joe is promoted to lieutenant as a result of his heroism on the battlefield, eliminating this potential obstacle to romance and the threat to male authority posed by a woman who outranks her male partner. Yet Joe’s antipathy (and attraction) to Eleanor as a female soldier remains. He disdainfully comments in Eleanor’s presence, “WACS ain’t women. They’re officers and gentlemen—Congress says so.” His aggressive insistence that a military woman is a contradiction in terms, and the implication that her very existence results from the meddling of politicians, registers the heated debates of the war period. Opponents regarded the establishment of the WAC as an unacceptable challenge to American womanhood. Thus “women’s military service was at best inappropriate and at worst marked the abandonment of more fitting responsibilities.” In this view WACS potentially relinquished their femaleness when they enlisted, an anxiety that informs both official and popular discourse of the period.

Immediately after his bitter dismissal, Joe overhears Eleanor brushing off a colonel’s invitation to the ballet, pleading the pressure of work and with a joke about her disinterest in “grown-up men in tights chasing muscular women across the stage.” The exchange intrigues Joe, who had read Eleanor as preoccupied only with rank and status. If the remark suggests her desire for traditional gender relations (rather than a world of muscular women and men in tights), in the date that follows the two are once more caught within troubled gender hierarchies. Thus when Eleanor speaks of the independence that the Army has given her, Joe testily responds by asking if she means independence from men. A little later he asks her directly whether she hates men, underscoring the perception...
of military women as antagonistic toward men and conventional feminine submissiveness. This first date almost comes to an abrupt end when Eleanor first asks Joe to the ballet and then pays for their drinks. When he recalls her earlier distaste, she responds suggestively, speculating, “Maybe the women will chase the men tonight.” Although much of the early tension in their relationship stems from Eleanor’s refusal of physical intimacy, here she seems almost predatory. When she pays the bill for their drinks Joe seethes, commenting bitterly, “That’s what I like about you. You’re such a perfect gentleman.” He expresses his resentment of female independence by suggesting more or less explicitly that the military woman has usurped a male position, becoming mannish in the process. More generally, however, Force of Arms locates the distinctiveness of the military woman in both her noncombatant status and her sexual respectability, even as it plays with the suggestion that she is either mannish or occupies a position of inappropriate authority (over men).

In the context of the contested respectability of the female soldier in the war period, as Meyer astutely notes, “bad women were those who acted like male soldiers.” The morality of sexual encounters during wartime forms a key subject of tension between Joe and Eleanor in Force of Arms. Although Eleanor makes it clear that she is not offering sex, Joe repeatedly attempts to initiate physical intimacy, whether through verbal insinuation or direct approach (putting his arm around her, kissing her). His frustration is evident. When Eleanor continues to resist his advances, Joe expresses resentment at being made to feel “like some kind of creep.” The film’s relative frankness about sexual activity outside marriage reflects its later date of production, but is also surely a response to contemporary perspectives on women in the military. On their first meeting Joe suggestively invites Eleanor for a drink, and she refuses. In subsequent meetings she explains her reluctance to begin a romantic or sexual commitment in relation to an idea of decency and the loss of her former lover—whose grave she was visiting on the first meeting in the cemetery—but also in terms of disgust at the exploitation of civilian women. She expresses her anger that local girls and women are forced to exchange sex for goods (exchanges strongly implied in earlier scenes showing GIs on liberty), characterizing American troops, or perhaps war more generally, as corrupting. While Joe’s commanding officer encourages him to have sex with local women, Eleanor’s sexual propriety is clearly regulated. In these ways the film highlights the very different expectations associated
with the sexuality of male and female soldiers, underscoring Eleanor’s status as good woman and respectable WAC.

If the war-romance hybrids tend to foreground differences between men and women, other films of the Second World War foreground differences such as class, region, and nationality more explicitly. The MGM drama *This Above All* (1942), which centers on the developing romance between the aristocratic WAAF Prudence Cathaway (Joan Fontaine) and the working-class Army deserter Clive Briggs (Tyrone Power), exemplifies the extent to which the dynamic figure of the military woman could serve as a sign of modernity and national continuity. The couple’s relationship is shaped by their different class backgrounds and their attitudes to nation and duty: Clive is intensely bitter at the British class system and the folly of military leaders appointed on the basis of family connections rather than soldiering ability. An example of what Mark Glancy terms “the British film,” placing the term in quotation marks to signal the status of movies set in Britain but produced in Hollywood, the film was adapted soon after Eric Knight’s novel was published. The explicit dialogue on class, nation, and equality in *This Above All* is informed by a number of different factors: contemporary debates concerning potential U.S. involvement in the war, American perspectives on Britain, the recent commercial success of gothic romance, the predilections of the production team, and the previous roles of its stars, Fontaine and Power. As Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black detail, in the difficult moment of a developing alliance with a colonial power the British Office of War Information was concerned that Hollywood films resist the temptation to draw on either the British Empire as a glamorous setting for adventure or stereotypes of British aristocracy: “For propaganda purposes British society had to be democratized and its empire written out.” In this context they judge *This Above All* as the most overt attempt to deal with the “theme of England as a class-ridden society.” As Glancy suggests, the movie adaptation centered attention on the love story and the character of Prudence; with her forthright views on class (absent from the novel), she becomes “the moderator between the old and the new England,” a figure who stands for necessary change. Neither Koppes and Black nor Glancy have much to say on the role played by a military woman in this drama of class, democracy, and war. Yet her enlistment is surely significant, functioning as it does to tie the themes of female mobility to class mobility and social change.

*This Above All* begins in 1940, the setting an affluent English home. In
the sitting room an assembled group, dressed formally for dinner, listen
to the radio and news that France has signed an armistice with Germany.
Life for this family is both leisurely and luxurious: they have space and
servants at their disposal. In this privileged space of comfort preens the
complacent Iris, an image suggestive of inappropriate self-involvement.
The events in Europe seem both terrible and unreal, the threat to Britain
denied by some in the party and confronted squarely by others (clearly
“right” in the film’s terms), who point to the need for preparedness. The
opposing attitudes within the group are summed up in emotional terms
as excitement and restraint, which also clearly reference stereotypical
constructions of Englishness. Subtly these terms are transferred onto
an issue of appropriate class and gendered behavior when Iris cautions
her brother Roger that his daughter Prudence “is not behaving in a man-
der befitting her position.” Iris is concerned that Prudence is fraternizing
with lower-class men; Roger responds with egalitarian rhetoric, address-
ing the class transgression though not the implicit criticism of Prudence’s
morality. The rationality of Roger’s perspective is set against Iris’s rather
comical, airy insistence that she is “not against equality.” “I’m perfectly
prepared to be equal with anybody,” she remarks, adding, “providing they
don’t start being equal with me.” Having set up an opposition between
decorum and equality, the film introduces Prudence, played by Fontaine
in breathless fashion. In the discussion that follows she is revealed as the
new aristocratic woman of Britain, initially seemingly preoccupied by the
trivial and pointedly feminine prewar pursuits of shopping, beauty, and
leisure but shyly and almost in passing revealing that she has enlisted: “I
did some shopping, and er, I had my hair done, and er, then I joined the
WAAFs.”

That concerns about class underpin the opposition of respectability
and responsibility mobilized in these establishing scenes quickly becomes
apparent when the assembled family object not so much to the fact that
Prudence has joined the WAAF, as to the fact that she has joined the ranks.
Her uncle Wilfred points out that he could have secured her a commis-
sion, a suggestion to which Prudence responds decisively, “I don’t want
to be an officer until I’ve learned to be a private.” To Wilfred, becoming
a private means setting aside a traditional entitlement to lead, while to
Iris it represents a rebellion typical of young girls of the time who “think
it clever to be different,” a word she enunciates with all the scathing con-
tempt of her small-minded, upper-class position. Prudence recoils at her family’s complaisance, proclaiming her modernity against their traditionalism, her presence in the here and now: “I’m in 1940 and you’re in 1880.” Once again the modern woman of today is compared to the restrictions (and here inappropriate, class-bound assumptions) of the nineteenth century. In *This Above All* discourses of the modern woman and of the need for an egalitarian society reinforce each other. Indeed there is an insistent process of displacement, as both the romance plot and the question that underpins Clive’s desertion (is Britain really a country worth fighting for?) develop over the course of the narrative.73 There is a clear suggestion that Prudence has transgressed more than class boundaries here, and that the erosion of class boundaries brings with it the threat (or promise) of sexual opportunity. Indeed such presumptions lay the ground for the romantic liaison that forms the center of the film.

The second scene shifts decisively from the affluent home to the WAAF camp, in which women from diverse class and regional backgrounds mix together. The new recruits feature in a generically familiar montage of transformation: first seen assembled in civilian clothes, then being given their uniforms and equipment, in their barracks, on the parade ground, drilling, undertaking physical exercise, gas mask drill, and marching behind a band. The friendliness of the comical working-class Violet Worthing, who promises Prudence she will fix them both up with boys, confirms the potentially compromising consequences of social mixing. Prudence is at first true to her name, rejecting Violet’s offer of a date. (Violet’s response, “You ain’t a bluestocking?,” is a telling condensation of classed and gendered norms of behavior.) Caught off-guard Prudence later agrees to assist Violet in her plan to get her boyfriend, Joe, alone so that he can propose. Brought along as a decoy, Prudence is left in the dark with the mysterious Clive; her observation that she doesn’t usually “come out like this” prompts him to describe her as a “very superior sort of WAAF,” a comment that registers both class status (of which he is acutely aware) and an inappropriate sexual distance.

In her study of British wartime culture, Antonia Lant deftly analyzes the complex symbolism and pervasiveness of the blackout: “Living through the wartime dark was experienced by everyone, regardless of class, age, sex, race, or regional abode. Universal in nature, the image of the blackout became a synecdoche for war in cultural life.” In narratives of chance...
encounters “the wartime night” is revealed “as an eroticised, hypnotic space.” This Above All rehearses its chance encounter exactly thus, in the night. The sexualized charge of the meeting and of the relationship that subsequently develops between Prudence and Clive is less overt than in the source novel but is nonetheless apparent. Attempting to escape from the rain, the couple are expelled from a hotel, the owner clearly assuming that they wish to use the premises for sex. Later, following an alcohol-fueled encounter in a haystack, Prudence rashly agrees to go away with Clive for a week during her first leave. Their illicit passion is sanctioned by the ticket inspector, who, recalling his own experience in the First World War, conspiratorially allows them a carriage to themselves. Their trip to the coast seems romantic and exciting at first, but then becomes rather sordid. (A chance encounter with the prurient Iris flusters Prudence.) Clive’s military buddy Monty overtly treats Prudence as a sexually available woman in these scenes, despite Clive’s assurances as to her character. Thus This Above All clearly exploits the erotic opportunities, here heightened by interclass mixing, associated with military service during the war (figure 15). Even so, Prudence’s class and gender status serve to reassure (we know that the working-class Monty and the aristocratic Iris are both incorrect in their presumptions), allowing her character to signal both continuity and a society in transition.

The military woman is evidently a democratizing figure in This Above All. Yet the meanings of the military woman in wartime cinema involve more than a simple statement of patriotism or modernity. Prudence’s private’s uniform signals her defiance of tradition and class entitlement, but it also poses a question about shifting gender norms and sexual morality. In the seclusion of their train carriage, Clive asks her to change out of her uniform, to appear for him in the guise of a civilian woman. Yet when she does so, in an erotically charged scene, it is not only her conventional feminine beauty that is revealed, but her decidedly upper-class status. That status had been temporarily masked by the very anonymity of the uniform. Darkness (the blackout) and the uniform both serve to ease sexual and social difference in the film, differences that are all too apparent here. Presumably Clive had hoped to see Prudence as a woman rather than a WAAF, but even out of uniform she remains a disruptive, troubling figure, one that needs to be contained.

This Above All differs from the war-romance hybrids discussed earlier
to the extent that scenes of combat are excluded from the drama (excepting Clive’s spoken recollections). The movie plays instead with the conventions of romance, courting gothic overtones in the later scenes, in which Clive emerges as a traumatized figure (by both combat and class inequities). As Glancy makes clear, this evocation of the gothic was a deliberate production decision to emphasize Prudence’s point of view and effectively exploit “Joan Fontaine’s most recent films, *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941), in which her character is in love with a man she does not understand or trust.”

This *Above All* certainly owes much to the gothic melodramas with which Fontaine had been recently associated (and indeed, as Glancy notes, to Power’s converted skeptic in *A Yank in the RAF*). Moreover the fact that Prudence spends a significant portion of the film out of uniform, notably during her coastal holiday with Clive, suggests a shift to romance. Yet when Prudence and Clive are finally reunited, she is in uniform once more, emphasizing her status as a military woman over her aristocratic social position. This last part of the film also casts Prudence as a figure who waits: at the railway station for an appointment Clive cannot make (since he is incarcerated), while her surgeon father operates on the injured Clive, and finally by Clive’s bedside during an air raid. Her assertion of her own modernity (inscribed through her military service in the ranks and her relative sexual freedom) is distinct from the frail femininity of Fontaine’s gothic heroines; in this context her inscrip-
tion as a woman who waits functions as a reassuring sign of the military woman’s commitment to a submissive femininity.

Representations of the Second World War, both popular and official, centralize the military woman while insisting on her auxiliary status. Her service is typically taken as a sign of modernity, rhetorically contrasted to previous generations of women constrained by a femininity understood as inappropriate to the needs of the present. To this end, tropes of personal transformation are a recurrent feature of the images and narratives discussed above. Though women’s military service is valorized and celebrated, it is construed as temporary, inextricable from the immediate context of total war. Representations of the war certainly acknowledge the culturally disruptive aspects of the military woman (the extent to which the female soldier is felt to be a contradiction in terms), seeking to reassure traditionalist sentiment while mobilizing a rhetoric of national necessity. Both recruitment materials and feature films also speak to contemporary concerns that military service might trouble gender norms, rendering women masculine or mannish or facilitating inappropriate sexual possibilities (promiscuity or lesbianism). Thus the transformative training camp films considered in this chapter underline the effectiveness and respectability (i.e., femininity) of military women. The films of war and romance equally speak to contemporary discourses, exploiting military women’s proximity to men within the reassuring format of romance. Romance also features prominently in the next chapter, which focuses on military nursing narratives. Here, however, the presumption that nurses are not really soldiers allows a different iteration of the military woman, as a dedicated professional rather than a temporary necessity.