



SHOULD WOMEN CARRY ARMS?

WHEN the war is over the work and sacrifices of the women will be held in high esteem. Many have expressed their desire to join the Home Guard and we print the remarkable speech delivered in the House of Commons by Dr. Edith Summerskill, M.P., on this subject. Dr. Summerskill said:—

“LAST week we passed a Bill to conscript women between the ages of 20 and 30 for the Auxiliary Services. Our purpose is to put 100,000 of these women on the gun-sights in the target areas. To-day the Government tells us that one reason why women must not be included in the Home Guard is the risk. This is rather a quibble about the mode of death. Women can face death on the gun-sight; they can actually be put on the target; they can be machine-gunned or bombed by the Germans; but they must not be taught to handle a rifle, or, perhaps, meet death in the Home Guard. The particular jobs that women can do in the Home Guard are of such a character, possibly, that they will not face as much risk there as the A.T.S. do on the gun sights. Therefore I ask the Minister to reconsider his policy.

Two Reasons Against

“The Minister said that there were two important reasons why women should not be included. One was that there were other jobs for them to do. I cannot agree with that. There are many full-time jobs women can do, and many jobs that women can do if they live in towns, where, perhaps they can work on half-shifts.

“I am thinking of the country districts, the large rural areas far removed from factories, where there are women in the 30's and 40's and 50's, and I hope that it will mean that women in the 50's can also serve a useful purpose in the Home Guard. There are women who have certain household responsibilities, but, at the same time, perhaps, five, six or twelve-odd hours a week which they could devote to the Home Guard. It would be more in keeping with woman's traditional role as guardian of the home to play her part in the Home Guard.

Cannot Be Divided

“I want it to be clear to everybody that I am not asking for women to come into the Home Guard to wash up for men. That time has long past. I believe that I shall be supported by many

WOMAN DOCTOR M.P. SAYS: “I AM NOT ASKING FOR WOMEN TO COME INTO THE HOME GUARD TO WASH UP FOR MEN. THAT TIME HAS LONG PAST.”

people when I say that it is better for a C3 man to do the washing up and for an A1 woman, perhaps, to be on the gun-sight. This surely should be our approach to total war. We cannot be divided on a sex basis.

“This, after all, may be the eleventh hour.

If we are going to make a total effort, are we to ignore more than half of the adult population, which is comprised of women? Women can make a very useful contribution, apart from the domestic side, to the work of the Home Guard.

“I do not for a moment pretend to be a complete authority on Army changes and organisation, although I

DR. EDITH CLARA SUMMER-SKILL, whose views on women in the Home Guard we print on this page, has been Labour M.P. for West Fulham in the House of Commons since 1938, and a member of the Middlesex County Council since 1934. She is 41 years old, qualified as a doctor, and is vice-president of the Socialist Medical Association

have taken more interest in the matter during the last six months than I have ever done before in my life, but I am advised by very responsible commanders of Home Guard units that they could make use of women very effectively as messengers and runners, and in order to keep open the lines of communication, to be on guard, to do all sorts of clerical work, and they could and should learn how to handle a rifle.

“I know that immediately I use the word ‘rifle’ everybody will be asking how we can provide rifles. The women of the country are not asking for equipment. They do not ask for rifles, but

they do ask that they should be taught how to handle a rifle.

“If We Only Knew”

“Responsible people realise that when an invasion suddenly comes all our preconceived notions may be swept away. Surely the War Office must admit that women on gun-sights have proved themselves efficient and reliable. Perhaps the Minister will say that this is a new idea, but my answer is that this is a war of new ideas.

“Are not many of us saying, ‘If we only knew; if only we had anticipated that move?’ I say, Anticipate the invasion in a practical way by using women. We have a Home Guard which men go into willingly. Are we women expected to hide behind them in the event of an invasion? Surely that is stupid.

“Cannot I help the Home Guard by acting as a messenger, or in some other way, or am I to sit by a man who handles a rifle, and in the event of an emergency which made it necessary for me to use his rifle say, ‘It was not womanly for me to learn how to use a rifle?’ It is stupid and short-sighted. I urge the Government to look at this thing with fresh minds.”

The Government's Reply

IN reply, Sir E. Grigg, Under-Secretary of State for War, said:

“The Hon. Lady, the Member for West Fulham, argued eloquently and cogently for the inclusion of women in the Home Guard. I can give her very little hope. The opinion of the Home Guard itself is greatly divided on the point, and I would point out that when people say in the same breath, ‘Why is ammunition short for Home Guard training?’ and ‘Why do you not train the women of the country to shoot?’, they cannot train the women without still further reducing the amount available for the existing Home Guard.

“I do not want to join in a long discussion as to whether one can get far with a rifle without using ammunition, but I would point out that we have already had complaints—quite justifiable—about lack of instructors in the Home Guard. Those we have are fully extended at the present time. In all these things it is really lack of material and personnel that caused the limitations, and not any discrimination against women as such. Therefore, I hope the Hon. Lady will accept that explanation.”

Come Into The Army, Maud

[Soon after women were conscripted for the A.T.S. in England, the following poem by “Sagittarius” appeared in the New Statesman and Nation. We feel that its relevance to New Zealand to-day, where women have been similarly called to the colours, is sufficient justification for its reappearance in the pages of The Listener.]

COME into the Army, Maud,
Your hours of ease are flown,
Get into the Army, Maud,
They are waiting for you alone,
And the word of command has been waited abroad
And the fall-in finally blown.

YOU were blind to the ads. in the daily press,
So they got you, sweet, on the run;
You would not pop into the battle-dress,
Though the War Office said it was fun,
You would not become an adventuress
In the ranks of adventurous A.T.S.*
Where brave girls cook for the Sergeants' Mess
And the batwoman busily bats.

YOU have failed to volunteer
So at last you have met your fate;
There has risen a splendid cheer
From the Commons holding debate.
The Air Force cried: “She is near, she is near!”
But the War Office muttered: “We wait!”
The Navy trolled: “She is here, she is here!”
But the Army barked: “She is late!”

QUEEN weed in the garden of Service girls,
You may sigh till the war is through
For gloss of ermine and glamour of pearls,
Or even a uniform blue,
De-rouge the nails, and prune the curls,
And into the A.T.S. with you!

(*A.T.S. Adventure Through Service. Daily advertisement).