



**Sara Louise Miller, *The Women Behind the Few: The Women's Auxiliary Airforce and British Intelligence during the Second World War* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2023)**

*Reviewed by Ajwa Hijazi*

The book 'The Women Behind the Few' offers an engaging insight into the role of the Women's Auxiliary Airforce (WAAF) - the female auxiliary of the Royal Air Force (RAF) formed in 1939 -against the backdrop of World War II. The author, Sara Louise Miller, lecturer at the Defence Studies Department, King's College London, and visiting scholar in the faculty of History at the University of Oxford, specialises in the history of World War II. In this book, she highlights the significant intelligence contributions of WAAF that assisted RAF during the war but had been previously overlooked in historical accounts.

In this captivating ten-chapter narrative, Miller recounts the inspiring journey of the women of WAAF who transcended the restrictive societal stereotypes of 'gossip and chatter' to carve out their indelible roles within the intricate network of British intelligence during World War II. At a time when women's expertise in high-level math, science, or engineering was not just rare but often dismissed, these remarkable women shattered expectations. They not only matched but often exceeded their male counterparts in providing crucial intelligence services for aerial warfare. Embedded deeply within bomber and fighter commands, they lived, worked, and, in many tragic instances, died alongside their fellow servicemen, proving their undeniable competency, patriotism and reshaping perceptions of women in

wartime roles. They were integral to radar operations and communication intelligence, and some were even parachute-dropped into Nazi-occupied territories as clandestine agents for the Special Operation Executive (SOE), an organisation formed to support resistance movements and gather intelligence across Europe. The bravery of these women was recognised through numerous medals of valor. Yet, one of their most cherished moments of recognition came when they received a rousing cheer from stationed airmen. This occurred as they marched back to their quarters after enduring a particularly intense raid that resulted in heavy casualties, highlighting the profound respect and admiration they garnered from their peers.

While describing WAAF members as the 'hidden few' (p.18), the author vividly captures their vital intelligence roles across various RAF departments, despite facing societal resistance and governmental skepticism (p.31). She highlights their critical involvement in the Dowding System during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. This system was crucial for gathering radar intelligence and relaying essential information to the Fighter Command, enabling the timely interception of enemy aircraft (pp.102,112). These courageous women also served in the Y Service - an operation designed to intercept enemy communications. They played a key role in deciphering Luftwaffe codes, thus exposing enemy attack formations and significantly contributing to the Allied war effort (pp.112, 117).

Miller also details how WAAF facilitated the seamless transfer of information to and from Bletchley Park, home of the Government's Code and Cypher School (p.260), and their deployment behind enemy lines in France to train and support the French Resistance, bolstering the Allied landings (p.198). She concludes how the WAAF became indispensable to the RAF's combat capabilities, and consequently, the Women Royal Air Force was established in 1949 as a peacetime counterpart. However, she notes a historical oversight: it was not until 1994 that women were formally integrated as full-time members of RAF, marking a significant milestone in their recognition (p.257).

Using gripping first-hand accounts of WAAF members, including radar operators (pp.55, 84), plotters (pp.56, 89), filter officers (p.88), code breakers (p.133), etc., Miller presents their perspective of war-time contributions and how they were inducted into the intelligence role out of necessity due to insufficient manpower. But still, they charted their territory from doing peripheral administrative work to being vital collectors, analysers, and disseminators of decisive information that paved the way for the overall Allied victory in the war. It is rather ironic and sad that the author discusses Britain's historical skepticism towards women's capabilities in intelligence roles during the World Wars which are prevalent even today according to her, instead of applauding their technical skills and critical contributions.

One significant issue in Miller's book is her frequent use of emotionally charged, hyper-nationalistic language, which can sometimes detract from an objective analysis of historical events. Despite this, the book is an insightful and well-crafted exploration of the often overlooked yet crucial contributions of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, whose efforts were pivotal in securing air victories for the Allied forces during the war. This work is particularly valuable for academics, researchers, and students specialising in international relations, gender studies, and sociology, as well as anyone interested in the nuanced historical accounts of the World Wars.

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