

# Winifred Phillips

Born

Autobiographical life story.

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*This account of Winifred Phillips' life was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from The Lady magazine.*

# 1. Early Life

After a harrowing childhood and losing the love of her life in the Second World War, Winifred Phillips joined the Army for a life of adventure. Vanessa Berridge talks to her about bravery, tragedy - and becoming the first lady Chelsea Pensioner...

Winifred Phillips brandishes her walking stick made from a Brussels sprouts stalk. 'I hit that many men with it,' she chuckles, 'that it lost all its shine. I've repolished it with nail varnish; a trick I learned in the Army.'

This is typical feistiness from the woman who, in 2009, became the first female Chelsea Pensioner after a 10-year „fight. Today, as a representative of the Royal Hospital, she's resplendent in the familiar bright-red jacket, with service medals on coloured ribbons across her chest, black trousers and black lace-up shoes. At 86, still abuzz with life and merriment, she has almost unwrinkled peachy skin, a splash of bright lipstick, and a devilish twinkle in her blue-grey eyes.

She resembles a bubbling kettle as we talk in her spacious ground-floor room, which opens on to gardens and greenhouses. The occasion is the publication of *Mum's Army: Love And Adventure From The NAAFI To Civvy Street*. Her frank memoirs tell not only of Win's 22 eventful years in the Army, but also of her difficult childhood, the loss of her one love in the war, and her resolve to move to the Royal Hospital.



*Liphook Warrant Officers course, 1962*

The book's striking opening sets the scene: Win has been locked in her bedroom, blamed for some misdemeanour of her younger brother's. Furious, she jumps out of the first-floor window, ripping her dress – and is lucky not to break her neck.

(Aged 70, she made another leap, abseiling off a tall building in Telford for charity.)

This mixture of courage and determination, with a hint of recklessness, would define Winifred Phillips's life.

But her pluck was needed in spades, for shortly after Win's first leap, her parents' marriage broke up and, without explanation, Win and her three brothers were packed off to different relatives. Win found herself at successive convent boarding schools, seeing little of her brothers and meeting her mother only ever twice more. 'Boarding school was hard, especially when the war was on,' she recalls. 'But I just took it for granted that's how life would be.'

Small wonder, then, that she chose professions, first nursing and then the services, to provide structure and companionship, together with the sense of family denied her in childhood.

Win resolutely lacks self-pity: 'Life is what you make it, really. I had a tough start, but you can throw that off and push yourself to the front.'

At 16, she began training in Birmingham to nurse sick children. While there, Win met a trainee wireless operator, George Wheeler, and fell deeply in love. But after nine idyllic months, George left for active service in the RAF and his regular letters stopped in mid-1944 when he was reported missing in action.

It would be more than four decades before her researches revealed that he had crashed and been buried in France. The War Graves Commission sent her first to the grave of another George Wheeler in Berlin. 'I knew as soon as I got near it that it wasn't the right place. I never went to Berlin again,' she shudders. Her voice dips as she looks across at photos of George and of his grave in France above her desk. Seven decades have not quenched her pain.

But George's disappearance brought into focus the fact that nursing didn't really suit Win. 'I used to look at the Clent Hills and think, Oh God, I want to see what's on the other side.'

At the Christmas party in 1964 (Win is at the back)

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## 2. A Life in the Army



*At the Christmas Party in 1964. Win is at the back.*

And after George's death, says Win, 'the thought of travelling was the main thing in my life. I had plenty of boyfriends who wanted to marry, and I said, "OK, but not me – go and find someone else".'

The example of her parents' marriage was not encouraging. 'I suppose my mother and father's life didn't do me any good. I had no feelings for my parents eventually.'

Chance dictated she ended up in the Army. 'I went to the recruiting office one day in 1948 to join the Royal Navy. But the navy and the RAF women had gone to lunch, and the only woman left was recruiting for the Army.'

She describes with brio the early years: freezing conditions, poor food, everything done at the double. There was the odd scrape, such as wriggling across the ground, commando or having a spectacular fallout with her boss over a switchboard in Egypt when she needed the loo.

Her career took her to Egypt and Cyprus, then back to the UK. Latterly, she worked in Singapore and Jakarta as PA to generals and a brigadier cousin of the Duchess of Kent. In the meantime, she travelled widely around Asia, often alone and braving the discomfort and danger.

I wonder that such an independent spirit didn't find Army discipline irksome. 'It didn't do me any harm. Life altogether has rules and regulations. They are just more explicit in the Army.'

‘We were the WRAC, aside from the men. We didn’t carry guns , but we did nearly every other job that the men did when they weren’t fighting. I wouldn’t have stayed in the Army if I’d had to become a soldier.

‘The WRAC was disbanded in 1992 and women now go in the Army with the men and are trained to use guns. I look at what they have to do today and think, good luck to them; it wouldn’t suit me.

‘I loved the WRAC as it was. I don’t think of myself as a feminist; I just know I’m equal to any man.’

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### 3. Chelsea Pensioner



*Winifred Phillips as a Chelsea Pensioner (second from left).*

So Win is content, back among servicemen at the Royal Hospital, after applying first in 1999 for a place. ‘They said they hadn’t got the facilities and suggested I went to a widows’ home, which I didn’t want to do. I wrote every year after that.’

Then in 2007, she and two other women took part in a BBC documentary, which forced the issue of admitting women to the hospital. After a four-day trial, like an Oxbridge interview, Win joined in the spring of 2009, the first of six women now at the hospital.



*Sharing a joke with a fellow resident. Inset above: Winifred (left) in Germany, 1960. Inset below: the airman she loved*

So are they now a community within a community? ‘

Oh no, I mix with the men,’ is her emphatic response. ‘It’s great, having done 22 years in the Army, living alongside men. If I were in a hotel, I would go into a room next to a fella.’

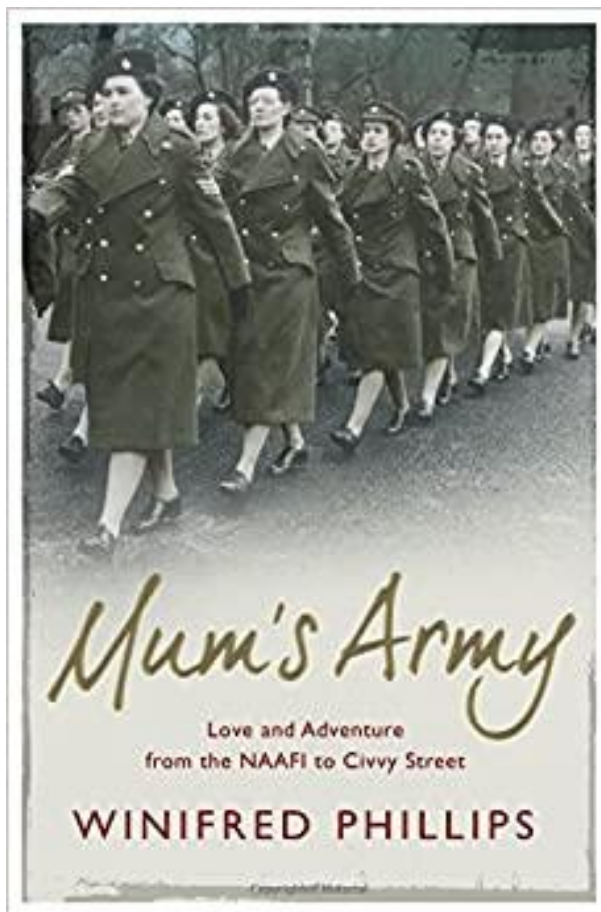
Her reception has been mixed. ‘One or two men just do not like women and will not speak to you. But that’s up to them.’

Whizzing around on her buggy, keeping her brain active by doing The Times Codeword, she relishes the company of the elderly soldiers whom she beguilingly calls ‘lads’.

‘I love this place and am very happy here,’ she says. ‘I have had a good life; I really have.’

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## X. Book



Winifred Phillips has written an autobiography: *Mum's Army: Love And Adventure From The NAAFI To Civvy Street*. It was published in 2013 by Simon & Schuster, priced £6.99.

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## X. Timeline

1926

Born Ilford, Essex, the third of four children and the only daughter.

Early 1930s

Win's parents' marriage breaks up and the four children are sent to live separately with relatives. Win starts at the first of two convent boarding schools.

1942

Win begins nursing training.

1943

She falls in love with George Wheeler, an RAF trainee wireless operator.

1944

George is reported missing in action.

1948

Win joins the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service).

1949

She enlists in the newly formed WRAC (Women's Royal Army Corps), travels to Egypt, Cyprus, Singapore and Jakarta and achieves the rank of Warrant Officer Class 2.

1971

Leaves the Army after 22 years' service and moves first to Norfolk, then later to Telford and Kent.

Early 1990s

Finally finds the grave of her wartime sweetheart after years of searching.

1996

Win abseils down Darby House in Telford to raise money for Cancer Research.

2009

Becomes the first female Chelsea Pensioner.

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