



## WAAF Plotter Marilyn Richardson (née Timms)

Marilyn Richardson remembers her time in the Womens' Auxiliary Air Force.

When my brother was called up for National Service in August 1939, I felt I should join the W.A.A.F. but due to home commitments, it was September 1941 before I was able to do so. This meant I did not take part in the Battle of Britain - to my everlasting regret.

Through my work as a receptionist at a Country Club, and at Punch's hotel built in 1939 near Doncaster, I was acquainted with Squadron Leader Lord Lincoln of 616 (Doncaster) Squadron. When I told him I was determined to join the WAAF, he advised me to become a Clerk SD (Special Duties). He gave me little detail but said it was the most interesting job there was. I am eternally grateful to him because the recruiting team tried to persuade me to do other jobs, pay clerk, office administration etc. but I insisted and was accepted as a Clerk SD. I failed my medical on a urine test but I was told if I got clearance from my own doctor, I would be accepted. I had suffered a perforated ulcer at 16 years old but the doctor who treated me had subsequently died. I had moved to another area and the doctor I saw did not know my past history, which I kept secret. He examined me and gave me the certificate, which was accepted, and I received my call-up papers. I had a fright in the middle of my initial training, we were told we were to have a medical inspection. I was terrified I would be sent home, but it turned out to be simply a 'free from infection' examination - nits, scabies etc. so all was well.



Marilyn Timms

After initial training, drill, parades, physical training etc. the whole camp attended a posting parade, where each person's name and number was called out and her destination given. A batch of us was not on the list and we were told we were 'on disposal'. This turned out to be camp duties, cleaning toilets, being runners for various offices etc. and after the first week, what was listed as 'farming'. This was potato picking at a local farm for which we were supposed to be paid an extra 6d a day - but I was never paid! Eventually my posting came up for a place on a plotters course at Leighton Buzzard. We were housed in what used to be a workhouse, stone floors and stone benches with metal bowls instead of bathrooms - but an open fire in the sitting room where we were allowed to wear slippers. It was sheer heaven after the discipline of the training camp.

I was posted to Duxford near Cambridge where I was very happy and I made friends who are still friends in 2001. The work was all I had hoped for. I had only been there a few weeks when one day there was a large enemy attack. Suddenly the table was full of plots and I had to work desperately hard to keep up with the mass of information coming over my headset. I found it very exciting and was very sorry when someone



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was sent to relieve me. Later the Flt Sgt. sent for me and congratulated me on my handling of the situation, and my 'calmness and efficiency'. That was one of my highlights - I no longer felt such a rookie. I then progressed to other jobs. When our own aircraft were airborne we manned a DF (Direction Finding) Room where a map table of our own area had local stations marked, each with a string coming out of the table at that point. Each of the stations gave a bearing of the aircraft that had transmitted, which was laid off on the compass rose on the map. In theory the strings should cross exactly but often made an open triangle, which the DF teller interpreted and passed to the Ops. Room. A Sgt. had a map table beside the Controller, and taking speed, wind etc. into consideration, laid off the track and could estimate very accurately exactly where the aircraft was at that time and direct him on to the enemy. This Sgt. had a plotter assistant. One of us also helped the OPS b Officer, the Controller's assistant, who was in charge of all telephone communications with all stations, sectors, army liaison etc. Often we had aircrew who had been grounded, mostly injured, who came as assistants to the Controller and Ops B., and to see what we in Ops. actually did. One of these was Jimmy Edwards, a well-known comedian who always called himself Ops B 71/2. He was with us for quite a few weeks and a great morale booster.

There were sad times though when planes were lost. One of the girls on our 'watch' married a pilot from one of Duxford's squadrons. Only a matter of weeks later his friends reported that he had been shot down in flames. Maureen was given compassionate leave and posted to another station, which was the practice in these circumstances and I never heard anything more about her.

In 1942 the Americans took over Duxford but we worked with them for some time. I remember in April 1942 I had been dancing with a Lt. Sandmierson (Sandy) one night. The next day I was on duty when his Squadron was in action, when loud and clear over the tannoy I heard him say "Larboard 82 (his call sign) larboard 82, mayday, mayday, mayday." His friends reported that they had seen him bale out but the Air-Sea Rescue did not find him. The weather that day was so hot that some of us had taken our mattresses out into Hinxton Hall grounds, where we lived, to sleep in the cool, so we hoped he would survive, but years later I saw his name on the American War Memorial near Cambridge.

After the Battle of Britain, all Ops Rooms were located away from the aerodromes. Duxford's was at Sawston Hall and the plotters lived at Hinxton Hall a few miles away. We also had an emergency Ops. Room out in the open countryside - very primitive, with Elsan toilets. We used it once or twice for training purposes but never actually needed to use it. The airmen, very few of them, (we were mostly girls) emptied the toilets and we almost had a mutiny when the girls were told to take turns in this. Luckily we won the battle.

When the Americans had totally taken over Duxford, a lot of us were sent to Watnall near Nottingham, the Headquarters of our group. It was not nearly so interesting as having our 'own' squadrons and aerodrome, but we saw what was happening over a



wider area. One night I was on the so-called 'death-watch' from 8.30pm to 2.30am. The whole country was covered in fog, quite non-operational when we learned that three important battleships, the *Scharnhorst*, the *Gneisenau* and the *Prince Eugene* had sneaked out of their Norwegian hideaway, and were sailing towards the English Channel. We were very excited but learned the next day they had escaped, into the Atlantic.

Whilst at Watnall I had two months compassionate leave to help nurse my sister and was then posted to Church Fenton near York where I served until my discharge in February 1946. Our Ops room was in the stable block at Grimston Park and we lived in Nissen huts in the grounds. Discipline was not severe and Clerks SD never did drill or went on parade because of our shift and night work, and not living on the camp. We would go through the perimeter wire instead of signing out at the guardroom so we could stay out late.

I really enjoyed being there and met my husband at a dance at York's De Grey rooms on the last day of his de-mob leave from the Royal Navy. My friend's fiancé (a navigator) brought back a length of silk to make her wedding dress. I was her bridesmaid, and when I was married three months later, we simply exchanged dresses and she was my Matron of Honour, so I too was able to have a traditional wedding.



Marilyn's cap badge



Arrows for aircraft seen and the others for those only heard. The circles were for aircraft circling.

The illustrations show a Royal Canadian Air Force cap badge, a 'swap' with her boyfriend that she wore for a year (no one noticed) and her original wooden plotting counters. They were later replaced with metal counters and magnetic rods.