



WRNS 3rd Officer Mary Hall (née Carlisle)

Mary volunteered for the WRNS in 1939 but was told she should first complete her education at Oxford University, as there were no available vacancies except for cooks and stewards, neither of which she would be good at!:

Chief Officer Currie told me later that they had had their eye on me for the Western Approaches Plot.

She went for her medical in her final year and cheated in the eye test by learning the card in advance! Just after Mary's final exam she received her calling-up papers. For her initial training Mary went to the Western Approaches base in Blundell Sands, where several houses had been requisitioned:



A group of about 20 of us arrived by train and had a fortnight of head inspections, squad drill, floor scrubbing, lectures on potted naval history, traditions and naval phrases, air-raid drill, 'suitable conduct' and all.

Being a Wren Plotter in Derby House was a great experience. Not only was the Battle of the Atlantic immediate and often scary, but we met many most interesting people. Some were unfailingly courteous, others more moody and sometimes tiresome. Being a Wren up a ladder one was a fly-on-the-wall.

The main Atlantic Plot was on one long wall two stories high and northern convoy routes were reached by ladder. The ladders we used were 'step-ladder' type, set sideways to the plot and were moved along a sort of tramline, top and bottom. One quickly got used to them and acquired a splendid balance, seeing how far the elastic would stretch when putting up the convoy routes.

The Atlantic Wall Plots displayed convoy and ship positions, the 'Admiralty Guess' of U boat positions and wind speed and direction. In some cases, for example [Operation Torch](#), the destinations of the force were not plotted in order to maintain secrecy. The plotting was by Dead Reckoning and positions updated every four hours.



'Girl in a gale' - Mary and Geoffrey on their wedding day April 1945

The plotters worked in watches - in four watches if we were lucky - and very long ones at that, because of the need for continuity and a long turnover. The Wrens' timing was 8am to 6pm and 6pm to 8am. During these watches we had time off for meals and a bit of a snooze at



night if we were lucky. The Officers had the same length of watch but changed watches an hour later. I felt claustrophobic to start with, being underground so much, but the job was fascinating and I soon became acclimatised.

I was lucky enough to be on watch when the King and Queen came round. Curtseying with a handful of pins and coloured elastic did seem a little bizarre.

On one very stormy occasion - the tail end of a gale - I took four or five Wrens to a corvette in Gladstone Dock to go out on some Hedgehog trials. I was the Leading Wren of the party and stayed on the bridge most of the time. It was quite an experience.

I left Derby House reluctantly in December 1943. Having refused a commission I was sent for by the Chief of Staff and given such a blast. (If the Navy thought I was suitable to be an officer who was I to question their judgement?) I cily polite but oh so cross! I finally said 'Aye, aye Sir' and that was that.

The course at Greenwich was magic - but cold - squad drill in the snow and I arrived, a Third Officer in Portland on Jan 1st 1944.

As a Plotting Office in Portland, Mary manned the Plot with 2 or 3 Wrens and they were linked by headsets to Radar Stations and Coastguards. The Plot was always manned and the movement of all ships monitored.

The plot was a Radar Plot on a flat table. It covered a small part of the Channel and was quite a change from Derby House, but fascinating and immediate and much closer to the ships and MGBs.

In the Spring of 1944 Mary was appointed a Duty Staff Officer. The Staff Office was responsible for operations in the base - the berthing of ships, taking reports from Coastguards and organising transport. Mary remembered that at Portland:

everything was dominated by D Day - its preparation, exercises, the landings and the aftermath. Again, a part of history. It was a privilege to be there.

During the build-up:

there was an increasing feeling of tension in the air. Chesil Beach was flattened on the Portland Harbour side and used as an enormous park for military vehicles of all kinds waiting to embark in the LCTs.

After the initial landings, Chesil Beach became a staging camp for German Prisoners of War.

On a lighter note, the foothold in France meant that ships returned with delicious French cheeses, which brought to the Staff Office a splendid continental air.

Mary also wrote of developing a love of the Dorset countryside; in the summer she swam and at Christmas 1944 the base put on entertainment.

Sometimes we spent a day with the CB Officer who regularly drove to all the coastguard stations delivering the latest codebooks - sometimes we rode pillion on



Coastal Force motorbikes for Operation P for Picnic, doing a slalom along white lines in the middle of the road - an indication of the general absence of traffic then.

Mary corresponded with her future husband Geoffrey before meeting him for the first time in January 1945 and marrying him the same year. Given command of *HMS Bigbury Bay*, Geoffrey sailed for the Far East, not to return until 1947. He did not see his daughter until she was 14 months old and she hid behind a curtain!

Subsequently Geoffrey returned to his original role as an hydrographic surveyor, and then later Hydrographer which meant his name was shown at the bottom of the Admiralty charts and his work took him to inaccessible places. Mary followed when she could and took her two children round the world. In October 1973 Mary was invited to be the Sponsor of the new *HMS Herald*, an Ocean Survey Ship:

Launching *HMS Herald* was a high spot though I had a moment of panic about breaking the bottle. I am so cack-handed, but Admiral Griffin who was standing beside me said quietly "Don't worry Mary, it will be quite alright. Just pick up the ship and throw it at the bottle!" The day then sang. I managed to visit the ship from time to time over the years and at her decommissioning last year I was in tears when they lowered the ensign.

The Centre is honoured to hold copies of Mary's recollections, together with a tape-recorded interview conducted by the Director [Dr Peter Liddle](#).