



## WRNS 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer Penny Martin (née Burra)

Penny was born in October 1921 in West Sussex. Her father, Septimus Burra, had served as an officer in the Royal Artillery during the First World War before becoming a farmer and also teaching classes in agriculture. In 1925 he returned to the law as his teaching job had come to an end, and the family, which included Penny's sister Anne, moved to Cheltenham. Despite her parents' reservations, Penny auditioned for, and was accepted into, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London in the spring of 1939, having undertaken a secretarial course at her father's insistence. However in July, with the prospect of war, the Academy was temporarily closed. Penny decided to try to join the WRNS and was interviewed in Plymouth in June 1940:



Norrie and Penny Martin in 1987, Virginia, USA.

When asked if I could type, I foolishly said "Oh yes, and I can take shorthand too!" which instantly decided my future. "Ah!", the recruiter said, "Then of course you'll be a writer" and added that probably I'd be sent to Yeovilton or St Merryn in Cornwall, where a new Fleet Air Arm Station was opening up. So I returned home and waited, and waited. I saw the dentist - had a physical (I forget where) collected clothes. . . . I finally got my draft notice on July 18<sup>th</sup> and the next day I set out to join the Navy - but not to St Merryn (which still wasn't completed) but to the Royal Navy College at Dartmouth, where I was to be secretary to the Naval Control Service Officer - a 'dugout' Navy Lt Commander called Dodgson whose job was the routing of coastal convoys up and down the western end of the channel between Portland and Falmouth.

Penny was housed with about 14 other Wrens in a large ward in a Sick Bay, which was difficult as most were watch keepers who worked on different shift patterns. Despite being a 'Day worker' Penny could often work a 14 hour shift, seven days a week. She contracted measles in January 1941 and was sent to an Isolation Hospital for 10 days before recuperating at home. In the spring Penny was drafted to the Coastal Forces Base having been promoted to Leading Wren and became the Writer to Tommy Carr, retired Commander. This posting was more to Penny's liking:

Anyhow, by the summer of 1941 I had collected half a dozen new beaux, of greater or lesser importance, and social life around Dartmouth was quite hectic. Included in my activities was playing the ingénue in a college production of 'George and Margaret', a popular comedy of those days. One of the College Masters (civilian) and his wife wanted to put on this production and somehow I got involved, playing the role of Frankie (one of the very rare times when I played someone my own age!) Several other Masters and the local butcher and his wife were also in it. A great advantage this because as a result we had **real pork sausages** in the 'breakfast scene' - a tremendous treat in those heavily rationed days.



In the autumn of 1941 Penny was drafted to the coast of Devon to work at a Training Depot for the Royal Marines. She was very keen to be sent overseas but in 1942 there was very little opportunity and instead was sent to the Royal Navy Engineering College just outside Devonport to be Lead/Writer to the Captain (Engineering) of the College. Finally, in May 1942 Penny's draft came through:

We had the usual lectures on the Perils of the Hot Climates (medical and moral!). We were issued white and tropical uniforms which included a wider brimmed 'batter pudding hat' such as Wren ratings wore back then. This 'Tropical' hat was lined with red flannel (!) and along with it we were issued white drill dresses, white lisle stockings (!! ) white canvas oxfords and, the pièce de resistance, a solar topee or 'Bombay Bowler'.

Penny's crossing began from Greenock, aboard *RMS Aquitania*:

where we were accommodated in 3-tier bunks - 6 of us to what had been a single cabin. We were housed - 24 of us Wrens ratings down one little side passageway off the main gangway, and at the end of our passage stood a Marine Sentry! Water was a problem. Baths were salt water only. Fresh water was turned on for the cabin laundry basin only a couple of hours a day, and we were expected to use it as sparingly as possible. Our 'messing' was pretty nice - we fed 'First Sitting' in the main dining room along with the Navy and Military Warrant Officers and Senior Chiefs. The officers had the 'Second Sitting'. But the food, though hardly what Cunard would have provided in peacetime was quite miraculously good to us - used only to wartime rations.

Not all passengers shared the same conditions, as Penny discovered:

By June 19 we were approaching the Cape of Good Hope and were all agog at the prospect of getting ashore in Capetown. With this in mind we were told to pack all our belongings. I was then told off to see all the cases taken down to G deck (the bowels of the ship) where they were to be stowed. A pretty sickening affair for several reasons. The ship was rolling very badly (this was winter in South Africa) and the smell of unwashed humanity was overpowering. This was where the wretched Army troops were berthed and the sight of what those poor wretches were being fed made one both ill and angry. A self respecting pig would have turned its snout up at such swill. In later years Norrie (Penny's husband) used to say I was a communist - it was such gross injustice at the way the troops were treated (vis a vis the officers - and **us** for that matter) which made me that way.

On July 4 Penny joined the *Princess Kathleen* which had 200 Wrens aboard. She then contracted dysentery and was moved to 13<sup>th</sup> General Hospital outside Suez, before going on sick leave to the YWCA at Ismailia:

By the time we were released from hospital the WRNS had been moved into a camp outside Suez. This was a Transit Camp meant for troops between ship and train and never intended as permanent housing. We were put eight to a tent on canvas cots with



straw paliasses. These were all full of bedbugs so we cast them out and slept on the canvas.

At the end of September Penny was moved up to Port Said where she started work in the Commander-in-Chief's Typing Pool dealing with claims for lost clothing. The following month she was sent to Alexandria to the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean's Office:

Our hours were a killer: 8.30am to 6.30pm and to 8.30pm every fourth day with a half day off per week. I was also told that as of now I would take over as Courts Martial and Boards of Inquiry stenographer, because the Wren who'd been doing the job was not only being commissioned but getting married at Christmas. . . A few days after I arrived in Alexandria the [Battle of El Alamein](#) began. We knew it was coming of course, but when 'H Hour' began at 9.30 on Oct 23<sup>rd</sup> we heard the gunfire clearly from the Convent - it sounded like a constant unending rumble of thunder and went on all night. . . 1943 was to bring a lot of changes for me. I was already running the Commander-in-Chief's Office II Typing Pool and handling a great many courts martial as well. We were chronically shorthanded in the office, but long hours usually coped with the volume of work.

Penny was also heavily involved in a 'Wrens Revue' staged in Spring 1943 in aid of the WRNS Benevolent Fund, an outlet for her love of the theatre. At the end of April Penny left for the Officers' Training College:

After three weeks of lectures, pep talks and collecting new uniforms I departed up to Cairo where I became the Assistant Secretary to the Additional Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief Levant. . . All the high and mighty passed through our portals. Commander-in-Chief Levant didn't trouble us much but Commander in Chief Mediterranean was Sir John Cunningham, and he paid frequent visits to our parish, expecting me to be his private secretary - a job I really loved because he was the most delightful man with a marvellous sense of humour.

Penny also enjoyed a hectic social life:

To be young and reasonably attractive in Egypt at that time meant, honestly, that one just had to put one's foot down and determine to stay home at least one evening out of the month but even that was sometimes difficult. It is no exaggeration or lack of modesty to say that one had half a dozen invitations for every one that there was time to accept. When one is young one can go without sleep up to a point, though I do have memories of literally falling asleep at the dinner table.

In January 1944, Penny took some leave in Beirut and then took her next leave in Cyprus in July. In mid-November Penny sailed for England, arriving on a cold, rainy day in Liverpool. Her next posting was in London, as Personal Assistant to an Engineer Admiral on the staff of the Control Commission for Germany. In May 1945 Penny recalled events on VE Day:

A few moments stand out in memory: a group of mixed nationalities and services atop a statue of Nurse Cavell; the gas flames outside the Pall Mall Clubs (the glass of globes had been removed for safety during the bombing); The Mall and the entire area



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around the Victoria Monument outside Buckingham Palace and a solid jam of people - our chants of "We want the King, we want the King" resulted in the whole family and Winston Churchill appearing on the balcony.

By the end of July Penny received her next orders, to go to Lee-on-Solent as Personal Secretary to Admiral Dennis Boyd. During the Autumn she spent a lot of time organising visits to and by, the Admiral, one of whom was the newly appointed (Labour) Parliamentary Secretary for the Navy. The staff officer in charge of the visit, Cdr Norrie Martin, would become Penny's husband, but it was not an auspicious start when Penny was cross with Norrie for constant changes to the itinerary! Fortunately the ill-feeling did not last and they married in December 1946 in Hong Kong. Norrie passed away in 1988 and Penny in 1994.

The Centre is honoured to hold a copy of 'Penny's Story' which reveals her sharp mind and sense of fun, which was kindly donated by her step-son Peter Martin together with the photograph of Penny with Norrie.