



## The Work of Women in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

Cathy Pugh

Cathy Pugh, who researches the Centre's archives and produces material for the Website, offers here an indication of how richly the Centre's holdings document experiences in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

The Women's Royal Air Force was formed alongside the Royal Air Force on 1st April 1918. Over 24,000 women members covered shortages in manpower, and with little formal training fulfilled a large range of duties including instrument mechanics and parachute packers. The WRAF was disbanded in April 1920, an unnecessary service in the post-war recession, however the need to prepare in the event of international developments over the Czechoslovak crisis leading Britain into war once again led to the formation of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and the Women's Royal Navy in early 1939, and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force on 2nd June, 1939. The fledgling WAAF was headed by Katherine Jane Trefusis-Forbes with just over 1,700 members stationed throughout the country in 47 Companies. The Air Ministry did not see an immediate need for female assistance throughout the RAF but further defence preparations demonstrated that more staff would be required and some roles such as catering, plotting and operating a teleprinter were considered suitable for women. Telegrams were sent out in August 1939, mobilising all WAAF volunteers and when war was declared on 3rd September, another 10,000 women volunteered.



Peggie Stead, centre, with colleagues and her lorry at RAF Marham.

It is the purpose of this article to make clear just what it was like for women joining the service in their initial training, how wide ranging was the work of women in the WAAF and to do this by quotation from the papers of WAAF documented in the Centre.

Peggie Stead, was working as a clerk in Leeds in 1940:

We had a lot of soldiers came from Dunkirk, they'd been ferried over. They were in a poor state and we were trying to entertain them and take them out for a drink or a meal and I thought, here I am sitting doing nothing, so I volunteered then and there (for WAAF service).

As volunteers, the first WAAF members were not subject to RAF discipline and were given the opportunity to leave if the life did not agree with them, but, as more became involved in



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secret work, the Defence (Women's Forces) Regulations were passed in April 1941 which made WAAF members subject to RAF rules.

In 1942 the National Service Act of 1941 came into being, initially calling up girls born in 1920 and 1921. However Barbara Grierson and her twin sister decided to take matters into their own hands:

By the beginning of 1942 conscription had come in. If you were not in a reserved occupation, you were directed to either munitions, the services or the Land Army, wherever the Government decided to send you. And both Daphne and I, being very independent people, didn't want to be pushed into something we didn't want to go to so we decided when we were seventeen and a half we were old enough to volunteer ... we decided we would join the Navy, mainly because we liked the uniform really. [We went to] The Kingsway, to the Recruiting Centres. The first was The Navy and The Army in the middle and then the Air Force at the end, and we went to the Naval recruiting office and all that they offered us were a batswoman or stewards or cooks... Daphne said, 'I don't want to be a cook,' neither did I. So we went past the Army because we didn't really fancy the Army much [probably the uniform], so off we went to the Air Force and they said yes, they had vacancies in their technical branch so we signed up, and that was June 1942.

New recruits received basic training in a largely female environment, usually accommodated in Nissen huts with up to 23 girls sharing a room. In two to three weeks they were kitted out, given 'FF1' (Free From Infection) checks, inoculated twice, and given dental inspections. They attended lectures on Service History, current affairs, discipline, welfare, First Aid, gas, fire and hygiene and were tested for and designated to trades. Primary training introduced them to pay parades, inspections, drill and tough discipline. Margaret Sturges recalls:

We had instructions for folding and placing our clothes in a certain order in a cylindrical canvas duffel bag that could be carried on the shoulder. A small bag held mending kits and other non-uniform items such as cosmetics, shoe polish and stationery. Hair had to be worn one inch above the collar.

Everything had to be labelled and laid out in order with fines for any kit found missing. Although it was forbidden, Ethel Vine, training to be a teleprinter operator in Signals, preferred to wear her own underwear:

I didn't like the underwear, we had 'twilights' and 'blackouts' in the knickers, and the 'twilights' were grey woolly things that came down to your knee - like old ladies wore, and the 'blackouts' were like silky bloomers!



Jeanne Sowry interpreting reconnaissance photographs at RAF Benson.



Phyllis Gasson trained in Morecambe:

A month's square bashing and lectures on hygiene, King's Regulations, aircraft recognition, fire drill and distinguishing different gases. For the latter we were herded a few at a time into an airtight small room wearing our gas masks but for the last few seconds, these had to be removed. As you can imagine this was a far from pleasant experience and we all emerged coughing and spluttering with eyes streaming and smarting. At least it did teach us how essential our gas masks would be in the event of a gas attack... Weather permitting the square bashing was done on the sea front. Tunics and skirts had to be removed so parading up and down on a chilly promenade in January was far from enjoyable.

These first days away from home could be lonely and distressing, very few girls were prepared for service life, and some training staff seemed possessed of no sensitivity. Jeanne Sowry remembers:

At the medical I was handed a paste pot by a dragon who said to me - 'and don't do it all over the floor'. I was already learning what service discipline was to be.

After a long day, Ethel Vine recalls:

The first night we got into this wooden hut and we were given these palliase things and we had to fill them with straw to lie on them..., we were all dropping off to sleep and then someone started crying for their mother and then someone said, 'I've got an earwig in my ear, there's an earwig'! so, of course, it was pandemonium.

Basic training was usually followed by intensive trade training. Sgt Peggy Chenery trained to be a barrage balloon operator:

We were sent to Cardington for training, it was very hard work. We learned how to operate the winches which were used to fly the balloons and also to keep the winches in good working order ... we had to know a little about the engines, enough to do a daily and weekly inspection.

When barrage balloons were to be disbanded, Peggy trained as a radar operator:

I was sent to Cranwell on a course. Radar was very hush-hush at the time and we had to go into a special compound for lectures and could not make any notes or bring anything out with us to study in the evenings.

There were over fifty trades deemed appropriate for the WAAF. They ranged from domestic roles, catering and cleaning, to highly specialised work. Peggie Stead, a DMT (Driver Motor Transport) drove lorries:

We had to do everything, a load of coal, a load of dirty laundry, food, bombs up to 2,000lb, we had to take aircrew to Newmarket for commissions or go and collect bombs, go and collect oxygen cylinders. I took coffins of aircrew that had been [killed], Canadians mainly, I used to hate that.



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The Signals Branch employed almost 32,000 WAAF by September 1944. It covered the Air Ministry's communication and intelligence work. Jane Cole MBE, fluent in German, was a Signals linguist in 'Y' Service:

Our job was to record RT messages from German aircraft (fighters and bombers) as they spoke to each other and to their Command Centres. We would write down these exchanges word for word and our transcripts were taken by dispatch rider to Bletchley Park Intelligence HQ for assessment. Most of our units were located on high ground along the south coast to enable us to pick up low flying raiders. So we were quite exposed and there were moments of high drama as we listened in to the aerial battles raging overhead. With experience we got to recognise the voices and call signs of the leading German pilots and one in particular I would recognise even now - Adolf Galland whose call sign was 'Mantoni'.

The Signals Branch included responsibility for manning the chain of Radar Stations along Britain's south and east coasts. LACW Jan Dinnage worked in this area:

The set I was to operate was new and being installed when I arrived. It was a Royal Navy mobile with hand turning and very difficult to handle in high winds. Crushed thumbs in the turning gear were an occupational hazard... It had a 10cm wavelength and the ability to give cover down to sea level. The set's hasty installation was to pick up low flying aircraft because tip and run raiders were coming in, under our existing radar cover and using Eastborne as one of their targets. It was the first set of its kind to be operated within the RAF Radar chain.

Alma Varley was a clerk in the Intelligence Office at Church Fenton:

The office was full of map chests, so we used to issue the maps to the aircrews going on sorties -this was Fighter Command - and give them their aids to escape. It could have been hidden compasses in various things, buttons and collar studs... and I used to give them their ration of, we called it 'the dog biscuit', and chocolate.

LACW Marilyn Richardson, a Clerk Special Duties plotted at Duxford:

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



Marilyn Richardson, left, enjoying some free time with friends.



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DF teller interpreted and passed to the Ops room.

Section Officer Jeanne Sowry enjoyed her trade working on the black and white reconnaissance photographs:

The work of photographic interpreting was important, secret, demanding and, at times, very exciting. Our requests for photographs came from many sources... When you were given the photos, you had no idea what you might see. The missions were flown from RAF Benson nearby and the aircraft that were used were Mosquitos. We watched shipping movements daily, we studied airfields old and new, likewise aircraft, marshalling yards and railways, ports and beaches.

Katie Ball, a trained nurse, joined the medical branch:

We would sleep on the stretchers [in an ambulance] whilst the ambulance driver of course, had to keep awake waiting for planes to come in. The first crash that we went on to was where a German and RAF collided and so, of course, we had the two bodies and we didn't know what was what of them. We had never dealt with it before and it was very traumatic. You sort of pick up courage... it's afterwards when you think about it - we had to take it all to the morgue.

Living and working conditions on camp could be bleak. WAAF members were accommodated in huts or hostels though occasionally they were boarded with civilians. Almost every WAAF experienced sleeping on the three hard, square mattresses known as 'biscuits' with rough, grey blankets for warmth.

Shortages in fuel made for cold, uncomfortable winters. Corporal Ada Ryder, a barrage balloon operator, recalls:

We lived in a Nissen hut, had no gas only an open coal fire and no hot water only an old gas boiler near the perimeter which we had to fill with water and try and light a fire underneath it. We never had enough coal, but I found a coal dump at Dutton and I used to get on our big bike, a huge carrier it had back and front, and I used to go and pinch coal with my tin hat on and pyjamas under my battle dress - pitch black and air raids.

Jeanne Sowry was practical at bathtime:

The baths and showers were shared by four huts full of girls and were pretty grim. I used my tin hat as a very effective shower cap and when inverted to carry my soap and toiletry.

Barbara Grierson recalls:

You also took your own bath plug because they were always pinched... you always guarded your bath plug like gold.

Phyllis Gasson remembers the other shortages:



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The food was not too bad but there never seemed enough of it. Consequently most of our pay was spent in the NAAFI. Our 'irons' had to be rinsed in a tub of hot soapy water, which by the time hundreds of knives, etc, had been dunked in it was decidedly greasy and full of particles of food floating on the top.

New WAAF members often found saluting and drilling daunting, but were made to practise over and over again, Service fashion, until they were used to doing things automatically. Sgt Cynthia Barry:

We were expected to respond quickly and correctly to the drill NCO's commands. It all felt very confusing and exhausting until we gradually became fitter and more capable of alert response. To my surprise, I began personally to enjoy parade ground sessions, which smartened one up several notches, having also polished buttons and shoes to near perfection. Once I saw Wing Commander McAleery, the Commandant of our WAAF unit, swinging along the camp road at the head of a sizeable column of WAAF, an inspiring sight, with brass buttons gleaming in the hot sunshine. This added to a growing sense of pride in being toned up, stretched and confident as never before, a new person with a feeling of belonging to something great and momentous, whether in a humble role or not did not matter.

As young women, they took great pride in their appearance. Sergeant Cynthia Barry notes:

We made the most of our lot, however, by turning ourselves out as trimly and freshly as possible, often washing, drying and ironing our shirts directly after coming off shift and in time to be ready for going out. Our collars were stiffly starched and ironed to a lethal sharpness, which often made red weals on our necks ... Later it became chic to turn our grey lisle stockings inside out, with the back seams upstanding, but you could be put on a charge for it, likewise wearing silk stockings in the ranks. Hair must be short enough not to go over the collar, the extreme opposite of the admired Hollywood stars with their luxuriant masses of curls. Many of us wore a headband round which our hair was tucked or rolled, the severity softened at the front by making much of flat 'kiss-curls' or bangs, or a dramatic roll on top, ending in a curl or two.

A woman was paid two-thirds of the pay of her male counterpart, although, accommodation, food, uniform, medical care and dental care were free and at the war's end airwomen were given a gratuity that amounted to two thirds of that given to the RAF. At the time, few WAAF saw this as an injustice, they were proud of their contribution to the air war and were very aware of the peril their boys faced. Joan Tiplady writes:

I would ask the first aircrew or crash crew to come into the Met Office 'Who is it? Anybody hurt'? I could



Joan Tiplady with crisply pressed creases in her skirt, changing it from a 'tube skirt' into a more fashionable 'cube skirt'.



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never bring myself to utter the word 'killed'. We always had to do a special weather observation immediately when the crash occurred for the investigation afterwards. I met one of the 'Guinea Pigs', a man whose face had been so burned. He was visiting and called in for a forecast, so brave. We WAAF always had to keep a stiff upper lip, but on this occasion, I escaped to the toilet outside to weep for this brave man and to wonder what his life would be like in a civilian future - if he survived the war... We were very young and had to face almost impossible situations

As a medic, and later a radiographer, Katie Ball regularly treated wounded airmen:

We had an RAF boy come in and they said so much of his body was burnt they couldn't believe that he could live. Even part of his spine had been charred, and in the end he died after about two weeks... medical [people] from all over came to look at this and see. They couldn't believe he had lived so long with the dreadful wounds he had. That always plays in your mind.

Katie also treated RAF personnel injured in raids:

I always remember this lovely little WAAF officer and she kept coming in with her hand, and each day they said, 'we will have to take another finger off, and you know in the end she hadn't got any fingers left... it was so sad.

From the lowest rank of Aircraftwoman 2nd Class, with no distinguishing badges, a commission went to whoever worked hard enough to achieve it. Jeanne Sowry could see the potential in some of her colleagues even at basic training:

It was interesting to observe, even at this early stage, that officer qualities came to light and those who were going to lead us; they comforted us, urged us to get out of bed, eat some food and cheer up!

Many, like Marjorie Mossop, did not want to become officers, preferring to remain with their friends in the ranks:

I had actually refused promotion. If you got promotion as a driver you were in the office and that wasn't me.

Phyllis Gasson had another reason:

After almost two years I was entered for a course for promotion and came out of it as a Sergeant. However, this meant being posted further up north so I turned it down. The reason being that my husband was in the Royal Naval Hospital at Portsmouth and I had applied for a compassionate posting to that area.

As a rule most WAAF did not fly although many, like Ida Kimber, experienced a 'baptism of air'- '[I] went up in a glider towed by a Dakota'. Similarly, Sgt Barry experienced 'a clandestine cross-country flight in one of the operational Halifaxes'. Meteorologist Joan Tiplady, writes in her memoir:



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It was forbidden for any WAAF to fly, but the WAAF Sgt, Daphne Morse (the only Met Sgt in the group) was allowed to go to a small outstation at Lissett, near the east coast, for a couple of weeks on attachment, for a break from the tedious, intensive work at HQ. She went for a few 'flips' there unofficially, and on this day, the plane crashed and the whole crew and their one WAAF passenger were killed. It was a complete mystery why it happened - weather OK, no known enemy in the area.

Air Force women generally worked side by side with men and relationships did develop. The Air Ministry expected good conduct and dignity from its WAAF, but there was certainly no drive against a healthy romance. June Scott, a Meteorological Officer was stationed at Wellesbourne Mountford towards the end of the war:

Peter (later to be my husband) had been a flying instructor in South Africa, and was now an Education Officer. We used to go for walks, bicycle rides, the theatre at Stratford.

Sybil Frostick, a clerk SD serving at Wittering recalls:

I was married from there... I was married at Harrow of course, where my Mother was, and I can remember looking out of the window and I was putting my wedding dress on and everything and seeing these WAAF come down the road - marching round - and there were five of them from my station. They had arrived down in their WAAF uniform, you know, marching up the street carrying a set of trays under their arms.

Sergeant Cynthia Barry experienced the arrival of American airmen in Summer 1942:

[It] was a culture shock for which we were completely unprepared by however many Hollywood films we had seen! Just ordinary boys, they were transformed from their civilian selves into glamorous figures, a little brash, but wearing much nicer uniforms than the rougher ones our RAF lads had to live with. Their attitude towards us and their dances seemed to us somewhat undemocratic, not to say shocking. They began by approaching our WAAF Officer with a request for 'a bus full of your prettiest girls' to be sent over for a particular dance. Our Officer thanked them but had to say gently that we did not do that sort of thing over here and it was up to each girl to decide to go. However, they were great fun on the dance floor with phenomenal energy and enthusiasm for jive and jitterbug. Moreover you got to know several Yanks' who were very charming and delightful.

Later, at another station, Cynthia remembers buying a gift 'as a present for a WAAF colleague expecting a baby the following spring'. Her lover's wife would not divorce him, Madge was desperately in love and was in the process of changing her name by deed poll for the sake of her child.

One of the girls on Marilyn Richardson's watch married a pilot from one of Duxford's squadrons:



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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 under such circumstances.

When the war ended, some WAAF were posted abroad, Daphne Bingham was sent to post-war Germany, but most were demobilised within the year. Cynthia Barry was accepted at a London art school, Alma Varley was engaged and looking forward to being married as was Barbara Grierson, Margaret Sturges had married an American serviceman and was expecting a baby and Margaret Mossop went straight to The Labour Exchange and found a job. Peggy Chenery had joined in 1940 so was one of the first to leave her station:

It did seem strange without my Service friends and after a few weeks [I] was glad to start work. Nothing was the same as when I left five years ago, so many of my old friends were missing.

The WAAF had made a vital contribution to the war effort supporting the RAF and despite the hardships generally, like Jeanne Sowry, they had enjoyed their service. 'I was privileged to have had such an exciting war and through the work I met so many people from all walks of life'. Indeed, even after so many years, the WAAF Association flourishes to match any Old Comrades' Service organisation.