



## “MY LIFE IN THE WRNS 1943 - 1946”

A talk given by Shirley Burr (WRNS QD 29087) to a number of organisations over the years she was in Farnham and Cornwall in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. She was also on Radio Cornwall as their Guest of the Week in July 1995. *I have included some extracts from her letters home to Momma (her mother, Winifred) and Popsie (her step father, Harold).*

“Essentially, this is all about my life in the WRNS from 1943 - 1946: but let me first fill in some background - it was in 1917 that the idea of a Women’s Royal Naval Service was formed. The first uniformed WRNS appeared in 1918 and by the time they were disbanded in 1919, some 7000 women had been recruited doing such jobs as clerical, domestic, coding and signalling on the new fangled wireless telegraphy, servicing the anti submarine equipment and driving. All these jobs freed a man to serve in the Fleet. After they were disbanded in 1919, it was decided to form an Association of WRNS where women were able to continue with some of the skills they had learnt during wartime.



This proved to be invaluable when in 1938, the first public announcement was made regarding the reformation of the Service, although as early as 1937 some women had already been recruited to serve as cypher officers and posted overseas. Of course, with all the technological advances made since the 1<sup>st</sup> WW, many more jobs would be open to them and there were WRNS stationed in the Mediterranean, the Near and Far East, Australia and America. By 1944, 74,000 women were in the Services but in 1943, two weeks after my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in May, I was called up having previously volunteered.<sup>1</sup> In those days you still



---

<sup>1</sup> Before joining up, Shirley had been a teenage model working first in a shop off Bond Street teetering about on 4” heels and then in Bradleys Fashion and Fur House in London. She was housed in a Hostel for apprentice models in Notting Hill. She was the youngest there. Most of the time she slept in the basement because of the bombing. The girls also acted as dance hostesses at the Canadian Forces YMCA - no drinks but lots of jitterbugging!

had to have had some connection with the Navy or else somebody to guarantee your good behaviour - in this case it was my stepfather.

I was sent down to Southsea to serve my probationary period along with about 30 others. We were quartered at an hotel called The Pendragon<sup>2</sup> which served as the Wrens Training Depot. We were allocated to the Rodney Division, where we were taught how to salute, make our bunks, recognise officers' stripes and flags and learn how to march - we had to watch a squad of Marines who seemed to spend all their time marching up and down the seafront. We were not very good as our left and right feet would get muddled up! There were 8 girls to a room in double bunks with a drawer and a small hanging space each.

*Life was certainly different but not unpleasant, judging from one of her first letters back to Momma! "I think I am going to like being a Wren, the life is so different that at first one can't really tell, but I will know that I am doing a bit to help the war."*

*Shirley described her first day in training as follows " I rose from my very hard bunk bed at about 7.15. I slept quite well as the train journey here and lectures and things I had yesterday afternoon having quite exhausted me - had breakfast at 8 which consisted of scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, bread and butter (we never have margarine!) and tea. I'm ashamed to say that I couldn't eat mine, fright having taken away my appetite, that is about the only thing that would! We then assembled in the lecture hall until it was time for us to "muster and squad" and for divisional training. I enjoyed that, all the Pro Wrens and Wrens assembled in an enormous garage round the back in their separate divisions. The roll is called and prayers are said and then we get instruction in marching and standing at ease and wheeling and a lot of palaver; I being the tallest was put to the end of the line and had to lead one file in marching. It was great fun especially when we marched right on the sea front and along as all the hotels on the front are full of soldiers and sailors. We have got used to being whistled at and called after - a bit disconcerting at first! Anyway, in the morning they are all being drilled as well so the whole front is covered with squads of men and women marching up and down. After squad drill we had a lecture on Health and Hygiene and then had to go to the signallers room where maintenance signallers and various other categories go for the time being. We studied various ranks of the Navy, all branches and learnt a few things on the traditions, rules and regulations of the senior service; by this time I was starved and we all filed in for lunch - stewed steak, peas and new potatoes as much as you wanted and chocolate pudding and vanilla sauce - not bad! Of course, all this time we are in our uniforms. After lunch we had about 30 minutes to ourselves so I went and washed and tidied up generally. We*

---

<sup>2</sup> The Pendragon Hotel (see picture) was closed down shortly after Shirley left. Training was moved out of Portsmouth Command.

*then had "muster and squad" along the seafront and after that a lecture by Chief Petty Officer Bois on the Navy or rather the WRNS. She told us most of the things that we wanted to know - we are paid fortnightly, I think that it is 15/4d but the odd fourpence won't be paid as that is paid along with the £8 a year for kit etc and is called a quarterly settlement. After that we had tea - a large piece of cake or rock cakes and tea, both very nice. We then changed into civvies and until 1700hrs were lectured on saluting, who to salute and how, clothes, requests for leave, drafting etc and various otherthings (by the way, we are the last contingent of Wrens that will be trained in Portsmouth Command - exciting, isn't it!). At 1700 or rather 1655(Naval time) the transport arrived to take all us new uns to be radiographed. We had no idea where we were going and it turned out to be the Portsmouth Naval Barracks, gosh, we ARE in the Navy now!! Thousands of them swarming all over the place - we had to strip to the waist and were radiographed by a couple of Naval doctors or surgeons. I had got over my embarrassment by the time my turn came. We then came back in the RN charabancs, luxurious affairs, had supper - soup (nice and thick) and corned beef and fried potatoes and bread and butter and strawberry jam. At 2040 hrs you can have a cup of cocoa if you want it (I didn't!). After supper, I went swimming - it was lovely and I must go tomorrow night if I can. Before you can go "ashore" and on coming "aboard", one has to collect and deposit your card with your name on it from the regulating office. I'm just a Pro Wren now, one of 450 and not an individual anymore....."*

After two weeks we were pronounced as suitable for entry and were duly marched to Portsmouth Barracks to receive our kit which consisted of 2 skirts, 2 Jackets, 2 shirts with detachable collars, thick stockings and heavy shoes and some horrendous underwear - bras strong enough to hold up the Berlin Wall and knickers, really worthy of the name, with elastic top and bottom, the legs coming down to below the knees and known as "taxi teasers" although they saved many a maiden's virtue as I was to discover!

There were lists posted up of the trade categories into which one could go including drivers, torpedo WRNS, boat crew, P5 (this was and still is the code breaking Enigma machine used at Bletchley Park) and gunnery which was a new category - so a friend and myself plumped for that.

We were duly sent to Whale Island (HMS Excellent) at Portsmouth which was the Royal Navy Gunnery School for 6 weeks of very intensive training. We learnt how to strip down and clean and reassemble all guns from a .38 Webley pistol, Oerlikon .05 gas operated anti aircraft guns up to the 3 pounders which were the largest. We learned the theory and the firing of each of them as well inside large domes, whitewashed inside onto which a film of three Heinkel bombers would be thrown. You got strapped into a pair of Oerlikon guns and, using new sights on the guns, would try to simulate a hit taking into account wind velocity and speed. - quite

exciting at the time! We also went down to the ranges at Eastleigh to fire the Lewis sub machine guns.

Women were still a novelty on the Base and the young officers would split up each side of you if you were in a squad (over 3 people was a squad) and I, being the tallest, had to decide which one to salute.

On Friday mornings there were "divisions". The whole complement of the Base was on parade in front of the Commanding Officer who took the salute. Our small contingent of WRNS was drilled by a GI (Gunnery Instructor) who would say to us "if any of you are going to faint, do it now!" I remember it being summer and very hot and we had to stand at attention for some time. When it was our turn to march past, the band always played "All the nice girls love a sailor"!

My friend and I were then posted to Dartmouth - actually, the Kingswear side - to HMS Cicada<sup>3</sup> (actually this was not a ship but a shore based establishment at The Royal Dart Hotel) and were quartered in a lovely house on the top of the hill called The Mount. We were attached to the Coastal Forces ie the torpedo and gunboats that were stationed there and also the larger Motor Launches that were the "secret boats". Our kit in the meantime had been supplemented by bell bottom trousers (the men's ones), navy blue shirts, scarves to tie around our hair if we were on a particularly dirty job, long navy sweaters and overalls. Plus horrendous navy woollen knickers! By taking out the crotch and the elastic and joining the now opened legs together and turning upside down, they made a very acceptable sleeveless slipover!



Our workshop was a large old French ship moored in the harbour called FS Belfort<sup>4</sup>. This, with the Aberdonnian moored upstream, were the 2 largest craft in the river and had the sterns of the boats anchored alongside together with the French (23<sup>rd</sup>) MTBs as well. We were taken over every morning and worked on the boats, some of which had been shot up and their guns damaged. I can't remember how many girls were deployed on these jobs, very few I know. Our CO evidently

My friend and her friend Joan in WRNS uniform was taken here. The formal photograph was one of a series taken for her parents. The back of the photo reads "Stationed at HMS Cicada, Dartmouth at Kingsweare. Hitched into Torquay on a milk lorry with Joan Hockin 1943".

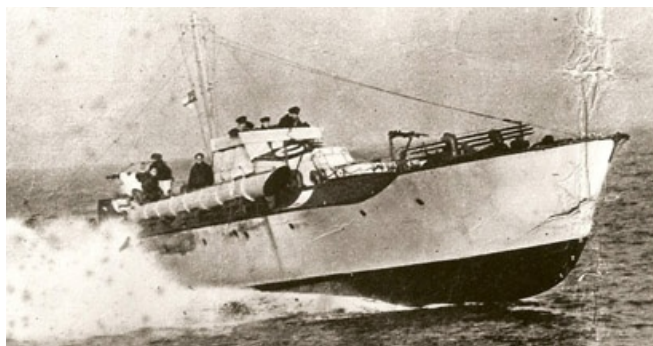
<sup>4</sup> FS Belfort was an Arras Class Gun Boat or Sloop (Aviso) built by the French Navy after WW1 in Lorient. Commissioned in 1919, it had been a sea plane launcher at some stage. She participated in the evacuation from Dunkirk in May 1940 and was then seized in Portsmouth on 3 July 1940. After use as a workshop, she was given over to the Free French navy and used as a barrack ship before D Day. She was sold and broken up in Nov 1946.

then had to find another hydraulic hand and decided on me - the Chief Petty Officer in charge of all the powered mountings ie guns powered from the ship's engines - name of Chiefy Mattias - a red haired Scot was not going to have any b... WRNS working for him! However, he relented after I had spent 3 weeks ensconced with my CO in the Rum Locker - where the rum was kept and where copper jugs sized from large down to a single tot were hung in rows - which was the only place with a flat table large enough for the graphs of the Hydraulics relating to the guns could be spread out and digested! We used to come out reeling from the fumes.

So I then became a hydraulic WRNS.I believe that only 11 girls were doing this, but it never became a recognised category - even the gunnery WRNS did not have blue badges but only the mens' red ones with a gun and "QO" (Qualified in Ordnance) that then had to be over embroidered in blue. For this, I earned higher specialist pay at £2-16-0 a fortnight.<sup>5</sup>

I had a mate called Jerry, a real cockney who would row me about the river to the boats that needed their guns or mountings repaired. He would announce my arrival on the boat and help me unscrew some of the nuts and bolts that had been well and truly painted in. (Zeebo grate polish)<sup>6</sup>

I mentioned the "secret boats" earlier<sup>7</sup>. These were the Motor Launches that would venture out at dusk to harry the shipping lanes into the French ports with occasional sorties into the ports to shoot up any German vessels that were there. We would hear them coming back at dawn and listen to see if they had all returned. The phone would then ring in our billets and we would be dressed in our coveralls and down at the jetty within 30 minutes to replace, repair and clean the



debris/blood off the guns that might have been damaged if the boat had been shot up. These boats and their crews would also be used to pick up agents who had to be smuggled out of France and airmen who had been shot down having been handed down through a series of safe houses to be picked up on the beach - a very

daring and dangerous job.

The Americans came as preparations started for D-Day.

---

<sup>5</sup> These were Mum's badges from her working overalls. The MT badge is what she would have worn from 1945 as a driver.

<sup>6</sup> Shirley would often talk about how the WRNS would use Zeebo black grate polish to draw seams up their legs to emulate seamed stockings in lieu of the real thing!

<sup>7</sup> One of the Secret Boat Captains was Andy Smith who was to remain a lifelong friend of Shirley and Jeffery. Read "The Secret Navies" by A. Cecil Hampshire for how these men and boats operated.

*As the build up continued, Shirley and the other Wrens were hard at work. She mentions the number of Americans "... one can't walk across the deck of the Belfort now without being whistled and shouted at from the Yankee Barges that are anchored in midstream - and Dartmouth is lousy with them - and there have been more muscles than that round here."*

*"Went to a dance at the Guildhall, Dartmouth last night, Thousands of Yanks - so came back chewing frantically and my pockets stuffed with candy etc - a Yankee barge nearly collided with the ferry on the way back and for a few moments had visions of us swimming for it..."*

*Boats were also going out on trials for seaworthiness and Shirley managed to get invited along. "At last your daughter is a real sea going Wren. I went out on trials this morning for 3.5 hours. It was lovely - nearly got blown over the side. I went on John's boat - I think he was expecting me to be sick but I lived up to the family tradition and all that and kept my composure remarkably well. I was wondering if any subs or aircraft would pop up, but nothing like that - only a few bits of flotsam ..."*

Our depot ship was moved upstream to make way for their big LCTs (Landing Craft - Tanks) and other crafts. Our workshop then was a hut in the middle of Jubilee Park on the Dartmouth side in the centre of the American forces. I tasted for the first time, the delights of ring doughnuts and white bread! From there we would watch the platforms for (as we later discovered) the Mulberry harbours. They would join these into square 6' panels of iron or steel and then push them into the Harbour where they were then joined together. I still carried on with my duties whilst this was going on.



I had a boyfriend at this time<sup>8</sup> who was stationed up at Dartmouth College, as were most of them. He was in charge of all vessels in the harbour and would send his "DUCKW" over to fetch me. I would bounce down the hill in this thing and the first time it went into the water and covered the headlights, I thought that I was a goner! They had part of Glenn Millar's band playing there on one occasion - wonderful music. The US Navy was "dry" of course so they made their own drink from fruit juice, eggs and surgical spirit!

There was a lot of rivalry between the French and the American Forces so the girls were warned to always go out in threes in the evening.

---

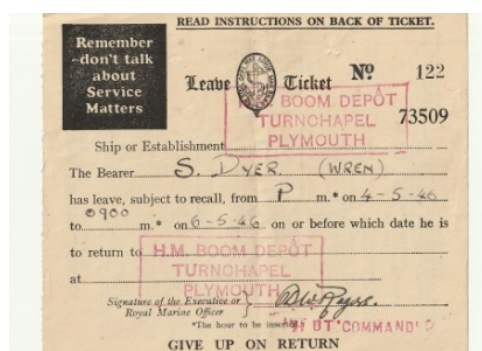
<sup>8</sup> During the time at Kingswear, Shirley mentions a number of boyfriends. There was Bruce Childs who was a regular until the end of 1944, then John and Andy, both with the MTB Secret Boats, Phil ( a Frenchman), Bill and a mysterious Lawrence (!) who was posted out to Italy and only mentioned once!

Of course we were leading up to D Day although we did not appreciate that at the time. All leave was stopped from March 1944; letters and telephone calls were heavily censored. Two other girls and I were friendly with the officers on board one of the big LCTs. We had often been on board for dinner where white bread and other goodies were served by a black steward wearing white gloves. Orders had come through that no one was allowed on any of the vessels in the harbour unless on duty. But we had had an invitation one night and were determined to go. So we shinned up the side of the vessel with me wearing my friend's coat and cap whilst he came up behind me to hide my legs from the Guard House opposite. We had a lovely evening and then came home. At about 2am there were footsteps and male voices in the hall outside the cabin belonging to the two other girls who were then carted off by the Military Police. I waited in fear and trepidation but nobody came for me! The following morning the CO informed us that these two girls would be kept in solitary confinement. I was trying to look inconspicuous at the back of the room but soon realised that they had gone into the cabins of their officer boyfriends where the Top Secret charts and Documents were laid out after being delivered that day. Luckily I had not gone!<sup>9</sup>

Of course D Day itself was postponed because of foul weather. I remember those poor chaps loading into the Landing Craft with their equipment, tanks and armoured vehicles and having to wait another 36 hours before they could finally move. What must their feelings have been? Many of them I had met and talked to or rather they talked. They wanted to show us pictures of their wives and girlfriends - a sympathetic ear and talk to hide their fears.

When D Day arrived (8 June 1944), the horizon was black with ships. I woke all our quarters and made them look from our windows at history in the making.

Our big LCT did not go until a day later and evidently went and liberated Guernsey. Nearly 500 craft sailed from Dartmouth, but of course our Coastal Forces had done their job. Our boom defence across the mouth of the river was now no longer needed and was duly blown up. We had fish for days after!



There was then a spell at Newhaven<sup>10</sup> and then onto Ramsgate where our flotillas were paid off. VE Day come

<sup>9</sup> This was one of Shirley's favourite stories and really showed how seriously the authorities took the lockdown before D Day.

<sup>10</sup> This was at Surrey House, an old Edwardian Convalescent Home for men then used by WRNS from HMS Forward and telegraphists. Shirley went with her friend Sylvia. The comments on this place were "Size was a disadvantage with some rooms that were used as cabins (dormitories). It was difficult to sleep during the day with comings and goings, radios on, chatter, etc. Each cabin rented a radio from a shop in Seaford (about 1/6d. to 2/- (7½ to 10p) per week), to which we all contributed. These were more or less permanently tuned to the American Forces Network except for BBC news and ITMA.!"

(8 May 1945) with many a party and sad farewells. We were now redundant and were sent up to Mill Hill to be reassessed and to choose another (trade) category. I said I would be a driver - I could not drive but said that I could - I was quite sure that once I was behind the wheel all would be simple. After a brief hiccup with a reorganising WRNS Officer who took a dislike to me - I was sent to Chiswick Passenger Transport Board where, along with about 30 others, we were taught the theory and maintenance of the internal combustion machine and put in very large 3 ton lorries . We were under the charge of a bus driver each one having 3 girls. Mine was a Mr Berryman. We were taught how to skid, stop and start on impossible hills and how to drive a bus. After 2 weeks, those who were not any good were weeded out and then 6 weeks later we took our test driving through London and thereabouts.

From there I was sent down to Plymouth Docks and into Maurice Yard - quartered up at Kings Tamerton. My first job that I really made a boob was a signal I was given to collect 3 men from Looe to take to Hooe - the Boom Defence Depot at Turnchapel in Plymouth Sound. I took one of the more comfortable trucks and started off, got to Looe, no sign of the men. Had the whole police force looking (all 4 of them!) then decided to look at the signal again - it said FROM Hooe TO Looe! Of course the sign posts had not yet been replaced so we had to study a large map in our office, but if it was to a supply dump or POW camp in the middle of Bodmin or Dartmoor, there would be splashes of paint on the trees that you had to follow and then drive into what seemed a dense undergrowth to find yourself in a heavily camouflaged area.

Those days you could drive across the Moors, pick up strangers and take them back to Plymouth or wherever with no suggestion of being attacked. One job was to take 3 dockyard officials up to Lady Astor's house on Plymouth Hoe. Treated very well and given tea in china cups. Another was to drive the Commanding Officer of the Dockyard to a changeover ceremony so had to wear skirt and stockings, white shirt and tie with flags flying on the car and everybody saluting. I preferred driving the lorries though usually with 30 men in the back or with stores for ships lying in Carrick Road (*This was the name given to the Estuary of the River Fal where many of the LCT maintenance yards were situated. There is now a WW2 memorial at Mylor Churchtown by the harbour to commemorate their work*) or mail down to St Eval <sup>11</sup>. I was eventually posted to Turnchapel, Hooe, The Boom Defence Depot, as the only WRNS and the only lorry, where to my astonishment I found this officer whom I had known in Dartmouth and was now in charge of a redundant mine sweeper.

---

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Taylor helped me out with this one. "St Eval was a small RAF base above Newquay and when I knew it was a domestic site for RAF St Mawgan which had the largest strip of concrete in the UK - built as a runway large enough for US Airforce pilots to see it after flying the Atlantic."



He had contracted Bells Palsy after his boat was blown up - he and his coxswain were the only survivors.

*It was now that Shirley started to count down the days for her demob and to being a civvie again. As she was in the Category 54 (being in Motor Transport) it meant that she was entitled to 56 days leave and would be out by the beginning of May 1946 with a gratuity. Her letters to Momma are now full of the excitement of leaving; she had some shoes sent from Bruce and pleads with Momma to get her some stockings and describes that “..for the past week I’ve been going very gay - out every night - drinking, dancing, dining and getting thinner. I’ve met one of the boys from Dartmouth - a two ringer RNVR - name of Andy Smith<sup>12</sup> - comes from a long line of Smith, Smith and Smith - very sweet, dances well and knows how to order food. Another is Bill Paul - a Warrant Officer on HMS Newcastle - a cruiser - also very nice. I’ve been out with them on alternate nights and find it quite refreshing to be a gad about again - aren’t you pleased!”*

So in May 1946, I left the WRNS. I had a farewell party given for me on board the battle cruiser HMS Newcastle in the Wardroom. I met Jeffery, my future husband, two weeks later!

However, the WRNS then became a permanent Service in 1949 working mainly in Shore Establishments until 1993 when entry in the WRNS ceased. Women then became integrated into the Royal Navy. They now enter on exactly the same terms as the men, same salary and are subject to the same rules of discipline as the men. All roles are open to them except in submarines and some minor war vessels. There are now women serving in about 40 ships around the world.

I am glad that I once served in the Women’s Royal Naval Service. A really life changing experience.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Note 7.