

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR EILEEN PICKERING NEE GASCOYNE

Do you ever feel that god has double crossed you or maybe you shouldn't have been born?.....that is how I feel.

Born an unexpected twin doesn't give you much of a start.....my brother, older than me by twenty minutes always getting preferential treatment in all things, didn't help me one bit. He was considered brighter than me (which he was, in maths and remembering dates in history) but of course boys in those days were given priority (girls were nothing really) i was always dressed up prettily (had some lovely clothes) but had best clothes and school clothes and never the twain shall meet....couldn't wear any new clothes on a Sunday if it was raining, a big disappointment if you had to wait another week to wear them 7 days was a long time...quite an ordeal in fact.

I always tell people that i was born in u.s.a. which really means upstairs in the attic...which is true, my parents were living, at the time of our birth, with my auntie and uncle and two cousins, so it was quite a houseful.....when we were six months old a house to rent came up and my auntie got on her knees and prayed that my parents would get the house in order for her and her family to get back to normal....bingo! Someone at the rent office took pity on my mom and she got the house for us much to everyone's relief.....we hadn't been in it very long before mom found bugs underneath my brother when he was in bed and she went berserk and the whole house had to be fumigated...all the wallpapers stripped off (and there were several layers of them).....and the house done up from top to bottom.

.my father worked in the steel works and had a lot of unemployment (on the dole really) so mom had to supplement the housekeeping by cleaning for other people and decorating too.....she used to paper a room for less than half a crown and more often than not didn't get paidshe also used to knit and sew for people and sometimes didn't get the money in that quarter either....she was a very hard worker was my mom.

My dad was a marvellous dancer and used to m.c most of all the big firms annual dances at the Sheffield cutler's hall there used to be 2 dance halls one for modern and the other old time my dad dealing with the latter and in one of the big banqueting rooms they used to hold whist drives to which my mom occasionally went into and once won the first prize of a full 12 seater tea service and they had to have a taxi to bring it home (it was a lovely tea service).....I Never had a lesson on how to dance it was inbred in me and i was dancing at the age of two....my brother and i went to our first dance at the ripe old age of six months..everyone taking it in turns to nurse us.....more often than not when my mom and dad went to a dance we were left in the care of the next door neighbours Mr. And Mrs. Sprigg and more often than

Not we were not in bed when they got home 'cos the Spriggs liked to have us in their house with them. Mom made me so me lovely dresses to go dancing in and i was never allowed to put the dress on until we were ready to set off to the dance and i remember that on one occasion i was wearing my lovely underskirt and one of my friends came to borrow my

skates which were kept in a cupboard.....guess what?.....i got some oh. Off the wheels of the skates on to the underskirt and didn't i get a clip for that. Mom was furious

And i cried of course 'cos you see the dress was made of crepe de chene and the underskirt showed through it, so did the oil from my skates.

My brother and i attended the same school and we were in the same class until junior school, at the age of seven when girls and boys were segregated. He being more intelligent jumped a year ahead of me so he was the shining light, so to speak. At the age of 10 he sat the scholarship exam (a year early) and won a place at the grammar school of his choice but my dad was out of work at the time and couldn't afford the needs for such an education so it had to be turned down.....the following year when the exam came around we both sat the same exam and when the usual forms were being filled in, my brother was given the choice of schools and of course chose

The one he should have attended the year before ...i had no choice...the school nearest, his choice was decided for me so that he could take me (i was treated as if i was at least 2 years younger than him, always)

At school i liked most lessons but especially swimming, dancing, sewing, drawing, didn't like history or geography very much yet i gained a distinction at the merit exam when i was 14 ..one thing i didn't dig very much was mental

Arithmetic, ugh!.....! Was in the rounders team dancing team and netball team (the latter occasionally because i was so small) i loved doing all those things and the travelling

Around to visit other schools. I remember on one open day the dancing team did the usual performing and the teacher had told us to go in a plain simple dress and how embarrassed i became when my mom decided that i could wear one of my best dresses for the occasion i daren't tell her what the teacher had said so i stood out like a sore thumb (in my opinion) i don't suppose anyone noticed but me.

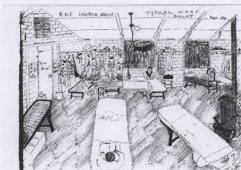
I was proud of my swimming achievements having gained a medal for life saving at the age of 14 and my brother couldn't even swim.....but (wait for it) he started to go for lessons at the ripe old age of 13 and by the time he was 14 had become the Yorkshire schoolboy breast stroke champion and i once more went in to the background. We both sat the merit exam and passed but naturally he did much better than i did (another good mark against his name) those days a boy was more important than a girl when it came to doing well so it didn't matter about me (any sort of job would do for a girl)we eventually said goodbye to school days and started looking for work in order to bring in a few pennies for the household...and had to go to what was then called the labour exchange and "sign on"

Location of story: Bletchley Park

Background to story: Royal Air Force

Contributed on: 20 October 2005

PEN DRAWING OF A TYPICAL HUT AT BLETCHLEY PARK -RAF Church Green.



Not just HOW but WHY?.....I will tell you the best I know how.

First of all, prior to Bletchley I was stationed at 9th.Troop Carrier Command, Grantham (which was originally No.5 Group Headquarters)....I was posted there just as the Yanks had started to work there...we were more or less teaching them the job....Gradually long after "D" Day they took over the signals completely and our postings came through....5 to Uxbridge and the rest of the girls to Bletchley approx.30...I was posted to Uxbridge but because one of the girls was getting married to a Yank and wanted to be nearer home I volunteered to exchange postings...much to my regret.

Whilst we were working with the Yanks we received their P.X. rations and it was like having Christmas every week...lots of cheap cigarettes, choc, biscuits and many other things besides..imagine how disgruntled we were when we had to go back to N.A.A.F.I. rations.

Because I had exchanged postings I had to wait for my railway warrant so the others set off before me....I went down to the railway station to see them off and on the way back to camp a lorry pulled up and told me to get aboard...they had seen to my kit and off I was sent...a very timid lonely W.A.A.F. The others journeyed via Nottingham, I had to go via London...and I had never been there and was a wee bit scared. I eventually arrived at Bletchley Railway Station and on presenting myself to the R.T.O. was informed that the others hadn't arrived and was pointed the way to the camp..I ignored all that and waited for the others.

We landed at Church Green and placed in to hut 129..what a dismal camp it wasnot a bit pleasant and we were even more disgruntled when we found out that it would take 3 weeks to Vet us and we were given some very unpleasant duties....My friend and I were put on Ablution cleaning...not at all

our cup of tea but we had to put up with it. I'll leave it to the imagination what the state of some of the toilets were in...ugh

During the weeks we were waiting we had lectures etc. and I remember we were given one by an R.A.F. Officer who spelt out the whys and wherefores and do and don'ts emphasizing the need for speed and (no errors)...he was speaking to the initiatedour machines at Grantham had almost set on fire on and around "D" Day (no errors)...when he asked for any questions one of the corporals stood up and gave him a slight lecture....we all enjoyed that .

The time came for us to be introduced to the Park.....all of us in hut 129 were put on "A" Watch.....the watches were 2 days 16.00 — 23.59

" " 12.00 - 20.00

" " 8.00 - 16.00.....48 hrs. stand down.

We had a pass which we had to show on going in and out.

We duly arrived for the first session in the Teleprinter Block not knowing what to expect and on reflections I feel sorry for the girls who had never known any other than the Park, having gone there straight from Radio School, at least we had had experience of a working station, so to speak.....it was just like walking in to a factory just loads of machines and neon lights which were always going on the blink which didn't help the eyesight one bit.

We were each given a section of machines to look after and all we did all the time we were on duty was walk around keeping watch over the printers that we had been allocated just signing for the signals, tearing them off, folding them in half and placing them on the conveyor belts to their respective destinations....this we did for the whole of the watches and then after stand down we were given another section to look after.....boring, boring, boring.

All this went off day after day, week after week, month after month.

I was only 5.ft.tall and was picked on a lot which depressed me and what made matters worse, I developed Scabies and was shunned by quite a few people..I had the last laugh though because the others in the hut had dysentery and had to have their blankets fumigated

I am not knocking the cookhouse because we had some decent meals but I started to be sick after most meals and couldn't bear my collar and tie on and eventually my friend told me that if I didn't report sick she would disown me so off I went....given tablets (I can only think that they were sleeping tablets) which I had to go to the sick quarters for each day to have one administered.

Having been vetted the only way out of Bletchley was to volunteer to go abroad which my friend did...she duly had a medical, was found to have T.B. was sent off to hospital and never came back...this made me very sad and lonely....and even more depressed.

I can't describe how ill I felt....but the job had to be done and I soldiered on..even managing to pass a trade test....We occasionally got to send signals but those machines were few and far between.

On one of the Watches a group of civilians came thru on their way to another department and I couldn't believe my eyes 'cos coming toward me was a girl I went to school with but we only just had time to ask "What are you doing here?" when she was moved on...I never saw her again, (she was a boy and girl twin just like me)...small world isn't it?

I befriended a girl in the next but one bed to me and she came from St.Neots and was able to get home on her S.O.P. and she took pity on me and I used to go home with her occasionally it was so kind of her family to take me in like that because they had a houseful, Mom, Dad, Aunt, Joyce herself, her brother and three land army girls so it was very kind of them to accept me as one of the family and they were such a lively lot it helped me a great deal Sheffield where I came from was a bit too far really although a corporal who lived there and I did once try going home on a 48hrs. pass but we had a struggle getting back to Bletchley and I became sick which didn't help matters especially when we were a wee bit late for duty however we didn't get put on a charge which was a blessing.

To cut a long story short I eventually was sent to R.A.F. Halton to face a Medical Board and had to travel in a corridor less train with a Sgt. who I had heard played her violin at midnight..so I wasn't too happy about that arrangement..however all was well although she refused to wear her cap so didn't salute an Officer who just happened to be passing the station entrance when we arrived at our destination she was reprimanded if I remember, and I was held up as an example of discipline...a feather in my cap I must say.

After facing the Medical Board and answering lots of questions I was informed that I had a nervous throat and given to choking (I am to this day..difficult when visiting the dentist). I was offered my discharge which I refused so the alternative was that I was posted to R.A.F. Norton. Sheffield the idea being that I worked on the camp in the signals section but lived at home in order to have food cooked by my Mom. and this arrangement lasted until my demob at the end of 1945..

I left B.P. silently two days before New Year's Eve 1944. and was put on duty immediately New Year's Day 1945. .

My war time experience at 17by Eileen Pickering nee Gascoyne

Contributed by Eileen Pickering nee Gascoyne

People in story: Eileen Pickering nee Gascoyne(Halfpint),Jack Pickering.

Location of story: England

Background to story: Royal Air Force

Contributed on: 20 October 2005 Photo Q

Photo Of 21 year old EILEEN GASCOYNE



I was 17 yrs. of age when declaration of war was announced, from the pulpit. in Church during the Sunday service. To say we were a little afraid of the unknown is an understatement war was expected, sandbags and Anderson shelters had sprung up all over the place and black-out curtaining was being bought by the yard. We had the first siren warning almost immediately but, thankfully it was a false alarm. Black-out was upon us and we carried our little boxes containing gas masks, all the time.

Life carried on normally for a little while but friends and workmates started to be called up for active service and a family circle gradually diminished.

Dec.12th. and 15th. 1940 (Thurs. and Sun.) Sheffield, where I was born and bred, suffered a Blitz....it was dreadful. Wave after wave of bombers almost all night and we were couped up with neighbours, in the shelter, almost below ground. My Dad had built bunk beds for my twin brother and me but we never slept in them, it was too crowded to lie down because all the neighbours in the yard wanted to be together. The only light we had was one candle and I remember the old lady next door to us sitting next to me drinking the brandy which was supposed to be for medicinal purposes only. The next day we had to "Shank's pony" to and from work, walking 3 to 4 miles each time, in to the City (no excuses those days) and that went on for weeks. All form of transport ceased and we had to walk in all weathers over rubble and dripping water mains, through a district that had had a lot of damage it was a nightmare

My boyfriend (who is now my husband) used to call for me and we would walk to work together most days

Jack had volunteered for the R.A.F. and in 1941 was called up for service and sent to S.Rhodesia for Pilot training supposedly for 9 months but he was held back as an instructor and didn't return until 1945.

In 1943, just before my 21st. birthday, I was conscripted into the services and was lucky enough to have my choice to join the W.A.A.F. I did my square-bashing (Drill) at R.A.F. Innsworth. Gloucestershire and at the end of the course we had to put on a show. I could tap-dance (and still do) so was roped in for the chorus and a solo Dress material being almost none existent. The producer went in to Gloucester and came back with some patriotic serviettes which we sewed 110 our issue bras. and made little skirts to wear over our Air Force Blue "bloomers," we thought we looked great and everybody thought the idea a good one, we just had to make sure that we didn't tear them, good thing they only had to last for the one performance.

From Innsworth, along with quite a few more "sprogs" (new girls), I was posted to Whitley Bay in Northumberland, a hellish journey, having to stand up or sit. on our kit-bags all the way. Being a short-hand typist, I was put to work in the Orderly room of Station Headquarters and eventually promoted to the Adjutant's Office, even though I was still only ACH/GD (Aircraft hand/general duties) at the time.

We had a Pig of a W.A.A.F. Officer and when she came to inspect us had us drilled on the lower prom facing the sun which reflected on to the sea, not very pleasant. I remember her once saying "Now I know what it is like to drill 70 wet, dead fish all said and done for the benefit of the holiday makers who came to watch us. There were a lot of barbed wire defences all over the place and she took great delight in marching us -towards them and not giving the order to about turn until we were about four aces away, she was not very popular.

After about three to four months we were allowed to re-muster and I applied to be a T/P/O (Teleprinter Operator). I had quite a Problem with the aforementioned officer, to let me do this because at the time said I that I would like to go into Safety Equipment

(parachute packing etc.) as far as that was concerned she said "NO WAY" she would have me scrubbing the cook-house floors first. I stood my ground and in the end she agreed for me to apply to be a T/P/O. I was accepted and was sent to R.A.F. Radio school at Cranwell College. in Sept.1943. It was a 10 weeks course, on shift work, 6p.m to 2p.m. and 2p.m. to 10.0p.m. alternate weeks, if my memory serves me correctly. We had to take a test at the end of each fortnight before being allowed to move on to the next step Of the training and if you didn't make the grade you were either moved back a fortnight or scrubbed altogether and sent to train as a cook. At the end of the 10 weeks we sat an exam and I passed ok which meant an upgrade in my pay to 2s.2d. per day.

From Cranwell I was posted to Grantham to a place called St Vincent's House which was gradually being taken over by the Americans (it had been No.5. -Group Headquarters of the Dam Buster era). We shared watches (duties) with the Yanks and as some of them were new arrivals from the States we had the task of training them an a one to one basis, more or less. Because we were attached to their unit, so to speak we were allowed their P.X.(stores,) rations and it was like having Christmas every week. Plenty of gum, choc bars and biscuits as well as other small items such as face cloths, pens etc. We were allowed 140 cigarettes a week Camel ,Chesterfields, Lucky Strike to name but a few. Being a non-smoker I used to send mine in the laundry parcel I sent home, for my Dad to have. The Yanks had plenty of money too and were over generous to the girls who dated them but a lot of us refused to allow this to happen too often, it did not seem right to take advantage of their good nature; most of the ones I worked along side were gentlemen...

On New Year's eve, those of us who weren't on duty were collected by truck and driven to Cottesmore camp and we had a whale of a time dancing the year out, jitterbugging and feeding our faces with food we hadn't thought existed anymore. It didn't matter that we had a long uncomfortable ride back in an army lorry and on duty the next day, we were tired but happy.

Our watch arrived for 8.0.a.m duty on June 6th. (D Day) 1944 to lots of shushes and "Don't talk to each other" orders from the R.A.F. Sergeant in charge of us, stupid man, all signals were in code anyway! We were kept very busy, sparks almost coming out of our machines. We'd had a suspicion something was afoot 'cos a few days beforehand all leave and passes had been cancelled. However, this did not deter my friend and I from getting up early on our day off, walking to the outskirts of Grantham and hitching a ride to Sheffield. I had written home to say we would visit

(no telephone for us) so we kept our promise. We had to come back the same day otherwise we would have been put on a charge. How we managed it all in the one day I don't know, I had no sense of direction and there were no signposts, but make it we did. There was one worrying moment on the way back when the truck driver stopped and got out of his cab (it was a transport lorry) and left us for what seemed ages and we had no idea how much further we had to go or even where we were. We were also starting to wonder as to whether we would be back in time for our 23.30 duty. I remember we were late but can't think what excuse we gave but luckily we got away with it. How we made it through the night I don't know but we were young and managed not to fall asleep during the long hours of pounding our machines.

The Yanks eventually took everything over and we were posted en bloc. to Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire. I should have gone to Uxbridge but exchanged posting with a Londoner; worse days work I ever did.

Bletchley Park was known as Station X, very hush-hush so, as they sang in one of the war-time songs "We won't talk about that". All I can say is that before we could work in the Park we were vetted and as this took about three weeks we were put to all sorts of menial tasks. Unfortunately for me and my friend, we were put on ablution duties cleaning toilets etc., it was awful. Despite discipline and hygiene lectures there were still the add bods who broke the rules and on occasions our duties weren't exactly pleasant.

The W.A.A.F. camp left a lot to be desired (there were Army, Navy, Air Force and Civilians at the Park). Navy and civilians were looked after the best, living in private homes etc., Army and R.A.F. personnel had to put up with concrete huts with bitumastic floors, very sparse, and what seemed miles to the toilets and baths.

(enclosed copy of the hut next to mine, to give you an idea of living conditions, this was drawn by a friend of mine who I recently discovered at a W.A.A.F. re-union).

Conditions weren't good at all and the only way out of the place was in a "box" on medical grounds, or by volunteering to go to India, which my friend did but at her medical, was found to have suspected T.B. and was posted to hospital for treatment. There wasn't much in the way of entertainment, morale was pretty low, and illness overtook some of us. The whole of our hut had dysentery (35 girls) except me. I was greedy and had scabies and the treatment for that was horrible. I had to go to sick quarters every day, have a bath and scrub myself until the sores bled, dry myself off and then the orderly with a brush, slapped an some sort of paste which stung and had to dry slowly before I could get dressed again. I felt very degraded and was spurned by everyone. They assumed that I was dirty, which made me very depressed. Sickness and depression dogged me all the time I was stationed there and eventually I had to face a Medical Board which entailed a trip to

R.A.F. Halton Hospital. I was offered a discharge on medical grounds, but refused it. The alternative was a posting to R.A.F. Norton, Sheffield where I was allowed to live at home, attending camp only for duties and pay parades, etc.

I remained at Norton until my demobilisation in October, 1945 and during that time, my fiancée came home from S. Rhodesia and we were married just after V.E. Day on 19th May, 1945. That is another story.

A SYNOPSIS OF my WARTIME EXPERIENCE

Mrs E Pickering(née. Gascoyne)

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