

A MEMOIR of LIFE in the WAAF during the
SECOND WORLD WAR

by

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Contents

I	Home and Away : to August 1940	
1.	Longing for Action	Page 1
2.	Enlistment and Training	3
II	RAF Uxbridge, HQ No. 11 Group : to Autumn 1941 at Biggin Hill	
1.	Down the Hole	6
2.	Briefly at Biggin Hill	13
III	RAF Huntingdon, HQ No. 2 Group : to end of May 1943, then to RAF Bylaugh Hall, Norfolk to early 1944	
1.	Promotion and Fresh Fields	14
2.	A Few Months in the Country	26
IV	RCAF Leeming 63 Base - Skipton RCAF - Leeming, 1944 to October 1945	
1.	An Operational Station at Last	29
2.	Skipton RCAF. 'I Go. I Come Back!'	49

* Notes referring to text pages : after END.

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I Home and Away : to August 1940

1. Longing for Action

My mother was seventeen years old at the outbreak of the First World War. At eleven o'clock on the morning of Sunday, the third of September 1939, I was already eighteen, sitting on my mother's bed as we listened to Neville Chamberlain's broadcast announcement that we were once more at war with Germany.

Initial numbness and shock were replaced by racing thoughts. War-experienced or not, neither of us knew what to expect. With no men of service age to worry about in our immediate family, for I had no brothers, our thoughts were free to roam elsewhere, to speculation upon the immediate future. Would we, for instance, face annihilation at worst or immediate bombing raids all over the country at the very least? With little behind me but a quiet, secure country upbringing, so much now began to beckon in a world of new turmoil but also of excitement. Although as yet unfocussed, I knew instinctively that the old life had gone, including the rest of the Fine Art course I had embarked upon at Reading University.

My mother urged me to join the Land Army, inspired by memories of her own youthful experiences. She had worked on the land alongside her fellow Bedford College students during their long vacations in the middle years of the 1914 - 18 War. It was one of the happiest times of her life. 'You will love it,' she said.

Perhaps too often I allowed my mother the role of oracle, for I was without rebel instincts at that time, no credit to me for being lazy and not taking on thinking things through on my own. Unsurprisingly I conformed and spent the month of October as the only girl on a farm near Windsor. Nothing could have

been a greater contrast to my mother's experience many years previously at her Dorset Farm at Briantspuddle. There she had been amongst a large group of undergraduate friends working together and living in their dedicated quarters in one of the farm buildings. Her home was in Hampstead, her college part of London University, both just some of what London had to offer, whilst my home and experience was centred much more narrowly upon village life, from which I was now eager to escape. However I was determined, for pride's sake, to try out farm life to the best of my ability.

The only task I confess to enjoying greatly during my short time at the farm was driving a Fordson tractor attached to the plough and being privileged to strike the first new furrow, with my eye fixed, as firmly as nervousness allowed, upon the little white rag on the marker stick at the far end of the field. The farmer then thought he could trust me on his new red International tractor, but alas I betrayed him by backing into a ditch. He could have been very angry but was extremely good about it, for which I was most grateful.

It took me no time at all to discover my unsuitability for looking after animals, especially cows, which continued to alarm me as much as they always had. The evenings were more interesting, when the farmer would talk to me endlessly of his ideas on anything and everything. Being of a similar mind I was not reluctant to take part, but his wife did not join in. My naivety was very great and it was only long afterwards that I realised how difficult it must have been for her to accept, with grace, the fact that a very young woman on her own was out around the farm with her husband all day and then talking to him in the evenings.

The only occasion when I saw anyone from outside the farm was through a tea invitation from our Land Army contact, the wife of a housemaster at Eton College, to a neighbouring landgirl and myself. My companion sought fit to bring her tiny dog, which she carried in her arms throughout. When the butler opened the door, to the accompaniment of deep throated growls from several huge dogs, he eyed the little dog with great disfavour, saying, 'The Dogs do not like small dogs'. Our hostess, however, did soften the initial impression by putting us at our ease most charmingly over tea.

By the end of October I had resigned from the Land Army, but before the next move I felt I was needed at home as my mother was ill again, my sisters, the twins being only in their early teens and our youngest sister five years old. Thus I continued in family life, not without understandable inner frustration. My friend Ian had joined the RAF in the early months of the War, following in the footsteps of his father, who had served in the RFC during the first War and returned in 1939 to the RAF and to France. There was no question for

me of joining any other service. At last, in May 1940, now nineteen, I applied to enlist in the WAAF and was awaiting call-up with eagerness and a little trepidation.

2. Enlistment and Training

When the order came, it was to report to Victory House in London on 25th June. There I joined a roomful of assorted young women awaiting their turn to start the process of enlistment, including the all important medical examination. The faces are now a blur, but for a tall bony young woman, previously pointed out as having lost her RAF husband recently. 'I thought you looked like a sulky public schoolgirl' she said, implying, I hoped, 'before I spoke to you'. It was a strange remark, for if most people were feeling as apprehensive as myself, small wonder that our expressions were less relaxed than usual.

Knowing that my flat feet might disqualify me, I was a little worried during the medical, but the MO was either kindly or failed to notice and I passed. We had our first experience of unaccustomed indignities, such as having to strip off, but would quickly learn to come to terms with the routine embarrassments of service life.

From Victory House we were to make our way by train, armed with railway warrants, to West Drayton WAAF recruit training depot, returning along part of my earlier rail route from Maidenhead to Paddington. On arrival we presumably first got kitted out, as I remember being in uniform by the time we reached the cookhouse, each girl clutching her personal cutlery issue of knife, fork and spoon. My first meal as 893742 ACW2 Barry taught me much about survival, clearly already learnt by less recent arrivals. Piles of large bread slices vanished in a whirl of grabbing hands and you had to be quick or you would get nothing. For bread, indeed, proved to be what really filled you up. However the meal was good and we even had icecream for the first and only time during my service.

Afterwards we washed our precious cutlery in a deep zinc bath of rapidly cooling water. In my agitation I carelessly dropped all mine into the murky depths and on applying timidly for help to the severe-looking supervising WAAF Sergeant nearby, was told 'Well get it out then!', none too gently. Rolling up a sleeve as high as possible, I dredged the bottom and at length, with great distaste, rescued my 'irons'. A team of recruits was detailed daily to deal with the hundreds of dinner plates, starting with water containing washing soda and almost too hot to bear, but never finishing before the water was quite cold and covered with a greasy film, as I later discovered at first hand.

The summer of 1940 was very warm, which made the wearing of collars, ties and thick tunics, buttoned up at all times, very stifling, along with unaccustomed grey lisle stockings and black lace-up shoes. Our introduction to washing in a separate ablutions building adjacent to our barrack hut was, conversely, not uncomfortable, once we became used to the idea, although later on, during several severe winters it would be a different story.

Nothing remains of the many lectures and PT sessions we must have attended during our initial fortnight, but the flavour of parade ground drill stands clear. This was very difficult at first as 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 Officer McAlery, 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.

This illustrates my strong romantic tendency, but of course there were many things in my new life which remained daunting for some time. One of these was saluting officers, especially in the street, where I would avoid meeting one if tactfully possible, turning down a side street or into a shop till the danger was past. Once I realised too late that I was saluting a surprised warrant officer, who of course did not respond. Saluting drew attention to oneself, I felt, but it was not long before such obligations became automatic responses.

Returning to our training, gas drill was an unforgettable experience, especially when we learned to trust our gas masks the hard way, by being ordered to remove them in a gas-filled chamber, from which we emerged, coughing and spluttering, to gulp pure air. Training for a mustard gas attack was much more serious and involved sealing ourselves, in that summer heat, within all-enveloping protective clothing. This followed the theory, more frightening than the actual experience of the lesser tear gas.

Apart from making our choices, dependent upon acceptance, from the modest range of WAAF trades at that time, we recruits were as yet an undifferentiated mass, to be sent off in batches to our various training units. Reputedly the most glamorous role was that of Plotter, working in a Fighter Command Operations

Control room where it was rumoured that the girls would be under the gaze of officers looking down from their balcony at the air war battle developing. In my case, however, though not opting for it, I was allocated to the trade of telephonist, but contrary to expectations this was to turn out well for me later.

On passing out at West Drayton in early July, I was posted to The Firs, Worcester, for telephonist training, which was to last some three to four weeks, according to uncertain memory. The unit was installed in a large detached house in pleasant leafy grounds, situated in the town. This was very different from the huge purpose-built camp I had just left. The discipline did not slacken, however, with regular parades on a scaled-down dedicated area near the house.

The Private Branch Exchange, always referred to as the PBX, was situated in the house itself, not in a temporary building. It was reigned over by the women GPO supervisors who were our civilian instructresses, spinster ladies who seemed to belong to a long-gone era in style of dress, hair and manner. In our rawness and youth we may well have presented a daunting teaching proposition! Seated on a swivel chair, wearing a headset with earphones and a black mouthpiece attachment round the neck, I learnt the mechanics and strict procedures for working efficiently at the switchboard, from 'Number please?' to clearing down at the end of a call and pulling the plug out of its socket.

You would need to make sure to ring the desired extension or outside number, such as a certain RAF station, without activating the ringing the wrong way, buzzing back in the caller's ear by mistake, very easy to do in early days, thus making the caller irate. You tried hard to be quick and accurate or risk causing rising impatience. Of course we escaped into the town in our leisure time and enjoyed Worcester, a delightful old place with its cathedral, the river and attractive parks. The summer continued warm and each of us tried to forget we were hemmed in by our thick clothing and the obligatory gas mask in its knapsack with steel helmet attached to the outside, every time we went off camp. Later we learnt to use the space inside our helmets for carrying shopping and for late evening fish and chips before returning to camp, although it was to be hoped we would not be ordered to wear our hats when our hair was newly washed!

My godmother, Ruth Drummond, a factory inspector, lived locally and I enjoyed visits to her house. She had been one of my mother's student friends on the Dorset farm during the First World War. My friend Ian Hay came to see me. He was training at RAF North Coates as a Wireless Operator/AirGunner. My short pleasant stay in Worcester was ending and I passed out as a trained telephonist in early August 1940. RAF Uxbridge was to be my first real posting, for duties with No. 11 Group, Fighter Command.

II RAF Uxbridge, HQ No. 11 Group : to Autumn 1941 at Biggin Hill

1. Down the Hole

On arrival at the camp entrance on the main street of Uxbridge, it was somewhat intimidating to be confronted with huge multi-storey barrack blocks, with First World War names such as Ypres and Arras, along with lesser buildings and a vast parade ground. Later I understood that this section of the whole site was a depot for RAF personnel and arrivals from foreign and Commonwealth airforces. Passing beyond this area, the ground began to rise and to take on a gentler, smaller-scale aspect as one approached the WAAF quarters in the upper camp. These consisted of pleasant bungalows with neglected gardens, previously occupied by regular RAF officers and their families. The bungalow to which I was allocated was said to have been lived in by Wing Commander O'Donnell, the Bandmaster of the RAF Central Band. Each room contained three or four beds and was light and airy, promising something more civilised than the previous crowded un-homelike barrack huts. Although untended and the grass dry and brown, that garden was to prove wonderfully pleasant to sit in and relax between shifts during that lovely summer of 1940.

We were not far from our large hutted cookhouse, which boasted more refinements than you might expect. You could even order a newspaper, which would be waiting for you on a side table as you came into breakfast. The food was good, if basic and the place had enough extra room for occasional small groups of entertainers to perform. Rawicz and Landsauer, the piano duo, gave a recital for us during my time at the camp. The former strict discipline seemed to be giving way to occasional relaxation, now that I was doing serious real work, but at the same time you had to be careful to judge each situation appropriately.

Our place of work was a little way down from our quarters, but still clearly separate from the lower camp with its daunting blocks. Those working in the nerve centre of 11 Group approached an insignificant-looking square concrete bunker and down a few steps to the entrance, where we entered a lift which then descended to what seemed at first an alarming depth. Emerging, we found ourselves in a long corridor, with doors opening off. We were now 'down the Hole', as the place was generally known. Twittering teleprinter machines could be heard, waiting to clatter out their messages, the sound fading before reaching an open door on the right, the entrance to the telephonists' domain, the PBX. Inside the long but not very wide room, the switchboard positions were ranged along the left wall, with space behind which had a certain significance on quiet nights, since we were able to kip down there in turn, with a blanket or two.

Two girls at a time manned the switchboard, twentyfour hours a day on four shifts, with a WAAF Corporal Supervisor in addition during office hours. The shifts are remembered as 0800 - 1200, 1200 - 1700, 1700 - 2359 and 2359 - 0800. Following night duty we had snatches of sleep during the day, returning at 1700 for the evening shift. The shift pattern for each girl could be complicated, with thirtysix hour breaks every so many sets of duties, with short and long leaves also built in. As with most of my colleagues, I did shift work throughout my WAAF career.

At Uxbridge, because of the artificial working conditions underground, anyone regularly on shift duty down the Hole for a complete year was entitled to ask for a posting. The following year I was to take advantage of this myself. Our PBX had an intriguing feature in that it was not completely manual. There was a group of secret stations with which connection was made by voice, not by buzzing. You could hear the relay system working after plugging in and speaking into it. Remembered names were Niton, Hawkinge, Chicksands and Kingsdown, believed to be Listening Stations, which indeed they proved to be. The Operations Room was further down the corridor, which was interesting for us when distinguished visitors, making their way to 'watch the battles' during the Battle of Britain, had to pass our door our open door. On one occasion we took it in turns to tiptoe as far as the corridor to peer from our less exciting domain to see the receding backs of Winston Churchill and Lord Halifax.

We knew that our AOC, Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, was a keen pilot himself and known to 'scramble' along with one of his 11 Group Squadrons, but in general we knew little of what went on in a vital centre at the heart of the nation, as it could have been termed that summer. We only had access to what came out in the newspapers or on the wireless, our modest excitements being occasional panics when the switchboard was exceptionally busy. No one on secret work of any kind ever revealed anything when off duty. However, we were always informed, via the switchboard, of air raid alerts and also knew that when Air Raid Warning Purple changed to Air Raid Warning Red, the steel doors at the surface entrance to the Hole would be shut until the All Clear came, relieving a definite sense of entombment!

During August 1940 we were aware of the growing number of daytime attacks by the enemy on airfields in the south of England and hearing of RAF and WAAF casualties at Biggin Hill in our own Group, for instance. September brought a switch to the bombing of London and a continuation of air battles in the South in defence of the capital, the peak date being the famous 15th of September. Two of us came on duty to find a tremendous aftermath to the day was resulting in the switchboard being the busiest either of us had

known it, a Christmas tree of winking lights. And so it continued without respite till morning, when we were verbally commended for our night's work by Wing Commander Porter, the Chief Signals Officer.

Exhausted, we slept all too soundly, after putting in a call to be woken up in time to be ready to return to duty at 1700 hours. Unfortunately, the duty runner failed to wake us and we were late. Presumably the Supervisor had reported us as next day we were summoned to appear before a very junior Signals Officer, who almost extinguished the glow from the commendation of the Wing Commander. We were roundly admonished, as if we our lateness had been deliberate. 'If you kick us, we will kick you' was the way he phrased it. Although by now drilled to strict obedience, I was moved for the first time, much to the amazement of my colleague, to risk standing up against such unjust criticism after we had worked hard and with honour. No further punishment followed.

Around this time, during a Red Alert, we were called from our quarters, wearing our tin hats, to crouch, not in an Air Raid Shelter proper, but in open shelter trenches. This was very annoying, as I was off duty and about to start for London to meet Ian before he travelled to RAF Kinloss for the final stage of his training. After about thirty minutes the All Clear sounded and I hurried through the camp on my delayed journey. At Baker Street Underground station I met Ian and we had half an hour together amidst the bustle before he had to go for the train. My last sight of him was as he took his seat in the crowded tube train which was too soon swallowed by the tunnel.

Towards the end of September a message came through from the Guard Room to say my mother was waiting to see me. Full of foreboding as to what this might mean, I made my way down to meet her. At once I could see what she would tell me, which was that Ian and his crew were posted missing on 24th September. It was likely they had not quite completed their course of training, let alone experienced action. It was so dear of my mother to come all the way to Uxbridge to give me the news in person. Although due back on duty at 1700, there was time for us to see a silly film, 'Oh! Johnny!', which did steady me a little before saying goodbye to my mother and going down the Hole again.

Weeks and months of grieving followed, but I was determined not to impinge upon or distress my room mates at all costs. This was not easy to achieve, but I did realise from time to time that my efforts were appreciated and this helped me to hang on. Work proved to be a great tranquiliser, the harder the better; moreover there were countless others suffering their own deep personal losses and I knew I was not alone. As the London night bombings escalated, we experienced frequent raids touching the Uxbridge district and

certainly as far as Hillingdon one evening when I set out to visit an uncle and aunt there, during air raids which seemed to come nearer than expected, with the usual accompaniment of the typical pulsing sound of enemy engines, crumps far and near and our searchlights raking the sky continuously. One other night of many, when I sought forgetfulness on my own at the cinema, I rejected the programmes at the first two places and chose that of the third in the row of cinemas lining Uxbridge High Street. During the show I was aware of raids going on quite near, confirmed when I emerged into the street, now full of broken glass, from, apparently, a direct hit through the foyer of the middle cinema. Firemen and others were busy clearing the debris, but there was by this time no evidence of casualties, if there had been any. Curiously I personally never saw any horrors although stories came to me from others from time to time.

On one occasion, impossible to date, I was having an early night alone in the bungalow, complete with curlers in my hair, when an airman, detailed from the lower camp, came to tell me to come at once as an unexploded land mine had dropped somewhere on the upper camp, caught by its parachute. He did not, however, welcome escorting a WAAF in nightwear and curlers, so I dressed quickly and we crept gingerly down the moonlit camp, peering into the shadows, neither of us knowing the exact location of the mine. It was fortunate that there was accommodation for all the girls in one of the empty large barrack blocks of the RAF Depot. Seeing the very basic beds with their wide strips of iron across the width and unyielding 'biscuit' mattress sections, rough blankets and lack of sheets, I realised how much more comfortable we WAAFs were on our sprung bed bases with bearable 'biscuits' having at least some 'give'. It had not been realised, apparently, that not everyone had been evacuated from the WAAF camp the previous night, but someone must have noticed my absence and remembered I was staying in that night. In the morning all surface personnel who could be, were evacuated whilst the explosive device was defused successfully. As we were on duty at that time, we had to be entombed, with the top doors tight shut for longer than usual.

The only time I met severe air raids in London was on a day out there with my friend Elizabeth Phillips. As evening came, we were marooned in the lounge of the Cumberland Hotel, along with a varied throng of many others in the same plight. No transport was available, the tube trains not running, in fact we had no means of returning to Uxbridge that night. Whilst we were pondering on what to do, Elizabeth remembered two male Hungarian friends who had a centrally placed London flat and might help, as indeed they did, by putting us up for the night and providing breakfast next morning. They were most charming, perfect

gentlemen, in fact, this perhaps surprising to many brought up in today's cultural climate. Of course we had already been in touch with last night's WAAF duty officer back at camp, to explain our predicament. She was most concerned for our welfare and never mentioned disciplinary action. This we found to be typical of how our well-being was looked after by our WAAF officers, especially if we were in a tight spot not of our own making. The men, I felt, were not always treated as leniently in similar circumstances.

Thoughts often turned to the safety of people at home, particularly in my father's case, as he had to travel daily to the City, starting at seven in the morning with a one and a half mile walk down to the branch line station to travel to Maidenhead, where he changed to the Paddington line. On the return journey he was at least able to catch a bus home from Maidenhead, but there were terrible delays on the Paddington line during the bombings. Sometimes he did not get back until ten o'clock at night or even later, only to rise at six to light the kitchen range in order to boil the kettle and make toast before setting out again. A day, came when he arrived at the office only to find it did not exist, having been completely destroyed in the previous night's bombing. A consequent move to Acton made his journey even longer and more complicated. My father already had a heavy workload, as his firm, Holman Brothers, which normally manufactured mining tools and compressed air street drills, had turned over to making armaments for the defence of merchant ships. The protracted exhaustion and strain of it all, I feel, caught up with him in later life, taking into account, too, his service in the First World War.

Although my family home was a peaceful Berkshire village, nowhere was immune from jettisoned enemy bombs being dropped randomly and we were not many minutes flying time from London. An aunt of mine, glad to share our house to avoid living in London, took the same walk as my father did to the local station each day. This followed a rough track between fields, where on one occasion a stick of bombs fell quite near her. She flung herself to the ground feeling severely shaken, but luckily was not hurt and somehow managed to collect herself together to carry on. My mother was more affected by food shortages and making do, added to worrying about everyone else. Her war work was devoted to helping at the mother and baby clinic held regularly in the village hall, weighing infants and dispensing official bottles of orange juice and cod liver oil. She loved babies and working for them. For myself, the only asset I could discern in civilian life was being able to wear pretty clothes off duty, rather than only on leave and to have enough clothing coupons for nice underwear.

Elizabeth, who was a room-mate in our bungalow, showed how it was possible to defy the strict rule

against the wearing of civilian dress in off duty hours. She had her hand sewing machine with her and ran up a light blue taffeta ball gown for a special event. Her officer boyfriend somehow smuggled Elizabeth past the guard room in his car and back again in the early hours. Another aspect of dress was one which annoyed us all at about this date, in connection with our uniforms this time. The smart raincoats initially issued to WAAF other ranks were taken away from us and were replaced by inelegant bicycle-type capes, somewhat resembling square groundsheets with a collared neck-hole, the points being worn fore and aft. We were quite convinced that this unpopular move stemmed from a worry that the WAAF ranks looked too much like officers.

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, the metal collar-studs transferring their tarnish, over time, to form near-indelible grey-yellow patches on our throats. 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 for being caught 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', bangs, or a dramatic roll on top, ending in a curl or two.

Regular issue uniforms could vary greatly from thick, woolly and clumsy to acceptably smooth and well-made. Girls from well-off families would have uniforms tailor-made for them in superior cloth. Battledress did not appear for me until much later, when posted to an operational station and I was unaware of when this was introduced for the women. Our airforce blue cardigans were adequate but skimpy by today's standards. Everyone disliked the thick 'passionkiller' knickers and aquired their own panties if at all possible. I did not mind the pink brassieres and side-hooked girdle suspender belts and actually liked the comfort of the wincyette blue, grey and white striped pyjamas. Everything we owned on camp had to go into our white cylindrical kit-bags, which we had to drag rather than carry, being unable to lift them as the men could, when posted elsewhere.

The only sport I took part in at Uxbridge was fencing which I enjoyed very much, not only for fun and fitness, but also as a physical and mental challenge. With no possibility of kitting myself out with padded

jacket and breeches, I had to make do with an Aertex shirt and navy shorts, whilst Elizabeth managed to acquire at least the correct jacket. The Duchess of Gloucester, our WAAF Patron, was to have seen our display during a visit to Uxbridge, but was unable to do so through lack of time.

My first attempt to become an officer was likely to have been in late 1940, after Elizabeth became commissioned as a Cypher Officer, or 'Cypher Queen' as generally known, following which she vanished into a different world somewhere else. At a requested interview with the WAAF officer in charge of the WAAF unit, Section Officer Campbell, I was chided for putting myself forward. 'You should have waited to be recommended, Barry' she said. Mrs. Campbell was rumoured to have run a Home for Fallen Women, the name quoted by my informant, prior to the war. She did sometimes appear suspicious of what her airwomen were up to if their leave address was not that of their family. Perhaps boringly dutiful in mainly going back to my family, I was unlikely to disturb the minds of the WAAF Admin. section.

During this time I was offered a chance to remuster to the trade of R/T Operator, very tempting in giving an opportunity to work on an operational station. However, with an uneasy feeling that this was not the right thing for me at this moment, I turned it down. Much later I realised that I had been led down the better path, to a then unimagined role, more interesting and satisfying than ever before.

It may have been in 1941 that I actually got as far as having a Commission interview, during which I must have shown myself to be naive and immature whilst I trotted out all the worthy answers my good father would have approved. No doubt I sounded incredibly pious, with the inevitable result that I did not succeed. A fellow candidate passed after giving her reason for wanting to become an officer as 'wanting to meet people'. Had I believed in myself more and possessed her confidence, I could quite sincerely have given the same reply. Green-ness was obviously my enemy, but by degrees I would begin to conquer it.

My work did not bring me into contact very often with exceptional people, but there was a WAAF officer seen around the upper camp for a time in the summer of 1940 who was unusual. For one thing she wore a monocle, was very smart and had a 'presence' and a certain lively air. She turned out to be Assistant Section Officer Jean Conan Doyle, daughter of the author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Years later I learned that she went from Uxbridge to the 'Y' station at Hawkinge to be in charge of the WAAF working at the listening unit there, rising many years afterwards to the position of Air Commandant.

My time at Uxbridge, as it moved into 1941, had settled into as much of a routine as wartime would allow, except for increasing unrest in our workplace, due to the unsettling effect of a neurotic personality in

our midst. She could not help it, but it did not make for harmony.

As August approached I would be entitled to put in for a posting, having completed a year's work down the Hole. In the circumstances I was ready and eager to take this up, not only for personal reasons but also from a wish to move on. Only one thing of note happened in the lead up to my departure. This was the sole confinement to camp imposed during my stay at 11 Group and it lasted for several days, whilst a certain contingent of Royal Canadian Air Force personnel was in evidence at the lower camp depot. These men wore shoulder flashes showing they belonged to the Rocky Mountain Rangers (?) or the like and they certainly looked dauntingly rough and tough if one caught a glimpse of them around the camp!

By the time my posting came through it was Autumn and I was to report to RAF Biggin Hill, not the airfield itself, but to the dispersed Signals Unit in Bromley town. This was not good news. Having heard so much about the famous fighter station during the Battle of Britain, I had naturally hoped to be living or at least working there.

2. Briefly at Biggin Hill

My new unit was situated in a large house in Bromley, where the PBX occupied what I recall was a room at the back of the building. No memory remains of detailed surroundings, this being eclipsed by the lack of welcome, indeed enmity which immediately confronted me. Unfortunately one of my fellow telephonists was highly resentful and accused me of selfishness in opting to come, although I had no choice in where I would be sent. It was a shock to be so disliked for the first time in my life, although I eventually realised that I was a focus for her frustration at being, as she obviously thought, supplanted as favoured candidate for the vacant post of PBX Supervisor, a notion of which I had been unaware.

Feeling so unwelcome did not help me settle into a role which was proving less interesting than the one I had left behind. Soon I applied for the next available posting and felt extremely glad of having done so, as the neurotic one from 11 Group had just followed in my own footsteps and was now also at Biggin Hill! My summons came remarkably soon, to my heartfelt relief, in November 1941, when I was ordered to report to RAF Castle Hill House, Huntingdon No. 2 Group HQ, Bomber Command.

III RAF Huntingdon, HQ No. 2 Group : to end of May 1943, then to RAF Bylaugh Hall, Norfolk to early 1944

1. Promotion and Fresh Fields

My new workplace was in Castle Hill House itself. The PBX occupied a back ground floor room, apparently in the old butler's pantry, judging by the deep teak sink below the window, to which our backs were turned as we sat at the switchboard. With natural light and in a house not a bunker, it was a welcome contrast to the 11 Group Hole of recent memory. My colleagues were lively and friendly and the work mainly routine, but this would change before long.

The Air Officer Commanding 2 Group in late 1941 was Air Vice-Marshal Stevenson, who had an intimidating reputation for fierceness amongst us. Working on the PBX was a witty, lively girl named Joyce Minard, who was frequently teased by a young GPO engineer who carried out regular maintenance work on the scrambler telephone in the AOC's office. He would pretend to be Stevenson lifting the receiver and barking out an order to be connected, knowing that Joyce was on duty. She, of course, was used to this game and well up to the repartee which followed. One day a gruff voice from that extension demanded to be connected with the Earl of Sandwich at nearby Hinchbrooke House. The unsuspecting Joyce said 'Sandwich? - what sort of sandwich? - a ham sandwich?' This was followed by an explosion of rage in Joyce's ear and she knew she was in for a bad time. However nothing much seemed to happen to her and it was possible to imagine the Chief Signals Officer dining out on the story. AVM Stevenson left 2 Group at the end of the year.

Not long after arriving at Huntingdon I was promoted to Corporal and put in charge of the PBX, following which I was very soon put to the test when a large-scale exercise was mounted. This involved, for us, certain landlines being notionally out of action, with orders to devise alternative routes to keep communications open, promptly and effectively. Presumably this had been carried out satisfactorily, as I was verbally congratulated afterwards by Wing Commander Eveleigh, the Chief Signals Officer, on our performance.

After an icy winter, with severe personal discomforts for mention later, the spring of 1942 brought me further promotion to the rank of Sergeant. this filled me with joy as I was now qualified for duties on the small PBX in the Operations Room upstairs in Castle Hill House. At last my chance had arrived to do secret

work, in however modest a role, in the same room as new and interesting people, ranking from Air Vice-Marshal down to Sergeant.

Before describing this fresh experience, I would like to say something of our WAAF off-duty living and leisure and to return to the day I arrived in Huntingdon. On reporting to the Guard Room I was directed to my living quarters in the large old Vicarage at Godmanchester, across the river Great Ouse. The prospect and indeed the whole scene seemed delightful even though winter was approaching. It was a shock, therefore, to discover the damp and chilly conditions in the unheated former billiard room which was to be my home. The very capaciousness added to the impression of unwelcoming gloom pervading the place, even when the weather was moderate. The only redeeming thought was that we could commiserate with each other and maybe take action together despite our lowly status under discipline. My promotions lay some time ahead and undreamed of at that time.

An old lady, presumably the widow of a former vicar, still lived in the rambling depths of the private part of the building and we rarely saw her. Our nights were often wakeful, especially if on early shift, as in the main we did not have alarm clocks and I did not have a watch as a back-up if the personal call system broke down. There was a nervous tendency to count the loud strokes of the nearby church clock over several hours, to make sure of getting up in time to walk back across the bridge for breakfast in our Mess situated in the compound behind the HQ building, before reporting for duty.

The discomfort of dampness and cold during that bleak winter, coupled with anxiety about oversleeping, made us unhappy and exhausted and we were driven by desperation to complain eventually. A WAAF Officer arrived wielding a small mirror, which she placed face downwards on someone's blanket. On lifting the mirror she declared 'There is no sign of misting on this mirror, so your blanket can't be damp'. Then she just went away. Extremely miserable, with many more freezing nights ahead, we took matters into our own hands, gathered wood and lit a fire in the enormous grate. Unfortunately it became evident that the chimney had neither been used nor swept for many years and was choked with debris and birds' nests and starting to smoke alarmingly. Worse, this was filtering through to our elderly lady's apartments, quickly bringing her to the scene, most upset. She must have protested to our WAAF Officer and we did get into some trouble. Disciplined to obey, we failed to wonder why we were expected to put up with our lot, whilst every barrack hut back in the camp compound was given its own solid fuel stove for regular warmth. Thankfully, signs of spring did begin to appear and our youthful health and spirits did the rest.

Good things were happening alongside the hardships, anyway, especially on the social side of life. The girls were invited to many dances in the area, notably at RAF Wyton and Alconbury airfields, to which we were transported by service bus. The arrival of the American airmen in high summer 1942 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 busful 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 their phenomenal energy and enthusiasm for jive and jitterbug. Moreover you soon got to know several 'Yanks' who were very charming and delightful. In fact we had enjoyable times at Wyton and Alconbury, whether with the RAF or the Americans. As an alternative to the dances, pubs and NAAFI, there was the more select Bridge Hotel on the Huntingdon side of the river. WAAF other ranks were not allowed to go there, as it was for officers only, but we WAAF Sergeants occasionally did so. It was a favourite haunt of dashing flyers from local airfields, including John Searby, who later became even more distinguished as a Master Bomber with the Pathfinder Force (PFF). But in the normal way we did not come across operational aircrew, except when a Squadron Commander visited the 2 Group Ops Room when one was there on duty.

The river provided much of our leisure enjoyment, when we would hire a skiff, a familiar pastime from outings on the Thames at Cookham, then spend a lazy afternoon, sometimes in the direction of Houghton Mill where they did good teas. We knew a place where you could bathe on hot days, where on one occasion we were about to take a dip, when a punt containing some of our officer colleagues glided by, serenading us with 'Who is Sylvia?' to an accordion accompaniment.

In June 1942 I was personally attracted to the wonderful virgin water meadow of Port Holme, now a protected site. This was bounded by a huge curve in the river, closed by a rivulet near the railway line, thus making the meadow an island. This marvellous place lay on the west side of the Huntingdon to Godmanchester road and in true June fashion, displayed a carpet of every kind of meadow flower. Sitting in the soft grass in the sunshine, what better place could there be to write one's letters than to the quiet hum

of bees amongst the scent of flowers?

Godmanchester, a handsome old place with beautiful buildings, also offered other WAAF living quarters which were the antithesis of the dreaded Vicarage, being light, airy and cheerful, with smaller rooms. Island Hall was a large Georgian house built directly onto the main street, on the opposite side to the church. The name derived from the little island behind the house, reached by a small footbridge over a tributary of the Ouse. My promotion and elevation to new work upstairs in Castle Hill house were very recent and I was just beginning to know my duties and shift colleagues and would be moving to different quarters. Two young women I knew at Island Hall offered me the spare bed in their room, one being LACW Cook ('Cookie'), who worked in the Drawing Office and looked unusual with her straight black bobbed hair with fringe cut to a point between strong eyebrows and dark eyes behind thick glasses. The other sharer of the room was Corporal Shorter, brown-haired and tall, from WAAF Admin. These two excellent WAFs were anxious to protect me from what they saw as flighty influences amongst the WAAF Sergeants I now worked with; girls who were lively and fun, but well brought up and certainly no moral threat! So I thanked my well-wishers politely and declined the offer. In fact practical considerations drew me to my ultimate living quarters in a Senior NCO's 'bunk', a little room next to the entrance of an Airwomens' barrack hut, situated in the large compound behind the Group HQ building. This was conveniently near my work, the Sergeants' Mess and the NAAFI and I was glad to have a break from doing the sometimes tedious walk from Godmanchester across the bridge to meals and work and back.

Before describing my life on duty in the Operations Room, I must mention one more personal encounter, not long after my Huntingdon posting, when I met LACW Jean Speirs, who would become a lifelong friend. She worked for Intelligence, in the Drawing Office section, along with some interesting people, including Cookie, all in the ranks, but as you might expect from the work they were doing, well educated and keen on the Arts. Jean, who worked as a textile designer just before the war, fitted this mould exactly, indeed she was uncompromising about standards, in cultural terms and generally. Here at last was someone with whom I could talk endlessly about books, Art and ideas and forget for a while the raw realities of our everyday living. She will come into my story again in a big way later on.

My WAAF Sergeant colleagues who, between us, covered the twentyfour hours' manning of the Ops Room PBX, were Betty Lennon, a dark-haired very attractive girl from Bradford, where her father owned a

mill, then Penny Schofield of the straight red hair and lovely tinkling laugh, from Norfolk and lastly Kathleen (Kath) who was small, thin and very Welsh. She married Bob, one of the GPO engineers. The Operations Room was on the first floor, large and light and stretching from front to back of the building. Seated at the little switchboard, the duty telephone operator had her back to the large front windows. Prominently placed on the right hand side of the room, as seen by us, was a dais with a grand wooden office chair, reserved for the Group Captain's use, with the best view of the Squadron Operations blackboard occupying the opposite wall. In the centre of the room stood a big map table. Around the perimeter were several work stations with telephones for the Duty Officers, the Group Captain had a scrambler telephone by his side. If the matter was secret he would say 'Scramble!' before going further.

Group Captain Hesketh was a fascinating person to observe. Of middle height, he had a great head, with sleeked-back dark hair on a surprisingly slight body with elegant legs and small feet. His craggy features could not be considered handsome, but in a woman, 'jolie-laide', perhaps? He would often sit on his chair in the Yoga position, smoking a cigarette in a slim cigarette holder, thinking. Imposing and forthright he certainly was, but unfailingly courteous to us.

After targets for the day had been decided, our AOC, who was now Air Vice-Marshal Lees, would join the Group Captain and the Group Meteorological Officer, a civilian, at the map table to discuss the weather prospects along the target route. Mr. Poulter was sandy-haired with a slight high colour and a deeply lined face, which, with his spectacles, gave him a lugubrious expression and he habitually wore a light brown suit with narrow light stripes. It was difficult for us ever to see the map from our position and it would have been covered when not being studied.

Following the AOC's retreat to his office, the duty officers were on their telephones or bustling about, with the quiet male Sergeant who was the Group Captain's clerical assistant coming and going with files and papers. Details of 2 Group squadrons and aircraft ordered for the day's operations were chalked up on the wall blackboard. When I first worked upstairs, probably in early spring 1942, two aircraft types were used, the familiar Blenheims and the new American Bostons, both light day bombers. From the fragmented picture picked up solely during duty hours, I gradually realised that our group formed the light bomber arm of Bomber Command, with a unique tactical role, quite separate from the function of the heavy bomber groups, but aiding them with diversionary operations. It made me proud to be associated in any way, however small, with such a special, highly individual force, sent to so many diverse targets, including

shipping, enemy airfields, railway goods yards, harbours, power stations and factories. Such variety gave extra interest, particularly the sound of place-names which remain with me today, such as Le Havre, Venlo, Schipol, Ostend, Eindhoven. Apart from meeting aircrew at local dances, we at Group were distanced from the squadrons, making the Operations Room somewhat impersonal, but with no less excitement generated when something big was going on.

The morning rush was reflected in increased PBX activity, with tea on everyone's personal agenda, made by me, of course. It was important never to forget that the officer whose place was nearest to me on the left had his own special large fine white bowl-shaped cup, with saucer, for his own exclusive use. Squadron Leader Douglas was white-haired, wore dark-framed glasses and was a Royal Flying Corps veteran from the first War. He could see and hear all that happened on the switchboard and I tended to be extra careful over everything I did when he was present, or he would put me right on some point of procedure.

Now ground-based for whatever reason, our duty officers were, in the main, solid fatherly figures, although a handful wore flying brevets and a more dashing air. All were pleasant to work with, save for one and he did not stay long. Occasionally an obvious flying type would be attached to Group for a time. One of these was Wing Commander Lerwell who must have come in the summer or he would not be having acute sunburn! He was tall and lanky, with fair straight hair and moustache and could not say his 'Rs'. He had a boisterous sense of humour in an 'upper class twit' mode, superficially speaking, but on closer acquaintance was friendly, likeable and more capable than he at first appeared.

With the emphasis on daylight raids early in my 2 Group experience, night shifts were mainly uneventful, leaving the watch to be kept in the Operations Room by the Duty Officer and the WAAF Sergeant telephonist. The Duty Intelligence Officer would visit us briefly from his Section next door, but would soon have to return to his office to be on call. Routine night duty could be made or marred by who happened to be sharing it. Most were considerate and polite and liked playing a two-person card game called Battle Patience, which helped to while away the hours. Sometimes the officer would have paperwork to do, whilst I kept myself going with solo versions of Patience and we would have the occasional discussion. Although a keen reader, I was afraid to lose myself in a book, as one had to remain visually semi-alert in order not to miss a winking light, signalling a caller on the line.

Unfortunately an officer arrived who turned out to be the second neurotic person I was to work with in

the Service, but worse this time as we were alone in the Ops Room for the whole of an eight-hour shift. He was a tense Flight Lieutenant suffering from a difficult love affair and apparently unable to deal with his emotional pain without punishing the nearest person unable to escape, in this case myself. It was impossible to pin-point anything he said in such a self-pitying and illogical fashion, but he threatened disciplinary measures if I so much as murmured a protest. Of course I was very shaken by this experience which was repeated to more or lesser extent over some weeks, when a less self-absorbed individual could have had a sympathetic listener! The situation was resolved when the officer disappeared from the Group scene a short time afterwards.

A middle-aged Intelligence Officer, attached to 2 Group for a while, was unusual and used to tell me about his work interviewing enemy airmen who came down on British soil. He had to report not only upon the living but also on those found dead at a crash site or separately, often a very grisly task. He seemed to cope with this terrible side by being flippant about it, perhaps the only way to continue in the job and remain sane.

The operation standing out most strongly from Huntingdon days was the famous Thousand Bomber raid on Cologne during the night of May 30/31 1942. It was a momentous morning duty as preparations got under way, with the exciting prospect of returning later that day on night shift, during which time the main heavy bomber force would become airborne. 2 Group aircraft, as usual, were to play a comparatively small but vital part, supporting the 'heavies' in a diversionary role, attacking enemy night fighter airfields. During this very night, but timed for the early hours, the operational debut was to take place of our newly introduced Mosquito aircraft, of future daring raids and fame. These would, however, be going the whole way to the main target.

There was an air of great secrecy in the Ops Room during the morning. Certainly something important was going on in Bomber Command. This only gradually became clearer to those never told anything, by picking up clues from what one was hearing and seeing. The relatively small size of our Group's effort was making no difference to the high sense of expectation and suspense which was building up. Knowing I was within earshot of confidential matters being discussed, the Group Captain said to me 'You did not hear that, Sergeant', to which I replied 'Of course not, sir'. It was the only occasion when he felt it necessary to emphasise secrecy normally taken for granted.

Evening duty in the Operations Room became more dramatic once we knew the main force bombers

would be taking off from airfields all over Britain, our own squadrons having departed some time ago on their separate tasks, except for the Mosquitoes. Everyone was listening intently, then, almost imperceptibly, a low hum began to reach us, growing to a distant roar which became louder and more insistent, swelling to fill the whole sky around us with an overwhelming, vibrating sound. The mightiest force yet assembled was massing towards the rendezvous before crossing the coast in the direction of enemy territory. It seemed a long time after the crescendo for the roar to subside and finally die away.

Other highlights were to follow whilst on duty, but much became routine and less memorable. The largest exclusively 2 Group mission comes to mind but with no detail. This took place in December 1942 and aimed to destroy Philips Radio factory at Eindhoven. We now flew five aircraft types on 2 Group operations, the previous three, Blenheims, Bostons and Mosquitoes, to which were added the Ventura and American Mitchell light bombers. It filtered through from the squadrons that there were considerable problems with the Venturas and that the Mitchell was definitely preferred.

Needless to say, the exploits of the Mosquitoes of 105 and 139 Squadrons, built of wood, with their amazing agility in risky low level attacks, often with very small numbers of aircraft, became a big focus of interest and attention. Wing Commander Peter Shand took on 139 Squadron and was often seen at Group, where he also had a WAAF girl friend who was about to become an officer. He was not tall, but every inch a dashing pilot, complete with luxuriant light-coloured moustache. The most memorable Mosquito sortie from my Operations Room experience, although a propaganda rather than a bombing mission, was the disruption of Goering's big Berlin speech in late January 1943. The Group Captain was listening intently on the enemy wavelength for the sound of Mosquito aircraft engines at the critical time of 1100 hours, but the wireless transmission went off the air and Goering had to postpone his speech. However the Group Captain seemed happy with the successful split-second timing of his aircrews. Although very familiar with much the Mosquito was doing in 1942/43, in the nature of things I never actually saw a Mosquito aircraft with my own eyes, then or since, to my regret.

Before my promotion and work move upstairs, I saw my friend Jean frequently and in February of 1942 we were drawn into a charmed circle at musical evenings given by Mrs. Lucy Boston in her ancient Manor House at Hemmingford Grey, a village about three miles east of Huntingdon. Mrs. Boston had bought the twelfth century house just before the war and restored it with the help of her architect son Peter. This was timely for Lucy Boston as she had wanted to use her house to the full and now she could do so for her war

work, bringing music and solace to the local RAF. These were mainly from RAF Wyton, but any RAF personnel who cared to come were welcome and this included WAAF and anyone from RAF Huntingdon.

Borrowing camp bicycles, we would set off, sometimes by moonlight, later on during light summer evenings. On arrival we parked our bicycles and ascended the outside stone steps leading up to the Music Room, the medieval Hall, with its great Norman windows showing the huge thickness of the walls. Below each was a window niche with a padded seat or large cushions. The capacious old fireplace formed another seating area and the heating came from a grand circular heater looking like stacked upside down handle-less copper frying pans, a Beatrice stove de luxe. Sundry easy chairs and a draped sofa supplemented the stone seating, soft light came from many candles in curiously shaped candlesticks placed on window ledges and dotted about the room, along with various Oriental objects. Our feet rested on folk art patterned rugs laid on the wooden boards, heavy curtains and hangings softening severe stone walls.

The dominant shape, set to one side of the room, was, however, a great horn rising from a handsome wind-up gramophone. On one side of this sat Mrs. Boston and on the other, her companion Mrs. Elizabeth Vellacott. Both ladies were formally dressed in long housecoats or leisure gowns and presented a quiet, dignified picture. People seated themselves and Mrs. Boston announced the opening music and subsequent movements or sections, needing, of course, frequent stops for winding up and turning or changing the record. The sense of concentration amongst all present was intense.

Lucy Boston was a mysterious presence, her heavy-lidded dark eyes with their inward brooding look and her air of calm stillness, were a soothing world away from our lives as presently lived. Sometimes she would ask one of us if we had a request, a little alarming to Jean and myself, culturally unformed as we felt ourselves to be at that time. 'Some Chopin, please' was all I could manage when my turn came, every single piece I might have remembered having fled my mind.

An interval for refreshments took place downstairs in the dining room, again lit by candlelight and the flickering glow from a blazing fire in a large Elizabethan fireplace. The highly polished table was laid with 'best' china and a generous spread of the best food obtainable at the time, with hot drinks, including coffee which was not Camp or Bev, all the work of an unseen hand.

We began to be aware of rumours that Lucy Boston was suspected of being a spy, not then knowing what the RAF authorities did, that she also offered a haven for local aircrew, who became temporary live-in guests in a part of her house, as a brief respite from the stress and danger of their flying operations night

after night. At the time one wanted to discount these whisperings, but thinking back I remember that most of our contingent came under the umbrella of Intelligence, albeit largely from the innocuous Drawing Office, including Jean Speirs and Cookie of Island Hall. However there were two Intelligence officers amongst the regulars at Hemingford Grey, one remembered as Margaret, a pleasant dark-haired fresh-complexioned young WAAF officer who always seemed a little vague. Then there was William Caldwell, studious looking but athletic at the same time, for he was in the hockey team.

Years later in an autobiography (*Memory in a House*, Bodley Head 1973), Lucy Boston revealed that the surveillance was real and completely undeserved. She was merely opening up her beloved house regularly throughout the war for the benefit of her RAF neighbours. In the 1950s Mrs. Boston became a children's author, basing most of her stories on her house and garden, growing old English roses and in later years doing patchworks which became the subject of a book by her daughter-in-law Diana Boston (Colt Books, Cambridge 1995).

A sequel to my story occurred in 1990 when Lucy Boston died at the age of ninetyeight. On behalf of Jean and myself I wrote to Peter Boston expressing our gratitude for all his mother did for so many of us at an extraordinary time in our lives and wishing we had done this in her lifetime. He kindly invited us to the memorial service at Hemingford Abbots church in October. Jean was very frail by then, but on that very warm day she managed to travel from Hertfordshire to Cambridge by coach, which was so late we barely succeeded in finding seats at the back of the church by the time we arrived. Afterwards everyone there was invited to the old house at Hemingford Grey for refreshments and I was able to take Peter my husband up to the Music Room, the contents seemingly unchanged, even to the curious candlesticks and the Oriental objects! The dining room, too, was immediately recognisable and Peter Boston was kind enough to spare time from his guests, to put out for me the old visitors' books we used to be asked to sign whenever we attended a Lucy Boston evening. Looking through the 1942 book I found a signature of mine under July, but could not see more as I was concerned about Jean elsewhere in the house, for she walked with some difficulty. The Old Manor House continues in its hospitable tradition to this day and is open to visitors by appointment.

Once promoted and working upstairs, I saw Jean less around the camp now we had our meals in different places, although we could meet in the NAAFI and talk. Sometime during the second half of 1942 Jean was posted to RAF Benson and although we corresponded, we did not meet again until after the war,

when I was getting married and invited Jean to the wedding. Alas, she was now in hospital, suffering from TB and awaiting an operation to remove a lung. The diagnosis was made too late, by a matter of a few days, to qualify her for a War Office Disability Pension, despite the efforts of the British Legion in supporting her case.

One result of working in the Ops Room was that we were drawn into various activities, such as forming a carol-singing group coached by Bill Caldwell from Intelligence and Mrs. Boston's evenings. He introduced us to some interesting carols beyond the old favourites, 'the Boar's Head' with its Latin refrain and 'Lully, Lullay' come to mind. We sang outside people's houses and in a hospital ward, possibly also in an old people's home. Bill was keen on the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at Kings College Chapel, Cambridge, where I believe he was up at the University years earlier.

Some of us were asked to join the mixed hockey team, which included Bill, but I found I was horribly unfit, although I did improve my stamina through practice. The men tried to persuade me to play goalkeeper, which I resisted at first because of the Amazonian implications in a mixed team. However, as I loved the game, I swallowed my pride to do as asked.

We WAAF Sergeants loved Cambridge, the most attractive place one could imagine in which to spend an off-duty day. We would often hitch-hike the fourteen miles or so, to wander its delightful ways, aware of those lovely buildings, see a few shops and sample one of the many nice tea shops before returning to camp. On a more cosmetic note, our colleague Penny discovered a very good hairdressing salon in the town and had her straight red hair cut and permed to form little curls all over her head. The style was named a 'bubble cut' and looked so attractive that Betty had her hair done too, followed likewise by myself shortly after. It was also a practical look with uniform as it was impossible to offend Admin by having one's hair over the collar at the back!

It was at Huntingdon that I had my first experience of what it was like to be ill in the Service, when I developed gastro-enteritis, trying at first to manage my night shift on unsuitable sardine sandwiches, which made things worse. Even more difficult was the unsympathetic attitude of the Squadron Leader Signals, who happened to be in the Operations Room at the time. He was a red-haired, cold-mannered man who obviously thought I was making a fuss or even malingering. Next day a summoned medical orderly sent me to report sick to the MO, who was kindness itself and got me admitted to the local hospital, where I was well looked after on bread-and-butter and tea. None of my colleagues visited me, but my kindly Island

Hall friends came to cheer me.

Changes were happening in 2 Group and as usual one had to pick up a sense of something in the air or observe visitations from unexplained new people and the arrival of a new AOC by the beginning of 1943. Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac was now in charge of 2 Group and is remembered with a high colour and a toothbrush moustache. One day he brought a distinguished visitor to the Operations Room, Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who was wearing a dark blue uniform with many gold rings on his sleeve. Mr. Poulter joined them for an earnest discussion at the map table. The Prince had an occasional high-pitched laugh, looked splendid and, of course, as royal as you would expect. This meeting may not have been unconnected with the stirrings already noticed at 2 Group, for it was gradually entering the general consciousness that a new Force was being formed, to be known as Second TAF (Tactical Air Force). We could not know then, but our time at Castle Hill House would now be getting short and that after the end of May we would not be there.

Before this came about, all unaware, I took nine days leave to travel around for a change, instead of going home. My first stay was at Preston, Lancashire, where a favourite aunt now lived. Before the war she had worked as a child psychiatric social worker, the first in this country, so I was told by my mother. Her work had been centred on Dr. Immanuel Miller's Clinic at the London Jewish Hospital in the East End. Now her job was to visit evacuees in various parts of Lancashire in her little car. She kindly took me along on some of her trips, the most memorable being via the wild, lonely and beautiful road through the Trough of Bowland. We also visited Southport and Lancaster. The latter, a town known for its long history, seemed held fast in the early years of the twentieth century, with little old women going about entirely in black, even to their headscarves, although I cannot remember seeing anyone wearing clogs. We travelled through bleak Nelson and Colne, known as 'The Moscow of the North' according to my aunt Beatrice Robinson.

Next I journeyed east to Boston Spa, in the West Riding of Yorkshire and pronounced 'Spaw' by my family, as with the Spaw in Scarborough, where we have links. Here I stayed with my paternal grandmother, now a widow, living with a housekeeper-companion in a small cottage with a little garden. She seemed old-fashioned in style and dress, but had been a lively, comparatively carefree young Victorian girl, winning many prizes at Scarborough School of Art and getting her watercolour paintings accepted by the Royal Academy for their Summer Exhibition. My grandfather had been obliged to resign his living at Clifford, a village a few miles away, through ill-health. It must have been a difficult and

restricting life with little money and a resident invalid. That special time with my grandmother ended when I caught the bus for North Allerton station and the London train.

Arriving finally in Hampstead, I came to the large private hotel kept by my great-aunt and uncle Swain, who had worked in Burma and Canada as a young man. Here I met the permanent residents at dinner each evening, fascinatingly diverse characters in a small world you might easily find in an Agatha Christie novel. My cousin, very handsome in his Army Officer's uniform, visited every evening, was a cruel tease, but was good natured at heart. He would be unlikely to see action as he was in the business of victualling the Army, having worked for Walls Meat Division in civilian life.

Returning to Huntingdon on the thirteenth of May, I was once more back to the usual routine until the day of the great move took place at the end of the month. Everyone belonging to 2 Group had to go, whether remaining with the Group or not. As my WAAF colleagues were remaining together, this softened any strangeness we were to face. Almost nothing of this huge exodus remains in my mind, save for a hazy impression of a fleet of coaches setting out for who knew where? This turned out to be RAF Bylaugh Hall, Norfolk, the setting for the second phase of my life with 2 Group.

2. A Few Months in the Country

The relocation of 2 Group to Norfolk changed the pattern and flavour of our lives in many ways. Bylaugh Hall, much larger than Castle hill House, Huntingdon, was a grand Victorian mansion built in Elizabethan style, standing in striking isolation amid quiet countryside. Situated some six miles north-east of East Dereham, a small market town, the house faced south and overlooked the river Wensum. Although well set back, Bylaugh Hall (pronounced 'Beelah Hall') was easily visible from the road, on the other side of which stood the little estate church, next to the river.

The WAAF living quarters were huddled but otherwise unremembered, yet the Sergeants' Mess, a cheerful-looking Nissen hut, remains clear, pictured in its grassy setting. The Mess was approached from a higher level, down steps cut in a grassy bank. The RAF NCOs, with whom we were to share our mealtimes, were not unanimous in their welcome, particularly the Warrant Officer, who had obviously seen many years' service as a Regular. Understandably he could view us as a considerable threat to his preferred male world.

Thus began the brief battle of the tea cosy, acquired by a WAAF member as a sensible teatime

accessory. After the first day this was nowhere to be found, until someone noticed it had been flung aloft to rest on one of the hinged window blackout boards, which formed a shelf when hooked up to the ceiling during daylight. We retrieved the cosy and used it as before, but once more it went missing; and so it went on for some time until both sides tired of the game. Long after leaving Norfolk, I came across the WO in London. Perhaps now I was a person, not a threat, he was charming and pleasant to me and we chatted for a while. Eventually we seemed to win a greater degree of acceptance among the men and it was easier to relax and enjoy the undoubted attractions of clean white tablecloths, flowers on each table and good food, the best ever encountered throughout my service career. The latter was presented with flair and served cheerfully by our waitress, a thin dark Welsh young woman always in swift motion, often entertaining us with her witty observations. Marvellous tarts, pies and salads come to mind, perhaps using estate produce from the old kitchen garden and orchards, but without confirmation this may be fanciful.

Construction workers were still employed on work for the RAF on the estate and presumably also for the moment living there in temporary accommodation. A large hatted building was used as a cinema for their entertainment in the evenings and a bar was also provided at one end of the room. Station personnel were also allowed in, for in this quiet country place little could be offered for leisure except the local pub. We welcomed a chance to see films within camp, although the place was strictly basic, with wafting beer smells and never enough seats for the capacity crowd. People would perch on cupboards or window ledges, the atmosphere hot, stuffy and smoke-filled but also friendly and good-humoured.

The Operations Room at Bylaugh Hall occupied a large ground floor room, but, alas, the PBX was placed in a small ante-room, thus cutting off the operators from seeing or hearing much of what went on in the main room. Sitting at the switchboard we could achieve only a slot view of a small section only of the duty officers at their tables set out in front of the Ops Room windows. Those officers were of a higher rank than had been usual at Huntingdon, Squadron Leaders instead of Flying Officers and Flight Lieutenants. These were in the main new to us, one being the then well-known England cricketer Bill Edrich. Bill Hesketh was still the Group Captain, but many Huntingdon faces were missing. The mysterious changes in 2 Group I put down solely to the formation of Second TAF, as I was then ignorant of our being now under Fighter, not Bomber Command, although with a light bomber force as before. This would have made clear the appearance of new personnel with more of a 'flying type' look, in the Ops Room.

One officer who did move with us was unfortunately someone the Group Captain seemed to find intensely irritating. This same man, seeming then middle aged, kindly but a little fussy, appeared to take a liking to me in a fatherly sort of way, becoming a kind of self-appointed guardian of my welfare, when our duties coincided. Probably over Christmas 1943, at the only season when a large number of parties would be organised, he became concerned that I was going to too many of these, was learning an unbalanced way of life and might come to grief. Perhaps he had lost a daughter or longed for one he never had, on whom to lavish attention, but I never knew.

We had settled into our new routine for some time, when three of us WAAF Sergeants were offered a chance to remuster to Clerk SD (Special Duties) Watchkeeper, which would involve working in the Operations Room of a Bomber Command Station. Betty Lennon, Penny Schofield and I began informal part-time training with a Squadron Leader from Intelligence, learning about routine procedures for setting up bombing operations. We would be taking on much greater responsibilities than before, to become the information channel through which instructions from Group HQ would reach the various station sections involved in the preparations on the ground. Having arrived at Bylaugh Hall to start work there at the beginning of June 1943, not many months would lie ahead before we were trained and ready for our new postings to bomber stations. Meanwhile we proceeded with the tuition whilst maintaining our normal shift pattern.

When our trade test came up, this too was informal, with verbal questions only. The senior officer who tested us did not seem to think we were particularly good candidates, although he passed us, which was a relief. In hindsight, I feel we were articulate and intelligent, or we would not have been picked out for our present work, but there may have been serious shortcomings in such an unstructured training system. This left us without adequate means to check against common sense born of first-hand experience. Perhaps actually to go up in an aircraft, or to be shown the armoury with its varied weights, sizes and types of bombload and to visit a photography section and understand the need for various photoflashes according to the heights ordered for an operation - these would have been an enlightening preparation for the job. All, however, was to remain theory when we came to take up our new work.

Life in general was now proving less interesting than in Huntingdon and I felt ready to leave 2 Group when the awaited posting came through. In this interim period we made the most of our leisure time, going to East Dereham or, further afield, Norwich, which I found an interesting city, where I enjoyed an operetta

one evening, starring the then well-known tenor Richard Tauber, who sang 'My Heart and I' in a production whose name escapes me.

The small estate church, mentioned earlier, was unused, but was sound and chiefly needed thorough cleaning and tidying to make it fit for holding services again. A small team of WAAFs, including Betty, Penny and myself, set to work and gradually restored the church as nearly as possible to its original cared-for look and services began to be held there once more. My own faith slept during most of the war, but not too soundly. At Uxbridge I had definitely been jealous of my twin sisters, confirmed as a matter of course via their school, whereas I had missed my chance in our home parish through illness at the crucial time. At Huntingdon I had read the lesson at a church parade, Isaiah chapter six, as a volunteer. Padres did not appear to figure upon the WAAF scene to my knowledge. Was there any provision officially made for us?

Since arriving in East Anglia we had become aware that Hitler might yet try an airborne invasion, although this may have been based on little more than a rumour. Eastern counties would clearly become a target and one did sometimes cast nervous glances at the sky, half-expecting enemy parachutes to appear, especially when gloom or bad news allowed the thought.

Precisely when in 1944 my posting came through is forgotten, but it was before March, when I was sent on a course from my new station. Betty and I were to report to the Bomber Command station at 63 Base RCAF Leeming. Penny was not to go with us this time.

IV RCAF Leeming 63 Base - Skipton RCAF - Leeming, 1944 to October 1945

1. An Operational Station at Last

Leeming airfield in the Vale of York, as busy now in its peace-time role as it was then, lies alongside the A1(T), formerly the Great North Road, south of its junction with the A684 at Leeming Bar. Not long before the outbreak of war, Leeming had been laid out with a large orderly complex of permanent buildings, roads and paths on the south east side.

The airfield and indeed the whole camp in 1944 appeared vast and open under a wide sky. Distances were daunting to contemplate after former closeness of workplace to Mess and living quarters. Our WAAF huts and Mess were within the Station perimeter but in a separate grassy compound, some way from the

central buildings, with a long walk to the gate of the camp along the internal road. A small Guard hut at our gate sheltered the duty Admin personnel who checked the girls out and more thoroughly, in at night, the latest deadline being 2359 hours. From here a wide tarmac path led to a row of wooden barrack huts and concrete ablution blocks, each Senior NCO being in charge of a hut, with the usual little room to herself by the entrance. This gave welcome privacy and adequate storage for belongings, even to a bookshelf.

My little collection was easily accommodated, as we had to take care not to collect more heavy items than we could carry if posted at short notice. However honesty leads me to confess that I was too busy living and frequently much too tired to concentrate on my core books, although I liked them being there. My mother had supplied me with Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Boswell's *Life of Dr Samuel Johnson*, a Victorian edition with tiny close print, an elderly cousin gave me a volume of Eric Gill's writings, to which I added the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, *Poems of Today* (Book 1) and *Grass of Parnassus*. At the other extreme we all read the low-life novels of James Hadley Chase, the most well-known of which was *No Orchids For Miss Blandish*, essential if we were to be accepted as sophisticated and unshockable. For more moderate escapism I followed my parents' passion for detective novels, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Austin Freeman from my father's era and sundry tales of adventure.

The WAAF Sergeants' Mess was a Nissen hut joined on to the Airwomen's Mess, which stood at the end of the wide path from the WAAF compound gate. Our mess was both a dining and a common room, with basket chairs round the perimeter and a gap for the excellent black stove where we boiled the kettle for tea and made countless slices of toast. It was a pleasant room which would become a place of memories. Our waitress, Marjorie, a plump fair-haired Yorkshire girl, had our interests at heart. We would ask her what the pudding was to be, just to see her wrinkle up her nose disapprovingly and reply 'Ee, it's ever so claggy, Sarge!'.

The path alongside the edge of the grassy area had enough width to allow a small WAAF Inspection Parade to take place at regular intervals. Here the duty Senior NCO lined up the girls ready for the inspecting officer. It was not, I believe, until after I had attended a Senior NCOs' WAAF Admin Course at Wilmslow in March 1944, that I took this parade myself. After that very stiff refresher course and endless hours practising what we were going to preach, I quite amazed everyone, including myself, in doing rather well. Non-Admin NCOs were considered somewhat hopeless on the discipline front and I felt I had

improved our collective reputation.

On one occasion I was threatened with being put on a charge by an inspecting officer with a temperamental reputation. Safe, as I thought, in having arranged a stand-in, I had gone off camp, but my substitute did not turn up for the parade as promised. The officer was cross, but grudgingly forgave me after I had apologised and explained. Another and more hilarious incident occurred, not at Leeming but probably at Huntingdon, when I first experienced being an inspecting officer's Sergeant and was somewhat nervous. The officer was a very young Assistant Section Officer in Cyphers, about nineteen years old, with a lively and unconventional personality. When it came to the actual inspection of the lines of airwomen standing to attention, she made me walk in front instead of behind her. 'Go on, Cynthia' she said, 'Carry on!', so the sergeant inspected followed by the officer! At least suppressed laughter banished nerves.

My RAF Wilmstow Senior NCO's Administrative Course gave me a sharp reminder that I had quite happily become physically slack. Drill and more drill was the chief activity remembered, with the first proud briskness of recruit training days long gone, to be replaced by a less starry-eyed view, modified by several years of varied experiences. The WAAF drill NCO, Flight Sergeant Larsson, was sharp and to the point. 'Wet fish, Barry!' she would shout, referring to my limp hands and feeble arms, clearly not good enough to set any example to the airwomen when I returned to my home camp. On the back of the official photograph taken at the end of the course, I wrote a list of the participants' names, including that of Sgt. Molly Parrish, a vigorous and amusing Cockney. She gave by far the best five-minute talk, on 'How to Iron a Shirt' (before the war she had worked as a laundress). Also enjoyable was a description of Dublin by Sgt. June Radcliffe in her soft Irish voice. Amongst other things, I now knew that Dublin letter-boxes were green. My own effort was unlikely to awaken breathless interest, but was at least a sincere attempt to convey the enthusiasm of my early teens for the abundant birdlife we would observe in the garden and on the Common (dug up, alas, for Dig for Victory). Nightingales were so numerous they stopped us from sleeping and their song became demoted from Keats' swooning verses to a 'row'. The family ornithology books were commandeered for my bedroom and I filled many notebooks.

At Leeming my watchkeeper colleagues were Betty Lennon who came with me from 2 Group, Connie Wahlstrand from Middlesborough, with ash blonde hair and unfathomable light blue eyes behind her glasses and, a little later, Sylvia, who had arrived to join the team. Our workplace, the Operations Room,

was upstairs in one of the main blocks, next door to the Intelligence Section, with its door to the right of ours. The facing wall of these two rooms bore two striking posters, each of which showed a glamorous Varga girl reclining in a voluptuous pose. The caption beneath one of these images showed the initials SEMO and under the other, MOPA, respectively for Self Evident Military Objective and Military Objective Previously Attacked. These pin-up American images in the Hollywood mode of the time, were immensely popular amongst servicemen, especially the Americans, during the war. They were beautifully painted in a highly finished style which gave their sexy looks an ambiguous quality of surface good taste.

Inside the Operations Room the duty watchkeeper sat, for a change, with her face to the windows, at a table with telephones, which were duplicated down the room for the officers. On the wall opposite was a large map of the European theatre of war and on the far end wall the squadron blackboards showed chalked-up lists of each squadron's aircraft and crews to fly with them for that night's bombing mission. Midway down the length of the room the Station Tannoy broadcasting system was set up on a table. One of our duties was to announce black-out time to the whole camp, trying not to notice, or rise to, occasional teasing from officers trying to put one off by making silly faces or doing a gorilla act.

The watchkeeper's most important task at Leeming was to take down verbal instructions from 6 Group (RCAF) Headquarters and to pass these on swiftly and accurately to the appropriate officers and sections involved with the operation ordered for the day. More often than not, within an hour or so of coming on shift at 0830, Group would come through with a target code name, which would not be passed on by telephone. Instead, the first to be alerted was the station CO, the Group Captain, with the words 'We have a target, sir'. He would come hurrying over with his loose, loping gait and intent expression. The Intelligence officer would have been summoned from next door and other interested officers followed, including the Wing Commander COs of our two squadrons, with flight commanders or individual pilots visiting through the morning.

Our squadrons were 427 (Lion) RCAF and 429 (Bison) RCAF, both flying Halifaxes at that time, although early in 1945 they would both change over to Lancasters for the remaining months of hostilities in Europe. Returning to procedures in the Ops Room, one became extremely busy taking down detailed instructions from Group, the often intricately varied bombload to relay to the Armoury, photoflash heights to Photography, briefing meal time to Catering and so on. A list would be typed up and distributed, with

each aircraft's letter and names of the whole crew to fly with it. The flashing beacon codes of the day would have been checked by the night duty watchkeeper and were also typed, but on rice paper, for obvious reasons and known as 'flimsies', used as a vital navigation aid, protected in transparent perspex holders.

When the target route came through it was our job to plot it on the wall map, using red tape and large flat-headed pins (white with a red rim, in my memory) to show the legs of the route, starting with the exit from the English coast, thence to the target and back, finally pulling the security curtain across. The telephoned instructions were of course confirmed a little later, via the teleprinter, on the 'B' form. Nearer the end of the war I salvaged one of these as a souvenir, but developed qualms after discharge, my papers informing me that the National Emergency was not yet over and we could be recalled. Was it a treasonable act to retain a secret document, I wondered? Eventually I destroyed my memento and regretted it ever since.

Morning duty was followed by a free afternoon and a return at 1900 for night duty until 0830 the next day. This could seem quite a heavy stint over twenty four hours, but as usual we got used to it. Moreover as remembered from Huntingdon, it could be doubly interesting being involved in the morning preparations for a bombing mission and later to cover evening take-off and night return of the aircraft, with all that could happen in between.

One memorable morning in June, on the second day of the Normandy landings, during, or just after confinement to camp for all personnel, a 429 Halifax skipper came into the Ops Room. His name was Squadron Leader Anderson, whom I remember as a heavily built man, somewhat older than his fellow pilots. Coming back for the night shift, I was able to follow at least parts of the gruelling ordeal he and his crew would suffer that night. There were many details I never knew until coming across two separate accounts recently (in *Failed to Return* by Bill Norman and *Action Station: Series No. 4*). All I could learn at that time came via messages over the telephone from Group through me or the duty officers. We knew the Halifax had been hit before reaching the target and that the crew had been ordered to bale out over France. Three did so, but the rest stayed with Anderson, to look after him and attempt to bring the aircraft back.

Once over English soil it was found impossible for the remaining crew to do anything for the pilot, except to throw him out as a last resort, having ensured his parachute would open and then to bale out

themselves. Squadron Leader Anderson came down near RAF Benson, south east of Oxford, for I recall the message coming through. Sadly, despite the best efforts of his devoted remaining crew, he did not survive his injuries.

When nothing had been laid on for our squadrons, the duty watchkeeper was qualified to keep the watch on her own. Should any emergency arise, such as an aircraft from another airfield being in trouble and needing to land at our Base, it would be easy to summon help very quickly. There were always official jobs to do, such as amending secret documents, but I always managed to do plenty of knitting or to take advantage of the lack of distractions to write long letters home - literally 'long' when I ran out of writing paper and resorted to a spare roll of teleprinter paper with some yards left on it.

In my few surviving letters from this time, I have to face the reality of the occasional jocular spelling and jokey style I adopted, perhaps as cover-up for extreme inner shyness and to enable me to keep going in my service life which I was enjoying so much. Maybe delightful Edward Lear himself, who did a similar sort of dotty thing in his letters, had just a little echo of the same going on within, but then his special talent justified what emerged from it!

Most of the remaining letters to and from my family (these must have been numerous, as I have always enjoyed corresponding) were probably destroyed in a severe loft fire at my parents' house in Brighton, where they moved for my mother's health very soon after the war. Gone, too, were the dozens of First World War 'Spheres' and copies of 'The Illustrated London News' I had pored over for many hours pre-war. These had absorbed and fascinated me, especially as my mother had many times made mention of how life was during 1914-18, but my father, never.

The work I was now doing I recognised as being the most interesting and fulfilling of my WAAF career to date. There was such satisfaction in having responsibility in secret matters, working with those in direct touch with the squadrons and concerned with operational organisation on the base, but most of all, meeting the aircrew boys themselves and adding them to our circle in the WAAF Sergeants' Mess. No more did I hanker after becoming a commissioned officer; in fact I never even thought of it. The present was already all I could wish for, with a full social life and marvellous friends. Some months later a senior WAAF officer on an official visit saw me at work and remarked 'We can't offer you a commission on a plate, can we, Sergeant? You all love what you do so much.'

Our off-duty life on this huge, apparently isolated Bomber Station, was surprisingly varied and full,

divided as it was between the Canadian YMCA Club (Canada House), on the main camp and our WAAF Sergeants' Mess in the WAAF compound. The 'Y', as the club was known, was a friendly place, selling transatlantic desirable items such as O'Henry chocolate bars and Sweet Caporal cigarettes. Visiting entertainments came, one being The Canadian Navy Show, mentioned in one of my letters. Regular dances took place, with jive and jitterbug predominating over traditional ballroom styles. The more extreme forms in jitterbug were not allowed, such as men throwing the girls over their shoulders, considered too dangerous on a crowded floor.

Everyone smoked then, in total ignorance of any threat to health. By today's standards it was excessive, but we naturally took up our ration of cigarettes (Players, with the sailor on the front of the packet, but also a proportion had to be in lowly Woodbines) and of chocolate. The latter came in three ply, a middle layer of milk chocolate sandwiched between two of darker plain layers. When we wanted superior cigarettes, the girls would go out and buy Balkan Sobranies, which represented the height of sophistication, even more so if smoked in a cigarette holder, long if possible, or with an ejector mechanism at the very least. It was one way of asserting one's individuality in a uniformed world.

The hostess who ran the 'Y' was our popular Esther of the Lana Turner figure and vivacious, generous personality. I have a photograph of her at a Leeming wedding in 1944, wearing a little pill-box hat with her smart suit, which may have been specific to her job. Within our Mess, back in the WAAF camp, we entertained groups of friends, aircrew and others, from one or two dropping in for tea and a chat or calling to give one of us a lift to her duty in a distant workplace, to more organised get-togethers. Of course many of the girls had regular boyfriends on camp, but even those who did not were treated as part of the scene, eventually almost as extended family, especially, perhaps, as the boys were living thousands of miles from their own kin. The lads would introduce other members of their crew, providing us with a widening circle, although some inevitably would be sent elsewhere, or, sadly, go missing. Screening parties were given from time to time for aircrews who had finished their current tour of bombing operations.

In high summer 1944 we got to know a whole crew, some of whom went out with our girls. They were the most delightful set of people you could imagine, in particular the three youngest-looking boys, Al, Casey and Mac who were like brothers. Betty Lennon became very attached to Al but would invite all three to her Bradford home for a weekend leave. After getting to know these boys for a while, we were not

surprised to learn that 'our precious crew' (so described in one of my letters), had volunteered for the Pathfinder Force (PFF). There was a setback when their bomb-aimer refused to go with them and the crew had to wait around, kicking their heels at their new station for some time before a replacement was found. The Station Commander of my early months at Leeming had now gone to PFF himself, as the CO of the sole RCAF squadron of that Force, a letter of mine stating that squadron commanders in PFF were Group Captains, not Wing Commanders as everywhere else.

Our concern for the crew was heightened by our awareness of the extra dangers and stress they could be facing in their new target-marking role. Lou Neilly, a skipper we had known well when he was flying from Leeming, had preceded our crew at PFF and now promised to let us know if anything happened to them. That day came all too soon, when Lou did indeed have to fly up to Leeming to tell us in person that our crew was missing, after a PFF mission flown from Gransden Lodge 405 (Vancouver) Squadron RCAF. We in the WAAF Sergeants' Mess were devastated, especially Betty, looking grey-faced and Jo Jowett, who had been friendly with Casey. Arleen, the Catering Sergeant in charge of the Airwomen's Mess, herself Canadian and engaged to an RCAF officer, was deeply upset. As the days went by with no news (our ex-CO, now with the RCAF PFF squadron himself, knew of our friendship with this crew and had promised to let us know immediately if anything became known), we all felt in our hearts that we would not see the boys again. It is impossible to pin-point the exact date in December 1944 when this happened, as it could not be mentioned in a letter for security reasons and memory cannot supply it.

The bomb-aimer who would not go with his crew to PFF was occasionally seen around the camp afterwards with a different, strained look. He was older than most of his former crew and we knew nothing of his home background, as often the case in those times, which is all that fairly can be said.

Our catering colleague Arleen would sometimes cook for us exclusively on special occasions, always in shirtsleeves and wearing her service cap. At Halloween she made some marvellous pumpkin pie. We hollowed out turnips for grinning candle-lit lanterns to place in the Mess porch (to avoid contravening blackout regulations). Arleen was a delightful young woman with a strong character and a lovely smile in a freckled face, which would crease up until her eyes almost disappeared. She was engaged to a thoughtful RCAF officer named Alex Stockdale, stationed elsewhere, although visiting as often as he could. They married after the war.

Our on-camp leisure activities were punctuated by an occasional day out in York or Leeds, reachable

by train, or my favourite place, Harrogate, needing a change of bus, but worth it for the shops and tea in Standings department store. To round off the trip, especially in cold weather, one would see a (quite often) forgettable film before starting back to camp, changing buses at Ripon. In winter one would be hit by the extreme bleakness of the long walk from the bus stop to the camp and would not look forward to the shuddering dash to the ablution block before huddling under inadequate blankets with a hot water bottle, if lucky with water more than just warm.

For simple but satisfying meals out we needed to go no further than 'Jock's', a short walk up the road from the main gate to the camp. Jock and his wife, then in late middle age, had set up a 'caff' in a small shed-like building with a corrugated iron roof. The two of them dispensed tea, baked beans on toast, bacon, sausages, tomatoes and fried eggs, all piping hot, with friendly, good-humoured efficiency. The men were always given two eggs and the girls one each, but this was accepted and no one seemed in the least unhappy with the discrepancy. The place was always crammed with service people. In North Allerton, some nine miles from camp, where our nearest mainline station was situated, the Golden Lion was good for dinners if you wanted something grander. There were also popular local pubs at Bedale and Exelby, where the Green Dragon comes to mind as being cosy and pleasant. On one occasion some of us went to a Scottish dinner-dance, dressed in our uniform, of course, making me feel unfeminine and clumsy in lisle stockings and flat lace-up shoes, particularly as Scottish dances are notoriously hearty and strenuous! However we had plenty of dances and a good time.

Always at the heart of things was our Mess, a space seeming small when all our friends were there, making our informal parties all the more warm and home-like. Wild or drunken behaviour was unthinkable there, just occasional pleasant madness, as in youthful families, but with an edge, since most of our guests were from Canada, so far away, but here at Leeming, faced with almost nightly fear and danger. We usually ended up sitting on the floor making toast and drinking tea, just in the light from the fire in the iron stove, playing favourite gramophone records of the time. Almost all the songs were dance tunes, giving them extra appeal. 'Begin the Beguine', 'Amor, Amor, Amor', 'Chattanooga Chu-Chu', 'Mares Eat Oats and Does Eat Oats' and 'Amapola', sung by Anne Shelton, were just a few. One bespectacled officer, thin and studious-looking and very nice, was known as 'Uncle Cleo' because of his favourite reclining position, propped up on one elbow, reminding us of Cleopatra.

The duty WAAF officer would visit us during her rounds of the WAAF camp, sometimes when we were

quite obviously going on far later than normally allowed. She tolerantly turned a half-blind eye and perhaps would have liked to join us if she could. This, however, was our private domain. It could be very different when we were attending the occasional and much larger men's RCAF Sergeants' Mess parties, which were noisy, with an overwhelming beer smell and the sight of occasional dropped half-eaten sandwiches on the floor, amongst accidental beer spills. The masculine sing-songs round the piano, later in the evening, deteriorated, as usual and were not for me, nor for most of the girls, but a few seemed not to mind and would stay on for an increasingly dirty repertoire.

One of the things I found so new when first at Leeming was the easy informality, after several years in a more formal environment at RAF HQs. At least some relaxation was to be expected at an Operational Base, but the reality exceeded expectations, probably due to the outgoing nature of our Canadians, the few English personnel happy to go along with a more relaxed culture. The officers, of whatever rank, short of the Group Captain, would call us NCOs by our Christian names ('first names' had not yet entered the general vocabulary). Always present, however, was the underlying service discipline in full measure when required.

Indeed, I witnessed a harsh disciplinary event whilst at Leeming. A major station parade was mounted on the very large Parade Ground at the Base, for a stripping ceremony. It was a painful sight. Before the assembled personnel (those not on vital duties) stood an RCAF Senior NCO, capless, faced by disciplinary Officers. The charge of which he had been found guilty was read out, an Officer marched towards the offending NCO, ceremonially stripped his chevrons from his sleeves and had him marched off in disgrace. Being placed some way back, I could not make out the charge clearly, but the impact of the whole scene shook me severely and I hoped never to repeat the experience.

One of our aircrew friends had taken part in the 'friendly fire' Falaise Gap bombing fiasco in August 1944. He was demoted from Squadron Leader down one rank to Flight Lieutenant. This was also shocking but I did not see it happen. Years later I understood there had been a muddle over smoke signals, not the fault of the aircrews on the mission.

A station parade of a more enjoyable kind took place in the presence of the teenage Princess Elizabeth, wearing her ATS uniform, when she came to Leeming to inspect us. A vague memory remains of her being accompanied by her father, King George VI or even by another member of the Royal family. We were, I think, concentrating strongly on the person of the Princess, in uniform as we WAAFs were,

young as we also were. It was a very special day for us all.

Late in 1944, but before our Group Captain went to PFF, there came a day when the watchkeepers were moved from the Operations Room, for reasons unknown, to work in the Flying Control building. Our new workplace was upstairs, behind the Control Room proper, but with an open hatchway between the two rooms. We were now on the edge of the airfield itself and could see through the hatch and onward via the large Control Room windows to the great open space beyond. Although we were to sit with our backs to the hatch, we could quickly swivel round to hand a message through it without getting up. Our own side windows gave us a more cramped view of the airfield, but we now much nearer the action, as we could both see and hear the aircraft marshalling for take-off, compared with the more secluded Operations Room.

This was some compensation for leaving behind much of the secret side of our work, including the initial preparations for bombing missions. Presumably personnel from Intelligence were now passing information to Group and putting up the target route on the wall map, with much else which had been our exclusive domain. In our new situation we would see officers from Ops only if they visited Flying Control, as the Station CO always did at take-off time. The people we now saw most frequently were the duty Flying Control officers, the WAAF RT operators and sundry very young-looking ground staff boys working as clerks.

Occasionally an ATA pilot in dark blue uniform would report to Control, having delivered yet another Halifax from the factory. Once I saw Jim Mollison there, a familiar figure from 1930s newspaper photographs after breaking yet another air record. Briefly inspired by all I was seeing, I applied to join the ATA but did not even pass the first hurdle, the medical. The MO found neither my sight nor hearing passed the rigorous test. My pride suffered a sharp blow, but I was enjoying everything at Leeming, so, although disappointed I spent little time in regrets. A brief unofficial cross-country 'flip' in a Halifax a little later made some amends.

My watchkeeping role was admittedly less fulfilling than before, but at the same time there was much fresh interest stemming from our proximity to Flying Control and its activities. We could hear the RT operator talking down the aircraft as they returned from their missions, realising for the first time the frustration of the pilots as they joined the circuit and queued for their turn to land, their longing for that moment must have made minutes seem like hours, after what could have been an exhausting, difficult and dangerous journey. One exasperated Canadian voice could be heard exclaiming bitterly, 'Hey, that turkey

cut me out in the circuit!"

My greatest excitement on night shift in the Control Tower stands out clearly to this day. It was a night of exceptionally high wind, remembered as gusting to ninety miles per hour with terrifying force. A bombing mission had been mounted and take-off time was getting near. The Halifaxes were already marshalled around the perimeter, with full bombload and engines revved up and ready to go, their huge looming shapes just discernible beyond the far windows. The Group Captain, our familiar CO of the loping gait and athletic build, was still with us and could be seen next door looking extremely concerned. Surely Group would cancel the mission even at this late stage? Suddenly my telephone rang with a message from Group, 'Hold the aircraft!', which I immediately relayed to the CO, who reached through the hatch to grab the receiver. There followed several anxious minutes, to the continuing dull roar of perhaps two dozen stationary aircraft ticking over. Another call came, 'Group says let them go, sir' and again the telephone was thrust into the CO's hand. So they all went off, I was unable to know where and remember nothing else of that night's story.

During the earlier autumn evenings when it was light enough, the Group Captain would be down on the tarmac to see his crews off. As each Halifax taxied slowly past him on the perimeter, he would put two fingers up to each skipper high above him in masculine send-off style. He was an extraordinary figure at these times, leaning, almost crouching forward, with fierce attention focussed on his men. It would have been interesting to know what the skippers thought of him themselves, but this was not the sort of thing one would venture to ask. But it could not have been without significance that our CO was soon to be in charge of the Canadians at Pathfinders.

Off duty I would sometimes observe night take-off on my own, from a vantage point on a camp road with high hedges, near the WAAF compound. It was particularly fine to see the Halifaxes crossing the moon whilst yet low in the sky. One night, however, there was a tragic beginning to a mission, when one of the bomb-laden aircraft crashed just after take-off and blew up. This was too far away to see clearly from where I stood, but I was aware of the enormous explosion and how it lit up the sky. The reality of that terrible impact shattered for ever any romantic picture of an aircraft taking off. But it did not completely stop me from wanting to see what I could of inspiring sights one would not have again once the war was won.

During our shifts day to day we were getting to know our mixed group of new colleagues. Two of the

duty Flying Control officers, both Flight Lieutenants, became our favourites. Jack Marshall, from Calgary, was one. A delightful man, he was tall and slim, with a sallow complexion, witty in his economical slow drawl and totally relaxed style, not altogether masking inner sensitivity. He fell for Betty, but she was to be married the following year to her choice from three suitors, each hoping to marry her after the war. Jack did eventually marry one of us, Joey, a dark-haired popular girl from our mess.

The other friend was Eddie Southall, less tall, a wiry energetic reddish-haired man from Edmonton. He was the only Canadian or, for that matter, American, I ever heard actually exclaiming 'Great suffering rattlesnakes!' The friendly insults Jack and Eddie exchanged about their respective home towns, both in the state of Alberta, were wonderfully entertaining, with quick-fire broadsides from Eddie countered by Jack's slower, minimal, but no less sharp ripostes.

One of the RT girls, known as Teddy, was quite a character, with her dark hair and definite eyebrows. Although thoroughly English, she adored Canadians and wanted to be as like them as possible, complete with accent. After the war she married 'the last Canadian out of England' as a letter from Arleen later described it.

The young airmen clerks worked similar shifts to ours and on night duty we talked a great deal together. Harvey was the only one of these whose name I remember. Dark-haired and good looking, he had married shortly before leaving Canada. His looks had led him into difficulties, for he was trying hard to be faithful to his young wife despite the attentions of various girls. So far, he said, he had somehow managed it.

Another boy was thin, blonde and also married. He was a professional golf coach and gave me a few lessons, but I am sorry to say I was one of his failures and golf never more featured in my life. A third lad was a thoughtful French Canadian, a little older than the others. Although not a special friend, he was moved to write a fine poem to me in French. It was so unexpected and touching I was overwhelmed and lost for words. Today I would dearly love that poem to come to light, for I did not think of making a copy.

Although loving my service life most of the time, I did even then have moments of homesickness when occasionally walking through Leeming village on a Sunday, aware of the family day going on in the houses and cottages along the street. However there was leave to look forward to, the longer the better, so as to be entitled to a railway warrant, now I was several hundred miles from home. Trains were slow, dirty and crowded, with a smell of soot in the tunnels and smuts flying in if the window was not completely shut. Making one's way from compartment to toilet and back could become an obstacle course, negotiating

kit bags and servicemen leaning against them to snatch some sleep. Sometimes my compartment was cheered by a lively or interesting journey companion who made the time go by unusually quickly.

Aiming for a London mainline station was fine, but on return journeys to smaller destinations, ears were straining to catch the names called out up and down the platform at each stop. Even now I can hear 'Sandy, SANDY!' alerting me to listen out for Huntingdon itself, during my time there. In darkness, peering through grimy train windows, few clues presented themselves, name boards, of course having been removed for the duration.

On thirtysix hour or even on fortyeight hour pass the expense of such a long journey on our low pay was prohibitive. Many of us chose the alternative of hitching a lift, as Betty and I had done between Huntingdon and Cambridge, a distance of about fourteen miles, compared with perhaps two hundred and fifty from Leeming to London. This seemed daunting, but the camp lay next to the Great North road, with its thundering lorries heading south. These were a better and safer bet than private cars, the few there were in those petrol-rationed days. The former had deliveries and return loads to deal with for their livelihood and long journeys to make, often as far as London. Staff cars were acceptable and did stop for us on occasion. It was a recognised means of travel for service men and women in those days and I never personally heard of any service girls coming to any harm.

With luck my driver would get me at least to the outskirts of the capital, where I would make my way to Paddington for the Maidenhead train and finally by bus to my home village. My sister, Angela, would be there to meet me off the bus with our youngest sister Rose, accompanied by our two London evacuees, two magnificent red setters, Sheila and her daughter Fodge, both mad with excitement. Ida, Angela's twin, had joined the ATS in August 1943, but Angela would not be enlisting until 1st December 1944, as girls continued to be needed in the services, even if health was an earlier problem.

The twins eventually came together at Bicester Camp. Whilst there they had an interesting but affecting experience when both were detailed to report to an unremembered local RAF airfield, which could have been Upper Heyford, before or around the time of VE Day, 8th May 1945. The girls were to act as hostesses and guides to welcome returning prisoners-of-war newly liberated from enemy prison camps. The whole operation was taking place in a vast hangar, set up with a delousing Station in a tent where the the lads started their rehabilitation procedures. Tables were set up, manned by Officers dealing with the Admin and advice matters. My sisters said some of the men were in a very bad state, either through

long-term deprivation such as poor diet and bad living conditions or ill-treatment and forced marches, resulting in painful feet almost preventing some of the men from being able to walk at all. It was impossible to be unmoved by their plight, especially in that they had all come straight from the camps just as they were, seeming traumatised, most hardly speaking at all.

Back on camp life went on much as usual until December 1944 approached and the WAAF Sergeants to plan for a special party to take place in our mess just before Christmas. We were determined to wear 'civvies', even a party dress if we possessed one, although we were quite aware this was against the rules. Of course I wrote to my mother asking her to send my shoes and black crepe dress decorated with heavy cream lace she had applied in vertical bands, one each side of the bodice from shoulder to waist. She was a wonderful needlewoman, first through financial necessity in order to to clothe us all through difficult times, from babyhood onwards, but later for the satisfaction she found in continuing, whilst her eyesight held out, to sew lovely things for her granddaughters. But at the moment there was no possibility of acquiring a petticoat to give a little warmth underneath my dress, as the clothing coupon issue for us was strictly for sportswear such as slacks, jumpers and 'shirt-blouses', which were blouses with a shirt-type collar. Very occasionally you might find a shop where they would accept our coupons for lingerie purchases, a cause for celebration!

At about this time I treated myself to a shopping trip in Harrogate, the first big outing since a recent leave, this time armed with what was then a large sum of six pounds, representing rare back and other extra pay. Armed with some of my precious clothing coupons and my full purse, Harrogate did not let me down. I discovered a shop which accepted the coupons refused me whilst on leave, first for a bra (also termed 'brassiere' in those days) then two pairs of pants (or panties) and a blue-green short-sleeved shirt-blouse to wear with my burgundy slacks. In the same shop I bought a pair of off-coupons fine cot pillow cases, beautifully hand-embroidered, as a present for a WAAF Sergeant colleague expecting a baby the following spring. Her lover's wife would not divorce him, Madge was desperately in love and was in process of changing her name by deed poll for the sake of the child. Perhaps such a 'marriage' was not made in heaven, but the glow of her obvious happiness was deeply touching.

As usual I had tea at Standings, sitting in a comfortable chair at a little table near the window, afterwards visiting a cinema with an unmemorable programme before catching the bus to Ripon and another from thence to the Great North Road bus stop nearest the camp gates. Already there was snow two inches deep

on either side of the main road and the long cold walk to my hut. A more sociable event at this time was a party in the Station Hotel at North Allerton, to which we were invited by the Intelligence section. Betty, Connie and I all went, as, although Connie was officially on duty, things were quiet and the Senior Flying Control Officer let her off. The only other young woman present was a very nice WD officer, the Canadian equivalent of a WAAF officer. After a large chicken dinner accompanied by ample drinks, we all retired to the smoking room for a sing-song, dancing and general merriment. Connie and I had been glad to arrive in one piece in a Staff Wing Commander's car which he was intent on driving on the wrong side of the road for some reason.

A lone incident which I know to have taken place at Leeming during my night shift on 1st December 1944, was due to bad visibility. In Flying Control, the duty officer had a tough task getting an aircraft down when the pilot could not see the runway at all, being virtually blind to anything outside the cockpit. However, by shooting off a number of flares to guide the aircraft down to the previously invisible runway, it landed safely. In the light of the flares I could just make it out beyond the Control Room windows.

Recently I unearthed a crumpled piece of paper bearing the Leeming logo of a decorated initial letter 'L', seen on some of the station writing paper. There is no date and the ditty scribbled on it relates to the earlier part of my night duty in the Control Tower and is for Teddy, the 'Canadianised' RT operator.

THE GEN. ON 429 'B' Beer.

What a crew!

Brayne and Depew,

Leeming's only ER last night.

B Beer that most despicable kite,

Its port outer had to fail

And Depew told Brayne to turn tail

And head for base.

It wasn't quite naice

For Beer to Pancake at one thirty

Whilst the rest strove on through the Dirty!

My next letter home, dated 3rd January 1945, gives the first and very sad news that 'our crew, that is, Pete, Gerry, Al, Casey, Mac, the Flight Engineer and their new Bomb Aimer are missing.' The present tense seems to promise 'hope that the crew have found their way back to Allied territory. If they are alive I'm sure they'd never get caught, they'd have too much cheek! I can't tell you when they were missing....' Maybe this was after Christmas because of the tense used, but equally, a blank spot in my memory remains for almost the first three weeks of December 1944, during which they could have been reported missing, with time to come to terms, as one had to, and before the festive season hit us. The answer is as elusive as ever, to this day. The letter now refers back to the start of the Christmas activities at Leeming.

Christmas 1944 was, without doubt, the most hectic, whirlwind festive period of my life, either before or since, with events falling over each other daily, over a period of about a fortnight. The opening celebration was the big WAAF dance held in the Airwomen's Mess on the Tuesday before Christmas Day. The officers were present, including the 'Groupie' (Station CO) and odd 'Wingcos' and of course the WAAF officers, mainly Canadian WDs. Unable to obtain bottled beer, we had to make do with the draft variety, poured ignominiously into an ordinary bucket, which was somewhat embarrassing, although luckily the officers did not seem to notice or else did not mind. After the WAAF officers left we had a little dance of our own and Jack Creeper played the piano. 'Then we made mountains of toast and lots of coffee and all sat on the floor, including the CO and sang carols in the firelight. It was simply wizard.' The last sentence sounds too cosy for the large Airwomen's Mess and we may have moved across to our own little Mess next door.

On the Saturday of that same week our long-anticipated WAAF Sergeants' Mess party took place. In my breathless style of those days, I outlined every detail for my mother. Of course it was all 'simply wizard - we dressed up in civilian clothes and had lots to eat and drink, a gramophone and the Mess was effectively decorated with a Christmas tree, our guests' names in silver paper strips pinned on our dark blue curtains and fairy lights and candles in beer bottles instead of ordinary electric light.' Accompanying sketches showed the names and the lighting, but I was unable to divulge that the foil strips, code-named Window, were normally dropped to confuse the enemy radar system during bombing operations. A Christmas cake had been made by one of the cooks and we also offered cheese straws, sausage rolls, dainty little iced cakes, oranges and lots of Canadian chocolates along with 'numerous packets of cigarettes, also of the Canadian variety.' Being stationed at a Canadian Base clearly had its advantages! For drinks I listed three bottles of Vat 69, one-and-a-half bottles of gin, one bottle of sherry and three crates of beer.

There were seventeen guests and the same number of ourselves, the WAAF Sergeants. The Group Captain was very frustrated because he wasn't asked - he always enjoys himself when he comes up to our Mess. We had the station photographer in and he took a number of wizard pictures - I hope to get prints eventually, but maybe not for some time as they have difficulty in getting the printing paper. Later on in the evening we all went and changed into slacks as we were afraid of ruining our precious stockings. I was supposed to be on duty, but managed to get off till the end of the party, when Joe and Mac brought me back to Flying Control in the Flight van.'

In our Mess on Christmas Eve we had our Christmas goose, given by Squadron Leader Kyles, the Watchkeepers' boss, along with some port and gin, ending the feast with Christmas pudding. Then Mac and Joe, Gunnery Leader and Flight Commander respectively of one of our Squadrons, took Joan, a tall, slim, dark-haired MT Sergeant with a face like an angel, along with myself, out for a drink, after which we all went to Canada House for the carol singing and finally to our Mess for coffee and toast.

Christmas morning started with all Senior NCOs being invited to the Officers' Mess for drinks. Mac collected us from our Mess at 11am. We had a wonderful reception from the Officers who were waiting for us. We sang songs around the piano, then Lou Neilly (PFF) turned up and we decided to give a party for him that evening. Betty and I had Christmas dinner with the Aircrew Sergeants at 1200 hours, very nice indeed, then we repaired to the main Sergeants' Mess for a while. Following this, exhausted and feeling horribly overfed, we retired to our own Mess.

Unfortunately, I could not relax as I was committed to organising beer for the evening, the NAAFI having let us down completely over Christmas. Joe and Mac came to my rescue by driving me to the Sergeants' Mess and persuading the bartender to let us fill our tea urn with beer, secretly, round the back of the Mess. The beer smell was becoming increasingly unwelcome, indeed sickening, since I was not keen on it at the best of times. That evening at the Lou Neilly party, people seemed satiated and exhausted after the relentless social round of the day and only a quarter of the dreadful beer was drunk. The conversation lapsed and one was feeling more like sleeping than anything else. 'I enjoyed myself not one bit, unfortunately. I would so have enjoyed being at home with the family that evening.' A hilarious moment had, nevertheless, roused us that afternoon. The sight of Mac, our Gunnery friend, arriving outside our Mess in a Jeep, with a large turkey bone in one hand and half a glass of beer in the other, was something I shall always remember about Christmas 1944!

Fortunately I was on night duty on Boxing Day and Mac came up to fetch me and walk down with me to Flying Control. Things were pretty busy on duty, which I welcomed. On 27th December Mac, Joe and Jack Creeper took Joan, Sylvia, a recently-arrived shift colleague and myself to North Allerton, for a turkey dinner at the Golden Lion. We had Pimms, rare and wonderful in those days, but were horrified to realise afterwards that the boys had paid five shillings each for them! 'That night was very eventful indeed, but I can't very well tell you in a letter, not yet anyway. Please do remind me to tell you when I come on leave at the end of this month, as I hope. The events were exciting, horrifying, amusing and extraordinary. More of this later.'

On the 28th I was on night duty, which was fairly quiet. Next day Betty, Joan and I went with Mac, Joe and Pop Lawler, a Squadron Leader Flight Commander of the other squadron here, to an Officers' Mess dance at Skipton-on-Swale, which was our satellite Station 'down the road'. Of course we had to go in civilian clothes, as 'WAAFs are not on any account allowed to attend dances at an Officers' Mess. We called at two pubs on the way and had gin and peppermint amongst other things, we took blankets in the van to keep us warm. It was freezing in my black frock and a borrowed warm but short grey fluffy coat, gloves and handbag. At our last port of call the van was stolen! Horrors! Luckily Pop had been stationed at Skipton and was well known and liked there, so he rang up and wangled transport. We got to Skipton late, of course, owing to this business and the party was in full swing. As soon as Pop opened the door there was a wild yell of welcome from at least twelve people and he was borne away in a few seconds!

The American band was very good and the food marvellous, laid out in buffet fashion on an enormous table. There was turkey, ham, stuffing, pork, salad and trifles, with coffee on another table. It was very cold. I shall have to try and wangle some coupons and get a woolly afternoon frock, as my black one, which everyone admires, is a bit chilly. Joe says he'll give me a few and I hope he remembers! The Group Captain from here was present. He saw us - and laughed - he's a good type! The Air Commodore was also there but I don't think he saw us. By the way, the SPs (Special Police) found our van outside the Sergeants' Mess at Skipton. Were we relieved! We got back at about 2.30 am, had some coffee, then went to our respective boudoirs, weary but content.

On New Year's Eve Mac, Joe, Jack, Joan, Sylvia and I went to Jock's for supper, then we, the girls, went to the Sergeants' Mess dance and the boys to the Officers' Mess party. The noise in the Sergeants' Mess was too much for us, so we soon left. I went to my bunk to change into slacks and fell asleep on the bed, but

awakened to the strains of Auld Lang Syne issuing from our Mess. I was peeved I missed it! Well, I now enjoyed myself very much, but we didn't break up the party until rather late. Wisely, I decided it would be fatal to go to bed for such a short time and instead I had a bath for about one and a half hours to wake myself up. I was due on duty at 0830 hours, you see, so for once I was in plenty of time for breakfast. I was on duty again that night, but luckily got a fairly decent sleep.

Yesterday afternoon Mac came up for a cup of tea and also Joe a bit later and we also had toast, the rest of the Christmas cake and some toasted marshmallows which Joe gave me. They also came up for a little while in the evening. This evening Joan, Joe, Mac and I are going to Jock's for supper. The boys are calling for me in a minute, so I'd better finish this before anyone realises what a long piece of teleprinter roll I have used.'

The events I mentioned saving up to tell my mother on my next leave are, in part, mysterious. 'Exciting', yes, if this refers to my Halifax 'flip', but 'horrifying'? - this sounds too extreme for the case; 'amusing and extraordinary' are definitely in context. It was strictly forbidden for WAAF personnel to fly in an operational aircraft, unless for a particular duty reason, still less on a bombing mission, although it was rumoured that WAAFs had indeed been smuggled aboard an operational flight. It would have been too shocking to reveal this officially if any came to grief as a result.

On the night in question I returned to camp to receive a message from Betty asking me to get in touch with her at Flying Control as soon as possible. She said I must go to such and such a place at a particular time and that I could not be told any more. Unfortunately some key advice had been omitted. I was still wearing formal uniform, that is, jacket and skirt, as we were not allowed to go off camp in battle-dress unless on duty. On obeying Betty's instructions, in total ignorance of what was to come, I found, to my mixed excitement and deep embarrassment, that I was to replace Betty on a clandestine night cross-country flight in one of the operational Halifaxes! The prospect of putting on a parachute harness whilst wearing such unsuitable garb, appalled myself and possibly the crew who procured the harness for me. Had I known, it would have been so easy to get to my quarters and change into Service trousers and top. However, we all came to terms with the situation, as I was determined not to miss the chance I might not have again. In the end it became quite a joke.

No details of the crew or the rendezvous with them, perhaps because it was dark, but the short flight over northern England, of perhaps half-an-hour, is remembered for the odd sensation of seeing the dimmed lights

of Darlington above my head. This was surreal until I realised the aircraft must have been almost upside down at that moment. At least I could now say, if only to myself, that I had been airborne in an operational Halifax! My reactions may sound exaggerated, now young women can pilot jet aeroplanes, but at that time it was an opportunity given to very few girls indeed, to most it was an impossible dream.

Early 1945 remains misty, with no letters surviving to provide detail, save for one well-remembered time but not date, when my ATS sisters paid me a most welcome visit. Ida had joined up in August 1943 at the age of seventeen, her twin, Angela the following year on 1st December. Permission was given for them to stay on camp in the WAAF quarters and we all paid a courtesy visit to the WAAF Admin Officer, after which we felt free to relax and perhaps to go a little mad. In this we were aided and abetted by Mac and his friend Joe Hogarth, who took us out in a jeep over the airfield, driving wildly around, taking pot shots at the many crows which rose up at our approach. The boys were clearly showing off in front of these new, decidedly attractive girls, but also letting off steam, remembering that the nights of stress and danger were not yet over for them. In today's conservation culture such a jaunt would have made one at least a little uneasy, perhaps, whilst acknowledging that crows do not come very high up in the popularity polls. My sisters, of course, were amazed at what went on, compared with the more regimented life at their Army Depot at Bicester. All too soon these pleasant hours rushed by in showing the twins around camp and they had to start the journey back to their unit.

Not long after my visitors left and possibly following my expected end of January leave, I was told I was being posted to RCAF Skipton-on-Swale. This could not have been a more unwelcome prospect, than to leave my friends and all else which made life so full and rewarding during my year at Leeming. However, there was, of course, a war on and selfishness was not in order. Moreover, I could do nothing about it but obey and report to the Skipton Guardroom as directed.

2. Skipton RCAF. 'I Go. I Come Back!'

Leeming's satellite station, Skipton-on-Swale, was some miles south of its senior neighbour, not right next to the Great North Road, but well east of it, between the river Swale and the A167 and bounded by the A61 at the southern end. The nearest small town was Thirsk, which was blessed with a mainline railway station,

separated from the town itself by the racecourse.

Skipton camp was more scattered and less developed than Leeming, allowing the temporary buildings in the form of Nissen or wooden huts to be well spaced out. The Control Tower, where I was to work on my own, in a room at ground level situated directly below Flying Control, was one of the few permanent buildings. Although all of us who came on shift in this room remained officially Watchkeepers and were Senior NCOs, our work now seemed to be reduced to manning the switchboard, taking messages and other routine tasks. Although people from upstairs occasionally came down for a chat when things were quiet, on the whole everything was much less interesting than before. At most I spent barely six months at Skipton and remember nothing of our Mess, so memorable at Leeming, nor of our living accommodation. A few people and events stand out, that is all.

In retrospect the most puzzling episode was the sneak enemy raid which undoubtedly happened one dark night whilst I was on night shift and alone as usual. There were some aircraft airborne, but not on a mission I believe. It was impossible to sort out what was happening with only one's hearing to go by, but I became aware of aircraft coming in at low level and the sound of machine-gun fire, rather than bomb explosions, as if there was shooting up of the airfield taking place. Upstairs you could hear people running about, perhaps taking cover, although as one was never told anything and could not ask, I could not be sure what was happening then or afterwards. The Station CO came in to see if all was well with me and remarked on my calmness. It was surely easier to keep cool if you were alone and not catching panic from others, should it happen that way. Nowhere have I since heard or read of enemy raids on British airfields during the last few months of hostilities in Europe, nor could I imagine where enemy aircraft could have been based, whether on land, or still less, launched from a vessel at sea. Wherein could lie any usefulness to the enemy?

My particular friend at Skipton was Bob, the same rank as myself, who came from Montreal and a tough side of French-Canadian life there. He was an easy speaker of that version of the French language although it was not native to him. He came from a milieu totally opposite to mine, fascinating for that very reason, but was naturally courteous in his straightforward way and very good company. We were both friendly with Pip Holmes, an Officer Pilot and a distinguished one. His girl friend, my colleague Joy, was a startlingly good looking blue-eyed blonde, a very nice and extremely bright girl. We all got on well together and had pleasant times as a foursome. On one occasion Bob and I enjoyed an outing to Fountains Abbey on a warm and sunny day, when I delighted in wearing slacks and blouse instead of uniform for a change. This was

probably after cessation of hostilities in Europe, when we began to be allowed off camp in sports wear.

At this time Joy and I were developing dental problems, identified by the camp Dental Officer as the gum condition gingivitis. Both of us had fundamentally good teeth, but Joy's state was worse than mine, as she had to have her gums 'cut and packed', a procedure I had to endure myself in civilian life, but years later. This was intended to slow down the deterioration rate and loss of teeth through abscesses. Perhaps it was as well we did not realise that we had been given a life sentence of discomfort and nuisance as things were then. This is not a pleasant subject, but the condition seems to have been a common one amongst servicewomen, according to what I have read. One of my sisters also fell victim to it. A civilian dentist told me I would lose all my teeth by the age of forty five. He was wrong, although having a less good smile was never a joke when ruefully noting the beautiful white smiles of others.

At Skipton the two resident squadrons were No. 424 (Iriquois) Squadron RCAF and No. 433 (Porcupine) Squadron RCAF. They had begun 1945 by re-equipping with Lancaster bombers, after operating with Halifaxes hitherto. They had little more than three months to come in which to fly operational missions, ceasing about a fortnight before 8th May, VE Day. Over at Leeming 63 Base RCAF, 427 (Lion) Squadron followed likewise a month later with re-equipping, likewise 429 (Bison) Squadron RCAF, but not until March 1945.

VE Day arrived whilst I was on leave, where village excitement, in our immediate locality, centred on the green beyond the end of our garden, which could hardly be seen from our old flint and brick house. This modest green area was all that remained of the wonderful common of my early teens, with its gorse bushes, linnets, yellowhammers, all the finches and of course the nests of all these, the most beautiful being the egg-shaped lichen-decorated long-tailed tits' nest. The whole common had been ploughed up to grow food for the nation, to my sorrow then and ever since.

Everyone who could, came along to help build a massive bonfire for after dark. Of course I went there on my own, as the twins were away and most others of a similar age. Rose, the youngest, was probably not allowed out late. My parents could not understand my enthusiasm for joining the villagers and did not seem to dream of coming out to see the bonfire lit, even briefly. It was a little disappointing and I really wished myself back at camp where my friends and I would certainly have had a celebration of some kind.

In the years since then, I feel I may have been unduly hard on an older generation who had, after all, seen it all before, although my dear mother was only forty seven and my father fifty one. In the intolerance of

youth it was likely I had underestimated the war-weariness which came upon the civilian population, particularly in my father's case. He, poor man, had worn himself out with all those difficult journeys to London and back, made worse by the extra travelling from Paddington Station out to a much more distant office after the City premises disappeared in the bombings. My mother had to contend with making do on the old kitchen solid fuel range, with frequent trips to the coal shed across the yard in all weathers and other country hardships, although she did find much satisfaction in doing her bit by helping at the regular Baby Clinic held in the Village Hall, weighing babies and dispensing cod liver oil and concentrated orange juice to the mothers.

Mention of Paddington Station reminds me of the night I spent in the Servicewomen's Shelter beneath the concourse there during my time at one of the Yorkshire postings. I had heard that my mother was suffering badly from influenza, so I applied for an emergency fortyeight hour pass at once. This would seem an over-reaction until you know how this extreme anxiety over my mother's health built up through my childhood, when she suffered from many illnesses, with several periods in the old St Thomas's Hospital in London. I travelled on the first possible train, a late one, precluding getting to Paddington from Kings Cross station before the last train to Maidenhead. I knew I must spend most of the night waiting for the early mail train, then remembered the Hampstead aunt and her private hotel, where I had spent a few days' leave from Huntingdon in 1943. Perhaps she would find a corner where I could sleep till morning as I was feeling pretty tired in my emotional turmoil. Of course I was being thoroughly unreasonable at a late hour and my aunt's obvious annoyance made me only too aware of this when I rang her from the terminus. I had forgotten her immovable view that you don't need to be ill, if really determined not to be, my mother being a prime example of someone who was too feeble-willed for such an iron resolve.

This seemed somewhat unfair, knowing how my mother's life was so dedicated to her family and to keeping going when she could. She was, after all, also looking after my aunt's red setters for the duration. Feeling angry and upset, justifiably in part, after this rejection, I got to Paddington and claimed a bed for the night in the basement Shelter. This was basic, but clean and run by kindly people, with refreshments of a kind, welcome after the station facilities closed. As foreseen, I had two or three hours sleep and a wash before catching the mail train at about 0430. How I managed to get out to my village long before the first bus was due, I cannot imagine. Perhaps I walked the four and a half miles there, which I had done before when desperate, so I knew some short cuts. My mother was not in danger and would recover normally, so

the anxiety proved to have been unnecessary.

The next memorable event, the great highlight of my short time at Skipton, was a flight in an operational, now missionless, Lancaster aircraft. Laid on following the end of hostilities in Europe, the trips gave ground staff of many kinds, including nurses, who had never had an official opportunity to fly, a chance to do some airborne sightseeing over previously enemy-held territory. These flights have been severally named Cooks Tours or Baedaecker flights, although I tended to see them as courtesy trips, perhaps a 'thank you' gesture.

During a quiet night on duty from 1730 on 2nd July 1945 to 0830 next morning, with 'nothing to do except make amendments to secret documents, which I cannot do until Flying Control have finished with the typewriter,' I was writing to my sister Angela. This was fortunate, as I was able not only to describe my excitement on learning that the WAAF Watchkeepers and Met Assistants were to be given priority on the cross-country flights over the Continent, but also to record in detail the experiences that came after. It seemed amazing that the girls were actually being given official permission to fly. Young women had indeed been up 'on the QT', of course, but until recently authority had been strict. I wrote 'there are two routes, one goes over Belgium, into Germany, over Hamburg, Duisburg and down the Rhine valley and the other mostly over France and takes a more southerly course.

Betty and Joy were all set to go today, but the flight was scrubbed owing to bad weather. The trip takes at least seven hours and we shall go in an operational Lancaster. I am simply *dying* for my turn to come! We go to briefing and fetch our harness and parachutes just like the aircrew boys. We might fly over Cookham Dean, as I believe the route goes over Reading. Anyway, I'll write and tell you all about it after the flip - I hope it's a lovely day. I can hardly believe I am actually *going*.

Lapse of 2 days - it's now the 5th - I didn't finish this on night duty and didn't have a minute till now when I am on duty till 1730 hours. Wait for the news! The very next day I flew on the 7hr trip over the Continent! What a day! Betty (one of my fellow watchkeepers here) and I collected our Mae Wests and parachutes and harness at 0930, staggered to the crew room at 0945, got helped into our equipment (which seems very heavy and bulky at first), then we all got into the crew bus at 1020 hours and were taken out to 'B Beer's' dispersal. They took some photos of us in front of the kite. Apart from the six members of the crew, there were the padre, Pip Holmes (a second pilot - he is Joy's boyfriend), three ground crew boys, Betty and myself. How we ever all got stowed away in the narrow spaces of a Lanc I don't know!

I stood next to the pilot in the cockpit for take-off (a smooth one!) and had a really good view. I had my

white roll-necked sweater and my battledress top on as well as all the trappings, but it was so hot I managed somehow to discard my jacket and roll up my sleeves. Pip lent me some sunglasses (I couldn't have done without them). We flew over York at 2,000 ft then climbed steadily above cloud and cruised at about 8,000 feet over the Wash, over Norfolk and out over the coast at Lowestoft. We did not break cloud till we approached the Dutch coast. Then I got my first glimpse of the sea. Pip bet me 2/6d he would see the first ship, which he did, a small merchantman steaming north.

We made landfall over Flushing (Vlissingen), the port on the south coast of Walcheren Island, which was inundated for miles and miles inland, deserted and all the villages and farms were shattered and flooded. In the harbour were many sunken ships and several barges on the beach were half-submerged. We cruised at about 1300 feet over Holland. It was pitiful to see little homesteads burnt out, besides signs of destruction in the towns. As we flew south of Eindhoven and over Weert, I got down into the nose, in the bomb aimer's position. It was a good place to get a fine view, but it was a bit cramped as both the padre and the bomb aimer were also in this little compartment! If one of us moved a leg one inch, everyone had to squirm about all over the place.

We approached the Ruhr with Krefeld east of us and Duisburg ahead. Pat (F/Lt Patterson the skipper) made a low circuit of Duisburg town, our first sight of an utterly ruined and devastated city. Three of the boys had cameras and took a number of photos of the places we visited. I do hope I shall be able to get one or two of the prints. If you are looking at the atlas, Duisburg is in the NW corner of the Ruhr, on the Rhine. We flew at, I should think, about 1,000 ft north above the Rhine - *all* the bridges are blown up and lying broken in the river. There are one or two temporary bridges, presumably for Allied troops to cross.

From Duisburg we flew eastward across the Ruhr industrial towns, I couldn't tell all those we passed over, as we kept circling over so many ruins and the towns seem to merge into one another, something like our own industrial areas in the north of England. We must have seen Oberhausen, Gelsenkirchen, Wanne Eickel and Bochum before we reached Dortmund, in the northeast of the industrial area. When I saw the utter shambles that used to be a thriving city, I thought Dortmund must be the worst of all, but I was wrong, as I shall shortly tell you.

Angela! - and whoever else reads this - you could *never imagine* the extent of the damage our bombing has done to Germany. The reality was so much worse than I had pictured in my mind. Industry is at a standstill, smoke was seen rising from three or four chimneys over the whole area, the streets seemed bare,

there were a few people and one or two vehicles - military traffic no doubt. We caught a glimpse of the Dortmund-Ems canal, which is very famous, before we struck northeast as far as Hamm, the most easterly point of the route. Here are the enormous marshalling yards which we bombed so heavily and in fact there were hundreds and hundreds of craters and signs of damage to the trucks, sidings and railway lines.

From Hamm we turned southwest over hilly wooded country, skirting the south side of Dortmund again and on to Düsseldorf. Again, utter devastation met our eyes as we circled Düsseldorf and took some photographs, then flew south to Cologne, where we found that the destruction in the other cities had been as nothing compared to what we now saw below us. The only building left standing is the cathedral, which rises black and tall from the tangled ruins on either side.' * As I type this many years later, the clearly imprinted memory of Cologne from the air on that memorable day includes also the blackened remains of the railway station just by the cathedral, and also the large Rhine rail bridge broken and lying in the river, all the juxtaposed elements making a dramatic if forlorn group. Back to my letter. *

'Some of the streets are still unrecognisable as such, for the mountains of rubble which have fallen on them. The question which everyone was asking themselves was where on earth could people be living now? Indeed there seemed nowhere for them, unless in temporary dwellings (I saw very few), cellars, caves or camps in the woods. Having circled pretty low over Cologne, we now flew as far south as Bonn although we should have gone as far as Coblenz; but we had spent some time in taking camera shots, so we turned westward at Bonn and flew towards Aachen over lovely wooded country, passing over a handsome Schloss every now and then. As we approached Aachen it became increasingly obvious that a battle had been taking place within the last year. Thousands of tracks across fields showed where tanks and armoured columns had passed, although these signs were less discernible since grass and crops had covered them, but from the air they could faintly be seen. You could see overturned vehicles, stacks of deserted equipment and many pathetic burned and ravaged farms and villages. Aachen itself had obviously been shelled and bombed to a terrible degree and there were potholes all over the countryside. One thing we can be proud of; we did not see a single bombed hospital. I think that is very good. We saw dozens of hospitals with large red crosses or squares painted on the roofs, all intact as far as we could see.

From Aachen we flew a pretty straight course for Vimy Ridge, passing over the river Maas near Maastricht, south of Brussels, over Mons, Valenciennes, Douai, Lens and so to Vimy Ridge itself. This last mentioned part of the route was the only stretch of country where we saw towns, villages and farms intact,

at least as seen from the air. Even there, however, we saw signs of destruction in the form of craters, shells of houses, broken bridges and new cemeteries. We circled the Memorial very low, it could not have been more than 200 -300 feet. There was a red flag flying in front of it and a large posh-looking car, containing some brass hat I expect, at the foot of the flagstaff. We could see a graveyard very near the memorial, containing the graves of the fallen from this war, I believe. Then we flew over the Ridge opposite where lies the enormous graveyard for last war dead, I think. It was very sad.

Our flight was now nearing its end, the time at this point was about 1545 hours and we now turned towards Dunkirk, with, again, signs of battle and bitter fighting. It must have been such hell as no one could ever dream of. Dunkirk itself was a complete and utter shambles, totally razed to the ground. We circled over the beaches, once swarming with men, now deserted and I kept on hearing over and over again the words 'Miracle of Dunkirk'. I see now what a miracle it was indeed. There were still one or two battered remains of boats on the shore, relics of the great evacuation of 1940. The sun was beating down on a blue sea as we set course for home, climbing steadily to about 8,000 feet. We made landfall over England at the Naze at approximately 1650 hours and flew a straight course back to base via the Wash and York. I was still in the nose when we came in to land. We made a good landing at about 1810 hours.

My, were we hungry and tired, although it was worth it and we won't get another chance, I don't suppose. One place I forgot to mention was Venlo in Holland. We saw the airfield there, which our bombers used to prang when I was at HQ 2 Group RAF. The WAAF officer and the nursing sister went up on the same route in another aircraft that day. As the padre remarked, there was so much to see that one couldn't take it all in properly, but I know I shall never, never forget such an experience.

I wonder if you would mind keeping this letter, as I probably shan't write another full account of the trip. It might be interesting to read some years later and I might forget some of the details I have set down here.'

My long letter ended with the local social news of the Leeming wedding of WAAF Flight Sergeant Dot Dean who was marrying 'Nobby' Hall at Leeming Bar church the previous day, 4th July 1945. 'You perhaps remember Dot whom you met when you were up here. She was married in white and held a bouquet of sweet pink roses. Everything went off without a hitch, they borrowed one of the Wingcos' cars to take them to the church and the reception was held in the Mess. They had a wizard 3-tier cake, made by one of the cooks. Connie was the only bridesmaid. I only just made it! I hitched from Skipton and jumped off the lorry outside the church at 10 minutes to two, the wedding was at 2 o'clock!' I concluded with the information that

my Leeming friend Betty Lennon would be getting married in September 'and talks of nothing else.' In signing off I lamented my want of mail. 'I sometimes despair of ever getting any mail and I never look in my pigeonhole now, but wait for Betty or Ida or Bob to tell me if there is any, as they are Bs too.'

A few days after our Lancaster trip, I made a point of taking fortyeight hours leave, as it was my parents silver wedding anniversary on 10th July. I managed to buy a bottle of sherry from the bar staff at the Officers' Mess, a triumph, as I was unable to get anything else interesting with which to celebrate the occasion, except for a humdrum jar of Horficks as a utilitarian offering. A surprise visit is not always the best thing, but I had not yet learnt it. On arriving home, my heart sank, as I found my father in bed, suffering from 'flu. He had no idea there was anything special about this particular day. Indeed, he needed to remove his wedding ring and squint at the inside to see the inscription, to make sure! Whether my mother knew full well it was their important day and was perhaps hurt at my father's lack of acknowledgement, or whether she, too, had forgotten, I never knew. However, as the eldest daughter, I had at least done my best.

By the end of July 1945 I was back at Leeming and picked up the threads again quite easily. Most of my friends had remained, although married WAAF personnel were being demobilised sooner than single girls, my own demob group being 32. One or two married girls had already gone, the next one to leave would be Molly, seen half cut-off and standing at extreme left of two of our Christmas party photographs from December 1944. A farewell party was organised on 4th August, to take place in the watchkeepers' old workplace, the Operations Room, as a photograph of the squadron boards with farewell messages chalked up, shows. 427's board is off-camera at left, 429 shows at left, 424 and 433 squadrons had long gone to Skipton-on-Swale.

Was it really on 14th August itself, official VJ day, that Leeming became aware, late in the day, that Japan had now capitulated, a few days since the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? In the WAAF camp we heard no announcement over the tannoy, but the news started somewhere and spread by word of mouth throughout the camp as the evening wore on. Darkness was falling as people emerged in all sorts of garb, including a few wearing pyjamas under their usual clothes, instinctively starting to stream out towards the airfield. The atmosphere was muted and strange, no one hurrying, no high spirits breaking out. All everyone seemed to want was just to gather together and experience - what? Perhaps it was more weariness than anything else and a sense of leaving behind and standing in the moment before unknown but inevitable changes would alter our lives yet again. A solemn thought. We had worked through the VE Day

excitements and emptied ourselves out and it could not be repeated the same way in the very last moment of all.

We were now back to our routine shifts, to sit out the time before our discharges came through. There was a feeling of ennui, with just cross-country flights and 'circuits and bumps' going on and the total disappearance of that heightened awareness we all shared throughout the hostilities. Peace had been out of sight for several years, but now it was here the adjustment was not altogether easy, despite the thankfulness. The one high point yet to come was Betty Lennon's wedding in Bradford during September. She was marrying Richard Petty, the successful suitor (of the three hoping she would have them when the war was over). Most unfortunately I missed the church service when the Staff car giving me a lift broke down and took ages to put right, but somehow I got to the hotel where the reception was taking place. It was sad not to be in time for the ceremony, but lovely to see Betty looking so marvellous and very happy. She was now out of the WAAF as a married woman.

On 2nd October I was discharged, along with my colleague Connie Wahlstrand. We left Leeming for ever and travelled to our Demob Centre at Wythall, just south of Birmingham. There we went through various unremembered procedures. I sold back my service greatcoat and Connie and I, in turn, entered an office and saluted the WAAF officer, who thanked each of us for our service. We were now free to depart on our fifty six days' discharge leave. We had arranged to stay overnight with Jo Jowett and her husband as they lived in Birmingham itself. Jo had, of course, left the WAAF some time ago. Somehow I had managed to procure a tin of sweetened condensed milk as a present. Jo was delighted, for such things could be scarce and therefore much appreciated at that time. Next day we said goodbye and Connie left for her home in Middlesborough whilst I went south to my Berkshire village.

Before the eight weeks of my leave were up I had taken a wrong turning after being persuaded into starting a course I should have known did not suit me. A saving factor appeared as if by a miracle. A grant was refused as the subject would not represent a continuation of my pre-war studies. Instead of keeping up with my drawing and sketching, I admit I had been learning about life and busy growing up and was probably sunk and undeserving in terms of an Art career. Not getting a grant was not a usual matter for rejoicing, but in my case I was able to leave without dishonour but not altogether without an inner sense of failure. However I was able to return to my rightful environment with relief and was accepted at my first interview, to start in January at a South London School of Art. It was also wonderful to be able to remain in

London.

My future husband, Peter L. Field, ex-RAF, whom I had not met before, did not arrive until 12th May 1946, following release from Detmold, Germany. He had been working with the British Control Commission Component, SHAEF Special Echelon, SHAEF FPO, BLA (British Liberation Army). He reached Duisburg on New Year's Eve 1945 but was not officially discharged until March. We have discussed together our first memories of Goldsmiths College, New Cross, as a considerably war-damaged building, which had been built in Italianate style in 1843-4 to be the Royal Naval School, according to Nikolaus Pevsner, but was now part of London University and housed both the Art School and a Teacher Training College.

A V1 Flying Bomb had sheered off the NW back corner of the Art side of the large building and ended its trajectory some one hundred yards further on, making a huge crater about twenty feet deep in the playing field area next to the railway line. Inside the Art Studios, a temporary roof protected the destroyed corner, where dozens of nineteenth century V and A Museum-produced full-size antique plaster figures had been shattered and were beyond restoring. Peter remembers helping to move these dismembered fragments to the great crater for burial. The Great Hall, which apparently had been formed by roofing over the old Naval Parade Ground, was out of use and would be for some time. It was officially reopened eventually by the Earl of Athlone.

Other damage was less obvious and was to human beings, ex-Servicemen, now students, some left with varying degrees of psychological problems. Four of these come to mind, two who had been together in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp and were still able to cope quite well, although one of them was able to mention some of the horrors which must have been forced below consciousness somehow. Of the remaining two, one could not travel on the Underground and had headaches. The other we remember as Stanley Goodey, who attended in RAF battledress, wearing an Observer's flying brevet and executed tiny, painfully cramped drawings with frightening intensity in the Life Room, sometimes achieving just a few agonised lines with a much-sharpened pencil point, during the course of a morning. The relaxed atmosphere in which the rest of us blossomed, perhaps also helped with his rehabilitation. London was grey, there were to be shortages for years, but we were happy.

END

Notes referring to text pages

Page 8 (1)

Following Ian Hay's death in a crash during a flight from RAF Kinloss on 24th September 1940, I learned very little detail, this seeming to me irrelevant anyway, whilst the loss was paramount and so fresh. Ian's sister, my lifelong friend Sheila, later Mrs Brygman, wrote after the funeral to tell me of her brother's burial place at Thomnahurich Cemetery, Inverness, the Gaelic translated as The Hill of the Fairies.

Seeking the spot in August 1975, Peter and I made our way up the silent wooded hill by the spiral path, winding interminably, it seemed, almost to the top, before discovering the Hay plot and the memorial stone. This was surmounted by a carving in the likeness of a propeller, although the top had broken off and lay on the ground. In order to take a photograph, one of us had to hold the separated section in place whilst the other took over the camera.

In 1945 I understood a memorial cairn of stones had been erected close to the crash site by Wing Commander J.V. Hay in memory of his son and the rest of the crew, but was ignorant of the exact location.

It was not until December 2001, at the funeral of Mrs Sheila Brygman, that I would hear more. There I met, for the first time, Rhona Hay, sister to Ian and Sheila through Jack V. Hay's second marriage. She offered to supply me with information she possessed about the 1940 crash, including the names of the rest of the crew.

Slightly surprised at myself, I knew I would now be very grateful and even eager to receive anything at all to throw light on that event of some six decades ago. From the varied copied material sent to me, official and otherwise, along with valuable enlightenment contained in Rhona's letters received since our first meeting, I have assembled the following brief account, on the next page, in the hope it may be of use to others.

Information provided by Rhona Hay of Skye

The crew of the Whitley aircraft which crashed

F/Sgt Ashley, Cecil Henry, pilot, aged 27, son of Ellen Ashley, stepson of Gomer George Phillips. From Bath.

Sgt Foley, Norman, pilot, son of Reginald and Rose Foley. Buried St Thomas, Keresley, Coventry.

Sgt Lucas, Philip Henry, DFM, son of Albert Victor and Amy Lucas. From Headingley, Leeds. Buried Hull Western Cemetery.

906233 Sgt Hay, Ian de Saille Errol, aged 19, W.Op/Air Gnr, RAF VR, son of Squadron Leader J V Hay and Mrs Sydney Hay. From Cookham, Berks. Buried Inverness, Thomnahurich Cemetery.

Sgt Proudfoot, David Scott, RAF VR (said to be an above average experienced pilot).

Sgt Millard, Ernest Stanley.

The Whitley was on a cross-country training flight from RAF Kinloss on the afternoon of the 24th September 1940. Eye witnesses stated that the machine was flying towards the small Morayshire town of Rothes when it burst into flames and began to dive steeply, the vertical dive continuing until it struck the ground near the summit of Ben Aigan. The whole crew perished. The cause of the accident was never determined, the wreck being too badly broken up for investigation.

This was the first crash of the war from Kinloss and the first of several tragic air accidents on Ben Aigan during the Second World War. The cairn built by Ian's father is marked on the OS map on the west side of Ben Aigan's summit. The actual accident site is thought to be slightly lower down. In 1995 a friend of the Hay family rebuilt the cairn, as the stones had tumbled somewhat, perhaps partly through being interfered with in ignorance of its purpose, now firmly on record.

Ian himself had become operational before the end of his eight-week course at No 19 OTU, RAF Kinloss, on 8th September 1940, as I now know from the transcript of a letter to his father of that date. This was kindly made available to me with the rest of the information. Ian would be flying as the Rear Gunner and standby W/Op of an Anson machine, possibly at a few minutes notice, for duties over the North Sea.

From the Canadian Navy Show my thoughts led me back to experiences of various ENSA shows on RAF Stations. Some were revues with comedy sketches, some irredeemably vulgar, with occasional drag numbers, my pet hate of the time, having seen many similar during intervals in cinema programmes of the 1930s, as alternatives to the more enjoyable lit-up electric organ rising out of the floor. At the very top end of ENSA entertainment, however, I enjoyed a wonderful performance of George Bernard Shaw's play Heartbreak House, with Robert Donat as Captain Shotover, marred only by a few asides from would-be mockers at the back near the bar. We may have been bussed from Huntingdon to RAF Wyton, which I recall had a good stage.

After my sisters came together at Bicester Army Ordnance Depot, where a number of Italian and German prisoners, including some SS, were put to work, there was much unrest amongst them at one time. The prisoners threatened to invade the camp if their conditions did not improve. This created a very alarming atmosphere for the ATS on duty, including my sisters. Presumably the protest came to nothing or was successfully resolved. Volunteering at the end of the war to welcome back our own returning prisoners was in friendly contrast. My sister, Mrs. Angela Duwell kindly agreed to write down her memories of that day, to include with my typescript, as follows:

'Around the time of VE Day, 8th May 1945, a group of ATS girls, including my sister Ida and myself, volunteered to welcome liberated troops returning from enemy prisoner-of-war camps by air to a local airfield near our camp at Bicester. We travelled by lorry to the large bomber aerodrome, arriving to see row upon row of trestle tables lined up, with chairs and benches, set up in a huge hangar. Many Australian soldiers were busy with the organising and manning of the repatriation process.

All of a sudden we heard the hum of heavy aeroplanes in the distance and soon there was touchdown, when the large four-engined bombers taxied round to their appointed stop just outside the hangar doors, like great blackbirds silhouetted against the sky. The aircraft disgorged the men one by one, looking traumatised and dazed as they alighted.

The first order of the day for us was to show the men to the DDT Tents set up at the entrance, to face the vital preliminary to everything else. They came out the other side with the white toxic powder adorning

them from head to toe, some limping, others on stretchers. Later I found out that the blisters on their feet were caused by forced route marches while in the the hands of their captors and there were several bandaged cases.

I remember noticing a pile of trophies piled on one part of the hangar floor, consisting of enemy regalia such as helmets, uniforms bearing swastikas, ornate daggers and I believe there was a sword in the heap.'

Angela Duwell

Sub-heading 2. 'I Go, I Come Back!' came from the signature exit of Sam Ferfechan, a character in Tommy Handley's highly popular wartime wireless show ITMA (It's That Man Again!).

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to my daughter Susan who first and often urged me to set down my war memories, which might never have materialised without the vital boost given by Dr Peter H Liddle when he requested this typescript for The Second World War Experience Centre, Leeds and I thank him sincerely. Deep thanks to my husband Peter, for reading and checking the text and for valuable advice based on his own RAF experiences, but supremely for patient, wise encouragement over a long period; to my sister Angela Duwell for her account of the day at the RAF Air Base with her sister Ida and other ATS, greeting our returning prisoners-of-war; I am indebted to Rhona Hay of Skye for writing many letters and supplying me with much new information, both official and personal, on the 1940 crash on Ben Aigan and on Ian Hay and his father, aided by her husband Keith Macleod, who has seemed endlessly willing to transcribe, add notes and visit the local town for photocopying purposes. On such short acquaintance with me, both have taken an immense amount of trouble, for which I am most grateful; my thanks go to Viv Petty for early typing and supportive interest in the subject matter.

Cynthia G. Field (nee Barry)



TOP R: My father, Leslie Barry, second row centre, with his West Riding Division Territorial unit, including mascot, serving from August 1914 to April 1915.

BELOW R: Back, my father, now in France with an Army Service Corps unit. His team of motor mechanics displaying the tools and repair components of their trade, 1915 - 17.

LEFT: First portrait of L. Barry in RASC Officer's uniform, mid-1917.



TOP L: My mother, Jessica Robinson (Poppy), shown in a cornfield at the Donset farm (Briantspuddle) where she and her fellow students worked 'on the land', as she always described it, during their long vacations 1916/17.

TOP R: A group of Jessica's friends from Bedford College, London University, outside their dedicated quarters at the farm. Note the occasional black armband. Those known to me are, back row, second left, Dorothea Robinson (Biddy, Jessica's visiting sister); front row left, Jessica looking down; second left Muriel Drummond; middle Ruth Drummond, Muriel's sister and my godmother; extreme right Beatrice Robinson, (Jabber, the eldest of my mother's sisters).

BELOW L: First picture of myself in WAAF uniform during telephonist training at Worcester, July 1940.

BELOW MIDDLE: Elizabeth Phillips and I in the neglected garden of our quarters in the old Officers' bungalows, soon after my first 'working' posting to RAF Uxbridge, HQ No. 11 Group, August 1940.

BELOW R: Elizabeth and I practising for a fencing demonstration before the Duchess of Gloucester, our Patron. This did not take place owing to lack of time in the Duchess's schedule. Late summer 1940.



TOP: Darbys, Cookham Dean, my family home, shown in about 1937.

BELOW: Elizabeth and I on a day visit to Darbys from Uxbridge, summer 1940. Seated, L to R, My mother; my youngest sister Rose; Elizabeth; at back, myself.



TOP L: Ian Hay at RAF Kinloss at the end of his training with 19 OTU, about to become operational as a fully fledged Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, early September 1940.

TOP R: Kinloss, September 1940. Ian, centre, in front of window, with the rest of his crew, at operational readiness eight weeks early.

BELOW L: Ian at home 1940.

BELOW R: Sergeant Cynthia Barry, following promotion in the spring of 1942.

THIS FORM IS TO BE COMPLETED ONLY WHEN
RAILWAY PASSENGER AND FREIGHT

Station Huntingdon Official No 89473 Rank Sgt Name BERRY C G
 Form 1000 No 2866/84 Trade 1000
 Leave from 1st to 1st Leave on May 1943
 for the purpose of proceeding on leave to 1st (insert town)
 Home Address Bank, Buff, 1st 1st 1st 1st
 Railway warrant required to 1st 1st 1st 1st
 Title of R.C.O. 1/s Section 1st Date 1st
 THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED BY ORIGINATOR ONLY
 Railway warrant number 1st Station Card Number 1st
 Entered in leave book 1st



TOP: Copy of a railway warrant for a complex long leave itinerary, to be followed shortly after by the big move of HQ 2 Group from Huntingdon to Norfolk at the end of May 1943.

BELOW: Sergeant Betty Lennon (later Petty), my colleague and friend at Huntingdon, Bylaugh Hall, Norfolk and at RCAF Leeming, 1942 - 1945.



SENIOR NCOs ADMINISTRATIVE COURSE		
	RAF WILMSLOW	MARCH 1944
<u>Back Row</u> (left to right)	<u>2nd Row</u> (left to right)	<u>FRONT ROW</u> (left to right)
Sgt Patterson ("Pat")	Flo Saunders	Sgt Spence
"Curran"	Sgt Stevenson ("Steve")	"Audrey Thomas"
"Lynn"	Flo Williams	"Wendy Mallett"
"Lark"	Sgt Mabel Owen	"Taylor"
"Tina"	"Holford"	"Margaret Edgman"
"Bulman"	"June Radcliffe"	Sgt Warren
"Boyle" ("Tock")	"Mc" <small>Sgt. (Rank Name) (Unit Number)</small>	Flo Larsen <small>Widow of a Pilot Officer</small>
"Elaine Rice"	"Betty Egan"	Sgt Murray
"Jeanne Thompson"	Flo Subcock	Sgt Marie Chapman
"Philipa"	Sgt Hazel Poley	"Pam Robinson"
"Marie Dribbler"	"Macdonald" ("Mac")	"Vera Hargreaves"
	"June King"	Flo Holwell
	"Eileen Page"	
<u>SEATED ON MAT</u>		
Sgt Molly Parnish	<small>(Note: Row 5 consists of 10 women "too good to be seated" - Curran)</small>	
Sgt Jones		

TOP: March 1944 at RAF Wilmslow. A group of WAAF Senior NCOs at an Administrative Course I attended soon after my posting from ^{Byrough Hall, Norfolk} ~~Huntingdon~~ to RCAF Leeming.

BELOW: The reverse of the photograph, where I recorded everyone's name.



TOP L: Summer 1944. Wedding guests outside the church (possibly Leeming Bar). L to R, Arleen (Canadian), Esther, YMCA hostess; an unknown WAAP Sergeant; Betty Lennon.

TOP R: The bride and groom leaving the church. Both were RCAF officers.

BELOW L: Alex Stockdale, Arleen's fiance. MIDDLE L: Two WD (RCAF) Officer guests.

MIDDLE R: A group of aircrew Officer guests. L to R, a French Canadian; an unknown officer; 'Foggy' with moustache, English; Sid Hensby, English.

BOTTOM R: Myself on camp, in 'civvies', after we were allowed coupons for sports clothing within the station boundary, late 1944.



TOP L: Weekend visitors to Betty Lennon's Bradford home, summer 1944. L to R, Al of 'our precious crew'; Joey, Betty's friend from Leeming WAAF Sergeants' Mess; Betty's younger sister; Mrs Lennon.

TOP R: Mrs Lennon with, L, Casey; R, Mac, both boys from 'our crew'. All except one crew member volunteered for Pathfinders and were all too soon lost from the sole Canadian PFF Squadron at Gransden Lodge.

BELOW L: WAAF Sergeants' Mess pre-Christmas party 1944. Picking out a few remembered names - Molly, cut off at left; Joe Hogarth offering Joan a drink; to his left Dot Dean holds a plate of cakes; behind her is Sylvia, watchkeeper colleague; front middle, Betty with Roger wearing pullover; on his left, Connie Wahlstrand with aircrew friend in civvies.

BELOW R: This view of the party shows the silver foil strips we employed as decoration, but which were used operationally to drop over enemy territory to disrupt their radar (code-named 'Window'). The same people have rearranged themselves!

9.
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thought Dortmund must be the worst of all, but I was wrong, as I shall shortly tell you. Augsburg, & whoever else reads this, you could never imagine the extent of the damage our bombing has done to Germany - the reality was so much worse than I had pictured in my mind. Industry is obviously at a standstill - smoke was seen issuing from 3 or 4 chimneys over the whole area - the streets seemed bare - there were a few people & one or two vehicles - military traffic no doubt. We caught a glimpse of the Dortmund-Ems canal, which is very famous, before we struck N.E. as far as Hamm, which was the most Easterly point of the route. Here are the enormous marshalling

4971 ON 15 PLEASE WRITE ON BOTH SIDES

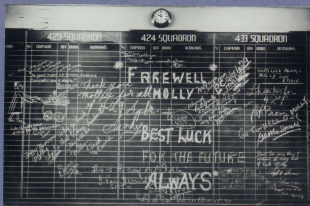


TOP L: A page from a long descriptive letter written to a sister after the trip

BELOW L: Cologne with bridge down, shells of buildings, including railway station, but the cathedral still rises tall.

VERTICALLY at R: Photographs of 4 unidentified bombed areas - we passed over so many!

BOTTOM L: Vimy Ridge memorial, passed over during the homeward flight.



TOP: Farewell Molly party, held 4th August 1945 in our well-remembered old workplace, the Operations Room at RCAF Leeming. I was back from my few months away at Leeming's satellite station at Skipton-on-Swale, to sit out the time until it was my turn to be discharged from the Service. This shows the Squadron board, where details of the aircrews and their aircraft would be chalked up.

BELOW L: A last outing from Skipton, to Fountains Abbey, enjoying the sensation of wearing my own clothes for a whole day off-camp, a concession since the end of hostilities in Europe.

BELOW R: My future husband Peter, coincidentally also in Signals and a Senior NCO.



A visit to Ian's grave in the clan Hay plot at Thomnahurich Cemetery, Inverness, in August 1975. I held in place the top of the memorial stone which we found broken and lying nearby on the ground, whilst Peter took the photograph.