

## **Nancy Sandars**

*WRNS in RN Y Service 1943 -1944. Looe, Lyme Regis and Abbot's Cliff. Intercept and DF operator against E-boats and enemy aircraft. Interviewed August 2015.*

Before the war I had spent time in Germany with a family who taught German to English students who were reading History. If you read History at Oxford in those days, you had to have German. I had been staying with this family at Die Klause in Jugenheim

There were two sisters, one a teacher, and the other looked after our physical comforts. They were Jewish, one was already leaving, and the other had the difficult decision to stay or go to England. They had a lot of friends here, particularly in Oxford and she decided to go there. She was 18 and I agreed to accompany her back, just before the war.

When I had been staying with them before, it was all a rather friendly atmosphere, but now there was a great notice up saying '*Unser Grüss ist Heil Hitler*', that meant you couldn't say anything to anybody unless you said 'Heil Hitler.

We had to get a transit visa to go through Belgium and there were crowds of Jewish people queuing for their visas. They were all refused and never said a word, but they just turned round and walked away, and you knew that was a death sentence, and they knew too.

Before I joined the Wrens I was in a thing called the MTC - Motorised Transport Corps. Because I was not very good driving a car, I said I would ride a motorcycle. I was in Reading, in the southern area, which went down to Southampton and Portsmouth. I took despatches over most of southern England. Although we never knew what was in the despatches it was nonetheless most interesting. We were taught how to ride motorcycles in difficult conditions by people who had ridden them in the United States during prohibition. I kept a record of some of those journeys.

However, this only remained interesting whilst there was a danger of invasion, once that had passed I lost interest in the job. All the other interesting people at Reading had left. There were only a few people, like the Duke of Marlborough, left, but he didn't really count for much. One of the people there with me was Jack Driberg, brother of Tom Driberg and he was lively and stimulating to talk with.

Jack had walked home from Turkey and could speak all the Turkish languages. He gave me some tips about the language and one day

he said, "you won't be hearing from me again for some time". I knew that meant he was going to North Africa and I never heard from him again.

After the MTC I expected I would be called up straight away, but it took quite a long time and I worked on a survey of the state of music and arts in the country. I worked from Newcastle and got to know a lot of interesting people, including musicians.

I had the choice of the armed services or doing things like munitions. I wouldn't do munitions work as I wanted to know the extent of my responsibility for the work I would be doing; I had rather anti-war feelings at the beginning of the war so the last thing I wanted to do was anonymous munitions where I wouldn't know what my responsibility was.

I'd also heard that in the Wrens, if you chose to de-bunk, they couldn't bring you back with the police!

When I first joined, we did a short course at Mill Hill, learning the Wrens' extraordinary language. For instance, one notice went up saying 'negative jackets will be worn', that meant you needn't wear a jacket, so you had to learn all that.

Then we then went to Wimbledon, to a nice house where we were well looked after and there, we learned our real job. We learned a certain amount about the ionosphere and technical things

We had to write very fast to take down very fast speech, and we couldn't think what all this was. I learned radio telephony<sup>1</sup> (RT) and a little bit of wireless telegraphy<sup>2</sup> (WT), but never worked on Morse. Our instructor was Freddie Marshall.

My first posting after training was to Looe in Cornwall. I was rather disappointed when I heard I was going there as I knew there would be very little traffic and it wouldn't be so interesting

Later, I went Abbot's Cliff, near Dover, a very odd place, perched on the edge of a cliff and below us ran the railway from Folkestone. We could go down under the railway and reach the sea. The first thing I remember about Abbot's Cliff was when I arrived there to replace someone, I opened the door of the house and heard the most lovely singing voice, because one of our Wrens was a professional singer.

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1 Radio communication using speech.

2 Radio communication using Morse code.

Our work was twofold – there was the tower, which was perhaps the most important, which had all the direction finding (DF) equipment. When you were listening to something you had to give a reading on it and put it through to control. With your other ear you were in touch with headquarters and you were talking to them - so one ear was doing one thing, and the other ear something quite different. You had to write down what you had heard.

In the tower you were cut off from local people and you took your food for the night and a tray with coffee and milk. The wind could be so strong that it took the milk from the jug. We used the equipment in the tower to find a bearing and send it to control, which we thought was Dover Castle

We knew exactly what we were doing, we could only do our job if we were up to 30 miles from the people speaking, in this case it was E-boats in the Channel and we knew we were monitoring them. We knew them by name; the captain of one flotilla was Willi Frend, I think, we would, hear them say for instance 'I have six severely wounded on board, I am making for home.'

For direction-finding we had a whole different set of instruments, and there would be others down the coast and the control centre could take bearings, compare them, and get a fix.

Towards the end of our time at Abbot's Cliff we were listening to the Luftwaffe and we had to learn their slang. We could hear the planes coming and they didn't mind the Ps and Qs very much. Our rather prudish officer looked at what we had written down and said, 'Did you really have to put that sort of thing down?', which amused us very much. We wrote it in German, for instance "*Ich habe Bauchweh*" ("I have belly ache"), meant the plane was damaged and the pilot was about to jettison an auxiliary engine and was limping home. Once, someone listening from a station on the Thames Estuary, heard a pilot say 'What's that funny little thing down three? Shall we drop something on it?' 'Another pilot replied, 'Better not, we'd better keep it.'

We were within range of the enemy guns and we used to have shells coming over, there was something called the *Batterie Lindemann*. I remember once when I was first on duty at Abbot's Cliff, someone said 'shelling warning'; I thought it was 'shilling warning', I was so used to extraordinary naval language! It meant we couldn't leave the building, so if we had 48 hours off, we couldn't take it. In the town there were loudspeakers which would instruct all personnel to take shelter, which was very tiresome. We had to do what we were told and go straight to the base.

I was on watch in our station when the first V1s came over. Everything went a bit crazy because I'm afraid our Wren commanding officer wasn't very on the spot and hadn't been told what could happen, and thought perhaps it was the invasion.

We knew things were very intense and we were in the area where the V1s were shot down. In the woods around us there were anti-aircraft batteries and sometimes if they hit one of these things it would turn over and come around. You could be out on a nice country walk and suddenly all the woods around you were alive with gunfire, you saw something had been hit and it seemed to be coming straight for you, which wasn't at all nice. It wasn't anything to worry about really.

We had to be very careful that nobody knew what we were doing of course. We worked with the Air Force, and they were operational in that area with big aerodromes. We went to dances with them and sometimes they were so tired after a sortie to France that you had to almost hold them up when they were dancing. We made great friends with them.

I could go riding, that was rather jolly.

Special Duties Wrens had, at first, had advantages, they didn't have to wear uniform and all sorts of things like that and the other Wrens didn't like this and complained. In Special Duties you had joined straight away as a petty officer or even a chief petty officer. By the time I joined I had to come in as an ordinary Wren and we had to behave exactly like the stewards and cooks.

When news of this came to Abbot's Cliff someone said 'That's impossible, she's on watch at night, and she can't possibly sleep in the daytime in the kitchen' - that sort of thing. So they thought again and gave me an old watch-room which was at the very top of the house and that was wonderful because the old radios had been left in it and I had access to music from my bunk. The only snag was the aerial; when it rained the water came down the wire so I put a bucket underneath.

When I was allowed away for 48 hours, I let other people take advantage of my room, which was alright, except that they always moved the bucket and I couldn't stop this. Finally, I said, 'Don't move the bucket, it's magic!' and they never moved it again.

I knew when something was happening, from my bunk I could see the clock tower in Calais. What wasn't so nice was that we could see when boats were hit and sometimes a boat would come towards us on fire.

Once D-Day was approaching we couldn't move at all, everything was cut off, but before that we could take 48 hours off and I could go home. My family knew nothing about what I was doing, we were just 'Special Duties'.

We knew the invasion was coming and we had seen the Mulberry harbour being towed past us. Of course we didn't have details but we certainly saw all the heavy stuff going past. You see, I had memories of the First World War, I remember the Zeppelins coming over, so I was very superior and said, 'This is only my second war'!

I suppose I was a bit older than the other Wrens, but on the whole, we were all fairly mature and knew what was going on. There was a very young Danish girl who was a great friend, she was [Ellen Karsten](#), later Branth. Her family, including her brothers, were in occupied Denmark. They were only allowed to use old, run-down; vehicles and the occupying force could overtake them. They used to disguise their fast vehicles as old crocks!

I also remember [Pat Owtram](#) very well, and [Ray Spender](#) - a singer with a lovely voice. [Alison Gerrish](#), she was WT as well as RT. The WT operators were in the same room with us and would sometimes tell us what was going on in the WT traffic. During the taking of Boulogne she heard the occupying force saying '*wir sind uberrannt, es lebe der Führer, Heil Hitler!*'<sup>3</sup>, and then, silence.

We never heard about Bletchley Park, but I believe that if you got promoted to petty officer you might be sent there for a short spell, but that was all I knew. I had a great friend who I think was there, [Arthur Cooper](#). He was a Japanese scholar and his brother [Josh](#) was also there and was well-known at Bletchley Park. There are a lot of stories about Josh because he was a character; he would take his teacup and throw it into the lake. The Cooper family were not very handsome men, they were extraordinary looking people, but they had a beautiful sister and she worked with a man who made films during the war, official films of the Post Office and things like that<sup>4</sup>.

I left Abbot's Cliff before the Y station closed, but the house remained and if you took the train from Folkestone and craned your neck out of the window you could just see it, perched on the edge of the cliff.

After Abbot's Cliff I went for a short time to Sheringham in East Anglia, very cold, doing the same work. I had a friend at another station near Great Yarmouth.

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<sup>3</sup> 'We are overrun, long live the Fuhrer, Heil Hitler!'

<sup>4</sup> Cicely Cooper married Humphrey Jennings in 1929 (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography).

When I left the Wrens, I went straight into archaeology. One of our officers at Mill Hill had trained as an archaeologist. I worked in museums and went to Persia and worked on the excavation of chariot tombs with well-known archaeologists such as Stuart Piggott

Many Wrens from Abbot's Cliff went to Germany after the war, but I still had very strong anti-war feelings. We all thought that this war was the end and we wouldn't survive, and we were rather horrified when we saw what had happened to Germany. I remember being taken to Dresden and saying, 'Did this city once have all these buildings?' and was told 'Of course'.

After the war I was able to tell the people at Jugenheim what had happened to their colleagues and they put up a memorial to them.

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