

Mrs Elaine van Hattem, née Beamish

Flowerdown and Colombo 1942-1946. WRNS Intercept Operator. Interviewed October 2014.

Life before the WRNS and volunteering

Before I joined the WRNS, I lived in Hornchurch, Essex and worked for the Prudential. I was then evacuated to Torquay, which I hated. I was there for a little while and thought 'this isn't me' and so volunteered for the WRNS. My father was in the Merchant Navy, my brother in the Navy and I had decided that I didn't want to go into the ATS. And so I was interviewed at Brentwood by a doctor, who also discovered that I apparently had appendicitis! After seeing another doctor, it was actually confirmed that I didn't have appendicitis at all!

Training at New College

As so I ended up at New College, London (near Swiss Cottage) on 5 August 1942, where I met Bobbie Whitby, and others. We had a choice of being a wireless operator or motor mechanic – I chose wireless operator, as did everyone else. I didn't know what was involved; I don't think the others did either! I completed my basic WRNS training in about two to three months, before we went on to Flowerdown. It was very nice at New College, the food was edible and we were near the theatres. We learnt Morse and were instructed by Commander Bloodsworth, who was very strict. We didn't use any machines, as I recall. It wasn't hard to learn, as we all helped each other and had some very good petty officers looking after us – it was a very happy time. We had to set to work when we left there to go to Winchester, though!

Flowerdown

We were offered the choice of posting – some chose Scarborough but I was very glad to have chosen Flowerdown, and we went straight to Winchester from New College in late 1942. We did visit Scarborough a couple of times. Flowerdown was five miles out of Winchester, next to the Fleet Air Arm base, in lovely countryside. We lived in cabins – there were about eight of us in each and we used to take it in turns to get up and make the tea! We eventually got bicycles as the mess was a long way from where we were sleeping. It was quite a big camp, as I remember. Petty Officers were based in a special row, going up to where our accommodation was.

There were aerals all around Flowerdown, picking up the signals. It was a free and easy life there, with lots of grounds. We went to dances in London, at the Royal Overseas League, in St James. I remember having our photos taken. We couldn't do much as we only had about £5 to spend. We stayed in the Piccadilly Hotel a couple of times, and went to a tea dance there once! We did this during our couple of days off – they didn't keep track of us during this leave, but woe betide you if were late coming back. Once I had terrible trouble getting back, I caught the train and it didn't stop – we went straight to Portsmouth. When I eventually got back and walked in on them having 'prayers', I got a terrible telling off.

The Work

We each had our own radio set, which was a 2 ft square black case – nothing elaborate - and earphones. We would sit twiddling the dial and would search for mainly submarines, ships, minesweepers etc. We listened and as soon as a signal of Morse came in, we would try to locate it. We would then take down the code as a group of four letters onto a pad. These codes didn't mean anything to us – it was the Charge Hand who knew how to tell the difference between ships and aircraft. It could be a very frustrating process. Once we finished taking the signal, the Charge Hand would take them away and we'd work on the next signal. We didn't know where these codes were sent on to. It was only later, after the War, that we knew about Bletchley Park. We often couldn't hear all of the Morse and the Charge Hand (who was watching over us) would shout if we didn't catch the message! The only really exciting thing was if we caught an enemy submarine or aircraft.

Lord Mountbatten used to visit a lot and did something to the code; he was certainly interested in this. He also went over to Ceylon afterwards with his wife.

We worked four hour shifts on three day patterns. We then had a day off. After this, we'd go on watch at about 6 am. One was a night shift and I think it was a bit longer. It wasn't tiring as you were with everyone you knew and you just got on with it. One clear memory I have is of the enamel tea mugs being almost black, as they were so dirty – however, I got used to it! The boys used to have their 'tot' at 1pm and sometimes we'd have a sip, depending on who you sat next to. We weren't allowed to smoke.

Bletchley Park

I never heard of Bletchley Park during my time at Flowerdown and it was only many years later, after we left the WRNS, that we went there to find out about it. Once we had signed the Secrets Act, we knew not to talk about our work and not even our families knew what we did.

Colombo

After around six months at Flowerdown, we went to Colombo. I remember us leaving on a Saturday night in coaches and it was pouring with rain. We had no idea where we were going. The coaches took us to Newcastle, where we boarded a boat, for Bombay. I don't recall volunteering for this posting; we were just told we were going, although I don't think they'd have minded if we had refused.

We had a terrible time travelling from Bombay to Ceylon, as the boat in front (which was full of naval personnel) was sunk and all on board died apart from a one Wren. It made us so miserable - the poor girl was in a terrible state. I can't remember the name of our ship. It took about a week to get down to Colombo and I don't know the route we took. Pat Smith married the midshipman on the boat - I've tried to get in touch to find out more details. I think his name was Douglas.

When we got to Bombay, we had to work in a factory for about three weeks, working on something to do with bricks, which we were a bit indignant about, as we had these wireless skills, that weren't being used! My cousin was out there and met me, which was nice. He knew all the best places to go, the Club of India etc. We were the first batch of Wrens who went over so maybe they weren't ready for us in Colombo. After we finished working with bricks they sent us on to Colombo.

It turned out they didn't know what to do with us in Colombo either. There was a bossy Petty Officer in charge. He would give one set of commands and then some else would give us a different set of commands. This is where our group was split up into one of three groups. One group went to Beaver House and I went with Vicky Smith in another group. Beaver was a big private house with sheds (bandas) in the garden. About 12-14 people would be in each banda, which had brick walls, no windows but a space below the thatched roof, to let the air circulate. We also experienced a lot of theft of our jewellery when we were out there. I remember my friend Jean Carr constantly getting up during the night to tuck in her mosquito net, to protect

her jewellery! We used to have a newspaper whilst we were there and in the end we had to pay for it. We were called HMS Lanka

A bus would come for us to take us to work at HMS Anderson. In our spare time we used to go to a very nice swimming pool and played tennis a lot. We also went swimming a lot as we were near the beach. It was a lovely crowd. We didn't get the same freedom as at Flowerdown.

The work was similar to Flowerdown – we were on the sets, doing interception on Japanese forces. The German work was done at Scarborough. We did some Italian work to begin with in Ceylon. The shift pattern was still four hours. We wore white uniform.

I met my future husband at a tea dance on the first day we were off duty. He was one of two Dutch boys we met and they took us everywhere – my future husband had his own jeep! He was in a special branch of the Dutch navy and his ambition was to rescue his sister from a Java prisoner of war camp. All she had saved from her house fire was a bed, which she had taken into the camp. She was so afraid that her son would starve, that she befriended the guards to ensure he ate properly. The Dutch government sent them to Australia afterwards for six months and then they returned to Holland. I married my husband in Ceylon – we went to Nuwara Eliya for honeymoon and stayed in the Grand Hotel and then the Hill Club. We had about one month off, which was lovely. Afterwards I went back to work and my husband would be gone for up to six weeks at a time. We had a flat just outside of Colombo, sharing a house with three other girls. We were lucky.

End of the War

We were simply told the War was over and put on a troop ship along with prisoners of war. I was in cabin with three Singhalese women and all the men gave up their cabins for the prisoners of war. My father met us at Southampton and met my husband for the first time. My husband had to report every day to the police station as he was an 'alien' – this made my mother very cross as he had fought for our country! Close to where we lived there was an MP, Chuter-Ede, who acted as sponsor for my husband to retrain in cake making at Westminster College, London and then run a cake business at the local shop. He duly became a British Citizen.

I was demobbed in 1946. We went to two reunions at the Festival Hall and met Prince Phillip at both.

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