Sue Green, née Hayward


Joining up

Before joining the WRNS I had started at the age of 17 as an apprentice at Harrods in London’s Knightsbridge, working in the beauty and hairdressing department. I was living with my parents just outside London. I had started at Harrods in October 1941 but had only got some five months into my apprenticeship when, one day, I was prodded with an umbrella by a rather austere lady who told me “You should be serving your country! Come along to Queen Anne’s Mansions and join the Navy”.

Actually I thought this rather a good idea and so in my lunch hour I went along to Queen Anne’s Mansions, but when I got there and told the Wren officer I’d like to join I was disappointed to be told that “We are full up and we don’t need anybody. However, we could do with some cooks and stewards!” Undaunted, I told her that I could cook and that I had done some cooking at school and was happy to play my part in that capacity if need be. She asked me if I was sure and when I agreed she told me that she would put me down for cook – with a preference for signalling! We hadn’t even mentioned signalling and where she got that idea from I shall never know, but that is what she wrote and off I went back to Harrods.

That evening, when I got home, I told my Mother that I had joined up and she said that this was ridiculous because I was far too young. This was in June 1942 and I was not due to become 18 until October, but I was called up at 17¾ in August and when I got my papers it was to be a telegraphist!

I was horrified, I knew nothing of telegraphy but I found that when I joined up, with a hundred or so other Wrens, none of them knew anything about telegraphy either, we were all raw recruits and that we were “in it together”, so I didn’t feel so bad.

So, in August 1942, we started off in Finchley Road, London (part of London University) in a huge old house all doing our initial training. From there we went to Hampshire, to Soberton Towers, which was a lovely old house near to Drxford and not far from Portsmouth. Here we did our fuller training and after six months became Royal Navy Telegraphists. From there, the people who lived in the north were sent to Scarborough and those in the south to Winchester (HMS Flowerdown).
HMS Flowerdown

I was at HMS Flowerdown for about a year. We had to learn the German and Italian message procedures and then, working in four watches (0800-1300; 1300-1800; 1800-midnight and midnight-0800) we would sit at our stations, scanning the airwaves looking for signals being sent. Once we had one we logged it. It was rather boring work, but I remember one particular day when a senior officer came along, gathered us together and announced, “Congratulations everyone, we have found and sunk a battleship (the Scharnhorst)”. We were unaware of the content of the signals and had no idea where our work fitted in the wider scheme of things. Where the signals we had taken down went on to we had absolutely no idea.

We lived in huts and I was still with the same group with whom I had joined up so we had managed to stick together. Something like 10 of us became very close friends, most of whom have passed on, but I am still friends with Elaine Beamish. The huts were pretty basic and being the Royal Navy they were called “cabins” and the bus taking us on leave was called the “liberty boat”. Each hut had a central passage running through it and a kitchen at one end, there was one bathroom between about 20 of us, but because of the shift system we found it relatively easy to share.

Apart from a liberty boat that took us to Fareham once a week, there was a nearby village to which we would most often hitchhike and we were regularly invited to dances held in the area.

Occasionally we had some extended leave and I would sometimes go home by rail from Droxford (a good couple of miles away) or more often we would hitchhike. Being in uniform, we never had much trouble getting a lift, particularly from lorry drivers who were invariably kind and would give us lifts. At home I was never asked what did nor did I volunteer any information to tell them, there was a kind of culture during the war that taught us all not to ask too many or difficult questions! So my parents had no idea what I was doing. Mind you, being blissfully ignorant even of the existence of Bletchley Park and the entire system, I wasn’t entirely sure myself, only that I sat; I listened and I logged!

The food at HMS Flowerdown was pretty grim but then food generally in Britain was strictly rationed and we all had a grim time of it. I certainly never got the chance to exercise my cooking skills!
My pay was 30 shillings once a fortnight, admittedly without deductions, but still not very much!

In December 1943, I was drafted, together with most of my original colleagues. We knew we were going somewhere abroad but didn’t know where, or for what. By this time we met up with a lot of our colleagues who had gone to Scarborough and we all went up to London to be accommodated temporarily in an old hotel behind Piccadilly. We stayed here for about two weeks wondering what on earth they were going to do with us. The only clue was when we got our kit bags and in there we found tropical kit, so that gave us our first clue as to where we were going to be drafted next.

We knew quite a few people, also listeners, who had gone to Mombasa in Kenya and thought we may be joining them but no one knew for sure. Our parents knew we were going abroad but no one knew precisely where.

First we went on a train to somewhere in Scotland where we embarked on a huge troopship, with thousands of troops aboard and once again our little gang stuck together. I remember going through the Suez Canal, this was quite exciting and on one occasion someone saw something interesting on the port side. I can’t remember what it was - and all the people on board rushed to this side only to be quickly told over the tannoy to go back as the ship was going to capsize! And throughout all this time we still we had no idea until at last we arrived at Bombay (Mumbai). Here we got a train which took about three days to get to a naval base from where we took an overnight ferry to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and there joined another train going through the jungle until we finally arrived in Colombo.

Arriving in Colombo in January 1944 we were ordered to parade in our best uniforms with hats and white stockings and we marched down the high street and off towards our barracks in Colombo.

**HMS Anderson**

We arrived at our “Wrennery” in Colombo and quickly settled in. From there we went back and forth to our shifts at HMS Anderson by bus, both Wrens and sailors. HMS Anderson was in the middle of nowhere, and was a great big wireless station. I recall that someone saw a huge cobra right near the place where we were to be working but this was quickly dealt with.

At HMS Anderson we had first to learn Japanese (Kana) Morse, which was very complicated, 52 characters against the 26 that we had been
used to. But we settled quickly into our Y station listening routines once again, though now we were listening in quite a different way.

At one stage we had to learn to type the Japanese Morse signals as we were receiving them. To qualify to do this we had to pass an examination, which, we were told, was a Petty Officer’s Course Exam. We thought that this meant we would be promoted, and get more money, but in fact none of us were re-rated as by that time we had had VE Day and the war was coming to an end, so nothing came of our work to pass the exam.

**Time Off**

We all found it pretty hot, the uniforms were still quite thick and most of us suffered prickly heat around our waistlines, but; on our times off we could all go down to some of the most beautiful beaches and swim in the sea and sunbathe – so it wasn’t all bad!

There were also lots of wonderful parties, with not many women and lots of men around so we had more than our fair share of entertainment! There were two very nice hotels to which we went for dances and recreation; the Galle Face and The Grand Oriental Hotel (or GOH) and a nightclub called the Silver Fawn which was always known as the “Septic Prawn” because on the day it had opened, long before our time, everyone had got food-poisoning.

In fact, we had such a good time that when I wrote home telling my parents about all the parties, the beaches, the swimming and the fun we were having, I received a stern letter from my father saying that what they really wanted to know about was the “flora and fauna”!

Every spare little bit of money we had, we spent on clothes. These were inexpensive and all hand-made in Colombo. We’d go into Hirdaramani with a sketch or a picture of what we wanted, choose them material and within a couple of days we’d get our frocks, dresses and outfits. There was not much else to spend money on, we could go into cafes and drink limejuice, but any real money we had, we spent on clothes.

Lots of people got engaged, including me, and many married. My friend Elaine was married there, to a Dutchman. My own engagement didn’t last very long when I got back to England as my fiancé was a Canadian and I thought I didn’t really want to go hurtling off to Canada so the engagement was short-lived.

We occasionally had some extended leave and I was able to get about a bit. My father knew a friend of a friend, an elderly gentleman
who lived alone in the hills above Colombo in a place called Nuwara Eliya (also known as Neuralia), a tea-growing area up in the hills. My father wrote a letter of introduction and with it I wrote to this man and he said of course I must come and stay on my next leave. His house was just behind a golf clubhouse and so every lunchtime he went to the golf club to play and every evening he would go to the hill club. He would take me and leave me to my own devices whilst he went up to the bar to meet his friends and play billiards. However, there were always lots of service personnel around more my age and I never wanted for company. Later he would come down, his car would arrive and we would go home. In fact I enjoyed my time and spent two leaves with him. These days you would never allow a young girl to stay with a much older man, but it was an age of more innocence and a more genteel behaviour than perhaps you could expect nowadays. I think I tried to look at the flora and fauna for my parents, but I was never very good at it!

On another leave I stayed on a tea plantation with a few of my friends, again with an elderly gentleman, who had all sorts of things organised for us. On one occasion we climbed the highest mountain in Ceylon and did so at night with bearers to carry our gear, in order to be there for the sunrise at a temple on the summit. It was easy going up, but coming down was agony on our calves. On another occasion we went trekking into the jungle opposite the estate where the army trained in jungle warfare and here I learned to hate leeches! Whenever there was a spare moment our host took us off to his club to play tennis. That was a very active leave!

It was not all a tropical paradise as while we were there a convoy headed straight for Colombo rather than the normal procedure of going to India with people going on to Ceylon by train, and several ships were sunk with great loss of life. We did realise awful things were going on, but it was really a different world.

End of the war

When the war Japan ended in August 1945 we had no work to do. Before we went back home we were put to work caring for Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs). Those that were well enough came to Colombo to be taken home on troopships and we had to look after them for a day, which was harrowing, we were the first people they could talk to and all they wanted to do was to talk about their conditions and treatment – how awful it had been. The powers that be had laid on the most unsatisfactory food for them; wonderful chicken salads and two cans of strong American beer, all of which was far too much for their stomachs and many of them were violently sick. They just could not take it. And these were the fits ones, the ones that could
walk. We just had to lend our ears while they told us how awful it had been.

Finally, in late November or early December 1945 my time in Ceylon came to an end and it was time to come back home.

Then it was back on a troopship for the long voyage home and we arrived in England just before Christmas 1945. We travelled to Portsmouth and received our gratuity money, about £84 as I recall, and we were demobbed. I quickly spent my money on clothes and before long I made my way back to Harrods.

I went into the same department I had left and said hello to everyone and they were all very nice to me. Then I saw my former manager, Mr Weedon, who told me that whilst it was nice to see me again, there were no vacancies for apprentices in his department! Luckily, however, I looked in on the father of a friend of mine, Mr Rogers, who was a buyer in another department and I told him that Mr Weedon didn’t want me back. He told me that as I had worked there for three months they had to take me back. So I went back to Mr. Weedon and explained this to him and, indeed they had to take me back as a manicurist. The only manicurists at that time were Revlon and Peggy Sage, Harrods had Peggy Sage and so I learned with them to be a manicurist. This might sound a bit ordinary but you had to do a lot of training and you had to do everything the Peggy Sage way.

Then I met my husband to be. He had lived in South Africa for some years, and because work was hard to find in England he decided to go back to South Africa and, after a month or so, I followed him out there and we got married. He knew that I had done telegraphy but neither he, nor my second husband, had any idea what I had really done.

In fact I didn’t know about the Bletchley Park connection myself until it all came out a few years ago and I was amazed to read of the entire story of Station X and the Y Stations, and thought, “Good Lord, that’s what we were doing!”


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