

Jean Rooke, nee Valentine

WRNS, Adstock Manor and Colombo

I joined the WRNS in 1943 in a fit of pique because my application to join the WAAF as an MT driver had been turned down! How wise they were and how stupid I was to think that my little height and leg reach would have been of any useful purpose for driving anything but a saloon car!

However I found myself on a train bound for Glasgow (I'd only ever been there once before as my parents always headed for the North and I mean NORTH, like Thurso and John O'Groats for our holidays.) and thence to Balloch in Dunbartonshire where we were installed in Tulliechewan Castle. I know the stone spiral staircase there rather well since I scrubbed it from top to bottom too often to forget it!

The building had very recently been vacated by a gang of Irish labourers who had left it in an appalling state even down to discarded food and greasy combs on the tables. However what better discipline to weld together a bunch of gently brought up maidens than to set them the task of bringing order out of chaos. That wasn't fun but although the Dunkirk spirit had not been invented long before we got on with the job. That was comparatively easy. The most awful thing we had to live with was the communal shower room (some wore their swimming cozzies!) and the truly appalling state of the loos. It seems this edifice of cubicles sans doors had been built over a large empty area into which the debris descended - a vast dry closet if you like - and I am going no further into the details here!.. Suffice it to say we all used to try to hold out until after we were let off in the evening when we headed for the "comfort" of the tiny waiting room of the local station.

The day we left there for London (I had never left Scotland before so great excitement) the First Officer WRNS called us together to announce that that day she had been privileged to PULL A CHAIN. So, presumably life was more tolerable for those who came after.

In London we were interviewed and after a couple of weeks in Earls Court doing nothing but waiting for orders and dancing every afternoon and evening in Hammersmith Palais to the music of, if I remember correctly, Oscar Rabin, I found myself on the way to Middlesex to train as a goodness knows what since it appeared the Officers who assigned me to this Category didn't seem to know "what" themselves.

Their prime concern seemed to be the matter of my stature again..." Stand up, Valentine, all right, sit down ". Natter natter amongst themselves and a general consensus of opinion was that I would do. They were wrong. In the event I couldn't reach to the top of my Bombe but since having divulged this Top Secret secret to me they had to make the best of it and so I was provided with a small wooden platform on which to stand while I set up the machine!

After learning how to use this monster, which, as we now understand it, was the

forerunner of the modern day Computer and having signed the Official Secrets Act I was then dumped in the middle of Buckinghamshire at Bletchley Park and mostly at one of the Outstations, Adstock. There we played our small part in breaking the German codes and felt very proud and privileged so to do. As Mr Churchill put it "The geese that laid the golden egg and never cackled." I cannot speak for anyone else, but I know I didn't breathe a word until after the first "Codebreaker" books were on sale some 30 years on.

After a very fulfilled and happy time, there was an order made to some of us to go overseas which, since I was still only 19 I could appeal against. My feeling was that if that was where we were wanted then it was my job to go although I was somewhat loth to leave my present location, work and friends.

So, to Bletchley Park for a course on Japanese codes and ciphers which was altogether a different kettle of fish. This time we were living in Woburn Abbey, a grand old pile, if at this time shorn of all its fancy trappings and pictures. This was February and as cold as Charity. The bedrooms had double sets of heavy doors, one green baize, but nothing kept out the all-pervading chill. Still, it was another interesting experience and in more modern times I have gone back there to see the place restored by the Bedford family to its former glory.

Back to London for a week on Chelsea Embankment in Crosby Hall the house of Thomas a Becket. We moved there from... oh I can't remember because it was 70 years ago! On a train then to Greenock and off to Colombo on the SS Strathmore. Nine in a single cabin just in case you have the impression we were being spoiled. One month later, in one of the first convoys through the Med, we docked in Bombay where we hung about for another week housed on the Dunera which had been damaged in a raid on the Bombay docks and was not seaworthy. The last Leg was in a battered old boat called the City of London, which rumour had been condemned pre-war and pressed back into service. Cockroaches the size of small mice – honestly!

Colombo at last and back to watch keeping in an office which housed several officers trained either in meteorology or who had done a crash course in Japanese, four Met wrens and me. Our job was to receive the signals from the wireless room specifically connected to Met reports in the Pacific, do our best to make sense of them then teleprint the results to various Fleet Reconnaissance Units in Hawaii, Melbourne, Eastern Fleet etc.

During the following eighteen months we worked hard, played hard and I think largely enjoyed our lives. During this time I met only one former pupil of Perth Academy, Alex Torrance who was stationed at the same Fleet Air Arm base as Clive, who was to become my husband. In fact when Alex left his aircraft in somewhat of a hurry Clive drove him to the Rest Camp at a hill station called Diyatalawa. He subsequently attended our wedding in the Scots Kirk and afterwards at the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo.

After spending the post war years in Burma. Karachi (then it was in India and

moved later to Pakistan!) and Bombay, we settled down in the UK and brought up a daughter and son. They spent very happy holidays every year with my parents in Perth, who in their turn would come to St Albans, Brentwood, Chigwell and High Wycombe to spend Christmas with us.

Shortly after my Mother died in 1970, Clive and I moved to Brussels and then to Cologne before returning to the UK just in time to be with my Father who died in 1972 and to settle in Marlow where we hope to remain.