

EDNA SEWELL*Edna Sewell*

'In February 1943, I achieved my ambition of joining the WRNS and, if honest, it wasn't patriotism but the uniform that seemed more flattering! The sea was in my blood, so I found myself in the RN Recruiting Office in Albert Square, Manchester, with a questionnaire in front of me asking "Why did I wish to join?" "Did I have relatives in the Navy?" and pictures of RN Officers' sleeves from which I had to recognise the rank. I must have done OK as a few weeks later I was sent a travel warrant with instructions on how to get to Mill Hill, North London. My destination was a large new building which the Admiralty had taken over. It is now the Cold Research Institute. For me it was a very exciting journey on my own to London, I'd never been further than Blackpool before. So there I was with what seemed hundreds of girls like myself, putting on uniforms and learning our basic training, such as saying going ashore instead of going out and remembering to look what the dress of the day was. If it was greatcoats and we tried to wear raincoats then there was no going ashore that day, but we learned very quickly. After this training we were posted to various naval bases.

I went to Chatham where I served as a Writer in the Surgeon Commander's office at the Naval Hospital and I loved it. However, after six months this came to an end, when I was drafted to a Convoy Signal Base at Southend-on-Sea. Here, with about 10 other Wrens, we kept the Confidential Signals books up-to-date which were kept in lead-lined bags and issued to the RN signalmen at the conference, before they left on each convoy, going through the English Channel or up the East Coast.

The busiest and most secret time I remember was the build up to D-Day when merchant ships were loaded with army supplies in the London Docks and sailed down the Thames to Southend, where hundreds of ships assembled off Southend Pier and, along with their escort naval vessels, were formed into convoys ready to sail to France.

8 May 1945 was VE Day. Four days later I married and within a month I was discharged from the WRNS as, in those days, married women weren't allowed to serve in the forces during peacetime. I was given a Post Office book containing my

very small discharge gratuity payment. Mine was No.1 so I could possibly claim to have been the first Wren to leave after the war.

All Wrens in WWII were volunteers. There was no conscription and there was no policing. The RN police had no jurisdiction over us and we were very proud of this, but if a Wren went AWOL [absent without leave] or committed a crime, she was immediately dishonourably discharged and, being of conscription age, could possibly be called up for ammunitions or the Land Army. That really was hard work. I only knew of one case during my service.

Editors' note:

Primrose Buckle, who has contributed some of her own memories to the WWII Royal Observer Corps article (see p.75), mentioned to me that she joined the ROC to avoid joining the Wrens because she disliked the idea of perpetuating the wearing of boarding school type long knickers down to the knee any longer! I asked Edna about this and she confirmed that official ones were indeed long, although not made of wool; they were not very comfortable and were known as 'blackouts'.