

Memories of serving in the ATS

written by Torla Mackarness as part of 'Memorial to the Women of World War 2'
project run by the Imperial War Museum



TM front centre, in trousers

I served from 1940 to 1945 in the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service], and was therefore spared some of the worst experiences of women during the war – loneliness, shortages, evacuation, conscription into work not chosen by oneself. The really difficult years, materially, came after the war for me, when I had small children, clothes and food were rationed, money was short and fuel for cooking and heating sometime hard to come by.

Preliminary training at Aldermaston was hard and tiring, but I think probably useful. Polishing shoes and brass, making bedding and those extraordinary hard slabs we slept on, called 'biscuits,' into incredibly neat packages; marching, saluting, and doing the much-loathed PE, all had their value for us as individuals, as well as for the country (we hoped!) Above all the meeting, mixing and working with people from different parts of the country, different backgrounds, different education, different family circumstances, was an unforgettable and thoroughly enjoyable experience for me, after my somewhat sheltered experience of happy home, girls' boarding school, and Oxford University.

All my service, after Aldermaston was with AA Command: first as a kiné theodolite operator at Practice Camps, to which Anti Aircraft batteries came at regular intervals, to practice fire (at a target towed behind an ancient and slow-flying aircraft). We 'kinés' were trained to follow the target and shell bursts with an instrument that photographed them before and after firing, to develop and evaluate the films, and by applied trigonometry, work out how far behind, above, below or ahead of the target the 4.5" or 3.7" guns were aiming, so that they could be corrected. A labour-intensive and time-consuming operation by today's standards, I'm sure, but as all the practice camps were in remote and beautiful coastal areas of Wales and

Scotland, it gave me the opportunity to enjoy and explore on my bicycle some wonderful parts of the UK – notably southwest Wales, Anglesey and Snowdonia.

Before long this method of gunlaying which, being dependent on eyesight, was only available in daylight, became superseded by a radar method; so, after a 6-month training, I became an instructor of the operators in this method of following enemy aircraft - identifying and pursuing a blip on a screen, rather than an aircraft in one's sights; and then passing back the information to the Control Room for onward transmission to the guns. I helped train these operators – all ATS – at Devizes and Oswestry, until summoned to the Edinburgh OCTU (Officer Cadet Training Unit). When commissioned I joined 518 Battery – part of 139 Mixed Heavy AA Regiment. We were part of the defences of Kingston-upon-Hull, then of Yarmouth and Lowestoft, finally of Derby and Nottingham. During this time the D Day landings took place, and, like everyone else, I was worried for the safety of our forces, in my case my husband, who landed on D+2. We saw, from our site in Norfolk at that time, vast numbers of huge American bombers flying very low from their East Anglian bases towards Europe, at about teatime: operations which I have been told resulted in heavy casualties.

In, I think November, 1944 I went with my Battery (now 483) from Southampton to Belgium, to join in the defence of Brussels. The camp was cold, wet, and thoroughly uncomfortable. The latrine tent was partitioned with Hessian, and some way from our huts; and I remember our senior ATS officer setting off for Brussels, in search of 'pisse-pots' for use at night! Baths were once a week, in the Public Baths of Malines, where time and hot water were strictly limited. On New Year's Day, 1945, we distinctly heard the rumble of heavy artillery, when the Germans began a push connected with the Ardennes offensive. And the saddest memory of my time there was the death of one ATS officer and several ATS Other Ranks, when a train ran into a lorry they were travelling in, from a dance, on a level crossing. My active service ended in the spring of 1945, when I returned to UK to have our first child.

For those of us who were married before, or during, the war, the partings after a 24-hour, 48-hour pass, or a 7- or 14-day leave, were agonising. Leave was meant to come round every 3 months, and this was pretty well maintained: but once the services were in Europe, and the outcome not perfectly certain, no-one knew what would happen.

Although those days are so long ago now, I have retained a dozen friends or more – there's no better way of becoming acquainted closely with people than sharing a barrack room with 19 of them!

Torla Mackarness, née Tidman

Volunteered 1940: Sgt Instructor

Commissioned early 1943, 2nd Subaltern Subaltern

Discharged para 11 (ie pregnant!) 1945

13.3.2001