

**Jean McKay (1922-). WAAF
Aberporth**

West Wales Veterans' Archive

Date of Interview: 21.7.20

Description

Jean McKay was born in London in 1922 though sadly her mother died when she was a young girl. Jean passed her 11+ exam and attended Grammar School in London and then entered employment in the Home Office shortly before the outbreak of WW2. Travelling and working in London during the Blitz of 1940/41 was perilous and Jean and her colleagues personally handed reports on the previous nights' bombing to the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Seeking even more excitement Jean, volunteered for service in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), joining the Meteorological Office, where she met her future husband, H.H. McKay who happened to be the Officer in Charge of her Flight. They married in 1943 and eventually had three children. Her husband was decorated for his part in the Met Office contribution to the planning of D-Day, and he continued to work for the Met Office throughout his career including postings Gibraltar, Germany and to Aberporth. They both fell in love with the West Wales area and decided to retire to Aberporth in 1984.

Early Life

Born in a nursing home, on the edge of Clapham Common, Jean was admitted to hospital for an operation on her hip when she just 18 months. At the same time, her mother was admitted to another hospital for a very serious operation. Jean's aunt came down from Scotland to care for her with her father and was devoted to Jean until she herself died much later in 1957. Jean's father had a good occupation up until Jean was about 5 years old when he lost his job and became unemployed.

Jean attended the South Norwood Elementary School and the family lived in a top floor flat. Her childhood for the next few years was happy with a considerable amount of reading, swimming and exercise. In 1930 Jean remembered seeing her mother washing up at the sink as she went out to play. It was the last time she ever saw her mother, as she was taken to hospital where she died from the recurrence of her previous serious medical condition. Jean has regretted to this day that she was not allowed to go to the funeral as she was felt to be too young. Her father was still unemployed and they had to leave their flat, and he and Jean went to stay with an aunt who was a housekeeper in a large house in Upper Norwood, where Jean was allowed to stay as long as she kept to the 'servants quarters'. Jean's father frequently walked the 15 miles into London for job interviews as he could not afford the fare. However, Jean remembers these lodgings and the owners with some fondness.

A bright girl, Jean passed her 11+ exam and was admitted to the Old Palace Grammar School in Croydon. She enjoyed her time in the school, attended a youth club, went rambling, and learned to dance (quite proficiently). She was 14 years old when King Edward VIII announced his abdication on the radio on 11th December 1936. It was a little earlier, soon after passing her 11+ her father had finally got a job and he rented a three bedroomed

semi-detached house in Shirley, Croydon. It had a nice garden which backed onto Shirley golf course and proved to be heaven after their earlier experiences living in the lodging house. Jean had her own bedroom and a bathroom with hot water! Jean matriculated from the Grammar School at 16 years shortly before commencement of WW2. Jean tells her story in her own words...

Outbreak of WW2

On the day war broke out we were to go to Margate on holiday but cancelled it. The announcement came at 11:00 AM and shortly afterwards the air raid siren went off. We all dashed next door with our gas masks to the neighbour's Anderson shelter, which was an open bracket structure made of corrugated steel buried in the garden. We did not have one of our own and it was terrifying. We did not know what to expect. However, on this occasion it was a false alarm. We slept in the shelter in deck chairs every night for about 6 weeks. There were no more alarms and when it began to get cold and wet, we gave up and went back to our beds!

I got a job in the Home Office in Whitehall and was paid 32/6d per week. I travelled up from Croydon on what was called the 'workman's train' at 7:30am because it was cheaper. This got me to Charing Cross at 8:15am. Getting to work in the morning was exciting as often parts of the line had been bombed overnight and we were loaded onto lorries for parts of the journey.

As I did not start work until 9:00am I went to Lyons Corner House or the ABC for a cup of tea which cost 2d. Later I was able to buy a season rail ticket and pay for it weekly for about 7 shillings.

Soon the air raids started in earnest and often I could not get home at night because the line had been bombed so had to stay at the Home Office where there were bunks provided in the basement along with a canteen. We did not have a phone so if I were unable to get home, I would phone the local police station and they would send a policeman around with a message. I also stayed once a week on First Aid duty and it just as well that I had no casualties whilst on duty as I had no training whatsoever!

Every morning there would be a phone call on what had been damaged overnight and then we would have to take this report down to Churchill in War Rooms, down below. He would just say 'good morning' when I handed him the information.

I remember receiving a pay rise to £2.10 and then used to put 10 shillings in the post office on Friday but more often than not drew it out the following Thursday.

On Saturdays all the West End shops shut at 1:00 PM and as we worked until 1:00 PM there was no opportunity for shopping. There was nothing much in the shops anyway.

But then on Saturday afternoons we went to the Theatre where you could sit anywhere in the house for one and six. They would announce from the stage that there was an air raid on and give you the opportunity to leave. No one ever did because there was nowhere to

go. One Saturday when we came out of the Theatre the whole of the Surrey docks were ablaze and the train hardly moved for hours as we sat there in the pitch dark. It was very nerve racking!

Being young and wanting a bit of adventure I left the Home Office because it was a reserved occupation and hoped to be called up. In those days you had get permission from your father if you were under 21 years old. In the meantime, I went to work for a firm of leather importers in the city. It was a small firm and we had great fun.

Eventually I did wear my father down and it was rather against my father's wishes that I joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). I was called up in February 1941 and went to RAF HQ in Kingsway London where I had my medical which mainly consisted of whether you were breathing or colour blind and took an intelligence test. It there where I met my friend Valerie Hills (nee Gribble).

At the initial interview we were asked which trade we would prefer. I was given the choice between Meteorology and Catering. As I didn't fancy cooking, I plumped for Meteorology although I had not the foggiest idea at all what it was!

We were told not to bring anything with us at all other than toiletries and then sent off to Bridgnorth by train and sat around there for three days before they discovered that we should be at Gloucester.

When we are finally arrived in Gloucester it was snowing. We were billeted in a large Nissen Hut with a little coal stove in the middle. However, as we were only allowed two buckets of coal each day, the stove was lit only in the evening for a couple of hours. I have never been so cold. We went to our bed in our clothes on with coats etc over the top to keep us warm. The only warm place was the NAAFI where they always had a good fire.

After six weeks initial training, largely marching about and saluting, polishing the buttons on our uniform, we were sent to RAF Morecambe Bay where we did more marching and PE in the bus station with lectures in the Theatre at the end of the pier. Once we had 'passed out' we received our first pay which was 16 shillings per fortnight. We were billeted with landladies and ours wasn't very lavish with food so we're all always very hungry! I remember being vaccinated with typhoid and tetanus jabs which made us all ill for three days.

After we left RAF Morecambe Bay, we were sent to London to do our six weeks course in Meteorology. A large block of flats near Victoria had been taken over. There was no furniture except bunks and tin cupboards with bare boards on the floor, but we didn't mind. I was able to go home to Croydon for the first time since joining up and we enjoyed being in London although the air raids were a bit scary!

My father and aunt had their ceiling down and someone up the road had a homemade shelter collapse on them killing the whole family. The guns at night lit up the sky and when they bombed Coventry you could see the flames. We learned to plot maps and read

barometers and use teleprinter forerunner of today's sophisticated computers and scanners but a lot noisier!

After passing our final exams we got our first proper posting. Mine was to Prestwick in Scotland where I met my husband. Prestwick was an Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) station which flew planes all over the country. All the pilots were volunteers who had passed they either passed the age for 'call up' or were of foreign nationality and came from all over the world; Spanish, Canadian, Indian, American, British and many more. There were many women pilots. They wore a navy-blue uniform and were a law unto themselves, but it was a very dangerous job for once they had taken off, they had no radio contact for security reasons. Quite a few were lost in bad weather especially over the mountains.

The station was run by Admiral Boucher who didn't approve of WAAF assistants and my future husband who was in charge of the office in Prestwick, was told to keep a close eye on us! The Admiral didn't approve of lino floors either so there were scrubbed boards which were very noisy.

My future husband had an old Austin 7 Ruby saloon which he had bought for £18 and stripped down. We spent a lot of time looking for parts in junk yards. He always said I only married him for his Austin 7 as he used to give me lifts to work in the morning!

In 1942 we got engaged and shortly afterwards he was posted to Liverpool where the Met Office was situated, underneath the Liverpool exchange. We were married in 1943 in Saint Mary's cathedral in Newcastle. I didn't have a white wedding as I had no coupons, but we spent the week in Yorkshire at the George hotel in Malton and I then spent the weekend with him in Liverpool. He was staying in a lodging house which had been theatrical digs. The landlady was very nice and a very good cook, but the bed was full of bugs.

My husband collected his new Officers uniform that weekend and we spent our time dodging down back alley just in case anyone saluted him. He knew nothing about saluting at all! Shortly afterwards we applied for postings to be near to each other. We weren't allowed to be on the same station because he was an Officer, and I wasn't.

Eventually he was posted to Honeybourne in Worcestershire. And I was posted to Wellesbourne Mountford in the same county. We lived in rooms in a cottage just outside Stratford on Avon. We cycled to work. For me it was about 6 miles and my husband about 13 miles although sometimes he could put his bike on the train if the running times were right. I can remember cycling home through the pitch-dark lanes about midnight feeling terrified. On one occasion someone was singing in a haystack and frightened me out of my wits.

The cottage had no bathroom and no electricity. There was gas lighting downstairs but upstairs it was just candles. We washed in cold water and in winter the water in the bowl froze overnight and the ice had to be broken. The toilet was at the end of the garden. We were lucky though because we could have a hot bath at work. The cooker was gas, but it was outside in an open lean-to as the old lady who owned the cottage thought it too dangerous to have indoors. Still, she was very kind to us.

On the station I would get information through a teleprinter and pass to the Chief Meteorological Officer who would then draw the chart. I would have to go outside and collect information from the Stevenson's screen which measured the pressure and temperature and had to blow up a big balloon with helium which had a sensor on the bottom. I would be let it go, and follow it with a theodolite, writing down all the readings before taking it back into the CMO. which he then plotted on the chart. It was all very 'hands on' and nowadays they sit in an office and look at a computer! I quite enjoyed it really.

When I became pregnant and was discharged from the WAAF we moved to Broadway in the Cotswolds as it had a rail station, and my husband could catch a train to Honeybourne which wasn't far. Initially we had rooms over the Coop shop. But the owner was the landlady from hell, so we were lucky to get a two-bedroom semi-detached cottage in the village. The owners were a Mr and Mrs Froggatt who lived next door. He was retired but owned a business in Birmingham making handcuffs for the police or any anyone else who wanted them and still travelled up to Birmingham once a week.

Our daughter Mary was born on 24.04.1944 in the Moreton in the Marsh Cottage Hospital and was christened at the Catholic Church in Broadway. The invasion started two months later on 6th of June 1944 and my husband thought it was best that I and the baby should go to stay with his parents in Newcastle. I was there for 18 months.

Then the war was over, and my husband was posted to Northwood in Middlesex, not far from London so we all went to stay with my father and aunt Croydon.

Post WW2

After a few months we rented house in North Harrow and stayed there until 1948 when we moved to Dunfermline. Our daughter Angie was born in 1949 and in December of that year we travelled to Gibraltar where we lived for three years returning in 1952, and then built a house in Highnam near Gloucester. This was the first house we owned. Our son John was born in Gloucester hospital in 1953 and then in 1956 we went to Cologne in Germany where we stayed for six years before returning in 1962 and moving to Coberley, Surrey.

Postscript

Jean's husband, Flying Officer HH McKay of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve worked on the Met Office team led by Group Captain James Stagg, who personally advised General Dwight D. Eisenhower to change the date of the D-Day invasion from 5th to 6th June 1944. For his contribution to this historic event Jean's husband was awarded a 'Mention in Dispatches' (MiD) dated 8th June 1944.

Jean's husband remained in the Met office throughout his career and his work took him to the Met Office in Aberporth. They both came to love the area and retired to Aberporth in 1984.