

**Pauline Penrose (1921-) Women's Auxiliary Air Force
Llechryd, Cardigan**

West Wales Veterans Archive

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Interviewer: Hugh Morgan (in the presence of Rod Penrose, Pauline's son).

DRAFT TRANSCRIPT: edited extracts from Audio Recording

Early Years

I was born in Islington right in the middle of London, but we moved fairly soon when my younger sister was born. We must have been there four years. My mother was from Edinburgh and my father was from London and he joined the RAF, not as a young man. He was a cabinetmaker and had been in the First World War, a Sergeant. He was in the British Expeditionary Force (in the Reserve) which was sent over there (to France) and he said, strangely enough there were men over there fixing Rolls Royce engines to German planes and when war was declared they had to finish it in order to be paid. Strange isn't it really?

He didn't get out until after Dunkirk and we thought we had lost him. It turned out that they couldn't get to the beaches, so they were going south all the way and travelling at night and hiding during the day in orchards right through France. He managed to get back but was in rags. It took him some while and we don't know how long it took him to get back. I wish I'd asked him, but I didn't think of it then. You are young and full of your own life and of course I was in the Air Force. Yes, I wish I'd asked him about it. He then did a bit of work for different firms but then had ill-health and retired soon afterwards.

We then lived in Stamford Hill. It was quite a nice little house because I remember growing up there as a young child. We moved to Higham Rd in Tottenham where a neighbour there was an Arsenal player, Bob John, and I got friendly with his daughter Joyce. He was ever such a nice man. (Bob John 1899-1982 – Barry, Caerphilly and Arsenal – 15caps for Wales). They lived about two or three doors away from us in the same block of houses and in those days, I don't think they trained like they do today. They trained at home, and he was always skipping. They had a sort of a paved area at the back of the house, and we used to have our skipping ropes and the three of us skipped together.

But then there was the recession. My father lost his job and my mother had to sell the house as it was always in her own name and we moved to Southgate, North London. Then the war came.

Second World War

We had a landmine which landed at the side of us. We were on a little joining road with two houses either side of the road. It was a link road to two long roads. When I used to go home, the first thing I would do would be to have a hot bath because there were very difficult circumstances then (and that would be when I was at Hornchurch, I think). You had to walk to the bathhouse, quite a walk from where we were billeted, and take your towel. Of course, there were never any plugs there, but we found that if we wrapped a handkerchief around a penny that worked as a plug, so you

could have a bath. Of course, nobody ever cleaned them. As soon as I got home, I had a hot bath.

While I was in the bath this landmine landed on the road that ran to the side. A terrible crash of course. It blew in our front door. It smashed the side window on the stairs. My mother called out and of course we couldn't put the lights on because the blackout had come down. She said '*be careful as you come down because there's broken glass on the stairs*'. So, I wrapped the towel around me and managed to get down without doing much of an injury. But it wasn't until daylight when we looked out. The front door was blown off or blown in. I think it was just blown in. And when we looked out it looked like a gap in the row of the houses opposite. Two of them had gone down. In one of them, the men were at war, so it was just the wife and I think one child and they had taken cover under, I think, a thick oak table, and they survived. The whole house had collapsed on them, and they survived. But the couple in the next house, and I don't know how many of them were there, but they didn't. So yes, that was a bit of a shock.

Before the war started (or had the war had just started?), I was at Standard Cables and Telephones. In those days you had lots of Tracers. It was the top floor of a large building. At one end there were the draftsmen and at the other end, the Tracers. There must have been about twenty Tracers and the idea was that we would trace the drawings and do all the printing, because their printing was almost illegible. We had then to make a really decent job so that it could be copied and sent to the workshop or whatever, to make something. And of course, we got war work. I was working on air

conditioning for a warship. Well, though they could stay, the draftsmen were joining up, they thought they had to do their bit. So of course, they were losing all their draftsmen.

They chose five or six of us, the 'better Tracers' as they put it, and we were taught draughtsmanship. Well, I got quite into the course but hadn't quite finished it, when my *fiancé* who was in the Air Force, came home on leave because he was going abroad. So, he had a fortnight embarkation leave. It was in the middle of winter at the beginning of 1942, and I asked if I could take my summer leave (early) to spend it with him and it was refused. I took it anyway and when I went back, I was given the sack. Unbeknown to me the other draftsmen that were there took it up with the union. I didn't even know that they could do anything like that. I had to go before a panel of elderly men, very sympathetic. We had just got engaged, and they decided it was unfair dismissal and I could go back.

In the meantime, I had got myself a job at 'Cossors' as a draughtswoman. They were just grateful to get anybody who had any idea. But I wasn't allowed to take it because I was conscripted. I was kept waiting for five weeks before my conscription came through, and that's how I went to the Air Force.

Looking back though it was such an interesting time, I'm glad I did go into the Air Force. I was very lucky. My fiancée was 'Signals' in the Air Force. He had to learn Morse Code and listen to and take down German communications. After three and a half years he got leave and came home

for a fortnight. We got married, 'special license' and then he went back to Egypt, and he'd been all over the place, Malta, Sicily.

RAF Hornchurch

I was posted for Basic training to Innsworth (I think it was). You were kitted out with your uniform and then interviewed to see what work you would be suitable for. They decided I would be a Plotter.

So, I was doing that for about six months at Hornchurch. We had a draughtsman there who had his own office and was mad on table tennis. There was a table there for quiet/rest times and he just wanted to play table tennis. Of course, it must have been on my papers that I had drawing office training so I was approached and asked if I would like to be his assistant in the drawing office. I said 'yes' it sounded interesting, and I always enjoyed drawing. I was there for about a week or fortnight I can't be sure now, when he was posted overseas. He was never there because he was always playing table tennis, so I had this little office all to myself. I don't know whether he survived the war. I suppose he annoyed them because he was never in the office.

I did all the work that came in, painting the plaques which used to go around the Ops Room, hung on a rail, of all the different squadrons that came. I had to put the squadron number (on the plaques) 321 or whatever it was. Of course, they were always changing so that meant repainting them. I did my best, but they varied and weren't always the same figures, so I had to make a template drawing before they then were sent over to the

workshop where they made them. I had the stencils so the figures all looked identical.

When I was at Hornchurch, they decided they wanted a bigger Plotting Table because it only covered a small area. We were billeted at Hornchurch and there was a coach which used to drive the different crews into Romford. At the back of which was a very big building that had belonged to the Freemasons and I spent ages making this bigger table which came down from The Wash and just included the Isle of Wight. It took me ages to do, then almost as soon as I had finished, they decided to close Hornchurch and we were all moved to North Weald!

RAF North Weald

I was in the drawing office, and we were at Blake Hall, a lovely country house, away from the airfield for obvious reasons. It looked like a farm and was a big building. I had one of the front bedrooms as my drawing office which was very nice. It had a sink in it for washing my instruments and things. So that's where I stayed until the end of the war, at Blake Hall.

We had our mess right on the edge of the airfield and we could see the planes going off and very often we could stay there (this was when I was a Plotter) and try and count them as they came back. And so often they didn't all come back. It was very upsetting because you got to know them, some of the pilots. There were so many squadrons there and these were always changing. We had a Polish one there. Now that's an interesting story....

For all the Poles were tall and slender and quite elegant and they liked to press their uniforms a certain way, very particular. When I was at North Weald getting towards the end of the War, there were a lot of Polish girls.....who didn't know any English and they were in the dining room and of course didn't know what to do. I tried to be helpful, and I had my schoolgirl French which wasn't much use, but at least I was trying to help them and they were so grateful, almost sign-language. They asked, 'would I visit them that evening when we were all off-duty'. It was summertime, I remember a lovely sunny day, and we were in a long hut with an entrance both ends and, in an area, called 'The Rookery' which was all trees and disguised. The Rooks used to nest in the tops of the trees. Well, I went to their hut and there was an entrance at both ends and I was knocking on the door. I could hear chatter inside, so I knew they were all there. I tried to push the door and it wouldn't open. I was banging away at it and suddenly one of the girls came and said, 'Oh Mam!' and took me to the other door because they had got a shrine at the end. I had tried to come in and I had almost knocked it down! They didn't wear their shoes inside, just their stocking feet and there was thick brown Lino which was like glass, it was polished and I had never seen anything like it in huts. They were so friendly; they were lovely girls. We were using sign language. But unfortunately, all they could do was clean, because they used to do was clean the latrines for the Germans when they were prisoners. I felt so sorry for them.

Air Sea Rescue

A Squadron Leader came to see me, I think because he had heard that I had been used to making plotting tables. He came and interviewed me and explained what was needed and asked me if I could do it. I said I would give it a go and it took me ages as there had to be a table for the North Sea and another one for the English Channel. There were several stations dotted around 11 Group and they were different colours, red, blue, green and black, and I had to calibrate each one, the four of them, all around this table. It was a large oval table, thick rubber, and the paint was cellulose, it was actually called 'cellamo' at the time, that was the make of it, and it had to be calibrated all the degrees all the way around. And of course, each one had to be calibrated differently. And then if a signal came from a downed pilot, it could be picked by several of these stations inland and it was then done by triangulation. So, they (aircraft) went out together and pin-pointed where the downed plane was. I had to take them down to Swingate near Dover and they were positioned in the Control Tower at Swingate. This was very successful because after a while I had to go back and touch up the paint, which was wearing off. So they were very successful and must have saved a lot of lives.

There were holes drilled through, these stations inland and it was called a mouse which was the general shape of it. It was lead, heavy, so it would drop through. Then that when they got the signal through and it was pulled out and that's where it crossed over the sea, that would pinpoint where the plane had gone down. This may have been in '43 or might have been later, but of course you dare not record anything because it was treated with

suspicion if you were making notes of anything. It was an 'only need to know' sort of business.

Towards the end of the War (*I had hoped to become an ATA pilot*). But having passed the medical and had an interview the War was coming to an end. My son said what a good job I didn't get it because I have no sense of direction!

VE Day

We were all confined to camp because they were concerned that there might be a last attempt by the Luftwaffe to fly over and put all their bombs on us. The last gesture, I suppose. We were confined to camp.

I wrote a letter which was printed in the Radio Times and a girl got in touch with me and she was in the (*small contingent of*) Army at North Weald. She had read my letter and she asked them for my address so she could contact me. She sent me a letter saying '*I remember us being confined to camp*', because a lot of people wouldn't believe it as on VE Day everybody was out celebrating and we were confined to camp!

I applied to be demobbed and was demobbed when my husband came home. I can't remember exactly when it was. I had a travel document which said that if War broke out again then I would be able to travel back!

Post-War

After the War, I then started a family in Southgate N14 and then eventually we moved to Southend (1950). It was a lovely old Victorian house built in 1898. We moved to Thorpe Bay where we made a flat for my husband's parents....and also my mother lived in a bungalow nearby. My son and his wife had already been living in (*West Wales*) for seven years and we had been down to visit them.....we were in Newcastle Emlyn and on the opposite side of the street was an estate agent. There were two properties for sale (*adjacent to each other*). My son and his wife said, 'well if you come to live down here, you can have the bigger house and we will have the other one'. We have been very happy here.