

# THE BIRDS THAT WOULDN'T SING

Remembering the D-Day Wrens

JUSTIN SMITH



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*Justin Smith*



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Cover image: 'Ginge' Thomas and Joan Prior (studio portrait, St. Germain-en-Laye, November 1944). Private Papers of Joan H. Smith

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*For my brother,  
For the life of Joseph Anthony Smith (1989–2023)  
And to the service and memory of all the 'Ramsay Wrens'*



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# The Wrennery

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## A Note on the Presentation of Names

In the list above I have included in brackets the birthnames of the principal Wrens whose testimony forms the basis of this account and

organised them by the married names they later adopted. Some, like 'Bobby' Howes, were married before they joined the WRNS. In textual citation I have used the name given in the archival source, which is reproduced in the Bibliography. I have avoided the use of the term *née*.

# Prologue: Letters from an Unknown Woman

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For the WRNS in the Southern ports 'D' Day will be remembered as the culminating event of many years of hard work, for it was the invasion of the Continent that had always been the ultimate object, and before and during that historic occasion much was asked of the Wrens and much was given. (Admiral Sir William James, GCB, 1946)<sup>1</sup>

I was driving down to Portsmouth to deliver my mother's ashes to the Royal Naval Dockyard, two years after her death during the COVID pandemic. The day before I left would have been her one hundredth birthday, had she lived.

Now that the experience of military service in the Second World War is almost beyond living memory, all we have left is the archives. Of course, we've had them all along. And they have grown over the years as more official records (at The National Archives and the Imperial War Museum) have been opened, like unquiet graves, and the oral testimony of those dwindling survivors (occasioned by the significant anniversaries of recent decades) has accrued. There is the possibility, perhaps, of a kind of settlement with the past, once those who lived through it have departed.

Where the motorway approach to Portsea Island from Southampton ascends past Fareham and carves a channel under the chalk ridge of Portsdown Hill the landscape above still retains the surface features of a militarised zone—Fort Nelson, Fort Southwick, Fort Widley, Fort Purbrook—whose networks of subterranean tunnels and chambers extend deep inside the cliff. Here was the nerve-centre. And from

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1 Foreword to Eileen Bigland, *The Story of the WRNS* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1946), p. ix.



atop the hill is where those off-duty watched anxiously and waited, overlooking the coastal map of harbours, creeks and inlets below blocked with a thrombosis of vessels. There are innocuous journeys it is impossible to make smoothly without ploughing through history. Digging up the past.

In this regard the Second World War is an overworked furrow. Like a popular footpath in a national park, we're in danger of wearing it away. But we are exercised in part by the fear of forgetting the lessons of history, or of not learning them well enough. We have a responsibility to future generations, we tell ourselves. Never again. Remember, remember. The moral problem, in the face of all that sacrifice, is not 'lest we forget' but that we can never remember enough. Generation after generation, like good pilgrims, we follow the same uphill trek; every ten years or so we stop and turn back to review what is now far behind us, asking ourselves, 'What does it look like from here?'

My mother resisted all this, by and large—even when those compatriots from her service days succumbed to interviews, persuaded by researchers of 'the people's war' (young enough to be their grandchildren) to disburden themselves of the loose change of memory, for the fiftieth, or the sixtieth, or the seventy-fifth commemoration. Her objection was founded on the oath she took on joining the Women's Royal Naval Service: that she would disclose nothing of her wartime activities. Not even after hostilities had ended. Any secrets she possessed would go with her to the grave. If anything, this principle gained a stiffer hauteur over the years, as the tongues of her contemporaries wagged freely, popular histories abounded and television documentaries spilled the beans. On only one occasion did she lower her guard, for an oral history project to which she (and several friends) contributed both memories and memorabilia. *The Vital Link: The Wrens of the Allied Naval Command Expeditionary Force, 1943–45*, was released as a VHS recording, produced by the Royal Naval Museum in 1994, for the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day.<sup>2</sup> I think because this was done under the auspices of the Navy, she thought it carried the seal of approval. All above board. I came across this tape together with a cache of letters, photographs and

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2 Chris Howard-Bailey (dir.), *The Vital Link: The Wrens of the Allied Naval Command Expeditionary Force, 1943–45*, VHS recording (Portsmouth: Royal Naval Museum, 1994).

service documents and a couple of pocket diaries, when going through her things. Watching the video (recorded voices over rostrum camera shots of old black and white photographs and papers) revealed little more than the arc of their journey, this small band of Wrens—how they lived together, and something of what they recalled feeling at the time. But presumably my mother was satisfied that they hadn't given much away. Even as a tribute this is cursory.

Women who served in World War II have also contributed (albeit marginally) to the vast array of literature commemorating D-Day (the most documented action of the entire war), and (substantially) to significant archives. Two Wrens who served with the Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force (ANCF)—Petty Officer Mabel 'Bobby' Howes and Leading Wren Jean Gordon—are both cited in Frank and Joan Shaw's *We Remember D-Day* (1994) and, ten years later, in Martin W. Bowman's *Remembering D-Day: Personal Histories of Everyday Heroes* (2004). Gordon also featured in *The Vital Link* and deposited her own testimony at the D-Day Museum archive in Southsea. Howes was one of a number of Wrens who contributed to the BBC's People's War memory project (2003–2006) which formed part of the sixtieth anniversary commemorative histories. This admirable venture, which garnered 'over 47,000 stories and 14,000 images',<sup>3</sup> included testimony from former ANCF Wrens Margaret Boothroyd, Kathleen Cartwright and Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas (who were stationed at Southwick Park, near Fareham on D-Day), and Elsie Campbell who was a Watchkeeper in the Signals Distribution Office underground at nearby Fort Southwick. Ginge Thomas (1919–2016), who worked for the Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (designate) (COSSAC) before joining ANCF, also contributed to *The Vital Link* and was interviewed by Rachel Vogelesen for *Women Who Served in World War II: In their own words* (Mereo, 2020). It is ironic perhaps, given my mother's tight-lipped stance, that her best Wren friend should have been so vocal in her later years. But she would probably say, 'You never could get a word in edgeways with Ginge'. At any rate, I'm grateful for her testimony, not least because she is the only source to mention my mother by name: 'I have a very clear memory

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3 WW2 People's War: An archive of World War Two memories—written by the public, gathered by the BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/about/>

of sitting in the back of a lorry with my friend Joan Prior, holding on to our typewriters and duplicators, on the way to Southwick'.<sup>4</sup> As the following pages will reveal, theirs was a special wartime relationship.

There are twelve disciples in this history and I have so far introduced six: Howes, Gordon, Boothroyd, Cartwright, Thomas and Prior; all ratings, with the exception of Petty Officer Howes. Besides Gordon, the D-Day Museum archive also holds transcripts of oral history interviews with Third Officer Beryl K. Blows and Second Officer Patricia Blandford. It seems that Blandford later wrote an entire dissertation entitled 'Fort Southwick: What Useful Purpose Did It Serve?'. Extracts from this are cited as 'A Wren's Tale' in Geoffrey O'Connell's local history, *Southwick, The D-Day Village That Went to War* (1995). The remaining four women were also officers: Fanny Hugill (Gore-Browne) (3/O), Elspeth Shuter (2/O), Barbara Buckley (Noverraz) (2/O) and Sheila Swete-Evans (2/O). Fanny Hugill gave a rich personal tribute to the Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force himself, Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay, on the occasion of a symposium to mark the donation of his personal papers to the archives of Churchill College, Cambridge, on 6 June 2014.<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to discern from her words the enduring devotion of these women, proud to be remembered as Ramsay's Wrens. Hugill, who died on 28 September 2023 at the age of 100, is believed to have been their last.<sup>6</sup> Shuter, Buckley and Swete-Evans each leave legacies of different kinds at the Imperial War Museum in London. Swete-Evans' papers include printed orders and photographs of Wrens embarking for Normandy in

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4 Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas (Leading Wren), 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac', WW2 People's War, A2524402, 16 April 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/02/a2524402.shtml>

5 Fanny Hugill (Gore-Browne), (3/O Wren), 'A Wren's memories', Ramsay Symposium, Churchill College, Cambridge, 6 June 2014, *Finest Hour* 125, Winter 2004–05, p. 19. <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-125/a-wrens-memories/>

6 In later years, Fanny Hugill (1923–2023) was a devoted supporter of remembrance anniversaries and memorial tributes to Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay (a statue erected at the signal station at Dover Castle in 2000, and a plaque at Château d'Hennemont—now the Lycée International de Saint-Germain-en-Laye—in 2017). She 'served as "chairman" of the WRNS Benevolent Trust, was a trustee of several other charities and in 2016 was appointed to the Legion d'Honneur' (*Times* obituary, 11 October 2023). Her papers, together with those of her late husband Lieutenant-Commander Tony Hugill DSC, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (1916–1987) are held at the Churchill Archive Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.

September 1944. Buckley has some remarkable photographs taken in France later that year. Shuter, an art teacher pre-war and a close friend of Buckley (Noverraz), bequeathed (amongst other papers, photographs and sketches) the most substantial written account of all: a 156-page memoir of her service from the time she joined ANCXF from Combined Operations in 1943, where she served until April 1945 when she was admitted to the Senior Naval Staff course at the Royal Naval Staff College, Greenwich. She served as Assistant Staff Officer Landing Craft and frequently deputised for the Commander, Staff Officer Landing Craft, and represented the ANCXF at meetings of SHAEF,<sup>7</sup> reporting on the supply and distribution of landing craft. For the last few months of her service in France she was also ANCXF's official war diarist.

These are the twelve principal sources from whom this history is drawn. If they provide a chorus of voices, in which the soloists Elspeth Shuter and Joan Prior share a platform, together they comprise three of what Penny Summerfield identifies as the 'four genres of personal testimony: letters; diaries; memoirs; and oral history'.<sup>8</sup> Joan Prior's diaries are insubstantial as sources (small pocket-diaries used for incidental dates, personal reminders, birthdays and the titles of films seen). She didn't have the discipline to keep a journal. Her writing is public and familial, not private and personal. Nothing confessional. But I have included visual sources from my mother's papers (and other archives) including photographs and service documents where appropriate. Online publication also allows for the sparing use of sound and moving image clips. How do audio-visual sources augment the written testimony? Or, as Annette Kuhn frames the question, 'what place do images and sounds occupy in the activity of remembering?'<sup>9</sup> The photographs, in the main, accompany the overseas travels of ANCXF in Parts II and III. Photography, for security reasons, was forbidden on UK military bases. But, from their departure for Normandy in September 1944, a visual travelogue ensues, itself an expression (as well as a documentary record) of liberation. There is portraiture too (in studios

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7 Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.

8 Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 15.

9 Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 127.

and on location), which was as popular in those times as the modern 'selfie' and as necessary an accompaniment to communication as the letters that carried them. My mother was also an inveterate collector of postcards on her travels (sometimes written and sent, often not), many of which augment her own 'snaps'. Archival film and audio testimony have been used sparingly as clips to provide points of contextual anchorage. But they also conjure the past differently from words on the page; they hail us in more romantic languages.

Although I have consulted a number of histories of D-Day, including the substantive contemporary accounts of those commanders most closely involved, I have made only minimal use of these published sources for three reasons which may appear at first sight to be contradictory. Firstly, this is a history of *the Wrens* of ANCXF and, as far as possible, I want their words to tell their own story. Secondly, this isn't really a military history at all, in the political sense. Those accounts have already been written, exhaustively. It is rather a women's history of military service. But it makes a modest, revisionist claim that military history should also incorporate experiences such as are gathered here. Thirdly, the substantial archive of my mother's letters home, which take centre stage in the second half of this book, requires the establishing context that her peers provide in the first half. Locating her subjective, contemporary responses in this way is important to understanding how, like all service personnel, she was both typical and exceptional. In this sense the book reverses the coordinates of standard historical methods. I am not using personal testimony and archival sources as evidence to support a historical account. Rather, I am using primary and secondary texts—augmented in places by semi-fictional narrative—to frame the presentation and aid the interpretation of a central archive comprising my mother's letters, photographs, documents and diaries. Where there are gaps in her correspondence, I have tried to fill them imaginatively, but not, it is hoped, too intrusively. These personal acts of interpolation became another means by which I could begin to make sense of the accidental archive she had left.

Letters home in wartime provide mercurial evidence. On the one hand, as personal records of the excitements and the strictures of daily military life for eager but unwitting young volunteers, they offer a rich tapestry of travels and travails. On the other hand, what they reveal

of their part in the conflict is limited both by their author's subaltern and marginal role, and by (self-)censorship. Their preoccupation with the quotidian often misses the bigger picture. And the extent to which the personal accounts of individuals can be read as representative of the group is difficult to judge from a single source. In this way, the subjectivity, immediacy and temporal redundancy of letters render their historical value always contingent, set in a continuous provisional present. Using them as historical artefacts broaches a fundamental contradiction. Like newspapers and mayflies, they live for a day.

In *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Janet Gurkin Altman writes that 'in numerous instances the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works'.<sup>10</sup> This is undoubtedly true also of non-fictional correspondence, especially that conducted in wartime. For the writer is always conscious of the impersonality of the military sorting office (in this case frequently Base Fleet Mail Office) that must be written at the top of the first page. And for Joan Prior, like many correspondents whose war work was desk-based, the omnipresent typewriter made personal letter-writing easy to do (between jobs), but also thereby an extension of their work. Frivolous and quotidian though much of my mother's narrative may be, it constrains intimacy with the more formal stance of reportage.

Finally, letters home also, inevitably, spend a good deal of time addressing the absent family and their affairs. There is a self-conscious discipline in Joan Prior's letters of replying to the last letter received. Since the family situation is unknown (and probably uninteresting) to the general reader, and only one side of the correspondence survives, footnotes attempt to identify most individuals named and illuminate some of the circumstances referred to, where known. Indeed, because it is invariably one-sided, correspondence always reminds us of what is missing, its untold other to whom it constantly refers. It follows that my mother's letters are also family history. They construct the family and bind it together. But they do so by reproducing an imagined fantasy of home—an important creative purpose for many young

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10 Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 4.

servicemen and women enforced to spend miles and years away from home. Jenny Hartley writes, as 'fictions of contact and spontaneity, women's wartime letters are masterpieces of simulated conversation'.<sup>11</sup> She might have been talking about my mother. Yet at the same time, letters are always as significant for what they withhold. Between the lines they are riddled with secrets and omissions, gaps in the evidence. Secrets are also a formal property of the letter, a form which simultaneously withholds as much as it discloses. This includes not only what was not allowed to be said about the war, but what couldn't be said in the family either.

But what follows is not only a one-sided conversation with two different parties, her parents (Grace and Harry Prior) and her elder sister Bessie and brother-in-law Stan; Joan Prior's letters are also unevenly distributed across her military service. There are no letters written home while she was undergoing basic training at Mill Hill, or while stationed at Norfolk House between September 1943 and April 1944. After all, for East Enders, London was hardly away from home at all. The first correspondence dates from the time between April and September 1944, when Joan was with the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief Expeditionary Force (ANXCF) at Southwick Park in Hampshire. Yet only three letters (written in May and June 1944) survive from this period. In fact, it is not until the Wrens of ANXCF landed in Normandy, in September 1944, that Joan's regular letters were kept by her parents. This pattern is an indication of two things. Firstly, self-censorship and the secrecy of the pre-invasion planning is likely to have made letters home rarer before June 1944. But secondly, and more obviously, it was not until Joan was overseas that correspondence became such an important lifeline for both parties, and that her experiences became more newsworthy and therefore worth keeping. Indeed, the fact that Joan requests her parents keep the letters and postcards she sends from France and Germany suggests that ordinarily they might not have done so (and that therefore earlier correspondence dating from her home service can be assumed to have been lost). Furthermore, it shows that Joan was consciously making a record of her experience overseas not merely for her family but for posterity.

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11 Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1997), p. 126.

In her introduction to *Women's Letters in Wartime*, Eva Figs writes:

I have [...] followed a policy of publishing letters in their entirety or not at all [...] I have to admit that a trail of dots in any published book always leaves me full of frustrated curiosity. War is not experienced in isolation. Usually it goes on for months or years, and gets bound up with our ordinary lives, one way or another.<sup>12</sup>

In the epistolary narrative which dominates the second half of this book, I have adopted a similar, unfiltered approach, not for fear of frustrating the reader's curiosity (for repetition is as tedious as excision), but out of respect for the integrity of the archive, and its author. Only occasionally have overlaps between the letters to Joan Prior's parents and sister been omitted, where duplication is most prominent. But there are two subjectivities in play here: hers and mine. In creating a narrative from the archive, I want to recover her story. But in that act of commemoration, I am also telling a story about her (which is my own).<sup>13</sup>

Eva Figs is not alone in noting the selectivity evident in the collections of the Imperial War Museum: 'people tended to think letters interesting and worth preserving if they were written by women away from home and doing active service of some kind. [...] This bias reflects the proud perception of the recipient, usually a parent [...] that the person who wrote the letters is doing sterling service for her country'.<sup>14</sup> On a practical level, this is true enough. But it is worth reflecting further on the status of the letter as a particular kind of human transaction.

Kafka observes that:

The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced—from a purely theoretical point of view—a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Eva Figs (ed.), *Women's Letters in Wartime, 1450–1945* (London: Pandora, 1993), p. 13.

13 It should be noted that any spelling or punctuation errors in original sources have been left uncorrected in quotations.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

15 Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*, quoted in Altman, *Epistolarity*, p. 2.



This observation has been pursued in a variety of settings by historians of the letter. For Penny Summerfield, Dena Goodman 'writes of letters as a medium through which women produced and consumed stories about themselves in the past, and letter writing as a process of self-discovery that facilitated the development of a "culture of the self"'.<sup>16</sup> Antoinette Burton 'explores the personal narratives of three Indian travellers to Britain between 1880 and 1900. [...] Cornelia Sorabjee, one of the three, travelled from Poona in India to England in 1889, to study at Oxford University'. For Burton, 'her letters home were [...] a stage on which she "performed" for her parents, explaining her choices, describing her social interactions, and testing her own respectability and moral worth against their values'.<sup>17</sup> David Gerber describes another aspect of the correspondent's mode of address as the "'epistolary masquerade" in which letter writers adopt strategies of communication designed to maintain and develop key relationships while placing limits on self-revelation'.<sup>18</sup>

These dynamics are all in play to some extent in my mother's wartime correspondence. And although the self as presented in her letters cannot be read as representative of the Wrens who were her comrades and friends, the inherent subjectivity of her evidence is of historical value precisely because, as Summerfield concludes, 'the epistolary self is regarded as both an agent of change and a prism through which the social, cultural and psychic dynamics of history may be understood'.<sup>19</sup>

The value which Summerfield attributes to the letter writer as a source of historical evidence must be weighed against Eva Figs's caution: 'many letters written by ordinary people, undistinguished by rank or accomplishment, and sent for mundane reasons, can be very tedious to the snooping eyes of posterity'. For Figs, 'perhaps only love and war can raise the temperature of life sufficiently to give real life and interest to letters written by lost generations, and the vicissitudes of war have more infinite variety than even the most consuming passions'. As it is hoped for the case of the archive presented in this book, 'War

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16 Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*, p. 37.

17 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 38.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

letters are fascinating because they tell us of great historic events seen at ground level, from an individual point of view'.<sup>20</sup>

Tamasin Day-Lewis puts this historical enterprise into another perspective: 'on the whole, we are no longer letter-writers. Telephones, faxes and email have radically changed the part that letters used to play in people's lives.'<sup>21</sup> Even this statement, from a book published in 1995, now sounds dated. But paradoxically, this technological transformation has recuperated letters as a unique medium of historical value, like shellacs in the age of Spotify.

For Day-Lewis, 'many of the people who lived through the Second World War describe it as the most exciting and dynamic period of their lives'.<sup>22</sup> My mother never said this. If anything, she downplayed it. But it was undoubtedly true, as her letters bear witness. I have often wondered if that was subsequently a source of disappointment to her, and many like her. She never admitted that either.

For me, this discrepancy, imagined perhaps, is part of a deeper disjunction which my mother's archive opens up. In the account which follows I have had to adopt a series of trade-offs: firstly, between the individual life in the letters and the context of the surrounding memory work gathered from a variety of sources; secondly, between family history and military history; and thirdly, between the desire to transcribe the letters verbatim in their entirety for the sake of archival integrity, and the temptation to edit and interpret them for narrative motives. The compromise I have arrived at has been fuelled by two further, personal obsessions: that I would find some explanation in the letters for the idiosyncratic front of secrecy she maintained for the rest of her life; and that I might meet the young woman who later became my mother, this stranger who seems like someone I should know.

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20 Figes, *Women's Letters in Wartime*, p. 9.

21 Tamasin Day-Lewis, *Last Letters Home* (London: Pan Books, 1995), p. 3. Whilst this fact is indeed true, scholarship on epistolary communications continues to adapt to changing technologies, as work by, for example, Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley demonstrates. See Jolly, M. and Stanley, L., 'Epistolarity: Life after death of the letter?', *Life Writing*, 32: 2 (2017), 229–233.

22 Day-Lewis, *Last Letters Home*, p. 2.



PART I

OVERLORD EMBROIDERY



# I. Wrens' Calling

## (London, 1942–1944)

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The National Services (No. 2) Act of December 1941 was the first to conscript unmarried women between the ages of twenty and forty (later nineteen and forty-three) to undertake work in the war effort: in industry, agriculture or one of the uniformed services. Hannah Roberts writes that:

Early objections to the conscription of women gave way to a national sentiment that was overwhelmingly positive. [...] Women who entered the women's services were far from derided; instead, they were congratulated for doing so. [...] Patriotism had a great impact upon all of the women's services, which began to grow rapidly after 1941. Numbers of Wrens doubled between 1941 and 1942.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the other women's services, the WRNS did not take conscripts; volunteers went through a selection process. There was a widespread assumption (shared by many who applied and indeed their parents) that social class was a determining factor in vetting applicants.

Jean Gordon reflects:

For girls of my generation and background, who were not normally encouraged or expected to go to work in the way everyone does now, and therefore not encouraged to train for anything useful, the war was an opportunity for them to leave home, gain some sort of independence and do something interesting which was actually approved of by their "elders and betters". Mothers of those days who would not have allowed their daughters to work in "unsuitable" occupations and had them chaperoned and constrained with, to us now absurd restrictions,

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1 Hannah Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime: The Women's Royal Naval Service 1917–1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), p. 99.

thankfully allowed themselves to trust in the universally held belief that all would be safe in the gentlemanly embrace of the Royal Navy. And in this they were proved to be right, as a matter of fact.<sup>2</sup>

Another Wren, Audrey Johnson, recalls: 'my mother had not wanted me to join the Land Army, because it would ruin my hands, neither had she wanted me to go into a munitions factory because she did not think I would like the type of woman there'. Such prejudices were widespread. Johnson confided to a friend, 'If I joined anything it would be the WRNS. It's the most difficult service to get into'. Furthermore, by aiming high, 'if we were turned down for the Senior Service we could still apply for the WAAF, and if that failed there was always the ATS'. Despite her expectations of failure, Audrey, 'the stepdaughter of a foreman engineer from Leicester', was enrolled as a Wireless Telegraphist. Nonetheless, in her new environment she:

felt unsure, lonely and out of place and could not work out how I had been accepted for this service, that appeared to choose its entrants with such care. I had nothing they asked for, certainly no educational qualifications. I had a feeling I must be the only girl who had left school at fourteen. But I was not going to mention that to anyone, and night school elocution lessons had helped a bit.<sup>3</sup>

The example of Audrey Johnson shows that neither background nor qualifications were a barrier to her joining the Wrens, although aspirational 'self-improvement' may have played a part.

As Jeremy Crang writes:

In order to ensure that the ATS (and in time the WAAF) got the necessary recruits, it was made clear that women would be allocated according to 'the needs of the services'. To help facilitate this process, special entry requirements were laid down for the WRNS (which had a long waiting list for voluntary applicants). These were designed to ensure that a large proportion of optants would be ineligible for the Wrens and included proficiency in German, practical experience of working with boats, or a family connection with the Royal or Merchant Navy.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 Jean Gordon (Irvine) (Leading Wren), 'Training in Portsmouth', unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, H670.1990/1.
  - 3 Audrey Johnson, *Do March in Step Girls*, quoted in Christian Lamb, *I Only Joined for the Hat: Redoubtable Wrens at War* (London: Bene Factum Publishing, 2007), p. 30.
  - 4 Jeremy A. Crang, *Sisters in Arms: Women in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 36.

Although the WRNS remained the smallest of the three uniformed women's services, as Audrey Johnson and countless other examples show, in practice these criteria, if relevant at all, were only loosely applied. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Information (MOI) recruitment film *WRNS* (dir. Ivan Moffat, November 1941) presents initiation into the service from the perspective of the officer-class, fresh from Greenwich training college, but endowed with plenty of paternal Naval pedigree.<sup>5</sup>



Video 1.1. Film clip (0.51) from *WRNS* (dir. Ivan Moffat, Ministry of Information, November 1941). Film: IWM (UKY 344), courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/1c9155f9>



Far from putting off applicants from humbler backgrounds, who like Audrey Johnson didn't obviously belong to the Naval 'club' through family connections, recruitment films encouraged aspirational applicants. In some senses joining the services may have offered many young women, Joan Prior included, a fast-track to social mobility. Brenda Birney, 'not having any affiliation with any particular Service', decided like Audrey Johnson 'to apply first to the WRNS and if they refused me I'd try the WAAF, leaving the ATS till the last. [...] I was called for an interview for the WRNS when I was asked if I had any

5 Ivan Moffat (dir.), *WRNS* (Ministry of Information), November 1941 (Imperial War Museum, UKY 344). <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060006265>



particular reason for wanting to join them. It didn't occur to me that the correct answer to this was that my father, uncle or whoever, was an admiral, although this did cross my mind much later'.<sup>6</sup> Birney's recent office work experience meant she was chosen to be a Writer. Like many others of her background, on arriving at the training depot at Westfield College, Hampstead,<sup>7</sup> she decided 'It was the nearest I was ever to get to going to university. [...] I was the best in the writers' class. [...] They looked on this as a crash course from which we would emerge after three weeks as fully fledged secretaries'.<sup>8</sup>

Of one of her interviewees, Barbara Wilson, Penny Summerfield reports: 'as a middle-class young woman, she decided that she would have to join the WRNS, the most socially select of the available options'.<sup>9</sup> Whilst Roberts' evidence substantiates this perception 'that the WRNS was the most admired' of the women's uniformed services, and 'far more selective than the ATS', she insists 'this was based on the skills and abilities of the applicants, rather than their family backgrounds or social contacts'.<sup>10</sup>

Alongside a rapid increase in its recruitment, the period of 1941–1942 also saw an expansion of the roles women could perform in the Wrens. At the outbreak of war, 'the WRNS was organised into two categories: one was "specialised branch", which would cover office duties, motor transport and cooks; the other was "general duties branch", for stewards, storekeepers and messengers'.<sup>11</sup> By 1942, the quest to relieve as many men as possible from shore-based roles to serve at sea led Wrens to be trained in a range of highly-skilled tasks—some of which, such as Anti-Aircraft Target Operators were semi-combatant. Wrens became Air Mechanics, Torpedomen, Ordnance (Armourers), Radio

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6 Brenda Birney, *The Women's Royal Naval Service: A World War Two Memoir* (privately published, 2016), p. 2.

7 Westfield College, Hampstead was opened in April 1941 as a London-based WRNS ratings training centre, in addition to the regional ports' depots at Devonport, Chatham, Portsmouth and Liverpool (Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p. 129).

8 Birney, *The Women's Royal Naval Service*, pp. 3–4.

9 Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 50.

10 Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p. 112.

11 Neil R. Storey, *WRNS: The Women's Royal Naval Service* (London: Bloomsbury / Shire, 2017), p. 31.

Mechanics, Degaussing Recorders, Dispatch Riders, and 'the most popular and symbolic of the WRNS categories': Boats Crew.<sup>12</sup> Wrens were also employed as Coders, Telegraphists, Cyphers, Signallers and Plotters.

Although Wrens could in theory choose a role, they were in practice directed according to the selection evaluation and the needs of the service. Priscilla Hext (Holman) 'applied to join Boats Crew, but alas that category was full up. They offered several jobs, but none appealed so they gave me an aptitude test. [...] Next day I was sent to see a Lieutenant Commander Royal Navy who told me that the test showed I had an engineering aptitude, so would I like to join the Fleet Air Arm as an Armourer?'.<sup>13</sup> Roberts' interviewee, Sheila Rodman, had worked as a 'laboratory assistant and typist for James Neelam and Co. steelworks' in her native Sheffield. Like Hext, she 'was selected to train as a Wren Ordinance (Armourer)' in the Fleet Air Arm.<sup>14</sup> Hazel Russell (Hough) was:

a fully trained secretary, employed by an insurance company. In my spare time I drove a YMCA van to anti-aircraft gun and balloon defence sites in the north London area. Since I wanted to join the Services I decided to volunteer to join the WRNS and hoped that I could become a driver. [...] I was then given a driving test and to my surprise was told that I had failed and they tried to persuade me to become a typist [...] Fortunately they were considering the possibility of recruiting six Wrens' [...] [at] *HMS Dolphin*, the submarine base in Portsmouth harbour [...] to replace the sailors who manned [...] a simulator known as the Attack Teacher.<sup>15</sup>

She was accepted, promoted to Leading Wren and ran an Officer training programme in submarine attack, conducting maintenance of the simulator between courses.

Understandably much attention has been paid by writers like Summerfield and Roberts to the examples of women working in masculine roles during World War II, the contingent nature of this permission to transgress gendered occupations, their experiences of those freedoms, their limitations and risks, and the reactions from

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12 Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p. 107.

13 Lamb, *I Only Joined for the Hat*, p. 93.

14 Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p. 134.

15 Lamb, *I Only Joined for the Hat*, pp. 59–60.

co-workers and family members. Indeed, interest in this phenomenon was manifest and widely publicised at the time, in the press, in MOI propaganda, in books and in films such as *Millions Like Us* and *The Gentle Sex* (both 1943). Peggy Scott's 1944 celebration of female contributions to the war effort, *They Made Invasion Possible* trumpets: 'they have taken over the men's jobs in the Services, in the factories and the shipyards, on the railways and the buses, on the roads and on the land'.<sup>16</sup> And her Wren examples feature Boats Crew, 'the first woman Fleet Mail Officer', Plotters, Wren Torpedo-Men (sic) and Signallers. Less attention is paid, then and now, to trained clerks and secretaries who served as Writers and Telegraphers in the WRNS. But for all those, like Brenda Birney and Joan Prior, whose work experience led them to become Writers, there are others whose potential to exceed their peacetime lot was identified in selection.

Roberts writes of Daphne Coyne, who 'was discouraged from going to the WAAF recruiting office by her mother because the WRNS was seen as "THE service"'.<sup>17</sup> Yet she:

came from a single parent family and had been working in a nursing home as a cook before joining the Wrens in 1940. Her expectation when going for interview was that she would become a cook or steward, as these were the only categories open at the time and mirrored her work experience. However, after beginning work as a messenger in a cypher/signals office she became one of the first Wrens trained to interpret radar signals. Clearly, the WRNS was more concerned about the ability of the people it employed than their social background.<sup>18</sup>

As Summerfield's extensive oral history work demonstrates, family background and parental opinion *were* significant factors in shaping young women's service aspirations. Yet her findings show 'there were no simple determinants'—such as social class or the daughter's/parents' ages—on these decisions. Summerfield's nuanced interpretation of her interviewees' testimonies reveals 'the process by which women's family narratives positioned the self in relation to discursive constructions of

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16 Peggy Scott, *They Made Invasion Possible* (London, New York, Melbourne: Hutchinson & Co., 1944), p. 7.

17 Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p. 113.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

wartime possibilities for young women. It reveals what different positions meant for the identity “daughter”.<sup>19</sup> For Crang what underpinned these negotiations was a seismic disruption whereby pre-war concepts of the “dutiful daughter” clashed with wartime notions of the independent young woman serving the state’.<sup>20</sup>

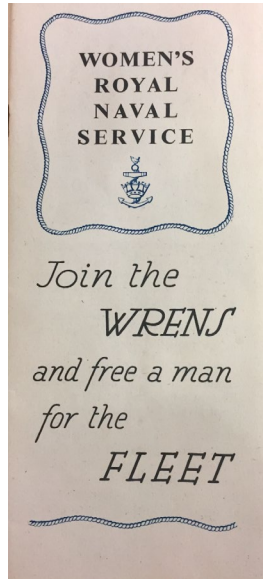


Fig. 1.2. WRNS Recruitment Leaflet, private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans, Documents.14994, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London..

In order to understand how this sociological tension played out in the case of my mother, it is necessary to know something of her own family background. Joan Prior was born in Barking, Essex, on 24 May (then Empire Day) 1923. The youngest of the three surviving daughters of a retired brewer, Henry (Harry) Prior, and his wife Grace, Joan had the advantage of a private education over her elder sisters, Grace (called Geg) (1908–1992) and Bessie (1909–1984). Fourteen years separated Joan from her next sister Bessie; there were but seventeen months between Bess and Grace. Her elder sisters not only grew up side by side, and went to the same schools, but were married on the

19 Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 70.

20 Crang, *Sisters in Arms*, p. 30.

same day, 22 July 1933, the year of Hitler's rise to power in Germany. As it happened, the occasion was more precipitous for the Prior family. A double wedding had been planned between the sisters, but their mother Grace, superstitious to a fault, rejected the idea as unlucky. So, they were married on the same day, at the same church, St Margaret's Barking, two hours apart. Grace first, to Charles Snell; then Bessie, to Stanley Bones. The day went off without a hitch, much to everyone's relief. Then, a month later, on 24 August, tragedy struck the Bones family. The husband of Stan's elder sister Annie, John Spink, was killed in an accident at work. He was employed by Nicholson's Gin-makers at their Three Mills distillery, Bromley-by-Bow. According to local newspaper reports, during a spell of hot weather he had been swimming in one of the large water tanks at the site and drowned. The inquest jury returned a verdict of death by misadventure. Grace Prior's verdict was characteristic: 'thank God we didn't have that double wedding, or they'd have blamed us!'

This anecdote is instructive of the family's mental landscape, dominated as it was by the paranoid fears of their mother. But it wasn't that she didn't have cause for anxiety. Grace and Harry Prior had lost their first-born daughter, Winnie (b. 1905), to rheumatic fever at the age of eleven in 1917. Beyond their grief at burying a child blooming with life in Rippleside cemetery, life (and death) went on: the end of the Great War brought the Spanish flu. With two other daughters under ten, a household to run and a husband working (and drinking) all hours at Glenny's Brewery, Grace Prior soldiered on as best she could. But in 1921 the trauma surfaced and she broke down. The doctor advised Harry Prior they should try for another child: a replacement. Joan was born a fortnight before her mother's fortieth birthday and was immediately doted upon. Within a couple of years her elder sisters, both good at arithmetic, left school and found employment: Geg became a cashier at Bright's butchers in Barking, Bess a ledger keeper at Eastick's in the City. By the time Joan was ten, her sisters were married. Their mother could lavish all her attention on Joan. And she did.

If this sketch provides an idea of the family's emotional temperature, the second factor that is important is their social

position. As the depression hit Britain in 1930, the Priors' lives changed. Harry Prior, following in his father's footsteps, had risen from drayman's boy (at fourteen) to head brewer at Glennys on a decent wage. But at the end of 1929 the company announced a takeover by Taylor, Walker & Co. Ltd, with the sale of fifteen pubs in Barking, Dagenham and Romford and the closure of the Linton Road brewery. There were thirty employees, nearly all of the older ones like Harry Prior (approaching fifty) being shareholders, and they were assured of 'just and generous compensation'.<sup>21</sup> The Priors invested this money into a succession of moderately unsuccessful small businesses, including corner shops and tobacconists in Barking, Walthamstow, Chadwell Heath and Hornchurch. They also funded their sons-in-law, Charlie Snell (an electrician) and Stan Bones (a haulage driver), to buy a garage—an enterprise which fell through. Despite their lack of entrepreneurial acumen, the family could afford annual holidays (to the West Country and the Isle of Wight) and, from the age of eight, to educate Joan privately, at Napier College, Woodford. These aspirations were entirely in keeping with their resolutely Conservative politics. During the school summer holidays in the early thirties, Joan would be sent away on the Great Western Railway from Paddington to Cardiff, where she stayed with Aunt Lucy (Grace Prior's sister-in-law) and her daughter Peggy, ten years Joan's senior. It was always said this was to give Aunt Grace 'a break'.<sup>22</sup>

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21 Glennys Brewery Ltd, Wikipedia: [http://breweryhistory.com/wiki/index.php?title=Glennys%27s\\_Brewery\\_Ltd](http://breweryhistory.com/wiki/index.php?title=Glennys%27s_Brewery_Ltd)

22 Lucy May Child, 1888–1980, married Grace Prior's closest brother, Justin Joshua Simeon Steele (1880–1927) who had served in the Welsh Regiment in the Boer War. They had a son, Justin 'Arthur' (1911–1940) and a daughter Margaret 'Peggy' (1914–1988), before he went off to Flanders, where he contracted syphilis. After the First World War he returned to his employment as a porter with the Great Western Railway at Cardiff station, rising to foreman before his deteriorating mental health resulted in him being committed to Whitchurch Mental Hospital where he died of dementia paralytica in 1927 at the age of forty-six. In 1935, Lucy married one of Justin's workmates, Bert Arthur (1874–1960). She was forty-six; he was sixty-one. When Bert retired (aged 65 in 1939), they moved with her daughter Peggy, to Bert's native Catcott, on the Somerset Levels. Lucy's son Arthur (also a railway porter at Cardiff) stayed behind, but died of bronchial pneumonia in February 1940, aged twenty-eight. Joan Prior spent summers with Aunt Lucy in Cardiff before her remarriage.

<u>PARTICULARS AND QUALIFICATIONS OF</u>	
<u>JOAN PRIOR</u>	
<u>ADDRESS</u>	6 Elm Place, Hornchurch Road, Romford, Essex.
<u>AGE</u>	17 Years.
<u>EDUCATION</u>	Eight years at Napier College, Woodford. One year at Pitman's College, Forest Gate.
<u>COMMERCIAL SUBJECTS</u>	
<u>SHORTHAND</u>	Present Speed 130 words per minute. Pitman's 50, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110 and 130 Certificates. (Awaiting Results of Royal Society of Arts 100 and London Chamber of Commerce 100.) <i>Pass with Distinction, etc.</i>
<u>TYPEWRITING</u>	Present Speed 40 words per minute. Pitman's 1st Class Business Grade. <del>Awaiting Results of Royal Society of Arts Intermediate and Advanced.</del> Gained credit in Royal Society of Arts School Commercial Certificate.
<u>SHORTHAND TYPIST</u>	Pitman's 80, 90, and 100 Certificates. <i>4 1/2</i>
<u>BOOK-KEEPING</u>	Gained credit in Royal Society of Arts School Commercial Certificate.
<u>COMMERCE</u>	Fair knowledge.
<u>ENGLISH</u>	Pitman's 1st Class Certificate. ✓ <del>Awaiting Result of Royal Society of Arts Intermediate. <i>Second Class</i></del>
<u>ARITHMETIC</u>	Pitman's 1st Class Certificate. ✓ Gained credit in Royal Society of Arts School Commercial Certificate.
<u>FRENCH</u>	Fair knowledge.
<u>PUBLIC CERTIFICATES</u>	Preliminary, Junior, and Senior College of Preceptors. Royal Society of Arts School Commercial Certificate. ✓

Fig. 1.3. The Curriculum Vitae of Joan H. Prior, 1940. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

When she left Napier in 1939, Joan completed a year-long shorthand-typing course at Pitman's Secretarial College at Forest Gate from which she obtained excellent certificates of proficiency. By then war had come. Joan initially found employment with an insurance company at Regis House, King William Street, on the north side of London Bridge. But in the full force of the Blitz in the late Summer of 1940 the daily commute had become increasingly perilous. Despite the large air-raid shelters under Regis House in the disused King William Street tube station,

Grace Prior's fears for her daughter's safety became unendurable. Her mother engineered a position for Joan with the local branch of the Britannic Assurance at their office in Romford, closer to home. For a while, things settled down. But by late 1941 her mother's protectionist instincts were increasingly at odds with Joan's spirit of independence which was fuelled by the new Act of Conscription. If Joan must serve, she should apply to the senior service.

**Britannic Assurance Co., Ltd.**  
CHIEF OFFICES—BROAD STREET CORNER, BIRMINGHAM, 1.

**District Office Clerk's Letter of Appointment.**

To **Miss Joan H. Prior,**  
**6, Elm Place, Hornchurch** District **ROMFORD.**  
**Romford, Essex.** Rd.,

Dear ~~Sir~~ Madam,

I have pleasure in informing you that your application for a Clerkship with this Company has been favourably considered, and you are hereby appointed at a salary of £ **1. : 10. : 0.** per week as from the **11th November, 1940.** in the Company's District Office as above.

The office hours and your duties from time to time will be communicated to you by the District Manager.

During periods of inability by you to perform your duties under this appointment owing to illness or other cause, any remuneration shall be at the Company's absolute discretion.

This appointment may be terminated at any time by either party giving to the other seven days' Notice in writing.

Please return the enclosed duplicate of this appointment signed by yourself as accepting the terms and conditions of this appointment.

Dated this **11th** day of **November,** 19 **40.**

*[Signature]*  
 General Manager.

TO THE DIRECTORS OF THE BRITANNIC ASSURANCE CO., LTD.,  
 BROAD STREET CORNER, BIRMINGHAM, 1.

I hereby agree to accept an appointment as District Office Clerk for the Company on the conditions set out in the letter of appointment—of which this document is a duplicate—and I hereby undertake and agree, in all respects, to abide by and carry out the conditions of the same.

Dated this **2nd** day of **December,** 19 **40.**

Signature of Clerk **Joan H. Prior.**

Address **6 Elm Place, Hornchurch Road, Romford.**

District Manager's Signature as Witness **[Signature]**

FORM 1748/1 4/38 K E529980

Fig. 1.4. Britannic Assurance Co. Ltd, Joan H. Prior, letter of appointment, 11 November 1940. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Grace Prior's calculations were stratified according to her own finely calibrated prejudices. Her Victorian snobbery had been cultivated over a lifetime of graft and circumspection. And her bigotry, like all bigotry, was rooted in insecurity: fear of others. The daughter of a bootmaker who gambled his family to ruin, as a girl she sold newspapers for her mother outside Upton Park station. She clung to an unfounded belief that their family was descended from nobility and had claim to a pedigree from which, by some mysterious quirk of fate, they had been cruelly disinherited.

It was a grand myth, but it fed a genuine sense of superiority. So, when it came to her youngest daughter's duty to her country, working in a factory or on the land was out of the question—the ATS were no better than they should be, and WAAFs romantically susceptible. By swift process of elimination, only the senior service, the Royal Navy, might offer the chance to rub shoulders with a better class of person.

Grace Prior, in arriving at this answer, had much in common with Jean Gordon's wartime mothers sketched above. Yet shared assumptions afforded little comfort to Grace. This still meant Joan leaving home. Who would look after her then? Joan's desertion would surely worry her mother to an early grave (she died aged eighty-five in 1968). It would tear her nerves to shreds. As certain as night followed day she would suffer another breakdown, like the breakdown she had after Winnie's death.

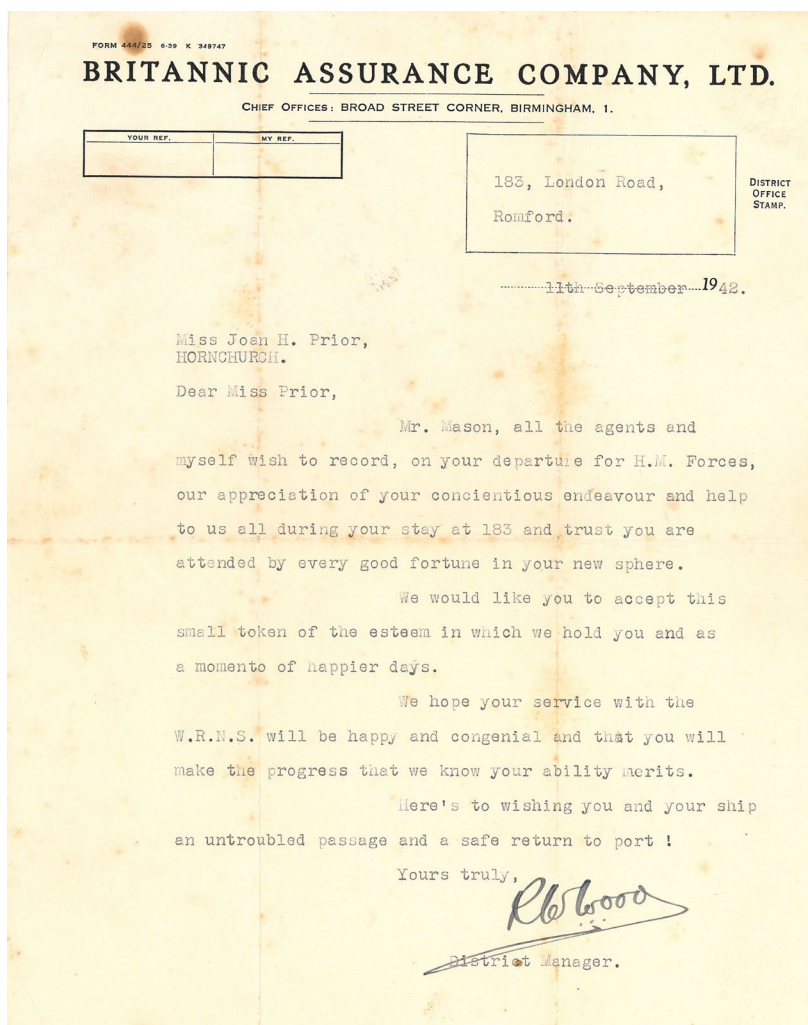


Fig. 1.5. Letter from R. W. Wood, District Manager (Romford), Britannic Assurance Co. Ltd, to Miss. Joan H. Prior, 11 September 1942. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

First, they would sell up the shop in Hornchurch and move in with Bess and Stan in Hulse Avenue, Barking. Then they should go to the country, Grace and Harry. That was it. If Joan was going away, so would they. They would go down to Somerset to her sisters-in-law Lucy and Ida. To the country. They would be safer there. Far away from the bombs and the sirens and the *ack ack* that tore through her soul night after night,

as if it were directed at her in person. And Joan would come home on leave, whenever she could, of course. And of course, she promised, she would write. Yes, she would write. So it was that in September 1942, at the age of nineteen, Joan Prior joined the Women's Royal Naval Service as a Writer.

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## WOMEN'S ROYAL NAVAL SERVICE.

### Certificate of Service of 2924 N.M.D.

NAME Prior Joan Halverson (M.S.S.) Official No. 41801 2786

Date of Birth 24th May 1923. Nearest known Relative or Friend (to be noted in pencil).  
 Religious Denomination Church of England. Relationship Sister  
 Home Address 6 Elmwood Park, Brockley, Sandown, I.O.W. Name Mr. Harry R. Prior  
7, LEED STREET, SANDOWN, I.O.W. Address "BROCKLEY"

National Registration Identity No. D. 206/3. Date of Enrolment 29th Sept AFO 2133/42  
28th September 1942  
 Date of Commencing Duty 14th September 1942  
 Period of Engagement Duration.

Height		Colour of			Sears, Marks, etc.	Date of Enrolment	Date of Commencing Duty	Period of Engagement
Feet	Ins.	Hair	Eyes	Complexion				
5	2	Light Brown	Blue	Fair				

Establishment	Rating	Specialised or Un-specialised	Category (A.F.O. 1687/41)	Mobile or Immobile	From	To	Cause of Discharge
H.M.S. Pembroke III	WRN.	Special	SL Typist.	Mobile	14/9/42	1/10/42	(Cin C.X.F.) (L.O.)
H.M.S. PEMBROKE III	WRN	Spec	SL Typist	Mobile	8 Oct 42	31/1/43	H.M.S. PEMBROKE III
Victoria III				M	9/42	31/45	Rated 4/2
for Naval Party					Sept 44	Jan 45	17th NOVEMBER 1945
Pembroke II	WRN.			M	1 Feb 45	28/3/45	
for Naval Party	WRN.			M	1/4/45	15/4/45	
NAVAL PARTY 1749			Writer (S.M.)	M.	1/2/45	15/4/45	
H.M.S. ROYAL ALBERT.				M.	1/2/45	15/4/45	Released Class A
H.M.S. Sandbrook I				M.	1/2/45	15/4/45	

CREDITED BIRTH CELEBRATION GRANT 14/8/42

PAYMENT OF WIDOW'S PENSION AND PAY AUTHORIZED 10/6/1946

Dad 31/5/46.

C.E. 51410/41.

Fig. 1.6. WRNS Service Record, Joan H. Prior, 41801. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

## 1.1 Mill Hill

Dame Vera Laughton Matthews, Director of the WRNS during World War II, wrote:

The opening of the great depot at Mill Hill by Mr. A.V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty, in May 1942, was a landmark in WRNS history. [...] Many distinguished naval personalities were present [...] in the audience but my chief memory is of the rows and rows of Wrens who packed the great hall and the high galleries. In speaking to them I said that in the Navy one talked about 'a happy ship' and that atmosphere was made not only by those at the top but by every individual; each Wren who passed through the depot would leave something of herself behind in the atmosphere which would affect those who came after.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 1.7. The former WRNS Training Depot at Mill Hill shortly after its opening as the Headquarters of the Medical Research Council in 1950. Image courtesy of Associated Press/Alamy Stock Photo. <https://www.alamy.com/medicines-back-room-boys-in-their-new-headquarters-at-mill-hill-london-on-march-21-1950-having-waited-ten-years-for-it-to-be-opened-due-to-the-war-the-building-was-used-by-the-admiralty-during-the-war-as-a-training-centre-for-wrns-the-exterior-of-the-new-building-which-will-house-the-research-workers-in-their-experiments-and-tests-ap-photo-image519356228.html>

Mill Hill, on The Ridgeway in North London, had been built as (and later became) the National Institute of Medical Research. Following its

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<sup>23</sup> Dame Vera Laughton Matthews, *Blue Tapestry* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1948), p. 190.

requisition in March 1942 by the Royal Navy, it was christened *HMS Pembroke III* and established as the central training depot, with a capacity of 900.<sup>24</sup> All new recruits entered the service as Probationers for basic training and their category of work was established at the end of the induction. As Roberts records:

The WRNS was the only women's auxiliary that did not provide uniforms straight away. The issuing of a uniform at the end of two weeks' initial training was seen both as a reward and achievement for many women. This protocol reinforced the perception that only the hardest working and most suitable would make it into the service.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, Virginia Nicholson is one of many writers who report the widely shared view that preference for the WRNS over the other women's services was down to the appeal of its uniform.<sup>26</sup>

Wren Angela Mack remembered that this spirit of rigour and exclusiveness was conveyed in an introductory lecture given by a 'fierce' naval officer:

He made it very clear that it was our duty to defend our country to the nth degree, if necessary to our last breath. We were exhorted to give one hundred and twenty per cent of our best every moment of every day to live up to the great tradition of the Royal Navy. Much was made of the fact that we would be *part* of the Navy and not an auxiliary service as were the ATS and WAAF.<sup>27</sup>

Roberts suggests that 'much was done in the first two weeks to put off those new recruits not cut out for a life in the WRNS'. She cites Wren M. Pratt whose 'most vivid recollection of this period is of scrubbing endless flights of stone stairs with cold water and carbolic, while others were assigned to kitchen chores. It was hardly surprising that many girls threw in the towel during that fortnight!'<sup>28</sup>

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24 Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p. 129.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

26 'Again and again women cite uniform as being the key factor in their choice of service'. Virginia Nicholson, *Millions Like Us: Women's Lives in the Second World War* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 145.

27 Angela Mack (Wren), quoted in Crang, *Sisters in Arms*, p. 49.

28 M. Pratt (Wren), quoted in Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p. 131. Laughton Matthews confirms that even at the time the step-scrubbing initiation at Mill Hill had become legendary, though it is reported as an entirely happy memory: 'I have heard a number of Wrens speak of their probationary training, which included a

Another new recruit, Margaret Boothroyd, wrote of their Mill Hill days:

This was our first glimpse of Wren life. Here we were Pro-Wrens, and we were given a blulette overall, a garment we wore for the first few days. We were then given a medical check, including a hair search for head-lice—we were very annoyed about that—then a meal. I still remember very clearly being given sausage and very thick ships' cocoa, which I didn't think went together very well. I met Laura (Mountney, later Ashley) that first day and we were together for the rest of our service in the WRNS.

We were shown to our sleeping quarters (cabins instead of bedrooms, bunks instead of beds, galley, not kitchen etc) and shown how to make our bed, envelope-style sheets and blanket, and the blue-white bedspread, which had a ship's anchor on it, this must be the right way up or the ship would sink!!

During those first few days we were interviewed to find out in which Section we were to work. We were all put into Divisions and really it was very much like being back at school. We had various lessons in classrooms learning the Navy jargon, badges and ranks. As for working and scrubbing, personally I did none and I don't think Laura ever did any either. My job was polishing a very long corridor, which was already very highly polished! Others cleaned cutlery etc.

Abbreviation	Role
W.R.N.M.	Assistant King Harbour
A.S.	Chief Submarine
H.O.	Sanitary Officer
A.F.O.s	Administrative Unit Officer (Weekly)
E.R.s	Books of Reference
C.M.C.	Commander-in-Chief
Capt. W.	Captain in charge
C.O.S.	Chief of Staff
C.O.C.A.S.	Commanding Officer's Board of Death
C.E.	Chief Engineer
C.E.	Chief Establishment
C.C.O.	Central Control Officer
C.X.O.	Chief Examination Officer
C.H.M.	Confidential Food Message
C.A.F.O.s	Confidential Admiralty Unit Officer
C.E.O.	Chief Officer
C.S.	Chief Staff Officer
X.O.O.	Chief Officer
H.M.	Head Message
H.M.H.	King Harbour Officer
C.W. Branch	Chief of Staff
N.C.S.O.	Naval Control Service Officer
S.O.	Signal Officer
N.R. and S.R.	Signal Officer's Administrative Unit
N.A.S.B.	Chief of Submarine (Board)
M.S.	Chief Sweeper
N.O.I.C.	Naval Officer in Charge
N.S.O.	Naval Officer
N.A.L.O.	Chief Liaison Officer
N.F.A.	Chief Liaison Officer (International)
O.I.C.S.	Officer in charge of ships
P.H.O.	Principal Medical Officer
O.C.W.	Officer in charge of works
P.C.	Protector
P.N.	Protector
O.U.A.	Chief Officer's official use only
R.A.	Chief Medical
V.A. (S)	Chief Submarine
S.P.	Signal Publication
S.O.I.	Staff Officer Intelligence
M.I.C.	Chief Examination Officer
S.H.M.	Confidential Food Message
S.O.O.	Staff Officer Operations
S.E.E.	Superintendent Electrical & Mechanical
T.E.O.	Technical Officer

Fig. 1.8. Notes on naval abbreviations taken by Joan Prior on 21 September 1942 during her first week of basic training at Mill Hill (*HMS Pembroke III*). Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

turn of getting up at 5.30am to scrub the nine floors of stone staircase, as some of their happiest service days' (*Blue Tapestry*, p. 191).

During our time at Mill Hill we were issued with a jacket, skirt, navy raincoat and greatcoat, hat, two pairs of shoes, gloves, three white shirts and a black tie. Wrens (I think it was the only service to do this) were given a sum of money per day in our pay to buy our own undies, pyjamas etc, which was very much appreciated; we got a clothing coupon allowance to buy these.<sup>29</sup>

Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas arrived from Swansea where she had worked as a typist in the Town Clerk's Office:

I had only been to London once in my life, and I felt absolutely terrified when I arrived at Paddington Station. I was on my own, and there was so much hustle and bustle! There were notices up that advised the Wrens on where to gather, and I was soon helped into an army lorry and taken to Mill Hill for my two weeks' basic training. There was no guarantee that you would become a Wren at the end of the training—they could reject you if they didn't think a service life would suit you.

The fortnight at Mill Hill was something I'll never forget. There were about 850 of us, all doing different things. In the mornings we did the most laborious tasks. I think I cleaned more bathroom taps in those two weeks than I have in my life since! At the end you had to do a test in whatever field you wanted to enter—shorthand typing, in my case.

I passed the test and was posted to Norfolk House, St James's Square, to a job which turned out to be one of the joys of my life.<sup>30</sup>

## 1.2 Norfolk House

On 8 October 1942, Wren Joan Prior 41801 was also sent to Norfolk House—once the seat of the Lloyds Bank board, soon to become the headquarters of Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (COSSAC). Here, at Norfolk House, the real work began. Wrens Prior and Thomas joined the typing pool run by Leading Wrens Patti Harmer and Di Parnham, based in room 410. However, for some weeks after the Wrens' establishment at St James's, daily square-bashing remained a ritual drudgery until Rear-Admiral Creasy (who

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29 Margaret Boothroyd (Wren), 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley', *WW2 People's War*, A2939646, 23 August 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/46/a2939646.shtml>

30 Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas (Leading Wren), 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac', *WW2 People's War*, A2524402, 16 April 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/02/a2524402.shtml>

succeeded Commodore John Hughes-Hallett as head of the Naval Staff of COSSAC) decided this was wasting valuable time and wrote to the Admiralty to tell them so.

In March 1943, Lieutenant General Frederick E. Morgan was appointed as Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander. Morgan's job, to derive from a number of extant staff studies a coherent plan for a cross-channel invasion, received the gloomy benediction of Field Marshall Sir Alan Brooke: 'of course it won't work, but it's your job to make sure it bloody well does work'. Embarking upon this monumental strategic mission, Morgan commented with wry Churchillian humour: 'never were so few asked to do so much in so short a time'.<sup>31</sup>

'Ginge' Thomas was soon seconded from the Naval section to work for General Morgan:

Norfolk House was alive with people from all three services and from different nationalities. I was originally assigned to the naval section, but after a few days I was sent "on loan" to a different section. I went to meet a man called General Morgan, the Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander, or COSSAC. The Supreme Allied Commander hadn't yet been appointed, and I soon realised that it was General Morgan who was responsible for planning the assault on the Continent.

The first time I met him was in a huge room with maps covering the walls. He was sitting behind a desk, and said, "Sit down sailor." He then dictated some letters to me. That was the beginning of what turned out to be not only a wonderful job, but a wonderful friendship as well.

My first impressions of the general was that he was quite tall, with fair hair and almost boyish looks, with a lovely soft voice—very easy to take dictation from. He was very friendly.

I went everywhere with General Morgan, notebook in hand. I took dictation, typed letters, and took notes at staff meetings.

At the time, General Morgan was working on the plans for the D-Day invasion, so my work was extremely interesting—although at the start, I must admit, it was a little bit beyond me. We all realised that it was very hush hush, and very important, but at the beginning I didn't quite understand what was happening. It was also a little bit frightening, because I never thought I would be involved in anything so important. Whether the invasion plans would be successful was a big worry in my little mind.

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31 Quoted in Peter Caddick-Adams, *Sand and Steel: A New History of D-Day*, Kindle edn (London: Cornerstone Digital, 2019), p. 119.



General Morgan was a workaholic. I don't think there were ever times when I was there and he wasn't. He was very energetic and hard-working, which I suppose he needed to be to head an operation of that size. I think he even had a bed at the office. He always apologised to me if we had to work long hours.<sup>32</sup>

GORDON: Before the COSSAC plans were approved in July 1943 a skeleton staff in Norfolk House was already beginning to research and plan for the invasion of France. As it was clear that the bulk of the assault forces and the build-up would inevitably come from Portsmouth, the C-in-C Portsmouth became the Allied Commander designate for the invasion. The staff was called the "X" staff and Commodore J. Hughes-Hallett was chosen to lead it as Chief of Staff (X) to C-in-C Portsmouth.

I joined this Staff at about this time and became part of the Registry where the Writers (clerks) worked in a room on the ground floor. To begin with, most of this secretarial staff were those who had been working on Operations TORCH and HUSKY, the North Africa and Sicily landings. There was a Chief Petty Officer (an energetic and articulate Irishman) in charge, about ten or fifteen Wrens, a desk or two, a telephone and a number of steel cabinets and the inevitable In and Out trays and wastepaper baskets. As this relatively small staff was engaged in "winding up" TORCH and HUSKY as well as beginning to deal with papers and documents for the (X) Staff, everyone found themselves doing whatever work was required, with newcomers like myself being taught their duties at the same time.

Though there was an air of restrained excitement and one became aware that there was something very important afoot, everyone remained calm and courteous towards each other and were always ready to explain in great detail what was going on and to what each paper referred. So that by being so early "on the ground floor" I was able to listen and learn and to grasp from the beginning the essential details of the workings of a Naval Registry dealing with Secret or restricted papers and documents, and was duly promoted (Writer). Plans have to be written down and orders and instructions have eventually to be put on paper, and Senior Planning Officers need an efficient Secretarial department to do this for them. Someone had to be trusted, but then in fact eventually the whole of the Forces of the UK were involved in some way or another in the putting together of this Plan and the training, transportation and supplying of the ships and craft and personnel who were to take part, so just about everyone had a secret to keep—and it was a big one.

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32 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

Basically, every paper and document referring in any way to Wartime plans and operations are designated Secret, or Most Secret, the latter being changed to Top Secret when the Americans became so heavily involved. Therefore, the security of these papers must be very carefully organised, and a process is evolved to make it possible to know the exact location and distribution of every paper at all times, even when circulating within the building to the Staff Officers for their information, comment or action.

To this end, every paper is recorded in a large book or Register with a serial number. From there it circulates to whichever Staff Officer needs to see it. It returns to the Registry before it goes to the next person, each name being entered and crossed off in turn. The Wren Messengers collected the papers from the Officers' Out trays and put them in the In trays, being careful of course to return them each time to the Registry. Thus, in theory, the location and destination of every paper could be found by looking in the Register.

Before, however, a paper or document circulated, the relevant file—"docket" or "pack" in Navy language—had to be attached to it with circulation instructions, any reference "tabbed up" and any other relevant material, such as maps, photographs or signals attached. Thus, it circulated with the "whole story" and the Plans' detailed development attached to it. After circulation it was "packed away" and the pack put into a steel cabinet until required again.

Papers of course were also given "pack numbers" but as they were all filed under subject matter the Pack Writers, of whom I became one, had to know and understand to what subject the paper referred and collect up and cross-reference any other relevant papers or packs. If they were circulating they could be intercepted at the Register or taken from the steel filing cabinets, but often a paper arrived with a new subject-heading, one which was difficult to identify as it was referred to only by its code name. For instance, one had to know that "Mulberries" were artificial harbours, but so also were "Gooseberries", and "Whales" and "Beetles" were part of them too. If one were suddenly asked for a paper on "The loading of Phoenixes into DUKWS" for instance, one had to remember that Phoenixes were concrete caissons (and what are caissons?!) and DUKWS were amphibious lorries and there could be a different pack for each, all cross-referenced. As it was not a good thing to write too much down, we had to commit a lot of code-names to memory and to help us we were sometimes sent down to watch a new film on some just-invented secret weapon being shown to the Senior Officers in the basement.

To begin with the files were roughly divided into Sections of Operations, under Prue Nesbitt: Personnel (Margaret Burden), and Training (myself and an assistant, Jeanne Law, as this was the largest

section). As the Plan became more complex and detailed, however, and all the files became part of one big operation with subjects divided and sub-divided into manageable parts, all closely over-lapping, we found ourselves each with about three four-drawer cabinets of files—roughly over a hundred each—to be understood and if possible memorised, often remembering the number of the pack as well, which made it more easily found in the Register. Quite a lot of detective work went into our daily duties as often Officers took circulating papers and packs with them in discussion with another, forgetting to inform the Registry. Also, Officers would require packs or papers on subjects whose official name they didn't know, and we would spend a long time trying to identify and locate a paper on "something about soldiers being trained on waterproofed vehicles at Poole". This would turn out to be the training of some Army regiments on DD tanks and we might have to get the paper from 21 Army Group or Combined Operations, which involved using the scrambled telephone, or it was circulating with another paper called merely "DD Tanks". When the Admiral or any of the Chiefs of Staff wanted a paper or one came in marked "immediate", or there was a Combined Chiefs of Staff Meeting, papers had to be found and prepared in double-quick time, as all these took precedence and were done instantly. A backlog of papers inevitably built up and one stayed later and later every evening "packing away" papers which had temporarily finished circulation.<sup>33</sup>

About a month after Jean Gordon commenced duties at Norfolk House, on 27 August 1943, Second Officer Elspeth Shuter arrived from Combined Operations Headquarters:<sup>34</sup>

In the Navy you rarely seem to arrive at a new job and find that you are expected. This was no exception. There were two brothers on the naval staff in Norfolk House—both were secretaries—and of course I had to go and say my piece to the wrong brother. Not that it made much difference when I had eventually found the right brother, as nobody had any idea what to do with me! [...]

At this time the Naval Staff [...] working under Rear-Admiral Creasy, consisted of no more than about fifteen highly qualified naval officers. My only qualification was that I had been playing about with landing ships and craft—on paper—at Combined Ops during the mounting of

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33 Jean Gordon (Irvine) (Leading Wren), 'Norfolk House', unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, H670.1990/4.

34 Under Lord Louis Mountbatten.

the North African and Sicilian operations.<sup>35</sup> So it was into the midst of this extremely able planning staff that I had been plunged. True, there were already two Wren officers running the signal distribution. But in the Navy signal officers are a law unto themselves and thus escape suspicion. No wonder then that there was much head scratching and doubts as to the value of a WRNS officer on the staff. I was passed from one to the other, each read the letter I had brought, looked at me dubiously and sent me on to someone else! I came at last to the Staff Officer in charge of Landing Ships and Craft—short title: SOLC—who said at once that he would take me on as his assistant. I am always grateful to him for accepting me so happily. Thus, in this haphazard way, I had the good luck to become Assistant Staff Officer, Landing Ships and Craft—short title: A/SOLC—on the finest staff I could ever wish to know.

But it did not strike me in that way to begin with [...] Those first days were very dreary. We seemed to be suspended in a vacuum waiting for the verdict of the Quebec Conference.<sup>36</sup> I could find no work to do (a situation that is always unsatisfactory: but one that is agony in a new job). I knew all too well that my presence was resented and my morale sank.

However, the Overlord plan was sold to the big chiefs at Quebec. The members of the staff who had been at the conference returned and once again the place hummed with activity. The target date for the operation was at that time 1 May 1944—only eight months distant—and there was much to be done.

Yes, the work involved was colossal. From the naval point of view it included the berthing and assembly of the greatest Armada of all time. Five naval forces, each capable of lifting a fully equipped assault division to the far shore, had to be mounted and trained. Two artificial harbours had to be created—literally created—and plans made for their assembly at the chosen sites. The supply and maintenance of the Army, once it had been put on the beaches, had to be carefully considered. All these and many other problems had to be tackled and solved during that autumn and the following spring.

Earlier in the planning stages of Overlord the Navy had said—no doubt with a thump of the table—that artificial harbours could be constructed on the far shore. At the time the idea seemed so fantastic that the Army wrote a skit on the plan called “Operation OVERBOARD”.

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35 Operations TORCH and HUSKY respectively.

36 At the Quebec conference in August 1943, Churchill presented the first draft plan (then code-named QUADRANT) to the Americans.

In this a great deal of fun was poked at the Navy, especially over their artificial harbours. Suffice it to say that late in the Spring, 1944, the security boys suddenly realised that operation Overboard—which had received a wide circulation—was very near the truth. Even the imaginary date, which was 32 May 1944, was exactly the same thing as 1 June 1944, which was by then the target date of the real operation. Great efforts were made to recall copies of Operation Overboard and to establish the author. Anyone possessing a copy was singularly unhelpful in the matter. It was all too rich a situation!<sup>37</sup>

But security was no joking matter, as one of my mother's anecdotes recalls. After the heavy casualties suffered by the Canadian landing troops in the disastrous Dieppe Raid of 19 August 1942—attributed by some, in part, to a security breach—the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, insisted on all Combined Operations planning employing an exclusively WRNS secretariat. The Wrens were, he said, 'the only birds that wouldn't sing'.<sup>38</sup> Extensive research has been unable to verify the attribution of this quotation, so the epithet remains apocryphal. Nonetheless, the utmost necessity of complete security around the planning of Overlord was impressed upon the small team of Wrens from the start, as Joan Smith's testimony for *The Vital Link* (1994) makes clear.<sup>39</sup>

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37 Elspeth Shuter (2/O Wren), 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter', Documents.13454 (Imperial War Museum, London).

38 Of the 5000 Canadian troops landed at Dieppe in a raid designed to assess the German defences of the French coast and trial the strategy for a large-scale amphibious assault, 913 were killed, 2,460 were wounded and 1,946 were taken prisoner. Mountbatten, perhaps unfairly, shouldered the blame. Yet, Churchill later reflected, 'Our postwar knowledge of German records shows that they did not have any special warning about Dieppe through leakage [...] Looking back, the casualties of this memorable action may seem out of proportion to the results. It would be wrong to judge the episode solely by such a standard'. Pragmatically, he judged, 'it was a costly but not unfruitful reconnaissance in force'. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume IV: The Hinge of Fate* (London: Cassell, 1951), p. 7968.

39 Joan Smith, in Howard-Bailey (dir.), *The Vital Link*.



Video 1.9. Film clip (00.22) from *The Vital Link: The Wrens of the Allied Naval Command Expeditionary Force, 1943-45* (dir. Chris Howard-Bailey, Royal Naval Museum, VHS recording, col., sound, 1994), courtesy of National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth. ©National Museum of the Royal Navy.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/1979f4dc>



In London, they were told they might be tailed by the Secret Service. The information they were privy to could never be divulged, even after the war. These secrets should be taken to the grave.

Writing after the war, Commander Kenneth Edwards, author of *Operation Neptune* (1946), observed of these WRNS: 'I knew of no instance of even the smallest lapse of security in spite of the fact that the majority of them had access to all TOP SECRET papers from the beginning'.<sup>40</sup>

Admiral Ramsay's biographer, Rear-Admiral W.S. Chalmers shared this opinion: 'integrity was a tradition of this fine women's Service, and there was never the smallest lapse of security either in conversation or at work'.<sup>41</sup>

Elsbeth Shuter remembers, affectionately, that the looser tongues in the office tended to be male:

Our staff was famous for its loud and carrying voices. How the plan ever remained a secret I cannot think. Except that I never remember hearing the actual landing area or the date mentioned in words. Of all the nice stories I know about loud voices this is the nicest. The Secretary,

<sup>40</sup> Commander Kenneth Edwards, *Operation Neptune* (London: Collins, 1946), p. 104.

<sup>41</sup> Rear-Admiral W.S. Chalmers, *Full Cycle: The Biography of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1959), p. 209.

on the side of the house responsible for Naval Administration during the pending operation, was worried because he had not been allowed to start the Administrative orders. He was in with his Admiral one day, trying to persuade him to attend more operational meetings the better to keep in the operational picture. The Admiral replied that it was not necessary for him to attend meetings as he could hear all he wanted to know of the operational picture through the wall. "Listen", he said, "They are talking now..." The room was hushed and through the wall came:

"Poor Sec. Admin is itching to begin his administrative orders but that old boffin next door won't let him get going!"

I like to think that the orders were started the next day...<sup>42</sup>

THOMAS: During the time I was at Norfolk House, an appeal went out to the public to send in postcards of the coast of Normandy, maps, Michelin Guides or any other information that might help with the planning of the operation. Although I didn't personally have anything to do with sorting out the information that was sent in, I remember the rooms with postcards stuck on the wall.<sup>43</sup>

SHUTER: All the offices had large maps of the north coast of France on the walls. Ours used to be covered with finger-prints all over the proposed invasion beaches. They were left by our many visitors demonstrating some crazy point that some crazy person had just suggested at a quite crazy meeting. Conscientiously, after one of these map-beating demonstrations, I used to go and make finger-prints on other parts of the map! In fact, so security-minded did I become, that every so often I would make a tour of the offices after everyone else had gone home and busily I planted my finger prints up and down the French coast anywhere, everywhere, other than the assault area. I hoped that in so doing I would diddle the fifth columnist—if there should be one!<sup>44</sup>

BERYL K. BLOWS: As a young and nervous Third Officer, I was appointed Personal Assistant to Rear-Admiral Tennant, on the staff of ANCXF at Norfolk House.<sup>45</sup> [...] On my first Monday morning, in my very new uniform complete with new black silk stockings, I reported

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42 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

43 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

44 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

45 Rear-Admiral W. G. 'Bill' Tennant, a veteran of the Dunkirk evacuation, was appointed by Ramsay to oversee the preparation and deployment of the Mulberry Harbours.

for duty and, after the usual introductions, was handed a yellow duster. Thoroughly bewildered, I was taken into an inner, inner room, through locked doors. On a vast kitchen table was a relief model, beautifully made, and complete with houses, roads and the five beaches of the Overlord coast. I was shut in with my duster and told to dust. Alone, I stood and concentrated on a mental picture of the outline of the map of France—the shape of the Cherbourg peninsular eventually gave the clue. I set to work but couldn't reach the centre without kneeling on the table, and caught my stocking on the spire of a church—Arromanches as I discovered later.<sup>46</sup>

Looking back, Third Officer Fanny Hugill recalled:

Many of the Wrens were very young—straight out of school—I was only twenty-one myself. But our standards were high. After years of war and knowing that we were trusted and our contributions valued, it was unthinkable that we would spill the beans—any beans.<sup>47</sup>

Kathleen Cartwright:

soon realised that the work was of great secrecy and importance and that we were the Headquarters for the Allied Naval invasion of Europe. We received and transmitted many signals in connection with "Overlord" referring to Mulberry Harbour, Pluto Pipe Line, etc and much information which became news items after the successful liberation of Europe. When a "top secret" message came through on our teleprinter it had to be sealed and stamped by the duty officer and then delivered to Admiralty House by whoever had received it on their machine. We were working eight-hour watches involving mornings, afternoons and nights.<sup>48</sup>

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46 Beryl K. Blows, (3/O Wren), Unpublished Personal Testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, AW ID. H679.1990.

47 Fanny Hugill (Gore-Browne), (3/O Wren), 'A Wren's memories', Ramsay Symposium, Churchill College, Cambridge, 6 June 2014, *Finest Hour* 125, Winter 2004–05, p. 19. <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-125/a-wrens-memories/>

48 Kathleen Cartwright (Wren), 'My experience of life in the Wrens' (contributed by Huddersfield Local Studies Library), WW2 People's War, A2843840, 17 July 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/40/a2843840.shtml>





Fig. 1.10. Drawing of Norfolk House, St James's Square, by Elspeth Shuter. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000010, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

THOMAS: I was living at a nurses' hostel between Chalk Farm and Belsize Park at the time,<sup>49</sup> and would travel to Leicester Square or Piccadilly Circus on the tube every morning. From the station there was the jostle of walking down the Haymarket, and by the time I got there, Norfolk House would be buzzing with activity. I didn't work shifts, but I would generally be there all day and if the general wanted to work in the evening I would stay late and be taken home by his driver. I was never allowed to go home on my own late at night.

There was no such thing as a typical day—the work depended on whatever was going on. I usually had to attend the Chief of Staff's conferences in the morning and evening, and the rest of the time I dealt with anything the general wanted answered or typed. After the morning meetings everything had to be typed up for the evening, and after the evening meetings everything had to be typed for the following morning, so there was very little time off. We often worked into the early hours of the morning.<sup>50</sup>

GORDON: With the appointment of General Montgomery to 21 Army Group and the decision to land initially five instead of three divisions, the task of the Naval Force had become much larger and it was thought that

49 The Wrens' quarters were on England's Lane off Haverstock Hill.

50 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

C-in-C Portsmouth would be too burdened with his duties in the Port to be commander of the Naval Expeditionary Force as well. So Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay became Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force (ANCXF) and Rear-Admiral Creasy became his Chief of Staff and both arrived at Norfolk House.

Their orders were the "safe and and timely arrivals of the assault forces on the beaches, the cover of their landings, and subsequently the support and maintenance and rapid build-up of our forces ashore", and this was further extended "to carry out an offensive from the UK to secure a lodgement on the Continent from which further offensive operations can be developed. This lodgement must contain sufficient port facilities to maintain a force of 26–30 divisions and to enable this force to be augmented by follow-up formations at the rate of 3–5 divisions a month". The Naval part of this operation was christened "Operation Neptune" and was the responsibility of the Naval Commander Admiral Ramsay. The overall plan for the lodgement of the Allied Forces after the initial landings and assault was called "Overlord" and General Eisenhower was appointed as Supreme Allied Commander, with Generals Montgomery and Bedell-Smith under him, and Air Vice Marshall Leigh Mallory the Air Commander. Commodore Hughes-Hallett, Chief of Staff (X) left Norfolk House for duties elsewhere when Admiral Ramsay was appointed ANCXF, and Admiral Creasy his C.O.S. But not before he had conceived the first idea of the "Mulberry" Harbour.

There followed, naturally, a big expansion of the original "X" staff at Norfolk House. Experts and specialists on every aspect and requirement of the plan arrived and set up their offices. The Mulberry expert Commodore McKenzie arrived. PLUTO, the plan to lay a pipe line under the ocean from the far shore, with all its CONUNDRUMS etc arrived too. The Signals sections grew, the Loading and Logistics Department with all its mass of paper, the Hydrographer, the experts on Landing Craft, Hospital Ships etc etc, to co-ordinate the many training of personnel and weapons and the devising of new operations to be planned to put into practice for the overall plan.

The Registry had by now moved to a large room on the first floor. The Wrens from TORCH and HUSKY had mostly left to take up commissions and their CPO had gone, thankfully, back to sea.

We had a new CPO in charge, D.H. Bennison, a quiet young man of twenty-eight who was always courteous, calling us by our surnames with the prefix of Miss or Mrs. He was "Chief" and had complete control of the situation and patiently guided us through with unerring efficiency. He would confront any member of the Staff on behalf of one of his Wrens whom he thought had been wrongly criticised. He had a younger PO to assist him, and together they opened all the incoming mail and

decided what must be done. The Wrens on the Register, now extended to at least three books, were also expanded in numbers. There seemed to be hundreds of Wren Messengers who never seemed to sit down at all. Downstairs there was a typing pool, "manned" entirely by Wrens, which swelled in size daily. They typed and re-typed plans for all operations, orders for ships and craft and Naval parties' establishments and installations, logistics and loading tables etc, etc. Everything they typed had to be checked before being "run off" on hand-operated Gestetner machines, and during all working hours there would be Wren typists asking anyone they could find "Will you check me, please?", or huddled together with anyone willing to check their copy. Whenever there was a "flap" on to get orders out, generally late at night, everyone available went downstairs to help them collate into sets and staple together the mounds of papers of Orders to be sent out.

Sometimes it was necessary to go to the floor above ours to extract a paper from the US Navy Registry. Here we were always greeted with evident pleasure. Their officer, in fact, greeted every Wren with "Hi there Petoonia, howya bin?". Though their Registry was equipped with a lot of complicated-looking gadgetry, extracting what we wanted was a lengthy procedure. In reverse, they expressed a gratifying astonishment at the speed with which we were able to help them, generally from memory. I think the difference was that we were supposed to know exactly what was going on and work from that knowledge, whilst they were not "in the picture" and had to rely on office procedures.



Fig. 1.11. A sketch of the Registry, ground floor, Norfolk House, St James's Square, by Jean Gordon. The D-Day Story Collection, 1986/227, courtesy of the D-Day Story, Portsmouth. © Portsmouth City Council. [https://thedaystory.com/ElasticSearch/?si\\_elastic\\_detail=PORMG%20:%201986/227&highlight\\_term=Jean%20Gordon](https://thedaystory.com/ElasticSearch/?si_elastic_detail=PORMG%20:%201986/227&highlight_term=Jean%20Gordon)

Along the corridor was the Despatch Department where Wrens dealt with the complicated procedure of packaging up, sealing and receipting any papers which had to be sent out. Quite early on in the planning of Neptune, when the receipts for Top Secret papers were duly returned to their senders, consternation was expressed by the recipient because a Wren had written her rank, as required, against her signature when receiving them, and no Naval rating was supposed to see or handle restricted papers! This posed a temporary dilemma, as to commission all the Wrens in the building, including the Messengers, would have produced not only a lengthy hiatus, but have aroused some unwelcome interest into what was going on at Norfolk House. However, this was soon overcome by a letter sent to all concerned with described us as "hand-picked and of the utmost integrity". Whilst the first might not have been strictly accurate, the latter was, I think, eventually proved to be true. At about this stage, I believe, we all solemnly signed the Official Secrets Act!

Security was of course as tight as the circumstances allowed. We all had passes to be shown to the Security men at the door. At the end of working hours often, as time went on, long after midnight, the steel cabinets had to be locked and the keys returned to the Duty Officer. Every bit of paper, including blotting and scrap paper, had to be put away in the cabinets or disposed of into the waste paper baskets marked "Secret" which had to be emptied by the Messengers or the last person to leave. This was called "Secret Waste" and there was a small room in the building into which it was tipped and where anyone after duty volunteered to go and sit on the floor amongst the paper (and in the early hours several mice!) to do a stint of removing all pins and metal tags—paper clips were not used as they were not secure and might attach other papers to them—which would have damaged the pulping machine. Though all the Wrens working on operation Neptune and Overlord must have known something about everything that was being planned, especially the Pack Writers, and had read or heard the code names, there was so much paper moving about that no one person had the time, or indeed the need, to read it all.<sup>51</sup>

Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay had served as Commander-in-Chief at Dover and had earlier masterminded the Dunkirk evacuation, commissioning and choreographing the myriad small boats that rescued numbers of marooned allied service personnel far in excess of the original plan. As Edwards records, in May 1942 Ramsay was 'temporarily relieved of his command and summoned to London. His absence from Dover was at that time intended to be only temporary,

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51 Gordon, 'Norfolk House'.

but he did not return to that command, for from that time on he was fully engaged in the planning and execution of amphibious operations'.<sup>52</sup> From 25 October 1943, Ramsay:

was appointed Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief of the Expeditionary Force, with the short title of ANCXF. This appointment was, in a sense, a supersession of the Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth [Hughes-Hallett] who had, since April, been considered as the naval Commander-in-Chief designate for the invasion. It was made necessary, however, because a study of the "COSSAC Plan" made it abundantly clear that invasion in the Bay of the Seine area on the scale contemplated would impose such a strain upon the resources of Portsmouth and the neighbouring ports that it would be physically impossible for the Commander-in-Chief in that area to assume any additional duties. Moreover, it was even then obvious that the task of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief of the Expeditionary Force would be so great and so onerous that it would call for the full powers of a man of exceptional ability.<sup>53</sup>

When Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay (together with his Staff Officer Plans, Commander G. W. Rowell—'SOPO') arrived as Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force at the end of October 1943, and ANCXF was established independently of COSSAC, General Morgan remained on the staff but was assigned to the role of intelligence coordinator. The planning for Overlord was now assumed by the three service commanders: Montgomery (Army), Tedder (Air Force) and Ramsay (Navy). It was the responsibility of the Naval part of the operation, code-named Neptune, with air support, to put the landing forces and their equipment on the Normandy beaches, and to maintain their supplies. In this unbelievably complex logistical task, Ramsay's resolute eye for detail was guided by the strategist's understanding that success depended on planning to the nth degree.

Shuter remembered with a shudder that:

Any major adjustment made by any one of the authorities concerned sent repercussions shivering through the others which were felt down to the smallest planned detail. [...] No one who has not tasted of combined operational planning—joint planning—can appreciate the difficulties and Overlord was no exception. Perpetual striving for agreement was called for between our Navy, Army, Air Force, the Ministry of War Transport,

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52 Edwards, *Operation Neptune*, p. 398.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 492.

the comparable American bodies and various other authorities involved. [...] It needed cool, calm men with an infinite capacity for work; the patience of Job; the self-restraint of a super-man, and an unflinching sense of humour. Luckily we had just such men. Despite all our troubles the plan was well in hand by December 1943. Then we struck a sticky patch.

It must have been about Christmas time that Field Marshall—then General—Montgomery left the Eighty Army in the Mediterranean and came home to take over the command of 21 Army Group. 21 AG was too large a body to be housed in Norfolk House but they worked nearby at St Paul's School, Hammersmith.

General Montgomery took one look at the Overlord plan and demanded two additional assault divisions. Consternation reigned. It was comparatively easy for the Army to produce the troops, presumably they would just be going in earlier than had been originally intended. But for us it meant additional ships and craft for two assault forces. It meant more staffs and crews; more training, more assembly and berthing facilities; more escorts, more minesweepers, and the survey of additional beaches.

Within a few days of General Montgomery's return General Eisenhower arrived to take up his appointment at Supreme Commander. I believe he took one look at the tenseness of the situation and very wisely went on leave!<sup>54</sup>

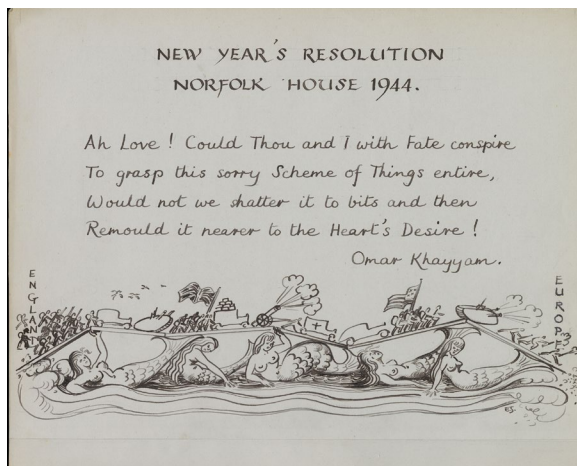


Fig. 1.12. 'New Year's Resolution Norfolk House, 1944'. An illustration by Elspeth Shuter. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000012, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

54 Eisenhower was based at Bushy Park, Teddington, where the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP) was established at a US base called Camp Griffiss in December 1943.

The nightmare that followed lasted for weeks. Were the beaches suitable for a broadened front? Could the shipping be found? Could the men be trained in the time? Was it feasible? Was it really desirable? Events have shown that it was feasible and was desirable. But chaos reigned while the question was thrashed out.

During these wretched weeks of indecision while discussions were taking place on the highest level we couldn't afford to sit idle. So during this time planning proceeded in triplicate. Anything done had to give the answer for a three, a four and a five divisional assault front. It was an exhausting and trying time. But even under this additional strain I never saw our staff obstructive, uncooperative or bad tempered. They were great. Always they took the broad view—the success of the operation as a whole.

By the beginning of February the joint plan became firm on the basis of a five divisional assault front. In the original plan approved at Quebec there were to have been one American and two British assault forces. Now two new assault forces, one American and one British, had been conceived and now had to be born. In addition each of the allies still had one follow-up assault force which was to land on the second tide of D-Day as agreed in the original plan. Seven assault forces in all!

To ease the situation it was agreed that the assault on the Mediterranean coast, which had previously been planned to synchronise with the Normandy landings, should be delayed. It was now that it was also agreed to make the Normandy target date the first of June instead of the first of May. This gained us an additional shipping from the Mediterranean as well as an extra month's new production both from this country and the United States. It also gave four more precious weeks in which to train the new forces.

We had kept abreast as far as possible by planning in triplicate, but naturally the writing of the naval plan itself had been held up during this period of indecision. For all this, under great pressure, our outline Naval Plan was out by the middle of February, and the detailed Naval Plan a fortnight later. To achieve this the staff, down to the last Wren rating, had shown a splendid understanding of the word "work". But despite these efforts and because of the increase in the size of the assault it was never possible to catch up the lost weeks entirely. This had serious repercussions which finally resulted in those who took part in the operation being overwhelmed with sheets of amendments to their operational orders.

Work rose to a crescendo during the Spring 1944. It reached the stage when you didn't expect to start any of your own work before seven o'clock at night. I only had some appendices to produce for the operational orders. How people who were writing the orders and were

responsible for tying up the detail ever stayed the course was a miracle of endurance. The day was spent in coping with an ever-increasing stream of signals, visitors, and the incessant ringing of the telephone. It was exasperating work always calling for adjustments and amendments. Concerning detail, nothing seemed to stay the same for two days, two hours or even two minutes together. More often than not I used to arrive home towards midnight. As I walked from the tube to my bed-sit I would find that I was sobbing gently to myself through the black-out. I was not unhappy; it was just nervous exhaustion from the countless irritations of the day's work.<sup>55</sup>

GORDON: Though most of us lived in WRNS quarters dotted about London, some Wrens came to work from their homes and of course all had weekend leave from time to time. Then listening to one's older relations and other civilians pontificating, as everyone did, about when and where the "Second Front" should take place was quite a strain. At some stage I remember being with my sister on leave in Brighton, a restricted area of course, and seeing what she described as "aircraft carriers" passing across the horizon. Something warned me not to contradict her, for though I had not yet seen them myself, these were parts of the "Mulberry" being towed to their assembly areas.<sup>56</sup>

THOMAS: The atmosphere in Norfolk House was very focused. Everyone seemed to be concentrating on the job, so there were no little cliques standing around and talking. There was always a feeling of confidence among the staff—there had to be, with an operation of that magnitude. Everything depended on getting it right. We knew that the lives of thousands of troops were at stake.

Everyone worked very long hours, often well into the evening. There were no rigid office hours and no clocking on. You just worked when you had to work, and left when you were told to go.

There was certainly no official leave, and I don't think I went home to Swansea once in the twelve months I worked on the invasion plans. I had the weekends off, and sometimes visited my cousin in Shaftesbury from Friday night until Monday morning. I would usually spend most of my time there catching up on sleep!<sup>57</sup>

GORDON: There were, of course, besides Admirals Ramsay and Creasy, many high-ranking officers working in the building, but except for when on the rare occasions Naval Captains and other senior officers could be

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55 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

56 Gordon, 'Norfolk House'.

57 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.



seen queuing with the rest of us for their ration (one each) of an unexpected consignment of oranges or bananas, one's duties confined on mostly to the Registry and the people there. Going down in the lift very late one evening, I was joined in it by Admiral Ramsay, who was astonished at the late hour I was working. He had, of course, been working too. Some days later a book appeared in which we had to sign on and off duty. This was supposed to regulate our working hours (most of us were by then doing an average of eighty hours a week) to a reasonable number, but inevitably I suppose, it became a means of disciplining us, by the Wren officer in charge, who was not allowed beyond the low barrier which contained us in the Registry, for being late in the morning—until "Chief" intervened! A "normal day" was supposed to be from 9am to 6.30pm. This seldom ended before 7 or 8pm, and often stretched after midnight. Then there were other days when one came in later and stayed later, or had an afternoon off—in theory. There were often long Friday to Monday, or short Saturday pm to Monday am, weekends when one could go home, taking one's ration cards of course (and stealing a basinful of sugar from Wrens quarters if one could dodge the Wren stewards). Lunch hours were generally a sandwich and a mug of tea fetched from the canteen and taken at one's desk—though sometimes it was possible to get out for lunch with a lunch voucher to the value of 1/-3d. Lyon's Corner House did quite a good one for this, and if you saved them up you could have quite an expensive meal. I once did this at the Berkeley Buttery, much to the embarrassment of the friend I was lunching with and the rage of the waiter who had to count them up! When we got back to quarters, at all hours of the night, having stepped over the sleeping bodies of people sheltering in the Tubes, we found even the "late supper" we had ordered was inedible. There was always demerara sugar (laid for breakfast), bread and cheese, and sometimes a pan of congealed Naval cocoa on the stove. This is what I mostly ate during that year and some of us got very fat and some even got ill.

In spite of our late working hours, we were still expected to take our turn at fire-watching in the quarters, sitting up all night waiting for the siren to "man" a stirrup pump on the roof. At Norfolk House we were also on a fire-watching rota and had to stay the night there and work the switchboard in the basement to alert those still working in the building.

Despite the importance of our work, we were all young and had the usual high spirits of normal girls, and there was a lighthearted atmosphere, and hilarity, such as when with the windows open in summer, a gust of wind blew some Top Secret papers out onto the street below and we had to yell to the doorman to secure them while we rushed down to get them.

Periodically, we went through Gas Drill, when everybody in the building at the sound of a warning bell sat solemnly at their desks or went about their duties wearing their gas masks! Communication with each other was difficult, punctuated by the loud "raspberries" emitted from the contraption by anyone breathing too fast, and made much worse by the gales of giggles which ensued. Answering the telephone presented its own problems, and whoever was at the other end of an incoming call must have used their imagination quite creatively in deciphering what was going on!

Though one of the telephones was "scrambled" we could make and receive outside calls on the others quite normally and make our free-time arrangements. Often young men we knew in other arms of the services rang us up to say they had got some unexpected leave, and we generally knew it was because they were about to be embarked on some operation or training which was in our files. Neither of us would have discussed this of course.

Except for occasional encounters in the lift at Norfolk House [...] one did not often meet Admiral Ramsay or other Senior Officers face to face. They had their own appointed offices and rest areas and so did we, and there was no opportunity for mixing. But the atmosphere of an HQ such as ANCXF is set by the conduct expected of each other from top to bottom, and it was clear from the very beginning that this was to be of a high standard. Though Admiral Ramsay himself must have been a man of great dynamic energy and vision (he had organised the rescue of the BEF from Dunkirk in the "little ships", and was afterwards known as "DYNAMO", the name given to the operation), he appeared to us whenever we met him in the lift, to be a quiet, dignified man who spoke and listened to us with evident interest and courtesy. But he set a pace himself of relentless dedication to the task in hand. People worked punishing hours without question, staying late until a job was properly done and completed. It was necessary, of course, but no one had to be told. On the contrary, concern was expressed by the Admiral himself at the long hours the Wrens were working and he tried to regulate them.

Admiral Creasy seemed to be a much more "outgoing" character with a breezy sort of approach. He gave us a stirring talk before we left for Southwick Park.

Captain Moore, our direct "boss" in the Registry, as the Admiral's Secretary, was often approached on our behalf by our Chief PO and seemed always fair and reasonable in his supervision of our general conduct and duties. "Compassionate" leave was always granted without question.

The Chiefs of Staff, although we generally knew they were in the building, kept their arrivals and departures as inconspicuous as possible

for obvious reasons, but the “pace” generally quickened on their arrival. Busy Staff Officers with huge responsibilities and masses of work to be got through in a limited time, occasionally became impatient. Many of them had already served in many operations at sea; some were still suffering from the effects of this. One Officer, suffering from a stomach ulcer, always had a bottle of milk under his desk. Others sometimes got impatient with Wrens who could not produce the pack or paper they wanted immediately. We were not, after all, entirely familiar with nautical nomenclature and technical terms: “my dear girl, you must know what hard’s are!”<sup>58</sup> and then realising, “no, why should you?”, and apologies. After all, an enterprise such as the one on which we were all working was a unique experience for everyone and we certainly, like many of the RNVR and RNR Officers and men, had to learn it as we went along. But in the main we were welcomed and appreciated.

Many of the Wrens had had the advantages of a higher education than that of the young men they were replacing to go to sea. Some had had a good secretarial training or held a job before they joined, and officers who had suffered the efforts of stoker<sup>59</sup> doubling as typist in small ships must have been glad of the change!

We called all officers “Sir” and saluted them. Both compliments could, if necessary, be used to one’s advantage in attracting or repelling attention! They called us “Wren” and then our surname if they knew it—and they mostly tried to learn them. They did not use our Christian names on duty. This produced a formal and disciplined atmosphere necessary to the serious urgency of the task on which we were all engaged.<sup>60</sup>

By this stage, life at Norfolk House had become an intense ritual indeed. Wrens worked around the clock, forty-eight hours on and twenty-four off. They kept a washing kit and a change of clothes at the office. They ate routinely at Lyon’s Corner House and The Trocadero, sometimes Vega. Ramsay held staff meetings morning and evening to plot progress, with operational staff conferences held every Friday afternoon. There was a regular succession of high-ranking officials passing through the

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58 A ‘hard’ is a solid ramp or sloped beach by the water’s edge, suitable for launching and landing craft. The term may be peculiar to the south coast of England, such as the Hard at Portsmouth Harbour, and Buckler’s Hard near Beaulieu. It is entirely possible, in the context of this example, that the officer was also trying to embarrass the Wren not only by her ignorance, but the potential sexual connotation of the term.

59 A stoker is someone who works in the engine-room of a ship—the hardest of working environments.

60 Gordon, ‘Norfolk House’.

doors: Eisenhower, Montgomery, Leigh-Mallory, Tedder, Mountbatten. The complex choreography of the massive sea-borne assault eventually resulted in orders published in volumes four inches thick, running to some 1,100 pages.<sup>61</sup>

Shuter recalls:

Our operational orders were finally in print about the middle of April. From then on it was a question of making as few alterations as possible as any change meant yet another amendment to be put in by hand when the orders were opened on the eve of the operation. Towards the end of April we quietly packed our bags and disappeared into the country.<sup>62</sup>

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61 Peter Caddick-Adams, *Sand and Steel: A New History of D-Day*, Kindle edn (London: Cornerstone Digital, 2019), p. 227.

62 Shuter, 'Private Papers of Miss E. Shuter'.



## 2. Coming of Age (Southwick Park, Summer 1944)

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Southern England was enjoying a spring heatwave when ANCXF moved out of London on 26 April 1944 and were installed at Southwick Park, near Fareham in Hampshire, which was to be Admiral Ramsay's HQ until September. Ramsay's biographer, Chalmers, describes Southwick as:

A moderate-sized Georgian house in the ancient Forest of Bere, some ten miles north-west of the city [of Portsmouth]. It had been requisitioned by the Admiralty as the Navigation School, and having become a "stone frigate" was re-christened *HMS Dryad* in accordance with Service custom. Ramsay, being a countryman, was delighted with his new surroundings, for instead of picking his way along the crowded pavements of London, he could take his exercise in the forest glades and rhododendron groves of this beautiful park.<sup>1</sup>

JEAN GORDON: Before we left London [...] after being assembled and addressed by Rear-Admiral Creasy who wanted to "put us in the picture" for the next phase [...] we were told of the strict security measures which would be enforced. Our whereabouts of course must not be known so the only address we could give our relatives would be "Naval Party 1645" and an Admiralty No. No diaries must be kept. No cameras, of course, and no telephone calls could be made to the "outside".<sup>2</sup>

Elsbeth Shuter writes:

our Battle Headquarters at Southwick Park were in the heavenly country behind and a little to the west of Portsmouth. SHAEF was to bury itself

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- 1 Rear-Admiral W. S. Chalmers, *Full Cycle: The Biography of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1959), pp. 209–210.
  - 2 Jean Gordon (Irvine) (Leading Wren), 'Southwick Park & Normandy', unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, H670.1990/5.

in a dank, dark wood a mile away, while 21 AG was already concealed in the woods and copses around our park.<sup>3</sup>

'BOBBY' HOWES: 21 Army Group men put up their tents in the park where they were well screened from aerial view by the trees, and General Montgomery's caravans were nearby whilst he took up residence in Broomfield House [on the Southwick estate, codenamed 'LIMEKILN']. General Eisenhower and his staff were a couple of miles away at SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) and all was ready.<sup>4</sup>

SHUTER: The Portsmouth area held the greatest concentration of shipping; provided the shortest sea passage—about 100 miles—to the Normandy beaches; and was to play the biggest part in the assault and subsequent support of the operation.

Arriving by train and bus, by lorry and by car, we took up residence in the big house and in the huts which were in neat rows outside the front door. There was not the least vestige of camouflage about those naval Nissens; they glistened in the sun! The Admiral's flag was duly hoisted.<sup>5</sup>

Ramsay wrote to his wife:

I've a lovely large room as an office and a bedroom next door. The mess is in the library and is quite comfortable, though the food is very plain. The rest of the staff are frightfully squashed up, commanders and below sleeping in dormitories of twelve and sixteen; Wren officers in two-tier bunks, twelve in a room. Surroundings are nice and all are taking the discomforts in the right spirit...<sup>6</sup>

GORDON: Our quarters were in a brick-bungalow type building to the south-west of the main house. We slept in the usual double-berthed bunks with an "ablution block" of lavatories and wash-basins attached to the building. Close by was a surface air-raid shelter into which we had to go when there was a Red Alert, clad in our bell-bottomed trousers, a seamen's jersey and tin hits, issued for the purpose. The raids were more alarming from the noise of the gunfire from the ships and gun

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3 Elspeth Shuter (2/O Wren), 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter', Documents.13454, Imperial War Museum, London.

4 Mabel Ena 'Bobby' Howes (PO Wren), interview, Frank and Joan Shaw Collection, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth.

5 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

6 Chalmers, *Full Cycle*, p. 210.

emplacements in Portsmouth and on the surrounding hills than from bombs dropped by enemy raiders trying to fly up the Solent.<sup>7</sup>

Fanny Hugill remembered:

About 150 Wrens slept and messed in huts on the grounds, and sixty Wren officers slept in three rooms at the top of Southwick House. Facilities were limited. There was one bathroom and one loo on the top floor. Tolerance and tidiness were essential, and mixed together, day staff and watchkeepers found sleeping in the day chancy. Still, to be out of London was wonderful, and we made lasting friendships.<sup>8</sup>

'Ginge' Thomas, as the later correspondence testifies, became Joan Prior's closest Wren friend, although during their time at Norfolk House they had worked separately because Ginge was seconded to General Morgan. Four years Joan's senior, before joining Swansea Corporation she had worked as a demonstrator for Imperial Typewriters, recruited for her incredible speed and accuracy—skills which served her well in ANCXF. Of their move to Southwick Park she recalled in 2004: 'I have a very clear memory of sitting in the back of a lorry with my friend Joan Prior, holding on to our typewriters and duplicators'.<sup>9</sup>

GORDON: Our steel cabinets and office equipment, which we had packed up ourselves after normal duty before leaving London, arrived with us and was placed in Nissen huts erected alongside the main house on the north-eastern side on part of the driveway. Next to us was the Meteorological hut with the "weather men". The rest of the operational staff were in offices in Southwick House itself.<sup>10</sup>

Kathleen Cartwright recalls some disappointment at leaving the capital:

Most of the girls, having been in London for some time, were sorry to leave to go to a remote area and there were groans as the coach set off. However, being a cheery crowd, with the usual British spirit, everyone settled down to accepting a change of venue. The spirit was flagging somewhat when our destination was reached. We came to a pretty village consisting of about two dozen houses. Masses of barbed wire

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7 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

8 Hugill, 'A Wren's Memories'.

9 Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas (Leading Wren), 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac', *WW2 People's War*, A2524402, 16 April 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/02/a2524402.shtml>

10 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.



and an endlessly long drive brought us to a typically old type of English Manor house [...] To the rear of the building were two long prefabricated sheds, still being prepared for us. The water was just being laid on and we had to scramble over planks to reach our respective quarters. I was quartered in a long narrow room with 14/15 double bunks down each side of a narrow space.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 2.1. Wrens of ANCXF at Southwick House, Summer 1944, courtesy of the Royal Military Police Museum.

SHUTER: A spy could have had his fill in the Nissen huts whose owners all possessed copies of the operational orders.

When we first arrived the lighting and telephone installations were not yet completed so workmen were still roaming round [...] One day an officer locked his hut when he left it at lunch time. On his return, however, he found a workman busy with his wiring, but standing on a chart, with one boot on the American assault area and the other on the British!

If I were a German the sudden appearance of rows of Nissen huts would in itself tell me that extra people were now living or about to live in those parts. But on one point those in charge of security were very firm: no one might walk at random across the grass, as tracks made in

11 Kathleen Cartwright (Wren), 'My experience of life in the Wrens' (contributed by Huddersfield Local Studies Library), WW2 People's War, A2843840, 17 July 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/40/a2843840.shtml>

this way show in air-reconnaissance photographs. So we had to keep to the paths!

Sometime after we had arrived an unsightly barricade of barbed wire was slowly unwound round the house—protection against paratroops—but it was not completed until after the operation had been safely launched! However, as it happened, there were apparently no spies, no air reconnaissance, and no paratroops, so we came through unscathed...

The security people were also given a last minute cause for concern for, towards the end of May, various code words used in the operation appeared in the crossword puzzles of a daily newspaper! Overlord and Neptune—code names for the operation itself; Omaha and Utah—code names for the two American beaches; Mulberry and Whale—code names for the artificial harbours and one of its components. However, on investigation, it appeared that there had been no intended breach of security. But it did seem ominous at the time! I understand that the author of the cross-words was not aware of the significance of these code words. Probably he had overheard them used in conversation in the clubs. When you are eating, sleeping and living immersed in the atmosphere of an operation of this type, it becomes your life and so does its vocabulary...<sup>12</sup>

It need not be supposed that, with the production of the operational orders, the work was over for ANCXF. There was still much to do. It is one thing to launch an operation but the effort will be wasted if plans are not made to sustain the armies after the beachheads have been secured.<sup>13</sup>

CARTWRIGHT: We worked the same hourly watches as in London, and every third day we had a turn on night duty. After a particularly tiring night we would fall into bed exhausted, only to be awakened about an hour later when a case would be banged on to our feet. Under the bunks was the only place to keep our cases and when the stewards swept the room, they hurled the cases on to the beds, regardless of any occupants. Nicely dropping off to sleep again, we could be wakened by chattering as off-duty Wrens prepared to go on duty after lunch.

The less said about the food, the better—cheese and minced beef dishes. On night duty the only meal consisted of corn beef, with margarine, together with crumbly bread from which to make sandwiches, but there were flies creeping around all the time which was off putting. I was lucky to have received some jars of jam from home, but with wasps hovering around, it was almost impossible to eat it.<sup>14</sup>

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12 The unassuming culprit, *Daily Telegraph* compiler Leonard Dawe, who was headmaster of the Strand School, was interrogated by MI5, but the case was dismissed as a remarkable coincidence.

13 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'

14 Cartwright, 'My experience of life in the Wrens'

Wren J.H. Prior, 41801  
 Naval Party 1645  
 c/o Admiralty  
 London, S.W.1

Friday 19<sup>th</sup> May 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,<sup>15</sup>

I have just received your letter written on the 17<sup>th</sup> and was so pleased to get it.

I don't know why you haven't heard as, as you say, I have written to you. However, I suppose by now you'll have heard from me.

I am now almost used to being here and little by little our troubles are being smoothed away. The food situation which was grim for a while is now practically O.K. and we really mustn't grumble.

The washing and bathing front is still very sticky and if you're not very enthusiastic about it, this is a perfect Paradise. However, we in our cabin always manage to see the funny side of everything, and if there isn't a funny side well we make one. Some time ago we had to get up in the night on account of a siren—a very rare occurrence, and you would have laughed. There are eight of us in a room which is not as large as your bedroom—nowhere near, and when we all tried to get up in the dark and all at once, things really started. After you'd been doing up your shoe for some time and wondering why your foot was moving around you discovered it wasn't your foot at all but someone else's. Then we had to hunt for steel helmets! At one stage we were all without exception underneath our beds groping wildly for these and each getting hold of shoes or slippers by mistake. The next problem was getting downstairs—and that is a problem! The staircase is steel, narrow and very twisty and you almost join a Suicide Squad when you descend even in daylight. After the descent in the middle of the night I thought seriously about applying for Danger Money. Needless to say I've fallen down them once, fortunately doing no damage, and Ginger trod in a fire-bucket which was cunningly tucked away in one of the many angles of the staircase, getting soaked almost to the knee in the process, but nevertheless we still come up smiling.

The other night we were roped in for fire fighting practice or something and the instructor having given us the details of where

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15 Grace and Harry Prior. Joan invariably called her father 'Paddy' after a family visit to a play at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, called *Let Paddy Do It*.

the bomb had fallen and just what it might do announced that the next step was to produce a stirrup pump and undo it and bring it into play, quicker than it takes to tell. He then dived for the pump himself and began to undo it. Well, we were all in hysterics, he just couldn't get it undone. After about 3 minutes Elsie<sup>16</sup>, one of the eight in our cabin, tentatively suggested that the fire had got rather a hold by this time and how about it, and he said, "Oh, well, this wouldn't really happen, it's just that someone's done it up the wrong way". It may not sound funny, but believe me, we were just curling up with laughter.

I'm awfully pleased that you're sending me a cake, although I do feel rather mean at taking your rations, but I had been feeling rather flat about the whole thing, until your letter arrived and then I told one or two of the girls, including my pals in the cabin and they insist that my 21<sup>st</sup> must not go by unnoticed, so goodness knows what sort of a party I'll have, but I know I can rely on them to think of something bless them. Thank Geg<sup>17</sup> for icing it for me, it makes such a difference to the appearance of it, and in fact thank you all.

Thanks for sending on Ron's two letters which I was very pleased to get.<sup>18</sup> He seems to be back at base again after being at the front, because the last letter I had was dated the 1st April and these were dated 30<sup>th</sup> April and 1st May, so that he's been away about a month. However, he continues to be O.K. although I think he's rather worried about his Dad. I don't know whether he's heard from home or not, but he says "Judging by what you say, Dad doesn't seem to be improving etc," as though what I said was all he had to go by.

I'm so glad your neck is better Dad and hope you don't have

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16 Elsie Cheney (Wood).

17 Joan's elder sister Grace Snell (1908–1992) was affectionately known in the family as 'Geg' (perhaps because their mother's name was also Grace).

18 Ronald Smith (1920–1973) was Joan's fiancé from Barking. Like many sweethearts during wartime, enforced separation and combat risks had put their relationship on hold for the duration of hostilities. A private in the 1/4<sup>th</sup> battalion Essex Regiment, Ron had arrived in Egypt in October 1941, saw action at El Alamein in 1942 and took part in the invasion of Sicily in 1943. By March 1944, his company was engaged in the Italian Campaign as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division at the third battle of Monte Cassino (15–23 March), under constant fire for five days and nights on the notorious Hangman's Hill. Following this action, the 1/4<sup>th</sup> battalion withdrew to Wadi Villa and remained there until 2 April with some local leave in nearby Venafrò and Benevento. The division then moved to the Adriatic front and arrived at Consalvi on 9 April. The battalion remained in the line there or in reserve at Orsogna until the end of May.

any more trouble with it.

Thanks too, for sending the *Sunday Express* so that I could read *Sitting on the Fence*.<sup>19</sup> It's the only newspaper we ever see, so you can tell it's in great demand.

Work still remains pretty hectic and most days there's someone in the office from 7-30 a.m. until about midnight, although we only do a late duty every three nights, so it's not so bad as it sounds. When you're in early—at 7-30—you get two hours off from 1 until 3 in the afternoon which is rather nice, as if the sun's out it's very pleasant. Jo<sup>20</sup> and I are early together, and we usually go for a spin on our bikes to one or other of the neighbouring villages and back. Apart from the discomforts and not being able to get home, I love it here as the country is so beautiful and at this time of the year there's such a lot doing in the way of farming.

Gosh, this typing is pretty awful, but I'm having to rush it to get it to press in time. Life here, is always rushing for something or other. When lunchtime arrives to-day, we'll rush lunch and then rush a bath, as it's our bath day to-day, and if we leave it till to-night we'll have had it as the water will either be all hot and no cold or vice versa, or even yet another alternative—as with last night—there'll be no water at all!

By the way, if Bessie<sup>21</sup> ever sees Richard Hudnut "Three Flowers" Vanishing Cream (which I doubt), could you ask her to get it please. Oh, no, never mind, I'll write to Bess when I've finished this and ask her myself, then I can thank her for getting my *Daily Mirrors*, etc.

I've written to Geg and the children and I also wrote to Charlie<sup>22</sup> this week, so I suppose by now they've heard from me.

I hope all are keeping well and not doing too much work—a thing I never believe in—and keeping smiling. We're hoping not to be so cut off from the world now, as Jo's wireless has arrived and we're going to try to fix it up tonight.

Last Wednesday, Betty<sup>23</sup> and I were half-day and we went into the nearest large town<sup>24</sup> and went to a cinema in the afternoon and had a very pleasant meal in the evening. We saw Bob Hope

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19 'Sitting on the Fence' was a regular wartime column by humorous feature-writer Nathaniel Gubbins in the *Sunday Express* newspaper.

20 Fellow Wren Joanna Day.

21 Bessie Bones (1909–1984) was Joan's middle sister.

22 Charles Snell (1910–1966) was the husband of Joan's sister Grace. An electrician by trade, he served with the Royal Engineers in Sierra Leone.

23 Fellow Wren Betty Currie.

24 Portsmouth. Censorship restrictions forbade the naming of places.

and Paulette Goddard in “The Cat and the Canary” and another film with Betty Hutton which we’d seen, “The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek”. It was quite a pleasant change.

This morning Ginger and I have been as greasy and oily as a couple of E.R.A.s<sup>25</sup> or stokers, as we’ve been cleaning the duplicating machine which was thick with black ink and grease. However, once more we’re clean and so’s the machine, praise be.

I think that’s all the news now, so I’ll say Cheerio, and God bless and thanks for everything.

With love from  
Joan xxxxx

P.S. Stroke Jimmy<sup>26</sup> for me.

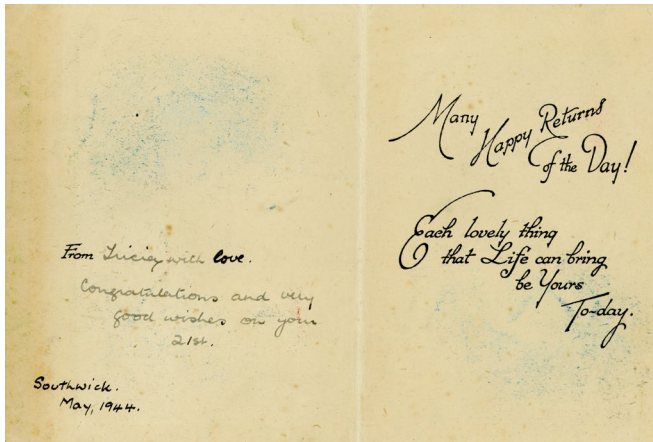


Fig. 2.2. Birthday card from Tricia Hannington (Wren) to Joan Prior, Southwick Park, 24 May 1944. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

HOWES: I was billeted at South Lodge next door to the village pub called The Golden Lion. My room was in the attic! Our work area was in the cellar at Southwick House where a telephone exchange had been installed together with teleprinters. The cellars were a series of whitewashed tunnels with arches leading off in different directions—one to the boiler room for central heating, then off to the left the teleprinter room, and on the right the telephone exchange. This was a very large room with a concrete floor. The telephone exchange was down the centre with my table

25 Engine Room Artificer.

26 The cat!

facing it. There were fourteen positions for operators and the switchboard was equal in size to a civilian exchange serving a town of 45,000 people.

The most important Officers had "Clear the Line Facilities" which meant that we had authority to interrupt calls for them if the person they wanted to speak to was already engaged. When they called a blue lamp glowed beside their number on the board. The Exchange was manned by an equal number of Wrens and men of the Royal Signals Corps, 21 Army Group. As the Royal Navy was the Senior Service I was in charge and I have to say that the men accepted me very well. There was a daily roster of watches and a rest room where everyone could take a rest without going off duty. The drinking of tea or smoking was strictly forbidden because the board was constantly busy.

All the telephones of the Top Brass had scramblers attached, and in conducting a conversation involving secret information the caller would ask: "can you scramble?". If the answer was yes they both switched on their scramblers and the conversation sounded like Donald Duck talking to anyone trying to listen in.<sup>27</sup>

Patricia Blandford was a Second Officer Wrens in charge of telephone switchboards at the nearby Under Ground Head Quarters (UGHQ) Fort Southwick. This subterranean network of tunnels buried in the chalk of Portsdown Hill was accessed 'down a steep flight of concrete steps (149) into a steel-lined tunnel. There was a large room with plotting tables, and small tunnel-shaped rooms equipped with teleprinters and switchboards, offices with desks and filing cabinets, a galley and wardroom, dormitories and wash-rooms [...] I made frequent trips to Southwick House to train switchboard personnel there. Red-capped Military Police were everywhere and it was quite obvious that something special was going on'.<sup>28</sup>

GORDON: Though most of the plans had been completed and the Orders gone out, so that the typing pool was much reduced in size and many of the messengers drafted elsewhere, there was still a lot to do and we in the Registry were still kept very busy dealing with papers on the "build-up" and "turn-round" of the Naval craft which would be transporting all the supplies and personnel to the Assault Forces long after D-Day itself.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Howes, interview.

28 Patricia Blandford (2/0 Wren), oral history interview recorded April 1991, transcript in the D-Day Museum Archive, Index Key 2001.687/DD 2000.5.2

29 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

MARGARET BOOTHROYD: The teleprinter room was in the cellar of the house and there was a chute down which messages came from upstairs. We had a direct line to the Admiralty and the work was very, very busy and tiring too. We worked three eight-hour watches through the twenty-four hours, which was quite hard. We found working through the night difficult at first and just had breakfast then fell into bed. Following a nightwatch we then worked in the evening of that same day. Then next day in the afternoon, early morning the following day and then night watch on that same day, so it was very tiring.<sup>30</sup>

CARTWRIGHT: The teleprinter room was a hive of activity and we could never relax for one moment as we sent signal after signal in connection with the coming most important event of our lives— the liberation of Europe and the end of the war. Whatever the discomfort, no-one objected; everyone was too intent on their work and the small part we were playing in this moment of history. I welcomed the change from routine when I was transferred for a short time to the deciphering room, which overlooked the official courtyard at the front of the building. We witnessed the arrival and departure of some very important and high-ranking officials. I shall always remember glancing outside upon hearing a jeep stop with a squeak of brakes. Out stepped “Monty” (General Montgomery). He glanced towards our window and raised his hand in salute. He looked so cheerful and friendly— such a busy person and yet he found time to acknowledge us with a wave. He wore a long grey pullover and his famous beret— nothing to signify the importance of his position. Shortly afterwards, General Eisenhower stepped out of his car— followed by his little dog! Next came Air Marshall Tedder— he was so tall and stately— immaculate in his blue Air Force uniform. We became quite used to seeing these important leaders and on one occasion, Winston Churchill passed on his way to the control room. With all these comings and goings we realised that the invasion was very close indeed.<sup>31</sup>

Vera Laughton Matthews reported:

Rear-Admiral Creasy, Admiral Ramsay’s Chief of Staff, told me how he found the Wrens ‘too thick on the ground’ as he described it—so he went round asking, ‘Watch on or Watch off?’ He was frequently met by ‘Watch

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30 Margaret Boothroyd (Wren), ‘In the Wrens with Laura Ashley’, *WW2 People’s War*, A2939646, 23 August 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/46/a2939646.shtml>

31 Cartwright, ‘My experience of life in the Wrens’.



off, Sir, but please may I stay?' But he was adamant and said, 'No, off you go'.<sup>32</sup>

CARTWRIGHT: It was a hectic life but pretty soon we became accustomed to sleeping in snatches. To compensate, however, the weather was glorious and in our free time, we were taken by liberty boats (marine lorries) to spend a couple of hours on Hayling Island and to enjoy the sands and sea. The only occupants of the Island were members of the forces, as the civilian population had been evacuated. On occasions, also, we managed to get a lift into Portsmouth and visited the cinema. When jeeps passed us on the roads we could always rely on a lift by the friendly American allies, but all the same it was better to travel in numbers!<sup>33</sup>

BOOTHROYD: We made good use of our free time, the grounds were lovely in the springtime and there was a lake and an old boat, but we decided not to try it! In spite of all that had been said earlier, we were finally allowed out of the grounds and liberty boats went into Portsmouth. One night we went to Southsea Pier to hear Joe Loss and his orchestra. Shortly after this the Pier closed and was used for landing wounded from France to hospitals nearby.

We, Laura and I, favoured Cosham and went to cafes sometimes for Welsh rarebit or just tea and cake and had a general look around the area. Sometimes we went sunbathing to Southsea or to Hayling Island. Generally we stayed around Southwick Village, where we played tennis, sketched or just went for a walk. One day Laura and I met an American airman who turned out to be the pilot of General Eisenhower's personal plane. He wanted to take us up for a spin, but we daren't go... I wish we had now!<sup>34</sup>

Beryl K. Blows recalled:

I went once to Portsmouth for a haircut and once to see a boyfriend on his way through—he was in a destroyer. I once went out in the Solent in a DUKW. With a friend, I hitched a lift to a village a few miles away where an uncle lived. He and my aunt greeted us without surprise and provided a good tea. He wrote to my mother saying I'd looked well and happy, but he knew better than to ask where I had sprung from or what I was doing. Southwick village provided a shop or two, but there was little to buy. A small ration of sweets and cosmetics were sold in the establishment. We sometimes went into Fareham or Cosham as one or

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32 Dame Vera Laughton Matthews, *Blue Tapestry* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1948), p. 236.

33 Cartwright, 'My experience of life in the Wrens'.

34 Boothroyd, 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley'.

two of the Naval Officers came from those parts and had relations living there. There were no dances, but the odd film show.<sup>35</sup>

BLANDFORD: We had many happy times at social gatherings at the Golden Lion in the village of Southwick, where the front bar, known as the “Blue Room”, had been unofficially adopted as an Officers’ Mess. The locals were wonderful people and always very polite; they went about their daily business as though we weren’t there.<sup>36</sup>

GORDON: At about this time, for some reason I believe to encourage us, the Wrens in the Secretariat and their Officer in charge, one of the Admiral’s Assistant Secretaries, and our Chief, were taken by road to Selsey, which was a barbed-wire and Restricted Area, where we were received by a Naval Party whose offices and accommodation seemed to be the beach huts and holiday houses on the front, and taken out in DUKWs (amphibious lorries which drove straight off the beach and into the water and then became waterborne and manoeuvrable as craft) out to sea, mercifully calm, to land on some huge pier-like constructions swinging majestically at anchor above us. They were hollow and we stepped on board them and stood in interested groups on the bottom deck with the huge sides and top deck towering over us, whilst the Officer lectured us on their use. We nodded in the dawning knowledge that these were parts of the “Mulberry” whose conception and construction we had been following on paper for the past year!<sup>37</sup>

SHUTER: One evening I was driven over to Selsey. The sight that greeted us was beautiful and breath-taking. The stretch of coast was opalescent in the evening light and there, shimmering and pearly, an idyllic factory city floated on the surface of the sea. It had the quality of a mirage—too convincing not to be true, and yet, no smoke, no sign of life. From the clearness and precision of line I felt that I must be gazing at an architect’s drawing through a stereoscope, so solid, so simple of line, so impersonal, yet bathed in a golden warmth as if washed in lightly with a brush. An architect’s dream come true.

The Park off Selsey Bill was one of the great assembly anchorages for Mulberry harbour units. The closely anchored phoenix units had a simplicity of line that you would find in a three-dimensional model of factory buildings. The illusion was completed by the tall chimney effect of the towers of the spud pierheads. My factory city was illusionary; but the Mulberry harbour units were hard fact. We drove silently back to

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35 Beryl K. Blows (3/O Wren), Unpublished Personal Testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, AW ID. H679.1990.

36 Blandford, oral history interview.

37 Gordon, ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’.

Southwick overawed by the boldness of conception and by the hazards of the task that lay before the men of the Mulberry harbours.<sup>38</sup>

HUGILL: Southwick Park resembled a village, with streets lined with huts, tents and caravans. Everything was sign-posted, busy and orderly, with redcaps directing the traffic. As watchkeepers, we were able to be out in the perfect summer weather. We rolled our sleeves up and our stockings down and sunbathed on the roof. Letters from home took three or four days. Our families had no idea where we were—and knew better than to ask. And of course we had no access to a telephone. Leave, other than compassionate, was non-existent, and we worked a seven-day week. This was hard enough for us; the strain the senior officers were under showed on their faces, but rarely in their tempers.<sup>39</sup>

SHUTER: Tension grew during these weeks and nerves became a little frayed, although we drank in the beauty of the Spring through the open doors of our huts... The month of May produced endless days of the most perfect invasion weather—blazing blue skies and zephyr-like breezes. It was impossible not to dwell occasionally on the splendid start the operation would have had if the original target date had been kept.

After the winter in London it was pure enchantment to gaze at the fat buds of the trees blazing like jewels in the sun, or to stand in a sea of cowslips and take in deep breaths of their warm, musky scent. The smells and scents of that Spring are in my nostrils now. The park itself was quite perfect. It had a lake, made complete by a little boat with a lugsail; a glorious open view of the downs with the feeling of the sea just beyond; there were fields of corn, meadows of pasture and, everywhere you turned, the most splendid trees each eagerly spreading out its leaves to the warmth. What more could anyone ask? It was life-giving after a day in a Nissen struggling with telephones and signals, to stroll round the stilly quiet lake in the evening. In London the staff had scattered at night to its own homes. But here we lived and worked together [...] I was with the grandest staff it is possible to imagine and they proved delightful company.

The most popular walk was once round the lake and I had many pleasant walks with my quickly expanding circle of chums. Yes, they were nice people. But on one occasion I was almost suffocated by suppressed laughter. I was doing the round of the lake with a young and earnest naval officer. He was delighted with the country like the rest of us. Chatting away to me he presently said, "It is wonderful really what you can see by just walking round this lake. Why I've seen wrens, tits

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38 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

39 Hugill, 'A Wren's memories'.

and other signs of the wild life that abounds..." Being a Wren I read the wrong meaning into this perfectly innocent remark, and I started to gurgle with laughter. But, on seeing that my companion had not realised the ambiguity of his remark and that he was now looking at me in some surprise, I turned the laugh, rather lamely, into a cough—and left it at that. He was, after all, very young.<sup>40</sup>

BLANDFORD: In early Spring 1944 large numbers of vehicles and men were coming into the area. One of my friends told me of the day she had seen soldiers in full kit scaling the chalk pit (later, I realised why). Soon, tanks were parked along the roads, half-hidden in the hedgerows; it seemed as if every space in the countryside was filled with soldiers, tanks and equipment.<sup>41</sup>

BOOTHROYD: During those weeks coming up to the actual D-Day landings many important faces came to the "War Room", the nerve centre of the invasion plans: the King, George VI, and Winston Churchill came often, and there were regular meetings between General Eisenhower, General Montgomery and Admiral Ramsay. Secrecy was of the essence and it still amazes me now as I think back of the tremendous responsibility we were given, but, at the time, life seemed normal and we took everything in our stride.<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 2.3. Admiral Ramsay with General Eisenhower at Southwick House, June 1944. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

40 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

41 Blandford, oral history interview.

42 Boothroyd, 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley'.

Wren J.H. Prior, 41801  
 Naval Party 1645  
 c/o G.P.O.  
 London.

Monday 29<sup>th</sup> May 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

Well, my birthday has truly come and gone, and all things considered I had a really good time. In the afternoon after I wrote to you, Betty and I went into a town some 20 miles away and had a really delicious tea and then went to a cinema to see "My Favourite Wife" with Cary Grant, Irene Dunne and Randolph Scott and "The Shipbuilders".<sup>43</sup> It was a very good programme and we thoroughly enjoyed it. The weather was marvellous and we walked part of the way back. When we arrived back in the cabin, they all insisted on retiring to the local for to drink my health which we did in Shandy.<sup>44</sup> It's quite a pleasant little place inside with cool flagstoned floors and old prints on the walls and roses climbing outside. The roses here are out—are they at home yet?

The cake was simply wonderful! Everyone loved it and we cut it crosswise so that everyone in the office had a piece and I still had half the cake left. On the 25<sup>th</sup> we were late duty and we didn't finish until 3-30 a.m. and I'm glad to say the cake came in very handy then as we began to get peckish.

Sorry, must stop for a while now as work had appeared.

Am continuing this in the lunch hour, sitting on a lovely daisy-covered lawn, walled in by the rhododendron bushes.

Life here never had a dull moment and a couple of days ago we were informed at lunchtime that we were to move our living quarters the same evening. This we did and now live some half-hour's drive from the office to which we travel in an Army lorry. But oh, I'd love you to see where we live, you'd love it! It's a lovely old pile (I can't tell you the name, of course) and is built on the lines of a small castle with turrets and archways and wide panelled halls and oh such lovely old sweeping staircases. Of course, I haven't had time to explore it yet, but it stands in beautiful grounds and when I get my next half day I'll take a look around it.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Winchester. This programme was showing at the Theatre Royal which was a full-time cinema.

44 The Golden Lion, Southwick village.

45 Soberton Towers, Droxford, ten miles north of Southwick in the Meon Valley. This 1905 folly, built by Colonel Sir Charles Brome Bashford, was requisitioned

Yesterday and to-day the weather is just the way I like it—very, very hot!

The blossom here this year is lovely. Mauve wisteria and red and white may and chestnut candles all bloom in profusion.

No more news at the moment, so will sign off.

With heaps of love from

Joan xxxx

SHUTER: As they days passed some people found themselves less busy than they had been for many months. Things were beginning to pass out of our hands, out of our control. My own department seemed as busy as ever. We were watching, urging and coaxing the last stragglers on their way round the coast to join their assault forces now assembled and amassed in the South of England. We were also setting up a system whereby we hoped to be able to keep track of the 4,266 landing ships, craft and barges of the allied invasion fleet. They would soon be on the move now. Once unleashed, they would be set in perpetual motion. [...] It was a frightening thought.<sup>46</sup>

HUGILL: As D-Day approached, the pressure of work eased. Some members of staff moved on to take up their forward positions, and the weather was wonderful. The typists completed the typing of Operation Overlord, over 1,000 pages of printed foolscap, and on Whit Sunday, many of us found time to go to Church in Southwick Village. At Admiral Ramsay's suggestion, two cricket matches between the chaps and girls were organised on a nearby, grassy field, with only the square hastily mown. Admiral Ramsay and the Senior Mess took on the Wren officers and beat them by four wickets. Ramsay himself made sixteen runs but noted in his diary that he was "very stiff." One of the girls was a lethal underarm bowler.<sup>47</sup> [This was a Wren Officer called Mary Adams, whose wicked delivery broke the nose of a hapless officer-batsman]. 'Bobby,' Howes says: 'it reminded Rear-Admiral Creasy of the Armada before which Drake played bowls on Plymouth Hoe.'<sup>48</sup>

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in December 1943 as WRNS accommodation to serve *HMS Mercury*, home of the Royal Navy Signals School at Leydene House, East Meon. See Chris Rickard, *HMS Mercury: Swift and Faithful* (East Meon History Archive, 2006). <https://www.eastmeonhistory.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/History-of-HMS-Mercury.pdf>

46 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

47 Hugill, 'A Wren's memories'.

48 Howes, interview.

SHUTER: It did seem as if we were going in battle in traditional English style. Not quite bowls on Plymouth Hoe, nor the playing fields of Eton, but a blend of the two very suitable for a combined operation.<sup>49</sup>

HUGILL: On 30 May, Admiral Ramsay found time to speak to about sixty Wrens of the Secretariat, to thank them for their hard and good work. This is something that those who were present have never forgotten. The Admiral's attitude to his junior staff was always impeccable, and, with hindsight, I'm sure that his friendliness and good manners were copied by all our seniors. We were a truly happy ship.<sup>50</sup>

BLANDFORD: By the first day of June, men were sitting in convoys of parked vehicles. Some sat in groups on the grass playing cards. Others were writing letters, presumably to their loved ones. They all seemed in very good spirits and would wave as we drove past.<sup>51</sup>

HOWES: In early June all personnel were called to a meeting to be told that Operation Overlord was about to begin. They were reminded of the need for strict secrecy and security and all leave was cancelled.<sup>52</sup>

SHUTER: It was about this time that we were impounded—cut off from the world! Until this moment I had never been able to realise that Overlord was really going to happen. This cutting-off from the world seemed in some way to set a seal on it. Overlord was going to happen as surely as the sun rises or the moon sets. Yes, Overlord was inevitable. The planning had become fact. Endless calculations on paper had been converted into men and material. It was indeed a solemn thought. But everyone was outwardly cheerful and spirits were high. We felt that we had given of our best and we awaited events with confidence.

It is hard to appreciate the power that lies in your pen when you work out invasions on paper. The work becomes part of your daily life—just another job to get done to the very best of your ability. Then suddenly it is no longer on paper but has become a vast armada of ships, material and of trained men.

The thought suddenly chilled my spine; it clutched at my sickened stomach. Who was I to have had a part, even a tiny part, in this great responsibility? Oh God! Please may be we not have overlooked one vital link, one small detail.

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49 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

50 Hugill, 'A Wren's memories'.

51 Blandford, oral history interview.

52 Howes, interview.

But at the end of the month the weather broke. Cold winds lashed at us and the sky became overcast and gloomy.<sup>53</sup>

BLANDFORD: The weather at the beginning of June was very stormy. Dark skies, high winds and heavy rain—it was more like November. During this time I was not allowed to go home: every position on the switchboard had to be constantly manned, with internal calls heavily curtailed due to Overlord planning.<sup>54</sup>

GORDON: Tension mounted as the days went by. Since the beginning of June we watched the arrival at Southwick House of all the Chiefs of Staff in consultation with Admiral Ramsay and though we did not know the actual date, we knew that because of the tide and weather there were actually only a few choices. This had of course been discussed earlier in the plans but now that the weather became a vital factor and began to deteriorate we realised that a great many of the forces assembled in ships and craft as far as the eye could see from the top of Portsdown Hill in the Solent and were also in assembly areas in other ports all along the south coast, must soon sail. Some in fact had already done so and sea-sickness amongst the fighting men—a lot of discussion had gone into which was the best pill available for them to take—was only one of the worrying factors to be taken in account. Besides which, there were terrible problems of towing and of small craft in high seas, and the problems of other vital operations which had to take place in the vanguard of the main assault.<sup>55</sup>

SHUTER: At 1200 on 1 June 1944, the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, assumed the operational command of the Neptune fleet and the general control of all movement in the Channel. Excitement rose to fever pitch.

D-Day had been agreed upon for 5 June and a complicated machine swung slowly but relentlessly into motion. Stores, vehicles and troops began to move to forward areas and a steady even stream flowed down to the hards. Loading had begun. The machine must be kept turning over evenly, the flow must be maintained, steady and continuous. One little check would cause endless repercussions, alterations to time-tables and widespread re-organisation. This gigantic yet delicately balanced monster of organisation gained in momentum. From the Nore to the Bristol Channel loading was in full swing. Ships, worthy old-timers that

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53 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

54 Blandford, oral history interview.

55 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.



were to be sunk on the far shore to form breakwaters had already sailed from the north of Scotland—and they began the drama of D-Day.<sup>56</sup>

BOOTHROYD: During the days up to the 6 June the parkland and lanes nearby were filled with troops, tanks, jeeps and other equipment. A huge NAAFI<sup>57</sup> canteen was set up to serve the troops. While we were off duty, we stood and waved to many of the men as they moved off to the beaches and to embarkation.<sup>58</sup>

By this time the operations room on the ground floor in Southwick House had become the nerve centre. Beryl K. Blows remembers:

The Liaison Officers (RAF, US, ARMY etc), sat with their backs to the wall, facing the wall plot,<sup>59</sup> at small individual tables, squeezed together each with a telephone on his desk.

The large table plot was in front of the big windows—daylight was taken advantage of but the windows were of course blacked out at dusk. The room became very hot when it was crowded. Officers never removed their jackets and the majority smoked. Ventilation was minimal'. The regular staff comprised 'one Wren Plotting Officer, two Wren Plotters, both probably Leading Hands, one Junior Naval Staff Officer, probably a full Lieutenant, one Duty Commander RN, and three or four Liaison Officers' who were 'not present all the time. [...] There was a small standing switchboard in the room, awkwardly placed in front of the door, operated by a Wren Telephonist. Many others came and went all the time: Wren Cypher Officers, Wren Coders. People looked in constantly and the room got very crowded. Attempts were made to limit numbers. Anyone not actually on duty or with business there was discouraged. But there were many visitors. [...] There was a Senior Officers' Mess adjacent to the Ops Room, so Senior Officers (Admirals, Generals) often looked in to check en route to eat, or after a meeting or before going to bed.

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56 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

57 Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes.

58 Boothroyd, 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley'.

59 The wall plotter made of cork board with small block pins to indicate and plot the movements of different groups of craft in their progress across the Channel, was installed in the Operations Room at Southwick House in May 1944. It was manufactured by a subsidiary of Triang Toys, International Model Aircraft, at their works in Wimbledon. The unfortunate workman who came to install it was required to remain at Southwick House until after D-Day, because it was considered too great a security risk to allow him to depart with the knowledge he had gained of the operation during installation.



Fig. 2.4. 'Headquarters Room, Southwick Park, Portsmouth, June 1944', watercolour painting, by Barnett Freedman, Art.IWM ART LD 4638, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/10043>

Furniture was very ordinary, workaday type officer tables and chairs. Telephone wires trailed everywhere, coming out of the floor. Signals were deciphered or decoded elsewhere, brought in and added to the appropriate clipboard.

The plots, wall and table, were "picture" plots as opposed to "operations plots". In other words, the plots at Southwick were a record of information obtained elsewhere. This came through by telephone from other operations rooms along the coasts, which in turn had received the radar reports from the chain of radar stations taking readings from their screens. Years of practice had perfected the system. We used chinagraph pencils on Perspex. Our telephone technique and speed of marking were impressive. Ordinarily, the plots would be updated at regular, precise intervals, perhaps half-hourly, but during an operation or flap this could be increased to every ten minutes. Information could be marked in grid co-ordinates or in cross-bearings. Additional data from other sources was constantly being added and slow-moving convoys would be marked up hourly. Every call was logged in previously ruled-up notebooks. Each convoy or ship on its own had a distinguishing mark, originating from the port of departure or initial radar siting. Thus, the early convoys of blockships sailing slowly from Scotland retained their mark all the voyage, progress having been plotted throughout. ETD and ETA times would have been

on a wall board. These marks were very informative, containing letters and serial numbers. "A" for Allied, "E" for Enemy, "U" for Unknown or Unidentified, followed by a number, followed by the direction it was heading. The composition of the convoy had been known at the time of sailing, how many merchant ships, escorts, air cover etc. All this information was logged and available in case of query or attack and the plotters could answer questions readily. Changes in the composition of convoys, breakdowns, came through by signal.

Anything unusual could be spotted by the plotters and senior staff alerted. Updating the plot took precedence over everything and everybody, thus: "Excuse me, Sir, the 1430 positions are coming through". One plotter logged the message, repeating back the information aloud. The second girl marked the plot. The Plotting Officer transferred anything needing to be shown on the wall plot. She oversaw all the data gathering in the room and took her turn doing other peoples' jobs when necessary, answering unmanned phones etc.<sup>60</sup>



Fig. 2.5. D-Day Wall Map, Operations Room, Southwick House, NMRN 2017/106/379, courtesy of National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth.  
©National Museum of the Royal Navy.

<sup>60</sup> Blows, unpublished personal testimony.

Wren J.H. Prior, 41801  
Naval Party 1645  
c/o G.P.O.  
London.

Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1944

Dear Mother, Paddy and all at home,

Here we are again, all merry and bright!

Since our move which I have previously told you about, life has been going along very smoothly if busily.

We have been enjoying what might be called a heatwave and expect you have too, although it seems to have broken a little now. On Tuesday I had an afternoon off and the weather was wonderful. I went back to our Quarters and changed into my shorts and ankle socks and lay on the lawn and sunbathed for a while. Then I went for a walk into a nearby village<sup>61</sup> across the fields and returned in time for supper which we took out on the lawn and had picnic fashion. It's the queerest picnic I've ever had—we had kippers and lots of bread-and-butter and peach jam and tea! After supper we played tennis and then early to bed for a change.

I thoroughly enjoy the drive to and from the office each day as we go through some beautiful country past endless thatched cottages with the roses in bloom round the doors and old brick walls covered with wisteria and drooping laburnum blossoms. How are the roses at home? Are the new ones we bought out yet? And all the packets of seeds Mum and I bought in Woolworth's?

I'm awfully sorry to hear that Mr. Smith is now suffering pain and although it doesn't seem right to say it, hope he doesn't hang on much longer in what must be agony.<sup>62</sup>

I have received a letter from Charlie and also one from Bess and one from Grace and will answer them all as soon as possible.

Yesterday, I had the surprising pleasure of receiving the letter from Bill which you sent on.<sup>63</sup> He is now in New Britain in the South-west Pacific where it rains all day and all night he tells me. He also enclosed some snaps of himself and of Brisbane. His mother has now apparently moved to Southampton but he doesn't give

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61 Droxford.

62 William George Smith (1872–1945) died at his home, 15 Park Avenue, Barking, on 11 June 1944.

63 William George Howell Porter (1923–1992). Singapore-born pen-pal. Joan and Bill had been classmates at Napier College, Woodford Green, before the war. Bill served in the Royal Australian Air Force. Their correspondence continued throughout the war.

me her address, so I can't write to her.

I think that's the limit of my news now except to say that I am keeping very well and hope you are all O.K.

Cheerio for now, with lots of love

From

Joan xxxxx

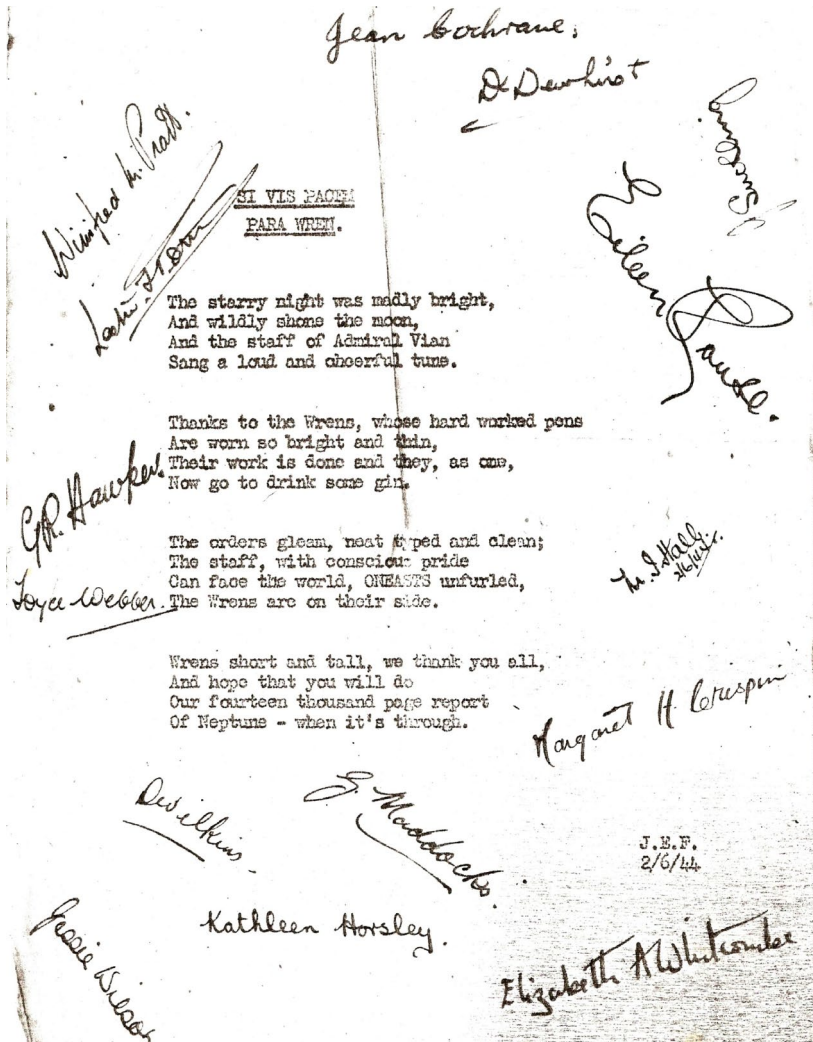


Fig. 2.6. 'Si Vis Pacem Para Wren', poem by J. E. F., 2 June 1944, signed by Wrens of ANCXF at Southwick Park. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

SHUTER: On 2 June the weather forecast for D-Day was not favourable, low cloud which would be bad for the air, both airborne troops and the aircraft supporting the landings, seemed likely.

Early in the morning and again on the evening of 3 June the Supreme Allied Commander, the Allied Commanders-in-Chief, their right-hand men and the meteorological experts met together in our Headquarters. The weather forecast for D-Day, the 5 June, was still gloomy. Thus, in the event, despite man's science and knowledge, despite his planning and organisation, the weather held the whip-hand.

If humanly possible a postponement would be avoided. There is no knowing what will happen if a great machine composed of human elements is suddenly checked. Above all, it is bad for the morale of troops, keyed to fever pitch, to have to suffer a postponement. The stoutest hearts are bound to falter and spirits to droop if men are cooped up for hours in a landing craft lying at anchor.

At 0415 hours on 4 June the men, on whom the decision rested, met again. In view of the still unfavourable weather forecast for 5 June, but on the promise of an improvement for 6 June, it was reluctantly agreed to postpone the operation for twenty-four hours. Thus the dreaded brake was applied to the mighty movement machine.<sup>64</sup>

GORDON: We stayed up most of the night of 4 June in the hut next to the Meteorological Hut listening, watching and waiting while they and the Chiefs of Staff came to the decision to postpone the Operation. With the knowledge that we had of what this would mean, we spent a worrying day thinking of that massive, waiting Armada, each craft with its own special difficulties brought about by the delay.<sup>65</sup>

BLANDFORD: Forty-eight hours before the landings, there was a total silence on the switchboards, except for the C-in-C's personal line. Everyone was at their positions, just waiting and waiting. With the terrible weather continuing, the atmosphere in UGHQ was very tense.<sup>66</sup>

THOMAS: I vividly remember the day before the start of the invasion. The weather was dreadful, and I remember a meeting being called with a meteorologist, I think his name was Stagg.<sup>67</sup> He said there would be a gap in the weather and if we didn't seize the opportunity, we would have to wait another three weeks.<sup>68</sup>

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64 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

65 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

66 Blandford, oral history interview.

67 Group Captain James Stagg, RAF, SHAEF's meteorologist.

68 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

SHUTER: Conditions of tide were such that the operation could only be carried out over a period of a few days. If the weather remained unsuitable throughout this time then the operation would have to be postponed until the middle of June. Imagine the complications that would arise in such an event! The seals on operational orders had been broken, men had been briefed. Thus, the whole invasion force would have to remain impounded throughout this period of waiting. Hundreds of thousands of men living on top of each other under increasing tension. Think of the effect on morale. The administrative headache would be intolerable. Surely the good God wouldn't send this to try us?

On the evening of 4 June our great leaders met again. The weather promised for 6 June still showed some improvement. Naturally the Army wanted to go. But could the Navy guarantee to take it there, and the Air give its planned support under the prevailing weather conditions? These were the factors upon which the decision rested. Accepting the promise of improvement given by the meteorologists the Navy and the Air agreed the undertaking. The final responsibility rested with General Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander. A great man if ever there was one. He had had many desperate decisions to make during the war and this one must have been the most vital of them all. He decided to launch the operation.

Thus a courageous decision was taken, a decision on which the whole course of the war and the lives of thousands of men depended. Thus it was that D-Day became irrevocably 6 June 1944.

Indecision, the most exhausting of all mental states, was at an end. The tension eased. We were committed! Operation Overlord was "on", and now no power on this earth could stop it. We all felt a lot better.

But 5 June, or D minus one, is a day I would not live through again for all the gold in the Bank of England. As the meteorologists had predicted, the weather was diabolical. The wind gathered in strength and the sea became rough. The sky was heavy with clouds. The day was chill and bleak.

We knew that no major landing craft, let alone tiddlers, would be sailed coastwise and empty on such a day. And yet, that evening, not only major craft but minor craft—forty-foot LCM and LBV (converted Thames barges)—were to set out to cross a wide expanse of angry Channel and they were very heavily laden—in some cases cruelly overloaded.

"Oh God," we thought, "Are all our months of careful planning, are all the fruits of man's ingenuity to be proved impotent against the hand of Nature?"

Our hearts bled for the gallant men setting out on this perilous voyage—and there was nothing we could do for them, nothing. It was out of our hands, events were moving forward remorselessly.

Our Commander-in-Chief was an inspiration throughout that day. His self-control was absolute. His courage was in his calmness.<sup>69</sup>

THOMAS: On the night of 5 June 1944, we didn't go to bed because we knew the invasion would be happening in the early hours of the next morning. We went out to watch the gliders being towed over to the continent. I vividly remember the sound of the aircraft. We all knew where they were going, but we didn't know what would happen when they got there. It was a very emotional and worrying time.<sup>70</sup>

CARTWRIGHT: On 5 June we were told by the Commander that the invasion boats had set sail for Europe. On that evening I was on night duty and knew that it was the most memorable occasion of my life. At midnight, the Commander told us that in twenty minutes our first airborne troops would land in Normandy.<sup>71</sup>

SHUTER: The night wore on. We heard the roar of heavy bombers passing overhead. We looked at each other. The softening-up bombardment of the assault area! The Air Force had not been grounded by the weather and the fleet had sailed! The weather experts had been right—the weather was improving. Oh, joy!

Later we heard dull distant thuds and crumps. We dashed outside, and from the ramparts we could see the flashes of exploding bombs as those bombers let go their load. Ah, this was the invasion all right! Those flashes came from the assault area. Nothing prosaic about those flashes: there was heat, there fire.<sup>72</sup>

HOWES: I was Duty Petty Officer on the night of 5 June. It was remarkably quiet and after the previous cancellation because of adverse weather, the operation was under way. For once the operators had time to chat amongst themselves, wondering if their boyfriends had sailed off to France and how long it would be before they met again. Would we be going to France too? Would we get any leave beforehand? Would the invasion succeed? How bad would the casualties be? All of these thoughts were bandied about, helping to pass the time—it was a very long night.

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69 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

70 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

71 Cartwright, 'My experience of life in the Wrens'.

72 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.



Because of the use of scramblers we could only anticipate what was happening, but a call from General Omar Bradley at about 0200 hours gave us cause to hope that everything was going to plan. The RAF had bombed the coastal batteries between Le Havre and Cherbourg and gliders had landed Airborne Divisions behind the coastline of Normandy.<sup>73</sup>

SHUTER: On returning to Southwick House I stole into the operations room half-expecting to hear that the assault forces had been scattered, perhaps by the weather, perhaps by the enemy. How could such a great Armada remain unmolested and undetected? But the room was not tense with battle. The watch was tranquilly drinking its cocoa! Reassured, I forced myself to look at the great wall plot and there, inside the lee of the Contentin peninsular, were the five lengthening lines representing the assault forces—intact, and as yet unobserved! Only two hours to go and they would be there. Oh, thank you God!

To me it seemed a miracle. Relief spread through my body in a warm glow and I climbed into bed feeling light as air.<sup>74</sup>

CARTWRIGHT: The office seemed chilled with expectance and no-one could speak, for I am sure that waiting for news is almost as bad as taking part! One could imagine all the dangers and what a risk was being undertaken and the lives of our brave invaders being so much at risk. I thought of my folks at home, soundly asleep, little knowing of the momentous occasion taking place and I offered silent prayers on behalf of all those taking part. Our first official news came through in the early hours from the *Augusta* and the *Scylla*<sup>75</sup>— all was being carried out according to plan.<sup>76</sup>

Fanny Hugill 'was on watch in the Operations Room for the night of 5/6 June. We were all subdued. Admiral Creasy, the Chief of Staff, kept watch and Admiral Ramsay went to bed, to be called at 5am if all was well. So it was, but the wind howled and the shutters rattled all night long'.<sup>77</sup>

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73 Howes, interview.

74 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

75 *USS Augusta* and *HMS Scylla* were the flagships of the Western (US) and Eastern (British) Task Forces of Operation Neptune, under the command, respectively, of Rear-Admiral Alan G. Kirk, USN, and Rear-Admiral Sir Phillip Vian, RN.

76 Cartwright, 'My experience of life in the Wrens'.

77 Hugill, 'A Wren's memories'.

BLANDFORD: Early in the morning of 6 June, our waiting was ended. Officers of the three services were standing around in groups and the strain showed on their faces. I had been on duty for forty-eight hours, with just short naps, and felt very tired. Suddenly, one of my young Wrens shouted, “Ma’am, Ma’am! Something is coming through!” The red light on the panel glowed brightly [...] I rushed to the position and listened. There it was—the long-awaited code word which meant so much. They were through at last. A cheer went up and many young girls shed a tear. Maybe a boyfriend was over there—it was a very emotional moment.<sup>78</sup>

BLOWS: On the night in question, most of the top brass went to bed—late. The Duty Commander and Captain Dickie Courage would of course have been present, and the Met people would have been coming in and out from their own office.<sup>79</sup>

HOWES: By the end of the Middle Watch we received news that everything was going well and at 0630 hours the first seaborne troops were landing on the beaches.<sup>80</sup>

BLOWS: Breakfast next morning was cheerful—so far so good, but we wouldn’t have talked shop. First news reports of the Allied landings were coming through on the wireless.<sup>81</sup>

HUGILL: At 8am I went off watch and in to breakfast, to hear Alvar Liddell announce on the wireless that the invasion had begun. I should have gone to bed, and indeed I lay down, but I couldn’t sleep and went for a walk. Later that day King George VI broadcast to the nation—a very solemn king, urging us all to pray for peace.<sup>82</sup>

HOWES: I finally went off duty at 0800 hours, and then at about 0930 came the BBC announcement of the landings. The Mess echoed to an almighty cheer—after all the planning the beginning of the end was in sight, our lads were in France and we had been part of it! [...] I walked down the tree-lined drive to Southwick House where the red squirrels were playing, very tired but very happy, and climbed thankfully into my bed in the attic of South Lodge.<sup>83</sup>

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78 Blandford, oral history interview.

79 Blows, unpublished personal testimony.

80 Howes, interview.

81 Blows, unpublished personal testimony.

82 Hugill, ‘A Wren’s memories’.

83 Howes, interview.

GORDON: On the morning of 6 June the Wren stewards who had stayed on as part of *HMS Dryad* and did our "messing" for us, told us at breakfast, did we know that there had been a landing by the Allies in Normandy? It was of course a great moment and there was an air of relief and congratulation amongst all at Southwick Park.<sup>84</sup>

SHUTER: It was good that morning—the morning of D-Day—to hear the wireless blaring forth to the world the news of the successful opening of the so-called Second Front. We tried to imagine what it meant to the average Englishman who had not known when it was coming—and what the reactions of the French people would be. But above all: what were the Germans feeling? [...]

The assault did indeed contain an element of surprise we had hardly dared to hope for in the Normandy landings. This was in some measure due to the unfavourable weather, but even more to the success of the cover and deception plan. The Germans were certain, as we had intended they should be, that a large force was approaching the Channel ports to the north-east, so realistic were the devices employed in their deception...

Thus the invasion forces met with no enemy interference on their way to the assault area. And, incidentally, despite the ugly weather, only a very small percentage of craft and barges were lost in the crossing. Bless them, the brave little things. I was so proud of them, as proud as a mother would be [...] Yes, phase one, the assault, was undoubtedly an unqualified success.

The staff looked as if it had been re-born that morning. We had been so immersed in the pre-invasion atmosphere, which had grown round us insidiously, until we had been held prisoner almost without knowing it. But, with the successful landing of the assault troops, we realised that round one had been won by us. The shackles that had held us slipped to the ground, we felt almost free again; free to breathe, to sleep, to enjoy the fresh air. The strain of the last few months had been intense. We realised now just how great that strain had been.<sup>85</sup>

CARTWRIGHT: The night following the invasion I was not on duty, but during the evening I watched the hundreds of gliders being towed across to France and felt very proud indeed to have helped, even in such an insignificant way, towards the culmination of such a great operation.

Within a matter of days our teleprinters were all connected to the ones in Normandy which were manned by the Marines and in between

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84 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

85 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

messages we were able to glean a little of what life was like on the other side of the Channel.<sup>86</sup>

BLANDFORD: I can still remember the thrill and relief of hearing the voices of our lads from that far Normandy shore.<sup>87</sup>

BLOWS: I recall quite vividly the sensations of pride, fear, rejoicing and loneliness we WRNS Officers experienced. [...] Proud of the possession of knowledge, as yet unknown to the world, that after four years of captivity, Europe was about to be freed, proud of knowing in work and play the gallant men who were to carry out this tremendous task; fearful of what might befall our many naval friends, whom for a year we had helped plan and rehearse the Invasion, rejoicing that this great day for which so many had patiently worked and waited was actually upon us.

And a sense of loneliness—for the docks which the night before we had seen filled to capacity with ships of all shapes and sizes, in their bareness were now hardly recognisable, and the desks in the shore establishment, so recently filled by many officers of the Combined Services often for 18 hours of the day, stood empty. Corridors, once filled with thousands of copies of Operation Neptune orders typed by Wrens, had been cleared, the last amendment made, and the last order given to our Landing Craft.<sup>88</sup>

SHUTER: By D plus one the beaches had been secured and soon supplies were pouring in through the beachheads. On one beach the Americans, who had been unfortunate enough to encounter a German division on night exercises on D-Day, had had a tussle. But now all were well established, and in a few days the Mulberry harbours were beginning to take shape. The old-timers had been sunk in position. Outside them, the walls of the great harbours made up of the Phoenix units, which had been towed across and sunk exactly in the correct positions, were nearly complete. Things were going well.<sup>89</sup>

HUGILL: Within about three days, a trickle of staff who had crossed with the first waves of ships returned, bearing as trophies gifts for the Mess of Camembert cheese and Armagnac spirits. They filed their reports and returned to Normandy.<sup>90</sup>

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86 Cartwright, 'My experience of life in the Wrens'.

87 Blandford, oral history interview.

88 Blows, unpublished personal testimony.

89 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

90 Hugill, 'A Wren's memories'.

BLOWS: Now our job turned from an operational to a domestic role. Telephone messages and letters had to be dispatched to anxious wives, parcels of newspapers and mail sent off by the fastest possible means to our ships at sea. We now had time for chores and letter writing (such things had been neglected for months), but we had little inclination to do either, and would have given much to bring back the ships and crews, and life with its tense though swift tempo.<sup>91</sup>

A watch was long—eight or ten hours. We ate before and afterwards and minimal refreshments were taken, outside the Ops Room (no cups inside). We worked in three watches (ie every third night on). No special celebration was in order after D-Day. We were all too well aware of the possible deterioration in the weather and the unpredictability of the enemy response. In any case, we were working under great pressure. Sleep could be difficult. Sixty Wren Officers in three bedrooms. Double-decker bunks. We had no expectations of privacy or right to quiet during the day. But we slept!<sup>92</sup>

SHUTER: Then on 19 June, which was D plus thirteen, a great storm blew up and it raged for three long days.

The whole assault area, being in the lee of the Cotentin peninsular, was well sheltered from the south-west—the quarter from which winds, or even a summer gale, can be expected at this time of year. But the gale of 19 June blew up from the north-east, and it blew with a strength which could not have been anticipated in June. It was a freak.

All the beaches were at the mercy of wind and sea. The British area was slightly more fortunate than the American. But throughout the length of the assault area ships, men and material were at the mercy of that cruel and angry gale driving in upon them. They were defenceless. Ships were driven ashore; and craft, vehicles and wreckage were flung up on the beaches well above high water mark. Great was the loss sustained. The Mulberry harbours which had been taking form with a success we had not dared to hope for, were damaged—the American one so badly that it was abandoned. [But by now] the armies were well established some miles inland, and the artificial harbours were sufficiently progressed to provide a great deal of shelter, and, in the case of the British one, to survive.

But even so, Fate had dealt a cruel enough blow. After what seemed an eternity the storm blew itself out and those on the far shore were able to assess the damage. Immediately came the cry for more ferry craft—those used in unloading from ship to shore. The stream of supplies to the Armies must be maintained at all costs!

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91 Blows, unpublished personal testimony.

92 Ibid.

Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth's splendid landing craft team did wonders. The few barges and minor craft still stranded on this side of the Channel were quickly collected together and delivered to the far shore. In addition LCT<sup>93</sup> of the Shuttle Service were held over there and used for ferrying duties.<sup>94</sup>

GORDON: After D-Day the work in the Registry somewhat abated and with the easing of the year-long tension we found it difficult to keep awake! We often fell asleep at our desks and on the grass outside the Nissen hut, but we were able, through the papers still coming in, to watch the progress of the landings closely. But it meant more free time and we were able to cycle in the surrounding countryside, sail on the lake, picnic on Hayling Island, and go to the cinema in Portsmouth (walking back from Cosham).<sup>95</sup>

SHUTER: At the beginning of July, Hut 113 had settled into a steady routine, and at last we were able to arrange that everyone got away for an afternoon each week. The fact that the team was having no break from the monotonous and intensive work had been very heavy on my conscience.

So it was that early in that month, a chum and I went down to Portsmouth. We rode across the harbour in the ferry and saw our craft at close quarters for the first time! We snooped around the harbour and went to Gosport, Gilkicker and Lee-on-Solent. Going back on the ferry we fell in with a red-bearded Commander. He was charming, and asked us to dinner on board his ship. It was the first social outing for months and it brought home to us the fact that we were suffering from a total immersion in work. Our host dined and wined us extremely well and we purred in our comfortable chairs feeling as sleek as a couple of kittens [...] We finally left the dockyard in a mellow state having drunk of the best during the evening—gin, a fine dry sherry, hock and port. Thank you, sir, that evening did us a power of good.

That afternoon spent in the harbour brought home to me just how much we were missing as we sat glued to our desks in our hut. [...] I was now determined that my team should "get to sea". But in the Navy there is nothing more difficult—if you are a Wren! Then it was that the Army came to our rescue. Each morning an Army launch went around the anchorages in the Solent and Spithead. They said they would be delighted to take a Wren or two along with them. The team in Hut 113 went first, and later Wrens went from other departments.

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93 Landing Craft, Tank

94 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

95 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

It was pure enchantment to spend the morning taking in lungfulls of good sea air, to feel the spray, to taste salt on the lips and to brace yourself against the wind. This was being alive!

The launch wove in and out between the anchored shipping; from battleships to landing craft; liners to coasters. They were all there—the ships we knew so well on paper! MTB roaring out of the harbour in a cloud of spray.<sup>96</sup> The simple lines of an LSD into which small craft swim, then the water is pumped out, and they are in a dry dock in which they be repaired or carried to their destination. Liberty ships bearing the names of US Senators with the most amazing pin-up girls painted round the funnels, the curve of the funnel emphasising the rounded form of a beautiful blonde! Train ferries, tugs and tankers. The thrill of a Sunderland flying boat landing on the water. Yes, these trips were quite the nicest thing that happened while we were at Southwick.

Of course, we were not living under ideal conditions at this time. In our dorm there were twelve Wren officers sleeping in double-deckers—bunks one on top of the other—and there was barely room to squeeze between them. But we had many good laughs. Our wit always seemed at its most succinct during air raids. [...] While at Southwick we were visited by doodle-bugs.<sup>97</sup> For one or two nights they snorted over at regular intervals. One night in particular we heard one murderously near. It seemed to shake the house as it passed over. K and I sat up in our bunks.

“Praise the Lord and keep the engine running,” we murmured, and immediately felt awful cads. Then it disappeared over the tree tops spitting out fire as it went. Of course, the guns all round sounded like hell let loose. A marine sentry got excited and blazed away at it with his rifle. Fortunately for us, he was not a good shot.

Later, when we knew we were going over to France, we used to practise the Can-Can in a state of semi-undress—supposed to indicate French influence—but always with our three-cornered hats cocked well down over one eye. The dance was done to the accompaniment of:

“We’ll do the Can-Can  
At Port-en-Bessin!”

and only stopped when, exhausted by laughter and exercise, we threw ourselves down on our bunks.

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96 Motor Torpedo Boat.

97 Hitler’s V1 flying bombs, soon known as ‘doodlebugs’ or ‘buzz-bombs’, began their aerial attacks of targets in London and the South East of England on 13 June 1944 and continued to be a menace until their launch sites in France and the Netherlands were overrun by the advancing allied armies.



Fig. 2.7. Illustration of Hut 113 by Elspeth Shuter. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000019, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

The liberation of Paris on 25 August was a great and stirring event. Paris, the heart of France, was free!

That evening, I saw our French Naval Liaison Officer setting off for his solitary evening walk as usual. It seemed too bad that he should be alone on such a night. Paris is Paris, and his heart must have been there. So later we went over to his cabin and asked him to an impromptu party to celebrate the great event. It was a great “shebang” we had in our funny little square ante-room—a room the size of a pocket handkerchief—which was all we possessed as a place to sit in. We toasted the Contre-Amiral, we sang the Marseillaise (badly, I’m afraid), and we danced.



Everyone was caught up in the happy and spontaneous atmosphere. The Navy was limbering up!

At the beginning of September [...] we said good-bye to Admiral Creasey, to the Navigator and the Hydrographer, both of whom had often made me laugh thus helping me through bad patches, and to many others I was sorry to leave behind. And with a wave of farewell, ANCXF picked up its skirts and crossed daintily over to France. And something of the gaiety of the night of the liberation of Paris seemed to go with us.<sup>98</sup>

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98 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

PART II

THE FAR SHORE



# 3. Liberation

## (Granville, September 1944)

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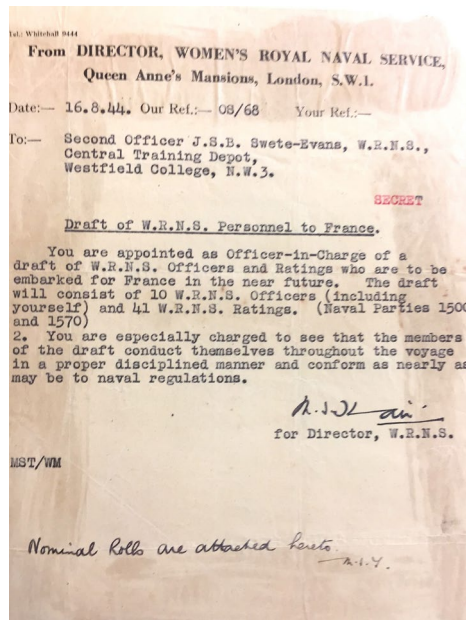


Fig. 3.1. Order from Director of WRNS to J. S. B. Swete-Evans (2/O Wren), 16 August 1944. Private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans, Documents.14994, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

The Headquarters of ANCXF and the naval parties on the Continent needed WRNS staff badly, and a month after D-Day the Deputy Director Welfare, Superintendent Goodenough, crossed to France to inspect accommodation and see whether suitable arrangements could be made.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Dame Vera Laughton Matthews, *Blue Tapestry* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1948), p. 239.

Wrens were not compelled to serve overseas, and some declined the opportunity. But, by the time of D-Day, it was not entirely voluntarily either. Crang records that whilst 'women over twenty-one were eligible to volunteer, with parental consent needed for those under that age', by 1943, because the demand exceeded the supply of volunteers, the Admiralty 'placed a liability for compulsory service overseas on "mobile" WRNS officers and ratings over the age of twenty-one, except in cases where this would cause "undue hardship"'.<sup>2</sup> And, Roberts writes, 'compared to the other women's auxiliaries, the WRNS had a much larger proportion of servicewomen in foreign locations [...] [where] the biggest roles were for writers, wireless telegraphists, domestic branch and stores workers'.<sup>3</sup> Supply was not a concern for ANCXF however. Indeed, Ramsay wrote to his wife as early as 11 July 1944: 'we have so many Wrens now with us that the question of whether conditions will permit of taking them too looms large'.<sup>4</sup> The majority was only too keen. But not all were chosen.

In many overseas theatres volunteers were screened closely, as one of Roberts' interviewees attests. Jean Matthews, a coder at Bletchley Park, attended a selection board where she was 'questioned for her suitability' before being posted to Ceylon. She reflected, 'they were very careful [about] who they sent abroad'. And she was asked by the Chief Officer 'what her parents thought about it'.<sup>5</sup> Joan Prior's mother, Grace, told her *exactly* what she thought about her twenty-one-year-old daughter signing up to go to France. But Joan, with her father's blessing, defied her. As Summerfield concludes, 'the emphasis on a father's approval of a daughter's war work could leave [...] a disappointed mother in the shadows of the account'.<sup>6</sup> Joan's first letters home from Granville allude to this tension.

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2 Jeremy A. Crang, *Sisters in Arms: Women in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp.175, 182.

3 Hannah Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime: The Women's Royal Naval Service 1917-1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 163-164.

4 Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay, 'The papers of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay', GBR/0014/RMSY, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.

5 Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p.164.

6 Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 57.

Joan had never been abroad. For Wrens from more privileged backgrounds who had holidayed in Europe before the war, like Second Officer Elspeth Shuter, the privations of travel courtesy of the Royal Navy and the devastation and hardship they encountered on the far shore provided a stark contrast with their peacetime experiences. For Joan and many others, there was nothing with which to compare what awaited them. Yet their reflections and observations cannot entirely disavow a touristic gaze upon the dishevelled seaside town of Granville. Nor can they quell the spirit of liberation that was in the air. Indeed, as the testimony which follows shows, the Wrens of ANCXF manifested an almost carnal desire to follow in the footsteps of the men whose fate they had helped to design, not just to put themselves in their shoes, but to embody them.

Although Joan had revisited France on a commemorative tour of 1994, in the company of other veterans, the far side of the Cotentin peninsular, out on a limb, had not been on their itinerary. She returned with a pouch of photographs, of beaming genteel ladies and elderly uniformed gents, seated at tables, posing between the courses of another French civic lunch. When I took my mother back to Granville in 2004, at the summer's end of the sixtieth anniversary year, it was already too late to rekindle memories by recognition. The walls were silent. We wandered the streets of the oblivious town, searching fruitlessly for something that was long lost.

### 3.1 Embarkation

MARGARET BOOTHROYD: Just a short time after the 6 June lists went up for volunteers to go to France. Some teleprinter operators would be required to join Headquarters as the Allies pressed forward on the Continent. Many put their names on the list and so did we, and the suspense was terrific while we waited for the names of those accepted to go over to France to be posted on the notice board.

There were around twenty teleprinter operators needed, and those not accepted just wept. How pleased Laura and I were to be amongst those going. Wrens under 21yrs had to get their parents written permission, so

Laura's parents obviously gave their permission for her to go abroad in the same way as mine did.<sup>7</sup>

JEAN GORDON: In September, those Wrens who had volunteered for Overseas service were sent on embarkation leave before going across with the HQ to Normandy from where Admiral Ramsay would, as ANCXF, continue to direct operations.<sup>8</sup>

FANNY HUGILL: The effects of bad weather and reverses in the field delayed our move to France.<sup>9</sup> Early contingents of Wrens sailed during August, and the full staff moved to Granville on the Cotentin Peninsula early in September.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 3.2. Contemporary newspaper reports of Wrens embarking for duty in France. Private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans, Documents.14994, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

- 7 Margaret Boothroyd, (Wren), 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley', WW2 People's War, A2939646, 23 August 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/46/a2939646.shtml>
- 8 Jean Gordon (Irvine) (Leading Wren), 'Southwick Park & Normandy', unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, H670.1990/5.
- 9 It is likely that Hugill was referring to the German counter-offensive of 6–12 August 1944 around the Normandy town of Mortain, which temporarily thwarted Allied progress eastward.
- 10 Fanny Hugill (Gore-Browne), (3/O Wren), 'A Wren's memories', Ramsay Symposium, Churchill College, Cambridge, 6 June 2014, *Finest Hour* 125, Winter 2004–05, p. 19. <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-125/a-wrens-memories/>

ELSPETH SHUTER: An advance communications party and the officers and ship's company of the good ship *HMS Royal Henry*, which was to sail us through France, had gone before.<sup>11</sup>

'Bobby' Howes was in the advance party:

We left Portsmouth at night by destroyer and crossed to Arromanches, where we transferred to a landing craft which took us alongside the Mulberry Harbour. A 15cwt truck was waiting for us and it was a long, dusty ride along bombed roads to Granville on the West coast.<sup>12</sup>

SHUTER: Then at the beginning of September, the Headquarters' Staff of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief Expeditionary Force, moved across to France. We went in dribs and drabs over a period of a week or so. ANCXF still functioned from England when the move started. However, after a few days the communications system on the far shore was established and in working order. Key personnel were there to speak with the voice of ANCXF. Then Admiral Ramsay himself crossed over and the command went into action from Granville in Normandy.<sup>13</sup>

On 8 September—D plus ninety-four—I too crossed to France. It was much too long after D-Day for my liking! If I had had my way I should have been over early on walking the beaches in search of wrecked and damaged craft. But alas, being a woman I would have been a beastly nuisance!<sup>14</sup>

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- 11 Elspeth Shuter, (2/O Wren), 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter', Documents.13454, Imperial War Museum, London.
  - 12 Mabel Ena 'Bobby' Howes (PO Wren), interview, Frank and Joan Shaw Collection, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth.
  - 13 On 8 September 1944. REF NO 060020B, dated 6 September 1944, states that the 'main headquarters of ANCXF will commence to transfer to GRANVILLE on Friday 8 September, leaving a rear party at SOUTHWICK until 1200 Sunday 10 September, at which time HQ will open at GRANVILLE', WO 219/493, The National Archives, London.
  - 14 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.





Fig. 3.3. Wren officers departing for France, September 1944. Private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans, Documents.14994, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

GORDON: Our journey to France started, for some reason, in Whale Island,<sup>15</sup> where we spent the night. We were awakened next morning, like everyone else, with “Show a leg there, wakey, wakey, wakey”, over the loud-hailer. We then embarked, in charge of our kit, but not carrying it as it consisted of enormous green canvas kit bag nearly as big as ourselves, containing a canvas bath, bucket, bed and bed-roll. In another bag, nearly as big, were out “personal” effects, consisting of our uniforms, including bell-bottoms and jerseys and duffel coats and wellington boots, and as many personal garments as we could stuff in. No civilian clothes allowed however. We had gas masks, tin hats, and each had an enamel mug, knife, fork and spoon. My gas mask with tin hat and my “eating irons” attached, fell off the back of our lorry early on in France, and I suffered miserably from the loss of the latter, and had great difficulty in explaining the disappearance of the tin hat and gas mask to a disbelieving Purser two years later, when I was demobbed.<sup>16</sup>

BOOTHROYD: We were taken to Portsmouth Dockyard and further equipped for our journey. Bell bottom trousers, square-necked tops, navy blue shirts and jersey, fawn duffle coat along with all the green canvas equipment normally provided for Officers and previously described. Getting everyone equipped and off to France must have been a tremendous job. We had our embarkation leave and were home for a fortnight. Following the D-Day landings there were a number of set-backs and the Germans fought hard to hold their ground. The city of Caen was

15 Naval base in Portsmouth Harbour.

16 Gordon, ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’.

difficult to capture. When we left Southwick we were very excited and looked forward to the journey. After embarking we “stood off” the Isle of Wight overnight and then made a run for it across the channel, early morning. We had boat drill and the Matelots took great delight in saying, “Last time across a boat sank here or there”, but we weren’t in the least impressed. I don’t remember myself or my friends expressing any fear whatsoever. Our age, the job we had been called to do and the excitement all played a part in our being completely confident. The thought of going into the unknown, or death never crossed our minds... we always thought we were on the winning side.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 3.4. Wrens boarding an LSI, September 1944. Private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans, Documents.14994, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

### 3.2 Channel passage

As Crang notes circumspectly, ‘the despatch of sizeable numbers of servicewomen overseas brought to the fore the question of trooping arrangements for the women’s services’.<sup>18</sup> Beryl K. Blows had the opposite difficulty: ‘I was the only woman to sail in the LSI *Queen Emma*, which I am afraid somewhat inconvenienced the ship, but everyone was helpful, especially the Secretary, a Lieutenant RNVR whom I met nine months later in Germany’.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Boothroyd, ‘In the Wrens with Laura Ashley’.

<sup>18</sup> Crang, *Sisters in Arms*, p.178.

<sup>19</sup> Beryl K. Blows (3/O Wren), unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, AW ID. H679.1990.

Shuter found the whole experience thrilling:

This crossing was to be one of the greatest memories of my life. We went on board *HMS Brigadier*, an LSI—Landing Ship Infantry—during the afternoon. In peace time our LSI was one of the cross-Channel packets running the night crossing from Newhaven to Dieppe. We were quite a big party of Naval officers, Wren officers and Wren ratings. The captain of the ship and his officers did everything to make us welcome and comfortable. I was shown the saloon fitted with bunks which was to house the Wrens, officers and ratings. There were profuse apologies because the accommodation was limited and we would have to sleep altogether. What did it matter? [...] And the Wrens, many of whom had not been out of England before, were delirious with excitement.<sup>20</sup>

Gordon's first impressions were less conducive:

We embarked into what must have been some sort of cross-channel steamer. Our quarters were below and had bunks in two tiers round a living space with a table at which we ate. Whatever male personnel had recently occupied it left the blankets unmade, and a smell of stale tobacco smoke.<sup>21</sup>

Wren officers like Shuter were able to rise above this:

Felicia and I were asked up to the Captain's cabin. We received more apologies for the poor accommodation. But sitting there and sipping our drinks, we told our host that we couldn't imagine what could have been more pleasant...

Towards midnight I went below to see the Wrens. They were all in bed—in their nighties—just as if they were safe in their beds at home, and apparently devoid of any fear of enemy action. What implicit faith in the Royal Navy! I remembered vaguely having seen an AFC which said that Wrens at sea must sleep in their bell-bottoms. But my request that they should get into their slacks was met with consternation on all sides. Most of them had packed them away in their heavy luggage! I had visions of the ship being torpedoed and of dozens of flimsily-clad Wrens mustering on deck. We had been issued with natty little life-jackets that you could wear quite flat, even inflating them after you were in the water. With groans I got them into these life jackets—most of them had no idea how to put the things on. I must admit that I hadn't much idea either, but by the time I had inspected and instructed thirty odd Wrens I was a dab

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<sup>20</sup> Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

at the job. Oh, they were resentful at being made to sleep in the wretched things!

I think the Wrens regarded the crossing as a joy-ride and I thanked my lucky stars that I had not been born to be an Administrative Wren Officer. For when I went to bed that night a small deputation was waiting to ask if they could go up on deck as they were so hot! "What next?" I thought: "A pleasure cruise, was it?" And one girl travelled in a brand new pair of shoes! Wren shoes are always diabolically hard for the first three weeks. [...] Poor dear, she was limping around with her heels hanging out of the backs before we arrived.

In the early hours we slipped out of the Spithead, two other LSI in company, and escorted by HM ships *Lapwing* and *Narborough*.<sup>22</sup>

GORDON: We sailed that evening. Many were sea-sick and when we woke at night cockroaches scuttled in their thousands from the light of our torches across the floor and the bulkheads close above our faces! We sailed in convoy, guarded by armed naval craft.<sup>23</sup>

'GINGE' THOMAS: My most vivid memory of crossing the Channel was hearing the ship's Tannoy blaring out, over and over again, Bing Crosby singing "Would you like to swing on a star?".

SHUTER: At first light I was up on deck. The *Brigadier* was cleaving through the water. We led the column followed by the other two LSI, while on each quarter our escorts were keeping guard like faithful watchdogs. A thrill of pride went through me as I looked at the little convoy, silver grey in the morning light.

Feeling a great sense of security now that it was light, I told the Wrens that they could take off their life-jackets as long as they carried them. As the chill drained out of the morning light I began to think that I had been awfully fussy the night before. It seemed so safe now as the sun began to climb into the sky. Then, quite suddenly, came the voice of the First Lieutenant from the bridge, "Second Wren, will you see that your girls are now wearing their life-jackets. We are entering the danger zone!" I couldn't look a Wren in the eyes for fear of seeing reproach for the night spent in unnecessary misery.

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22 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

23 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.



Fig. 3.5. Wrens on deck, travelling to France, September 1944. Private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans, Documents.14994, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

It must have been about eight o'clock when we first made out the coast of France showing hazily on the port bow. It was Le Havre which at that time was still held by the Germans.<sup>24</sup> Then we heard the noise of aircraft. Soon bombers from England were milling overhead until the heavens were throbbing with the roar of their engines. They seemed to circle over us before starting the run in to bomb Le Havre. It was most exciting. The little blob of land we had seen on the horizon soon disappeared behind a pall of smoke, and the bombs that fell short threw up great plumes of water. Other bombs were jettisoned quite near us and it was as if we were surrounded by giant whales at play.<sup>25</sup>

24 The major port of Le Havre was considered by Hitler one of the *festung* (to be held at all cost to the last man). Equally it was strategically vital to the Allies, who agreed to a desperate plan to reclaim it—the unforgiving ‘Operation Astonia’. Allied bombs rained on Le Havre during the night of 5 and 6 September. The bombardment was so intense, so terrible, that it became known as the ‘storm of iron and fire’. Just to make sure, bombing continued for another three days. Le Havre was finally liberated on 12 September but at an appalling cost. 5000 people had died, 12,500 buildings had been destroyed, the port was devastated (partly by departing Germans) and some 350 wrecks clogged the sea bed. <https://www.normandythenandnow.com/a-photographic-record-of-the-storm-of-iron-le-havre-1944/>

25 Shuter, ‘Private papers of Miss E. Shuter’.

GORDON: In passing Le Havre [...] we watched our own planes bombing it and were ordered below and “battered down”.<sup>26</sup>

SHUTER: There was never a dull second. We were now overtaking LCT and LST convoys, and ships returning to England were passing us. I dashed in delight from one side of the ship to the other. Then I had to tear myself away and go to breakfast.

### 3.3 Landfall

SHUTER: On coming on deck again there was land stretching away on the starboard beam. Now we were seeing the east coast of the Cotentin peninsular and somewhere in front of us lay the assault area, though it was not yet visible. I realised we were just about in the position in which the assault forces had been when, on the morning of D-Day, I had crept into the plot to see how things were going. How exciting it was! Ninety-four days ago, and now the Allies were beyond France racing for the German border.

I gazed at the horizon ahead and gradually the blur of a great city began to appear—once again I could see factory chimneys! It was of course the British Mulberry harbour at Arromanches distinguishable by the towers of the spud pierheads—one vast concentration of shipping spread upon the sea. We strained our eyes—now we could make out the concrete walls of the harbour and the individual shapes of the ships anchored outside. A big convoy of ocean-going troopers was anchored off the harbour and, within, the funnels and masts of many ships showed tall above the harbour walls. The port was working to capacity.<sup>27</sup>

GORDON: On arrival on the “Far Shore”—the name always used in the plans as much for ease of reference as security—an amazing sight met our eyes. As far as one could see along the coast there were naval craft of all types, steaming back and forth and unloading their cargoes of weapons, supplies and personnel onto the beaches via the “Mulberry Harbour”, now in place with all its floating piers, “Gooseberries”, “Whales” and “Beetles”. We excitedly identified most of the installations and ships whose names had been familiar to us on paper during the last

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26 Gordon, ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’.

27 Shuter, ‘Private papers of Miss E. Shuter’.

year. It was a thriving, busy port with all the accompanying noise and bustle.<sup>28</sup>

SHUTER: We too dropped anchor outside the harbour and, fascinated, I watched the ferry craft—*my* ferry craft!—loaded with troops and stores disappear inside the harbour entrance to be off-loaded at the pierheads. Then our turn came. We disembarked into an LCT bobbing alongside the *Brigadier*. Slowly we passed through the harbour mouth and there lay our artificial port—Port Churchill as the French affectionately called it! It seemed to be exactly as it had been planned and laid out in the model we had kept behind locked doors in Norfolk House. In those days, I had looked at the model and had tried to visualise how the real thing would appear, and I had failed. The difficulties and hazards, the problems of production, the shortage of suitable tugs for towage—all these troubles and others lay between the model and reality, and it didn't seem possible that we could win through. But, we *had* won through for now I was seeing reality!<sup>29</sup>

This dramatic landfall, so intricately planned and so often imagined by the Wrens themselves, was worked over time and again in their shared memories like clumps of French knots in the Overlord Embroidery.

THOMAS: Near the coast of France we had to disembark onto landing craft, and then we landed on the wonderful Mulberry harbour. We had typed about it hundreds of times but were now seeing it for the first time.<sup>30</sup>

BLOWS: It was a thrilling moment to see actually in use the harbour on which I had last seen men working day and night at the main south coast ports, and without which such success could not have been achieved.<sup>31</sup>

GORDON: We were transferred with our office equipment, including the steel cabinets, onto a landing-craft to be taken to the Mulberry so that we could get ashore. As this was flat-bottomed it heaved and rolled with the swell and we were able to experience a very little of what it must have been like for the assault forces.<sup>32</sup>

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28 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

29 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

30 Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas (Leading Wren), 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac', WW2 People's War, A2524402, 16 April 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/02/a2524402.shtml>

31 Blows, unpublished personal testimony.

32 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.



Fig. 3.6. Wrens of ANCXF on board an LCI preparing to land at Arromanches, 8 September 1944. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

SHUTER: The harbour walls reached out—great curving, protecting arms—and enclosed a vast millpond in their embrace. While outside the waves fretted and broke against the walls covering them with spray, sucking back again defeated and deep green with jealousy.

We landed at a pierhead, the whole structure lifting slightly with the swell. Cranes were working, lorries being loaded, men were giving orders, and tanks and vehicles moving away in a long, continuous stream. We were packed into cars and joined the procession bumping down the great length of the swaying pontoon causeway—and so onto dry land. Thus it was we landed in France!<sup>33</sup>

BOOTHROYD: When we arrived off the Normandy coast rope netting and ladders were thrown over the side and we actually clambered down this from the ship onto the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches and then went by transport across country to Granville.<sup>34</sup>

GORDON: In due course we landed on the Mulberry and were driven over the floating piers (waved at and cheered by anyone who caught sight of us!) and landed in Arromanches.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

<sup>34</sup> Boothroyd, 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley'.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.



Hugill recalls, '[we] landed at Arromanches on a beautiful morning. A fleet of lorries and cars awaited us, and the sound of the tyres on the ramp of the Mulberry harbour is something I shall never forget'.

SHUTER: I gazed and gazed at that wonderful harbour; at the still, imprisoned water; at the mass of anchored shipping; at the ferry craft scurrying to and fro; at the busy pierheads; at the long causeways; at the continuous flow of traffic and, above all, at the very vastness of it all. I wanted to have it indelibly written on my mind, for with the capture of real ports to the north, ports that were nearer to our armies, the Mulberry harbour would soon have served its purpose.<sup>36</sup> Then the units that went in the making would be towed away again, and once more Arromanches would slip back into being a quiet little Normandy fishing village.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.4 On the road

GORDON: We were then transported in large lorries—or Naval Transport Vehicles (Personnel). They had benches and were covered in an awning which could be removed in hot weather and closed in cold. They were quite difficult to climb into in fairly tight skirts and were dusty and noisy.

We were driven down the "Red Ball Convoy Route" which the main roads supplying the Front Line was called.<sup>38</sup> This again was a hive of activity with vehicles of all kinds trundling down it and taking precedence over us (while we waited in a siding to let them pass). As we travelled we saw some of the devastation of war in the blackened wrecks of tanks and big guns and other vehicles by the roadside, and the ruins of buildings and the great gaps torn in the "bocage" by the tanks.<sup>39</sup>

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36 The surviving Mulberry 'B' at Arromanches was decommissioned in early 1945, by which time the port of Cherbourg was operational and Antwerp in the east was accessible to the Allies. During its five months of service, over two million men, half a million vehicles and four million tons of supplies passed through the temporary harbour. <https://www.combinedops.com/Mulberry%20Harbours.htm>

37 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

38 'That road was so called because it was marked everywhere with a red ball. On it the military traffic stopped either by day nor night. It was entirely closed to any other traffic and the military traffic knew no speed limit and its drivers no rest. The motto painted on big boards nailed to the trees was "Get on or get off the road"'. Edwards, Commander Kenneth, *Operation Neptune: The Normandy Landings, 1944*, Kindle edn (Oxford: Fonthill Media, 2013), p. 5062.

39 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

HUGILL: The long drive to Granville was like a royal progress. We waved and waved. Battle-hardened as we were by the effects of bombing at home, we were shocked to see the devastation of so many French towns and villages.<sup>40</sup>

SHUTER: The drive from Arromanches across to Granville on the west side of the Cotentin peninsular was intensely interesting. Great dumps of stores spread out on either side of the road for mile upon mile. The white dust was inches thick. The roads were solid with heavy army vehicles. We met a column of German prisoners marching along in the dust. I felt I was in the thick of the battle!

We skirted Bayeux and soon we were entering Saint-Lô. This was the first time that I had seen the result of carpet bombardment. It will be remembered that when the Americans broke out of their bridgehead the Germans were resisting in Saint-Lô. Warning was sent to the civilian population exhorting them to leave the town. Then Saint-Lô was devastated by heavy air bombardment and the next morning the Americans moved into the town. We were driving through it now. Perched on a hill it had once been a charming little town. Now there was not a house that was not in ruins. The west end of the church lay sprawled into the market square. Everywhere was complete desolation and utter ruin. It was formidable! I had never seen such utter destruction. Never. Saint-Lô had only been a little town but now it did not exist at all. Two Americans were travelling in our car. They were very upset by the sight and they instinctively turned up their collars and slumped down in their seats, lest the few inhabitants should see them.<sup>41</sup> We, the Allies, had been waging total war round Saint-Lô, fighting for our lives. If the destruction of the town had been necessary, then there was nothing to be ashamed of—it was a tragedy, but not a crime—and yet we felt that we were looking upon an act of criminals. It is one thing to hear someone else say that a place has been totally destroyed, but it means something more when you have seen it for yourself.<sup>42</sup>

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40 Hugill, 'A Wren's memories'.

41 As one GI passing through later was famously reported to have remarked, with heavy irony, 'we sure liberated the hell outa this place!'

42 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.



Fig. 3.7. Photograph of Saint-Lô, September 1944. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000026, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

THOMAS: I remember travelling through Saint-Lô, and being astonished at the amount of damage there had been to the place. I was used to bomb damage because Swansea had been badly damaged, but the devastation here was breathtaking.

As we travelled through Normandy, troops would stand outside their tents waving at us—they probably didn't see many girls around there!<sup>43</sup> That was a thought echoed by Elspeth Shuter's friend Barbara Buckley: 'the French threw flowers and opened windows. We sat on the back of a jeep, waving. We were delighted. We could see what sort of conditions they were in. They saw we were women and did not expect that. They seemed surprised.'<sup>44</sup>

### 3.5 Views of Granville

GORDON: Eventually we arrived in the town of Granville on the [far side of] the Cherbourg peninsular, where Naval HQ was set up and where we took up our quarters in vacated houses in the main street. They were clean and well-swept and empty, but ours had apparently been a "delousing" centre for captured German prisoners before we occupied it.

43 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

44 Barbara Eileen Buckley (Noverraz), (2/O Wren), 'Private papers of Mrs B. E. Buckley', HU\_099995, HU\_099996, Imperial War Museum, London. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030041099>

Before going to bed we had of course, by torchlight, to unpack our kit bags and assemble our beds—not easy (but worse trying to get them back later into the bags!), and then go down to the Mairie in the centre of town to eat and to collect a bucket of water each, as this was the only source of water. One became quite adept at washing the whole of one's person (again by torchlight) in one canvas bucket, being careful to remove a mugful for one's teeth first.<sup>45</sup>

SHUTER: Granville was enchanting and very little damaged. The old town clung together on the top of a high rocky promontory thrusting out into the sea. There was a glorious open sweep of coast to the north and, on a fine day, Jersey (still occupied by the Germans) was clearly visible. To the south we looked down onto the fascination of a harbour and port, and beyond to the new town of Granville lying at the foot of the rock. Beyond again, the coast stretched south to the Bay of Mont St. Michel.<sup>46</sup>

HOWES: Until the main party arrived we lived in a French guesthouse and had meals with the American GIs in the casino which was great as their food was good. Then were told to move into an empty Medieval village called Hauteville which was surrounded by a very high wall and entered by a portcullis bridge.



Fig. 3.8. Postcard of the gateway to the Hauteville, Granville. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

45 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

46 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

The main party were due to arrive that day but they didn't turn up. So we four Wrens chose an empty house in a side street and barricaded ourselves in a room on the second floor with our kitbags. We slept on the floor with our gasmasks as pillows and covered by our duffel coats, ever mindful that the Germans were just across the water in the Channel Islands. What a relief when the Main Party arrived next day.<sup>47</sup>

BOOTHROYD: Each time we moved, all we needed was an empty room and out came the bed, bedding, chair, washbasin, bath (never used) although we did have baths! Bucket and kitbag and we were set up. We had been issued with a tiny stove, biscuits, a small pack of dehydrated food and tiny sachets of Nescafé (the first I had seen). Laura [Mountney] and I were given this empty room in a house in a street just inside one of the huge stone gateways into the old walled part of Granville. We worked in a large factory type building further around the harbour. The field teleprinters were set up and work began. We did have a little time to look around Granville and later some places around St. Malo.<sup>48</sup>



Fig. 3.9. View of the Wrens' quarters (left) and barracks (distance) on le Roc de Granville. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

HUGILL: Arriving at Granville, we viewed our filthy quarters in houses only recently vacated by the Germans. Before erecting camp beds, we opened the windows and washed the floors. There was little electricity, and, not allowed to drink the water, we got a taste for the plentiful wine. The beach was not mined, so we paddled, and the

<sup>47</sup> Howes, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Boothroyd, 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley'.

pretty little casino, which only recently entertained the enemy, was in full swing.<sup>49</sup>

SHUTER: The Americans were busy in Granville getting the port into working order. While we were there the Casino was opened as an Officers' Club. The atmosphere should have been alright, it seemed to be decorated in the traditional white and gold, you sat in rich red velvet chairs, an American band played dance music—but there was something garishly dead about the place. I hated it. Perhaps the black-out, which did not allow the tall French windows to be open to the terrace and the sea, nor any sound of the sea to be heard above the tuneless blare of the band, was the cause of the depressing gloom that pervaded the place.

There was one ill-fated party at the Casino. I was not there but I was a witness to the devastating effects next morning. That evening the Casino had been supplied with cognac which was captured Wehrmacht stock. And it was bad stuff. Next morning a sea of faces, in varying degrees of greenness, mustered for the staff-meeting. One of the staff, who was all behindhand, sat sorting his signals during the meeting. As he read them he placed them on his foot which was crossed over the other leg. The meeting progresses and the pile of signals grew higher and higher. Fascinated I watched, waiting for the whole pile to topple over! Cognac was given a wide berth after that experience.<sup>50</sup>

BOOTHROYD: There were some women around the town with shaven heads, mostly wearing scarves. We were told these had fraternised with the Germans. Now this does not seem a great crime and for some of those women, circumstances must have been very difficult, but in 1944 we were absolutely amazed that anyone would have wanted to have anything to do with a German. Granville—at any rate the part we lived in—was quite desolate when we arrived. There were still dead bodies around and many derelict properties, some had been bombed, but the

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49 Hugill, 'A Wren's memories'. Ramsay wrote concernedly to his wife on 11 September 1944: 'the Wrens are all very excited at being in France & are putting up with physical discomforts quite cheerfully. The officers' dress is most attractive as they wear a blue battle dress jacket with shoulder straps & a blue beret with a badge on the side. I have some anxiety over the Wren ratings as I see them walking about hand in hand with American soldiers and it is difficult to keep much control over them as they are in billets & seem to be able to come & go a bit too freely. However, I am going to see that the chief officer does her best'. Ramsay, Admiral Sir Bertram Home, 'The papers of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay', GBR/0014/RMSY, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.

50 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

French were glad that for them the war was over and soon they returned to their homes, shops opened and the church once more tolled its bell.<sup>51</sup>



Fig. 3.10. Postcard of The Casino at Granville, in pre-war days. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

SHUTER: The Headquarters of ANCXF were in the barracks at the extreme seaward end of the headland. I felt that I had got to sea at last! For if you looked up quickly from your work and straight out through the open windows, there was nothing between you and the sparkling blue sea, and your lungs were filled with the clean salt air. I was happy to be there—very.<sup>52</sup>

GORDON: We could walk to work in the Naval HQ which was in a large French barracks directly overlooking the sea. From the sea wall we watched the Germans on the Channel Islands opposite through binoculars.<sup>53</sup>

SHUTER: A steep street, clinging to the edge of the cliff, climbed up from the port to the old town. It then swung in under the great portcullised gateway set in the rock face. Once inside, the noises of the lower town and the sounds from the harbour dropped from you. You were in a hushed, deserted place, the silence broken only by the clatter of your own shoes or by a peal of Wrens' laughter. For we, the Navy, were the only living things in that sleeping place.

We were quartered in the dignified early renaissance stone houses. They were gems with their fine doorways and exquisite panelled rooms. The Wren officers, rightly or wrongly, lived in a Nunnery! K and I shared an attic which was reached by tortuous spiral stairs. The house was built high on the edge of the rock and, leaning from the window, we looked

51 Boothroyd, 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley'.

52 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

53 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

straight down into the pool of the harbour—just as you might lean over the edge of a wall and look straight down into its still depths.

The old town had been cleared of its inhabitants when the Germans were in occupation. But while we were there the local people began to trickle back, their possessions piled high on handcarts. During our stay a service was held in the little old church that crowned the promontory. This was the first time that the church had been used since the Germans had arrived in 1940. A little procession, bearing the statue of the Virgin in their midst, climbed the steep streets singing as they came. Little girls in white carried bunches of flowers and the women were in the local costume with stiff, white starched headdresses. It was quite a simple little procession and somehow touching.



Fig. 3.11. 'The local people began to trickle back, their possessions piled high on handcarts'. Private papers of Mrs B.E. Buckley, HU\_099996, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.



Fig. 3.12. 'The local people began to trickle back, their possessions piled high on handcarts'. Private papers of Mrs B.E. Buckley, HU\_099995, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.



We lived and worked under conditions more austere than any we had met with before. We had come over to France with great, green canvas camp valises. Everything in mine was now in use—camp-bed, canvas chair, canvas bucket, washbasin and bath. For there was no furniture left in the houses of the old town. In the barracks we sat on camp stools working at narrow army tables—and the roof leaked! With a plop! Plop! The rain used to splash down onto the floor behind me. Our uniform too had gone to action stations. Even the Wren officers wore battle blouses crowned by berets, with the cap badge worn saucily over one eye. We were in the American sector and so we lived on US rations, and very good they were. We had fruit juice with our breakfast and snow white bread. But the dehydrated potatoes made me feel almost in the front line!<sup>54</sup>

GORDON: As we were in an American “zone” we were victualled by them, another hardship as their “hard tack” biscuits—instead of bread—had a sweet taste, there was no tea, and too much salty “pork and beans” and peanut butter in their rations. All came out of tins of course or was the new dehydrated food which had recently been devised. It was our first taste too of “instant coffee”.<sup>55</sup>



Fig. 3.13. ‘Granville from the window’, sketch by Elspeth Shuter. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000032, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

54 Shuter, ‘Private papers of Miss E. Shuter’.

55 Gordon, ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’.

BLOWS: We lived by candlelight at this small peace-time holiday resort, in a somewhat bomb-scarred French house. Water had to be collected from tanks outside the house, and a bath was out of the question.

Gum boots and battle dress were the rig of the day, for our rapidly advancing tanks had made havoc of the Normandy roads. [...] We had anxious moments too, when the supply of candles ran out, and when a pig started eating our underclothes from the line.<sup>56</sup>

SHUTER: We had felt that when we left England the work would fade away. But this was not so. Two operations were being planned: NESTEGG and INFATUATE. "Nestegg", the proposed assault of the Channel Islands, was being mounted from the Plymouth Command. It was later abandoned as the pre-assault bombardment would have been so costly in civilian lives. It is no good "liberating" anyone if you have to kill them in the act. "Infatuate" was the proposed assault on the island of Walcheren. This was now necessary to secure entrance to the Scheldt and to the great port of Antwerp. The value of Antwerp was immeasurable as it had been captured almost intact and, by its position, it would offer the shortest supply line to the Armies.<sup>57</sup> So we were busy deploying our assault ships and craft to meet the requirements of these two operations. At the same time we had to take care that the rate of the Build-up was maintained. It was agreed that the ships and craft required for "Nestegg" should remain in the Shuttle Service, but that they should be held at a few days' notice for the operation. A new force—Force "T"—was formed and trained for "Infatuate".<sup>58</sup>

Ramsay's command was also responsible at this time for establishing a system for repairing and restoring to operation captured deep water ports as soon as possible. What hadn't been bombed by the RAF had been mined and blocked by German sabotage initiatives, to thwart the Allies' invasion supply lines. Cherbourg, which had been captured on 27 June, was the first, where the team led by Commodore T. McKenzie, the Principal Salvage Officer on the staff of ANCXF had the port operational by early September.<sup>59</sup>

In gaps between work in the office, Joan Prior had begun writing home soon after her party's arrival. A letter dated 10 September is

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56 Blows, unpublished personal testimony.

57 The strategic value of the allied capture of the port of Antwerp on 4 September 1944 was thwarted by the Germans' continued occupation of the heavily-defended Walcheren Island, at the western end of the Beveland Peninsula, which prevented access to Antwerp via the (mined) Scheldt estuary.

58 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

59 Edwards, *Operation Neptune*, p. 5094.

the first surviving report, but clearly not the first to have been sent. The missing letters themselves may not have been received, which might explain her mother's reported anxiety. By her account, a lot has happened already. As will become characteristic of her epistolary style, Joan is replying to her parents' family news as well as relaying her own activities. This balancing act was vital to the success of correspondence of service men and women writing home.<sup>60</sup> Her concern here is for their safety as Hitler's V2 rockets supersede the V1 flying-bomb campaign. From the start, Joan's day-by-day resumé's are typical of her letters. In later life, if you asked her what she'd been doing, she would begin: 'well, on Monday...'. As a young woman, already the more she wrote the less she was saying. Her wartime letters were subject to censorship of course; but self-censorship was the prevailing force. It was always about what was left unsaid, reading between the lines. But what endures most vividly is her prosaic sense of wonder, on the threshold of this brave new world.

Wren J. H. Prior, 41801  
 Naval Party 1645,  
 c/o Base Fleet Mail Office  
 Reading  
 Berks

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

Here I am once more, and must endeavour to remember all that's happened since last I wrote—I don't know whether I'll succeed, but here goes.

I wrote you on Tuesday, well on Wednesday Kenn and Ginge and Ken<sup>61</sup> and I (the two Kenneths are Marines and are very nice boys indeed) went into a town a few miles from our Quarters and spent the afternoon there.<sup>62</sup> We bought gifts for the boys to send home to their mothers and sisters, like perfume powder, and lip-

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60 Janet Gurkin Altman observes: 'given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge', *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 13.

61 Kenn Walsh and Ken Philbrick (1922–2013), RM.

62 Saint-Pair-sur-Mer.

stick etc. and I bought some face powder there for Bessie's birthday. Then came the loveliest find of all as far as Ginge and I were concerned. We saw in a shop window some tiny little coloured coats-of-arms of the various French departments and towns which had small links at the top and could be attached to a chain. There-upon we were swept into the shop and we each chose about a dozen of these together with a bracelet to fix them onto and as I type this I'm proudly wearing the complete thing. The boys fixed them on for us while we were buying cosmetics etc. and on one occasion we came out of a shop to find them surrounded by French kiddies all intently watching the procedure!

In the evening, we held a Dance at our Quarters to which all the Marines were invited, and we had a very enjoyable evening, except when the French band couldn't be made to understand the sort of music we wanted and played all sorts of queer tunes!

I'm afraid it's now Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> and I'm endeavouring to get on with this letter to you, but when I have to stop it sort of breaks the trend of thought so to speak.

On Sunday I went to Paris! What a thrill! I've wanted to go there ever since I landed on French soil and at last managed it. We saw the Arc de Triomphe, walked down the Champs Elysees, visited the tomb of Napoleon, saw the Eiffel Tower and Louvre and all sorts of things.

It's a very lovely city, well laid out, clean and almost every street of importance is wide and tree-lined and just now with the leaves turning colour they look wonderful. The fashions are incredible—the hats fantastic! They're tall and queer-shaped and are the vivid colours imaginable. The suits here are being worn with long tailored jackets and short knife-pleated skirts. The latter seems to be a popular thing just now as most of the frocks are close fitting well below the hips and then froth out for about 8 inches in knife pleats sometimes of an entirely different shade. I don't know whether these fashions will ever become popular at home but at least the French women can wear them and get away with it.

There, I've just had another interruption and now it's Thursday 14<sup>th</sup>—I'll just never get this letter finished and posted to you I know.

On Monday, Ginge and I decided to do some washing so we had supper quickly and dashed back to our cabin, sorted out all the things we had to wash, grabbed our canvas buckets and went to fetch the hot water. To do this we had to walk some way through the trees, along the terrace, down a flight of stone steps, across

another open stretch and so into the Mess. To our joy the water was hot—it's usually the reverse—so we trailed all the way back to our cabins this time carrying the hot water with us. We were just longing to get down to this dhobeying,<sup>63</sup> in fact we could hardly wait and things seemed to be going so very well we just couldn't believe our luck. Then the first tragedy happened. Just as we'd got our clothes nicely dipped in the hot water—out went the lights! There was a scuffle of feet and a good deal of mumbling and out of nowhere came two candles. These were lighted (when we found the matches) and we could just discern faint outlines then, because by this time it was quite dark outside. I could see Ginge rubbing away and Ginge could see me. What we neither of us could see was what we were washing and whether we were getting it clean. Anyhow, with true Wren philosophy we decided to give each thing that came to hand a time limit, we rubbed for say 5 minutes and then dipped and then rubbed again and then wrung it out and put it in a towel for the time being. At the end of about an hour the lights functioned once again and we were able to see the results of our efforts. Just as well you weren't there because I'm afraid some of the things weren't too clean, especially hankies. How would you like to do the weekly wash under such conditions? Still we get a laugh out of it really.

On Tuesday I was "Duty Wren" and part of my duties was to "man the library". There I found a very good book entitled "Polonaise" and dealing with the life of Chopin which I am endeavouring to read, but only manage about three lines just before the light goes out at night.<sup>64</sup>

Last night we were Duty Watch and didn't get back to our quarters until about 9-15 so on the whole I think I've managed a very rough summary of me and my doings in the past week.

I've been much busier than usual during the past week as one of the girls here who works individually for an officer has been away and I've been doing her work. She certainly has a full-time job as I've hardly had a minute to spare, but it's quite interesting and I've enjoyed it really.

Please, please could you let me have Charlie's address?<sup>65</sup> I do want to write to him and haven't the remotest idea where to send a letter.

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63 Naval slang for washing clothes.

64 *Polonaise—The Life of Chopin*, Guy de Pourtalès (1927).

65 Charlie Snell (REME), the husband of Joan's sister Grace.

I do wish Grace and the kiddies hadn't gone back to London.<sup>66</sup> They were comparatively so safe where they were and I know that London is still at the receiving end of quite a few nasty ideas and shall worry about them being back. I expect Charlie will worry a lot too and I do think they should have stayed where they were for just a wee bit longer.

I don't know anything about being home for Xmas as leave hasn't been mentioned yet and of course we can't really expect it—after all it's not as though we're in need of the rest or anything as we're so very well looked after and at the moment the prospect is very dim of anything like that. However, I'll bear in mind the compact and will most certainly buy one for her. I'm glad she said what she wanted as then I shall be sure it'll be welcome—it's so difficult to get people something they really want, so if Grace or Bess or indeed anyone Mother knows I shall send something to can be persuaded to tell me, I'd be grateful.

My love to Ida<sup>67</sup> and to all at Trevale<sup>68</sup> and of course to Mag and Fred<sup>69</sup>, not forgetting you both. God Bless and don't worry about me please.

Lots of love from Joan. xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> September 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

Last night I received your letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> September which meant it only took three days, so the mails here are looking up definitely.

I must say I was a little hurt at Mother's attitude as I'm afraid it isn't always possible for me to write and furthermore because of this, not possible for me to explain. You understand enough about the sort of work I'm on to know this by now, but I'm really sorry to know that it did cause you so much worry. In any case you end by saying to write once every week. Previously you say

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66 Joan's elder sister Grace was pregnant and had left Barking to join her parents in Somerset, with her sons (David and Terry) and in-laws, after a V1 'Doodlebug' attack on the night of Wednesday 29 July.

67 Ida Suzanna Child (1885–1979) was Lucy's elder sister.

68 'Trevale' was Bert (1874–1960) and Lucy Arthur's house in Burtle, near Bridgwater.

69 Fred (1879–1960) and Mag (1881–1952) Arthur were Bert's brother and sister-in-law. They lived at Langley Cottage, Langland Lane, in the neighbouring village of Catcott, where they had more room than Lucy and Bert to accommodate the Priors.

that you had waited eight days for a letter—well, that's only one day over a week after all.

However, once more I apologise, though I still can't explain, and please if in future a delay does crop up, try not to worry too much, although I know it must be difficult for you and is only natural.

As you say, the doodle-bugs certainly seem to be a thing of the past now and I shall write to Grace at 21 Glenny<sup>70</sup>; then Mrs. Snell can read them too.

I'm sorry the weather wasn't too good for Mr. Snell as it makes such a difference down there doesn't it?

It's a good thing they're starting on the repairs to the house isn't it?<sup>71</sup> I expect you'll be able to go home quite soon, and although I think it did you both good to spend these past weeks down at Burtle, with the winter coming on it perhaps wouldn't be so good.

In view of what you say about going over to Joyce's I'm addressing this letter there in the hopes that it gets there quicker that way, although I sent the last letter on Sunday to "Trevale".

Give my love to Joyce and Ivor, also Don and Jean, and you can pass on all the news to them, for me.<sup>72</sup>

Since I wrote to you on Sunday nothing much has happened here. We've been issued with a marvellous little set of things there's a camp bed, a bucket, a bath, a chair and a wash-basin all in green canvas and pale varnished wood and all collapsible. We've been given a canvas hold-all and they all fold up into almost nothing and pack away in this. We've been told to mark them as they will be our property after the war! We've also got a few bed-clothes, but whether the same goes for them or not I don't know.

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- 70 21 Glenny Road, Barking was the home of Grace's in-laws, Charles (1886–1946) and Daisy (1888–1973) Snell. They had returned from Somerset to Barking. However, the perceived lull in the flying bombs targeted on London was a premature judgement. Although by September 1944 they were attacking a variety of targets in the south-east of England outside London, they were by then augmented by the even more sinister V2 rockets which afforded no warning.
- 71 Following the collateral damage sustained from a V1 flying bomb which fell in the playing fields of Park Modern School (depot) in Rosslyn Road, near their home at 64 Hulse Avenue, on the afternoon of 23 June. Joan's sister Bessie (an ARP warden) and her husband Stanley Bones (1908–1974), a London fireman, remained in residence, while their parents decamped to Burtle in Somerset, to stay with Grace Prior's sister-in-law, Lucy Arthur (1888–1980).
- 72 Ivor (1904–1970) and Joyce (1901–1976) Coombes, and their children Don and Jean, had moved from Hill Farm, Edington Road, Burtle (where they were neighbours of the Arthurs) to South Farm in the village of Pawlett, some eight miles west of Burtle, in 1942.

However, they're very useful and the bed quite comfy.

Yesterday Ginge and I went into town and shopped. At least we looked at the shops. We both bought a lipstick but that's all. It's a quaint little place with twisty narrow streets and dozens of little dark shops. I certainly wouldn't like to go there without an escort—thank God we've got the Marines with us to look after us.

It struck me as being particularly funny to see all the Marines drinking lemonade, but they won't touch the spirits or liqueurs over here as they say they're bad for the stomach and I suppose they should know.

The sea here is wonderful—it's so clear that it's transparent and when the tide's in you can lean over the sea wall and see the beach at the bottom of the sea and every now and then the weeds or shells at the bottom—and the colour, it's a sort of blue-green but more green than anything. It's really lovely!

A funny thing we noticed during the lorry ride from our port of disembarkation to here was that the cows in the fields here are not like ours they're sort of woolly. Their coats are shaggy and sort of like teddy bears—all cuddly looking. It's so queer, but rather nice all the same.

I have received my bank book and thanks a lot for sending it. Naturally, I haven't used it yet, but I think they told us to bring them in order to bank the balance of pay we don't spend. Quite honestly, there's really nothing much to spend money on here, but I'm not banking any yet until we get paid again, as I don't know when that will be and don't want to put it in only to take it out later.

I'm glad that Mother received the money. I sent it the morning we left as we were not allowed to bring any English notes with us and that was all I had left besides the money I'd changed into francs and I didn't know what to do with it. I knew I owed the victualling money which I'd promised, so just sent it all in the hopes it would reach you.

I understand that poor old England is now receiving the rocket business and wonder if Barking is getting its share of them now that the "doodle-bugs" have ceased. I do hope not, especially as Grace has gone back with the kiddies and I expect others are returning too.

Give my love to Mag and Fred if you see them, I'll drop them a post-card today to wish them well and to let them know I'm still in the best of health and spirits.

I had a letter from Bessie the same day as I had one from you and am afraid I haven't had time to reply yet, but will do so today



if poss. She said she'd received the parcel which I sent home with odds and ends in on the day that we left, but had not yet received my bicycle. I do hope she has by now as I'm rather worried about it.

She told me that Grace had heard from Charlie saying that he'd arrived safely but she didn't know where.

Last night by the same post as I had your letter I had one from Ron and one from Bill.<sup>73</sup> From what I can gather Ron is now away from his Battalion and is awaiting posting somewhere. I don't really understand what he means, but I gather that he might get a Base job or something even though he says he's still A.I.<sup>74</sup> Bill of course is as happy as ever, he always is, and has sent me a postcard which he captured from a Jap officer—nothing on it of course, but just a sort of Japanese scene. He as always wants another photo of me and I honestly can't remember which one I sent him last. Can you?

I wish you could see me in my sailors' flannels. I'm afraid they don't go down very well with the boys, and they certainly don't go down well with us. They're too funny for words.

You'd laugh too at the French people here. In one part of the town—where we're billeted—it was deserted until recently, but now the population is drifting back. You'd think they'd start to put the houses in order but not a bit of it—they collect in groups of about a dozen or so and then down on their hands and knees and start weeding the streets and the pavements! Still I suppose they know what they're doing, and the streets certainly need weeding.

Don't worry about me, although we have the difficulties that I've mentioned above, we really do look on them all as fun and help each other out and make the best of things like that. I'm still well clothed, well fed, sleep in a comfortable, clean warm bed every night and good companionship (especially bless Ginger for this). I suppose to sum up you could say we're well and happy in spite of everything.

By the way, although I'll do my very very best not to let there

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73 Bill Porter, RAAF.

74 The 1/4<sup>th</sup> Essex Regiment moved from Castelfrentano to Campobasso for mountain warfare training in June and returned to the divisional concentration area at Andrea on 10 July. It then fought in the advance north to Arezzo, which was reached by 22 July. It continued in the line until 10 August, when the 1st King's Own relieved it. The battalion then left the brigade for rest and reorganisation. On 17 August Ron was one of sixty-seven 'war-weary and unsuitable' ordinary ranks posted to 198 Transit Camp at Arezzo.

be a gap in communications between you and I, we understand we're going to continue our gypsy-like existence in another place of residence, so it'll be pack bags and we're off, once more! I don't know the details yet, but if I pop up in yet another place, don't be surprised.

Well, I think I'd better close now as work has appeared on my desk.

God bless and keep you both. Will write again soon.

Lots of love

from Joan

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SHUTER: While in Granville a few of us got hold of a truck and went "swanning" to Mont St. Michel. It was a perfect afternoon. That lovely, unique place was unchanged—except that it was empty of tourists! Mère Poulard was still tossing her foamy omelettes—and they were still the same exorbitant price! The narrow climbing street still had its bric a brac shops. I bought some small pieces of Quimper pottery, and it was very expensive. We climbed to the monastery but here there was a change, for the guide shook us by the hand and explained that as were the first English to visit them for so many years there would be no charge! We wandered round the ramparts. The vast expanse of sand, sea and sky that surrounded us had the same inexpressible luminosity that I remembered so well. Mont St. Michel is a jewel set in mother o' pearl. It is an exquisite thing and I was happy to find it untouched by the war.

The people of Normandy looked rosy and well. In fact, I don't believe that materially they had been so very much troubled by the war until the Allies passed that way. Now it was impossible to get their produce into Paris, and so butter, eggs, milk, cream and cheeses were plentiful. I had a meal in a little café in Granville that was a poem! Although I felt guilty when I thought of the people of Britain with their tightened belts.

It was an unpretentious café and, in England, you would have passed it by as a "pull up for carmen" serving strong brown tea and solid meat pies. But this café in Granville gave us a meal that was a dream. There were four of us—and the company was good. The meal started with omelettes of four eggs each (but we could have had a dozen eggs each if we had wished). With the omelette there was a great plate of sliced tomato swimming in vinegar and well-seasoned, French fashion; lashings of golden Normandy butter and that delicious, slightly sour, rye bread. This was a meal in itself; but we had not started yet! The omelettes were followed by a huge pink langouste and thick, rich

mayonnaise. And all the time there was good white wine and much laughter. Gâteaux: pastries covered with sliced apple in syrup followed and with them a large bowl, repeat BOWL, of whipped cream was set in front of us! We ate the pastries French fashion: dipping them into the cream, taking a bite and then piling another dollop of cream onto the pastry. And when the gâteaux were finished we ate spoonfuls of cream by itself! It was heaven! But the meal was not yet over, for now a great round Camembert cheese appeared before us and the dish of butter was replenished. And it was not some beautiful dream—it was all quite real!

After the meal we walked along the little esplanade. It was the time of the grande marée; the waves were beating against the sea-wall;<sup>75</sup> every now and again we felt the salt spray in our faces, and we walked to the sound of the sea. It was a good evening indeed.

### 3.6 On the road again

SHUTER: Before the end of September—after an all too short time by the sea—we once again packed our belongings and moved forward. Our new Headquarters were to be in St. Germain-en-Laye, just to the west of Paris.<sup>76</sup>

GORDON: Everywhere we went in France we were feted by the “liberated” people, who waved to us and cheered as we went by in our lorries. When we travelled up through the towns and villages which had been part of the battle areas, around Caen where a lot of the heaviest fighting had taken place, it was very moving to see how the people climbed out of the rubble of their ruined homes to wave and cheer us.<sup>77</sup>

SHUTER: I travelled from Granville to St. Germain in a brake. It was an interesting journey as we passed through the battlefields of Normandy. The choice of routes lay between the road through Caen or the one

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<sup>75</sup> Granville has one of the greatest tidal ranges in northern Europe.

<sup>76</sup> Shuter, ‘Private papers of Miss E. Shuter’. An incoming message CONFIDENTIAL ROUTINE to SHAEF (order REF NO 1615053) advised that the ‘present HQ of ANCXF at GRANVILLE will be known as ANCXF (Main) from 0800 21 September. Advanced HQ to be known as ANCXF (ADV) will open in vicinity of ST. GERMAIN at same time’. According to a further SHAEF Memorandum of 150 737 (A4), 25 September 1541: from 25 September, ANCXF (Main) at Granville would cease to exist and ANCXF (Main) would be St Germain from that date. WO 219/493, The National Archives, London.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’.

through the Falaise gap. We plumped for Caen as we had heard terrible accounts of the damage the town had suffered.

We skirted along the Southern edge of what, I suppose, had been Caen. The road had been cleared by bulldozers. We passed between banks of rubble, twelve feet high in some places—and that was all that was left to be seen. Just rubble.

Looking back over our shoulders at the heart of the town we were relieved to see that buildings and churches were still standing. But the part of Caen that we passed through was more totally destroyed than anything I had ever seen before. Even the city of London had burnt out shells of buildings left to point reproachful fingers at the sky. *Saint-Lo* had been laid in ruins, but it had been possible to trace the form of the battered buildings. But this was shapeless, utter and complete annihilation.



Fig. 3.14. Panel 30, *The Struggle for Caen*, *Overlord Embroidery*, courtesy of The D-Day Story, Portsmouth. © Portsmouth City Council.

Liberation, unfortunately, often meant total destruction and a phrase grew up. If you passed a village that showed signs of war but was repairable, you remarked drily, “Not properly liberated, that!”, or if you saw total destruction: “Um, that has been well liberated”. However, taking our drive as a whole, the scars of battle were not as great as I had expected. Once the Falaise gap had been closed our armies had moved fast, so fast that there was little destruction in their wake.<sup>78</sup> But Normandy (and in particular, *Calvados*), the ports of Brittany, and the Channel ports, had paid the price of liberation—and they paid dearly—but it was to be the price paid for nearly the whole of France.

78 The ‘Falaise gap’ refers to the route east of the town of Falaise where allied forces planned a pincer movement to encircle a pocket of stout German resistance encountered at the beginning of August 1944. American divisions from the south-west and Canadians and Poles approaching from the north attempted to isolate the German army. But counter-attacks meant that it wasn’t until the third week in August that the allied forces met at Chambois, thus closing the Falaise gap. Thousands of retreating German troops had already evaded capture through the gap.

On our journey the roads were thick with great convoys of army traffic streaming in both directions. The route was lined by notices announcing that the roads had been cleared of mines as far as the hedges. If you needed for a moment during the course of the journey to find a screen from the constant stream of traffic, you were apparently in danger of detonating a mine—no doubt with tragic results!

Lunch-time! The dust and the thunder of heavy vehicles were unbearable. So we decided to turn off the main road. Immediately, we were enfolded in the peace of a fresh, green countryside. We found a darling village. Not the straight, rather shabby streets that flank the main roads of France exhorting you to drink BYRRH;<sup>79</sup> but placid houses, an inn and a church clustered round a small village green. It was more typical of England than of France.

We had wine at the inn and lunch from our American rations which were carefully done up in their camouflaged packs. The meal was delicious: chopped ham in an easy-to-open tin, delicious biscuits, chocolate, and cigarettes and matches were all included. After the meal, and remembering the mines, I decided to explore the garden. I have never laughed so much! Talk about pin-ups—every inch of the walls of the cabinet was covered with religious pictures and cut-outs of white and gold tinsel angels! I could have spent an hour, spell-bound by those fascinating walls!

The rest of the journey was uneventful but I was thrilled with the Bailey bridges that we crossed. Constructed by Sappers in a very short time they can carry the heaviest traffic. And yet they look like a child's Meccano suddenly grown to full size.



Fig. 3.15. Postcard of the beach and promenade, Granville (sent home by Joan Prior from St Germain-en-Laye). Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

79 Byrrh is an aromatised wine made of red wine, mistelle and quinine. Created in 1866 and a trademark since 1873, it was popular as a French apéritif.

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> October 1944

Dear Mother & Paddy,

This is one of the photos I promised you, and I'd like you to keep it for my album please. It was such a nice place I'd like to have this reminder of it. I'm keeping well and happy & will write as soon as possible a nice long letter, but I'm very busy here these days. Until then, God bless and look after you.

Lots of love

From Joan xxxx

Already, Joan Prior was making her own archive.



## 4. *The Cutty Wren*

(Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Autumn 1944)

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Saint-Germain-en-Laye is a comfortable commuter town almost twenty kilometres west of Paris at the end of the A1 Réseau Express Régional (RER) line. Its royal history and grand terrace overlooking a languid loop of the Seine and its proximity to the Forest of St Germain have earned the commune its place alongside Versailles and Fontainebleau as one of the palatial satellites of the Ile-de-France. Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 James II lived out his exile in the Château of St Germain. The 1919 Treaty of St Germain officially brought to an end the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Between 1940 and 1944, the occupying German forces made St Germain their staff headquarters and more than 20,000 Wehrmacht soldiers and officers were located in the town. The chief attraction of St Germain-en-Laye for the Wrens of ANCXF was the possibility, shore-pass permitting, of being on the Boulevard Haussmann in less than an hour. Yet the liberated Paris, notwithstanding the superficial charms it might have revived for the tourist flâneuse, was a city on its knees. Elspeth Shuter had a keen sense of this. Joan Prior's discoveries were in the company of Ginge Thomas; by this time, they had become inseparable.

Shuter's post-war memoir and Prior's letters home provide the two most distinctive voices of this chapter. Their contrasts (born of differences in social class, age, experience and rank) are above all medium-specific: Shuter's memoir is a reflective narrative; Prior's letters are impressionistic and quotidian. They are equally passionate in conveying the extraordinary circumstances in which they *find* themselves (for both narratives are self-revelations too). Yet Shuter's privileged position is not simply the perspective of the officer-class; it is that of looking back, if only from the vantage of Henley-on-Thames in October 1945,



to the recent past. Prior's letters are located in their present moment, are constantly negotiating the home-and-away shuttle of estranged correspondents, and above all in their reportage manage to recover the commonplace from the peculiarity of their situation. It is precisely their ordinariness that is striking. Finally, they also weave a web (as most wartime letters home do) of familial (and familiar) entanglements; these are the fine threads of attachment that make the fabric of family history.

#### 4.1 Châteaux

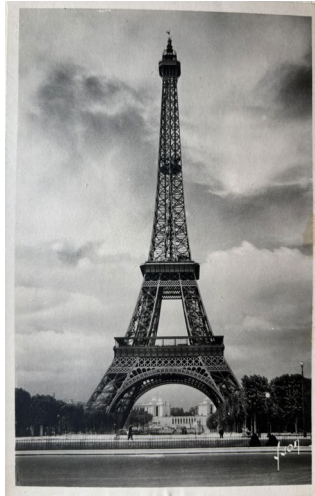


Fig. 4.1. Postcard of the Eiffel Tower, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Wren J. H. Prior, 41801  
 Naval Party 1645,  
 c/o B.F.M.O.  
 Reading

9th October 1944

Dear Bess & Stan,

Yesterday I looked up at this with my own two eyes! What a thrill! Will tell you more about my visit to the gay city in my next letter to you. Incidentally, I've been in the middle of a letter to you for two days now & haven't had a chance to finish it!

Lots of Love  
 From Joan Xxxx



Fig. 4.2. Château d'Hennemont, St Germain-en-Laye, May 1945. 'With the British Navy in Paris. 12 and 13 May 1945, at the Headquarters of the Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force at St Germain-en-Laye', Lieutenant E. A. Zimmerman, A 28586, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205159929>

ELSPETH SHUTER: We arrived at St. Germain in good heart. The caravans, which formed our mobile HQ, were drawn up around a comfortable if hideous château.<sup>1</sup> It was pseudo-medieval in the worst possible taste. It had castellations, turrets and a tower; awkwardly large French windows; and at one end a great top-heavy gable. Having been a German headquarters it was covered in a dead, muddy-green colour from top to toe. But the terrace and garden were a riot of zinnias, dahlias, asters, marigolds and those jolly little French begonias. It was nice to think that the Germans had planted them for themselves, and here were we to enjoy them!

The château was built on the top of a rise and the view from the tower was superb—undulating forest land in every direction. Sadly, we had left the real sea behind us in Normandy, but here a sea of trees lapped at the walls of the château. Trees billowing mile upon mile like the waves of a deep green ocean, on and on they rolled until lost in the blue of the distance. I decided that this was going to be a wonderful place.<sup>2</sup>

1 Château d'Hennemont, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

2 Elspeth Shuter (2/O Wren), 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter', Documents.13454, Imperial War Museum, London.

BERYL K. BLOWS: The Headquarters of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief Expeditionary Force was a vast château which had been the home of a Maharajah.<sup>3</sup> Montgomery's Headquarters were quite close; in fact, that is the reason we were there, although we could not explain this in answer to the many inquiries we had in the streets as to why the Navy was in Paris.<sup>4</sup> We were in charge of the administration of all the Naval Parties on the Continent, and now our main job was to move the Port Parties up to Belgium.<sup>5</sup>

JEAN GORDON: By now we were of course part of "Overlord"<sup>6</sup> though the Admiral was still Senior Naval Officer and in command of all French ports as well as the operations still going on between the UK and the French coast.<sup>7</sup>

MARGARET BOOTHROYD: The Château where we lived was at La Celle St. Cloud,<sup>8</sup> and the one where we worked was some miles away in St. Germain, both suburbs of Paris. They had been used by the Germans and we had a wonderful time clearing all the Nazi memorabilia... pictures of Hitler, flags and pennants, making a great bonfire of them in the grounds. The large room at the Château in St. Germain was amazing. Alongside our basic teleprinters was still much of the beautiful pink and gold châteaux furniture, but we were asked not to sit on it or use the furniture.<sup>9</sup>

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- 3 Château d'Hennemont was built in 1907 for the pharmacist Henri Cannone, inventor of Valda pastilles, on the site of a medieval monastery which had been destroyed by Edward, the Black Prince at the beginning of the hundred-years' war. The château was probably the only building designed by the young architect Henri Duchamp who was killed in the First World War. Between the wars it was the residence of Tukojirao Holkar III, the Maharaja of Indore (Holkar State), and his son Yeshwant Rao Holkar II.
  - 4 SHAEF set up its Paris HQ at the Trianon Palace Hotel, Versailles, some 8 miles from St Germain.
  - 5 Beryl K. Blows (3/O Wren), unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, AW ID. H679.1990.
  - 6 Under the auspices of SHAEF and Eisenhower.
  - 7 Jean Gordon (Irvine) (Leading Wren), 'Southwick Park & Normandy', unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, H670.1990/5.
  - 8 Le Petit Celle St Cloud, at nearby Bougival. The château was built in the mid-eighteenth century on the site of a seventeenth-century farm. Since 1855, it had been the residence of generations of the Dutreux family, until the German army commandeered it in 1940. They had departed on the night of the 17-18 August 1944.
  - 9 Margaret Boothroyd (Wren), 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley', WW2 People's War, A2939646, 23 August 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/>

Elspeth Shuter had a rather different view of the contrast between their working and living châteaux:

If our Headquarters at St. Germain was hideous to look upon, so was the Wrennery a gem. About twelve miles away in the little village of La Celle St. Cloud, which hung on a hillside rising from the Seine, we lived in a renaissance château. It was of white stone and formal in design: long and low with a central doorway and the suggestion of a wing at each end. The château was only one room thick, the entrance hall leading straight through onto a broad terrace at the back. At least, the terrace was reached by two curving stone stairways and from it the view out over the sloping park land was charming. The château was in every way elegant.

The Wrens were quartered in stoutly built German huts and the Wren officers in the château itself. I shared a room with K and Barbara [Noverraz]. We *had* gone up in the world compared with the bare rooms of Granville! For here the walls were covered with a delightful printed linen, long velvet curtains hung at the well-proportioned windows, there were gilt and brocade chairs, built-in cupboards and a wood-burning stove. All we now needed from our camp valises were the beds, wash-basins, and our little buckets. On the back of our bedroom door was a notice signed "Adolf Hitler"! Even the toilet paper was torn-up German printed matter. It was satisfying to be so hot on the heels of the Germans and to use their printed matter thus!<sup>10</sup>

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stories/46/a2939646.shtml

10 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.



Fig. 4.3. Entrance to Le Petit Celle St Cloud, Bougival, Autumn 1944. Private papers of Mrs B. E. Buckley, HU\_099999, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

'BOBBY' HOWES: We were billeted in two long wooden huts in the grounds of the Château. They were divided into cabins, a few individual and others holding five bunks. There was an ablution room at one end with a row of toilets and a row of washbasins with only cold water taps. Fortunately, our Quarters PO, Wren Dorothy Harvey, was able to obtain a field kitchen copper, which we could fill with cold water and heat by lighting a fire underneath. There was plenty of wood in the grounds of the Château. We had a canvas bath fitted into a wooden frame and this we set up on the floor. It was very draughty with Wrens coming to wash or visit the toilets and no privacy so we didn't bath very often.<sup>11</sup>

SHUTER: The journey between St. Germain and La Celle St. Cloud was made, painfully, in a lorry. More stockings met their end in that lorry than I care to think about! It was a hazardous journey and we usually pitched in a heap on the floor rounding the first corner. Our insides were shaken to bits, and the clank and the rattle could be very trying. It was rather beautiful running along beside the Seine in the early—very early—morning. But the real consolation was in the waving, smiling

11 Mabel Ena 'Bobby' Howes (PO Wren), interview, Frank and Joan Shaw Collection, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth.

populace. In Normandy, the people had been friendly enough when spoken to but otherwise impassive, even indifferent. Here they received us with joy. Children waved and gave the V sign. Very little ones, who knew no better, gave the Nazi salute. But after a time even this triumphal journey, done twice daily, began to pall, and so the last into the lorry was dubbed CWP—Chief Waver to the Populace—for each journey.<sup>12</sup>

BOOTHROYD: It was a fantastic time for us all, the French people were so glad we were there and nothing was too much for us. Whenever we walked through the gates of La Celle St. Cloud, people were waiting to greet us and invite us to their homes. We have many happy memories of different French families and were able to hear their trials in the war.

We were regularly issued with cigarettes, chocolate and biscuits. Usually we ate the chocolate and biscuits then gave the cigarettes to our French friends. Two families named Nordling and Bochley were very kind to us and invited us to their homes. We spent much time wandering around the Palace of Versailles, which I think was free to us, and we enjoyed so much of Paris.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 4.4. Montage of souvenir photo packs (90x70mm). Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> October 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

Here I am again, snatching a few moments to say hallo and how are you once more.

12 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

13 Boothroyd, 'In the Wrens with Laura Ashley'.

Since last I wrote to you I've been to Paris on an "organised tour" sounds good doesn't it? Well, it was good. We went almost everywhere in such a short space of time I must try to tell you all about it.

We visited some of the places which I visited on my unorganised tour so I won't bother you with that and of course a good deal of it I can't tell you because it consisted of views. That is to say we stood high up and saw the whole city from various angles.

One thing which did impress me though was that we went through Montmartre right up to the highest point in Paris which is L'Eglise de Sacre Coeur which being translated is the church of the Sacred Heart. It's the loveliest church I've ever seen and I'll try to go there again. I can't hope to describe it so I bought some photographs which I'm enclosing although even they don't do justice to it. Each altar is of marble inlaid with gold and other precious stones in various colours and they have to be seen to be believed.

Another place we visited was Notre Dame which is very lovely indeed. I'm hoping to go to a service there some day but I doubt whether I shall get there.

I'm afraid we couldn't wander about at will and so did not have an opportunity to shop, but my goodness the shops did look exciting and marvellous. If at all possible Ginge and I will try to shop there, but there again these things are doubtful. We had tea at the NAAFI which is an enormous hotel and is very comfortable indeed.

To-morrow afternoon Ginge and I have the afternoon off but haven't yet decided what we'll do. We thought it might be a good idea to have a photograph taken as several of the boys have had theirs done in a nearby town<sup>14</sup> and they've turned out rather good. However, we'll see to-morrow.

On Sunday we had the afternoon off but it poured with rain—literally streamed down and I went and curled up with a book by the wireless in our rest room. It's a lovely old room built as an extension to our mess. It was built of course by the Germans who were here before us and I must say it's most attractive. All round the walls are low backed seats fixed to the walls like an old settle you know, wooden and carved, and above are very stiff compressed cardboard panels which a budding German painter has made use of. Each panel depicts a German dancer or musician in Tyrolean costume or some other such native dress and they're

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14 St Germain-en-Laye.

very attractive. The fireplace is an enormous wide-chimneyed affair brick built and very cosy and we burn logs—great logs which stretch right up the chimney—on it.

I don't think I have any more news at the moment, so will cease for a while and finish this before I go back to Quarters to-night.<sup>15</sup>

Want this to catch the post now, so will write when I reach the office again.

Lots of love

From

Joan

Xxxx

Elsbeth Shuter did not share Joan Prior's enthusiasm for Germanic décor, despite their improved circumstances:

Our standard of living had also risen at St. Germain. The interior was as excruciatingly bad as the outside had promised. It was a jumble of neo-Gothic carving hanging like fretwork; great baronial fireplaces; draperies of cloth of gold; great chandeliers; tiled bathrooms and a sweeping marble stairway—but it was comfortable. We had solid German desks to work at, cupboards whose fronts went up and down like a roll-top desk, and there was a profusion of deep armchairs. The Germans evidently believed in solidity and they had done themselves well!

I had a desk in the Staff Office.<sup>16</sup> Other members of the staff shared another big office known as "Operations".<sup>17</sup> But their room was painted grey and faced north, while ours had gay yellow brocade walls and the sun and light streamed in all day. There were tall double windows and a balcony on two sides of the room. Our chums, who lived on the cold grey side of the building, used to drop in for a gossip or to get warmed through by the sun. Out of deference to "Operations" we called ourselves the 2<sup>nd</sup> XI and we were a happy team. Quite a lot of schoolboy fun used to flash round the office on a bright morning. There was the pilot who, despite a merciless running commentary from the rest of us, held long conversations in French with Monsieur le Directeur des Phares.<sup>18</sup> Then there was Ducky, an American colleague, who was a great joy.<sup>19</sup> He always got his signals about two hours after we did. Several of us would

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15 At La Celle St Cloud.

16 Room 14.

17 Room 16.

18 Admiral Ramsay's personal pilot, Lieutenant Commander Edward Brett, RN.

19 Lieutenant Commander E. C. Endt, USNR.



discuss and dispose of a hot piece of news and then, when it was all forgotten, Ducky would get the same signal. After a few minutes he would start to read the same thing out to us as hot news! Then we would gently tell him that it had all been disposed of hours before. "Oh," he would say, "How did you know? The signal has only just come in!" Bless you, Ducky!

Ducky was certainly a personality and, therefore, an asset to the office. For one thing, he got American sweet rations, which were lavish compared with ours—and he shared them generously! He used an electric razor and as it would not work in his sleeping quarters he used to shave in the office! How visitors' eyes used to pop out of their heads when they heard the burr, burr, and saw Ducky absorbed in his task. He would finish off his toilet by chasing the odd bristles that had been missed by the razor with a pair of eyebrow tweezers! To do this he twisted his face into the most amazing contortions.

I became quite air-minded while in the 2nd XI as our team also included a Coastal Forces liaison officer who incidentally, during the occupation had flown low over Paris dropping a tricolore on the Arc de Triomphe.<sup>20</sup> He had a great welcome whenever he went into Paris. The Parisians had been very touched by that act. Then there was V who kept us well informed on all the latest lavatorial gossip!<sup>21</sup> (Note: Lavatorial gossip is navy slang for the latest, official or unconfirmed, news).

Soon after we arrived at St. Germain one of the male members of the 2nd XI was exploring our room: opening cupboards and peeping in. He turned a door handle, it opened, and he found himself in the middle of an immense and slippery white tiled floor. Then he heard a voice say that it wouldn't be long. Looking wildly round he saw to his horror that a head was peeping at him from over the edge of a bath at the far end of the room. He was in the Wren officers' bathroom!

Our palatial bathroom was a great joy to us. But it was a preposterous room really—so vast—and the many long mirrors were heated so that they never misted over! The bath was the deepest I have ever seen which was quite lucky if we were going to have unexpected visitors. Owing to the tiling everywhere, voices echoed and carried from the bathroom into the 2<sup>nd</sup> XI. We overheard many amusing conversations, but the funniest of all was the chorus that would rise to a crescendo when a number of people got back from an afternoon in Paris:

"Oh my dear! How marvellous! Not Chanel No.5? But how *simply* MARVELLOUS!"

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20 Group Captain Gabriel, RAF.

21 Staff Officer Air, Lieutenant Commander V. G. H. Ramsay-Fairfax, DSC, RN.

“We went absolutely everywhere; we saw absolutely everything [...] It was simply marvellous!”

“It was wonderful; it was marvellous. No, I can’t explain, it was just *marvellous!*”

“What? Oh no! we didn’t go inside, but it was simply marvellous all the same.”

“It was a marvellous view, I can’t describe it. But it was just *marvellous!*”

“Oh my dear! Really? How simply *marvellous!*”

COS—the Chief of Staff<sup>22</sup>—overheard a conversation like this one day when in the 2nd XI. He was very tickled and later teased the offenders with an extremely good imitation, and “Oh my dear! How simply *marvellous!*” became a byword.<sup>23</sup>

## 4.2 Paris

Boothroyd recalls fondly:

We were so fortunate for we could go into Paris from 1300 to 2100 if we got a pass. The shops were lovely, at least to our eyes. We were particularly interested in those beautiful shops which sold wonderful perfumes: Elizabeth Arden, Chanel etc, etc, all lovely to see. We were told the American soldiers had bought up Chanel No.5 when they arrived. It was always a sore point with the English lads that the Americans had so much to spend.<sup>24</sup>

‘GINGE’ THOMAS: I remember going into Paris on the metro quite often, we would visit Galeries Lafayette and other wonderful places. I loved the Sacre Coeur and went there very often.<sup>25</sup>

GORDON: Paris, though over-populated with the influx of the Allied forces, seemed comparatively empty as there were so few civilian vehicles about. Instead of taxis there were little covered carts pulled by bicycles and some chic ladies drove themselves in very pretty horse-drawn equipages with basket-work carriages. They bowled along to the Bois de Boulogne and sat outside the few cafes and restaurants left open to them.

I and Jeanne Law attended a fashion show by Paquin. As it was a cold day we were wearing our duffel coats and, in our uniforms, caused more

22 Commodore M. J. (‘Bob’) Mansergh, CBE, RN.

23 Shuter, ‘Private papers of Miss E. Shuter’.

24 Boothroyd, ‘In the Wrens with Laura Ashley’.

25 Phyllis ‘Ginge’ Thomas (Leading Wren), ‘Ginger Thomas’s D-Day: Working for Cossac’, WW2 People’s War, A2524402, 16 April 2004. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/02/a2524402.shtml>

stir than the models, who themselves came over to examine our apparel. A few days later duffel coats, smartened up and “feminised” (ours were strictly Naval) were in the shops in Paris.<sup>26</sup>

SHUTER: I shall never forget my own first afternoon in Paris. It was late September; the air was crisp, but a warm sun shone out of a vivid sky. The trees in the boulevards were tossing off their leaves—gold and red. The beauty of Paris struck me afresh—what a spaciouly planned city! It was clean, sparkling, almost dazzling that September afternoon. Undamaged by war, it was en fête. Flags added to the gaiety: not stuck out of windows willy-nilly as in England, but elegantly draped or fluttering, each one place with careful thought and in perfect taste. They glowed richly against the cool coloured buildings. In fact the whole city, dappled as it was in bright sunlight, seemed to be shouting for joy. It was infectious, soon we too were shouting for joy.

Yes, Paris was delirious with colour. The swirling leaves; the fluttering flags; the streets filled with gaily painted bicycles: blue, yellow, red and green. And the brightly coloured clothes of the women! Vanished was the Parisian dressed quietly, if beautifully, in black. The gendarmes blew their whistles and bicycle bells chorused. The city gave us a warm, gay smile of welcome.

Oh! The fun of it all. The joyousness of Paris in her liberation is common knowledge now. But at the time it burst upon us without warning. We were enchanted. We were intoxicated!

Impossible ever to forget the defiant spirit of those bicycles! They were fitted with bright-coloured saddle bags and decorative dress guards. The girls cycled in gay, full-pleated skirts many of them tartan; these they coyly arranged over the back of the saddle before mounting. Some of the bicycles had little trucks on pneumatic wheels hitched on behind. I thought of the English effort—a shopping basket on a small, badly-running wheel which you push along with a walking-stick handle. How difficult we make things for ourselves in England!

Then the taxis! A bicycle with a side-car looking like a perambulator with a brightly-coloured hood. The “fare” sat in the baby carriage and the taxi drive peddled, charging more to go up the Champs Elysées than he did to go downhill! But the most ingenious thing was a glimpse I had of a man and a woman sitting side by side in what I thought to be a very small motor car. But on looking again, showing under the running board were two pairs of feet solemnly peddling round and round.

And the women's hats! They were monstrous. They stood about eighteen inches high, or so it seemed: richly-coloured turbans or narrow top-hat shapes. Of course, veils, feathers and flowers were in profusion.

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26 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

Sometimes a whole bird, wings outstretched, rested on the brim! We were told that throughout the Occupation the Germans had slavishly copied the Paris fashions, and so these hats had been devised to pull their legs.

Earrings were equally exotic. Made of sequins, feathers, glass, semi-precious stones, or starched lace, they swung almost to the shoulders. Gloves and shoes were also gay—in face, whatever their suffering, the women of Paris had determined that the Germans should know nothing about it.

The shop windows were as beautiful as ever and full of luxuries: hand-painted crêpe-de-chine scarves; sumptuous leather handbags; silk undies and silk stockings. But they were an impossible price. Cosmetics and parfum were the real joy to us. They were in all their pre-war glory and not expensive when we first arrive in Paris. But prices were to rise to unattainable heights later.

That afternoon Barbara and I raced madly from shop to shop greeting and being greeted. There was much shaking of hands. To many people, we were the first British women to be seen in Paris as the city was in the US sector. The people seemed genuinely delighted to see us. We got presents of lipsticks, fountain pens and propelling pencils! K and another Wren officer were embraced by one old lady. The tears were streaming down her face as she kissed them on both cheeks murmuring “*Mes belles Libératrices; mes belles Libératrices!*”

What a never-to-be-forgotten afternoon! We returned to St. Germain exhausted with excitement, but with a warm glow round our hearts. It had been touching to be given such a great and genuine welcome. Yes, my dear, it really was simply marvellous! Yes, it really was.

Later we were to learn that the Paris we saw that happy afternoon was but a brave façade which hid hunger, hardship and poverty. The shop windows were bright with luxuries, but essentials were unobtainable. There was no guarantee that Parisians would get their allowance of rationed foodstuffs. There was no security. Inside, the big shops were in semi-gloom owing to the shortage of electricity and, if you went to the hairdresser, you couldn't get your hair dried as the power did not come on until the evening—after the shop had closed! Yes, the gay city we had seen was actually deep in suffering.

All the same, the French had no real conception of Britain's war effort—or of the work that our women were doing. They asked us why we were in the Navy. We explained proudly that we were volunteers but added that even if we had not been we should have been conscripted into something else by then. We described how British housewives were working part-time in factories and running a home as well. They shook their heads in disbelief. We insisted; they looked incredulous. They were unable to visualise such complete mobilisation. Our country was working in a way that was beyond their comprehension. Later in the autumn, Mr Churchill made a statement in the House of Commons

quoting figures which showed just what our women had been doing. Several times after that I was stopped in the street and asked questions by French people and congratulated on Britain's war effort. They were certainly envious of us but, above all, deeply grateful. Never once did I come across resentment because in 1940 we had been lucky enough to be saved by a narrow strip of water. It was always gratitude, overwhelming gratitude to us for keeping up the fight in those dark and bitter days. I liked the French for this, it would have been easy enough for a proud people to feel jealousy and resentment.

### 4.3 Entente Cordiale

SHUTER: Soon after our arrival, our marines played a football match against St. Germain. The town did the honours royally, and after the game did they have tea and buns? Oh no, the teams were floated in champagne! I couldn't help a chuckle as, at that time, we had only been able to get vin ordinaire for the officers' mess! The Mayor explained with great relish the history of that champagne. A French collaborator had delivered a large consignment to the Germans. Then the Germans had fled hastily before they had had time to drink the wine, but they had paid for it. So, the Mayor confiscated the champagne and the money, and the collaborator was thrown into prison. Thus the town got the champagne free, and the collaborator lost his money and his freedom!

This football match was a great event as a number of our staff (including Wren officers in their berets—fit to melt the heart of any Frenchman!) went down to watch. One perplexed little Frenchman, talking to a senior naval officer, remarked, "But you English are so funny; now why do you take the trouble to put your mistresses into uniform?!"

At least that was the story when it reached me. I seized on it as an important clue, for it threw some light on to the "Mystery of the Charwomen". French women, who had worked in the château for the Germans, also did the cleaning for us. On going into the office each morning, we had at first been greeted with: "Bonjour Madame!" Then, after a few days, when they knew we all went back to La Celle St. Cloud each night, the morning's greeting changed to: "Bonjour Mademoiselle!" When I questioned one of the chars about this she laughingly explained that in France when someone of my age was unmarried, she was called "Madame" out of courtesy. That is as may be; but why switch back to Mademoiselle after a few days? I am sure I did not grow visibly younger under the influence of good French wine! At least, not with quite such rapidity.<sup>27</sup>

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27 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.



Fig. 4.5. George Mellor, RM (studio portrait, St Germain-en-Laye, 1944). Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 20<sup>th</sup> October 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

I have just received your letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> October and thanks a lot for same. I hope you will excuse this typing but I'm in such a hurry that I won't bother to correct any mistakes that may arise.

First and foremost I ought to explain the "rush" about life these days. As I believe I told you, one of the girls who works individually for an officer is sick and I'm doing her work. Well, I'm afraid it keeps me busy all day every day and I just don't get

a minute to type a letter to you in the office, and as you know I haven't a fountain pen so writing outside office hours is tricky. However, I keep trying to get five minutes and this is one time when I've succeeded.

I'll answer your letter first and then talk about me.

I see you are at Mag's again and am glad in a way as she does make you so welcome doesn't she.<sup>28</sup> I'll address this to Aunt Lucy's as I see you're returning there on 23<sup>rd</sup> and by the time this gets home you'll be back.<sup>29</sup> I expect you do want to get back home how and I should think with the winter coming on Somerset—or at least Burtle—isn't very attractive as there are no trees to speak of and you miss all the lovely tints which make Autumn in the country so worthwhile. I hope Mother is looking as fit and well as when I saw her last—she did look so much better and not so thin either. When you get to Barking, Mumsy, you mustn't get ill and thin again—even if you have to take Cod Liver Oil and Malt to keep you plump! And above all try not to worry too much about me—believe me they watch us with an eagle eye to see everything's O.K. You might not credit it, but since we've been out here we've all had another medical exam, although we had one before we came, just to make sure and I'm O.K. still. The food is as good as ever and if anything I'm putting on weight, although I wouldn't swear to that as I've no means of testing my weight here—praise be.

Last Saturday, Ginge and I had the afternoon off and we went into a nearby town<sup>30</sup> and had our photographs taken, seaman's jerseys and all!!! I must tell you all about it. We went into the shop (one of the boys named George<sup>31</sup> had had his taken and had shown us and it looked so nice we thought we'd go to the same place) and a man came out and we exchanged pleasantries and then tried to tell him we wanted our photos taken. We couldn't seem to make him get the gist of it, however, so Ginge pointed to one of the many photographs on the walls and then pointed to us (here I must tell you that she'd indicated a very attractive young girl photographed in a scanty swim-suit) whereupon he broke into a broad smile said that he understood and he was so pleased and all the rest of it and told us to go to No.46 Rue [...] (the name of a street). We came out and looked at each other and of course

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28 Fred and Mag lived at Langley Cottage, Langland Lane, in the village of Catcott on the Somerset levels.

29 At 'Trevale', Bert and Lucy Arthur's house in Burtle, near Bridgwater.

30 St Germain-en-Laye.

31 George Mellor, RM.

began to roar with laughter. However, we decided to try it and walked along (almost in fear and trembling) and to our relief found on entering that it was a very nice studio. A woman came forward and we explained what we wanted and discovered that we couldn't order less than 6 postcards (artful creatures). That was O.K. but then she said that it would come to 180 francs each, that is 18 shillings which would be 3/- per postcard. Now George told us that his had only cost 150 francs, so I asked her if that was the cheapest she could make it and she said it was. Then, I had a bright idea and went through the photographs she had of people who'd already had them done and found George. I pointed to him and said "150". She laughed then and asked if he was a friend and I said he was so she said that we could have ours done for 150 too! It just shows you, you just can't trust them at all. Two or three times I've had similar experiences and by arguing and refusing to pay I've got things cheaper.

I don't think 15/- is at all bad for 6 postcards as he took a great deal of trouble over them and although I don't know what they'll turn out like I've seen other people's and they've been good. We've to call for them on 26<sup>th</sup> October so now we can hardly wait.

Well, after that, we went to the local sports stadium and watched the Marines play football against the Naval and Marine officers. The Marines won 2-0 but who wouldn't with Ginge and I to cheer them on!

On Thursday (that's yesterday) we worked all day as per usual and in the evening we had a dance at Quarters. We had a very mixed crowd—Sailors, Marines, Soldiers and Airmen—and it was very good fun indeed. Quite informal and amusing but good fun.

To-night I'm late duty and to-morrow I think I'm going to a social, but haven't quite made up my mind yet whether the laundry can wait another night.

Well that's about all the recent news of me and my doings. Have had a letter from Bessie by the way, she writes often to me.

In my last letter I was so rushed for time that I didn't tell you much about the organised tour we made of Paris. In fact I can't remember now quite what I did tell you. I know I sent you some photos of the Church of the Sacred Heart, but I can't remember what else I told you. I'll mention one or two things now so if I've told you before, please forgive.

Oh, Duty calls, so I must leave this for a moment.

Back again, for a bit. Now, I was going to tell you more about Paris wasn't I, well I think if I want this to catch to-night's post I'd better postpone it for another letter and get this one off minus.



The trees here now are lovely, I do wish you could see them. Ginge and I went for a walk in the woods in the grounds of the Château where we work, in the lunch hour to-day and it was amazing. We particularly noticed that at one time we looked down and were walking on a carpet of fallen leaves—coloured rusty brown. The next time we noticed them they'd changed completely and were yellow and gold. Then we looked a bit further on they were red and pink and later on still they were green! It just depends on the type of tree you see, what colour the leaves are when they fall, but it will give you some idea of the wonderful colours the countryside here is wearing. I've never seen anything like it in England, indeed I haven't. Everywhere there are trees, in every street on every corner and I love them so.

Well, will say Bye-bye for now. If I get time will write to-morrow. Until then, God Bless, take care and keep smiling.

Lots of love

Joan xxxxx

SHUTER: The French were warmly hospitable and invitations poured in. But there still seemed to be some doubt as to what Wrens really were. Our Quarters Officer had an invitation for some Wrens to go out to tea. The hostess had a little girl, nine years old, so she asked if she could entertain girls of about the same age—it would be such company for her little daughter!

K and I made some delightful friends. A professor of English and his wife. They lived in exquisite apartments in the Hôtel Vendôme. It had been the house of the Duc de Vendôme at the time, I believe, when James II lived in the palace at St. Germain. At their home we were able to enjoy real music for the first time in years. They had friends who played the piano, the violin and the violoncello, and one lad was a clever composer. We spent delightful evenings in their company. Monsieur and Madame were Anglophiles. Madame told me with pride how she had never looked a German in the face throughout the Occupation. Winston Churchill was their hero because in their darkest hour in 1940 when no Frenchman had yet come forward to lead France, it had been Mr Churchill who had spoken to them and offered France so much. For the same reason the Americans were less popular than the British because, from the French point of view, the Americans had failed them, the world, and the cause for freedom by not entering the war when France was stricken down. We had long and interesting talks and often found that we were taking the French or American side against the Anglophiles. They described how they had listened to and clung to "Ici Londres" throughout the years of occupation; how they had picked up the reports of the Normandy landings from

English broadcasts and how the news had been passed from house to house; people weeping and laughing in their joy. We were bombarded with questions about England. Were the buses still painted red in London? Was London badly damaged? Were we short of food and clothes? Madame was delighted when I took her some coffee, she clutched a cake of soap to her bosom, but she almost wept when I took her half a pound of tea. They were delightful friends, but they were filled with despair over the state of their country, failing to see how it would ever rise again. "France," they said, "lay stunned. If only they had a strong government like us. If only they had a Churchill!" I found that I loved the French that I met. They were stimulating company and quick to see humour in the same things that we do. I felt tinglingly alive when I was with them.

#### 4.4 Social life

SHUTER: Early in October we had a house-warming at La Cella St. Cloud. The whole of the officers' mess was asked—and nearly everyone came! So we were over a hundred all told. Just before the party began the light in the bar-room failed. Hastily we collected together some candles and the atmosphere of the party was enhanced. It really was rather a lovely sight. A snow-white cloth on the table (one of Sister's sheets!), and a row of candles down each side. The cask of wine, mellow in the candlelight. The gentle flames reflected a thousand times in the rows of glasses. The stewards in white flitting to and fro, their faces illuminated, then lost again in shadow.

We had a lovely big room for parties and this evening it was riotous with flowers. A log fire burned in the great open hearth. Our staff never needed entertaining, things always went with a bang from the start. In lots of ways I enjoyed that party more than any other, maybe partly because it was the first to which the staff came in full force. It was so nice to have all our friends gathered together and to see them shedding their gravity and soon looking happy and carefree—and it was all done on a cask of vin ordinaire! We called it giggle-juice; it certainly provoked much happy laughter and no ill effects. That night the consumption averaged out at two pints a head! We danced, we laughed, we played oranges and lemons, and we were happy.<sup>32</sup>

GORDON: Paris, into which we could travel (free on the Metro) in our spare time, was entirely taken over by the Allies and many of their restaurants and hotels made into clubs and recreational areas for the mass

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32 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

of servicemen and women now arriving. We were not allowed to eat their food, of which indeed there was very little, but of course wine was easily available, and those Wrens who were not used to it, which was most of us, and who went out with the Americans, who were also unused to wine and mixed it freely with the spirits they could get from their PX stores, often came back to quarters very much the worse from drink.<sup>33</sup>

SHUTER: I got the urge to see the night-life of Paris out of my system early on. I enjoyed it; it was a new experience. But once I had tasted of it and the novelty had worn off, I never wanted to go again.

We went to the Casino de Paris when it re-opened for the first time after the liberation. We had a box on the edge of the stage which was quite an experience in itself. The audience was almost entirely French and I enjoyed it all very much. Later, I went to the Folies Bergères and this time the audience was almost entirely American. The compere spoke in English as well as in French. I should love to go behind the footlights in that theatre and see the stage machinery. I have never before seen such wonderful scene changing. The stage effects were colossal, and when the performers were dressed at all they wore the most sumptuous costumes—spreading crinolines; costumes of ostrich feathers and of flowers; silks, brocades and velvet. We certainly had not seen such things in England for a long time—if ever. But despite all this I did not enjoy that evening. In the undress parts the GI's cat-called and whistled. They shouted: "Go on, kiss her!" and "Get on with it, kid!", until I felt wretchedly, miserably, uncomfortably naked myself.

Despite the lavish productions the theatres were unheated and, when the curtain was lowered, the whole auditorium was lit by one huge blatant bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling. The girls of the Folies Bergères struck one night demanding heating or more clothes. Of course they got the heating. A country seems ill indeed, or gravely in need of help, when it allows the production of expensive materials and fantastic luxuries if, at the same time, its people are starving to death and dying of cold. Poor France!

Another night we danced at the Lido. The atmosphere was good: it was gay—and *French*. The cabaret was excellent. The funny men were funny; the tableaux and dancing girls quite beautiful. Some of the tableaux were deliciously nude and in perfect taste. I could sit and enjoy them as an art student enjoys a good life model.<sup>34</sup> They gave me real

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33 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

34 Before the war, Elspeth Shuter had trained as an artist, attending Goldsmiths' College School of Art (1929–33) and the Royal College of Art (1933–1934) before completing a teacher training course at Brighton School of Art (1935–1936). She was Art Mistress at Pate's Grammar School for Girls in Cheltenham (1936–1940)

aesthetic pleasure—and there were no cat-calls! But I went another time to a night-club in Montmartre. I enjoyed the evening because I was with delightful people. But the cabaret was the most sordid and distressing affair I have ever seen. The girls wore little bits of tinsel or sequins so arranged that they looked most consciously naked. Much more so than if they had had absolutely nothing on at all. They were flat-chested or grossly pendulous; thin and scraggy, or fat and flabby. They were pathetic. All had faces of stone, fixed in a stretched smile, or just dead. One had an appendix scar and another the long mark of a caesarean. No glamour about that cabaret. Poor dears, I wanted to wrap them up in nice warm blankets and send them home. Once again we had penetrated beyond the dazzling shop window and had glimpsed the inner despair, the utter wretchedness and misery of the city. After that, I never again dabbled in the night-life of Paris.<sup>35</sup>

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> October 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

Once more it seems ages since I last wrote and I honestly haven't had a spare second. I'm trying desperately to write this now and will get what I can written before I'm sent for to get on with to-day's effort.

By the way, I've just finished a letter to Bess, and have told her the news up to last Sunday. As she says you are going home shortly I've asked her to let you see that letter and I'll continue this one from here and she can read it.<sup>36</sup> I didn't want to have to send a joint letter if I could help it, but I'm afraid until Kay<sup>37</sup> comes back to take over her job again I'll have to do it that way.

There, you see, it's now the 27<sup>th</sup>! But good news at last, Kay has come back to-day and for the first time in ages I can really settle down and have a good old chat to you.

Well, last Monday we were Duty and Ginge and I had a couple of hours off in the afternoon and we went into the nearest town to look round the shops. My dear people are so helpful in the shops here, they don't mind how much bother they go to and they don't seem

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and attended Cheltenham School of Art where she learned cabinet-making and bookbinding. In the 1939 census return she identifies her occupation as 'Art Teacher and Painter'.

35 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

36 Grace and Harry Prior returned from Somerset to 64 Hulse Avenue, Barking at the end of October.

37 Kathleen 'Kay' Chandler.

to mind when you don't buy anything, unlike the shop assistants at home. Anyway we ended up by Ginge buying some cough sweets at a chemists. In the first place we didn't know how to ask for same and I knew the French for sweet so we said that and then coughed. We stood in front of the poor little proprietor and coughed pitifully—we even began to feel sorry for ourselves—until in desperation he brought forth a box of cough lozenges and gave them to us! He wouldn't let us pay, wouldn't hear of it as we had such bad coughs!

On Tuesday I was lucky enough once more to be able to visit Paris and took the opportunity of doing some Christmas shopping. Honestly once you've shopped there, London is just dull. The shops themselves are beautifully built and inside the art of display achieves perfection. In one enormous store there is a ground floor and then the other floors are built up in tiers, sort of gallery fashion so that from them you can look right down through the middle of the building to the ground floor.<sup>38</sup> And the wonderful lighting and fittings. In the Beauty Department there they had miniature counters for every well known brand of cosmetic with the name written over the top so that if you always used Coty beauty preparations you just went there and every Coty product was there.

Elizabeth Arden have a simply wonderful Beauty Salon—it's really worth going there just to see it. The floor is carpeted in rich purple relieved with flowers in pastel shades of pink, green and blue, and the walls are cream and silver. The curtains are sheer and flesh coloured and all the fittings mirrored so that they reflect the light.

Coty too have a lovely shop in the Rue de la Paix as also have Richard Rudnut—this'll please Bessie because she needn't hunt for same any more. In the same street Mappin and Webb have a shop and also Alfred Dunhill. I bought, too, some Christmas Cards which though out of the ordinary I hope will be O.K. I didn't really think I'd send any, but Xmas isn't Xmas really unless you do, so I've changed my mind and hope that these I've got will do.

I wish that you Mother and Bessie and Grace could see the shops with me. They're honestly like something I've never seen before. I don't know why either, that's what puzzles me. Except perhaps it's just that they're Parisian. The various little glass cases and windows will sometimes be a mist of cobwebby tulle with a hat or a powder compact or a pair of exquisite gloves in the centre of it. And you never see a powder bowl or compact or purse or handbag on its own. There's always a wonderful swansdown power puff tied with satin ribbon or a silk handkerchief or scarf with it. The packings too for things like powder and perfume are such as you never see at home. Even an ordinary box seems to

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38 Galeries Lafayette.

have something different and exclusive about it.

One thing I notice over here is that they're not in the least short of paper for wrapping, or paper bags. In one shop I went in I bought three different quite small things and had a separate bag for each! They're quite strong thick paper too. And lovely tinselly string from tying up parcels, or thick corded silk in some shops.

On Wednesday I stayed in and coped with dhobeying and washed me too!

On Thursday (that's yesterday) I went with several of the girls from the office to an R.A.F. Social. It was the second one I'd been to and was very enjoyable. They had music and singing and games and a spelling bee and a quiz and all sorts of things like that and in fact in was an extremely pleasant evening with a very nice crowd of boys.

Oh, another event yesterday! Ginge and I went into town in the afternoon and collected our photographs! Personally I don't think either of them is good. They both look rather posed and artificial especially about the mouth they looked awfully made up for us. Still I'm enclosing one for what it's worth and hope that perhaps later on I'll have another done in collar and tie this time and that it'll be better.

Oh, and another thing I meant to tell you was that Ginge and I went into a shop the other day which sold umbrellas and leather wallets and bags and that sort of thing because Ginge wanted to get Kenn a wallet.<sup>39</sup> While we were waiting to be served a lady was buying an umbrella and she spoke to us and said that she was English and had been caught over here when war broke out and had been a civil prisoner or something. Anyhow she gave us her address and told us to go round for tea whenever we liked. We haven't been there yet, but must go one day because she seemed so pleased to see us and I expect wants all the latest news about the old Country. She herself came from Sussex.

Yesterday as we were coming back to the office we met a man on a bicycle who stopped and presented us with some grapes! They were delicious and it was so unexpected.

I think that about covers the news up to date and thank goodness I've caught up with myself at last.

Will write again soon, and this is a promise, but until then, God bless and look after yourselves won't you.

Lots of love

From Joan xxxx

P.S. What d'you think I can get for Stan & you Paddy for Xmas? Awful shortage of things for men here.

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39 Kenn Walsh RM.



Fig. 4.6. Joan Prior (studio portrait, St Germain-en-Laye, October 1944). Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

SHUTER: Sometimes in the afternoon I had the most lovely walks with my chums in the forests that surrounded us. It was grand to swing along at a good pace, often in silence, with beauty on every side. French forests are so wonderfully well looked after. Broad paths lead for miles and miles between beautiful well-grown trees. At intervals these paths are intersected by others. At each of these "étoiles", for so they are called, you are torn by indecision as the vista down each new glade looks more enticing than the last! Those walks, the first real exercise for months, are one of my happiest memories.



Fig. 4.7. Forest of St Germain, Autumn 1944. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000041, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

In November, Barbara left the staff for good.<sup>40</sup> Her going left a horrid gap in our life, especially in our dorm. Never again did K and I have quite so much laughter at night, nor sit on our beds quite so helpless with mirth. Barbara was a very vital person and her high spirits had been infectious. We missed her greatly.

But by now the French wine had imbued everyone with the festive spirit. Wine is surely the keynote to the difference of temperament between our two nations! There was a positive orgy of parties. Once a

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Noverraz.



week we had a guest night with a band and dancing. I looked forward to Bomps-a-daisy which was the signal for jackets off and enjoy yourselves!

If a party ever looked as if it might be a bit sticky to begin with then "One-O" (as we affectionately called our unit officer) and I always met together beforehand.<sup>41</sup> Then into action we went, advancing from a whisky base! There was the time that a General from SHAEF was the guest of honour. I was sitting next to him and in trying to entertain him I told him of the stupendous spectacle to be seen down in the valley. The Germans had made a very good job of blowing up a railway viaduct. Enthusiastically I described it, for to me, viewed disinterestedly, it had great aesthetic value. The permanent way looked like a great, gleaming serpent writhing in its death agony as it lay slithering away into the bottom of the abyss. The General stared at me for a moment, then turned and talked to his other neighbour for the rest of the meal. Afterwards, I was told that he considered railway communications in France to be his biggest headache! However, I felt that even Generals should not allow their appreciation of the aesthetic to become blunted by work. I was to meet him again several months afterwards. We were introduced. He looked hard at me and said, "We have met before, I think." "Yes Sir, we have," I replied, rather amused.

Then CNAO<sup>42</sup>—Chum John to me—organised a banquet in honour of the French Admiralty. The guests included six women of the Service Féminin de la Flotte. It was the greatest fun, that party. We ate, we drank, we had toasts, we danced and we sang French rounds well on into the night. Next day, Chum John had a letter of thanks from a darling little French Admiral who had been the guest of honour. In his letter he said that he had found the Wrens altogether "séduisantes". We rushed for a dictionary and found: séduisant = tempting, fascinating, charming, seductive. Good enough we thought!<sup>43</sup>

THOMAS: We had a wonderful time in France [...] and were treated like lords and ladies—wonderful food, wonderful entertainment in the camps. We were invited by the French to lots of functions, and sometimes dinner would take about three hours because the food would come in about seven different courses.<sup>44</sup>

SHUTER: Later the French Admiralty asked us to a party. Plate after plate of the most delicious paté, sausage and such like appeared before us. I decided that with the acute food shortage in Paris we were being given a cold supper. But I was uneasy. I had been caught once before, so I asked

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41 First Officer M.R. Rathborne, MBE, WRNS.

42 Chief Naval Administrative Officer: Captain John Russell, Lord Ampthill, RN.

43 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

44 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

my neighbour for a menu. The worst had happened! I was completely full and we had only just finished the “hors d’oeuvres variés”. Uniform, with its tight waistband, is not ideal for a banquet. There was nothing for it but to unzip the top of my skirt! This caused much merriment, so I assured my neighbours that it was an English custom for showing appreciation of a meal!

One of the happiest parties was one given by COS in the Admiral’s château.<sup>45</sup> This house had a lovely sweeping stairway. Irresistibly, I slid down the baronial bannisters! When half way down, I realised that the rest of the party was still at the top of the stairs and roaring with laughter. A skirt is not ideal for bannister-sliding. However, there seemed nothing for it but to go on, gripping the banisters tightly and hoping for the best. I was nearly blistered by friction. What we do for England! Yes, our parties were great fun.



Fig. 4.8. Postcard of the Château St-Léger, Admiral Ramsay’s private residence. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

45 Admiral Ramsay made his home at the nearby Château St-Léger in St Germain. On arriving in Paris, Ramsay had written to his wife (24 September 1944): ‘my new château is an appalling building standing in its own grounds of considerable extent & only 5 minutes’ walk from another huge barrack of a château that is my HQ [Château d’Hennemont]. Both these places were occupied by the Germans for some years right up to when they had to bolt, & the places stunk of them. My château is tawdry, threadbare & dirty [...] It’s the worst arranged house I know with at least 3 great salons, downstairs & upstairs, full of what was once gilt furniture & mirrors, statuettes, candelabra etc. The chair cushions are all worn through & look awful, the carpets & rugs are missing, having been torn up or taken by the Germans. The cellar has been broken into and ransacked. I am gathering the best of the furniture into one room on the 1st floor & making it into our sitting room & I hope I shall make something of it’. Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay, ‘The papers of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay’, GBR/0014/RMSY Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.

Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

Once more I'm on the air again saying that I'm fine and well and happy.

I do hope all is O.K. with you, and was very pleased to receive your letter written on 24<sup>th</sup> October.

With regard to Ron's Xmas present, it's very difficult to get things for men out here. I could get a pipe and a pen, but outside of these two things there doesn't seem anything obtainable that he hasn't already got. Anyway, next week on my afternoon off I'll shop and see what I can do, although I think it's a bit late now for Xmas presents really.

I've managed to get most of the presents for the women of the family, but men are such a problem here. I say, that sounds bad, I mean gifts for men are tricky.

Since last I wrote nothing momentous really happened until yesterday when Ginge and I had our hair permed! I expect you're all surprised, but really mine had grown to the state where it was on my collar, (which is not admired by the powers that be) and the odd ends underneath were as straight as Nature intended the whole thing to be. Ginge also had masses more than the Service said was good for her, so we hied us into Paris and then the fun started.

We were ushered upstairs into a lovely salon where there were about a dozen chairs and a wonderful view out onto the street below. You honestly do things the comfy way in France because we sat down in these leather easy chairs which were on a swivel so that you could turn around and look in a mirror or alternatively at the rest of the room, or again out into the street. That was the first novelty. The next was that our hats and coats and parcels were removed to a cloakroom and we were made comfortable by a charming French girl. We were then received by M'sieur who spoke excellent English and who produced an enormous pair of scissors and began snipping. He announced that to suit my face my hair had to be 'built up' so not knowing quite what to expect I said "Have it your own way, chum" or words to that effect, closed my eyes and prayed hard. In due course we were both shorn to his satisfaction and then our hair was fixed in rubber grips and then curled as per usual and then (more than that about this paragraph) he popped on a sort of little clipper thing and Bob's y'r uncle. Suddenly off went an alarm and the whole thing was over. I had hardly realised that this was 'it'. There's no machine

or being strung up to gadgets about it at all! It's really amazing. What also amazed me was that we hadn't yet had our hair washed and so I asked him about this and he said they never washed it before a perm because the hair then retained its natural grease and oil and so the perm was never harmful to the hair. I thought it a good idea. In case we got a little heated while this was going on, however, they gave us a pretty little fan to use—so sweet, and so French! The next thing, of course, was having the hair washed. This again, was unlike anything I've ever known before. We sat before a wash-basin, but with our back to the basin with the neck resting comfortably on a fixture and the head well back. It was then washed all the water etc. ran down a metal chute away to the back. It's a marvellous idea because you don't get your face or neck wet in the least and are reclining comfortably all the time. After this we had a friction. This is a head and scalp massage with perfume—I smell of it yet! Then the hair is set with pins and the waves pushed in but no combs used and under the dryer you go. During this part of the proceedings the electricity failed (this is always happening over here) and for about five minutes we sat in the dark just waiting, then on it came again and all was well. When it was dry, my dears, instead of taking the pins out by hand they just waved a little gadget over the top of your head and it had a magnetic tip and all the pins flew out of your hair and stuck to the end of it! We were more than amused and were in fits. At the end of all this, the hair was brushed with a dear little brush, till it shone and then combed and set. Well, 's'all I can say about that, except that my hair and Ginge's looks all the better for it and most everyone likes it. We are thinking of having our photo taken again so if we do you'll see how you like it (or not!).

The night before we had a dance at our Quarters sort of Hallowe'en and the hall was beautifully decorated. We had big cut-out bats suspended from the lights and large black spiders (not real, of course) and masses of lovely autumn-tinted leaves, some from a creeper outside being especially lovely—pale yellow and pink turning a lovely warm clear red. This looked lovely, but I think it looks even lovelier as it grows spilling over an old grey stone wall. I must say everyone went to a great deal of trouble to make the decorations apt even going so far as to hollow out a pumpkin and make eyes and nose and teeth! Proper Hallowe'en it was!

I'm now continuing this on 5<sup>th</sup> November—Guy Fawkes' Day and I'm determined to celebrate it even if it only means striking a couple of matches and holding them till they burn out! Yester-

day afternoon I went into the small town nearby and armed with a shopping list I tried to do the errands for several people in the office. My goodness, what a day! I went to a photographer's to collect photos of one of the Marines here, and a wedding group was in process of being taken and of all things they wanted me to be in the group! Of course, I refused but had a nasty moment at first. However, I collected the photographs and all's well that ends well. This afternoon, I'm going to watch a football match and if anything exciting happens at that will let you know in my next mailbag.

I think that about ends news of me for the moment, so will hie me back to answering your letter.

Fred certainly has had a good apple crop this year, and I for one could just eat one now.

Now that you have gone back to town I shall expect you, Mother, to maintain the good progress you have made, so don't let me hear to the contrary. I know you wouldn't tell me, but don't let me hear from any source! You must take care, not wear yourself out, and above all don't worry.

I have not yet received Charlie's address from Bessie, but have now received a letter from him, so it's O.K. I have replied to him and sent him a photograph incidentally. I'm sorry he's been drafted out there—it must be deadly and he must be very worried about Grace too.<sup>46</sup>

Guess that's about all now, all my love and God bless you all. My love to Bess and Stan and I'll write them again later. Please all take care of yourselves and don't worry about me as I really am well and happy.

Lots of love from  
Joan xxxxx

## 4.5 Operation Infatuate

SHUTER: During October many of the staff had been busy with the plans for the assault on Walcheren. The Army was already approaching the island from the direction of South Beveland which lies to the east. Two assault forces had been built up and trained in the Portsmouth command. One consisted of LCA and minor support craft; these were

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46 Charlie Snell was posted to Sierra Leone.

to ferry the army across the Scheldt for the assault on Flushing. The other force, which was mounted at Ostend, consisted of LCI(S), LCT and major support craft. Their job was to land the troops at Westkapelle on the extreme western tip of the island. This was to be a hazardous undertaking as the western end of the island, guarding the mouth of the Scheldt, was one of the most heavily fortified stretches of coast in all Europe—in all the world. The landing was to be supported by the RAF and by naval bombardment from HM ships *Warspite*, *Erebus* and *Roberts*.

Three weeks before the assault the RAF successfully breached the dyke in the vicinity of Westkapelle. The sea swept in through the gap flooding the hinterland. It was opposite this gap in the dyke wall that the Army was to be landed. Conditions of heavy mud caused by the flooding were anticipated so amphibious vehicles were to be used wherever possible. Unfortunately, it was also necessary to take some tracked vehicles.

A few days before the operation was due to be launched, Admiral Ramsay and his Staff Officer Plans set off in the caravans of our mobile headquarters. They were to join up with the Army headquarters—Canadians—who were responsible for the Army side of the plan.

Once again the weather was against us. The visibility promised to be so bad that the RAF could not guarantee their support. However, despite this, and having weighed up the pros and cons, the Army decided to “go”.

The landings in the Flushing area went well and with few casualties in the initial stages. But the assault on Westkapelle was a different story. It was to be an epic of cold-blooded courage.

On the morning of the assault the RAF was grounded by the weather conditions over the airfields although, ironically, visibility in the assault areas was fair. Oh, the cruelty of it! If only those aircraft had been able to get into the air. The result was that some of the heavier targets had not been neutralised by air bombardment before the craft went in. But even this was not all. The bombarding ships were also shorn of their accuracy as their spotting fighter planes were also unable to reach the target area.

Thus it was that at 0900 on 1 November 1944, those gallant little support craft, their guns inadequate to neutralise the heavier shore batteries, tackled the searing fire of this strongly defended area quite alone. Flak, rockets, shells were hurled at the enemy. They went in firing and continued to fire until their own guns were silenced or until their crews were killed or wounded.

The two LCG(M) beached themselves and engaged the enemy at close range until they could fire no more. It was a deadly duel between the

17-pounder guns of the craft and the 4" and 6" shore batteries that they were so valiantly engaging. One LCG(M) was sunk as she lay beached. The other, its guns silenced, retracted, but sank soon after.

Under cover of the supporting fire the troop and vehicle carrying craft slipped in and beached in the gap. The soldiers and their equipment went ashore. Owing to the mud great difficulty was experienced in getting the tracked vehicles through the breach and onto the dyke wall. The amphibians did better. But slowly, very slowly, the craft were called forward for unloading. It was a situation calling for the utmost degree of self-control and courage. A few more, then a few more. The rest waiting while all hell was let loose around them.

The support craft, maimed and bleeding, kept at it throughout the forenoon—Lilliputians attacking giants—their guns striking terror into the hearts of the men manning the shore batteries. Blindly, instinctively, the Germans kept firing at the craft that were attacking them. Had they directed their fire at the other craft quietly and steadily landing our troops we should probably not have made the day. As it was, after a fierce and deadly battle, our army established itself. The RAF were able to get into the air in the afternoon and new heart was put into our men.

At 1230, after three and a half hours of gruelling fire, our beloved little craft, their job done—and well done as never before—withdraw and those that were still afloat limped back to Ostend. I suppose the support squadron would have been surprised if they had known that a Wren officer in the middle of France was yearning over them like a mother. My heart was filled with pride, but oh, it was sore indeed. To me it seemed that no courage could have been greater than that of the soldiers and sailors of Westkapelle.

After a few days of hard and bitter fighting, Walcheren was ours. The Scheldt could now be swept and soon the great port of Antwerp would be humming.<sup>47</sup>

## 4.6 Armistice Day

BOOTHROYD: The day Mr Churchill and General de Gaulle visited the Arc de Triomphe, Laura and I left St. Germain after morning watch and went to Paris. We had heard they were coming and thousands of people were there. We did not intend to get caught up in the crowds but were swept along without choice. Thankfully we managed to stay together

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47 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

and managed to get a good view of both men laying wreaths at the tomb of the Unknown Warrior—a day to remember.<sup>48</sup>

SHUTER: Mr Winston Churchill was to visit Paris on 11 November 1944. He was to drive up the Champs Elysées to the Arc de Triomphe for the service to be held at the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, and afterwards to return to the saluting base for the march past of Allied troops.

I was determined to be there among the French crowd so that I could watch their reactions when they realised that Churchill, who meant so much to them, had come over to be with them on such a day. For it was a great day to them—their first free anniversary of 11 November since 1939.

I begged a lift in a jeep and the four of us took up our stand on the Champs Elysées about half way between the Arc de Triomphe and the saluting base. The security measures were amazing—at least, amazing to me born and bred in the orderliness of England. American army police in their white helmets were standing, a few yards apart, on the roofs of all the buildings lining the route—a row of snowdrops outlined against the sky! The French crowd was excited: they knew Général de Gaulle was to be there—more they did not know.

A roar of cheering sounded in the distance. It swelled and rippled up the Champs Elysées. It still wanted a few minutes to eleven o'clock. They were coming! Big cars roared past.

“Vive de Gaulle!”, the crowd shouted.

Then they caught sight of Mr Churchill as the cars flashed by.

“Church-eell! Church-eell! Monsieur Church-eell is here! Vive Church-eell!”. They shouted; they cheered; they stamped; they screamed the good news at each other; they laughed; they wept. A little lady in front of me, a black spotted veil over her face and smelling strongly of garlic, turned and, clutching hold of my hands, asked if it really was Mr Churchill who had passed. I said it was. We all shook hands excitedly. With a flourish the other Wren officer (who was shorter than I) was given a stool to stand on! Oh, it would have been worthwhile to travel a thousand miles to share their pleasure.

Then, a sudden hush swept over the crowd; we were rooted where we stood—the two minutes' silence.

Now cheering started again. This time at the top of the Champs Elysées. “They are coming!”, the crowd cried. And, down the middle of the avenue, walking slowly, came Général de Gaulle and Mr Churchill. The crowd waved and shouted, clapped their hands and stamped again with delight. “Vive de Gaulle! Vive Church-eell! Vive Church-eell!” And

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48 Boothroyd, ‘In the Wrens with Laura Ashley’.



Mr Churchill gazed around him at the crowd, which was now half-mad with joy, and he looked very happy. I was more than delighted with the reception. It was colossal!

The march past was very fine. Madame de Garlic and I exchanged the names of the French contingents for those of the British and American. With bands playing they came—tramp, tramp—in a never-ending stream. The Garde Républicain; the Royal Navy; Général Koenig, the liberator of Paris, at the head of his men. What an ovation for him! The RAF, who meant so much to the French. They had a great reception. The British Army, the American Army, French sailors, British sailors and Americans—all were represented. On and on they came. The Chasseurs Alpains, marching with a quick running step; North African troops, a rich note of colour; the Gardes Mobiles, fine sombre men. To the skirl of a pipe band, with kilts swinging, came the Canadian Scottish. The crowd was delirious with excitement. Général Leclerc's men; more clapping, more cheering. What a pageantry of colour, and bands playing from top to bottom of the Champs Elysees—and still more came.

Pleased with our morning, we slipped away. But I was determined to go into Paris again in the evening to see how the city was celebrating after more than four years of German occupation.

The Arc de Triomphe was flood-lit for a few hours. What cared they about the black-out on such a night? Wanting to see the reactions of the ordinary citizen we went to a little café in the Place Blanc.

What fun it was! A small band with violins, accordion and drums was playing, and everyone was laughing, eating and drinking. We too ordered drinks. People were asking the band to play special things, so Peggy wrote something on a slip of paper, signed it "Une Matelotte Anglaise!" and passed it up. There seemed to be some discussion. The band crowded together, read the note, talked, argued and looked in our direction. Suddenly Peggy gasped. She had remembered that her composer was now considered to have been a collaborateur! We quite expected to be run out of the café. The band shook their heads—but they smiled. Perhaps it was alright after all. Then, with a roll of drums, they stood up and solemnly played "God Save the King". The talk died on people's lips. There was silence. Everyone stood up. We went on standing for a long time as the band had now broken into the "Star Spangled Banner". Then followed "La Marseillaise" and the Belgian national anthem.

After that we were toasted. Drinks appeared mysteriously on our table and everyone seemed very happy. Then a tough looking Frenchman came in. We took one look and christened him Monsieur le Black Marketeer. He threw money around—drinks everywhere! Then he saw us and in a loud voice ordered the band to play our national anthem.

We all screamed that we had just had it. But he was not to be put off and we all stood up again while the national anthems were played through a second time! More drinks all round. What an evening! What an entente cordiale! The evening had surpassed all expectations. I wonder why I am so happy in a French atmosphere?<sup>49</sup>

Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> November 1944

Dear Mother and Paddy,

Here I am once more, dears, more or less continuing the letter I've just finished to Bessie and Stan.

However, I'll stop my news and answer your latest letter first. First and foremost, thanks a lot for keeping the mail coming, not only you, but Bessie as well—it is so nice to hear such a lot and to know that you're both O.K. in these worrying days at home.

I'm glad you had a comfy journey up from the country<sup>50</sup> and wish I could have had tea with you when you returned! What a lot we should have had to chat about. I've been thinking it might be an idea to keep my letters so that I could explain things which sometimes have to be obscure owing to the demands of the censor—but it's up to you really. If you don't fancy doing so, don't bother.<sup>51</sup>

I too wish I could see Mother now, as she's looking so well. I'll never forget how well she looked on my last leave. Now you must keep it up, Mother and not take any backward steps! I expect you both feel glad to be back at home though especially now that the winter's coming on. Now that you've come home I must drop a card to all the Somerset folk occasionally just to let them know everything's O.K.

I think that's about all in answer to your letter so you now continue with my news.

On Friday, Ginge and I were late duty and we had time off in the afternoon from 1 till 5 o'clock. We had lunch and then walked down to the nearest town and had our photographs taken.

My dears, the funniest things happen here. We were crossing the market place and suddenly an old woman shot across the road and rush up to Ginge and seized both her hands and said to

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49 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

50 Returning from Somerset to Barking.

51 The greater number of letters that survive from this time forward suggests that Joan's parents followed her advice.

us “Are you English?” (all this in French of course). We said we were, whereupon she seized me round the neck and covered me with kisses and kept saying “Thank you very much for liberating us” as if we’d done it personally! She then repeated the same procedure with Ginge and still keeping hold of our hands enthusiastically chattered on in French about how much she liked the British. We tore ourselves away eventually, our faces crimson and disappeared as fast as we could—it was all most embarrassing!

Then, not long afterwards, an old man passed and said “You take care, you catch cold”. We didn’t quite understand this, as although it was a cold day we were well wrapped up, so we said “Pardon” and he repeated the same phrase, so we said “Oui” and went on. The only thing we could conclude was that it was his only phrase in English or something! Everything happens to us!

To-day, being Armistice Day, there are celebrations all over the country on a large scale. In this same nearby town,<sup>52</sup> there was a parade in which our Marines took part, so this morning Ginge and I set out to watch same. We walked into the park and followed the crowd. There were dozens of people walking very determinedly in one direction so we went too. We arrived at the spot in time for the “Marseillaise” and then suddenly everyone began to run.

It really was the most extraordinary business! They were all running in the same direction—from whence we’d just come, incidentally—and there were boys and girls, young men and young women, grey haired old ladies—all tearing along at a terrific rate. Old men—one in particular just in front of us had a dog which snapped at people’s ankles as they overtook him—even one old man in a bath chair was wheeling himself along. Well, we thought, must be something doing so we joined in. This all took place in the park so it was something like a glorified cross-country run, over lawns, through masses of leaves, in between trees, people threading their way in and out with amazing rapidity—just as if every Saturday morning they always did this! Boys in coloured uniforms—the equivalent of our Boy Scouts I should think—charged along carrying long wooden poles—I tell you, it was fantastic. However, nothing daunted we panted along. I did think once that we might hitch a lift from the old chap in the bath chair, but decided after a moment’s thought that I could out-run him. Well, we ended up where we’d come in, in front of a lovely old château, where the crowds were beginning to line

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52 St Germain-en-Laye.

the roads. We had a camera with us and Ginge was going to take a snap of the boys as they came along if she could, so we didn't want to get too far back. Knowing us, or should I say me, we managed to get in front and stay there! Everyone was wearing Red, White and Blue ribbons and badges and pictures of General de Gaulle and General Leclerc and goodness know what. People swarmed round, climbed railings and trees and in fact wormed their way everywhere—it was too amazing for words. At last along came a contingent of what I should imagine was the equivalent of our Chelsea Pensioners. They were resplendent in silver helmets (looked quite like firemen really) and shuffled along followed by a French band. As the latter speaks for itself I won't comment on it. Then came the American military band headed by the most ridiculous drum-major I've ever seen. Rhythm wasn't the word! If he'd had a scarf instead of a mace he might have been doing the rumba! The Yankees marched at their usual casual rate, and then—came the Royal Marines in blues! Our boys from the camp. They easily outshone any of the others there and Ginge and I went out in front of the crowd and Ginge took two shots of them. Whether the snaps will come out or not we don't know as they were moving all the time. Still, we're hoping. Then came matelots in blues and then more Marines in khaki. After that we more or less joined on the end of the parade so that we'd get through the gates without having to push through the crowd, and when they were all lined up outside we took another snap. We then came back to the office where I'm now typing this.

By the way, we've discovered a little shop in the town where we can buy an Overseas Edition of the Daily Mail. It's only one sheet and there's not overmuch news but at least it's in English!

Well, now I'm afraid it's Sunday—just like that. I posted the letter to Bess yesterday so perhaps they won't both arrive together after all. To-day there's the heaviest frost ever. Everything is white and it does look really lovely. I wish you could see the countryside here—I think we must surely be in one of the loveliest parts of France for it's so beautiful.

I was glancing through a Picture Post this morning which P.O. has sent to him from home, and there's a long account of cider making in Somerset in it. I read it all and could just imagine Fred and Ivor collecting the apples and making the cider!

This afternoon I'm again going to cheer for our team in a Football Match against the French—turning into a regular football fan these days, but at least it's good clean fun.

By the way, did you get the little packet of photographs which I sent home to you? They showed views of the Basilique de Sacre Coeur. I don't remember you acknowledging them and so I wonder if you got them or if they went astray in the post, although they shouldn't have done so as all our mail is censored here before going through Post Office channels.

Even though we're half-way through November there are still roses blooming in the gardens of the Château! I think it's incredible. Still for the past two mornings we've had heavy white frosts, so I don't suppose any of the flowers will last much longer. It's such a pity because the dahlias were still looking wonderful. There don't seem to be many chrysanthemums in the gardens around here although there are quite a few in the florists.

By the way, have I told you about our horse? I don't seem to remember telling you, so here goes. Ginge and I do for a "constitutional" every lunch hour. Helps walk down our lunch, and provides us with amusement. In a field near our place of work is a dear little red horse with a white blaze on his nose and we talk to him every day. When we come along now he runs to the railings and pushes his head through and muzzles in our hands. He's so sweet and knows us very well now.

Am rapidly coming to the "must eat" stage now and so will close and dash to lunch. It's usually chicken on Sunday, so I'm hoping. Take care of yourselves and God Bless you both.

All my love, From,  
Joan xxxxx



Fig. 4.9. Photograph taken by Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas of Royal Marines parading through St Germain-en-Laye, Armistice Day 1944. 'Ginge and I went out in front of the crowd and Ginge took two shots of them. Whether the snaps will come out or not we don't know as they were moving all the time'. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

## 4.7 Landing craft

SHUTER: The character of the work was now changing. The problem of the Build-Up—the sustaining of the Armies as they pressed forward—was still our biggest worry. But we now dealt with a variety of problems connected with our landing craft fleet. Looking back, Overlord seemed like a gigantic party. In Norfolk House we had been busy with the preparations. At Southwick we had had the party, and it had been a great success. Now in France, we were clearing up and putting everything tidily back in its proper place after the visitors had left. For our guests, the Armies, were now through Belgium and far into Holland.

All the winter we had to fight to hold onto ships and craft for the Build-Up and to plead for new craft for Force “T”. For it seemed that if things didn’t move any faster in north-west Europe, then assaults on places like Heligoland and the Frisians would be necessary in the Spring. Once we had lost the craft we could never hope to get them back again. Our view was parochial—defeat Germany first—whereas Admiralty’s outlook was global. They wanted the craft badly in order to refit them and get them out to SEAC for the war against Japan. But Admiralty was always very understanding and fair to us.

At this time Force “T” was busy licking its wounds after Walcheren. It was being refitted and we did wheedle additional craft out of Admiralty to bring it up to strength again. Another force was also being formed ready to carry civilian supplies to southern Holland which was now in a terrible plight and cut off from any relief from the east. Later, Force “T” moved its forward Headquarters up to Bergen-op-Zoom in Holland. From there, minor landing craft carried out very successful reconnaissance raids among the islands of the eastern Scheldt.

Antwerp was now working to capacity and we wanted every LST<sup>53</sup> and merchant ship we could lay hands on to bring in supplies. The spirit of the Belgians was wonderful; they worked long hours unloading in the docks, and they were under-fed, ill-clad and short of fuel in their homes. Also they were now being subjected to intensive V1 and V2 attacks. They called a one-day strike not, they hastened to assure us, because they were dissatisfied with the Allied administration of the port, but because they wanted to draw attention to the privations their families were subjected to. The next day they returned to work, taking their families with them to try and make good the loss their one-day strike had caused. It must have been about the same time our comparatively well-fed, well-clothed and warm dockers in the London area were working on a go-slow policy and, by this time, no V weapons were landing in England. I was ashamed of them.

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53 Landing Ship Transport.

From the beginning, Belgium seemed to work with a will to put herself on her feet again, and by her own effort. The comparison with the lassitude of the French was very noticeable. France was very sick indeed.

There was certainly no monotony about the work. Another job was the turning over of certain LCT<sup>54</sup> to the French for harbour work in the ports we had cleared and returned to them for their own use. It sounded a simple problem: we did not want these particular craft, neither did the Admiralty. But the transaction took months. Everyone became involved, even the Treasury, as these craft were fitted with American lease-lend engines!

The original assault area was now no longer in use as supplies were now brought in through the captured ports. So the ferry craft bases along the assault front were being closed down. This was a tediously slow business as, by now, the craft were mostly unfit or too small to make the winter crossing back to England. So they had to be lifted by an LSD.<sup>55</sup> These ferry craft got a low priority as the LSD were being called upon to lift operational craft up to the area of the Scheldt.

During this time one of the ferry craft bases was closed down as a result of an all-Wren docket. We were very proud of that! The docket first came to me, and I wrote my bit. Then it went to the Engineer Officer (Plans).<sup>56</sup> He was away, so Felicia, his assistant, wrote her piece.<sup>57</sup> Then it was due to go to CNAO—the Chief Naval Administrative Officer—he was a great chum and we thought he'd be tickled pink to have an all-Wren effort. So we minuted it to his Personal Assistant, a Wren, instead of to his Secretary.<sup>58</sup> She summed up the findings of the "Staff" and CNAO, much amused, concurred. In such light-hearted manner another base was closed!

Lieut.-General Sir Frederick Morgan, who had been my first chief in Norfolk House, now held special meetings to consider the withdrawal of landing craft. He was entirely on our side with regard to our policy of "hang on for dear life to as many as possible until we can see what our needs will be for the Spring". With him I felt at ease; it was a great privilege to witness his handling of a meeting. On one occasion he came up to me and said, "Well sailor, I have a new short title for you—LCQ. Do you know what an LCQ is?" I was dubious and hazarded, "Landing Craft Query?".

"Not at all," he twinkled. "It is Landing Craft Queen!" Bless the Pongos.<sup>59</sup> I was very happy working with them.<sup>60</sup>

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54 Landing Craft, Tank.

55 Landing Ship Dock.

56 Staff Engineer Officer (Planning): Commander E.H.D. Williams, RN.

57 Third Officer Felicia R. Farquhar, WRNS.

58 Captain Lord Ampthill's PA was Third Officer Penelope A. Belfield, WRNS.

59 Naval slang for the army.

60 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

## 4.8 Festivities

Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> November 1944

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

First and foremost how are you Mum? Much better I hope—please don't worry!

Secondly, how's the Christmas spirit in the house? You should see our office—more mistletoe than that! The stuff grows ad lib about here on almost every tree—it's amazing. Wish I could send some home.

We're almost having our Christmas out here now, as all this week everyone in the office has been busy packing parcels of every shape and size as we had zero hour to-day. I've sent off one to you containing things for you Mum and Dad, and Bessie and Stan and hope you like them. I'm afraid I did the best I could, but it's a bit tricky out here. I sent another parcel to Grace at 16 Surrey with things for the boys, herself and the baby.<sup>61</sup> There again, though, I had to get what I could as kiddies things are very scarce here. Still, it'll be something just to show they're not forgotten won't it? I also sent a parcel to Somerset with things for Auntie Lucy, Peggy and Gladys—'fraid I couldn't find anything for Uncle Bert.

Think that's about all the gen on presents at the moment and talking of sending things—Mum, do you think you could send out my little red thermos? I wonder if it was packed tightly inside with paper it'd be O.K. What do you think? If you don't think it would get here whole, don't send it, but it'd be useful because we don't get anything to drink at the office during the day and I could fill it in the morning before we leave and Ginge and I could have a "cuppa" in the morning about eleven. However, I leave it to you, dear.

Also, do you think you could start sending the *Sunday Express* again. I never see "Sitting on the Fence" now because we don't get newspapers over here. I believe I told you once before that we managed a couple of times to get an *Overseas Daily Mail*, but we don't see Nat. Gubbins efforts ever and they are so enjoyable.<sup>62</sup>

Now, having got all my "wants" off my chest I can chat about the latest news. I'm afraid there isn't much this week as the weather has been simply frightful rain, then wind, then rain and

61 Grace Snell's home was at 16 Surrey Road, Barking.

62 Nathaniel (Norman) Gubbins (1893–1976) wrote a wry, observational column entitled 'Sitting on the Fence' for the *Sunday Express*. It was particularly popular with readers during the Second World War.



wind for days and days—Manchester's got nothing on this place! Ginge and I have stayed in most nights and gone early to bed—last night we were in bed at eight and asleep at half past, easily! I don't know why we've developed this sudden bed complex, but there it is. I went into Paris on Wednesday and finished my Christmas shopping—I wish you could have been with me—you'd love the shops! Especially when you see things that have been unobtainable in England for so long.

Ginge and I have had our photograph taken together and I'm sending one now in this letter, although we neither of us like it very much! Still that's typical isn't it?

What touches us more than anything out here, really, is the way all the boys are in the shops buying things for their wives and mothers and looking so worried and being so careful about wrapping them up and tying them with tinsel and so on—they're awfully thoughtful.

I bought a St. Christopher for Ron and another for Charlie and sent Ron's off yesterday in a registered envelope so I think it'll get there in time.

I haven't sent anything to Miss Reid this year as I never had an acknowledgement of last year's gift although I wrote twice, and I wonder if she has moved or something. I'll send a card and see what happens as I'd love to write to her if possible.<sup>63</sup>

By the way, did you ever receive a little packet of photos of the Sacre Coeur which I sent you some time ago? I'd like to know because I have some others of different places but if they're not getting home safely I'll hang on to them, although I'd like to get rid of them because they're taking up too much room in my kitbag. That reminds me I'll probably be sending home some pamphlets on Florence which Ron has sent to me and which are no use to me out here and also take up room.

During the past week we had an ENSA show, which unfortunately only a few people could go to see as it was in the afternoon and we were on duty, worse luck. However, one of the girls who went got me the autographs of the cast and they included Geraldo,

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63 Eleanor J. B. Reid (1874–1954) was part of an odd coterie of spinsters with indeterminate, though philanthropic, attachments to the Prior family of Joan's adolescence. The daughter of author and newspaper editor Thomas Wemyss Reid (who gave the literature small romantic gems like *Gladys Fane*, 1883, and *Mauleverer's Millions*, 1886), she was born in Leeds, grew up in leafy Hampstead, and became the Librarian of Lichfield Cathedral. Her own, more modest, publications concern the history of dissenters, notably 'Lollards at Colchester 1414', published in *The English Historical Review*, 29: 113 (1914), 101–104. Her connection to the Priors was established through Joan's maiden aunt, Clara Simco (1861–1939).

Bobby Howes,<sup>64</sup> Noel Coward and Frances Day! Wish I could have seen it though.

Am afraid we've been rather hectically busy at the moment in the office and consequently I'm a bit late in writing this, but hope you won't be too anxious about me. Was going to send a card, but it's so easy to mean to write and then so much work comes along you find you can't! However, I'll adopt an every other day system in future I think and send a postcard to you just so's you don't worry, Mum.

I'll start that new system just as soon as I can get into town to buy some cards.

News at the moment is not plentiful—right now Ginge and I are sitting side by side tapping out letters to our respective homes—only as she hasn't got a Mum and Dad to write to she shares you!<sup>65</sup> Don't mind do you? She's got a very nice family mind you, I know them all so well although I've never met any of them, but then she's on close terms with you as well although you don't know her! Complicated isn't it? However, she sends her love along with her likeness. I hope you'll meet some day because I want you to love her as I do.

Am getting awfully hungry. I'd like to walk in to No.64 Hulse Avenue now and eat—let me see what I would like to eat—steak and chips and fried tomatoes and fried bread and onions, and then a nice creamy rice pudding made with real rice (we only have ertsatz rice out here!) and then biscuits and cheese and coffee with lots of sugar and no milk. Oh, that'd be lovely. The only thing is I've left out a potato baked as we used to do them under the fire in the ashes, and filled with cheese grated and salt! See, I'm never satisfied—don't even know what I want to eat when I come home. Whatever it is, that first meal will be wonderful after being away from home cooking for so long.

Talking of meals, I remember my last—it was soused herring cold with masses of bread and butter! It was lovely.

Better say 'bye now as the transport's due, lots of love for everyone, specially you Mum and of course Paddy, God bless and take care of you.

All my love  
Joan xxxxx

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64 Wren PO Mabel 'Bobby' Howes was, of course, nicknamed 'Bobby' after this popular entertainer, Bobby Howes.

65 Ginge's mother, Eleanor, died in childbirth. Her father Bill, a school-teacher, died when she was thirteen, in 1932. (Obituary, Ralph Griffiths, *The Guardian*, 1 February 2016). She was raised by her aunt, Annie Daniel.



Fig. 4.10. 'Ginge' Thomas and Joan Prior (studio portrait, St Germain-en-Laye, November 1944). 'Ginge and I have had our photograph taken together and I'm sending one now in this letter, although we neither of us like it very much!' Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 4.11. Postcard of Notre-Dame, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 24<sup>th</sup> November 1944

Dear Mum & Paddy,

How's things? Better I hope. I do hope the "buzz-bombs" are not too bad now that you're back.<sup>66</sup> Thanks for planting the wall-flowers Paddy—I love them! How's this for a church? Not bad is it? It's a magnificent place really—photos don't do it justice. The

<sup>66</sup> V1 flying bombs, AKA 'Doodlebugs'.

weather here is ghastly rain & wind ceaselessly. Had my hair set yesterday. God bless you both, and take care of yourselves, dears.

All my love from  
Joan xxxxx

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Fig. 4.12. Postcard of L'Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> November 1944

My Dear Bessie,

Received your letter dated 21/11 to-day. Of course it's O.K. I wrote yesterday & think we'd better forget the whole thing from start to finish. Let's all put back the clock to when I first came here and not dwell on any of it again, please.<sup>67</sup> Will write again soon a newsy letter.

Lots of love to all and to you Bess.

From Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> November 1944

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

Last night I received your letter dated 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov. and would like to answer it straight away. It was like a ray of sunshine through the dark clouds of the past week and I feel so much happier now

<sup>67</sup> The subject of Joan's falling out with her sister Bessie is unknown.

that I've received it, as it really seems that all our misunderstandings are over.

Especially glad was I to hear how much better Mum is. Now, I'll go through your letter and answer it.

Sorry, can't oblige with Ginger's Christian name—it's a trade secret and I won't tell.<sup>68</sup>

Tell Mum to keep up the singing even though I know how out of tune it is—it's cheerful anyway. How I envy you being able to slip out into the garden and cut flowers! Never mind, when I come home one of the first things I'll do is go into the garden—and if it's summer time, pick one of Dad's roses.

I can understand how you and Stan felt about the street lighting, as I know how I felt when I first came here. None of the lights, headlights or anything is dimmed here and the street lighting is brilliant as is that in the shops at night. Even neon lights and coloured signs in Paris too!

The films you saw sound interesting and I should have liked to have seen them both. With regard to the M.O.I. film, I have seen the subject—when I first came over here. It really is as you say a wonderful piece of work.

With regard to the book question, there are so many I do want, and yet I don't really know which to say. I'd like Eric Linklater's "The Man on My Back" (think that's what it's called, but you can check up by any of my other Linklater's), and also Jerome K. Jerome's "Three Men on the Bummel" and the collected poems of James Stephens. Oh, and I've just remembered I'd love "The Importance of Living" Lin Yutang (that's who it's by)—well, I'd better stop of the list will get endless.

Look, if all these people have gone away, Millie, Mrs. Bones etc., what are their addresses so that I know where to send Christmas Cards? Could you let me know soon please?<sup>69</sup>

How are they all? Mr. Bones's eyes are better now I hope.

The toys sound fun and you can tell Stan that I think the wheelbarrow will be the most useful out here.

Talking of Christmas and toys—we've just been discussing arrangements for festivities and what we want and what we'd like. I think it's more or less fixed now that we have carol singing in the village on Xmas Eve, a dance on Xmas Day and a party on Boxing Day. We're also giving a party for the children of the village and are going to have a Christmas tree and all. I think it'll be fun

68 Her birth name was Phyllis, which Ginge detested.

69 Millicent Grace Rawson (1916–1991), Stan's sister. Bill Bones and his wife Mary, their daughter Millie and her daughter Margaret (aged three) left Barking for Cheltenham for his health.

when we really get it organised although it's a bit in the air at the moment.

One thing that is in plentiful supply around here is the mistle-toe! It grows on almost every tree and really seems to thrive here.

Since last I wrote I haven't much news to tell you of life out here. Ginge and I have been shopping a couple of times and to the hairdresser once, but that's about all.

Will close now, as I want to get this letter off—will write again soon. Having a day off to-morrow—Lovely!! Lie in in the morning!

Lots of love, and God bless you all,  
From Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*



Fig. 4.13. Postcard of the Théâtre de l'Opéra, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> November 1944

Dear Mum and Paddy,

Just a card to let you know everything is still O.K. and to hope you are both keeping our of harm's way with the V.2's.<sup>70</sup> How are you Mum, still improving I hope and now becoming quite your old self. Will write you a letter after to-morrow as we have a day off then and will write and let you know what I do. At the moment I'm thinking of spending the morning in bed and expect I shall—lovely thought! God Bless you and look after yourselves won't you?

All my love  
From Joan xxxxx

<sup>70</sup> V2 rockets, which superseded Hitler's V1 flying bombs.

Friday 1<sup>st</sup> December 1944

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Just received your letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> November, so am trying to answer it in a spare moment, but may have to stop occasionally to do a job or two in between. However, the start's the thing.

We too quite naturally heard of the fine reception given to Churchill and Eden and I wish I could have seen them. We haven't yet got the developed snaps of the parade which Ginge took, but hope they'll come out O.K. I too wish you could see one of the Football matches, Dad, you'd love them I know. It's much the same as English soccer, but very much faster—they just hare about all over the place, shouting and gesticulating energetically.

I'm glad you got the photos—and will now take heart from that and send another packet in my next letter—maybe in this one if I don't get it finished to-night (the photos are back in Quarters, you see). Talking of keeping things, if you feel so inclined you could keep those of my letters that describe any unusual experiences out here as I think it'd be fun to read through them when I'm home and relive the incidents again. However, don't bother if you feel you'll get too many.

Fancy picking blackberries at the end of October! And such a lot too! I'd have loved to have been with you down at Catcott that day as I like blackberrying.

I'm sorry and indeed worried that you're still getting such a lot of disturbance at home and hope it's not having an adverse effect on Mum.

I'm glad you went to see Mrs Duncan and Mrs Clark and to know that they are both well. Give my love to them both when next you see them. I don't understand the bit about Al Clark though. You say he's had a month's leave from Italy and is now in Holland. When I was at home some time ago I saw him when he was on leave from Italy, is it the same leave? Or has he been back again and home again since then? By the way, the next time you go over to see Mrs Clark, you might get his address so I can drop him a line. There might be a chance of our meeting as we're on the same Continent—you never know.

Speaking of him reminds me that I've not heard from any of the office crowd lately and am beginning to wonder where they all are. I think I'll drop a line to Miss Barker and see if she knows anything.<sup>71</sup>

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71 From Joan's previous employment, Britannic Assurance, Hornchurch branch. Al Clark was a colleague there.

Had a day off on Wednesday and Ginge and I both stayed in bed until lunchtime and slept! I can hear you from here! I got up and had lunch and Ginge went out with Kenn and I went into a nearby town with one of the girls in our cabin named Kay.<sup>72</sup> It was a wonderful afternoon—the air was clean and sharp and the sun shone warmly on the now nearly bare trees. The sky was a clear blue with little white clouds like froths of cotton wool sailing about in the wind. We both enjoyed the walk which altogether is 4 miles. When we had covered about two and a half miles and climbed two hills an American car gave us a lift the rest of the way. Never in all my life have I been in such a wonderful car. We stepped out of a cold natural world into one of luxury and ease. The air was automatically changed inside so that there was always fresh air and it was faintly perfumed with lavender. The seats were so soft and springy that one just sank into them. There was an automatic cigarette lighter attached to another fixture which was an ashtray and last but not least there was a radio playing all the time. It seemed just like flying you couldn't feel the ground at all. We just sat there absolutely entranced until we had to get out. We shopped for a couple of hours and then made our way back. We arrived back in Quarters rather chilly and we went over to the Rest Room and found a glorious blazing log fire and sat by that and got roasted!

In the evening we had a dance at Quarters and of course just as everyone was washing and making up ready for the aforesaid dance, out went the lights! If it hadn't been such a blatant contradiction I would have said "Never a dull moment"! However we managed somehow and we fixed masses of candles in the chandeliers and danced by candlelight. It was quite fun and made a change and a novelty.

Yesterday Ginge and I went to an ENSA show and saw Joe Loss and his band. It was really good and we had an enjoyable evening.

Well, that's about all the news from this side of the water for to-day. How's Geg—I'm going to write to her next. How's everyone at home? Tell me what's left in the garden and if there's anything new in the house.

Give my love to anyone you meet who asks about me and to whom I've forgotten to send a card. I'm afraid there are one or two people to whom I owe cards and just haven't had time to send them.

I hope you're keeping better now Mum and that you've stopped worrying those silly worries of yours. Throw them all out of the window (that's what we do with all the rubbish here—

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72 Kay Chandler.



it's a French custom!).

Must say bye-bye for now, dears. God bless you and do look  
after yourselves won't you please.

S'all for now.

All my love

From Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

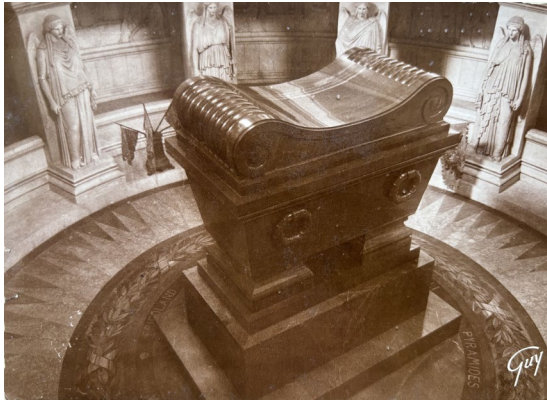


Fig. 4.14. Postcard of Le Tombeau de Napoléon 1er aux Invalides, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1944

Dear Mum and Paddy,

Last night I received your letter of 29<sup>th</sup> Nov. and was very glad to get same. Will answer it as soon as possible. So glad you wrote Mum—thanks a lot. This p.c. shows the tomb of Napoleon which I described in one of my earlier letters—remember the pink marble? Wrote to Geg yesterday. Hope you are both keeping well and out of harm's way. I'm fine and still keeping well. Lots of love

From Joan

Xxxx

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Monday 4<sup>th</sup> December 1944

Dearest Mum & Paddy,

Am now endeavouring to reply to your letter of 29<sup>th</sup>. It was nice to see your handwriting once again. You and Paddy take it in turns now, I see—I like it!

With regard to the post-card of the church I sent you—I have been in it in no uncertain way. I didn't tell you before because I thought it might worry you, but the second time I went to Paris was on an organised tour and that was one of the places we went over. Of course, bright little me had eaten pork for lunch and it didn't quite agree with me, and there, in the centre of Notre Dame, I went into a lovely faint. However, it was only a matter of seconds and all was well again, but I understand it made quite a stir. Ginge and Kenn were both very practical and helpful and everything was very soon O.K. and we continued the tour.

I'd glad you had an opportunity to see Bob before he went back again. I expect Florrie will feel lost again now, especially as he's been home a month.<sup>73</sup>

I'm pleased, Mum, that you're trying not to worry too much. I know it must be hard for you, as even I (who you know am not the worrying sort) often worry about you all at home, particularly with the rockets still whizzing around.

I hope Grace keeps O.K. and that everything continues to be alright for her—it must be such a worry to you too.

The weather here, as I told you in my last letter, has been rain and more rain and it's still continuing that way. As you know we have about seven or eight miles to cover between our Quarters and the office and it's been more panic than that for the last two days because a good part of the road runs parallel with the river<sup>74</sup> and what with the normal Autumnal swelling of the river, and the moon waxing and the continual rains, this river has been and gone and overflowed its banks and for a couple of days we chugged through it, but it's much too high now and we have to take a long roundabout route. There are many houses along the roadside which are isolated now and the people are evidently used to it because they've built little wooden stages and platforms outside their houses and tethered little boats to these and they just come out of doors, hop into their boat, and row away as if it were the most normal thing in the world! We ain't got much money, but we do see life!

Yesterday we had a half day and went back to Quarters in the afternoon and slept until about half past five. We (Ginge and I) then got up, had a lovely hot all-over wash, dressed and had supper. In the evening Ginge went out with Kenn and I went with Kay

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73 Laurence Leslie Snell (aka Bob or 'Nobby', 1921–1991) and his wife Florence (1921–). He was Joan's sister Grace's brother-in-law, and Ron Smith's best friend in Barking. He served in the Royal Navy on the escort aircraft carrier *HMS Pretoria Castle*.

74 The Seine.

(another of the girls in our cabin—you remember, the one who wanted me to go to her 21<sup>st</sup> when I was in London—she's altered no end since being over here and is a really nice girl, now) to see a play called "The Lady from Edinburgh". This was produced here before going on to London and I think it'll be a grand success. It's a comedy and really is amusing and clever. I hope London will like it when it comes there although I understand it's going to Belgium first.

This afternoon we're off from 1—5 and are going back to Quarters to do I don't know what, but I expect I'll read before the fire or do my ironing or something.

By the way, I bought some silk & wool stuff out here and some knitting needles and Kay is making some socks for Geg's coming baby!! I'll have all the Typing Pool organised soon!

Oh, another thought, this bit's for Bessie. There's quite a bit of Poudre Tokalon<sup>75</sup> over here in those pink square boxes with mauve bands round. I believe you used to use it but can't remember. It only costs roughly 1/- for quite a fair sized box and they have it in Ocre, Rachel, Rose Ocre, Peche, Brun Soleil. If any of these shades suit you and if you did use it and would like some, Bess, let me know. I wouldn't buy it without asking in case you don't want it. If you do, let me know what shade. If it's no one of those mentioned about praps I could ask for it and wait until they have some.

We had quite a feast in our cabin last night! One of the girls had a cake sent her, iced and all, and we made some coffee (after a style) anyway it was good fun and lovely to have real home-made cake again. Bessie's assumption in one of her recent letters was quite correct, but some things are O.K. such as magazines, candles (the lights are always going out), soap and so on.

By the way, talking of soap, I told Geg I wanted a soap-box, but I bought one yesterday in a town quite near the office.

Guess that's about all for now. Wish I could stir the Xmas pudding. Tell Paddy not to push the bottom out of the basin this year!

God bless, look after yourselves and lots of love to you both.

All my love

From Joan

Xxxx

P.S. Put plenty of fruit in the XMAS cake!

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75 A popular brand of French face powder.



Fig. 4.15. Postcard of l'Église de la Madeleine, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> December 1944

Dear Bessie & Stan,

Here I am popping up once again to say "What's cooking". Am sending a letter to Mum & Paddy to-day and so thought I'd just drop a card to you to let you know everything's O.K. this end. This p-c. shows a simply lovely church which is as impressive as it looks. Do wish you were here to see all these lovely things with me, though. Perhaps when all the "crossness" is over we'll all come over here to see the sights. Personally conducted tour! Will say cheerio and hope you're both still O.K.

Lots of love from  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> December 1944

Dearest Mum & Paddy,

This is one letter you'll read more than once, I bet. Now please, Paddy, you take the letter and everyone else can group round in easy chairs, by the fire—oh, and with Jimmy on his stool in the corner too. Well, won't tantalise you all any longer the big thing is I'm getting leave and will be home soon! I leave here on 28<sup>th</sup> December and expect to arrive home (that is, in England) on 29<sup>th</sup>. However, I'll let you know more precise details as and when I know them. At the moment all I know is that we are getting seven days from time we land in England to the time we leave England again. It'll mean I'll be home for the New Year and in that case I'd

love it if we could go to a show on New Year's Eve as we always have done. If you have any better plans of course, don't bother, but if not, d'you think you could book seats at any good musical comedy that we haven't seen? Apart from that, I don't mind much what I do except that one day I think I'd better go to Hornchurch and see everyone there. Apart from that I don't want to spend my leave going round seeing everyone—just couldn't cope with it as I expect you'll appreciate.

Now, comes the tricky part. Do's and Don'ts and May I's and Please's. When I get in, as soon as possible, please may I have a hot, hot bath!! It's the most important thing of the lot. Next, don't eat up all the turkey at Christmas! I expect we'll get real Christmas fare out here, but you know I like your cooking best—so just remember, turkey sandwiches please! And when I come in—don't know what time it'll be, but can I have a black coffee? Gosh, you'll be fed up with me making all these requests, but it does seem so wonderful to be coming home and such a surprise too. If you haven't already sent my Xmas gifts, please don't send them as they might get lost on transit and I'd rather have them at home.

To get back to normal again, I received Bessie's letter dated 2<sup>nd</sup> last night and was very glad to have it.

I was very amused at Bessie's account of the dance! Sounded completely mad, but fun all the same. Will they be having one when I'm home?

You, Mum, had better behave when you're out shopping with me! I won't stand for all this nonsense and playing around! We must go up to London to the shops one day as there are several things I need to buy before I come back.

Pity I just missed Bob isn't it? Still, never mind.

Well, guess I've rambled on just about enough now; I only wrote to you yesterday, so haven't any ordinary news. Anyway, I expect you'll be so excited now, you wouldn't bother to read ordinary news!

Will write again soon, and in the meantime, take care of yourselves, God Bless and don't worry.

All my love

From Joan

Xxxx

P.S. I don't want to see any pork, and I'd like real potatoes, fresh greens and real rice!

P.P.S. Have just been told not to bank on any special date on account of sailings, weather etc., but still it will be 29th or thereabouts.

Friday 8<sup>th</sup> December 1944

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

Just three months to the day since I left England and leave in sight already! Honestly, they spoil us, don't they? I'm very very glad though, because I'd love to see you all again and I feel especially that it will cheer Mum up so much.

We all decided when we wanted to go, wrote the names for each week on a piece of paper, and drew them out of a hat. I put down for Christmas, but didn't get drawn, so I thought the New Year would be next best and luckily I got that. Perhaps it'll be for the best after all, as I had become rather tied up out here for Xmas being on the Social Committee etc. Anyway, as long as I see you all soon, I don't very much mind when I come and I'm lucky really as some of the girls have to wait until the end of January!

If there's anything you'd like or think I might be able to get out here, please let me know rapidly and I'll try to bring it home with me. Perfume? Or hairclips, or indeed anything you think of.

Since last writing I've had one or two exciting times. I went to Paris with Kay and saw a film called "Doughgirls" with Ann Sheridan and Alexis Smith which was extremely funny, and from there we went on to the Ambassadors Hotel which is a rest centre for British Tommies on leave from the front. They have a rest period of 48 or 72 hours every so often and are sent to Paris or Brussels for rest and relaxation and entertainment. Lady Malcolm and Lady Moore apparently run this club and asked for Wrens to go along to help entertain the boys. Kay and I went (incidentally, when we arrived we found we were the only two girls there) and had tea and chatted to dozens of boys from all parts of England, Scotland and Wales. It was great fun and most interesting. Most of them were going back to their units the next day. They are each given a room and a maid waits on them but they have all meals in a large dining room. There is a library, lounge, orchestra, easy chairs etc., a bar and a never ending round of entertainments if they want. Organised tours, if they wish to see Paris, free tickets for all the shows, cinemas etc., in fact whatever they want to do most, they can do. The boys themselves are overwhelmed that so much should be done for them, but after all, it's only what they deserve. We spent an enjoyable couple of hours there, and then made our way back to Quarters.

I wish you could see Paris by night, though. You'd love it. As you drive down the Champs Elysees you can see the enormous bulk of the Arc de Triomphe behind you, faintly illuminated by the headlights of dozens of fussy busy little cars all going at a

terrific speed and in several directions at once. It stands there against the confused rumble and jumble that is Parisian traffic, a perfect foil for the passing things below—solid, looking all enduring and awe-inspiring. And the lights, in every café and along the boulevards—coloured neon lighting—just like fairyland!

Last night I saw Noel Coward's "This Happy Breed"—the film with John Mills, Celia Johnson, Kay Walsh and Robert Newton. It was simply wonderful. So human, so humorous, yet sad and somewhat disturbing in parts. A typical Coward production is the best praise I can think of.

No Bess, I haven't heard from Bill lately,<sup>76</sup> so will send him a card to jog his memory. Actually I expect he's too busy to write these days. I don't think he finds life any less exciting though, because he's just one of those people who when they have a debt to pay or an injustice to avenge will do on and on doggedly even happily to "get his man". He's a fine chap and I'd love to see him again. Still, he still talks for coming to England after the war, so I expect we'll see something of him.

Haven't heard from Tommy either.<sup>77</sup> He's completely vanished. Probably on his way to Burma or the Gold Coast or some other outlandish place.

Tonight I'm going to a concert in a nearby town so will write and let you know what it's like afterwards.

By the way, d'you remember when I was in London, my telling you about Gaetano or Guy as we used to call him? An American born Italian who was a marvellous artist. We used to go to listen to Frederick, the philosopher and anarchist in Hyde Park, remember? Well I accidentally bumped into him in Paris the other day and am now endeavouring to get to see a show he wants to take me to, but transport is the difficult thing out here. However, if we do manage it I'll let you know.

Guess that's all for now, Bess. God Bless, and all my love to you and Stan.

I'll be seeing you  
Joan Xxxx

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76 Bill Porter, RAAF.

77 Tommy Atkins was a Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) mate of Charlie Snell and also hailed from Barking, where he had met Joan over Christmas 1943. They had a brief correspondence during the summer of 1944 while he was on a training course at Osmaston Barracks, Derby. On 21 August 1944, he had written: 'your tracks are very well covered, no mention of any town and no postmark, no wonder they call you "The Silent Service", you could be anywhere between LE and J o' G'. (Land's End and John o' Groats).



Fig. 4.16. Postcard of Le palais de Chaillot vu des jardins, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December 1944

Dear Mum & Paddy,

Received your letter dated 7<sup>th</sup> last night. Will reply as soon as possible. Just to let you know everything is O.K. this end and to send you yet another postcard for the collection.

S'all for now. Look after yourselves and God Bless.

All my love

From Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Monday 11<sup>th</sup> December 1944

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Received your letter dated 7<sup>th</sup> last night and am snatching a moment, well a quarter of an hour to be exact, before the transport goes to hastily scribble this and let you know "All's well!".

I like your system of writing now very much, and look forward eagerly to your letters containing as they do little bits of gossip, news and this and that.

So sweet of Mag to send you a box of apples. Mind you, save me one or two for when I come home! Talking of Mag reminds me that I had a Christmas Card and a nice letter from she and Fred last night and must reply to them. It's so nice of them to bother. She said she'd heard from you too.

As you say, I expect we shall get turkey for Xmas—anyway we often have it and chicken now, but it's not like that we get at home you know, so I'll be longing for a little teeny weeny bit—just one sandwich???? I hope!



Thanks for passing on Joyce's best wishes. Must write to her.

So glad Mum's sent the Thermos, but in view of the fact that I'm coming home so soon now, it seems a bit of a pity really, chancing its breakage I mean. Still, can't be helped. Must just hope it arrives O.K. that's all.

Don't bother about sending me a Xmas present, Mum, as it'll be easier to wait until I get home.

Since last I wrote I've been to another ENSA Variety Show which was very amusing although no-one well known took part.

Am having a hectic rush getting Xmas cards for everyone and also in remembering to whom to send them. It seems to me there are just dozens of people to whom I'll need to send one. However, I suppose I'll get it over with in good time.

By the way, did I remember to tell you that I'm looking forward to eating potatoes when I'm home? Real potatoes I mean, not dehydrated, but nice real ones—baked, boiled, chipped, in jackets—just anyway. And Paddy, you can look at me and say "You're as Irish as a barrel of pork marked 'Limerick'" if you like, but I shall just eat and eat and eat them!

Time is getting short, now, dears, so you must forgive this very short little note. However, thought you'd prefer a short note to none at all, so here it is for what it's worth!

Take care of yourselves, God bless and my love to Bessie and Stan and of course to yourselves.

All my love

From Joan Xxxx

\* \* \*



Fig. 4.17. Postcard of La Place de la Bastille, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> December 1944

My Dear Mum &amp; Paddy,

Sorry, but haven't had time to write a letter to you dears. Will try to do so to-morrow, but in the meantime just sending this to let you know I'm O.K. Everything is fine here & I do hope all is well with you.

Take care of yourselves and lots of love from

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*



Fig. 4.18. Menu for the dinner celebrating a football match between a team from the Royal Navy and the Sports Association of the 12<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, Paris, at the Vélodrome de Vincennes, 17 December 1944. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 4.19. Postcard of La Place de la République, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Monday 18<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1944

Dear Mum & Paddy,

Received your letter last night and am glad to know you got my leave letter O.K. Thanks for booking for Cinderella—I'm sure I shall love it. I can't get home quickly enough to have all the "big eats". Will try to get the things you ask for and to bring them home with me. Am glad Geg is O.K. still. Am still keeping fit and well and having a nice time over here. Hope the buzz bombs aren't being too troublesome over there. Until I see you, all my love, and God Bless,

From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1944

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Received your letter written on 17<sup>th</sup>—thanks a lot. As you know when I originally told you about my leave I said I would leave on 28th, but two previous batches of leave personnel have to come and go before I do and the first batch was late on account of bad weather and that made the second batch late. The latter are away at the moment and my batch has to wait until they return so it looks as though I shan't leave until about 30th unfortunately. Still never mind, at least I shall be home which is more than lots of people will have. The only point though is that you said you've booked seats for the night of the 1st. I expect I shall arrive in time for this, but if not, you go and if it's a case of my arriving in

London on the evening of the 1st I'll go straight to the theatre and meet you there. If I can't get there in time at all I'll try to let you know so you can get someone else to use the ticket. I'm awfully sorry about all this but I'm afraid I can't help it. I think perhaps the best thing will be for me to 'phone you directly I arrive in port in England, then you'll have some idea of when I'm coming.

I'm so glad things are a little quieter as I don't want to have too hectic a leave in that direction.

I too have heard from Charlie and imagine the climate isn't suiting him too well, as you say.

The party for the kiddies was a tremendous success, but I believe I told you about it in a previous letter.

On Wednesday I went with Ginge to see Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman in "Saratoga Trunk" and also Dinah Shore and Danny Kaye in "Up in Arms"—two very good films, especially the former.

Last night I saw "Andy Hardy's Blonde Trouble" with all the usual Hardy family, Mickey Rooney etc. Plenty to laugh at!

Well, it's getting awfully near Xmas now, isn't it? I'll be thinking of you at about a quarter to three on Xmas Day—just before the King's broadcast. Incidentally, Ginge and I are Duty on Christmas Day. We're going to think of her family at 1 o'clock and of you at a quarter to three. So you do the same your end will you? O.K.

I'm trying frantically to get the things you wanted, Mum, but it's a bit tricky as I haven't another half day before my leave, at least I have one on Boxing Day, but I don't suppose the shops will be open. However, I've not given up. I've got some hairgrips and some perfume for you Mum and I'll try the other perfume and the comb when I can. I had thought of buying perfume for myself but it'll probably evaporate by the time I come home, so I don't think I'll bother.

Have finally sent off all my Xmas Cards—then I thought of about seven more people to whom I should have sent, but I'll send New Year Cards I think.

Guess that's about all the news for the moment—can't stop because it's lunch time.

Take care of yourselves, my love to Bessie & Stan and of course to yourselves, God bless.

Lots of love

From Joan

XXXX



Fig. 4.20. Photograph of ANCXF Wrens in the snow at Château d'Hennemont, December 1944. 'Thank God we had all been issued with duffel coats!' Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

## 4.9 The freeze

SHUTER: The cold had set in with a vengeance and it was to last for six weeks. Now our dear little château at La Celle St. Cloud seemed less attractive. No hot water; no hot drinks; no wood fuel for our stoves; no coal for the central heating plant. Like a French château of that type, it was excessively damp. One day there was a slight thaw and then it froze again harder than before—the thermometer touching zero on occasions.

The slight thaw set the walls streaming and the moisture ran down the walls, across the floors and down the stairs. Then it froze again. So after that we walked on ice and the walls sparkled and glittered, dusted with frost like a child's Christmas tree. The falls of snow were heavy and it got beaten down hard onto the roads—even on the main roads—and we might have been high up in the Alps instead of in Northern France.<sup>78</sup>

GORDON: We travelled daily to work in our lorries and often arrived so cold that we had to be lifted out by the sailors and marines on guard duty. Conditions at work were marginally better, but there was little heating in the rooms. We worked in rooms with painted and gold-leafed walls

<sup>78</sup> Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

and ceilings, with brocade curtains, sitting at our desks as the weather got worse, with our duffel coats wrapped round us, and we “brewed up” chocolate bars in our enamel mugs on little solid fuel stoves with which we had been issued, amongst all the papers on our desk.<sup>79</sup>

SHUTER: Our lorry slithered and skidded up to La Celle St. Cloud and the journey took twice as long. The drivers did well; they had no accident throughout the whole of the cold spell. Thank God we had all been issued with duffel coats! We sat huddled in these, the hoods over our heads, our hands deep in the pockets. But we would arrive home late at night with no way of thawing ourselves before we got into bed.

At night, having got quickly into my pyjamas, I would then start to dress up for bed. A high-necked seaman’s sweater, a cardigan, a muffler worn as a cummerbund, bed socks covered by seaboot stockings, and fur-lined gloves! Then I would wind a rug round and round me until I looked like a great woolly cocoon. Watching me dress for bed caused K a lot of amusement and she always managed to slip into hers just before I was ready! So then I had to do a kind of sack race across the floor to put out the light. Then back again, hopping and stumbling—and so to bed!

It was a positive relief to get up in the morning. The hairs in my nostrils were stiff with frost and, despite my cocoon, I was still clammy cold. Peeling off the night layers to stand for a split second in the “basic” before hastily putting on the day layers was an agony. Then slithering along the corridors and down the slippery stairs we packed into the lorry for the slow, bumping journey over the icebound roads. The crunch and clatter of chains on the wheels was now added to the symphony of clanks and rattles of the transport. At St. Germain, a beautiful wave of stuffy central heating hit us as we entered. We drew in deep grateful lungfuls—and imagine the joy of a hot bath! No wonder our spacious bathroom was so dear to us.

Then came the shameful night when I could not screw up my courage to part with my day clothes at all. Minus jacket and skirt only, I then superimposed my night attire over the things I was wearing. I was warm that night. But K and I decided that our standard of hygiene had sunk below rock bottom! So that day we packed up our beds and thereafter slept in the office until the end of the cold spell.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> XI kept up its record. It was still the warmest and brightest room in the building. We had a steady stream of chilled and blue visitors who came to sit awhile and thaw out.<sup>80</sup>

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79 Gordon, ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’.

80 Shuter, ‘Private papers of Miss E. Shuter’.



Fig. 4.21 & 4.22. Snowballing, Château d'Hennemont, Winter 1944. Photographs by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

HOWES: When the weather worsened and winter set in, we were snowbound and the journey by truck from La Celle St Cloud to the Château d'Hennemont where we worked in offices became hazardous. On Christmas Day 1944 we made a fire in the mess in a wrought iron stove and broke up a chair to get it started, as the wood in the grounds was so wet. That was the worst Christmas I've ever had.<sup>81</sup>

SHUTER: I had arrived back from England on Christmas Eve. The sky shouted for joy with its very blueness. Frost, as thick as snow sparkled like a thousand diamonds on trees, on grass, on everything! Happiness and laughter filled our lives.

After lunch I collected together a working party of chums. Armed with axes, choppers, saws and a barrow, we sallied forth to gather our

<sup>81</sup> Howes, interview.

Christmas greenery. What fun we had! We attacked branches with choppers and frosty diamonds showered down in our faces. Soon we were panting and rosy, our breath wispy white in the cold air and our bodies tingling with the exertion. We returned to the Château laughing and talking, our barrow piled high with branches.

Christmas day was perfect. The sun bowled across the blue heavens and the air was sparkling. Happy greetings went the rounds. Never did I remember such a happy Christmas! We had been through stirring times together, and together we had known courage, hope, doubt, despair and, above all, final triumph. It was as if we had grown up together, getting to know each other slowly, imperceptibly at first, but with the steadfastness of true affection. So many of the staff were now so beloved by me that I felt that I was with my own family. Indeed, we *were* one large happy family.

At midday, in true Naval tradition, the Wren officers went out to La Cell St. Cloud to serve the ratings with their Christmas dinner. It was a splendid meal: turkey, sausages, bacon, roast potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, cauliflower and asparagus, and then came Christmas pudding and mince pies. But the room was so chill that the poor dears sat down to this feast huddled in their duffel coats! They were full of high spirits and undaunted by the cold. K and I fooled around in white caps and aprons with "Gert" and "Daisy" on the bibs. We both speak fluent cockney and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves—and we even did quite well in tips!

We went for a swinging walk in the afternoon. Through the still, ice-clad forest and along the Terrace of St. Germain bathed in sun. The Terrace is a good mile in length; perched high up and backed by the forest, it looks out across the Seine. In the dreamy blue distance there was a blur which was Paris, Sacré Coeur and the Eiffel Tower standing tall against the sky like sentinels.

That night Admiral Ramsay and his personal staff were the guests of the Mess. We had a lovely Christmas party, a gigantic Christmas Tree, a Father Christmas and presents for all. What happy memories—Father Christmas saying that he had a present for a little boy called Bertie who had done very well during the year—and the Commander-in-Chief going up to take it from his outstretched hand. The Wren officers in bow ties and huge and beautiful Parisian buttonholes, the presents of Chum John—we looked almost feminine!

On Boxing Day a staff team led by the Commander-in-Chief played a match against le Golf de St. Germain.<sup>82</sup> It was yet another day full of happiness and sunshine. The course was a charming one set in the heart of the forest. Everyone loved the game. Speeches followed and Admiral Ramsay touched the French deeply with his delightful words of thanks.<sup>83</sup>

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82 Located in the nearby park of St Germain.

83 Ramsay wrote to his wife (28 December 1944): 'our golf match against the local club was a great success. It was a hard white frost but nevertheless we set out



New Year's Eve we had another glorious party at La Celle St. Cloud. The happiness seemed to spill over, our cup was so full. We had travelled a long way from the tense, strained Christmas of the previous year when our plans had been halted by indecision over the size of the assault. We had achieved much in the year and I thought that my heart would burst with gratitude and with the happiness of it all.

Then fate took a hand and dealt us a cruel and deadly blow...<sup>84</sup>

## 4.10 Tragedy

HOWES: On 1 January 1945 I was asked to report to Admiral Ramsay's office where he informed me that my name was in the New Year's Honours list. I had been awarded the British Empire Medal, Military Division, for zeal and wholehearted devotion to duty. Unfortunately, the next day, 2 January 1945, Admiral Ramsay was killed in an air crash. His plane crashed on take-off as he was leaving with his staff officer (Operations) for a staff meeting in Brussels. Whether it skidded in the snow or the weight of the snow on the wings caused the crash was never divulged but we were all desperately sorry to lose such a popular admiral.<sup>85</sup>

GORDON: One of the last photographs of Admiral Ramsay and his Flag Lieutenant<sup>86</sup> was taken by my co-packwriter, Jeanne Law, as they left together for this flight and posed for her. They took off in the Admiral's personal plane with his own pilot and other Staff Officers, one of whom was the Senior Operations Officer, Commander Rowell.<sup>87</sup>

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8 4somes & one ladies ditto. My Flag-Lieut & I played the President & Vice President & after a most exciting match we holed a putt on the last green to win by one up. We were the only winning pair, all the others losing excepting one half. We were given an enormous tea & the families & members all came to it, after which we had a vin d'honneur of champagne during which I was presented with a silver plaque to mark the occasion & the President read a very nice speech in English. Of course I had to reply. Luckily I'd expected something of the sort & was not altogether unprepared. I've challenged the club to a return match later on when we will be the hosts. But golf is quite out of the question at present owing to the state of the ground'. Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay, 'The papers of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay', GBR/0014/RMSY, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.

84 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

85 Howes, interview.

86 Flag Lieutenant Derek M. Henderson, RNVR.

87 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'. The pilot was, exceptionally, Lieutenant Commander Sir George Lewis. Lewis had replaced Ramsay's regular pilot Lieutenant Commander Edward Brett, who had been given leave to visit his sister-in-law in Cannes and was due to depart for the Gare de Lyon after seeing the flight safely off. Lewis was accompanied by his radio operator, P.O. David L. Morgan.

There is two minutes of Admiralty-sponsored British Paramount News footage of the final, fatal flight of Ramsay and his staff. The first scenes show the Admiral at the airfield beside his car, with his staff: Ramsay

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Ramsay had with him his staff officers Commander G. W. ('Bill') Rowell and Flag Lieutenant Derek M. Henderson. All five on board were killed instantly. In the mid-1990s, Brett, who was present at the airfield, gave his account of the tragic incident. 'On the night of 1-2 January it has snowed and all our planes were still blanketed with snow when I reached the airfield, but work had already begun on the [Lockheed] Hudson [AM-550] under the direction of my highly conscientious [Air Engineer Officer] Jack Tolley. He had made pretty good time, and the Admiral arrived just as Tolley was carrying out the engine run-up checks and testing the variable pitch of the propellers. Despite all this meticulous attention to detail, official documents still had to be signed by the people responsible for airframe, engines, radio, etc, resulting in a delay before take off. Sir George and his radio operator [Morgan] took their seats in the aircraft, followed by the Admiral and his two aides. After a further run-through by the pilot, the chocks were pulled away and the plane taxied towards the head of the runway. "X Flight" was stationed at the south-west corner of the base at Toussus-le-Noble. The Hudson had therefore to travel along the entire southern length of the aerodrome before being able to get into take-off position facing west. I jumped into my Jeep accompanied by Tolley and we drove to the start of the runway. The weather was fine, visibility moderate with a slight breeze. The pilot opened the throttle and the plane accelerated very slowly. Judging by the sound of the engine I had the impression that its condition was normal and I detected nothing irregular. Even so, I was uneasy and I was relieved to see the plane leave the ground. It rose at a shallow but not unusual angle. At between four and five hundred, before levelling out, it went into a slight turn to port. Then suddenly a violent stall, an almost vertical downward spiral, and a fireball. I tore in the Jeep to the western boundary of the base and ran across the fields even though I knew I could no longer do any good. A body was lying just north of the wreckage but it was unidentifiable. Without question all the occupants must have been killed instantly and the only consolation was my certainty that no-one had suffered. [...] After bowing in tribute to the victims, I was left with the sad duty of phoning headquarters, giving out the dreadful news, and having the site of the accident placed under guard. Even now, fifty years later, the sequence of events that morning and the visual memories it has left remain intact. I know the Hudson was a machine which had to be treated with caution and it had a nasty reputation, but I have no rational explanation to offer for the loss of air speed which was the cause of the crash. Could it have been frost on the engine cowling? Yet if so, why did the plane not level off or land straight ahead in the fields? Or was there another reason? I went back to St. Germain, where of course I found everyone completely devastated and prostrate with grief. [...] It was only when I read *The Year of D-Day* [ed. by Robert W. Love Jr. and John Major], that I learned that Sir George Lewis had asked Admiral Ramsay if he could rejoin him as his pilot. Sir George was known to be closely involved with Kay Summersby, General Eisenhower's ATS driver, and it was said that they had become lovers. That is perhaps the real reason why Sir George wanted to come to Paris.' Edward Brett, 'A memoir of Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay', papers of Fanny Hugill, GBR/0014/HUGL/12, Churchill Archive Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.

exchanges his naval duffle coat for a flying jacket and chats to his aides. They climb aboard. As the plane taxis towards take-off ice is clearly visible on its wings. We cut to the crash scene and fire-fighters hurrying to extinguish the blaze of the wreckage.<sup>88</sup>



Video 4.23. 'Death of Admiral Ramsay' (British Paramount News, black and white, mute, 02.10, 2 January 1945). Film: IWM (ADM 431), courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/bd9c2512>



SHUTER: The light went out of our happiness; we were numb with grief. That same afternoon, the snow began to fall, faster and faster spun the flakes. They beat against our aching temples, our bruised hearts, our crushed happiness. Alone with our overwhelming sorrow we were battered and imprisoned by a thousand million whirling snowflakes.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> 'Death of Admiral Ramsay' (British Paramount News, b/w, mute, 02.10), Imperial War Museum, 2 January 1945, ADM 431.

<sup>89</sup> Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.



Fig. 4.24. A guard of British, French and American seamen kept vigil in the Chapel, Château d'Hennemont, January 1945. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000058, courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London.

HOWES: We attended his funeral in the new cemetery at St. Germain en Laye and were allowed to wear Wellington boots with our bell bottom trousers tucked in because of the snow. As the cemetery is opposite Château D'Hennemont where we worked, we walked there behind the main party. General Eisenhower came in his jeep with his outriders on motor cycles wearing white helmets, white gauntlets and white gaiters. We called them the snowdrops. All the top people from the Army, Navy and RAF attended.<sup>90</sup>

THOMAS: The funeral was held there, in terrible weather. It was a particularly harsh winter, with icicles the size of my arm hanging outside our Nissen huts. We carried wreaths and marched behind the coffin, which was drawn on a gun carriage. We were all very upset because he had been like a friend to us.<sup>91</sup>

GORDON: The route from the château to the cemetery was lined with British and American service personnel and we, the Wrens, marched in the procession. We had never done a funeral "slow march" before and

<sup>90</sup> Howes, interview.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

in the icy winter conditions found it difficult in our leather-soled shoes to keep our balance and slithered about badly. We had been chosen to stand at one side of his grave throughout the service which was held outside, with a contingent of French sailors immediately behind us. The solemnity of the occasion was somewhat stirred by the order coming from behind us as the cortege approached of “Hautes les bonnets!”, the French for “off-caps”. Tears of grief and laughter were mingled on that sad day.<sup>92</sup>

There is further Admiralty footage of the cortège and burial of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay and his staff (Commander G. W. Rowell, Lieutenant-Commander Sir George Lewis, Lieutenant D. M. Henderson and Petty Officer D. L. Morgan) on 8 January 1945 in the cemetery at St Germain-en-Laye.<sup>93</sup>



Video 4.25. 'Funeral of Admiral Ramsay' (British Movietone News, black and white, mute, 04.19, 8 January 1945). Film: IWM (ADM 552), courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/8155ffe5>



THOMAS: The night after the funeral there was a heavy snowfall, and all the wreaths were covered in snow and ice. Admiral Ramsey's family were due to spend some quiet time by his graveside the next day, and that morning the Wrens were sent out to shake the wreaths free of ice.

92 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

93 'Funeral of Admiral Ramsay' (British Movietone News, b/w, mute, 04.19), Imperial War Museum, 8 January 1945, ADM 552.

I remember very clearly the smell of the flowers as we shook those wreaths.<sup>94</sup>

SHUTER: For many days, muffled and mute, our whole world lay motionless as if held in a deep sleep. The countryside was buried deep in gleaming white. The sky was heavy and grey. The sun no longer shone. No breath of wind fingered the hushed trees; the snow lay on every branch, on every tiny twig, on every blade of grass, on everything. As it had fallen so it rested.

Under this pure white shroud those we had lost were laid to rest. As they had fallen so they too rested. Stilly quiet was the world; not a breath, not a whisper. As we mourned so the trees, their snow-laden branches bowed by sorrow, mourned with us.

No loss could have been greater—none more keenly felt. Gone was our Commander-in-Chief who had quietly gathered round him a loyal, hard-working and a happy family—happy in mutual confidence and trust, happy in triumph. Gone were they all. Gone.

Heartbreaking loss, admiration and deep affection were ours. Great achievement, modesty and simplicity, theirs. They had died in the service of their country with the certain knowledge that ultimate victory was with the Allies.

Work went on, new people came to fill their places, we even laughed again. But for some of us our laughter never quite rang with a note of pure happiness. The clear, sweet happiness of Christmas 1944 had died with those who had been our colleagues, our comrades, our friends—our chums.<sup>95</sup>

These are the last lines of Elspeth Shuter's memoir. Between December 1944 and April 1945 she kept the official Naval War Diary for ANCXF, extracts from which are included in the next chapter. In April 1945, Second Officer Shuter was accepted onto the Senior Naval Staff Course at the Royal Naval Staff College, Greenwich—one of only two WRNS officers admitted to the course annually. She passed out in the top division in July 1945.

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94 Thomas, 'Ginger Thomas's D-Day: Working for Cossac'.

95 Shuter, 'Private papers of Miss E. Shuter'.

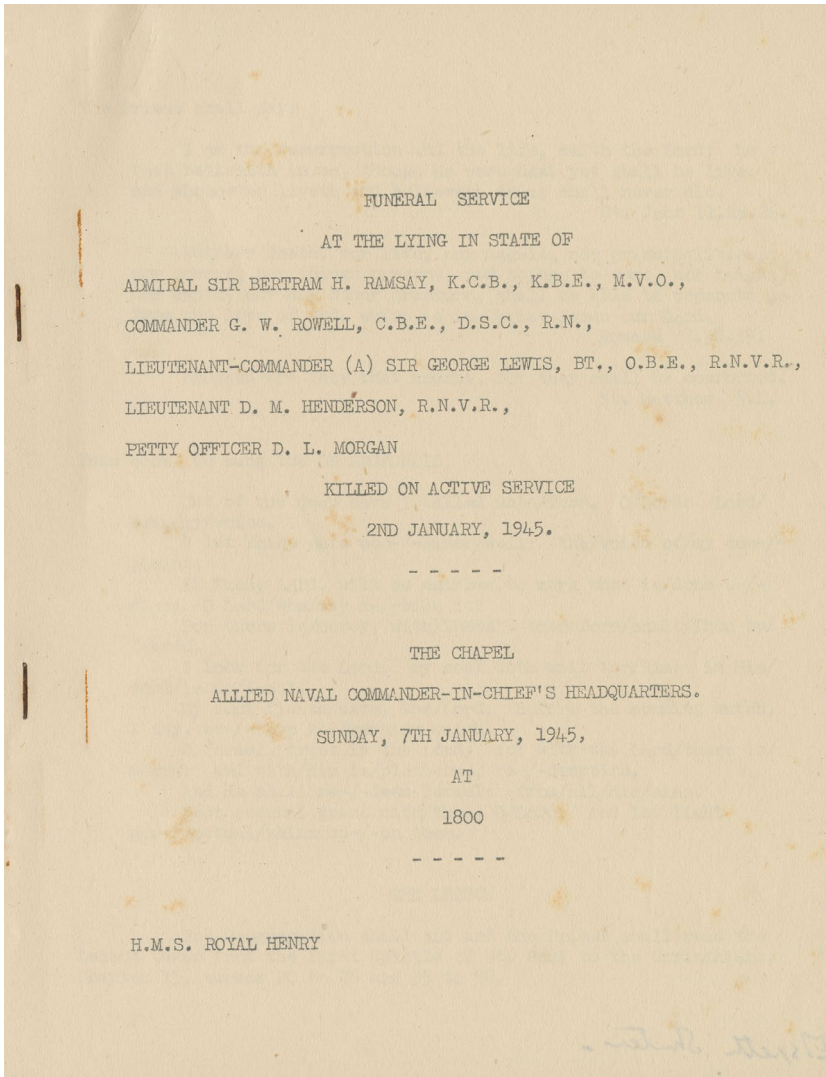


Fig. 4.26. Cover page of the order of the Funeral Service of Admiral Ramsay and his staff, 7 January 1945. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000060, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

PART III

THE SONG OF JOANNAH





## 5. Victory in Europe (especially Paris and Somerset, Spring 1945)

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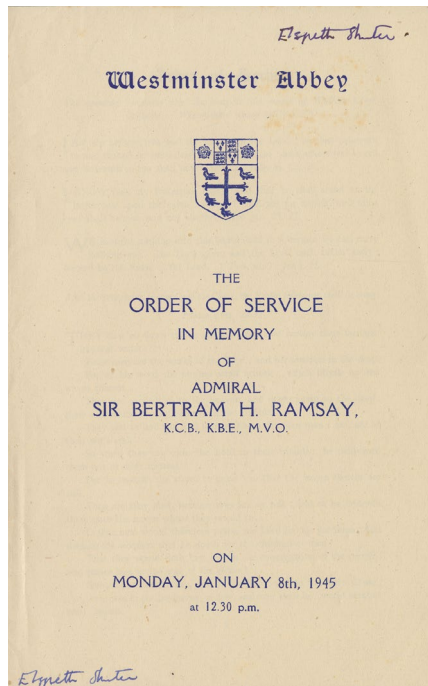


Fig. 5.1. Order of Service for the Memorial Service of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay, Westminster Abbey, London, 8 January 1945. Private papers of Miss E. Shuter, Documents.13454\_000063, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

Joan Prior was at home on leave when news of the fatal accident came through. Entries in her Naval pocket diary reveal that she had arrived at Victoria station from Newhaven on New Year's Eve. The same source notes that on New Year's Day, she went with Mum and Paddy and Bess

and Stan to the pantomime: *Cinderella*. And Joan spent the rest of the week visiting family and friends, mostly in Barking and Hornchurch. She had not the space, nor perhaps the inclination, to record how she felt. So what follows is speculation, combined with some handed-down family history.

Everywhere there was seasonal cheer like glazed icing on the underlying weariness of war. It couldn't last much longer, could it? Surely the end was in sight? Everyone was welcoming, so glad to see her and she them. So why did doing this round of visits feel like another kind of duty?

On the Wednesday she went up to London to the shops with Bess. They gazed at the bright windows and bought nothing. It wasn't Paris.

On Friday the fifth, in the evening, when her rounds were almost done, she called in on Ron's sister Maud at 15 Park Avenue. How big and empty the old place seemed now that the Smiths had dispersed. Just Maud there alone, in this house that had always teemed with life, with comings and goings, and laughter and tears, and love and war. Maud told her what Ron hadn't. Perhaps couldn't. He was coming home on leave. On Sunday. After four years away. Four long years in which he had inexorably drifted away from her, so that she felt now as if they were only connected by a fine thread of memory. Despite the news, the letters, the second-hand reports, the cryptic messages that signified nothing. That evening, Maud gave her a talking to. What was she going to do? Their leave had coincided. It was serendipity, wasn't it? It was meant to be. You couldn't live through this war and not recognise fate when it stared you in the face. It was around every street corner. If they didn't sort it out now once and for all then no good would come of it. 'Come round to tea on Sunday,' Maud said.

Joan admired Ron's spinster sister as a figure of saintly stoicism and long-suffering. In later life she often recalled her selfless devotion as an example. She had nursed Ron's father—the enfeebled patriarch trying to salvage dignity in death. She had given up her life in service for that final act of familial kindness. Her loyalty to the households where she had worked had been a matter of professional pride. Yet years later, after the passing of a generation ensured that the embargo on family secrets could be safely lifted, it was revealed that twice she had been raped by different 'men of the house', undergone painful illicit abortions, left her employment and found a position elsewhere. Never had she married. When their mother died in 1938 she came home, to run the house, tend to her aging father, and look after young Ron. Above all she adored her kid brother Ron, then seventeen. She treated him like the son she might have had. Their father's death, when it came after an agony of denial—a feeble last rage against the dying of the light—was a relief for Maud. But for Ron it was a blow. His love for his father, the old tyrant, had been

rooted in fear. Now his loss was like the fall of a great dictator. Il Duce indeed. Ron was stunned. He didn't grieve out of sorrow or pity, but from disbelief that the centre of his world had finally been toppled. Yes, this had been a blow for Ron. His war had been book-ended by the loss of both parents. But, said Maud, it was Cassino that had broken him.<sup>1</sup>

On Monday the eighth, Joan attended the memorial service in Westminster Abbey. The church was packed, more braid and ribbons than that. All the top brass. Lady Ramsay, of course. Poor lady, two boys. She wondered, idly, if those who were bred for high office that enabled them to bear such responsibility as he, to conduct themselves with such bearing, yet modestly, undemonstratively, were also prepared to face tragedy and loss with the same decorum—not stoically exactly, but with a sort of inner reserve, with dignity. Why didn't everyone break down? Why didn't they cry out? They had cause enough after all.

Joan was supposed to return to duty in France the next day, Tuesday. But she sent a hasty telegram and was surprised when she was granted a five-day extension. She spent the rest of the week with Ron. By Saturday, when they said goodbye at Victoria, it seemed almost like old times. After all, they had said goodbye once before.

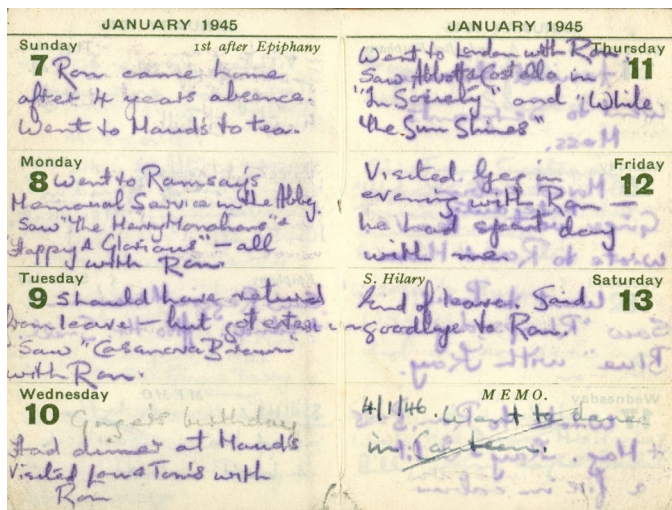


Fig. 5.2. Pages from Joan Prior's 1945 pocket diary. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

1 Like so many others, including New Zealanders and Gurkhas he fought alongside, Ron Smith's 1/4<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Essex regiment (part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade) had endured the brutal, prolonged Italian campaign which, in the winter and spring of 1944, became concentrated in a succession of attritional battles for control of the hilltop monastery of Monte Cassino.

What the imaginative reconstruction of Joan's 1945 new year's leave might convey is a sense that in wartime home leave so often became the site of another kind of melodrama, away from the routines of service life. There was scarcely enough time to pick up the threads of family and friendships. Yet, in this compressed space, by accident or design, often in helter skelter fashion, deaths, marriages and births took place, engagements and separations happened, crossroads were navigated, dies cast. What kinds of chaotic dissociation did home leave, for all its superficial joy, also involve? And, after all, might it not be productive to consider at least the possibility of a creative disjuncture between the relentlessly upbeat tempo of Joan's spirited correspondence and her interior life? Might shore leave sometimes have brought you down to earth? Or had she unequivocally imbued the advice on epistolary stagecraft from Daphne du Maurier: 'we must not forget, in our letters, that there is comedy in war as well as tragedy'.<sup>2</sup>

Rear-Admiral Creasy's personal tribute to Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay was published in *The Times* on 5 January 1945 and the text was circulated to all staff at ANCXF Headquarters:

As one who was intimately associated with Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay in the planning and execution of the great combined operation which launched the allied armies in France, I would pay tribute to the memory of a great and courageous leader. Gifted with a quick and eager mind, Admiral Ramsay brought to his task an unrivalled knowledge of amphibious warfare and a happy ability to cooperate to the full with both the British and American Military and Air Force authorities.

Under the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, Admiral Ramsay carried on his shoulders, as D-Day dawned, as great a weight of responsibility as has fallen on any officer. Never did he betray by a word or a look the anxiety which he must have suffered at that time. Each situation as it arose, every decision that had to be made was dealt with quickly, smoothly, and imperturbably. And as time passed and signal after signal poured in and the great, the almost unbelievable success of our assault revealed itself in all its aspects and implications, he took it all with equal tranquility.

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2 Daphne du Maurier, 'Letter writing in Wartime', *Good Housekeeping*, September 1940, reprinted in *The Home Front: The Best of Good Housekeeping, 1939-1945*, ed. by Brian Braithwaite, Noëlle Walsh and Glyn Davies (London: Ebury Press, 1987), p. 21.

To see him at his best was to see him when things were not going well. Having quickly mastered the facts he would make his decision, take the required action, and calmly await the event. He had great moral courage. And now he has gone, tragically gone by the same road as his brother Commander-in-Chief, the late Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory. But his name will never be forgotten in its association with D-Day, and, to those of us who had the honour to serve under him, his will be the first figure called up by memory as each anniversary of that great day comes round. (G. E. C., Rear-Admiral CREASY)<sup>3</sup>

TOP SECRET.

SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.

ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.

PERIOD 1<sup>ST</sup> TO 15<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1945, inclusive.

2. The tragic death of Admiral Sir Bertram H. RAMSAY, K.C.B., K.B.E., M. V. Ø., Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, who was killed on 2<sup>nd</sup> January, when the aircraft in which he was travelling to BRUSSELS crashed soon after taking off from TOUSSUS, has overshadowed everything that has happened during the last fortnight. Admiral RAMSAY was buried at ST. GERMAIN-EN-LAYE on 8<sup>th</sup> January with full naval honours. On 9<sup>th</sup> January Vice Admiral KIRK, U.S.N. was appointed to act in his place pending the arrival of the new Commander-in-Chief.

3. On 1<sup>st</sup> January the responsibilities of Flag Officer, British Assault Area, were taken over by Senior Naval Officer, British Operated Ports (France) with his headquarters at CALAIS. The administrative responsibility of all British operated ports in FRANCE opposite the PORTSMOUTH and DOVER Commands was assumed by Admiral Commanding Dover.

4. The responsibilities of Naval Commander, Force T, have been clarified and it has been agreed that he should be responsible for the support of the Army

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3 *The Times* (London), 5 January 1945, p. 6.

on the western flank, including local seaward defence in the EAST SCHELDT area. To facilitate this, Naval Commander, Force T, moved his headquarters to BERGEN-OP-ZOOM and his tactical headquarters to ST. PHILIPSLAND on 6<sup>th</sup> January. Patrols and reconnaissance carried out by minor craft of Force T in conjunction with the Army included one landing on EAST SCHOUWEN.

5. The V weapon<sup>4</sup> menace to ANTWERP is increasing and during the last fortnight damage sustained included damage by near misses to S.S. SAMINVER and S.S. BLENHEIM on 8<sup>th</sup> January; damage by blast to the Central Station and the Naval Officers' mess on 10<sup>th</sup> January; damage by blast to S.S. SAMPA on 11<sup>th</sup> January.

6. Two of H.M. Ships were attacked by the enemy. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January, H.M. Trawler HEYBURN WYKE was torpedoed and sunk off OSTEND, and on 6<sup>th</sup> January, H.M.S. WALPOLE was mined north west of ZEEBRUGGE but reached the UNITED KINGDOM. In addition, the tanker Y.48 sank between CHERBOURG and the Isle of Wight on 11<sup>th</sup> January but enemy action is not suspected.

7. The war against enemy midget submarines has continued. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January, H.M.S. COWDRAY reported a kill north of ZEEBRUGGE. On 10<sup>th</sup> January, a midget submarine was sunk W.S.W. of FLUSHING by an H.D.M.L.,<sup>5</sup> and another by the defences off the northern end of the SOUTH BEVELAND Canal on the same day. In addition a number of possible sinkings were reported.

8. The supply of operationally fit L.C.T. (4)<sup>6</sup> that offer for loading the SOUTHAMPTON area has been far short of the number called for. The whole situation has been under examination as the number that offer for loading has in no way been comparable with the number claimed to be operationally fit by the administrative authorities concerned.

9. The acute shortage in cross-Channel personnel lift has necessitated the carrying of troops in L.S.T.

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4 V1 flying bombs ('Doodlebugs') and V2 rockets.

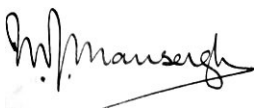
5 Harbour Defence Motor Launch.

6 Landing Craft Tank. Used to transport heavy armoured vehicles to beach sites.

(2).<sup>7</sup> It has been found necessary, owing to the lack of escorts, to limit the number of troops to 150 per L.S.T. (2). The whole problem of cross-Channel troop movement is still under investigation. The inauguration of B.L.A. leave ships on 2<sup>nd</sup> January, added to the shipping difficulties.

10. The acute shortage of tugs has been stressed during the past few weeks, and in raising all tug repairs to priority one it is hoped that the situation will be eased, though it will always remain a serious one.<sup>8</sup>

M. J. Mansergh  
For ADMIRAL  
(absent on duty)



\* \* \*

Monday 15<sup>th</sup> January 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Well, it's started all over again this hectic, slap-happy, crazy existence of ours and this is the news and it's me reading it.

We had a marvellous time on board. That sentence is a masterpiece of understatement if only you knew! To begin with I was able to make a long and serious study of the various bricks used to build the quay at Newhaven together with the various vessels in the harbour, the lights onshore and other features of the harbour life seeing that we stayed put from 3 o'clock until 10-30 in the evening doing sweet Fanny Adams, to use a naval expression.

We travelled back on the same ship that we came across on (at least I came across on it) and that was somewhat of a relief as I had made friends with the cook and the R.P.O.<sup>9</sup> so had quite

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7 Landing Ship Tank. Used to transport heavy armoured vehicles by sea.  
8 Extract from ANCXF Naval War Diary, 1-15 January 1945 (23 Feb 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.  
9 Regulating Petty Officer.



a good time as far as they could help it. I found there were four other Wrens going back and that was because they had been due back the previous day and when they arrived at Newhaven the sailing was cancelled owing to bad weather and they had to come back the next day. Also in the party were Ken, Reg, Len Willis and Len Jenner, Bill Sweetingham and several other of the Marine Guard,<sup>10</sup> so I was well looked after and had my luggage managed completely for me. Bill Sweetingham by the way I discovered comes from Coppins Farm near the Robin Hood, near the Tech. College and near a church.<sup>11</sup> All very complicated but I expect you know it. I think he used to be a bus conductor before the war. He has lost his wife in the blitz and now lives with his mother who looks after his two kids.

Well, George, the R.P.O. out of sheer devilment made me O.C.<sup>12</sup> Women passengers and to my horror I discovered we were right down below in the hold of the ship, aft, so I knew we were in for a rough time. To add to my difficulties 35 N.A.A.F.I. girls were bunked in with us and I could see a situation developing right away.

The first thing was that we were victualled. Remember that, victualled. Nice word. Well their interpretation of it was to present us with several tins of corned beef or bully to use the naval term for it, together with several packets of ships biscuit. The situation became quite impossible when I was surrounded by N.A.A.F.I. girls who wanted to know how to extract the corned beef from the tin without a tin opener! So I found George. I asked him whether he thought we'd all been issued with cast iron saw-edged teeth specially for the journey and he screamed with laughter and said "Put a tin between a couple of biscuits and dig in!!" I told him it was as much as my teeth could manage to bite through one biscuit never mind the tin as well. Anyhow the great thing was we were provided with a tin opener. My food for the next twenty-four hours consisted of bully beef and ships biscuit and that ain't hay.

The next tricky problem was that I had to see all women passengers (and that included about half a dozen French women) in bed by 10 o'clock. I think the least said about that, the better.

Well, when we weighed anchor and began to steam that was

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10 The 'Marine Guard' were the detachment of Royal Marines responsible for the protection of ANCF.

11 Off Longbridge Road in the Becontree area of Barking and Dagenham.

12 Officer Commanding.

the end. The seas were high, the going heavy and the ship just pitched and tossed violently in all directions. Immediately I should think 33 out of the 35 N.A.A.F.I. personnel and two out of the five W.R.N.S. were seasick and continued to be so until we docked! I felt I ought to do something, but found it to be useless—there's just no cure, so I got George to fix me securely in a top bunk and went to sleep. I was awakened at a quarter to nine the next morning to find the ship still bobbing around like a cork and people still being violently ill. The whole thing was like a bad dream, so I went on deck and stayed there until about half-past eleven when I was told to see that everyone was up and doing as we were docking pretty soon. That was easier said than done as people were still being ill, but in the end I triumphed, and somewhat exhausted we disembarked.

I staggered to a waiting lorry and we began the journey back to base which took about five hours and which was horribly cold. The whole of the countryside is under thick snow and the roads treacherous. What with the cold and having had very little food I was proper chokker, but still we survived and I got back to the chateau at about five o'clock in the afternoon. Well, my dears, the huts were hung with icicles—the biggest icicles in the world I should think—honestly we broke a small one off and it was over three feet long and was five inches thick!! Turned out nice again, hasn't it? There is about five inches of snow on the ground and it is solid and crisp and very slippery.

Well, of course, Ginge and I met and chatted and chatted and chatted, and then we both went to the Sergeants Mess for the evening to celebrate the award to Tricia of the B.E.M.<sup>13</sup> She won it as being representative of the Typing Pool for the work we did for the big do.<sup>14</sup>

Since writing the above, this morning, I've written to Ron, reconsidering my decision about our engagement and you'll be pleased to know I've decided to become engaged to him. I expect he'll get his letter at about the same time as you get this because Ginge is going on leave to-night and is posting them for me in London.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Leading Wren Patricia Anne Hanington, 35614 (1920–2017). British Empire Medal (awarded 1 January 1945).

14 Operation Overlord.

15 Joan's formal reporting of her engagement to Ron is telling in several ways. It conveys to her parents the careful consideration which informed her change of heart. It acknowledges the serious commitment this bond entails—none of the

Well, so many people have suffered from colds etc. that they've decided maybe the huts are too cold for us and we have moved into the chateau itself. Ginge and I moved this afternoon and my dear, what a panic. We just laughed and laughed over it. If you'd seen us trailing through the snow covered grounds carrying beds, cases, valises—oh, everything, honestly the humour of the situation would have struck you—it was too funny for words! However, we're settled in now and I hope it will be warmer. At least we've a brick wall between us and the weather.

Just as I'm writing this one of our officers has been in to burn some papers on our stove. Yes, we've even got a stove in the office. Mind we have to collect our sticks to burn on it, but at least it's warm. Well, right now the office is so full of smoke I can't see across to the other side and I'm typing this with tears streaming down my face where the smoke is making my eyes water!! Here we sit, in the depth of winter, snow on the ground and all, with the windows wide open to try to get the smoke out! Cold is an understatement!

The things I do for England.

Well, everything's O.K. I'm O.K. and all's well with the world—well, almost anyway! Miss the home comforts rather much now and can't think why we laugh so much about the discomforts our here, but that's human nature for you I suppose.

Be writing again soon, my love to you both and to Bessie and Stan. God Bless all the time,

Lots of love

From

Joan xxxxx

P.S. Had your letter waiting for me and also one from Maud.<sup>16</sup> Shan't answer either as I've been home since they were written. Also had a letter from Mag and one from Bill.

P.P.S. Please send on my bell bottoms.

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hasty hitching of many a wartime romance. And this rather transactional public announcement conceals her emotions: either the depth of her true feeling or, conversely, her private misgivings.

- 16 Letty Maud Smith (1897–1947). The only one of Ron Smith's eight brothers and sisters who did not marry. She ran the family home at 15 Park Avenue Barking following the death of their mother in 1938, and nursed their ailing father, William George Smith, until his death in 1944. She looked after Ron, the youngest Smith son, to whom she was especially close, before her own untimely death in 1947.



Fig. 5.3. Leading Wren Tricia Hannington, BEM, St Germain-en-Laye, January 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> January 1945

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

I expect by now you will have read my letter to Mum and Paddy relating the details of my journey back. Shivering at my typewriter I now proceed with the story.

Of course you will realise that I'm writing this from another world—one of ice and snow and sleigh bells and reindeer, of snow queens who wave large glittering icicles over our beds at night and so on. Aesthetically speaking, it's breathtaking and wonderful. I've never seen such beauty. We live in a hilly district and the slopes are pure white and untouched by man. There are many trees all of which are exquisitely touched with snow—even the walls have tufts of it on the rough stones which jut out. The skies are more or less always a wonderful pale blue and the nights are clear and starry and from near and far bells ring out at night on the sharp air. And

then we remember the fallen—and I'm one of them!! It's worse than walking on glass my dears you just take one step forward then slide back two. It's not amusing getting up in this cold atmosphere and it's not good for the appetite to slide down almost all of the fifteen steps down to the mess, but it's life, though sometimes I wonder that it isn't death! However, we still survive, though it's a dark age we live in—and I mean that literally. Since I've been back the electricity problem has been acute. I arrived on Sunday late afternoon—lights out. Monday morning, Monday evening, Tuesday morning, Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning—lights out. Sometimes it's just for an hour, sometimes two, sometimes three, but it's maddening. *Candlelight in Algeria*<sup>17</sup> was a film misnamed—they couldn't have known about us!

I have now moved. Just like that. Ginge and I have a cabin to ourselves now, but I wonder whether it was worth it. First of all we took a chair each and set forth. Out of the hut across the lawn, across the courtyard, under the arch, across the inner courtyard, up two flights of a spiral wooden staircase, along a corridor (very narrow) and at last *Chez nous!* Well, that was with a chair. When it came to the beds it wasn't the same at all. In the end we had to dismantle them, fold them up and take them in that way! All this mark you, trudging through about six inches of snow. We got our boots so covered with hard frozen snow that we kept losing our footing on the staircase and just kept collapsing with laughter. We must have looked so funny. We finally settled in (that was Monday afternoon) and then in a sudden panic it was decided that Ginge and Kenn<sup>18</sup> were going on leave that night. They went off at about half-past nine that night, so ever since we moved I've been sleeping alone in this cabin which seems strange after sharing one with eight people until then. I must tell you about the leave people.

Twenty Wrens and many Marines, sailors etc. formed a leave party who were to catch the boat from which we disembarked and make way to England. They were travelling as we did from here to the point of embarkation by lorry and set off in convoy. The lorry containing the Wrens broke down and the rest of the convoy proceeded leaving 20 Wrens to cope with a very cold night. A relief was arranged and this arrived and broke down. A third lorry also set out but brought no joy to the party, so there they were on the road, tired, cold and hungry with no prospect of rescue, never

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17 *Candlelight in Algeria* was a 1944 spy saga directed by George King, starring James Mason (as a British agent) and Carla Lehmann as an American sculptor.

18 Kenn Walsh, RM.

mind leave! They managed to find a place to get some food and after many trials and adventures were rescued and brought back to our Quarters having spent a very cold night out in the open! They finally went with Kenn and Ginge on Monday night and as we've heard no more, it's to be hoped they got away safely this time. Incidentally, that was the third attempt that party had made to get home, having returned before.

Yesterday I went to Paris, but I'm afraid shopping was out of the question. I went with Kay<sup>19</sup> and we had an awful time ploughing our way through the snow-covered streets. The traffic had turned it into a dark brown mixture, but as it's still freezing the snow was still there like mud and much thicker. In the end we gave up trying to shop and went to the cinema. We saw "Rhapsody in Blue" which told the life of George Gershwin and featured of course his lovely music. I could easily see it again—it was grand. I don't get any more time free from work now for nine days, so I'm afraid I won't be getting all the things I promised for some time. Still, as soon as I can I will send them.

Guess that's about all for the moment, dears, so cheerio, God Bless and steer clear of the rockets etc.

Lots of love  
From  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> January 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

How are you both, and Bess and Stan? Not having too much disturbance I hope.

I wrote to Bessie on Wednesday—seemed in the writing mood, for I wrote to Ron and to Mag and Fred as well. I told you that we'd moved cabins I believe, well I discovered a stove in mine, most peculiar looking thing, sort of tall and oblong with a pipe carrying the smoke outside. It looks something like this—[pencil sketch]

As the whole place is colder than that and damp into the bargain I thought it would be a good plan to light a fire and warm the room. I left the office at 6, got back, had supper and then Kay and I set to work. The previous occupant hadn't cleared the thing

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19 Wren Kathleen 'Kay' Chandler.

so I raked out all the old ashes and Kay acquired some firewood and between us we found some paper and coal and we set to work. Work was the word! We found that to lay the fire first you had to work from the top so that you practically stood on your head to put the paper and wood in. Having done that it was impossible to light it from the bottom as the grating is about half-way up the stove, quite inaccessible through the small opening in the bottom out of which the ashes are raked. We eventually managed by throwing in lighted matches from the top! Anyway, now that I've acquired the knack I've had a fire in there and life's much nicer somehow now. On Thursday I again made a fire and then owing to the fact that I was the only person in in our part of the quarters I was dragged off by one of the P.Os.—she's very nice—to help with the boiler downstairs. It appeared that the water was frozen and therefore nil and that a fire had been lighted under the boiler which threatened to blow up at any given minute! By the way, we get hot water now in this way. Well, we couldn't get the red-hot coals out so we took out the inside of the boiler so that the fire heated nothing but the room in which it stood. The things I do for England! I'll be general handyman when I've finished my life in the Wrens.

Having done all that, I washed and returned to my cabin where I got ready for bed and then went through all my kitbags and cases sorting everything out and putting on one side everything that needed mending. Having done that, I mended quite a few things by the fire—doesn't that sound nice, and then went to bed in my nice warm room! I still can't get over being warm!

Last night I went with Tricia to see Frank Sinatra in "Higher and Higher" which was very good in that it amused us beyond. We just laughed and laughed. However, the music was good and we enjoyed it.

All the girls in the office have had some of your cake and like it very much. Colour-Sergeant Turner, R.M. or "Topsy" to us also had some as he came in while I was cutting it and said I was to send you his compliments, say "Thanks very much for the cake", and he'll be looking forward to the next one! Of course I needn't say, I liked it too.

We haven't had any mail for days now as the weather is so bad that the 'planes can't fly it over, but I expect it will arrive in due course. On Thursday and Friday it began to thaw and everything became slushy and dirty, but surprisingly enough to-day and in the night it began to freeze hard again and all day it has been snowing. I've never known such snow,—it's only two o'clock now

and already it's about four or five inches deep! Everything and everyone is covered with it—it creeps in everywhere. It looks very pretty, but the snag is that as it's freezing all the time it's so slippery and dangerous that you find yourself on your knees at the most amazing times and places! Still, it could be worse I suppose.

Haven't really any more news just now, but thought I'd drop a line to let you know I'm O.K. My cold took a turn for the worse and developed into a cough and a loss of voice too, but that only lasted a day and I'm much better now all-round, with voice completely returned. Hope you're all O.K. and that Bessie isn't using her bicycle yet!

God Bless, and till I write again, cheerio,  
With lots of love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Friday 26<sup>th</sup> January 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

Am so sorry it's been such an age since I last wrote, but I've had a busy week socially and in the office we've been too busy to type to you.

I see I wrote you on Saturday. On Sunday Kay & I were duty all day and in the evening we went to the Sergeant's Mess where we had a very pleasant evening. On Monday evening we had a gramophone concert of classical music given by the padre, which I thoroughly enjoyed. On Tuesday I went to the cinema at the office and saw "Fanny by Gaslight" which I loved.

On Wednesday we had a dance at Quarters which although it began rather half-heartedly livened up and was quite a success. We had an American band and my goodness it was an absolute menace!

On Thursday I had a half-day and had a very successful shopping expedition with Kay.

To-day—or rather to-night, I'm Duty Leading Wren<sup>20</sup> which involves sitting in Quarters Office from 8 until 10-30pm and then going to all the cabins to see that everyone's in. Hence this hand-

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20 Joan Prior's service record notes that she was officially promoted to Leading Wren with effect from 1 February 1945.



written epistle.

I suppose you've seen in the papers the appointment of Admiral Burrough in Admiral Ramsay's place.<sup>21</sup> The funny part is that I worked for him in London for a while. I know the new Secretary too. Remember Peter, Bobby and John? Well John's the new Sec! Isn't it a coincidence? There are no signs of Peter or Bobby yet, but who knows?

I s'pose you're now wondering why this is suddenly being typed—well reason number one is that I'm now in the office and it's 27<sup>th</sup> and in the middle of this letter last night Ginge came strolling in plus suitcase plus duffel and all sorts of panic ensued.

We made a fire for the Wanderer's Return, and I'm afraid we chatted and chatted. Ginge didn't come back engaged—but almost!<sup>22</sup>

Still no mail again. You know since I've been back from leave we've only had one mail and I got your letter then. I'm glad Ron met up with Bob at last<sup>23</sup>—and equally sorry that I missed him, but still you can't have everything.

The weather here is just too awful to be true. It snows all the time and the wind is icy, but never mind, somehow we manage to smile through.

Must stop now, dears, so that I can catch the transport back to Quarters and to supper! Then a little spot of woodchopping so that I can get sticks for the fire and then up to the cabin and to the odd jobs—and they are legion, believe me!

Please send my bell-bottoms soon, keep out of harm's way and

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21 The Admiralty had issued the order appointing Vice Admiral Burrough (formerly Flag Officer Gibraltar and Mediterranean Approaches) as ANCXF on 8 January 1945. On 15 January 1945, Commodore Bob Mansergh (Ramsay's Chief of Staff) had informed staff of ANCXF that pending Admiral Burrough's arrival in post Vice Admiral A.G. Kirk, US Navy, would act as ANCXF. A message from ANCXF to SHAEF on 19 January confirmed that 'Admiral Sir HAROLD M BURROUGH KCB, KBE, DSO, has this day assumed duty as ANCXF', WO 219/1012, The National Archives, London. Chris Madsen writes: 'Burrough's arrival brought minimal change in the existing ANCXF administrative and planning structure. In due course, Commodore Hugh Webb Faulkner, RN, replaced Commodore Maurice James Mansergh, RN, as chief of staff at ANCXF's main headquarters in France. Substitutions were generally selective because Burrough realized the value of continuity [...] To a large extent, Burrough simply picked up from where Ramsay had abruptly left off'. Chris Madsen, *The Royal Navy and German Naval Disarmament, 1942–1947* (London & Portland: Frank Cass, 1998), p. 28.

22 Ginge and Kenn Walsh were dating regularly at this time and had gone on leave together.

23 Ron's closest friend was Bob 'Nobby' Snell, whose older brother Charlie was married to Joan's sister Grace.

God bless.

All my love to you all,  
Joan xxxx

\* \* \*

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> January 1945

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

Last night (Happy day) the mail unfroze and we had stacks and stacks of it. I had two from Ron, one from you and one from Bill and also my bellbottoms for which "Ithangyow".<sup>24</sup> I wrote to Mum and Paddy yesterday, but felt I just had to write now and tell you that at last I'd received your efforts.

Last night I was duty at the office and finally went back to Quarters, had supper and then proceeded, after collecting my mail, to chop wood. About eight of us have invested in a chopper and nightly now I take my exercise chopping firewood! I lit the fire, changed into pyjamas and dressing gown and slippers and then settled down to read my mail by the fire. Ginge came in (she'd been out with Kenn) and I'd managed to salvage a piece of bread and butter from supper which we toasted over our fire and then we made some hot chocolate by melting down our choc. ration, and we drank this in bed. The only snag about having the lovely cosiness of a fire is that we just can't bring ourselves to leave it and go to bed. We just sit over it and toast ourselves!

We've been so busy lately I haven't had time to write you in the office, but really last night I had so many letters and so much mail is required now from me that I just had to make the effort. By the way, I'm trying to get you some perfume and then I'll send a parcel off to you in the tin in which I had the cake I brought back from leave. By the way, now that we've a fire we need newspaper to start it off with. D'you think perhaps you could send the Sunday Express or something each week please—I got the one you sent with the bellbottoms. Another request please, d'you think you could send a tin of cocoa or coffee or something of that sort of thing so's we can make something to drink at night and eat our choc. during the day. That is known as having your chocolate and eating it!

Now, having made a perfect nuisance of myself with requests, I'll endeavour to reply to your letter. That reminds me, haven't

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<sup>24</sup> Sadly, none of the wartime correspondence between Joan and Ron survives.

said thanks for same yet, so here it is.

No, I haven't laughed at any more newspaper men, but on a recent visit to Paris Ginge and I were walking along when suddenly an American came up behind us, put an arm round each of us and said "Gee, it's a long time since I walked along with an English girl" to which we replied simultaneously—"I'm not surprised!" and left him rather dazed and bewildered by it.

Sorry to hear the Capitol is out of commission, but perhaps it'll be O.K. soon.<sup>25</sup> Also sorry about the news of George and Millie's house, as you say it's a blessing she and Margaret were out of it.<sup>26</sup>

Yes, dear, I'd love some candles, as the lights are still very temperamental—as a matter of fact I'm typing this with the lights out so don't be surprised if it doesn't make sense!

Poor Ron, he does seem down in the dumps, but he'll soon get over it—more so, probably when he gets back to Italy because he's built a life and world out there without me whereas the only recent life he's had at home, I've been a large part of.<sup>27</sup> Sounds crazy but you probably get what I mean.

Ginge is typing furiously by my side now with a grimly sarcastic smile on her face (most unlike our old Ginge) but as you know we haven't had any mail for about ten day until last night and then she got a letter—one letter, from a friend or perhaps I should say enemy overseas. He, having been informed about the conditions under which we're living writes from the warmth of Italy—"Well, well, fancy living in a cold old hut, you poor thing!!!"—and that's how it goes on. She gets sarcastic letter from him—he gets one better from her which brings on one better from him. What a life! We can't even get sympathy now!

Bill my dear is in the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>28</sup> He says he

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25 The Capitol cinema in East Street, Barking. Damaged in the attack described below.

26 After the death of Mary Bones, Bill, Millie and Margaret (b. 1941) returned to Barking, since the worst of the V weapons seemed to have stopped. The Rawsons were promptly bombed out by collateral damage from a V2 rocket which fell on St Paul's church in Ripple Road on Sunday 14 January 1945, killing eight and injuring a further fifty-two worshippers. Though Millie and Margaret were out at the time, George Rawson was at home in nearby St Margaret's Road that morning. The blast knocked him under the bed, and then the ceiling and part of the roof collapsed onto the bed. He managed to get out seemingly uninjured, though he subsequently died in December of that year.

27 In truth, Ron Smith (at home on compassionate leave) was dreading going back to his regiment in Italy, still mourning the death of his father, and probably suffering from what would now be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder.

28 Bill Porter, RAAF.

landed on this island and had to chop down part of the jungle in order to build a hut to live in. It was pouring with rain the whole time and was hot damp and muddy and he was being bitten most painfully by red ants. Still he manages to smile through—I'm sure I don't know how.

I don't think I've any more news at the moment, so I'll sign off here. God bless, take care and my love to Mum & Paddy as well as both of you.

All my love,  
Joan xxxxx

P.S. On reading this through I find I've asked for something to drink. How about milk? If you can spare it, could you send a tin? I don't know whether household milk or condensed is best. What do you think? Anyway if you can spare any of either—and only if you can, mind—I'd love it.

\* \* \*

TOP SECRET.

SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.

ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.

PERIOD 16<sup>TH</sup> TO 31<sup>ST</sup> JANUARY, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 16th to 31st January, 1945, inclusive.

2. On the 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1945, Admiral Sir Harold M. BURROUGH, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O., assumed duty as the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief Expeditionary Force, in succession to the late Admiral Sir Bertram H. RAMSAY, K.C.B., K.B.E., M.V.O.

3. It has been necessary, owing to the increased danger from V weapons, to revise the rules covering the intake of ammunition at ANTWERP. It has been agreed, therefore, to cut down the importation of ammunition at ANTWERP to the minimum. To achieve this the bulk of ammunition on British account is to be discharged at GHENT and OSTEND.

4. On 16<sup>th</sup> January, 1945, there was a strike of shipyard and dock workers at ANTWERP. The strike was more in the nature of a demonstration to draw attention to the shortage of food, coal and clothing among

the civil population. It was not directed against the Allied control and operating conditions of the port and work was resumed next day. But it was felt that it was a pointer, and that if the high standard of work being obtained from the civilians engaged in the port was to be maintained, then more adequate relief must be given.

5. During this period the clearance and development of French and Belgian ports has continued and on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1945, the French assumed operational responsibility for the port of BOULOGNE. On 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1945, the artificial port at ARROMANCHES was closed, the dismantling programme having been completed. It has been agreed to abandon ZEEBRUGGE as an operational port for coastal forces in favour of FLUSHING.

6. It became advisable to appoint a Naval Officer-in-Charge at GHENT owing to the volume of imports on both UNITED STATES and BRITISH account, and the decision to use the shipyard for repairs to H.M. ships. The Sea Transport Officer had previously been in charge of the port.

7. Strong representation was made by Flag Officer, Holland that the shipyard at FLUSHING should come under his control as well as the port. This was supported by the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force. It had previously been decided that the shipyard should be run by a small British naval staff, who would be directly responsible to the Admiralty, while the rest of the port would be under a Dutch Naval Officer-in-Charge, who would be responsible to Flag Officer, Holland.

8. Senior Naval Officer, Pluto,<sup>29</sup> reported on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1945, that Hamel 3 had been successfully laid, tested and put into operation between DUNGENESS and BOULOGNE. This is the first Hamel<sup>30</sup> pipe line to be successfully operated and the achievement shows great tenacity on the part of all concerned.

9. Minelaying in the approaches to the SCHELDT by enemy aircraft on the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1945, has resulted in a review of the defences of the SCHEL-

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29 Pipe-Line Under The Ocean. Fuel supply lines laid from coastal sites in southern England to the continent.

30 Steel pipelines.

DT. It was realised that should such minelaying continue the swept channel might easily become blocked by wrecks with grave results to the flow of supplies to the Armies. This problem of strengthening the defences has not yet been resolved.

10. Severe weather conditions, including ice in certain reaches of the SCHELDT and in the canals, have hindered the clearance of imports from ANTWERP. The resulting accumulation of stores in the dock area meant that fewer ships could be called forward. Ice also caused the cessation of minesweeping in the upper reaches of the SCHELDT.

11. Attacks by E-boats in the Thames Estuary and the mouth of the SCHELDT resulted in one L.S.T. (2) and one merchant ship being damaged by torpedo; both subsequently reached the UNITED KINGDOM. Several SEE-HUNDE<sup>31</sup> operating off RAMSGATE have necessitated the strengthening of the patrols guarding the DOWNS anchorages.

12. The misuse of L.S.T. (2) as personnel carriers called for an investigation into both the British and U.S. Army programmes for cross-channel troop movements. Agreement was reached and it was established that L.S.T. (2) should not be used as personnel carriers except in operational emergencies. It was agreed that the normal army programmes could be met by the use of personnel ships and that the armies would give the necessary advance information.

13. Negotiations were finally concluded for the release of 35 L.C.T (4) to French civil manning. These craft are needed at ROUEN, LE HAVRE and BOULOGNE to deal with the French civil imports programme due to begin early in February.

14. Landing ships and craft in the cross channel shuttle service have been able to meet certain new demands during the period under review. L.C.I. (L)<sup>32</sup> have been in service again assisting with the January back-log in personnel lift. U.S. L.S.T. (2) have been allocated to meet the requirement for the delivery of equipment for the French rearmament programme. Six

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31 German midget submarines, Type XXVII.

32 Landing Craft Infantry (Large). Troop-carrying landing craft.

U.S. L.S.T (2) have also been refitted with rails to carry rolling stock, thus been refitted with rails to carry rolling stock, thus allowing the train ferries to lift more locomotives.<sup>33</sup>

M. J. Mansergh  
For Admiral  
(absent on duty)



'BOBBY' HOWES: By February the snow was so deep and the roads so frosty, the truck we were in almost skidded off the hill at Bougival into the river below. And we were eventually moved into a house in St. Germain-en-Laye, where I shared a room with PO Dorothy Harvey, our Quarters Petty Officer, and we actually had a washbasin with hot and cold water on tap, such luxury.<sup>34</sup>

L/Wren J. H. Prior, 41801,  
Naval Party 1645,  
c/o B.F.M.O.  
Reading,  
Berks.

Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> February 1945

My Dear Mother & Paddy,

Am now settling down at long last to reply to your letter of 18<sup>th</sup> Jan. Honestly we get busier and busier and I just haven't had the time to write. I see by my diary that I last wrote to you on Saturday, so will continue the story from there.

In the afternoon, as we were duty watch, we had a few hours off and Ginge and I saw the new Donald O'Connor Peggy Ryan film "Bowery to Broadway". At least that's what I thought it was going to be, but I'm afraid those two delightful young people only come in at the very end and good as they are don't make up for what I thought was not a first-class film. Still, it passed an afternoon.

On Sunday my ring came and Ginge put it on for me and we

33 Extract from ANCXF Naval War Diary, 16–31 January 1945 (23 Feb 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.

34 Howes, Mabel Ena 'Bobby' (PO Wren), interview, Frank and Joan Shaw Collection, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth.

cooked a meal in the cabin by way of celebration.<sup>35</sup> We'd made a fire and Ginge brought a tin of sardines back with her and we had some bread which we toasted and had Sardines on Toast! It was fun! In the evening we went to the Sergeants Mess and I received more congratulations than that!

On Monday and Tuesday both Ginge and I were last in the office and by the time the fire was going when we got back it was time to go to bed.

Yesterday was our half-day and Kay and I went to the cinema to see Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall (a new discovery supposed to be the second Greta Garbo) in "To Have and Have Not". It was a first-rate film being both well-acted and amusing. As for the new girl—I for one liked her. She had good dialogue which helped and as for herself—I'd say she was a mixture of Veronica Lake, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, but anyway she's good.

That's the up-to-the-minute news and this is me reading it.

This morning the thaw set in and although everywhere is now deep in water at least it's much warmer and it's not so treacherously slippery. It really started last night and we had leaks and floods and pipes burst and all the whole bang shoot in Quarters, which made things very cosy. Still in spite of that one can't help being relieved as it had begun to get so bad that we have had to keep getting out of our transport on the way to and from the office to push and pull and wait breathlessly while it went round hair-pin bends and then get in it again. We used to get out because the drivers always said "When you're out—it's just the wagon and me if anything happens" so we used to wait almost petrified in case anything did happen. It must have been hell driving us around, because our Quarters are in a very hilly district and at places there's a sheer drop away from the road into a valley below, and of course going up hill the wheels just went round and round and we got nowhere fast!

However, I think we've said goodbye to all that, at least for a while and to-day we've blue skies, sunshine and all the rest.

I'm glad Grace is still keeping O.K.<sup>36</sup> My love to her and Terry<sup>37</sup> and Bessie & Stan and of course to both of you.

God Bless and take care won't you,

Lots of love

Joan

Xxxx

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35 A sapphire engagement ring from Ron.

36 Grace was heavily pregnant.

37 Grace's younger son, Terry (1940–2019).



Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1945

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

I received Dad's letter last night containing the tragic news of your Mum's death Stan. It was such a shock that I read it and re-read it before I could believe it was true.

At a time like this, no words of mine can help, but you know I think, how very deeply and sincerely I do sympathise. I wish I could do something to lessen your loss, but in my humble way I can only do rather less than most people, and that is feel with you the grief, or a part of it, that you must be experiencing.

The only comfort to be found is that we're living in crazy, cruel times, Stan, and I think you'd always want the best for your Mum and I know she's getting it now. Far, far more than we who are left to mourn. It's perhaps a blessing she passed away now, rather than lived on to cope with V.2's, buzz-bombs, ill-health and the rest. At least, you must try to look at it that way, and in time I'm sure you'll see that this is right.

I felt I wanted to write and express my sorrow to your Dad and have accordingly done so, but I find I've lost the addresses that you gave me, Bess, so am enclosing my note in with this letter and would like you to be so kind as to pass it on. I'll slip in an envelope too, so if you'll just address it and post it, I'd be grateful.

I'm sorry too that the disturbances have become worse so much so that Mum and Dad have gone to Catcott again.<sup>38</sup> At least I'm glad they're away because I don't worry so much about them, but there's still both of you—please take care won't you?

Up to the moment this letter seems nothing but sadness, but to talk of other things, how's Geg keeping Bess? Dad told me she was "still knocking about" but you know how vague that is! Also how is Mr. Bones—his eyes and so on? Please let me know. Have still not managed to get your perfume Bess, but you know how it is, one thing crops up and then another, but I'll try next time I'm in town.

I can't remember when I wrote you last and I've omitted to enter it in my diary (what a memory!) so will read the news summary from 28<sup>th</sup> Jan onwards.

Here is the news and this is me reading it:-

On Sunday, my ring came—more excitement than that—Ginge doing the honours and putting it on my finger! In the evening

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38 On the Somerset Levels.

we both went to the Sergeants Mess and really celebrated. More congratulations and condolences than that!

On Monday I did late duty at the office and have nothing to report.

On Tuesday—see Monday—there’s no difference!

On Wednesday—ah, this is more like it, saw Humphrey Bogart and new film star Lauren Bacall in “To Have and Have Not” which was really rather good. I liked it a lot.

On Thursday we had a dance at Quarters and it was really a success—I think we all thoroughly enjoyed it.

On Friday Ginge and I saw Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins and John Loder in “Old Acquaintance” which we both loved. It was much better in my opinion than “To Have and ...” see Wednesday!

On Saturday—oh, here I am caught up with myself at last—on Saturday I’m writing to you.

Have heard from Dad, Ron and Betty Currie<sup>39</sup> this week and haven’t really found the time to breathe properly unless it’s the cold taking my breath away. However, as I want to get this off to you to-night and as my transport is going any minute now, must sign off. Will write again soon, truly,

Once again saying God Bless and don’t worry too much—and I’m fine out here,

Lots of love,  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February 1945

Dear Mother & Paddy,

First and foremost, many happy returns of the day, Paddy. I hope you have a nice birthday and I’m so sorry I can’t be there to celebrate with you.

Now to reply to your letter of the 30<sup>th</sup> Jan.

I was not really surprised to hear that you’d both returned to Catcott, as I knew that was your intention if things got worse, and also you knew you’d be quite welcome—which makes a difference. Quite frankly I’m glad you’ve gone because I shan’t worry nearly so much about you as it’s practically a “safe” area isn’t it? I wish

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39 Betty Currie was a Wren friend at Norfolk House and Southwick Park who chose not to go over to France.

Bessie & Stan and Geg could get away too then I wouldn't need to worry at all. But still, I know that's impossible. I'm very glad that you've taken Terry too, as it's such a burden really for Geg if anything happens in the night or any bombs arrive with Terry to think for too. And, of course, he'll be able to see David now and I think that will do him a lot of good.<sup>40</sup>

How is Geg now? Is she still at home I wonder? I think I'll drop her a line this morning addressed to her home anyway. Just in case though, do you know the address she'll have at Radlet<sup>41</sup>? If so, will you please let me have it as I expect she'll like to have plenty of letters while she's there.

I sympathise in your wintry weather and am glad to say that we've thoroughly thawed out now and the air seems quite mild and spring-like. The only drawback is that everywhere is dripping wet and the mud comes over our ankles and water oozes out of the wainscotings and drips down the walls—altogether a very damp existence. However, in our cabin Ginge and I have a fire going almost always even if we don't get in until 9 o'clock we light a fire, and it seems to have dried out much more than most other rooms. Having got over that, the local people say we haven't really experienced the cold yet and that in Feb. and March biting east winds sweep across the countryside and just cut you in two! I'm waiting for it!

I hope it's not too bad at Catcott as it's so miserable in the country in the rough weather isn't it. With the melting of the snows here the river is once again in spate and I'm afraid it may flood again, but still—there's never a dull moment!<sup>42</sup>

So glad to hear that Ron was going to Somerset with you for a few days. The rest will do him good, and the country air, as from what he tells me he's been doing a lot of running around.

My dears, your day up in Town did sound fun! Fancy you stopping out so late, Mum, I'm surprised at you! Ron leading you down the wrong path I can see. I know the place where you went to lunch. When I went up with Bessie and Mum it was shut owing to a death in the proprietor's family so we went to that other place. Incidentally it's on the same side as the Vega in the same street as the place you went to but a little farther down and it's a little pub called "The Hand and Racquet"—just in case you should

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40 Terry's older brother David (1935-) had been effectively evacuated to Somerset.

41 It had been arranged that Grace would give birth at Radlett Hospital in Hertfordshire.

42 The Somerset Levels flooded annually.

look for it again.<sup>43</sup>

Your lunch sounded delicious—in fact the whole day’s programme sounded good to me.

I was sorry to hear about the birthday party, but from Ron’s account of it it seems to have ended up O.K.

I was very sorry indeed to hear the news about Mrs. Bones. I have written to Stan and also enclosed a letter for him to forward to his father expressing my sympathy but there is so little one can do—words do seem so hopeless in a case like that. Still, I tried. What a pity Bessie & Stan didn’t get there until it was too late.<sup>44</sup>

I sent you a post-card to let you know I’d got your letter, but haven’t had time to write fully until now, though, I’m sorry.

By the way there’s an awful shortage of coal and fuel of all kinds out here and in all the towns (including Paris) there’s no electric or heating of any kind until 5 o’clock in the afternoon. So if you want to shop you do it in the dark before 5 o’clock!! Just to make life more confusing I suppose.

Yesterday I went to tea with a French family. It started by a man on a bicycle handing a note into the back of our lorry one morning as we were going to the office. We’d previously seen him every morning and we always waved to him. He asked for someone who wished to learn French to go on Sunday afternoon and said that he wanted to learn English. So on Sunday afternoon I duly presented myself to the house and was warmly welcomed. There was Mr. and Mrs and their son (aged 14) name Jean Pierre or John Peter in our language. They invited a friend to tea—a very charming young girl about my age who spoke a little English. It appears that she can read and write English fairly well as she’s been corresponding with an English girl in Sheffield, but she finds difficulty in speaking it. Her name is Denise. Grandma was there and another friend of the family with her two children, so altogether we had a jolly party. Jean Pierre and M. Goupry also speak a little English and with my little bit of French we managed quite well. Mme. Goupry played the piano—we had Chopin, Beethoven, the latest swing tunes, “Pack Up your Troubles” and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” and a selection from “Rose Marie”. I know it’s a queer mixture, but we all enjoyed it and laughed quite a bit

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43 The Hand and Racquet was a dining pub at 28 Whitcomb Street, off Leicester Square. Vega, a celebrated vegetarian restaurant opened by German emigrants Walter Fliess (1901–1985) and his wife Jenny in 1934, stood nearby on the corner of Whitcomb Street and Panton Street.

44 The Boneses had left for Cheltenham because Bill Bones had suffered a series of minor heart attacks, although it was his wife Mary whose heart failed first.

over our efforts at conversation. I'm meeting Denise one day next week and am quite looking forward to it.

In the evening I went to the Sergeants Mess and had a very nice time, and to-day, here I am typing this to you. That's all the news for the moment.

Give my love to Mag and Fred—it's so nice of them to have you stay with them—and tell Mag she's to keep a watchful eye on you Mum, none of this coming home late from Bridgwater now!

When you see Auntie Lucy and family give them my love too—I sent them a post-card a day or so ago.

My cold is now much better and I'm keeping O.K. My love to you both and God Bless all the time,

Lots of Love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Friday 9<sup>th</sup> February 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter written 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb. night before last and was so pleased to hear from you. Yes, I did receive my ring O.K. and was under the impression I'd told you so, but evidently I couldn't have done.

Dad wrote and told me that he and Mum were taking Terry away to Catcott and that Ron was going with them for a few days but I haven't heard from them since they down there, nor from Ron either for that matter, but the posts are few and far between down there aren't they? I expect I shall hear again soon.

Can you let me have Geg's address when she goes away to Radlett please? I've asked Dad for it, but I expect he's forgotten to let me know. I hope she's O.K.

Oh, Bess, it's sweet of you to think of it, but I don't want to take your points you know. If it makes things any easier, send Household Milk and we'll manage somehow or other, but don't go without yourself dear, will you?

I wrote to you last on Saturday and now it's Friday so almost a whole week has gone by and I've not told you the news. There's nothing startling, but what there is you shall have.

On Monday we were late duty and apart from work there was nothing doing.

On Tuesday Kay and I went to see Bob Hope in his latest film "The Princess and the Pirate" which was screamingly funny. One

of the funniest bits of dialogue to my mind was when Bob Hope looked out of a window and saw a gallows being erected ready for the man in possession of the map (sounds vague but you can guess how the film goes). The Man in Possession at the time was Bob Hope and he turns to another fellow and says "I'm getting out of here. That's not a noose for a moose, that's slumber lumber. They're not getting me on the swing shift!" My dear, I just laughed and laughed and laughed. It's a good film, all through and if you get the chance, don't miss it.

Escorted by Ken and Reg,<sup>45</sup> Kay and I also paid a visit (much longed for in my case) to Montmartre. It's crazy, honestly, but it's fun. My dear there are roundabouts in the middle of the roads and quaint little shops and cafes and the streets are the last word. All cobbled, very twisty and either going violently up or down hill. How it clings to its hillside I can't think. If I get the chance I'd like to go again as you could spend a day there really and still not see everything.

On Wednesday we had a dance which was quite a success.

On Thursday (yesterday) we went to the cinema on the camp and saw "Four Jills in a Jeep"—Kay Francis, Carole Landis, Mitzi Mayfair and Martha Raye. It was very good indeed.

Oh, I forgot to tell you: on Tuesday Ginge and I reported to the dentist for an overhaul, and, horror of horrors, I've got to have a tooth filled. I'm a bit nervous as you know it's going to the unknown, but I don't sp'ose it'll be too bad. It's the very last tooth on the left side and he said that it would only be a small job, so I s'pect it won't be much. I've to go to-day, it would be a Friday wouldn't it!

Don't think I've much more to say at the moment, except that my cold is almost gone at last and oh, yes, we're moving Quarters again. Never a dull moment is there! This time we're moving into a nearby town much nearer to the office so we'll probably have to walk to and fro which will be wonderful won't it?<sup>46</sup> Am I kidding? I wonder what the actual Quarters will be like though. Of course we don't know when we're moving but the current rumour is about Sunday. I s'pose we'll be told on Saturday afternoon that we're moving on Sunday or something equally panic-making. Never mind, *c'est la guerre!*

I hope you're both keeping well, and that Stan is feeling better about things now. Also of course I hope the disturbances aren't

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45 RMs Ken Philbrick and Reg Hunneybell.

46 This was the house in St Germain-en-Laye that Bobby Howes refers to above.

too bad again now.

My love to Mr. Barnet, Mr. Stock and anyone else I know at Post 10A.<sup>47</sup>

Keep your chin up, and God bless all the time dears,  
Lots of love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> February 1945  
Alias Valentine's Day  
Alias Ash Wednesday

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

On looking at my Diary I find I haven't written to you since 5<sup>th</sup> Feb. Can't believe it's true, but s'pose it must be. Honestly we've had such a hectic time I've hardly had to time to breathe, but sorry about delay all the same.

On Friday I wrote to Bessie and in the evening went to see a play called "Three Cornered Moon" which proved very entertaining. And then came the news! We were told to be ready to move our Quarters on Sunday morning. Everything had to be ready by 9am! You can guess what a panic it was. However, it meant that we would be much nearer the office and altogether we felt would be an improvement. On Saturday I packed everything and Ginge and I surveyed each other across our little room for two and nearly cried. We'd managed to make everything so cosy, what with the fire and the room for two and everything, but there it was.

On Sunday it poured with rain and to make matters worse we were the Duty Watch which meant we were in the office until seven at night. Well, we finally got back, cold, wet and hungry and then my dears, then, we saw out room! We can laugh at it now, but I can't tell you to what depth of depression we sank at the time.

We discovered that we were in a room under the eaves, so that the shape was indescribable—all angles and corners and alcoves and bits of wall and ceiling slanting in on you where you least expected it. We were five in a room—and although Ginge and I aren't exactly angels of peace, the other three were more than a little noisy! Well, we had supper and then began to try to sort things out a bit.

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47 The Air Raid Wardens' Post 10A, where Bessie was stationed alongside messers Barnett and Stock, was located in Levett Road Barking, conveniently around the corner from the family home in Hulse Avenue.

After a while, with beds erected and made we began to see life wasn't very kind after all, because apart from only just being able to walk about between the beds, we'd no cupboard space and no room to keep cases or kitbags in the room. However, a small cupboard was procured—really only sufficient for two people to share at most (and we had to make it do for five!) and our bags were put outside the door—the policy just then being out of sight out of mind. Having got that far—the inevitable happened—the lights went out! The situation was no light, no candle, no torch (mine having broken and Ginge being without one) and no eagerness to move outside the door for fear of falling down one of the several staircases or tripping up over some unfamiliar object. Ginge and I just sat on one of the beds and surveyed the dripping darkness outside and the chilly darkness inside and—being us, laughed and laughed, though if anyone had asked us what we were laughing at we wouldn't have known. Well after a bit I stirred cautiously and groped my way to Tricia's cabin as I knew she had some candles, and we lit that and the fun began again.

When the other three arrived and we all began to get ready for bed it was really hopeless. Every time Stella sat up in bed she cracked her head on the ceiling which sloped suddenly down to the eaves! And Ginge and I had the space of one chair between our beds and a brick wall either side so we couldn't get out of bed together! Honestly more panic than that! However, I believe we're moving out soon (Ginge and I that is) and leaving the three in that room and we may be lucky enough to have a room to ourselves, but it's all in the air at the moment. I do hope so though, for honestly the room just won't hold five people no matter how you try. In the meantime, we creep about cautiously otherwise something is sure to go wrong.

On Monday evening we just hadn't the heart to go back to our "home" so we went to the cinema in the town and saw Leslie Howard and Ingrid Bergman in "Escape to Happiness" which was a very old film, but one which I hadn't seen.<sup>48</sup> It was really wonderful and I enjoyed every minute of it.

Well, that's the story up to the time of going to press.

Last night I received a parcel from Bess with one or two things I wanted and must write to thank her for them to-day or to-morrow—depends on whether I have time. We're rather busy and it's a job to find a spare moment to write really.

I also received a very nice wallet from Ron and have had

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48 Better known as *Intermezzo* (1939).



several letters of course. In his last letter he told me not to write until he sent me an address, but as I don't know when that will come along we're rather at a stalemate at the moment.

I'm slimming now, or at least, I'm having the opportunity, on account of being near our place of work now we walk to and from the office, except on late duty at night, of course. It takes about 35 minutes and now that the weather is being kind to us once again, we quite enjoy it. It's not so good in the pouring rain though! At the moment, the weather really is grand. It's just like Spring, with warm sunshine and lovely skies and vivid colours. Even the air itself seems warm and sweet. It's one of those days to-day when I hate staying in the office and when I want to go out for a very long walk through the lovely countryside. Ah, well, no rest for the wicked. I can imagine to-day in Catcott and the lovely view down across the moor from the bottom of the orchard, away over to Cheddar and Wells and Glastonbury. If the weather's like it is here the hills will have blurred grey edges and the buildings be creamy and sunlit and the trees all the hundreds of different colours that they are across there. Mad, of course, because it's probably pouring with rain and the mist has come down over the moor and you can't see a thing!

Well, my love to Mag and Fred and all at Burtle as well, and of course to both of you, because now I must fly to lunch.

God bless you both all the time, and take care,  
Love to Terry as well,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

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TOP SECRET.  
SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
PERIOD 1<sup>ST</sup> TO 14<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 1<sup>st</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1945, inclusive.

2. Midget submarine activity was less during the fortnight under review than during January but photographic reconnaissance disclosed a number of them in IJMUIDEN and other Dutch ports.

3. The most serious event of the fortnight was the loss of twelve M.T.B.<sup>49</sup> at OSTEND in a series of explosions which cannot be attributed to enemy activity. The craft were all berthed close together and blew up one after the other. Many deeds of heroism were performed by crew in trying to put out fires as they began in neighbouring craft but in only too many cases these were unavailing and many men lost their lives in the explosion of their own craft.

4. Force T and its associated Commandos instituted a series of small raids on SCHOUWEN and the neighbouring Dutch occupied territory using L.C.A.<sup>50</sup> sometimes accompanied by L.C.S.(M).<sup>51</sup> So far there have been no casualties in these raids which provided valuable intelligence and excellent practice for Force T.

5. Measures to defend the SCHELDT and its estuary against minelaying from the air were discussed by interested parties and it was found very difficult to provide adequate protection against aircraft coming in from the north and north west. Improved radar warning is being provided, however, and this will it is hoped give the anti-aircraft defences a better chance.

6. During this period consideration was given by S.H.A.E.F. and the interested authorities to a re-organisation of the Build-Up Control

Organisation, including the moving of its headquarters to London. No final decision was taken in view of a letter from 21 Army Group pointing out that the possible disorganisation which might occur temporarily was not acceptable in view of pending operations.

7. Difficulty was experienced by Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, in providing escorts for L.S.T. convoys which contained large numbers of troops and S.H.A.E.F. issued an order that not more than 180 troops were to be carried in any one L.S.T. unless application was made four days before with full reasons for the operational necessity of such overloading.

8. The fortnight saw the institution of Force U con-

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49 Motor Torpedo Boat.

50 Landing Craft Assault. For landing troops on beaches.

51 Landing Craft Support (Medium). Crew.

sisting of 36 L.C.M.(3) and 36 L.C.V. (P)<sup>52</sup> with a completely mobile maintenance organisation all under the command of Captain P.H.G. JAMES, R.N. This force was provided as the result of a request from 21 Army Group for craft to help them ferry men and stores across the RHINE after the assault. The principal difficulty experienced so far has been to evolve a satisfactory method of carrying the landing craft overland from ANTWERP to the neighbourhood of the RHINE.

9. During the last week in January and the first half of February, the weather in the CHANNEL was never good enough for L.C.T. to sail from PORTSMOUTH to LE HAVRE. Occasionally a group of L.C.T. sailed from PORTLAND because if in difficulties they would have been able to run for shelter to the SØLENT but it was not until 14th February that any L.C.T. could sail from SOUTH-AMPTON. This, in addition to delaying the U.S. build up, kept at PORTSMOUTH the L.C.T. which were waiting to sail to ROUEN for transfer to the French.<sup>53</sup>

H.M. Burrough



ADMIRAL.

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Friday 16<sup>th</sup> February 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Although I only wrote to you on Wednesday, I've since found a letter from you and Mum in my writing case dated 7<sup>th</sup> February and I don't think I've ever actually answered it.

I can just imagine how delighted Terry would be to see David as he was always asking about him wasn't he? I'm glad you took Ron to see Auntie Lucy and that she made you all so welcome. It was a coincidence Peggy coming home by the early train wasn't it?<sup>54</sup>

52 Landing Craft Vehicle (Personnel). 'Higgins boat'.

53 Extract from ANCXF Naval War Diary, 1-14 February 1945 (13 March 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.

54 Margaret ('Peggy') Cox (Steele) (1914-1998), was Lucy's daughter by her first marriage to Grace Prior's brother, Justin Steele.

I have received my ring and to the best of my knowledge I wrote and told you so, but perhaps you haven't received the letter yet, or perhaps I thought I'd told you and hadn't. At all events, I have received it and am wearing it and everyone admires it because it's so uncommon.

I'm glad Terry is keeping well and also that he's not being any trouble.

Yesterday I went to Paris (great excitement) with Denise a French girl whom I met at M. Goupry's house. I believe I told you about her. Well, it really was grand to go with someone who knew the place well. She took me to see Notre Dame and this time I didn't faint! And then she took me into the Latin Quarter of the old City which is built on an island in the middle of the Seine, and right into the University of Paris where she is a student. Apparently they are quite free to come and go there as they please and can attend every day or once a week or once a month just as they desire and depending of course on how far away they live and so on. I really enjoyed it.

Dad, Ginge and I thought we'd like to see if we could put some bulbs on the graves of the boys we knew who've gone since we came over here as a couple of them were personal friends. We'll have to get permission and so on first, but supposing everything is O.K. in that direction, which would be the best things to get, and when shall we get them—at what time of the year and so on?

To-day is another lovely warm sunny day as was yesterday too. We walked along the banks of the Seine yesterday and the water was rushing and swirling by terribly fast and also had risen up the steps leading down to the water till it was lapping the paving stones in the streets! I'm afraid it if doesn't subside soon, they'll have flood galore on their hands. It has already flooded a considerable area further down.

Do you need seeds of any kinds—flowers or vegetables? As there are masses of packets of them over here and I expect I could send you some if you like.

Guess that's about all for now. I hope you're all keeping fine—I am at the moment. My love to Mag and Fred and a great big hug and kiss for Terry and for David too.

All my love to you both, and God Bless,

Joan

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Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> February 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Was very pleased to receive your letter dated 14<sup>th</sup> Feb. and glad to know everything was O.K. with you both.

Last night had a letter from Bessie in which she told me the great news that Geg had had a baby girl!<sup>55</sup> Isn't it wonderful—just what everyone seemed to want—even Geg. I'm glad because it sort of makes up for all she's been through. From what Bess said I gathered it hadn't been too easy for her, poor kid.

I wrote to her as soon as I received your letter containing her address and again to-day to another address which Bess sent in her letter, so I hope she gets them both. I should think she feels in need of cheering up really, with no-one of her own with her, except of course the baby. Wonder what they'll call her? Fancy her being born on Valentine's Day too!

I'm so glad Terry is growing so well—I think the country air is just what he needed really to completely pick him up don't you? I'm also glad he's behaving well as it makes such a difference when you're not at home doesn't it?

To ease your mind Mother mine, you'll be pleased to know that I haven't been alone to the Goupry's again. I met Denise in Paris the other day and we had a very pleasant time as I believe I told you in a previous letter. Actually of course they're very nice people and there's no harm in it, but just to please you I'll not go alone again.

Well, since I last wrote to you great things have happened. To begin at the beginning where most stories begin, on Friday night I went to see a film called "Two Girls and a Sailor" which is the best musical film I've seen for quite a while and I thoroughly enjoyed it. On Saturday I did less than nothing in the way of amusement as we were Duty Watch and that was a solemn enough thought for any girl's day.

On Sunday Ginge and I again went to the cinema—this time we saw "The Impatient Years" with Jean Arthur, Charles Coburn and Lee Bowman. It was also a jolly good film.

On Monday—and this is the great thing—we moved our cabin! Sounds simple put like that doesn't it? But when Ginge and I get together on anything it ceases to be simple! Well, to begin with we moved all our junk into the new cabin and dumped it on the floor. Then we fixed up the beds and stowed away all the rest of our gear and generally sorted ourselves out.

Then, my dear we thought the light could maybe be improved,

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55 Jacqueline Beth (b. 14 February 1945).

so taking from our corsage a 100 watt light bulb we drew Ginge's bed into the centre of the room, placed a canvas chair upon it and Ginge performed the daring feat of mounting this precarious platform—one hand clasping the bulb, the other entwined in my hair to steady herself! The old bulb was removed and the new one substituted and there was a deathly 'ush as the light was switched on and we waited for the bright blaze. Imagine our feelings when a wee glimmer was seen—about as bright as a 15 watt bulb I should think! We were speechless at first and then almost hysterical with laughter! Having recovered Ginge again mounted and removed the bulb and was about to re-insert the former bulb when the flex which was running from the doorway across the ceiling to the middle of the room, became detached from the ceiling and dropped to a little above waist-level right over by the door, so that on entering the room the first thing one did was to trip over the light! When we again recovered from our laughter, Ginge fetched a terrific pair of steps—I've never seen anything so terrific. They were at least twice as high as ours at home! She then mounted these and pinned the flex to the ceiling again and all was well once more.

The next crisis was when we decided to draw the shutters whilst we washed and got ready for bed. All these French cha-teaux have long windows which open outwards or inwards and shutters which fasten back against the outer wall. The first difficulty was that the shutters were fastened and I couldn't unfasten them, so nothing daunted I climbed out onto the front porch (sounds frightening but it's quite safe really being an enormous expanse of roof which is quite flat and solid) unhooked the shutter and climbed back again. All went well until we were going to bed and wanted to open the shutters. Then to my horror I saw that one of them was propping up about five bricks above the window and if I moved it they'd all come in on my head! I don't need to tell you that the shutter is still shut on that side! That's the summary of one evening in the life of a Wren in France! We do see life!

To-night I think I'm going to the cinema again, so I can be sure of a calm sane evening.

No more news at the moment, dears, so guess I'd better close now. Oh, by the way, I had a letter from Tommy last week and he's in India of all places.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps you'd let Mrs Snell know, as I know she takes an interest in all the boys. Has she heard any more of Peter by the way?

I also had a letter from Peggy this week—I've been getting so

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56 Tommy Atkins, REME.

many letters I'm sure I'll never catch up with answering them—still I can but try!

Cheerio for now, my love to Terry and David and Mrs Snell and also to Mag & Fred. Hope everything is O.K. and that everyone is keeping well. God bless and take care of yourselves wont' you?

Lots of love

Joan xxxxx

P.S. Did Bess tell you that Stan was having trouble with a polypus<sup>57</sup> again? Seems to be pretty bad too this time, but I expect it will be alright when they've removed it. I feel so sorry for him though, because they're so painful aren't they?

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TOP SECRET.  
SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
PERIOD 15<sup>TH</sup> TO 28<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 15<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1945, inclusive.

2. During the past fortnight there has been continued enemy activity by E-boat, midget submarine and mine against our shipping sailing to OSTEND and the SCHELDT. An L.S.T.(2) was torpedoed east of RAMSGATE and merchant shipping sustained casualties from mining off OSTEND. All the indicator loops at the mouth of the SCHELDT are now completed and on 22nd February a midget submarine was detected by them and subsequently sunk.

3. Several small raids were made by craft of Force T in the vicinity of SCHOUWEN, all without casualty.

4. Trials with L.C.I.(L) fitted with radar navigational aids for the assistance of navigation in low visibility were carried out in the SCHELDT. Radar type 971 proved most satisfactory. The trials were considered to have been valuable and developing on the right line but were discontinued as Their Lordships felt that the apparatus could not be used operationally until further trials and modifications had been made.

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57 Nasal polypus or gelatinous myxoma.

5. On 15<sup>th</sup> February the last tow left ARROMANCHES and the port was finally closed. During this period TERNEUZEN and GHENT have been able to accept a 24ft draught at all tidal periods.<sup>58</sup>

H.M. Burrough



ADMIRAL.

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Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> March 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

How are you both, and Fred and Mag and Terry? Quite O.K. I hope. I'm fine and everything in my particular garden is lovely at the moment.

Right, now I last wrote you a newsy letter on Tuesday, so here goes with the news from then on.

On Tuesday I saw a grand film called "The Way Ahead" starring David Niven. It was the story of the British Army—something like the Army equivalent of "In Which We Serve".

On Wednesday I went with Ginge to see "None But the Lonely Heart" with Cary Grant. It was one of the finest films of its kind I've seen for a long while, but very unusual. You'd like it. It was based on the novel written by the same chap who wrote "How Green Was My Valley". Did nothing much on Thursday or Friday—except the weekly wash etc!

On Saturday I went to see "Dragon Seed"—another peculiar film with Katherine Hepburn and Turhan Bey.

On Sunday I had a half-day and went with Ginge to see another film "Hollywood Canteen" with many stars in it.

Monday brought forth another film called "Janie" and that was very funny. (I expect you think I've been doing nothing but see films, but that's because now that we've moved our Quarters and are living in the town near to where we work we can get in to see a film in the evening after we've finished at the office and it makes a change from sitting in the Quarters).

On Tuesday I was Duty Watch so didn't do anything exciting except work.

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<sup>58</sup> Extract from ANCXF naval war diary 15–28 February 1945 (20 April 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.



On Wednesday, yesterday, I had the chance of another visit to Montmartre so took it with both hands—Ken leading the way.

You'd love Montmartre—it seems to me to be the real Paris. It lies behind the big shops and magnificent buildings and is just a little town like any little town in England might be with narrow streets and markets and just ordinary people—and then there are the artists, painting in the streets and an odd gypsy swings along here and there, and there's the oldest church in Paris, it might be an English country village church it's so ordinary. Of course they say the night life is far from ordinary, but I wouldn't know about that anyway.

Well that seems to sum up my activities. I haven't heard from Ron since just before he sailed, but don't expect I shall until he arrives in Italy again.

I have heard from Geg and she seems to be O.K. now thank goodness and I believe she came home on Monday last.

I hope Stan is fully recovered too, as he had had his operation in the last letter I had from them, but it was still painful as was only natural.

The moor must have looked queer flooded over like that. What do they do with the cattle and horses they used to graze there, I wonder?

How's David and Mrs Snell getting on? Any more gossip about Peggy and her husband?<sup>59</sup> Ron said he didn't think she'd changed much and looked quite happy. Isn't it curious?

Well, dears, I don't think I've a lot more to say just now. I wish I could have a 48-hour leave to whizz home and spend one day at Kew and one at South Weald in about three weeks' time. It'll seem funny not seeing Kew when the daffodils are out—I always do go there. I've asked Ken to keep his ears and eyes open to see if there's a French equivalent of Kew anywhere, but I myself have made enquiries and I don't think there is. They obviously don't go in for such things.

Be writing again soon, dears, until then,  
Lots of love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

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59 Ernest Edward Cox (1917–1984). They had married on 10 August 1940, but the war had estranged them.

Monday 5<sup>th</sup> March 1945

My Dear Bessie &amp; Stan,

Well, here I am at long last, popping up with another news letter from the Western Front! Am I kidding?

I note from the ever faithful Diary that I last wrote you a letter on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> Feb. so will take it from there.

That very evening I went to the local cinema and saw a screamingly funny film called "Janie" with Robert Hutton, Edward Arnold, Ann Harding and "Janie"—can't remember who she was now.<sup>60</sup> Anyway, it's jolly good entertainment if you're in the laughing mood.

On Tuesday we were Duty Watch and work was the main feature of the day with a general tidy-up in the cabin that evening.

On Wednesday I was shown a little more of Montmartre. I'm afraid that now it's really my favourite part of Paris—afraid, because that's not what's expected of the visitor really. I mean, the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe etc. are so wonderful that that's what you're supposed to remember and rave over. Well, while I do appreciate all that, at the same time I think the real Parisians and the real heart of old Paris lies in Montmartre and it's quite a simple little place—just like an English market town really.

It has a Clovelly-like atmosphere in that it climbs up the side of a hill (its name comes from that, meaning Hill of Martyrs) and there are just flights and flights of stone steps to be climbed if you want to go any place. The streets are narrow and twisty and then suddenly one comes upon a large cobbled square and there'll be roundabouts painted in gay colours and stalls of vegetables and lovely spring flowers and little shops selling religious symbols—they have hundreds of the latter out here—little blue beaded pictures of the Virgin and masses of rosaries etc. etc. They really commercialise religion in a way, I think.

Of course, we (that is Ken and I) passed all the notorious night-clubs and cafes and they looked quite harmless I thought but Ken assured me that they're not and steered me firmly past!

Well crowning the whole town and surmounted on the hill is the wonderful Sacre Coeur. You remember I sent home a small set of snaps of it? I thought then it was the loveliest church I had ever seen and I think so now. It's unbelievably beautiful.

Having made the great climb, we descended the other side of the hill and came to a very quiet and self-effacing building which

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<sup>60</sup> The eponymous Janie was played by Joyce Reynolds.

when I asked him, Ken told me was a convent out of which once you'd entered you never came out again. It was for nuns only and their only contact with the outside world was that some nuns from another nearby convent shopped etc. for them and brought the food and other requisites in to them. They themselves once they've crossed the threshold never come out again. He told me that when the Germans were in occupation they'd gone in and brought out one old woman who hadn't seen the outside world for sixty years!

Then we saw the only remaining windmill in Paris which has apparently been there for years and years. They still have the original millstones outside too.

Having by this time walked up so many stairs and on so many cobbles we dashed down into Paris proper and had tea in the N.A.A.F.I. We then went to see "Shine on Harvest Moon" with Ann Sheridan and Denis Morgan. Two good songs out of that film—"Time Waits for No-one" and "So Dumb But So Beautiful"—I enjoyed it quite a lot.

On Thursday—Dewi Sant according to the Thomas<sup>61</sup> but St. David's Day in any Englishman's mind—didn't do much except write to Mum and clean the cabin in the evening.

On Friday I wrote you a p.c. of a corner in Montmartre which I'd visited on Wednesday and also wrote a couple of other letters. In the evening we went to the cinema on the camp here and saw Errol Flynn and Ronald Regan in "Desperate Journey"—honestly it was the craziest film I've ever seen—quite impossible, but nevertheless, we laughed over it!

We're now in the middle of what we call our nine day stretch. In fact it's that one week we get Tuesday afternoon off and then we have no more time off until the Thursday week! Consequently we don't go out very much and nothing very newsy or exciting happens for me to tell you.

By the way, on Thursday I intend to get your perfume, but I was afraid that a bottle would break so I've seen some solidified perfume about and I'll get that. I made up a parcel to send to Geg, but then someone or rather several people said that they'd recently sent parcels home and heavy duty had had to be paid on them so I didn't want that to happen to Geg just now so I'm getting a Duty Free Label as soon as I can and will send the things for her, for you and one or two odds and ends for Mum as well in the one parcel. I think I'd better address it to you, but if you'd rather

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61 Ginge.

not I'll send it all to Geg and let her distribute it. I'll enclose too a lipstick for Eleanor—at Mrs Duncan's—but if you don't think you can manage to deliver this easily—let me know and I'll try sending a separate little package, only a lipstick's so small to do up.

Oh, and another thing—honest Bess I'm always asking you to do things for me these days—we're now allowed chits for stockings, two per month, two pairs I mean, and can send them home signed and ask someone to get them for us. I've just requested my chit, and when I get it if I send it to you, d'you think when you've a spare minute (if ever) you could slip over to Etam's in Ilford and get some for me? If you don't think you'll be able to manage it, I could send the chit to one of the girls in London who used to work with us and ask them, probably Betty would get them for me, so don't be afraid to say if it would complicate life too much, will you?

Talking of complications, how's Stan these days? All post-operation effects now cleared up I hope. And how're you? Cold gone yet?

Must send a card to Geg and Jacqueline also to-day.

Don't think there's anything else I wanted to say at the moment, dear, so will say God bless, take care and lots of love to you both.

From Joan

Xxxx

P.S. Give my love to all at Post 10A.

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Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> March 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Well and how are you both? O.K. I hope. I'm fine myself—no colds, no worries and at the moment no work! I've been going through my writing case and have discovered a letter from you dated 26<sup>th</sup> Feb. I also note that I last wrote to you on 1<sup>st</sup> March, so possibly haven't answered that letter and will do so now.

I'm glad Terry is behaving so well—it makes such a difference when you're away from home doesn't it? Still he always was easier to manage than David, although I myself have always found Dave easy to cope with.

I had a letter from the Gouprys asking me to go and see them again and wondering why I hadn't been, but it was only by chance that I got the letter because it had been wrongly addressed, so I think that the best thing is to ignore it as if I hadn't received it at all, but of course, it is very awkward as you know I don't like do-

ing anything like that.<sup>62</sup>

Hey there, Mother mine, you're slipping. I never hear from you personally these days? I bet you're out and about the countryside all day now and haven't time to sit down and write to poor little me! Is that it?

I'm so glad that the weather is tops. It does make such a difference down there doesn't it? Here also we are enjoying fairly good times as the sun shines most days and although it's still fairly chilly the fact that the sun's out makes one feel brighter altogether.

I had a letter from Bessie dated 2<sup>nd</sup> March which I haven't answered yet and as I expect she will have told you Stan is still not better and able to go to work yet. I do feel so sorry for him. It must be awful to have such pains in the head. Still he seems to be receiving good treatment so I expect we must just hope that it will all be over soon.

She also told me that they'd both seen Jacqueline and thought she was just wonderful. They say she's so tiny and pretty just like a doll—I would love to see her. I expect you would too, I keep forgetting that because you're in England doesn't mean you see her.

Has she told you that my voting papers came through with my name as John H. Prior instead of Joan! What a scream! Anyway she had it put right for me. Poor Bess, she seems to have to dash around putting everything right for everyone! Specially me.

I hear also from Bess that you say there are daffodils our already in your part of the world. Lucky you! These last few days I've been so homesick for England. I guess that "Oh to be in England now that April's here" stuff really is true.<sup>63</sup> All the winter I've not minded being away but now that Spring's coming I want to go to South Weald<sup>64</sup> and see the violets in the woods and the primroses and the daffodils and tulips lining the flagged path up to the church there, remember? And I want to see our apple tree in blossom on the lawn and the bulbs shooting up and flowering under the tree there—I can picture it all so clearly in my mind's eye and I would so love to see it in reality.

On Sunday I went for a walk through some woods quite near to the camp and found what I thought at first were violets, but they were some other kind of mauve flower and they were beautiful. I did manage to find a few violets though and some wild strawberry

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62 Grace Prior, characteristically xenophobic, had expressed great displeasure in Joan's fraternising with a French family. Joan appears to have appeased her, perhaps because of her mother's fragile mental health.

63 Joan succumbs to the familiar misquotation of Browning's 'Home Thoughts, from Abroad', substituting time 'here' for place 'there'.

64 South Weald Country Park near Brentwood, Essex.

plants in flower and of course the ever faithful daisies. Made a world of difference to me finding those few little flowers. I felt quite refreshed and at home again. I also found a wonderful little chattering brook. You could stand still and listen to it gurgling along happily there all by itself with only the birds in competition. Remember the brook at South Weald? How I used to walk beside it even when it deviated from the main path?

Since I last wrote to you I've done very little in the way of entertainment I'm afraid, but what little I have done you shall know forthwith here and now etc. etc.

On Friday night I went to the cinema on the camp with Ginge and Saw Errol Flynn and Ronald Regan in "Desperate Journey" which was quite good entertainment but was quite impossible. It featured some Allied airmen who crashed in Germany and performed the most impossible feats, escaping from the Gestapo and doing all sorts of wild things. It was quite absurd really, but we had a good laugh over it.

On Saturday as on Thursday Ginge and I had a domestic evening. We've started doing that now. We've arranged a sort of system so that almost every other night we stay in and sweep and dust the cabin, spend quite a long time over our hair, brushing it etc. and also get in an all-over wash for ourselves (just as good as a bath, I don't think!). Still we feel better after it and can enjoy ourselves on the other evenings with no nagging feeling that we haven't "done" the cabin and ourselves for days.

On Sunday we were Duty Watch, but as we hadn't much to do I thought it would be an idea if we went out in one's for about an hour's walk.<sup>65</sup> That was when I went into the woods near the camp and found the violets!

Yesterday I wrote to Bess and also dropped a postcard to Mrs Snell and David and hope that perhaps David will scribble me a line in reply. I'd love to hear from him.

Don't think there's anything else that I've to tell you at the moment my dears, so will say cheerio for a bit and will write again soon and until then take care and God bless you both my dears.

Lots of love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

P.S. Give my love to Mag and Fred and also to Terry with a great big hug and a kiss for him.

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65 That is, singly, since they were supposed to be on duty.

Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> March 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

Have almost at very long last got to the despatching stage of this long-promised parcel of mine. I should think it's beginning to sound like a myth to everyone at home. However, I shall get your perfume this afternoon and then I think it's complete.

I've included everything for everyone in it and am afraid I'm going to ask you to pass them on. If you can't manage to give them to people could you post them for me please, Bess, or get rid of them somehow or other. I've enquired about a Duty Free label and I can now get one, so don't repeat don't pay any duty on their parcel when it arrives—it's not repeat not necessary!

Peggy wrote and asked me to get her a curl-comb. Well that was easy, but honestly you just can't do up a parcel containing nothing but a curl-comb—it's so small, so I've enclosed this for her too. Another similar thing is that Mrs. Duncan's niece Eleanor asked me to get her a lipstick. I've got a Lizzie Arden—that was simple,<sup>66</sup> but when it came to making a parcel out of one small lipstick I was stumped again! Sorry to bother you about these little things, but didn't know how to send them otherwise.

The Bootees, Baby Brush, Stationery and Ribbon are for Geg and the baby. The Kirbigrips are for you and Mum, as are the combs. Keep what you like and send the rest to Mum, or give them to her when she comes back if you like.

I've also enclosed my Pen, dear, as I find it impossible to get a gold nib for it over here. There's some funny rule about if you give up something gold they'll exchange it or something, but I went into one large pen shop where the woman spoke English and she said I wouldn't get a gold nib anywhere in Paris they just aren't making them now. If you are in London at any time, or know anyone who will be and they could drop it in at Conway Stewart's I think that would be the only solution to the problem. However, I've been without it for so long now that I've more or less got used to it and it doesn't matter much, so don't go out of your way specially will you.

Think that's about all the parcel gen. Will add a bit more to this if I get time before I leave to-day. Until then, So-long.

Well, here I am again, after all. Now, I must get down to answering your letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> March which I received just as I'd posted my last letter to you.

I wrote to Millie on Tuesday thanking her in anticipation for

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66 Elizabeth Arden

the candles and generally having a chat. I can just imagine Margaret being thrilled over the card from Paris! Bless her!

So glad Geg and Jacqueline are keeping well. I had a letter from her yesterday saying she was going to Burtle for a few days and think it's best really if you're still getting disturbances at home, don't you?

I'm so sorry to hear you're not much better, Stan, it must be absolutely wretched for you. I wince just to think of it myself. Hope it's better soon anyway.

Oh, yes. About this P.O. Savings Book. About two days before my leave was up I drew some money out of the post office and the girl said could they keep my book for making it up. I said it was difficult because I was stationed overseas and was only on leave but she said if I put my service address on an envelope she'd send it on. This I did, but it seems as though they've sent it back to my home address after all. If you would send it on to me I shall be very grateful as I should now like to put some money in for a change! Strange but very true!

Thanks for altering my name on the voting papers—trust them to get me wrong, see, everything happens to me!

I'd love to see our garden now, with the apple tree and the spring flowers in bud—they'll be out soon and then it'll look grand won't it?

The *Mirror* which you send to Ron (thanks a lot) is O.K. His address is still the same as far as I know—I write to the same address anyway, although I don't hear and shan't until he makes landfall I expect.<sup>67</sup>

Since last I wrote I've seen one excellent film called "Arsenic and Old Lace" with Cary Grant, Priscilla Lane, Ed. Everett Horton and Raymond Massey. Remember I saw the play in London and Naunton Wayne took Cary Grant's part—I loved it then and just now when I saw it as a film it was smashing! You must see it come storm or shine, Bess, you'd love it! I was just rolling around in my seat with laughter!

Well, sorry pets haven't time for any more just now. God Bless, and please take care of yourselves won't you?

Lots of love

From Joan

Xxxx

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67 Ron had disembarked in Italy on 28 February 1945.



TOP SECRET.  
SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
PERIOD 1<sup>ST</sup> TO 15<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1945, inclusive.

2. During the last three months a steady increase has been shown in the number ships which have completed repairs in the port of ANTWERP. This is a matter of congratulation to all concerned as the work has been carried out under difficult and arduous conditions.

3. Our shipping continues to be menaced by mines, E-boat and midget submarine but casualties were light during the period under review.

4. U.S. L C.V.P. did magnificent work in assisting the First U.S. Army at the REMAGEN bridgehead. They proved invaluable in the building of the pontoon bridge and in addition were used for casualty evacuation, ferrying, patrol work and netlaying.

5. Force T carried out a full programme of small raids with minor landing craft at various points on the islands of SCHOUWEN and OVERFLAKKEE. From these raids it was deduced that the enemy was no longer working with patrols but had instead established strong points heavily protected by mines.

6. On the night of 8th/9th March enemy forces from the CHANNEL ISLANDS carried out a raid on GRANVILLE. Damage was done to port facilities and to Allied shipping in the harbour. We sustained casualties and the enemy took some prisoners. One enemy minesweeper was lost. Means of strengthening the defences of this part of the French Coast have since been under discussion.

7. Difficulty was experienced in meeting the U.S. Army requirements for the cross-channel troop lift. In order to meet the peaks, four ships from a C.U. convoy did one trip across to LE HAVRE. H.M.S. ROYAL ULSTERMAN was released from training duties and re-joined the SOUTHAMPTON/LE HAVRE shuttle. It was also agreed that L.S.T.(2) could carry up to 300 troops in order to tide over the crisis.

8. On the 15<sup>th</sup> March Commander U.S. Naval Forces, France, assumed all the functions previously performed by Commander U.S. Naval Ports and Bases, France.<sup>68</sup>

H.M. Burrough



ADMIRAL.

\* \* \*

Friday 16<sup>th</sup> March 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

Well, first and foremost I'll answer your last letter dated 10<sup>th</sup>, and then take it from there.

I'm glad Geg is going to Somerset because it's such a worry with the baby isn't it? I had a letter from Mum telling me all about her going down there, and I do hope she'll be able to have Terry really because I think Mum's nerves are getting bad again and he worries her. Unnecessarily of course, because she thinks he has the same effect on everyone else as he has on her whereas they probably don't find him tiresome at all. She's not really right yet, I suppose, although I wish she could be—it makes life difficult for her and for those around her. Still we can do nothing but hope and pray she gets completely well soon.<sup>69</sup>

Thanks a lot about the stockings, dear, I'm enclosing the chit in this letter. Do you ever cease doing things for me I wonder? Thanks, anyway.

Yes I did get the candles and the papers thanks, they've not been needed since I got them funnily enough, but any minute now I expect the wretched lights will go again.

I'm glad Stan is able to go back to work at last and hope he isn't rushing it unduly by going back too soon. Hope everything goes O.K. at the hospital anyway.

I must say the social and dance sounded fun. It must have been nice too meeting all the old crowd you used to see such a lot of

68 Extract from ANCXF naval war diary 1–15 March 1945 (20 April 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.

69 Grace Prior's mental health was an ongoing cause of sibling concerns.

when Stan was full-time N.F.S.<sup>70</sup>

Honestly, those windows! How do you manage to cope and to keep so cheerful about the whole thing.<sup>71</sup> I think you're very wise really not to have them replaced again. They're things which are so very easily broken and these days you never can tell from one minute to another can you? How wonderful that Jacqueline is so good. That's the sort of baby I could cope with. Sleep all day and sleep all night, but they're few and far between aren't they?

We've started our maintenance dose of anti-typhus inoculations again, and these stretch over a period of three weeks. I've had two and am just recovering in fact from the second one although I still have a stiff arm.

On Thursday I went to Paris with Ken and we again improved our knowledge of Montmartre. I just love that place. On Saturday we went to a gigantic fun-fair called Luna Park.<sup>72</sup> Ken vowed I should be able to look after myself in case of emergency and taught me to shoot on the rifle range there. After the first couple of shots which went wide, I settled down to it quite well, and believe it or not scored a bulls-eye for the next fifteen or so shots! I called it beginner's luck, but of course Ken speaking with the authority of a pukka Royal Marine, said that there was no such thing as luck in shooting. It was all terrific fun though, we went on Dodgem Cars, Scenic railway, oh, all sorts of things and had a hectic time altogether. I was almost in a state of collapse in the end!

The Y.W.C.A.<sup>73</sup> have opened a club in Paris now which serves lunch, tea, dinner and supper and the meals there are delicious. We badly needed something like that where we could eat really.

On Sunday Ken learned that he was going on draft on Monday so we spend a pleasant last evening together, he buying me masses of flowers ("to get rid of all these odd dirty many-coloured notes", according to Ken) and giving me as a parting gift an alarm clock, because he'd heard so much about how I hate getting up in the morning and always rely on someone to call me! The joke is, that since we've had it in the cabin and have set the alarm, that is four days, it's gone off apparently and wakened the girls in the cabin next door, but neither Ginge nor I

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70 The National Fire Service (1941–1948) in which Stan Bones served (latterly only part-time).

71 The front-room windows at 64 Hulse Avenue were blown out only months after having been replaced from a previous bomb-blast.

72 Located in the Porte Maillot district of Paris.

73 Young Women's Christian Association.

have heard it! Typical isn't it? I daren't tell him or he'll probably come rushing back to throw it at me!

I saw Deanna Durbin in "Christmas Holiday" at the cinema on the camp but didn't like it very much and certainly wouldn't recommend it.

On Wednesday we had a dance at Quarters and it went very well indeed.

Since then I've had a very lazy time really and haven't been out and about very much. However, to-morrow I have a day off and expect I'll visit the Gay City.

Yesterday lunchtime we walked around in the grounds of the Chateau here and came across enormous patches of blue and white violets. I was with Ginge and Kay and we each picked a bunch and now have them on our desks in the office. They smell simply heavenly.

Don't think I've any more news at the moment, dears, and as a job is waiting on my desk to be done, I'll say cheerio, God Bless, and take care of yourselves won't you?

Lots of love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

P.S. Have just heard from Ron and his address now is:-  
Pte. R. Smith 6024738,  
The Essex Regt.,  
2 Plt, A Coy.  
Re-allocation Centre, (all arms),  
C.M.F.

P.P.S. About the stockings dear. If you like to take this letter to Etam's just in case they query it. It's now established that this is a perfectly proper and legal way to do things. We are now allowed to send signed chits home and then have the stockings sent to us. Actually Etam's have always been wonderfully helpful and obliging whenever I've bought stockings there. If they haven't fully-fashioned in at the moment could you leave it for a bit until they do have them please, as they wear so much longer and we don't often get chits for new ones now out here.

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Fig. 5.4. Target Shooting Card from Luna Park, 10 March 1945. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 5.5. Art Spry, George Mellor, Stan Swann (RMs), Luna Park, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

JEAN GORDON: Whoever was in charge of recreation for the forces in France at that time did their best and dances, clubs and cabaret were organised. Noel Coward came out and gave us a two-hour long entertainment with only his pianist as accompaniment. This was held in the building in the grounds of the chateau which was used for all assemblies (or “musters”) and as a chapel on Sundays.<sup>74</sup>

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> March 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Well, this is the first day of Spring, and what a lovely day it is too. It's just wonderful! Before I enthuse any more, however, how are you both and everyone else down Zummerzset Way? How's you, Mum? Better I hope with the lovely warm weather coming. It should do you good to go out and sit quiet a bit in the garden with some magazines. I wish you could come over here for a little holiday—even if only for a week I'm sure you'd love it. You could just sit in the sun on the boulevards all day and watch the world go by. And what a colourful world it is too! Ah, well, that's only wishful thinking I'm afraid.

On Sunday Ginge, Tricia, Kay and myself went to Paris and sat in the sun on the Champs Elysees and watched the people wander past in their new Spring Fashions, and the kiddies playing in the park. It was a wonderfully warm day and we sat and sunned ourselves until it got a bit cool when we went to see a film called “A Song to Remember” with Merle Oberon. This was the life story of Chopin, and while not being true to his life, the music was simply delightful and we enjoyed every minute of it, especially as it was in technicolour [sic] and the clothes were lovely.

On Monday the highlight of the day was a personal visit to our camp of Noel Coward who entertained us for about an hour and a half in our camp cinema. He was simply magnificent. We enjoyed every minute of it. He sang many of his famous songs including “Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans” which caused such a fuss on the B.B.C. a while back. He also “did” a couple of poems by Clemence Dane which were very good, and one or two new things which were very funny. We were all exhausted with laughter by the time we got home.

Yesterday we had quite a quiet day, and so far to-day has prom-

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74 Jean Gordon (Irvine) (Leading Wren), ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’, unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, H670.1990/5.

ised to be equally unexciting, although something is sure to crop up to present us with a laugh—it always does.

I must say Spring has started off in wonderful style here as the weather really had to be seen to be believed—it's great. Clear skies, warm sun and everything just budding and bursting to be the first showing colour. In the fields and grounds of our Chateau the grass is literally smothered with primroses yellow and blue, and violets, white and blue, and cowslips. I've never seen so many growing wild anywhere before.

Well now I'll get around to answering your lovely letter of 15<sup>th</sup> which I received a day or two ago.

I'm so very glad that the weather is as good where you are because I know down there it does make such a difference.

My ever faithful friend Ginge has taken "um" that is to say is a bit chokker about a remark of your father mine. You say in your letter "that sort of thing is not uncommon amongst our government clerks" and having been one of they, as the locals say, for some years she'd have you know it doesn't apply to each and every one. However, I know from your particular experience what a time you've had trying to push some sense into their heads, and when I'd explained this, I think you were forgiven.

I'm glad Geg is away with you at last. It must have been panic trying to find somewhere in the village for her to stay. Do let me know where she is so's I can drop her a line, but in the meantime give her my love and also to Jacqueline and Terry.

I envy you your visits to Loxley Woods,<sup>75</sup> although the woods here are of course delightful.

Yes, I hear often from Ron and he is still at the re-allocation centre. I remember he had the same address before he went into the printing office at Naples. I think it's a sort of camp where they keep all men available for posting and just draft them for various jobs from there.<sup>76</sup>

Sorry, Mum. I received your letter after I'd written that to you, but take it all back now. It was a lovely long letter Mum and I enjoyed reading it—especially going to South Weald. Keep them coming.

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75 Loxley Wood: fifty acres of ancient woodland near Shapwick, beneath the Polden Hills in the Sedgemoor district of Somerset.

76 In November 1944, Ron had been posted to HQ Army Welfare Services, from whence he was attached to the British Army Newspaper Unit for training as a draughtsman in the printing office in Naples. Before being called up for military service, Ron had been apprenticed in the print trade with Messrs George Berridge and Co., 174 Upper Thames Street, London, where his father had worked as an engine driver and his older brothers Jack and Will were employed. He returned to complete his apprenticeship on leaving the army in 1946.

Not a lot more to say and certainly not much time to say it in—it's now ten to six and I've a dozen things to do before I go. I'm Duty Leading Wren to-night which means I've to stay up late to check all the girls in but still I suppose I must earn my bread even if I get my jam for nothing.

S'all for now. My love to everyone there and heaps to yourselves. God bless all the time.

Lots of love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

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Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

I sent you a Mabel Lucie<sup>77</sup> yesterday acknowledging the lovely flowers, but thank you once again—they were, oh, I can't tell you—just like a breath of air in an English wood! Took me right back to Loxley Woods and all the lovely things that go with it. Swain's Jumps in particular<sup>78</sup>—that was the first thing I saw coming back from the station with Ivor!

I was so sorry to hear that Mag is not quite on top of the world, and do hope she's O.K. by the time you receive this. Give her my love, and Fred too, please.

To-day, Sunday, we're "Duty Watch" and that means we're in the office all day. However, it's not a very nice day—the first rough day we've had for about a week now—almost inclined to rain, really, but very close and sultry.

I had a letter from Geg written on 22<sup>nd</sup> March together with an Easter Card. She seems fairly well and happy as are all the children and seems to like it in her new billet. I'm glad she's away really, because with the baby it's such a worry these days isn't it? She says she's getting quite plump—but knowing Geg I find that difficult to believe. She's never been plump! I can't imagine it, somehow.

I also had a nice long newsy letter from Bessie written on 17<sup>th</sup> March, good old St. Patrick's Day! She says it seems awfully fun-

77 A postcard by Mabel Lucie Attwell, popular kitsch illustrator and a favourite of Joan's.

78 Swain's (or Swayne's) Jumps, or Leaps, are a line of four or five stones in Loxley Wood to which local legends have become attached. Jan Swayne, a Shapwick villager and supporter of Monmouth's failed rebellion, was arrested in 1685. But in an apparent show of his celebrated athletic prowess before his family and villagers, he evaded the militia by leaping into the boggy woodland undergrowth where he lay low until his pursuers called off the search.



ny now that Geg's gone away and Stan's back to work and you're both away too—kind of lonesome sometimes, but she says she'll get over it in a couple of days. It's having had Stan home such a while she thinks. She'd just received a box of primroses from Geg and she was thrilled! She just couldn't stop looking at them. Poor old Stan is still having to attend the hospital every week and must be in terrible pain I should think.

Mail has just come in and I've a letter from Reg Wood of Britannic fame—remember?<sup>79</sup> And also from Bill.<sup>80</sup> The latter dear soul has enclosed letters from two of his pals to me. I expect they're so very bored with life out there, the climate's rotten and their job isn't a picnic exactly, that they welcome letters no end. Never rains but what it pours does it? Some days I get no mail at all, others I have heaps to answer.

Must stop now, please, because I've got a truck to catch so's I can get some supper.

Will write again sooner than that, but in the meantime, keep smiling, God bless and all my love to you both,

From Joan

Xxxx

P.S. Love to Terry and David too.

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Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> March 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

Just trying to send another few lines to get up to date with my news such as it is, so although I only wrote you last night, here I am again.

I just can't remember where I got up to with my news from this end, so I'll start from St. Patrick's Day and work up from there.

Well, on that Saturday, Tricia and I went to see Bette Davis and Claude Rains in "Mr. Skeffington". It was marvellous—if you get the chance, do go and see it, I know you'll love it. Bette's acting is of course superb.

I've also seen Joan Fontaine in "Frenchman's Creek" which I wasn't particularly struck on, except that the colouring was good.

Yet another on my films-I've-seen list is "A Song to Remember" with Merle Oberon. It's supposed to be the life of Chopin, but of

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79 R. W. Wood (District Manager Britannic Assurance, Romford).

80 Bill Porter, RAAF.

course it isn't true and is very Americanised. However, the music is still original Chopin and is very beautiful. I just love Chopin's music so the film was a success as far as I was concerned.

Sorry, this paper looks messy. I'm afraid we've been rather busy lately and I haven't had time to clean my machine, so I hope you'll excuse the dirty marks.

Well, anyway, since all the above happened, I've seen a most queer film called "Murder, My Sweet" with Dick Powell, Ann Shirley, Claire Trevor & Otto Kruger. Honestly, it was odd. It was a kind of pseudo Orson Welles thing, you know, all in the dark, and pouring with rain, but whereas I really go for the latter, this was just peculiar. Still we laughed a lot over it anyway!

On Saturday I went with Tricia and Kay to see Andre Kostelanetz and his orchestra at the Paris Opera House. I expect you've heard him on the wireless—at any rate on the A.E.F. programme.<sup>81</sup> He has quite a large orchestra and they were wonderful. Highlight of the performance was the appearance of Lily Pons (apparently his wife) who sang many songs. People just wouldn't let her go and she sang song after song. She has got a marvellous voice though, I must say.

The orchestra played Ravel's "Bolero", Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue", the last movement of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust", a medley of American Folk Tunes, and a medley of Scottish airs and one or two other things. They also of course accompanied Lily Pons with her operatic arias and other things she sang. The only thing which wasn't a success to my mind was when she sang "Summertime" from Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess". It was of course written for coloured people and the opera itself did have a coloured cast and I've heard a coloured woman sing it before. I s'pose that's what put me off really. She sang it O.K., but there was just that something missing all the time.

The Opera House itself of course is a gorgeous place, all gilt and red plush and crystal glittering chandeliers! Very imposing and aristocratic!

Well, that's all the news for the moment from the Wren front. However, I've now received your letter dated 23<sup>rd</sup> March! The mail service is looking up!

Glad you've come out of the blues, Bess. Knew it wasn't really like you. I'm awfully sorry about Stan, though. Honestly I don't know how he keeps so cheerful I'm sure I shouldn't. It must be ghastly for him.

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81 BBC's Allied Expeditionary Force radio service.

It was a bit of luck that you were able to go to yet another N.F.S. dance so soon, wasn't it? Isn't it funny how you go for weeks without being able to and then suddenly you can go to two or three.

I share your love of fairs too, but at least I am careful what I hit!

No, Ginger's Kenn didn't go with Ken, and I'm awfully glad really because they're so very happy and I know what it's like to miss someone like that. I'm still trying to get used to Ken's going—it does seem strange, after his being with this Party since last May. It's quite a while.

If I can, Bess, I'll get an alarm clock and bring it home next time we have leave (if ever)! I don't think I dare trust it to the post anyway.

You're never still getting entangled with the lead from the vacuum cleaner? Honestly it's a bit much. I can distinctly remember reading you a passage from "Three Men in a Boat" once about them getting tied up in the tow-line! Even that didn't help. You still do it!

I heard from Bill yesterday and the poor boy is still up to his ankles in mud and it rains continually. I do feel sorry for him. Apparently mail is scarce out there, so two of his pals enclosed letters to me too! So here I am yet widening the circle!

I'm still O.K. and keeping free from all ailments including colds, so I consider myself very lucky.

By the way, I sent Mill, George and Margaret an Easter Card and also a while back I sent a letter, and I've an awful horror that I haven't got their surname right. Is it RAWSON? I do hope so. If not could you tell me what it is please, so's I'll know in future? Which reminds me, when's the infant's birthday? I'd like to send her a card from "Sailor".

Don't think there's anything else I want to say just now, except take care, and God Bless all the time.

Lots of love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

P.S. Just remembered. Can you get me any shampoos? They're queer over here and I don't like to trust to them. If poss. Palm Olive but if not any fairly wellknown make—Amami, Icilma, Evan Williams etc.

Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> March 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Thanks a lot for your letter of 26<sup>th</sup> March with the newspaper cutting. Yes, it was interesting reading all about old Blake. It's funny I suppose, but Somerset seems like my second home to me and we were always so fond of "old Blake" especially his gardens in Bridgwater that I was glad to hear he's been laid with the elite of Britain.<sup>82</sup>

By the way, I'm enclosing some more snaps of me—not very good really, but that's what they turned out like, so you may as well have them good, bad or indifferent.

I had a letter from Bill on Monday and he enclosed notes from two of his pals who thought they'd like to write to me! Said they feel as though they knew me! Boy, they don't know the half, but perhaps it's just as well. Anyhow I expect I'll slip a note to them when I get a minute as it must be rotten being stationed out there.

I also had a letter from Reg Wood from the *Britannic*, you know, and he's in India now! Honestly the number of people finding their way to India is amazing!

On Thursday I went with Tricia to see a play called "Saloon Bar" which was a film in England at one time, I believe, with Gordon Harker as the star. Anyhow although he wasn't in this production, it was very well acted and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Last night Tricia and I again went out and saw a film this time called "The Thin Man Comes Home". You know it was one of the "Thin Man" series starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. It was very good indeed.

I've asked Bess if she can get any to send me a couple of shampoos, but if you see any Mum if you go into Bridgwater, d'you think you could send me some please? Palm Olive, is my favourite, but otherwise, anything you think will be O.K. will do.

We've been quite busy of late and consequently I haven't had much time for shopping or anything like that, but even so I've not seen any shampoos over here.

The weather here is still being simply wonderful and as we're the Duty Watch to-day we're off from 1 till 5pm so Ginge, Kay and I are going back to Quarters to lay in the sun. We have large grounds to the Quarters and they're really lovely just now, although not as lovely I expect as the lanes round Catcott and Stahl etc.<sup>83</sup>

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82 Blake Garden. A municipal park in Bridgwater, Somerset. Named after Bridgwater-born General Robert Blake (1598–1657), opened on 9 August 1902 to celebrate the coronation of King Edward VII. A memorial stone to Blake was laid in the south choir aisle of Westminster Abbey on 27 February 1945.

83 Actually Stawell, a village near Catcott on the Polden ridge. But Joan spelt it phonetically, if Germanicly.

Funny thing, when we went to see "Saloon Bar" we sat next to three R.A.F. boys and I got into conversation with the one next to me and noticed his accent and I asked him whether he came from Somerset and he said he did and how did I guess. Of course I told him you were down there now and it turned out that we knew a lot of the same places. He actually came from Frome. Isn't it a small world. He said that he'd give anything to see the countryside round there now so I told him I'd had a piece of it sent to me the previous week. Of course he thought I'd gone mad or something, but I explained about you sending me the flowers from Loxley woods wrapped in moss and earth and he said "Please stop—you're making me so homesick!" I did feel sorry for him. Still I s'pose he's not so far away from home as a good many fellows.

Well, I don't think I've any more news this end. I bought some more postcard views this week so's I'll be able to send you a card in between letters again.

I'm glad Geg, Terry and David and the baby seem to be doing so well. Of course it's what they all needed really isn't it? The quiet, the country air and this lovely weather. How's Mrs Snell, Aunt Lucy and all her family? Mag & Fred? I hope her cold is better now. And of course most important of all—how are you both? I don't 'spect there's much wrong with you Paddy—you always were so full of beans—me too! But how are you Mum? Please try to get fit and well again, like you did when you were down there before, remember? All nice and rosy and plump and smiling again. I know it's difficult, but just try will you, please? 'Cos I feel so worried about you if you're not quite well.

There, well, I'm afraid I simply must go now—I've got a job to do right now. Bye-bye now. Will write again soon, but until then—Take care, God Bless and Happy Easter.

Lots of love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

TOP SECRET.  
SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
PERIOD 16<sup>TH</sup> TO 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 16<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1945, inclusive.

2. The danger to shipping on the NORE-FLUSHING route from mines, E-boats and midget U-boats continued. The midget U-boats have been particularly active, both in torpedo attacks and in minelaying. Vigorous counter action has been taken and there have been numerous sightings and attacks on midget U-boats by ships and aircraft. During the period under review there have been at least six successful attacks by ships and two by aircraft. Prisoners have been taken.

3. On the night 22<sup>nd</sup>/23<sup>rd</sup> a most successful interception was made, with air co-operation, on two groups of E-boats approaching the NORE-FLUSHING channel. M.T.B.s vectored by H.M.S. TORRINGTON and H.M.S. SEYMOUR engaged the enemy and forced them to retire before reaching the channel. In a similar action on the night 25<sup>th</sup>/26<sup>th</sup> two E-boats were set on fire.

4. Force T made three raids on SCHOUWEN. Two were without opposition, in the third 12 enemy were killed for the loss of two killed and four wounded.

5. A request was made for air attack on a SPERRBRECHER at IJMUIDEN as she was believed to be intended for use as a blockship.

6. Enemy V weapon attacks came to an end on 30<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>84</sup>

H.M. Burrough



ADMIRAL.

\* \* \*

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> April 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

Crazy me! I wrote you yesterday and said I was enclosing some snaps and then I forgot to put them in. Anyway I'm sending them now with this and hope they reach you O.K.

One is of Margaret, Ginge and me—it's Margaret's camera, see.

Another is of Margaret & I sitting on a milestone—and the other is of the three of us again sitting on a plough—a very old plough I think—it was most unsafe!

<sup>84</sup> Extract from ANCXF Naval War Diary 16–31 March 1945 (12 May 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.

Sorry can't stop to write more now—take care of yourselves  
and God bless you both.

Lots of love,  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*



Fig. 5.6. Margaret Beverley, 'Ginge' Thomas and Joan Prior, outside the guardhouse, Château d'Hennemont, St Germain-en-Laye, Spring 1945. Private papers of Joan



Fig. 5.7. Joan Prior and Margaret Beverley, St Germain-en-Laye, Spring 1945. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 5.8. 'Ginge' Thomas, Joan Prior and Margaret Beverley, St Germain-en-Laye, Spring 1945. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1945

My Dearest Mum & Paddy,

After I scribbled you a note yesterday enclosing the snaps which I'd forgotten to enclose in my letter of the day before, Ginge and I had lunch and then went to see a film called "Mrs. Parkington" starring Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon. It was an excellent film and we both enjoyed it very much.

To-day apparently there's some ceremony and parade in Paris in which General de Gaulle gives the various French Regiments back their colours. It's the third time in the history of France that this has happened as when France is conquered she loses her colours and then is represented with them on the Liberation. Fancy having that happen three times! And yet they don't seem at all ashamed about it. Paris is simply bristling with flags and in the Place de la Concorde an enormous dais has been raised and large composition towers with flags and Crosses of Lorraine and all sorts of bunting and decorations. All the people were going about yesterday waving small Tricolours and all along the route for the parade barricades have been erected to prevent the people from going into the roadway! I tell you—it's fair panic!

When we got back to Quarters last night Ginge had a letter to say her Auntie had passed away. It was very sad and I felt at a loss to know what to say to her, but really we both knew that it was best for her Auntie as she had been in such terrible agony for so long it seemed cruel to wish her to linger. She had the same thing as Ron's father you know, but she was in much more pain with it and had had it for so much longer.<sup>85</sup> Of course it isn't of much comfort to say that to anyone who's just lost their Mother—or at least she was the only Mum Ginge has ever known—but I think she was marvellous really. I'm sure I couldn't have taken the news so well, not in a thousand years, and I don't know anyone else who'd have been as plucky either. Well, it's over now and time will smooth it out I 'spect.

Thought I'd just write and tell you, as I don't like to bother Ginge with talking about it and I wanted to get it off my chest.

It's not a very nice day here now—terribly windy, but I s'pose we can't have sunshine all the time.

Hope you're all O.K. there, especially you, Mum, and take care won't you? God bless you both—be writing again soon.

All my love

Joan

Xxxx

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85 Stomach cancer.





Fig. 5.9. Postcard of L'Arc de Triomphe, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

How's things? Everything here is O.K. and I'm getting along fine. Hope the weather is still good for you and that everyone is O.K. Give my love to everyone I know and of course I send it to you both.

Lots of love

Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

Well, I'll start this off with saying Thanks once more for the stockings! Compared with most of the other girls, I'm rich! Everyone's just going over and over this stocking question here, because although we send chits home, it appears no-one back there can get them—I think you must be a genius to have found them for me!

Have just received your letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> March. Thanks for that too.

Well now, let's see, what have I done since I last wrote? Not much I think on the whole.

Yesterday Kay and I saw Bing Crosby's latest film with Betty Hutton called "Here Come the Waves". If it hadn't been Crosby, I'd have walked out. It was trash. Still he sang about three songs and I enjoyed those. One called "You've Got To Ac-cen-tuate the Positive" is particularly good I think and I can't stop singing it to-day.

Last night the padre held a gramophone recital in our cinema and I went to that. I enjoyed that too! Not much difference is there? The programme was a couple of Strauss Waltzes (including the Blue Danube), The Dance of the Hours, Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, and Mozart's Serenade for Strings. I loved it.

Now to answer your letter. So glad the mail caught up with you, even if it did all come in a rush.

With regard to the parcel. I didn't earmark the various combs for any particular person, but I'll get another two or three and send on to you as you seem to view them as "gold dust". Meantime, you can please yourself about the things for Mum & Geg. As you say, the news certainly is wonderful and I understand the flying bombs and rockets have had a lull too for a while recently. If you don't get any more, of course, I expect the family will come back.

I will try to get the alarm clock when I next come home, or rather just before I come home. I don't want to get it now in case it gets broken, but I promise to do my best.

Certainly you can take half the notepaper. I'll send another couple of boxes with the next parcel so that you can halve that too. I'm sorry, Bess, I really didn't give it a thought that you'd be short of it too. Can't think why. I just thought (when I bought it, mind, Geg was at home) that she was having to write to me, to Charlie, to David & Mrs Snell and then when she went away, to the family as well, and that she'd be going through it pretty quickly. Now that you mention it I can see you're not doing so badly yourself! You write often to me and of course to the family now they're away, so by all means help yourself, dear. Sorry, I didn't think of it before. I'll also send some more kirbigrips.

The Albert Hall concert sounded marvellous, I bet Stan loved it.

I was sorry to hear about Mill's whitlow—they're so painful—as you know! Glad Margaret liked the Easter Card—honestly this is a funny country. One minute I'm calling hell out of it because they make me so mad, and the next I'm thinking what lovely ideas they have, like their Easter & Christmas Cards and a hundred other things just like that, and I'm thinking what a wonderful place it is—see, the truth is, the place is crazy!

Don't worry about not having sent me an Easter Card dear because you know I don't normally send them at home. Here, you just couldn't ignore Easter if you wanted to. All the shops & cafes display Easter Cards, all the florists (of which there seem to be a great many) sell flowers like daisies, primulas, pansies, forget-me-nots—any small flowers, made into Easter Eggs, with the heads of the flowers showing outwards and the whole tied up with ribbons;

and all the department stores and lots of other shops too, fill their windows with chicks, bunny rabbits, Easter Eggs, and other similar things. It's really a festival over here which no-one overlooks.

I was interested to hear your views on "Wilson". I've heard such a lot of divergent views that I began to wonder what it was like. I haven't had the opportunity of seeing it yet, but if I do, you can bet I'll be there.<sup>86</sup>

Yes, I have seen "This Happy Breed"—I loved every minute of it.

I was so sorry to hear about Jacqueline. She can't afford to lose weight really can she? Must be like me, a Nestles Milk baby. Remember how I used to love it?

Poor old Stan. He's still undergoing treatment then? Let's hope that soon it will all be over and he'll feel comfortable again.

Can I come back to earth with some business for a minute Bess? First of all, next Monday I can get me a chit for another two pairs of stockings. When I send it on to you I'll enclose a P.O. for £1 as I think that will about cover the four pairs. If not, please let me know how much they were.

The next thing is the Daily Mirror which you send to Ron. It's occurred to me several times, and each time I've done nothing about it, but when I send you the stocking money I'll pay the outstanding paper money. I believe I always managed to more or less keep up to date until I went overseas. I've counted from that time on and up to 13<sup>th</sup> April it comes to 30 weeks, that's 15/-, so I'll send you a P.O. for £1.15—next week, dear.

Do you know what happened about my insurance which was due on 1st April? Before I came back from leave I paid Mum the rest of the premium up to April so that I believe she was going to pay it for me. I wondered whether she'd said anything to you, as she's away now. I'll write to her to-morrow and ask her about it anyway.

Must go now, as I've a job to do. Hope you're both keeping O.K. (except of course for Stan's polypi) and take care, won't you? God Bless and don't work too hard!

Lots of love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

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86 A 1944 Darryl F. Zanuck biopic of 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), starring Alexander Knox.



Fig. 5.10. Postcard of L'Hôtel de Ville, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> April 1945

Dear Mum & Paddy,

Just to let you know I received your letter last night, O.K. Will answer it in a minute, but in case I can't spare a minute, this is to let you know that everything here is O.K. God bless you and all my love,

Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Was very pleased to get your letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> April. I acknowledged it on a p.c. but haven't had a minute until now to reply to it. I was a lovely letter Mum dear—so newsy and all.

I do wish you were feeling a bit better Mum, as it worries me so out here to know you're not well.

I've never been to the Church at Chilton Polden but I can imagine it must have looked wonderful.<sup>87</sup>

It's funny you should have mentioned the War Bond insurance Mum because the day before I got your letter I wrote to Bessie and asked her whether she'd heard from you about it, as I was wondering how it would be paid with you away. If I remember rightly, I did pay you the premium up to 1<sup>st</sup> April, but I was wondering who would pay it for me. As you've already written to

87 St Edward's, Chilton Polden, Sedgemoor, a mile and a half from Catcott.

her, however, there's no need for me to worry about it any more. Thanks, a lot.

Yes, I hope Stan is soon quite better. These things seem to have lasted such a long while and of course must be so painful. I feel very sorry for him.

You asked after Mr. Wood.<sup>88</sup> Didn't I tell you, I had a letter from him about a week or two ago and he's in India! He doesn't like it very much because he never could stand the heat, even in England in the summer and of course it's terrific out there. Apart from that, however, he seems to be making the best of life and has no complaints, although naturally he'd like to be home if it were possible.

I did hear from Mr. Mason about a month or so ago, but it wasn't a very newsy letter being in reply to my previous effort and I haven't replied to it yet.

Fancy you having tea in MY Tudor Café! The idea! Seriously though, I hope you enjoyed it. It's a lovely little place isn't it?

I'm not surprised to hear that Mr. Snell doesn't look very well. He's been falling away for some time now I think. Every time I see him he looks older and more tired and it must be such a worry having all his family away and just he left in that house quite alone. I can just imagine if it were Paddy in 64 Hulse and you and all of us away all the time. It would be awful. I think I must drop Mr. Snell a line, although I don't quite know what to say. Still I could have a chat about the life out here I s'pose—it might cheer him up. I did write to Mrs Snell and David a couple of times but I've never had an answer so haven't tried for some time, which is naughty of me really, but I've so many people to write to who do answer that I haven't time to spare for those who don't.

Glad you heard from Ron. I heard again this week and he's moved again his address now being—

6024738, Pte. Smith R.  
The Essex Regt.,  
D Coy. No. 1 I.R.T.D.,<sup>89</sup>  
C.M.F.

I don't know what it means, but expect it's another sort of transit camp.

I'm glad Bob's still in England as Florrie's had quite enough of

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88 R. W. Wood (District Manager Britannic Assurance). Mr Mason was the Hornchurch branch manager.

89 Infantry Replacement Training Depot.

his being away really and they both deserve a break.

Tommy's address as far as I know is as follows—

14667599 Cfm. Hawkins T.

Draft RDZGZ. R.E.M.E.

India Command.

That's what it was on 6<sup>th</sup> February anyway and I haven't heard from him since, which is partly my fault I'm afraid as I hadn't heard from him for months and months and then this letter suddenly turned up, so when I replied being me, and as you know how we always fought, I ticked him off and teased him about digging me up now that he was out in India and wanted mail, so's he'd have someone to write to. Since then, there's been dead silence! Still, I expect something will happen soon. We've always had an erratic correspondence of sarcastic letters—we thrive on it! Tommy never hears of Peter either, because I always ask after him and he always tells me he never hears.

You're right about Charlie, he is getting on out there, but I think he deserves to don't you?

I'm glad Geg is in such a good billet—it does make a difference with the young baby doesn't it? I'm also pleased to hear she's putting on weight although that's a sore point with me at the moment. I too am putting on weight as you all went to great lengths to point out when I was home on leave. Ginger's Kenn now teases me by calling me Porky Prior!! What's a girl to do now, I ask you? Still, you know me, never really worry about a thing like that!

I was glad to hear the news about Peggy. I do hope things work out alright for her. It seems such a shame otherwise. I think really John's death or at least the news that he was missing may have something to do with it. She knows now there isn't any hope for her in that direction, although I think they were just born for each other.

I don't know why you haven't got your Easter Card Mum as I sent yours the same day as all the others and Bess has acknowledged hers. Never mind it'll turn up, I hope.

Last night Kay and I again went to the cinema and saw "Follow the Boys" with George Raft and a whole galaxy of stars. It was quite good entertainment. After the cinema we went back to Quarters and found a dance in full swing. We arrived just in time for the Interval and "Eats"—trust me! And afterwards stayed for the second half of the dance. I thoroughly enjoyed it although as you know I'm not very keen on dancing.

Think that's about all the news from my end. Ginge is still

feeling a little down about her Auntie, but that's only to be expected and I guess she'll be better soon. I hope so because it's not like dear old Ginge to be so quiet.

Must go now. My love to all I know there and of course to you both. God Bless and take good care, wont' you?

All my love,  
Joan xxxxx

P.S. I sent the parcel off and Bessie received it all O.K. I think she said she wouldn't be sending your things on because they might get lost in the post or something, but you can find out about that anyway.

My love once more to Mag, Fred and of course all "our family"—Joan.

\* \* \*

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Received your letter dated 8<sup>th</sup> April last night—thanks, a lot.

I was sorry to hear you hadn't received my two letters and hope you do get them eventually. I posted them O.K. and other than that I'm afraid I can't do anything except hope they arrive. P'raps they have by now. Actually I sent a letter on 31st March, another on 1st April, another on 2nd April and a post-card on 3rd April! I was rather proud of my record, but apparently you haven't had them at all.

Fancy you listening to the presentation of colours on the wireless! Just shows you what a small world it is!

I'm very glad that you've decided to stay on in Somerset for a bit. As things are going now it looks as though it'll soon be over, and though the buzzbombs have stopped I'd be much happier if you stayed there for just a while longer, because I think that before the final collapse there may be an intense form of air warfare—possibly even gas—no-one can tell and you'd be much safer there than in London whatever happens, and after all I don't somehow think it'll be for much longer. I know as a rule I'm the last person to forecast the end of the war, or even say it'll only be a few months. In fact this is the first time I've ever said anything about it, but I do feel now that it won't be very long—so please don't go back to London for a bit if you can avoid it!

I wrote to you last on Saturday, and haven't done anything spectacular since really.

On Sunday I went into Paris with Tricia and we went into the gardens which lie along the Seine and sat in the sunshine at the side of one of the many ponds which are in these gardens. They each have goldfish in them and also a fountain and at the side of one of them there is a stand at which you can hire sailing boats. All the kids come there and hire a boat and they sail them on the pond. We sat there for about an hour watching these kids with their boats. It was so amusing.

On Monday Kay washed and set my hair for me and Ginge and I had one of our domestic evenings.

Yesterday I had a new experience for me. Having nothing much to do in the afternoon I went to the hairdressers and had a manicure. My dear, she nearly had a fit when she saw my hands! You know how long I let my nails grow on occasions! However, it did them a world of good. She cut off masses of dead skin round the cuticles and also got all the dirt out which accumulates at the sides of the nails, and altogether made a very thorough job of it. I bought some colourless Coty nail varnish and asked her to put that on—if you don't take your own they use the most vivid shades you can imagine and they're hideous. So I took mine with me and she put that on and they really looked lovely. I wish you could have seen them Mum—cut to a respectable length and nicely shaped and cleaned. They looked really nice.

In the evening Kay and I went to a variety show at the Olympia theatre. I wish you both could see one of these shows—I've never seen anything like them in England. You know the sort of thing—people doing dance acts, juggling, conjuring—contortionists and strong-man acts and so on. We have them in England, but over here the acts are so original and so clever too. I loved the whole programme last night. We saw first of all the chorus—this was most originally done. The scene was a giant Easter Egg tied up with an enormous bow of ribbon which was then undone and the Egg opened up to show inside a mass of yellow downy things like chicks—but it was the chorus! They all came out and were wearing hats of the cap variety all yellow fur with beaks where the peak of the hat normally comes. Their dresses too were this yellow fluffy down stuff and they really looked like chicks! After their act they again piled into the Egg which was closed and off they went! I loved it. Then there was an act of three people who performed wonders on roller skates and another of a man singer and another a woman singer and then a man contortionist who did the most extraordinary things. He walked about on his hands whilst both his legs were round his neck! And another turn was of three men playing



glorified mouth-organs and another was a girl acrobat. Then there was a girl who performed gymnastics on a long rope which left her hanging by an ankle way up in the air, and then there were two men who gave a physical culture display and they were magnificent! The whole show in fact was marvellous—I wish you could have seen it.

That about takes care of my news. Ginge is feeling much better now although of course it will take a long while before she's her gay old self again.

I can't begin to describe the countryside over here. It's too beautiful. Everywhere purple lilac blooms and the fruit blossom is delightful. I've never seen so many wild flowers anywhere—it's really wonderful.

Hope the weather keeps fine for you. It seems to be continuing sunny and warm here but of course that's no guarantee that you're having the same good fortune. Hope Geg and the three kiddies are O.K. Give them all my love won't you please? Also Mag & Fred. Take care of yourselves and God Bless all the time.

All my love,  
From Joan

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Fig. 5.11. Postcard of Fontaine lumineuse, place de la Comédie-Française. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

Just to let you know that the fountains are again working in Paris, though I've not seen them floodlit yet! Hope you're both O.K. I'm still fine!

Writing soon.

Lots of love from

Joan xxxx

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Friday 13<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Well, well, what a day this's been! Truly Friday 13<sup>th</sup> has lived up to its reputation!

To start off we heard the tragic news of President Roosevelt's death. It was such a shock too.<sup>90</sup>

Then when we arrived in the office, we found a form to be filled in giving particulars of our Height, Bust, Hips, Waist and size in shoes. That was OK till we started to work it out with a tape measure! Boy, we nearly all discovered how fat we'd got and are now all frantically worried and vowing not to eat fatty foods and to do plenty of exercise. I expect that will last for a couple of days and then we'll all be back where we started. Much to my amazement I've increased round the hips 3 inches! I'll have to do something—rapidly! Ginge is lucky being 34 bust, 23 waist and 34.5 hips. Even Betty Grable couldn't grumble at that!

The other shadow on our day is that two of the girls in the office have got measles. Whether German or otherwise is not yet firmly established. Remember I had it this time last year? Because of that I don't s'pose I'll get it again, but if you don't hear for about a week you can imagine that's what's happened. However, don't worry because I don't think I'm at all likely to get it. I had real measles when I was 7 too, so it it's that I think I'm fairly safe.

I'm afraid there's nothing much more to tell at the moment. Except that the weather here of course is wonderful still and the lilac grows profusely here and after rain which we get sometimes

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90 Franklin D. Roosevelt (32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States, 4 March 1933—12 April 1945).

in the nights it smells wonderful.

I do hope you're feeling a bit better now Mum. Try to cheer up, because the news keeps coming in so good now that it mightn't be very long before it's over. Do buck up and be well again, please.

Hope Geg, David, Terry and Jacqueline are all keeping O.K. Just had a letter from Bessie in which she says the baby's doing well on Nestle's Milk. Just like me! Give them all my love and also Mag and Fred and of course to all at Burtle and to yourselves.

God bless and take care,  
Fondest love,  
Joan xxxxx

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Fig. 5.12. Postcard of Les Grandes Boulevards: Portes St Martin and St Denis, Paris.  
Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

Just the day-to-day bulletin to let you know I'm still O.K. and that no-one else except the two I told you about has fallen a measles victim. Here's hoping.

Weather still glorious here and the lilac getting lovelier every day.

Hope you're O.K. and keeping safe.

Fondest love  
Joan xxxxx



Fig. 5.13. Postcard of Notre-Dame, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> April 1945

Dear Mum & Paddy,

Everything still O.K. Will write again in a minute, but this is just to say "Hallo—How are you?—I'm fine" all in one breath as it were. My love to all at Catcott & Burtle and of course to both of you. God Bless.

Lots of love  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

Thanks a lot for your letter written 10<sup>th</sup> April—it was so newsy and chatty.

Think I'll drift through that first and come to my chat later.

Have received the newspapers O.K. and laughed over them. Also the four Amami shampoos! They are wonderful! Thanks a lot!

Was very glad that you'd paid my Insurance dear, as I was worried about it not being paid promptly, although they know me well enough not to do anything drastic. Yes the receipt would be "Farmer" that's the married name of the girl's place I took. I knew they had two girls after I went. See, I didn't know my own strength! Sorry you had such a walk to the office. Of course you never came that way at all did you? It doesn't seem far to me of course, because of our 35-minute walk to the office! But I expect

it was tiring when you're not used to it.

I was also glad to hear that Mum & Paddy are staying on for a bit in Somerset. I wrote them asking them to stay on if it could possibly be done, because although the buzz-bombs have stopped, I'm not sure everything is O.K. yet. I don't think anyone can visualise the war lasting so very much longer in Europe, but I'm rather scared they might try a final blaze against England—maybe air attacks or gas or something. It's one of those things which can't be forecast, but I still think there's a possibility and they'd be safer in the country, especially as I don't s'pose it'll be for much longer, anyway. I told them this in a recent letter and hoped it got through to them O.K.

In his last letter to me Paddy said that David was going to stay with Geg, but I couldn't understand it very well as I thought there wasn't room and that that was why Terry hadn't gone with her.

I was glad also to hear that Mr. Bones was back in Barking. As you say he's more familiar with the roads etc., there. I do so hope he can have his operation soon.

Well, dear, you go and see Crosby's new film by all means—it's quite passable light entertainment, but it's by no means a good film. Of course Crosby's singing is tops as ever and Betty Hutton's performance is good but her part isn't good. She plays the role of twins and does it wonderfully well.

I've also seen Charles Boyer and Irene Dunne in "Together Again" which I simply loved. It was smashing.

On Tuesday last I had a manicure which was a new experience for me and they certainly made my hands and nails look glamorous! In the evening I went to a variety show which was extremely good.

Now it's the 17<sup>th</sup> and I'm still frantically trying to get this letter finished, but my dear, the panic in the office this morning! Cos why?? Cos we're getting leave again and I'm due to leave here on 2nd May homeward bound for a week! Well as a matter of fact I'm in rather a flat spin about it because it's all so sudden. Of course I'd love to go down to Somerset and see Mum and Paddy, but I'll have to come home to 64 Hulse first to get some civvy clothes and dump my kit etc. Then again, I want to see you and Stan. It's awfully difficult really. I think my best plan is to come straight home to you and then go on from there to Somerset. I've scribbled a p.c. to Mum to tell her I'm getting leave but of course I'll have to write to see if I can get fixed up there, because I don't suppose there's room for another person at Mag's otherwise Geg would have gone there, and Aunt Lucy's is so far away really when it comes to walking up in the morning and down again at night to

Burtle. So all things considered, I'll leave my arrangements there to Mum and ask her to wire or write home to you where I am to go and then when I get home to you I'll be able to find out where I'm going to spend my leave.

I expect it won't be possible, but if you could get leave and come down too Bess it would be lovely! If you can't I'll stay a day with you before I go and come back early and stay a day before I go back because I do want to see you and Stan and spend some time with you. Of course I don't know yet what hour we'll arrive so can't make any definite arrangements but naturally will keep you posted as I get to know the details.

Dear, I do hate to bother you with various odds and ends but do you think you could slip through my wardrobe and see if there are any things which need cleaning etc. and I'll pay for them when I come back, but I just must get into mufti, it seems ages since I was and this uniform's so hot here now in this weather it will be delightful to get into something cool. (If I can still get into them!)

I'll try to bring your clock too, if I can get one. Is there anything else you'd like?

Must stop now so's I can write a note to Mum about all this. Gosh, I'm so excited! Can't believe it's true.

Take care of yourselves, God Bless and see you soon!

All my love,  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

TOP SECRET.  
SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
PERIOD 1<sup>ST</sup> TO 15<sup>TH</sup> APRIL, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1945, inclusive.

2. The attacks by midget U-boats diminished considerably during the period.

3. Force T made landings on an island north east of NIJMEGEN. They also landed parties on DUIVELAND and SCHOUWEN. During a landing on SCHOUWEN four of the enemy were killed and one captured with no casualties to our forces.

4. The Germans landed a sabotage party of 18 men from GUERNSEY on the COTENTIN Peninsula. All but one were captured before they could inflict any damage.

5. Enemy pockets on either side of the GIRONDE Estuary were attacked by French troops on 15<sup>th</sup> April, after heavy preparatory bombardment by the French Naval Task Force.<sup>91</sup>

H.W. Faulkner  
for Admiral



\* \* \*

Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Can't stop to chat about other things at the moment as I haven't much time to catch the post with this, but I must give you some more details of leave.

I'm due to leave here on 2<sup>nd</sup> May and will go straight home to 64 Hulse because I must dump my kit somewhere and get some civvy clothes—it's far too hot for uniform this weather, over here anyway!

I'd love to come down and spend my leave in Somerset Mum. D'you think there's anywhere down there that'll fix me up and put up with me for a week or thereabouts? I don't want to spend this leave at home as I spend the last one there and in the summer the town is so hot I just must spend it in the country. So if it's at all poss could you stay with Mag and Fred for a little longer—also Geg so's I could see the baby and Dave and Tel? I know it may be putting you out or making difficulties, so it it's absolutely imposs I'll understand, but if can arrange it, could I come down there? I'd much prefer it. Of course I want to see Bess & Stan and will do so before I come down to you and

91 Extract from ANCXF Naval War Diary 1–15 April 1945 (24 May 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London. Commodore Hugh Webb Faulkner, DSO, CBE, RN (1900–1969), had by now replaced Commodore Maurice James ('Bob') Mansergh, CBE, RN, as Chief of Staff.

if Bess can't get any leave to come with me then I'll go back a day early and spend my last day with them too, I think. In any case I'll have to go back there again to pick up my uniform and kit etc.

Hope this letter doesn't sound too much of a jumbled mess—I'm so excited I just don't know where I'm making sense or not. Oh, by the way, I've told Bess that I'm writing to you asking if I can come down there and I've told her I'll ask you to write or wire her at home whether when and where I can come down, so that when I arrive home I'll know where and when to do. O.K.??

Got to catch a lorry now, God Bless and take care of yourselves.  
Fondest love,  
Joan xxxx

\* \* \*

Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Still longing to know where I'm going to spend my leave, and a bit worried now since receiving your letter dated 16<sup>th</sup> April as you say you're going back home on 23<sup>rd</sup>—that's tomorrow! I hope you get my letter in time for you to stay down there a bit longer as I do so want to spend my leave in the country just at this time of the year.

I'm not writing to you at home because I've written to Bessie telling her about the leave and if you go home before my letter to you arrives, you'll know through her.

Hope everyone is keeping well—especially you Mum. My love to Geg, David, Terry, Jacqueline, Mag & Fred as well as all at Burtle. God Bless you all,

Fondest love,  
Joan xxxx

\* \* \*

Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

Received your letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> April & also telegram last night. Was awfully glad to get same, but a bit puzzled because you say to 'go to Edington' and also 'O.K. at Mag's'. If I'm going to Mag's isn't it better to go to Bridgwater & get the bus to Catcott?



I don't suppose I'll be here to receive a reply to this query, so unless I do hear to the contrary when I get home I'll do as you say and go to Edington. However, if you think there's time for you to wire different instructions to Bess, do so. But don't bother if it's O.K. that I go to Edington.

This must sound an awful muddle, but things here are a bit mixed all-round.

I was amazed to hear the news about Peggy! And of course very glad. My dear, I s'pose I'll be introduced to him when I'm on leave!<sup>92</sup>

The measuring up we are now given to understand was for summer uniforms, although that isn't settled. Our officer is going to ask whether the Admiralty will permit us to have them, but I don't think much will come of it, really.

Well, poor old Ginge, I am sorry to say has had another blow and that is that Kenn has just gone on draft, so she's on her own again now, 'cept for me. Just to cheer her up she had a cist grow in her cheek and has just had it removed!

Apart from that we are both O.K. Hope all well down there. Be seeing you soon,

Fondest love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter last night—and loved it!

However, life is rather a muddle at the moment Bess. You see at the same time I wrote to you, I wrote Mum & asked her if I could stay at Mag's. She meantime told me that Geg, the children & Dad were returning on 23<sup>rd</sup> and she was following later. I then received a telegram saying "Arrange pass for Edington. Everything O.K. at Mag's". Then I got your letter saying you can get leave too to coincide with mine. The snag is now, that if I'm staying at Mag's, I should have thought it better to go to Bridgwater, but as they've made a point in their wire of saying "Arrange pass for Edington" I wondered whether Metford would be taking

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92 Peggy had been reunited with her estranged husband (m. 1940) Ern Cox (serving with the Somerset Light Infantry).

me over in the car! Honestly I couldn't understand it very well, so I've written telling them of my doubt about the journey & said I'll definitely go to Edington unless you (Bess) or I (Joan) hear to contrary. So if they wire you saying "Bridgwater" I'll have to try to get my pass altered in London somehow or other, I s'pose.

I'll either be leaving here on Tuesday night (1st May) or Wednesday morning. I don't know which, but as soon as I arrive in London, I'll phone you and we can exchange the latest 'gen' on the journey down & so on.

Ginge is coming on leave with me & is either going down to Swansea or Shaftesbury (Dorset). She's about as clear as I am on the point of where, at the moment. The thing is though Bess, that if we leave at 8 on Wednesday morning we won't reach London till about 10 or thereabouts in the night, so if there aren't any trains to take her away, d'you think she could spend the night with us, please? Of course other things may crop up, but just in case, that is. Anyway, I'll let you know when I phone. If we leave here on Tuesday night, we'll reach London about lunch-time Wednesday and if I could dash home & pack a bag and dash back again we might catch the 5 something train and then I'd spend the time in London to get odd things at the end of my leave instead of the beginning. Anyhow we must leave that till I phone I think. By the time you've got this far you'll probably be as confused as I am, so I think I'd better stop now!

Anyway, the essentials are:

I'm definitely going to Edington.

You & I will go down together, after I've packed some civvies.

If you've already made any arrangements for me (for the first days of my leave) in Barking or London it's O.K. but if not we'll go down as soon as we can after I arrive. O.K.?

The only snag about (3) is that it will be tricky if Dad has arranged for Mets to meet us, although I don't think this likely as they don't know exactly when I'm arriving.

Think that's about all I dare say—every next word must be making you ever more muddled!

My love to you both and God Bless,

From Joan

Xxxx

P.S. The chances are that Ginge won't be coming to stay the night, Bess, but—"just in case".

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dearest Mum,

I got Paddy's letter yesterday telling me the latest developments and I gather that you are now at Catcott on your own, Paddy having taken Geg and the kiddies back on Monday. I understand that he is staying at home until I arrive and then coming down to you with me. In the meantime, of course, unbeknown to you, I'd written asking Bessie if she could manage to get leave and she has, so she'll be coming down with us too. I can't make any hard and fast arrangements till I actually arrive in London, but I intend if possible to come down to you by the first available train, not spending any time in Barking, and to come back a day, or maybe a couple of days, early and see Geg, Maud & people like that then before I go back. I think it'll save time doing it that way instead of wasting a day at each end of my leave.

How kind of Fred and Mag to welcome my coming. Please thank them in advance, until I can do it personally, will you?

The weather here still continues fine and roses are in bloom in the gardens—they look delightful and it seems so strange to see them out in April!

I don't think I've anything else to tell you at the moment but I thought you'd like to know, as far as I myself know them, what arrangements are being made.

See you soon,

Fondest love,

Joan xxxx

P.S. Don't expect to arrive at Victoria until 10.30pm  
Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May.

\* \* \*

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter dated 21/4 last night, Paddy, and am writing to tell you the little bit more I know now about things. Of course, you know the way things are in the Service—one minute one thing is decided and then the next minute it's changed, so these facts aren't 'cast iron' by any means. Still, for what they're worth, you might as well have them.

At present the plan is to leave here on Wednesday morning (2 May) and arrive at Victoria Station at about 10.30pm. So you can see it'll be pretty late. Still we should be able to get a District train

straight through to Barking from there O.K. As I told Bessie in a previous letter, Ginge may be coming to spend the night with us. I hope that's O.K. by you—well, I know it will be, but I couldn't ask you as I didn't think you'd be there at 64 Hulse you see, so I asked Bess instead. You see Ginge wants to go to Shaftesbury, so if we're going to Edington we'll be catching the same train as far as Salisbury anyway. At that time of night you see I don't think she'll be able to get a train at all, so she'll be stranded.

If you could be at Victoria at about 10.30pm Paddy, that would be grand, but if for some reason we arrive and you're not there, I'll phone one of the many numbers that Bessie's given me and enquire whether you've left. If not, as long as someone is there to meet me at Barking, it'll be O.K really. Still, we'll leave it that if you can you'll come to Victoria at 10.30 Wednesday night, 2<sup>nd</sup> May. O.K.?

Looking forward to seeing you all so much, I'm getting really excited!

Have written to Mum this afternoon and told her of these arrangements.

God Bless you all,  
See you soon,  
Lots of love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Here I am once again—altering the arrangements. Still, as I'm changing them for the better I don't mind.

It now seems that I arrive at Victoria at 8.30pm (not 10.30) which will of course be much simpler all-round won't it? I've written you the same news on a post-card and will be posting this and that at the same time. You see, I don't know which is quicker, a letter or a p.c. However, I'm hoping that one or perhaps both will arrive in time. If they don't though, and I arrive and there's no-one there, I'll phone right away, and you could meet me at Barking Station because it is from there onwards that I need assistance really.

The weather here has completely broken, unfortunately, and to-day it's bitterly cold with a strong wind, and even hailstones and snow! They say English weather's changeable, but my goodness, this is amazing!

I haven't very much time not to wander on, as the P.O.'s away this week on leave and I'm in charge of the office! We've managed O.K. so far, but it does keep me on my toes, having all the writing and administration to do—that's why I've been sending you letters in my own "fair?" hand lately.

I'm keeping very well and am excited now about my leave. I only hope the weather's O.K.

Hope you are all three keeping well—especially Stan with regard to the old nose.

Don't think there's anything else I wanted to say, except give my love to Geg if and when, will you please?

Bye now,

Hoping to see you very soon now—"you lucky people!!"<sup>93</sup>

Fondest love,

From Joan

Xxxx

P.S. If you come to Victoria and Ginge is there too, Paddy, give her a warm welcome (I know you will anyway) because she hasn't even heard from any of her people saying they'll be pleased to see her & is a bit upset about it.

\* \* \*



Fig. 5.14. Postcard of Place de l'Opéra, Paris. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

93 The popular catchphrase of cockney variety entertainer Tommy Trinder.

Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> April 1945

My Dear Paddy,

Latest information is that I arrive at VICTORIA at 8.30pm not 10.30pm as previously stated, so that's better really isn't it? Am writing same news by letter too because I don't know which is quicker. If you're not there when I arrive, I'll phone through so that you can be at Barking Station. O.K.?

Lots of love,  
Joan xxxx

TOP SECRET.  
SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
PERIOD 16<sup>TH</sup> TO 30<sup>TH</sup> APRIL, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 16<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1945, inclusive.

2. The period under review covered the advance of the armies into GERMANY after the crossing of the RHINE.

3. Raiding parties by Commandos in the Dutch waterways kept the minor landing craft of Force T busy on most nights. The crews acquitted themselves well.

4. BREMEN was captured on April 26<sup>th</sup>, the actual surrender being made to an officer of No. 30 Advance Unit, and Commander Task Force 126 entered the port next day.

5. The beginning and end of the fortnight saw the completion of the first half of operation VENERABLE, the ejection of the Germans from the mouth of the GIRONDE, and the beginning of the second half of the assault on the ILE D'OLERON. In both operations a French Naval Task Force, under Admiral RUE, carried out some effective bombardments.<sup>94</sup>

H.M. Burrough



ADMIRAL.

94 Extract from ANCF Naval War Diary 16-30 April 1945 (8 June 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.

## Leave

Another hiatus in Joan's narrative. Here are her customarily brief pocket-diary entries:

### **Thursday 3 May**

Ginge travelled down to Salisbury with Dad, Bess & I, having spent night with us.<sup>95</sup>

### **Friday 4 May**

Phoned Ken.<sup>96</sup> Went for a walk. Wrote to Ron.

### **Saturday 5 May**

Met Ken. Saw 'Love Story', M. Lockwood & S. Granger.  
It rained. Had tea.

### **Sunday 6 May (Rogation Sunday)**

David's birthday.<sup>97</sup>

Ken walked out to Catcott.<sup>98</sup> Had lunch with us & walked back to Bridgwater.

### **Monday 7 May**

Mum, Dad, Bess & I went to Minehead. Lovely day.

### **Tuesday 8 May**

VE Day. War over with Germany.  
Went to Pawlett.<sup>99</sup>

### **Wednesday 9 May**

Came home. It rained. Went to see Geg & Mrs Snell.<sup>100</sup>

### **Thursday 10 May**

Went to London. Saw floodlighting.

### **Friday 11 May**

Shopped. Saw Maud in evening.

### **Saturday 12 May**

Returned from leave.

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95 In Barking. Ginge changed trains at Salisbury, for Shaftesbury where she stayed with her cousin Molly.

96 RM Ken Philbrick had family in Bridgwater, Somerset.

97 Joan's sister Grace's elder son who turned ten in 1945.

98 Where the Priors were staying with Mag and Fred Arthur at Langley Cottage.

99 To visit Ivor and Joyce Coombes at South Farm.

100 Joan's sister Grace ('Geg') and her mother-in-law, Daisy Snell.

The brevity of this itinerary of the week that saw the end of the war in Europe is symbolic of comic ironies that would require a further semi-fiction to relate. I imagine scenes from a period drama:

1. The old Somerset and Dorset train ('Slow and Dirty' or 'Serene and Delightful', depending on your prejudice) chuffing from Yeovil Junction towards Glastonbury. The gradual descent from Pylle and the first sighting of the Tor. Joan (in civvies now, of course) sitting next to her elder sister Bessie; their father, Harry, opposite, chewing on his unlit pipe, looking out of the window. Passing between Ashcott and Shapwick, there are glimpses through the alders and willows that line the track of men on Westcott Heath, half-buried in peat cuttings. Lifting the black, lustrous slabs on huge spades.
2. The arrival at Edington. Metford with the shooting brake handling the luggage. Greetings at Catcott. Aunt Lucy is there too, and Peg. Everyone wants to know about Paris. That evening: meeting Peg's husband Ern, who brings in a catch of eels and takes an excessive shine to Joan. Lethal farm scrumpy and cheddar before bed. Nothing seems rationed here.
3. The cinema in Bridgwater with Ken. *Love Story*. Joan's fondness for Cornwall's Celtic romanticism. The lyrical score. Ken and Joan—a fantasy melodrama, an unmade film. We'll always have Montmartre.
4. A walk across Catcott Heath with Ken. The new pumping station at Gold Corner and the Huntspill River, a five-and-a-quarter-mile channel diverting the old King's Sedgemoor Drain, 200ft across. This enormous waterworks, funded by the National Government and excavated with German and Italian POW labour, is set to keep the Levels drained, and protect valuable farmland from the perennial winter's flooding of some 8000 acres. Ken has read about this and admires the feat of engineering. Joan ponders whether rivers can be man-made.
5. The daytrip to Minehead. Grace Prior's anxieties about unsavoury company on the train. Eventually adequate seating arrangements are made. Passing Italian POWs working in the fields who stop and stare. A stroll along the strand, past the



arm of the old harbour wall enclosing fishing smacks and pleasure craft. The story of the Person from Porlock. Fish and chips. The mournful cries of gulls. The seaside town that war forgot.

6. The news of victory in Europe comes when they visit Joyce and Ivor at Pawlett. Bess and Joan want to celebrate and go along to the pub. The interior is untroubled by news from the outside world. A couple of locals look up from their glasses as the two young women enter. Strangers. Conversation stops; then starts again. Bess asks if they can have the wireless on. Isn't it wonderful news?! The landlord is unmoved and the wireless stays off in the interest of saving the battery. It's as if the war never touched this place. A young man sits alone at a table: a tall, thin, bespectacled outsider. They strike up conversation. He at least is willing to celebrate. Two pints later he reveals he's a scientist, working at the experimental munitions factory on Puriton Level. Developing a new kind of explosive. RDX. Top secret you know. All hush hush. But don't suppose that matters now. The enterprise requires three-and-a-half million gallons of water a day, pumped from the Huntspill River. So that was why they cut a new drain. Not to help the farmers at all. Walking back, Joan and Bess marvel at his indiscretion. What happened to Careless Talk Costs Lives? They decide he must be a Communist.
7. Back in London. The floodlights are on. Trafalgar Square is crammed, still. Everyone dizzy with mirth. Sailors arm-in-arm with Landgirls, paddling in the fountains. Water/floods as metaphor. A new post-war covenant.

TOP SECRET.  
 SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
 ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
 FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
 PERIOD 1<sup>ST</sup> TO 15<sup>TH</sup> MAY, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1945,

inclusive.

2. This period saw the end of the war against Germany marked by the complete surrender of all German forces to those of the Allies.

3. For the naval forces under the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief it meant, however, not an easing up, but a greatly increased activity in occupying and opening up the ports of HOLLAND, DENMARK and North West GERMANY and the start of mine clearance thereto.

4. Naval forces carried the Crown Prince of Norway back to his country after an absence of five years.<sup>101</sup>

H.M. Burrough



ADMIRAL.

GORDON: Eventually VE Day came, celebrated with French champagne drunk out of by now chipped enamel mugs and then later in the evening into Paris to join the crowds of people dancing and singing in the streets and climbing onto any vehicle they could to ride in triumph down the Champs Elysées.<sup>102</sup>

HOWES: On 8 May 1945 when VE Day was announced, we went into Paris to celebrate with the French people who crowded down the Champs Elysées. The excitement was immense.<sup>103</sup>

BERYL K. BLOWS: I shall not forget VE night—Paris floodlit, her fountains playing, the Allied flags flying from the Arc de Triomphe, and the madly excited, cheering crowds kissing us on both cheeks when they discovered we were British. Neither will Geoffrey—a young Lieutenant-Commander RNVR—who spent VE-night in a French sewer, into which he fell accidentally.<sup>104</sup>

101 Extract from ANCXF Naval War Diary 1–15 May 1945 (29 June 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.

102 Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.

103 Mabel Ena 'Bobby' Howes (PO Wren), interview, Frank and Joan Shaw Collection, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth.

104 Beryl K Blows (3/O Wren), unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, AW ID. H679.1990.

GORDON: All the shops and hotels stayed open and drinks were “on the house”. Lights shrouded for so long blazed all night, the fountains were turned on and floodlit and hundreds of people joined hands and danced in the water.<sup>105</sup>

FANNY HUGILL: We dressed a large staff car with a White Ensign tied to the roof and a Union Jack on the bonnet. Groups of us piled into cars and jeeps to set off for central Paris, about 15km drive away. Roads were crowded. Everybody was out on the streets and music—both live and canned—blared from open doors and windows.

We approached Paris by the Avenue Grand Armée—a wonderful view, and the Arc de Triomphe was magnificently floodlit with the flags of the Allies underneath. Down the Champs Elysées our route was barred with wooden barriers. Two of our party played up to the crowd, did some hugging and kissing, and moved a barrier to allow us to drive through.

We were making for the fine hour in Faubourg Saint-Honoré, which was the Officers’ NAAFI. This house had performed the same function for the German officers. We then all set off on foot. The atmosphere was electric, all [of] Paris was celebrating, and I don’t remember any unpleasantness of any sort. It was a most good-humoured crowd.

We were hoping to reach the Place de la Concorde, where we found dancing en ronde in full swing. Later we walked down to the River Seine, which was a wonderful sight with all the barges and boats glaring lights and blaring music, as we walked along the quay. Retracing our steps to the NAAFI, we found a party and dancing in full swing. It was an extremely hot evening. Some people were going to keep up the party all night, but our little group turned for home about 2.30am. It is impossible for any of us to appreciate exactly what the Parisians were feeling. Back at Saint-Germain, I fell into my uncomfortable camp bed, having taken part in something I would never forget.<sup>106</sup>

Monday 14<sup>th</sup> May 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

Sorry I didn’t write yesterday, but being a Sunday much to our amazement we found our watch was half-day, so in the afternoon I went back to Quarters with Kay and Ginge and we changed into

105 Gordon, ‘Southwick Park & Normandy’.

106 Fanny Hugill (Gore-Browne), (3/O Wren), ‘Paris—VE Night—8 May 1945’, *The Wren* (Spring 2000), p. 28. <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-125/a-wrens-memories/>

frocks and lay in the garden sunbathing. It got so hot, however, that I had to come in and cool off! At about five o'clock we caught the train into Paris and went to the cinema and saw "Ministry of Fear" starring Ray Milland—it was very good indeed although it was a bit creepy at first.

Paris looks lovelier than ever now, because all the fountains have been turned on and shoot up cooling streams of clear water in different patterns. They say VE day here was terrific! One fellow was in London on VE night and in Paris the night after (he flew over) and he says that London wasn't a patch on Paris. They have the Big Four's flags hung from the middle of the Arc de Triomphe and in the middle of the Avenue Grande Armee about 200 yards from the Arch, they've placed a giant searchlight, barricaded around, which plays on the Arch when it gets dark. It's really beautiful. The Sacre Coeur (remember, the church on top of Montmartre?) also is floodlit and as you leave Paris by train you can see it standing out bathed in light from the top of the hill—it's lovely. I wish I could photograph them for you and let you see how wonderful they look. We didn't stay late last night because we all felt still tired from the journey, but soon I am going to stay in till the late train to see all the illuminations.

Talking of the journey back reminds me I haven't really told you all. The journey from London to Newhaven went very quickly indeed and was quite pleasant. Once aboard, however, we had to wait a couple of hours before we sailed. It was so beautifully sunny and warm that Ginge, Kay and I curled up on a couple of rugs and our duffels and went to sleep on deck all the way across, so that part of our journey was quite pleasant too. The difficult part started then. By this time it was 2-30 (we'd had lunch on board and it was very nice indeed) and we scrambled into the waiting train. Waiting train was right—it waited until ten to five before starting! Honestly it was grim, everything was so dirty and hot and smelly and the sun was simply glaring down on us. We finally arrived at 9 o'clock and completed the final part of our journey by lorry. Gosh, were we glad of a cup of coffee when we got in. Of course, to crown it all, I was greeted by a letter from Ron asking me not to take leave yet and a wire also asking me to postpone it for two weeks. First Officer had opened the wire to see if it was urgent and needed forwarding, but of course she didn't send it as it was too late by then. She said it arrived three days after I'd gone. I've written to him to the Park Avenue address and explained that I couldn't put it off, and can't get more, but I didn't explain why in a letter, but told him you'd know and would

explain. Sounds complicated but I think you will understand. (I 'ope!)

I'm afraid I'll have to stop just now and do a job. Here I am back again now. Of course, ever since we've been back the water's been turned off in Quarters, so we're having a wonderful time in that direction, but still we live—who said the war was over anyway???? We're late duty to-night, and if I can manage it I'd like to do my weekly wash, but of course that depends on so many factors I just don't like to think about it. For one thing it depends on whether we leave the office at a reasonable hour. On Saturday night our late duty watch didn't leave at the normal hour of seven—they didn't leave in fact until 6 a.m. the next morning! Good thing they were Wrens and not bus conductresses! Still we're living in hopes of getting off at seven. Then of course we've to hope that the lights are on, and then pray for the strength to carry water in from the garden! *Quel vie!* Never mind—we still manage to smile and mean it.

As I've only been back such a short time there isn't much more news for me to tell. How's the cake doing Mum?

By the way, I meant to ask Bessie whilst I was on leave, but I forgot. Do you take the Advertiser? If so, could you forward it on with the Sunday Express? You see I religiously read the Herald of Wales every week which Ginge gets and I'm fast getting to know more about Swansea and its people than I know about Barking. If you don't take it, then don't bother please.

Oh, and another thing, I forgot to bring my watch back with me. When next I go into Paris I'll take Bessie's alarm clock, and when that's repaired and sent to you, if you could send my watch I'd be grateful. You could send it now, but I thought perhaps if we waited to see if the clock arrived O.K. we could see whether they did go through the post O.K.

Don't think there's anything more now, so will say bye-bye. Take care, and God Bless you all. My love to Bess & Stan and Geg and family too, and of course to you both.

Fondest love,  
Joan xxxxx

Friday 18<sup>th</sup> May 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

How's life? O.K.? Well, I'm afraid since I last wrote so little has happened that I've practically no news to tell. Still, here goes.

Last Tuesday, Kay and I went to Paris and walked right to the other end of the city to see the shops there. We'd never been to them before and they were very nice indeed. We didn't buy anything, but just drifted around looking at all the pretty things. It was awfully hot though, and we bought some cherries from a woman with a stall in the street and they cooled us off a bit. Are there any cherries at home yet? There are masses here and they're really lovely dark ones. They're 2/6 a lb. though. In the evening, after supper at the Y.W.C.A. we went to see a variety show which was very good indeed, and then travelled home and so to bed.

On Wednesday I was Duty Leading Wren and that meant I'd got to stay in Quarters, so Kay and I got busy with my frock! I drew the design of what I wanted and from that Kay cut me out a paper pattern from which I cut out the material. Since then I've not had the time to do more, so it's just awaiting sewing. I'm having a square neck, a fairly close-fitting bodice and a fairly full skirt. Nothing fancy though as this is my first attempt! When next I go into Paris I'll try to get some frilling to sew in round the neck and sleeves, or some ribbon or something just to finish it off you know.

On Thursday that is yesterday, Ginge and I went to Paris and saw a good film called "Winged Victory". We didn't stay late though because it was so hot—far too hot for collars & ties anyway!

That brings me up to date with my doings. I had a very nice letter from Bill this week. He seems well at the time of writing but had had a bad leg. He says he tires quickly now though having been out there so long. I do think it's the limit. It's more than time he had leave if not a draft! He wished to be remembered to you also.

Don't think I've any more news at all now. I do hope you're getting this lovely weather at home. You ought to go and sit in the park a little bit each afternoon Mum, it would do you good—I would say Bessie too, if I didn't know she was working 9 till 6! Hope Dad & Stan are keeping well too. Till I write again, take care won't you and God Bless you all.

Lots of love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> May 1945  
 [Joan's 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday]

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bess & Stan,

Just received your letter of 19<sup>th</sup>. Got it last night as a matter of fact, birthday cards and all. Right on time! Thank you all so much—and I do mean thanks. Thanks most particularly at the moment for the cake. We've just had coffee and a piece of aforementioned cake in the office—after pay too!—and it was lovely, the cake I mean. You packed it beautifully and I got it a few days ago and had been meaning to write and thank you for it then, but I thought I'd wait till we'd tasted it!

By the way, as I've already said, I got your letter last night and it was the first I've heard since I came back from leave—over a week, and I was beginning to worry about you all.

Last Saturday evening I began to sew my frock and according to Kay's expert eyes, didn't do too badly at all (I 'ope!). Again on Sunday, it being our Duty Watch, I stayed in all evening and did a bit more to the old frock! (I dread to tell you this, but I haven't touched it since!)

On Monday—I've just discovered on looking at my diary to write this letter that it was Whitsun Monday—Ginge and I went into Paris and it rained and rained and rained. We went to the Y.W.C.A. and had tea and waited for the rain to stop, but oh no, nothing so simple, on the contrary it only rained harder. In the end we decided we'd go to the cinema. We looked at the programme sheets and found we'd seen the films that were showing at both cinemas and we didn't feel in the mood for French cinema. The films are mostly English speaking but the audience mostly French because they have French captions underneath and so of course there's the smell to cope with! Not feeling in the mood for that we decided to go to see Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in "To Have or Have Not" which we'd seen once before, but it was warm, cosy, free and above all out of the rain, so that made up our minds. Off we shot out into the downpour stared at by the dozens of Parisians who were sheltering in doorways and underneath shop blinds. We rushed to the Metro at the Concorde and dashed down the steps—and just a few other people had also decided on the same course! I've never seen so many people trying to get into one train. Anyway, the great thing was we were in. Normally we'd have walked as it was only one station, but because of the rain we hadn't. I had a man digging a trench in the middle of my back and a woman with a wet mackintosh washing my face, whilst Ginge had a mouthful of wet feathers from a Paris model hat and someone breathing garlic down her

neck! Altogether a pleasant journey.

After all that, however, we reached the cinema, saw the film and emerged into the downpour and regained the Y.W. in time for supper. Kay came in from the office and joined us in this meal and we all three went to Olympia and saw Glenn Miller's band of the A.E.F. with Ray McKinley, Johnny Desmond etc.<sup>107</sup> It was grand.

Think that's all the news up till to-day—22 years old—golly, think of it. Honestly, I don't feel more than 19, so why worry!

This morning we've all been tamping mad in here because of VE Day. Everybody seems to be getting 48 hours leave for it by order of the Government within two months of VE Day. That is everybody but us! They've decided that perhaps we can be spared from 1230 on one day until 1130 on the next—not quite 24 hours! Well, of course, the Thomas and the Prior don't quite like this, so the Thomas brings it up in the office and we find that neither does anyone else. After all, as Ginge said, the bus drives who've already had about six weeks holiday off and on with the strikes and so on—they're getting their little 48. So are the postmen and the munition makers and the shop-keepers and everyone else who fancies they can dig in and help themselves! Even the B.L.A.<sup>108</sup> men who deserve it more than anyone perhaps have only just got it, but at least they've got it. The A.T.S. over here are getting it too—everyone! So the Prior toddled off to see 1st Officer about it, but no joy. She told me, quite rightly I suppose, that leave was a privilege in the Navy. That no Naval or Wren officers or ratings in our party were getting 48 and that we couldn't really expect 48. Well, there it was. And nothing could be done. However, she's promised to look into the times of leave so that perhaps we can have it from 6pm one day till 6pm the next. Only as it is now, of course, it means leaving Paris at about 9am to get back in time. We've sat and thought of all the people we could write to about it. Our M.P.s.? Well, when I thought of Mr. Parker I said a quick and definite NO. Then we thought p'raps Mr. Speaker? But after all, why should we worry, we've only worked night and day for long periods at a time for 2/3d. a day, we've nothing really to bother about—much! Anyhow, we laughed it off in the end as we always do and apart from

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107 American band leader Glenn Miller is believed to have disappeared in a plane crossing from England to France in December 1944 ahead of his Allied Expeditionary Forces (AEF) band's move to Paris for a concert tour and broadcasts. The band, without Miller, fulfilled their commitments during 1945, led by their drummer Ray McKinley.

108 British Liberation Army—the name given to the British Army troops who served in Europe between D-Day and the end of the war, mostly comprising 21st Army Group.



tucking it away to remember at the right time, we've forgotten it.

The next very important item in this letter is about the Election. Of course with Winnie resigning and things happening faster than it takes to think, things are a bit muddled just now.<sup>109</sup> We don't get newspapers so I don't know any of the details that led up to the resignation or anything. The one thing I am pretty sure of is that is Labour's work! You know Bess from the chat we had about it when I was on leave that if there's a chance to vote Independent for me—please take it! You know I nominated you to vote for me when the time comes. If not, then Conservative or Liberal (if that party's still going)—anything but Labour. If you can possibly get any dope out to me about the candidates for Barking before the Election, would you do so? I'm sorry to be such a pest about it, but this is important. It's just as important for every man and woman to put their note in the right place as it was for them to put their weight into winning the war—perhaps it's more important—the war only lasted six years—we want that peace we've worked for to last far longer please and it won't if we all sit back and ignore such an important thing as this first General Election after the panic's over. Churchill's men and policy were good enough in the tough times, they're good enough for me now. Most of us here are solid behind Churchill and we want to remain that way. Anything slightly savouring of Labour is the opposite—just look at them! On second thoughts don't—they make me sick! Anyway, Bess, now that that's off my chest, if you can't get word and reply beforehand don't vote Labour. Preferably Independent. Also don't vote Commonwealth—they're far too Communistic. I know it's grand in Russia, but let it stay there.<sup>110</sup>

Well, I must just get some assistance while I jump down off my soap-box, and rush out to catch the transport.

Before I do rush off though, I hope you're all keeping well, that the allotment is going fine, that your job's going O.K. Bess and that everything in the garden is lovely.

My love to Geg and the kiddies, and to you Bess & Stan. Of course to you Mum and Dad. A special big hug for my birthday to you both.

Fondest love,  
Joan xxxxx

109 Following election defeat, Prime Minister Winston Churchill resigned on 26 July 1945.

110 The 1945 General Election was held on 11 July 1945. Clement Atlee's Labour Party won an unexpected landslide victory, securing 393 seats against Churchill's Conservatives who won 197. The 10.7% swing to Labour was the largest achieved by any party in a British General Election. The turn-out was an incredible (by modern standards) 72.8%.

Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> May 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

According to the old diary I last wrote you on my birthday. Well, a lot of things have happened since then, so here goes with the news.

On Friday night Ginge and I went to the cinema on the camp here and saw a film called "Experiment Perilous" starring George Brent, Hedy Lamarr and Paul Lukas. It was rather queer, but quite good.

On Saturday we had a half day and in the afternoon went shopping for various things I needed such as nail files, etc., and in the evening after supper at the Y.W.C.A. we went to the Canada Club where there was a dance. It was very nice indeed, quite quiet but very friendly, and we thoroughly enjoyed it.

On Sunday afternoon, although we should have been duty, we "swapped" with another watch so that we could go to Fontainebleau. We set out at a quarter to two, but lost our way, and didn't arrive there until five o'clock! However, after some time we managed to persuade the guide to show us round (it normally closes at five)—how silly of me, I should have said first that there is a wonderful palace there where all the French kings from Napoleon's time onwards, have lived. Anyhow, we were shown round this marvellous building—and it has to be seen to be believed. We then adjourned for sandwiches and grapefruit juice—how I hate that!—and then returned home. We got back about half past nine and although it wasn't late we were tired all the same and soon went to bed.

Yesterday, we had our 23 hours VE Day leave! Still, in spite of that being a sore point we really enjoyed it. We went into Paris and went straight to the Y.W.C.A. (not the same one as we go to for meals) where we were received as though we were of great importance! Am I kidding! Honestly though, we first of all registered and then someone relieved us of our cases and we were whisked up to the fourth floor by lift. We were shown into a very nice room and left to ourselves. It wasn't a pretty room, but was fairly large, quite clean and rather homely looking. We unpacked (sounds terrific, but in reality meant putting out our washing things, pyjamas and a book by the bed). There was a washbasin with hot and cold water and a reading lamp on the table between the two single beds. Plenty of cupboard space and shelves and mirrors, and last but not least, a wonderful springy bed. It was one of those deep Slumber mattresses that spring and spring and spring—wonderful! We then had tea and walked along to the

cinema in the Champs Elysees where we saw Bud Abbott and Lou Costello in "Here Come the Co-eds"—it's a scream. If you get the chance do go to see it.

We then had dinner and went on to the Marigny Theatre where we saw a play called "To See Ourselves". None of the actors is well-known, but it's very funny. We laughed a lot over it. We left there at about ten to ten and went into the NAAFI for a last cup of tea, as we thought we might not be able to get anything else before we went to bed. Having had that we made our way back to our room—incidentally it's the Hotel Metropolitan—and just got in in time as a thunder storm broke. Much to our surprise there was a running buffet being served there, so we had another cup of tea and then to bed.

This morning we had breakfast in bed at nine o'clock, and then got up and made our way back to Quarters in time for lunch. Then on here, where I slipped this sheet of paper into the machine to let you have all the details.

Haven't had much mail lately, but I've had another (Scuse odd paper, but I've run out!) letter from Reg Wood, still in the wilds of India and not liking the heat very much. He writes a very interesting letter; although he too hasn't heard from Mr. Mason, nor Mr. Clark—in spite of writing to them both.

By the way, I'm sorry to be such a pest, but about this Election! Have just been informed that the voting papers will be sent out to the forces everywhere to give them all a chance to vote, or something, so if you haven't already done anything in the matter of voting for me by proxy Bess, don't do it, and I'll have the papers sent out to me and will do it from this end. I think they believe it will get too complicated if it's done the other way, so they've decided to post the papers out to us. If you hear anything more your end of course let us know please.

Don't think there's anything more to say at the moment—just wanted you to know I'm O.K. and still keeping fit and well. I hope you're all O.K. too. Isn't it nearly time for you to go to hospital again Stan? If so, best of luck!

Till I write again, looking forward to hearing from you, God bless you all and take care of yourselves—'specially Mum!

Fondest love,  
Joan xxxx



Fig. 5.15. The Château at Fontainebleau. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

TOP SECRET.  
 SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.  
 ALLIED NAVAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EXPEDITIONARY  
 FORCE'S WAR DIARY.  
 PERIOD 15<sup>TH</sup> TO 31<sup>ST</sup> MAY, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the War Diary of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Expeditionary Force, for the period 16<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1945, inclusive.

2. The latter half of May saw great progress in the opening and mine clearance of ports in HOLLAND, DENMARK and North West GERMANY and the start of operation DOOMSDAY, the first stage in the relief of NORWAY.

3. The diary gives details of the U-boats, other war vessels and merchant ships which were captured or surrendered during the month.<sup>111</sup>

H.M. Burrough

  
 ADMIRAL.

<sup>111</sup> Extract from ANCXF Naval War Diary 16–31 May 1945 (29 June 1945), ADM199/1445, The National Archives, London.

Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1945

My Dear Bessie, Stan and Mum & Dad,

Thanks a lot for your letter written 27<sup>th</sup> May to which I will endeavour to reply. I'll tell you why I say "endeavour" in a minute.

The VE Dance at the Fire Station sounded smashing! I wish I could have been there—I know I'd have loved it!

So you liked "Here Come the Waves"? Well, I still don't think it came up to the usual Crosby standard. However, there were two songs which I loved—Accentuate the Positive and I Promise You.

Fancy seeing "Blithe Spirit" before me! Actually I missed it when it was in Paris—I believe I was on leave or something. Still, I'm still hopeful.

The Netherfield Gardens party sounded fun. I'm so glad everything went well—especially for Ivy's sake.<sup>112</sup> Glad she liked her lipstick by the way—it's quite a risk buying one for someone else.

Yes, Dear, I'm afraid I know all too well that Ron arrived in England on my birthday expecting to find me there.<sup>113</sup> Of course I s'pose it was only natural, but I had written several times telling him when I was having my leave and when it would be over. However, I 'spect he'll have a good time when all's said and done. He's lucky to be getting 28 days so soon after his 40 or whatever it was he had before isn't he?

I can just imagine the roses in the garden now. Over here roses seem to grow like weeds—with the same profusion I mean. They're really lovely. People have them climbing up the trunks of trees in their gardens and over trellis and simply everywhere.

The fair, Bess, sounds simply grand. I'd love to go to it! When you've been you must write and tell me all about it.

Since last I wrote several things have happened. Firstly, on Wednesday, several of the girls in the office had to take an exam to become a leading wren. Better do a bit of explaining here. Hitherto, the system was one of long service and automatic promotion. Now they've instituted a system whereby you have to pass an exam before your name goes on the roster for promotion. Several of the girls in the office took it and Bobbie Walker, our A/Sec. thought it would be a good idea if I took it too (Not sending up the papers of course) just to see what a Leading Wren could do, so he said! It was a stiff test really—4 mins. dictation at 120 w.p.m.

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112 Ron's elder brother Jack (1909–1972) and his wife Ivy (1908–2002) lived at Netherfield Gardens, Barking.

113 Ron's ship had left Italy on 10 May and arrived in England on 23 May.

and then type it back in 12 mins.! Then a letter to type and a tabular statement. Well, Ginge did the shorthand-typist part with one error, and the letter with one error and I did the shorthand-typist part with two errors and none in the letter. I didn't have to do the tabular statement, I don't know why. Both Ginge and I were mad though because we checked up after and found that our shorthand notes had been perfect and we'd just misread our errors! Anyway, she passed and a couple of the other girls Enid and Babs passed too, although only scraping through, so it was a relief really when it was all over. You see I'd have felt awful if I'd failed because I've got my hook now and they can't take it away, but I should have felt that I didn't deserve it you see. (Not that I do really!)

Well that was Wednesday!

On Thursday Kay, Ginge and I had a half-day and we went into Paris. We'd seen all the films showing at the English and American cinemas so we went to a French cinema showing "It's a Date" with Deanna Durbin, Kay Francis and Walter Pidgeon. My dear, we were in fits before it started because having paid to go in, a girl comes along to show you to a seat and then says "Service!" Well, we didn't see why we should give her a tip for that because we could have found our way to our own seats and saved her the trouble really, so we deliberately misunderstood her and said "Yes, we were in the Service—Royal British Navy" and then ignored her. Obviously she was quite stunned and she went away very puzzled!

After dinner at the Y.W.C.A. we went to the Canada Club to a dance. We had a very pleasant evening during the course of which I met a Canadian soldier whose name was Elmer! Honestly I didn't know how to keep a straight face! I thought it was only in jokes that people had names like that.

On Friday we held a Ship's Company Dance and invited lots of outside units too and we had a wonderful time. I had a good deal of dancing "instruction" from a very pleasant fellow in the R.A.F. whose main hobby was dancing apparently. Anyhow—I know a lot more about it now than when I went into the dance hall. We also brought each other luck in as much as we won the Spot Waltz and he got cigarettes and I got a lovely bottle of Gilot perfume in a white and gold box lined with satin! It's a dream honestly. Thing is I don't want to open it for fear it evaporates and I don't want to send it home for fear it breaks on the way!

Last night I washed my hair and Kay set it and now—oh, boy! Who is this Veronica Lake????

You remember that film we saw at Bridgwater—"Love Story"? Well I simply loved the theme song "Cornish Rhapsody" as you may remember, and this week Ken sent me the music of it. We have a new girl with us now—one Jean Cochrane—who used to be at the Royal Academy of Music and has now joined the Wrens. She says it make a change from playing the piano all day! Anyhow as you can imagine she plays beautifully and she played it for me last night—Cornish Rhapsody I mean—and it sounded as wonderful as when I heard it in the film. I think it's marvellous. Anyway I spoke to her about my taking up the piano again and she said that she was going to ask for a quiet room with just a piano in it when we move to Germany so that anyone can practise without interruptions.<sup>114</sup> At the moment our piano is in the fo'c'sle where everyone gathers in the evenings and there is table-tennis and chatter and all sorts of things to cope with. Anyway she said she didn't see why I shouldn't be able to pick it up again if I was willing to put in sufficient practice (Didn't like the sound of that bit—rather ominous!) and she would be glad to help me all she could over anything I didn't understand. So, when we get to Germany—providing we can acquire a piano—I intend to start though just how far I'll get isn't to be dwelt on just now.

To-night there'll be more panic than that because we've a kit muster to-morrow and I've sent lots of things home and so on, still I expect I'll manage somehow.

I don't think there's any more news now, so I'll close down. Before I do Ginge sends her love to you all—she still remembers the chips!

God Bless you all and take care of yourselves won't you?  
Fondest love,  
Joan xxxxx

P.S. Thanks a lot for Sunday Expresses and Advertisers—both coming through and both gladly received.

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114 Admiral Burrough had written to SHAEF on 15 May of the plan to move his headquarters to Germany: 'I consider that they would best be situated at MINDEN which has the advantage of being near the ports and 21 Army Group and Second TAF Headquarters. I of course intend to have a portion of my staff with SHAEF (Forward) at FRANKFURT which will be composed of Rear-Admiral PARRY and some 12 Officers. Full details of accommodation required will be signalled separately. Request early concurrence to these proposals so that work on the Headquarters at MINDEN may be commenced immediately', WO 219/493, The National Archives, London.

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> June 1945

My Dearest Mum and Dad, Bessie and Stan,

This is only a wee note just now to let you know that I've just received your letter written on 30<sup>th</sup> May by this afternoon's mail, Mum. As I wrote to Bess yesterday there's not very much I can tell you, but I wanted you to know I got your letter O.K. and that everything is still fine here with me. To-night I expect to send some clothes off to you because we had a kit muster to-day and there are several things I find I don't need so will send them home before we move. I'll send the cake tin as well and also the alarm clock. I don't know whether you'll be able to get it repaired at all but as I'm not sure when we're going I didn't like to leave it here as it would have taken some weeks apparently, and I got off to a bad start on account of the shops being shut on my day off for two weeks!

I'm sending my old pair of bedroom slippers, and an old suit (minus buttons). I wonder whilst I'm on the subject of sending, whether you would send me 3 vests. Not that I wear them but I was that much deficient in kit and as they're part of the recognised kit I'll have to carry them about with me even if I don't wear them. I've easily got three somewhere about at home, but can't remember where. Doesn't matter if they're old as I've only to show them just to prove I have them with me.

I haven't done much more to the frock as I've been rather busy lately all-round. We've been awfully busy in the office and consequently things like darning which I used to be able to squeeze in in the mornings are having to be done in the nights now.

Your tea-party sounded fun. Wish I'd been there.

Yes, I know Ron came home on my birthday—he seems awfully fed up about it, but honestly I did warn him and it's just one of those things, isn't it?

I'm sorry to hear that Muriel has married Jim, though it's nothing to do with me, but he was so peculiar—I don't know how on earth she ever prevented herself from being rude to him, he was so irritating!<sup>115</sup>

My love to Grace and the kiddies when you see them. By the way, if I send some stationery home for Mag and Fred and some for you as well will that be O.K.? I mean, will you forward it on for

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115 Muriel Rollingson (Brown) (1920–1989) was Joan's cousin, the daughter by her second marriage of Grace Prior's younger sister Lilian (who, in Grace's inimitable phrase, was 'no better than she should have been'). The unpopular husband Muriel had chosen was James Rollingson (1921–1997).



me—it can all go in one parcel then. Thanks, a lot.

We're having a tremendous increase of staff here lately and have already got two new girls in the typing pool!

Well, must fly now, dears, work's waiting and that's one of the few things I don't keep waiting!

Fondest love,  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

L/Wren J. H. Prior, 41801,  
Naval Party 1749,<sup>116</sup>  
c/o B.F.M.O.,  
Reading,  
Berks.

Friday 8<sup>th</sup> June 1945

Dear Bessie & Stan, Mum & Dad,

Just received your letter Bess of the 4<sup>th</sup> June and was glad to know everything was still O.K. at home.

Fancy the letters taking all that time! You know they aren't being censored here now, but at the Base, so that may take longer—I don't know.

Funny you not liking "A Place of One's Own"—I'm longing to see it still because with that cast I'd enjoy any film.<sup>117</sup>

My dear, how thrilling but disappointing for you to come so near but yet so far from all that food at the fair. Of course those fresh vegetables just don't bear thinking about over here!

I'm so sorry about Peggy—I do remember her quite well! Some people do have more than their share don't they?

I'll see about the Voting from this end Bess, so don't worry about it at all. I'm glad you and Stan are able to have a holiday together again and to go right away, after all this time. I love the I.O.W. and hope you have a lovely time there.<sup>118</sup> By the way, let me have your holiday address so that from 30<sup>th</sup> June I can send a line

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116 This is the first letter on which Joan Prior indicates the redesignation of ANCXF from Naval Party 1645 to 1749, which they would remain for the duration of their service in Minden.

117 Another Gainsborough melodrama starring James Mason and Margaret Lockwood.

118 The Isle of Wight. Joan had holidayed there as a child with her parents. Bess and Stan Bones would be so enamoured by their visit that the following year they persuaded Grace and Harry Prior to invest with them in a hotel in Sandown, where they established a thriving business in the post-war holiday boom.

or two to you there.

That seems to about take care of answering your letter, I think, now for my gossip.

On Tuesday Ginge, Kay & I went to our own camp cinema and saw "Circumstantial Evidence" with Lloyd Nolan. It wasn't very good really. Also, please note, I sent you a birthday card, Mum!

On Wednesday, the three of us again went into Paris and in the afternoon we tried to shop—I say tried because nearly all the shops were closed for the Anniversary of D-Day! However, whilst Ginge was buying a pipe for Kenn in one of the shops, I bought a fountain pen—I'm using it now as you can see—because I didn't think there was much chance of getting the others repaired.

If you haven't decided upon anything else yet, perhaps you'd like to "buy" it for my birthday, or perhaps Mum & Dad would, or something. But if not—it's quite O.K. I don't really mind but thought that maybe something I'd actually got & really wanted might be a help.

Heard from Ken yesterday that his father's very ill. He's got Diabetic Meningitis and has completely lost the use of his legs. Isn't it awful?

Don't think I've any more news at the moment dears. I'm not at the new address yet—will of course let you know after I've arrived there. However, please send mail there.<sup>119</sup>

God Bless you all,  
And Fondest Love,  
From Joan xxxxx

With the end of the war in Europe, the principal task of ANCXF became the management of German naval disarmament, alongside its ongoing logistical oversight of the liberated ports whose repair and re-opening were vital to the supply lines of the Allied forces amassed in Europe. Their move from France into Germany, on 15 June 1945, marked the transition from liberation to occupation. It also changed the nature of the Wrens' work somewhat, and their social and cultural lives considerably.

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119 ANCXF confirmed in a message to SHAEF on 7 June that its St Germain HQ would close on 15 June and re-open in Minden on the same day. WO 219/1012, The National Archives, London.



# 6. Occupational Therapy

## (Germany, 1945–1946)

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Before the two world wars that fuelled Joan's mother Grace Prior's lifelong loathing of Germans, the *Baedeker* of 1910 recorded:

Minden: an old town with 27,000 inhab., lies on both banks of the Weser, which is crossed here by two bridges. From the *Main Railway Station*, which lies on the right bank of the Weser, we follow the Victoria-Str. and Kaiser-Str. to the *Weser Bridge* (view of the *Porta Westfalica*). Near the W. end of the bridge are a *Statue of the Great Elector* (1640–1688), by Haverkamp, and a *War Monument*. The Roman Catholic *Cathedral* is a well-proportioned edifice, of which the tower dates from 1062–1072, the nave from the end of the 13th cent., and the choir from 1377–1379 (sacristan, Dom-Str. 12). Rich window-tracery. The cathedral treasury contains valuable works of art. The *Rathaus*, in the marketplace, has arcades of the 15th century.<sup>1</sup>

*The Bomber's Baedeker: A Guide to the Economic Importance of German Towns and Cities* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1944), produced by the British Foreign Office and the Ministry of Economic Warfare, provides the following data for Minden, Westphalia (population: 39,000):

Minden is on the main railway line from Berlin via Hannover to Western Germany. It lies on the left bank of the Weser two miles downstream from the *Porta Westfalica*, the narrow gap in the hills which divide Westphalia from the North German plain. The *Mittellandkanal* crosses the Weser at Minden. The town has a variety of industries (most of the factories being individually small), including lead-pipe making, furniture, industrial porcelain and stoneware products, and clothing and

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1 *Northern Germany as far as the Bavarian and Austrian Frontiers: Handbook for Travellers* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1910). <https://archive.org/details/northerngerma00karl/page/38/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater&q=Minden>

uniform manufacture. The most important industry in Minden is now the aeroplane works mentioned below.

Inland Harbour Minden (2) The important Junction of the river Weser and the Mittelland Canal is in the North quarter of the town, and consists of a system of locks, a pumping station, the aqueduct carrying the canal over the river, and the inland harbour. The locks overcome a 4–6 ft. head between the canal and the river. The Canal is the link between the Rhine, Weser and Elbe and is the main artery of the German inland waterways system. The level of the canal is maintained by water pumped from the Weser at Minden. Minden is an important transit centre for grain. Grain from Hanover is shipped down the Weser to Bremen or by the Mittelland Canal to the Rhine via the Dortmund-Ems Canal.

Peschke Minden (3) The Peschke Flugzeugwerkstätten G.m.b.H. are aircraft-repair shops. These works appear to have been expanded, and it is possible that they are now making some aircraft components on the spot. The works are in the Northern part of Minden near to the inland harbour.<sup>2</sup>

It was with some irony, therefore, that what had for years been a target on the maps of Allied bombers, the Peschke Airworks, became the headquarters of the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief Expeditionary Force on 15 June 1945.

## THE REMOVAL OF A.N.C.X.F.'S HEADQUARTERS TO GERMAN SOIL.

60. Since late September 1944, A.N.C.X.F.'s Headquarters had been located at the Chateau d'Hennemont, St. Germain, about six miles from Versailles and thus convenient to the main departments of S.H.A.E.F.

61. It was a natural conclusion that A.N.C.X.F. should move to Frankfurt so as to be alongside the Supreme Commander's Headquarters, and in early May arrangements to this end were well in hand.

62. The intention then was that A.N.C.X.F.'s "Post Hostilities" Staff, under Rear-Admiral W. E. Parry, C.B., should move from London to Minden, where this staff would be best located to put into execution the plans for the control and disarmament of the German Navy. At Minden

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2 Foreign Office and Ministry of Economic Warfare, *The Bomber's Baedeker: A Guide to the Economic Importance of German Towns and Cities*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Foreign Office and Ministry of Economic Warfare, 1944). The Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG).

they would be ten miles from Bad Oeynhausen, where 21st Army Group Headquarters was being established, while Lubbecke to which the British Control Commission was shortly to move is eight miles away.

63. But soon after the surrender it seemed likely that the Supreme Allied Command would terminate somewhat sooner than had been envisaged and with this in mind it seemed preferable for A.N.C.X.F.'s Main Headquarters to go to Minden. It was still necessary, however, for a strong liaison staff to be maintained at Supreme Headquarters and Rear-Admiral Parry was accordingly made head of this staff, which was established at Frankfurt early in June. A.N.C.X.F.'s Main Headquarters opened at Minden on 15th June.<sup>3</sup>



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3 'The final stages of the Naval War in North-West Europe', supplement to *The London Gazette*, Tuesday 6 January 1948, number 38171.



Figs 6.1–6.5. Minden, 'one of Germany's lesser-bombed towns', 1945. Photographs by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Interviewed in 1994, 'Ginge' Thomas remembered: 'by the time we got to Minden, things were getting a little bit boring as far as I was

concerned. It was the aftermath of things'.<sup>4</sup> If that reflection is seemingly at odds with the resolutely buoyant mood of Joan Prior's letters home, that cannot be attributed entirely to her consistent performance of positivity for home consumption; indeed, in their frenetic calendar of work duties and social engagements, there seems to have been never a dull moment. Yet, Ginge's memory must surely also have contained the trace of a more widely shared sense that, after VE Day, the job was done. If the nature of their clerical work was largely the same, the collective motivation that drove it (the defeat of Nazi Germany) was somewhat dissipated by its achievement. This period, following the surrender of the vanquished, became a second kind of 'phoney war'. Jeremy Crang writes: 'those [women] who did serve in Germany in the aftermath of the conflict displayed a mixture of emotions [...] There was suspicion of the civilians with whom they came into contact. [...] There was pity for the malnourished children [...] And there was defiance'.<sup>5</sup> Surely then, there was also simply tedium. Exceptionally, ANCXF Wrens like Laura Mountney, returned from Paris to the UK, discouraged by her father from serving in Germany.<sup>6</sup> The transition from being welcomed as liberators (despite some early negativity encountered in remote corners of Normandy), to being grudgingly tolerated as the occupying forces by a defeated and largely destitute population, would not have been lost on the Wrens of ANCXF.

BERYL K. BLOWS: I visited the main ports, and never have I seen such complete devastation as in Kiel, Hamburg and Bremen [...] On these journeys I looked in vain for the healthy blond people I had heard about, and found nothing but drawn, unhappy faces on tired, overworked bodies, and spirits bitter against the Nazi regime as much as the British.<sup>7</sup>

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- 4 Phyllis 'Ginge' Thomas (Leading Wren), in Chris Howard-Bailey (dir.), *The Vital Link: The Wrens of the Allied Naval Command Expeditionary Force, 1943–45* (VHS recording, Royal Naval Museum, 1994). Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth.
  - 5 Jeremy A. Crang, *Sisters in Arms: Women in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 199.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
  - 7 Beryl K. Blows (3/O Wren), 'A Wren in Europe', unidentified press cutting (p. 47); Janet Sheila Bertram Swete-Evans, 'Private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans', Documents.14994, Imperial War Museum, London. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030014798>



What is noticeable from the evidence of Joan Prior's correspondence is how the suspicion and defiance noted by Crang (with which the Minden letters begin), gradually gives way to sympathy and (despite strictures against fraternisation) later to some intermingling with German civilians—perhaps more a desire to occasionally don 'civvies' and relax than to prematurely bury the hatchet.

This curiosity is manifested chiefly in the Wrens' increasing opportunities to travel in their time off and sometimes on work errands too. Joan is as fascinated with the scenic route to attend a court martial in Plön as she is with the celebrated landscape of the Harz Mountains on a short break with Ginge. And having left behind the convenient pleasures of Paris, Brussels becomes the next best thing. If greater freedom to travel as 'tourists' was one development of this strange post-conflict occupation, another was the semi-official encouragement for Wrens to provide entertainment (at the very least as dance partners) for the locally-stationed allied troops—'something for the boys', as Joan writes home.

It is clear that such extra-curricular duties were understood among the Wrens who served in Germany from the words of a 'Wrens' Ditty Song' ('to the tune of John Brown's Body'), which are handwritten in Second Officer Sheila Swete-Evans's diary:

Have you read the daily papers? There's a job for us to do.  
It isn't what we came for, but we think it's time you knew.  
They're sending us to Germany, but not to see the view:  
They're sending us as comforts for the troops.

CHORUS

Oh whatever will me mum say,  
Oh whatever will me mum say,  
Oh whatever will me mum say,  
When she knows that I'm a comfort for the troops.<sup>8</sup>

Although Joan Prior's reports indicate that there is no let-up in the pressure of their work - supporting ANCXF in its dual role of maintaining the allied supply lines via port routes and overseeing the disarmament of the *Kriegsmarine* - the swift establishment of leisure

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8 Janet Sheila Bertram Swete-Evans, 'Sheila Swete-Evans papers, 1889–1988', David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.  
<https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE003167710>

activities on the base (including sports, swimming, concerts, dances and cinema) is augmented with frequent escorted trips to other allied camps in the region. And there are also invitations from some naval officers to socialise at their private quarters. Whilst there are no revelations of impropriety in Joan's letters—perhaps for fear of 'what me mum will say'—there is certainly evidence of what would now be considered the crossing of professional boundaries: an expectation that the Wrens' duties were not confined to their desks and teleprinters. From the typing pool to the swimming pool, this was clearly war work of a very different kind.

If all this sounds at best frivolous, Joan's early missives also reveal her reactions to discovering first-hand the effects of war, travelling to Minden through Holland, as well as in Germany itself. The privations of their own domestic arrangements, at least initially, are but a shadow of the conditions experienced by many outside the safety of their perimeter. And the excitement of Joan being dispatched to attend courts martial also reminds us that occupying forces break other kinds of professional codes of conduct too, sometimes with criminal consequences. What Joan couldn't reveal about Minden are secrets she might not have known—its hidden underground munitions factory beneath the Kaiser Wilhelm I monument they visited at Porta Westfalica—and perhaps ones she had heard about, but would not mention. Long before she and her comrades were allowed to visit the town's cinema, indeed, six weeks before the arrival of ANCF, a British Movietone News film revealing the horrors discovered at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen was screened at the Scala Lichtspiele in Minden's marketplace, where local citizens were corralled and compelled to view it.

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

Well, here I am at long last settling down to write and let you have all the gen. It's a Sunday and I'm feeling so worn out and tired, but still must drop you a line or you'll be wondering where on earth I am.

To start with we started off on Tuesday morning, 12<sup>th</sup> June, and were to go by bus to Le Bourget aerodrome just north of Paris and from there to fly to Germany. Well, we were up and packed up our bedding etc. At 7am all our bedding and suitcases went into a

waiting truck and were whizzed off to Germany by road leaving us with just a small case with washing gear and sleeping things in it. Ginge and I also retained our duffel coats and travelling rugs just in case—and later on we were thankful we had done this.

Well, we had breakfast and then headed for Le Bourget. Having got there, it had started to tip with rain and the sky was looking so stormy and thundery and after waiting about half an hour we were told that there would be no more flying that day so back we went to Quarters.

We had lunch at Quarters and then Ginge and I went into Paris. We went to the cinema in the afternoon and saw Fred MacMurray and Madeleine Carroll in "Honeymoon in Bali" which was very good indeed and then after supper at the YWCA we went to the Canada Club dancing in the evening. Well, that was our last night in Paris and it nearly broke my heart to leave. I don't know when I've minded leaving a city so much. Well, that was that and we trekked back to Quarters and slept on the boards that night. That was when we were glad we'd got our rugs and duffels because boards have a way of getting hard and cold after a time!

The next day we set off in the bus once more and went to the Chateau to pick up the Wren officers for the trip. We arrived there and were told once more no flying so back to the Quarters and there we hung about till lunch-time when after a hurried lunch we were told we were not now flying but going by road. So, once more into the busses we piled, picked up the Wren officers and the stewards and started off.

We went north through France, and into Belgium, through Mons and several other big towns and so to Brussels. We arrived there at half past eleven at night and slept in the Church Army Hostel. After breakfast there, we set out on the road again at 8am and went north through Belgium across the frontier and into Holland. The damage in the Dutch towns is pitiful and the people are all starving.<sup>9</sup> Honestly, it's ghastly when you thinking of the

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9 'In Holland when our transport halted we were much distressed when Dutch people came to us and begged for food. We had been issued for the journey with the usual "hard rations"—3 packs each of breakfast, lunch and dinner, of which breakfast was by far the best containing a hard lump of porridge (to be watered down and heated or could be eaten whole as a biscuit), instant coffee, biscuits and a packet of lavatory paper. There had been much swapping around of these luxuries en route as some people preferred 3 breakfasts and others the bar of chocolate which the lunch contained. When the Dutch appeared we had to be ordered not to give them all our day's rations'. Jean Gordon (Irvine) (Leading Wren), 'Southwick Park & Normandy', unpublished personal testimony, D-Day Museum Archive, Portsmouth, H670.1990/5.

people at home now grumbling because the busses may not run to time or because they've to queue for food. Those people would love the chance to queue all day if there was any food at the end of it! We went through a town which was called Venlo. I say was, because it just doesn't exist anymore.

Then we crossed the German Frontier and crossed the Rhine. Actually, for all I'd heard of its beauty I was disappointed as the place where we crossed it was quite uninteresting. It was just a very wide stretch of even water with flat land each side of it. I suppose it's further south that it winds through hilly wooded country with castles on its banks. Anyway, that over we went through one German town after another and it would do your hearts good to see the damage inflicted by the RAF and the Americans. Not one German town or village that we passed through—and we went through a good many—had escaped. All had suffered in some degree or another and most were worse than anything England has ever seen. One town called Osnabruck just doesn't exist anymore. There were only two houses which were habitable in the whole of that town and it wasn't a small place by any means! Munster too, was badly damaged and so eventually, at about half-past nine we arrived at our destination Minden.

All that day on the road of course we'd not been able to buy food, so we lived on American Army "K" rations. We stopped by the roadside for lunch, tea and supper and each time had to make a fire with twigs or anything that was handy and boil up water to make coffee or a hot drink of some sort. And we ate ship's biscuits and cheese and fruit bars. Ginge and I were luckier than most because we had some cherries. That came about in a very peculiar manner.

Ages ago when we were in the "little wooden huts in the winter time" I went to a dance and a soldier there just back from Belgium gave me a 20-franc Belgian note as a souvenir. I didn't really want it at all as I didn't know him and a souvenir was the last thing I wanted, but I took it just to please him. Before we got into the bus at 8am on Wednesday morning I went across to the market in the square at Brussels and bought 20-francs' worth of cherries! The others weren't able to do it because they hadn't any Belgian money and the Belgians wouldn't take French money, so we were jolly lucky.

I think that about completes the journey stage of the proceedings so now I'll go on to our office. We work in a simply enormous building I can't possibly give you an idea of how large it is. It used to be a factory and in 1938 it won the Hitler Prize for the best

factory in Germany!<sup>10</sup> It's really a lovely place. Masses of large windows and oh, so many offices! Of course Hitler would have a shock if he could see it now because it's been turned into one H.M.'s ships complete with large notices on every floor—"A Deck", "B Deck" and "C Deck"! and the Admiral's Flag and the White Ensign fly from a wonderful complete quarterdeck!<sup>11</sup>

Well, so much for the office. We have about ten minutes' walk from the office to our quarters and all this in inside a certain area bounded by a perimeter outside which no girl may go without an armed escort! The town proper is outside the perimeter and only our office and quarters are inside so it's quite a small area really. The quarters we don't like at all. We're living in what used to be the offices of a factory (this one won the second Hitler Prize in 1938!) and they're not at all suitable for living quarters at all. (Seems to be too much "at all" about that last sentence). There's no hot water and yesterday afternoon there was no cold either!! We have two sawyer boilers which the Germans are supposed to light but which of course they don't do. Honestly you'd never think that they were the beaten race at all—they just lounge around and do nothing unless it's an order screamed at them from a very business-like Commando. Incidentally the Commandos are guarding us. There are about 15 of them to every street and they're all armed with Tommy Guns, so we've not much to fear. But most of the Germans are foul. I never did like them but now I hate them more than ever. One of them in particular serves us at the table and honestly—if looks could kill! He goes about with a perpetual sneer and the first day we arrived he was sent for two pots of tea and the Chief, thinking he was rather a long time, looked across the courtyard where the galley is and saw him standing doing nothing. He told him to hurry up with the tea and presently it arrived. He asked him what had kept him so long

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10 'In Minden our Naval HQ was a large modern building which had been the Melitta factory. Around it were factory buildings where hundreds of foreign nationals had been forcibly put to work by the Germans at the machines they contained. These were now useless of course, having been battered by the Germans before they left'. *Ibid.*

11 Chris Madsen observes that 'the central location was within driving distance of Eisenhower's new headquarters at Frankfurt, the Control Commission's military and civilian divisions at Hanover, and Montgomery's headquarters at Bad Oeynhausen. Requisitioning surrounding houses for accommodation, the Royal Navy transformed the industrial site into *HMS Royal Henry*. Additional personnel, including a large number of Wrens, arrived from London to complete the staff'. Chris Madsen, *The Royal Navy and German Naval Disarmament, 1942–1947* (London & Portland: Frank Cass, 1998), p. 92.

and he said that he'd started out with the tea and lost it on the way over to the mess! Now I ask you! The chief said that that sort of thing happened frequently at first and that they would pass the pots of tea and bits of food into the basement and then share them out with the German workmen. The latter are here to convert the factory into something more like sections and offices for us and make such a noise banging and hammering that I think they do it purposely because they think it annoys us!

The food situation is pretty grim too as we're a long way from any other unit and supplies are rare in coming through. We're living on tinned food of course, but now that we're not in an American sector we're noticing the difference. British Army rations aren't so good! At times I've complained about the Americans, but they win hands down over us when it comes to organising and making their troops comfortable. If we'd been with them we'd have had a cinema working by now and a theatre and a canteen or something, but of course, the British authorities think that all you need to do to live is breathe!

I'm beginning to suspect a gloomy note is creeping in—well, if it is, ignore it because after we've been here about a fortnight I expect everything will straighten itself out. I hope so because at the moment it's deadly.

Another worry we've got is that there are no washing facilities. There's never any hot water and there's nowhere to dry clothes and there's nowhere to iron them, so our personal and bed linen will just have to wait and get dirtier and dirtier I suppose! They say all that will come in time though, and who are we to argue!

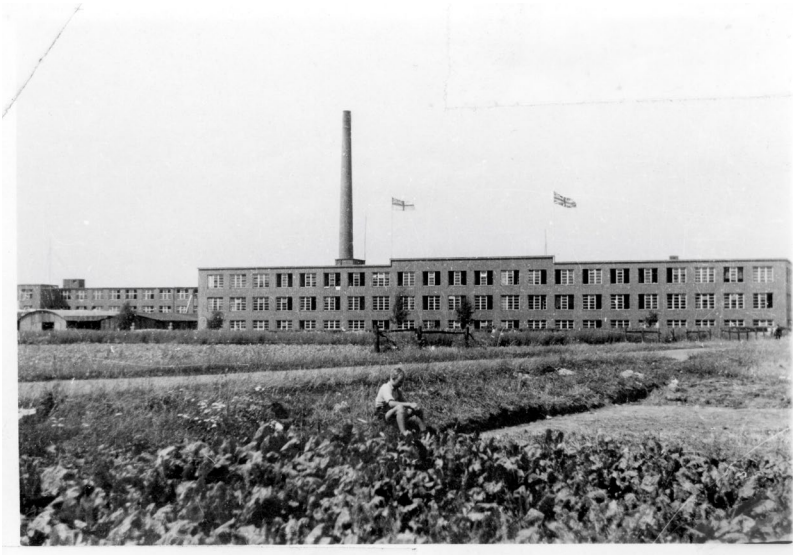
Think that's about all I've time for at the moment, Mum, but will write again soon. Till then, don't worry about me because as I say, we've got to be here about a week before they can begin to get things organised and the rest will do me good anyway.

Take good care of yourselves and God Bless all the time.

My love to Geg and the kiddies and to Bess and Stan—have a good time you two on your holiday—and of course to you both.

All my love,

Joan xxxxx



Figs 6.6 & 6.7. The Melitta factory, lately the Peschke air works, Minden, 1945.  
Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.8. View of the Quarterdeck from the office window, Minden, 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.9. The Quarterdeck, *HMS Royal Henry*, Minden, 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.





Fig. 6.10. The perimeter gate, *HMS Royal Henry*, Minden, 1945.



Fig. 6.11. Joan Prior before the Quarterdeck, *HMS Royal Henry*, Minden, 1945.

JEAN GORDON: We were accommodated in requisitioned German houses and all was contained in a barbed-wire perimeter. Royal Marines who had fought in the Walcheren Island Operation guarded the perimeter, and we were much more frightened of them than any of the beaten Germans we saw. We had been given strict instructions not

to “fraternize” with the Germans. We were not supposed to speak to them and certainly not to salute any of the captured German officers who occasionally turned up at the HQ. [...] As by this time some of the concentration camps had been liberated and the Germans had been “the enemy” for what seemed a long time, we had no inclination to be friendly, and the sight of their captured or “knocked out” vehicles and prisoners gave us more a shudder of disgust than anything else.<sup>12</sup>

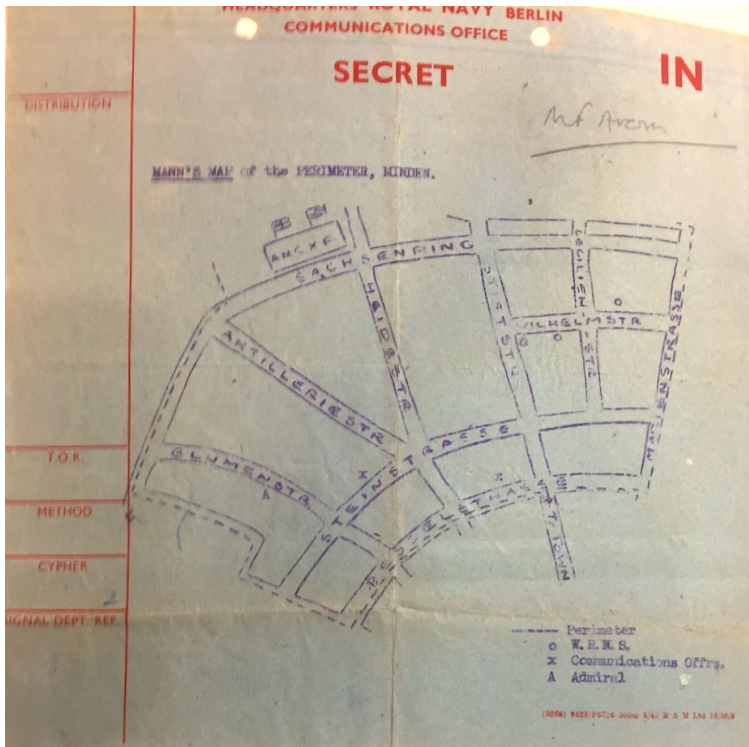


Fig. 6.12. Mann's Map of the Perimeter, Minden, 1945. Private papers of Miss J. S. B. Swete-Evans, Documents.14994, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, 'Southwick Park & Normandy'.



Figs 6.13 & 6.14. Wrens' quarters, Wilhelm Strasse, Minden, 1945. Photographs by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> June 1945

Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Well, here I am again popping up with a few lines to let you know how things are going.

After I wrote to you on Sunday, having been Duty all day Ginge and I went to a Commando Sergeants Mess and had quite a pleasant evening.

On Monday we went to a cinema run by one of the Marine

Units nearby and saw “You Can’t Do That To Me” a Maisie film, with of course Ann Southern. It was quite good, but I don’t think I’ll go there again because the atmosphere was awful. It was thick with smoke and all the doors and windows had to be shut to provide the necessary darkness of course and honestly you could hardly see the film there was such a fug and fog in there!

On Tuesday I had a half-day and spent it doing all my dhobey and actually got it all dry too. Only snag now is that we’ve no iron! I’ll just have to wear my shirts rough dry that’s all. We have to do all our own washing now because there isn’t a laundry yet.

To-day as for the past two days I’ve had a very busy time at the office. We’ve two men being Court Martialled here and I, for no known reason, have been nominated to be shorthand-writer to the Court and to take down the case! Between you and me I’m quite terrified. I’ve never been into a Court of law before and all these terms “Defence”, “Prosecution”, “Evidence” and so on rather shake me! Still, there’s always a first time, so they say, and to-morrow is my D-Day!

Apart from the office life point of view, things on the home front have improved. We’ve now got some baths installed and some wash-basins—all with running hot and cold—which is simply marvellous! And almost every night there’s something doing in the way of entertainment if you want it, so there’s no need for anyone to be unhappy really.

The gardens of the private houses inside the perimeter, too, are simply amazing. Of course, all the Germans living in these houses have had to evacuate, but the gardens, are simply full. Never have I seen such enormous strawberries or cherries, and the flowers too are lovely. I slipped in and picked some the other day for the cabin and they smell heavenly. We look very cosy and domesticated in the cabin now with sweet peas, crimson roses and bright pinkish-red carnations and pansies, standing around in jars! The fruit of course is also an attraction! In addition to those I’ve mentioned there are any amount of currants—red, white and black. And the cabbage lettuce, onions and peas are very healthy looking.

Just now, and for the last day or two we’ve been experiencing a heat-wave on a scale I’ve never know before. It’s almost too hot to walk to the office and back!

Even though we’re not making out so very badly now, and hope to do even better in the future, the girls in the American sector of Germany are really “on velvet”! About four of our girls went into the American sector with a small Naval Division and my goodness in a letter I’ve just received from one of them there’s no doubt that the Americans win hands down where organisation

for their troops' comfort is concerned. They really credit you with being human!

Inside their perimeter they have "8 cinemas, 2 theatres, 5 swimming pools, lots of tennis courts, a golf course, a pressing and alteration shop" to quote her letter! And we can't even get the essentials like laundry done! Honestly sometimes I wonder how the British Empire ever keeps its citizens full of patriotism—and yet I believe individually and collectively they are the most patriotic race going! Amazing isn't it? Still, we keep on hoping and I suppose in time we'll boast 1 cinema inside the perimeter and there'll be more joy over that one etc.!

Both Ginge and I are well and managing to laugh in spite of all. Ginge by the way has a new job. She's been made the Secretary's personal typist!<sup>13</sup> Lucky girl, but she deserves it really—she's wasted in the Pool.<sup>14</sup> If the last few days are anything to go by I'm unofficially the A/Sec's typist! But I shouldn't think anyone would envy me that, although Bobbie and I get along alright still.<sup>15</sup> Actually, I don't mind being in the Pool at all nowadays as it gives me a chance to see all sides of the routine by going to different officers for shorthand. If I go to the Minesweeping Officer—I see that side; the Submarine Officer—you get that angle; the Shipping Officer—there's another viewpoint; and of course to Frothy Faulkner the dear old Chief of Staff<sup>16</sup>—the whole thing tied up into one! So I'm not complaining; all round I manage pretty well, and do more or less as I like as far as Ted Grant (my big white chief) is concerned!

Think that's about all for now, dears, as work is again peeping over my shoulder!

Take care and God Bless. My love to you all—and d'you think you could send me a cool breeze from England? I'd like that more than anything else at the moment!

Fondest love to all,  
from Joan xxxxx

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13 Secretary Ted Grant.

14 Ginge's exceptional qualities as a shorthand-typist of great speed and accuracy had been recognised early on in her service when she was seconded to work for General Sir Frederick Morgan at Norfolk House. In many ways, Joan Prior was happy to 'play second fiddle' in their relationship, both at work and leisure.

15 A.Sec Bobbie Walker.

16 Commodore Hugh Webb Faulkner, DSO, CBE, RN (1900–1969).



Fig. 6.15. 'Washing day, Minden-style', 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

Having now got breathing space for a minute or two I'm trying hard to catch up on my correspondence—and that's no easy job. First and foremost I find letter from you Mum dated 13<sup>th</sup> June and still unanswered, although I have written in between but haven't answered any letters.

Glad you got the card OK this time!

Of course I remember about the birthday present, now, how silly of me to forget! Just shows you, I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels these days!

I'm sorry you didn't manage to get a present on your birthday as although as you say you can always have another try it's so nice to have it exactly on your birthday isn't it? My dear, trying to cut me out eh? Navy blue handbag indeed??

I haven't been able to send Charlie anything as there's just nothing out here to buy at all unfortunately.

I do hope Geg's back's OK. If she does have trouble with it it will be so difficult won't it because she simply will not rest with it at all. I know it's awkward to rest with kiddies but even so I know what she's like—never still is she?

You always do make records on the bagatelle! It's not fair. Why don't you give someone else a chance? Pretty good though even

for you, I think!

Well, I think that about takes care of your letter Mum.

As I wrote you yesterday there really isn't much news from this end, but thought I'd just like to answer your letter all the same.

I heard from Ken yesterday and his father's much better. He himself is on leave at the moment prior to a draft to dear knows where, but as ever, he's making the best of life.<sup>17</sup>

I also heard from Bill yesterday too. He's still keeping his chin up, though goodness knows how in that awful climate! He sends his best to all the family too.<sup>18</sup>

I managed to get through my yesterday morning's work without a hitch, though it wasn't a very pleasant duty. The lad concerned got three years' penal servitude and that ain't hay in any man's language. Of course he was guilty but even so it seems a lot out of a fellow's life doesn't it?

Don't think there's anything else just now, but straight away now I'll answer Bessie's letter which I received yesterday. If I don't do it while there's an opportunity I don't know when I will be able to.

Take care of yourselves won't you? God Bless.

All my love,

Joan xxxxx

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Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1945

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

I'm glad both the parcels arrived safely. How funny that the clock should start to go when it arrived! I don't know what is wrong with it at all, but as you say I don't think it can be very much.

So Mother's using powder every day is she?? We shall have to look into this! Anyway I'm glad it arrived OK.

I'm not sure about the postal order question, so let's scrub round that until I see you again eh? I think that will be best.

You're right about the French shops. They're always closing all day for some holiday or other—it amazes me the number of holidays that France has.

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17 Joan's Royal Marine friend Ken Philbrick whose father had been diagnosed with diabetic meningitis.

18 Bill Porter, RAAF. Joan's pen-friend was still on active service in the Pacific.

I've already written you about the conditions here, so I won't weary you with more of that now. Of course if we were in an American sector it would be vastly different, but I s'pose we can't complain really.

Actually, now that we've settled in, there's masses of entertainment going on all round for us and it's getting really exhausting. Everything is piling up on us. Every night there's something on and we more or less have to go. That sounds queer, but really isn't. It's a sort of moral obligation I feel. You see there are many units of troops around here and they haven't seen English girls for simply ages and so they invite us to a dance or a cinema show or a party and they send masses of transport for us to take us far out into the outlying districts, just so's they can have a chat or a laugh or a dance with us and honestly you just can't find the heart to refuse them. There are only about 80 of us all told and of course always a third of that number are on watch and that only leaves very few when it comes to two or three do's a night so if you don't go, they feel so disappointed.<sup>19</sup>

They make us feel like ENSA<sup>20</sup> or "Something for the Boys" or something! We go bowling along in trucks for miles and then pull up amidst a crowd of cheering Tommies! It's too funny for words really.

On Thursday night we went to a dance given by the RAC and had quite a pleasant time. Last night we went to one given by the Royal Warwickshire Regt and it was grand fun. It was in a place miles away in the country and the dance itself was held in a converted barn! It was beautifully decorated with paper chains, silver bells, red paper hearts, tinsel—all sorts of things in fact to make it look festive! The boys went to an awful lot of trouble to do it too. The only snag was that the floor was very uneven—really wavy! The band was very good indeed and apparently it tours the various units and plays at all the different dances—it's a jolly fine band as a whole!

Ginge and I amazed the whole outfit last night by being offered a drink and refusing it and then on being pressed asking for, getting, and drinking a glass each of cold water! I don't think they'd ever imagined such a thing before!!

I'm Duty to-day unfortunately because there's a Gymkhana

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19 It is interesting that Joan considers the Wrens' social role as a sort of moral imperative. Clearly, that personal feeling was encouraged by a weight of cultural expectation.

20 The Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) provided entertainment at home and overseas for the British armed forces.



on this afternoon. Motorcycle racing, sports,—all sorts of things, sideshows, tea in the open and altogether it sounds fun but perhaps it will be exhausting as it's so hot in the sun here in the afternoons.

I should laugh to see you haring about under a mass of stirrup pumps! It's quite one of the funniest things I've heard!

Got another parcel of newspapers yesterday. Thanks a lot. Yes I like the Dispatch—it does have quite a lot of news in it. Don't think I've heard of Alibi with M. Lockwood, J. Mason etc in it.<sup>21</sup> Sounds good though. I like that cast.

Yes the vests did arrive OK. Thanks for sending them. The food situation at home sounds grim, but I can't say we're enjoying the best out here. Still that's another sore point with us at the moment and perhaps the least said about it the better.

As you say, the Labour Exchange don't waste much time, but you seem to have the right answer for them all the time, so it's just as well. Otherwise you'd be in a factory or something by now wouldn't you?

I've gaily started a new page but I don't think there's much more to tell at the moment. To-night I'm going to yet another dance! I tell you, it's getting into my blood. But I have found that it's the only way to learn. To go to dances, get on the floor and hope for the best. I've improved out of all knowledge now and even though I say it myself I'm not in the least nervous of dancing with anyone now, though of course, I don't always meet with success. I'm still not able to cope with being thrown under somebody's arm, round past their left ear and almost out through the window! Barking will have to start a new era in dancing when I come marching home because I've grown very fond of it and don't want to let it drop.

That ends the epistle I think dear. My love to all at home and take care won't you and God Bless.

Have a nice holiday both of you!  
Fondest love,  
from Joan xxxxx

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21 *Alibi* (1942), was a crime film directed by Brian Desmond Hurst based on a French novel by Marcel Achard.

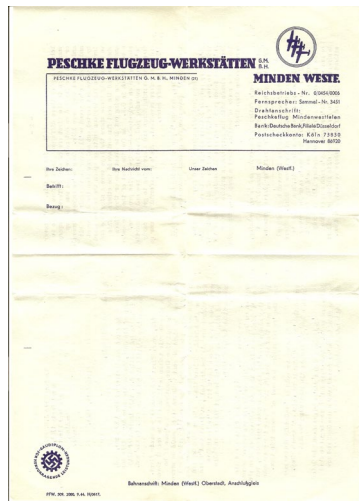


Fig. 6.16. Peschke Flugzeug-Werkstätten letterhead. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 29<sup>th</sup> June 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

Sorry I haven't written so long but we've been hectically busy in the office and in the evenings your time's not your own!

I got your letter yesterday Paddy and was pleased to know everything at home was OK. I'll answer it now and then go on to my news later.

By the way, ignore the notepaper, but I've left mine at Quarters and found this in the drawer of my desk so thought I might as well use it up.<sup>22</sup>

As you say Ginge and I did want to fly just for the experience of flying but in a way I'm glad we came by road because we certainly did see more of the countryside that way.

Now that we're settling down, things are getting better and difficulties are being smoothed over. At last we've got hot water laid on and six baths installed and about the same number of washbaths so by dint of much conniving we're managing our daily bath even if sometimes we do snatch it in the lunch hour!

Yes I see what you meant Bess by "Thursday's child has far to go"—it's certainly true in my case. Often when I think of all this

<sup>22</sup> Peschke Flugzeug-Werkstätten office stationery.

you know it's too good to be true and I think I must be dreaming. I can't believe it's really me! All my life I've dreamed of traveling far and near but I couldn't ever imagine it happening and yet here I am seeing the Continent with no responsibilities, no food problems or billeting problems or in fact anything that faces the stranger in a foreign country.<sup>23</sup> Of course as you know only too well from my letters we have our troubles, but it's so easy to grouse about them and get them put right in English.

The garden sounds lovely now and the allotment too. I'd love to call in and have a meal at home right now!

The food situation is the only thing that hasn't improved—oh, and the laundry.

Our cabin is quite cosy now though. We have curtains at the windows, a mat on the floor and a cream cupboard for hanging space and a light oak sliding door cupboard with shelves so now we've been able to unpack properly instead of living out of suitcases as we'd been doing previously. We've two vases of flowers and the books, photos etc make the place look very cosy and we love it.

The laundry problem got so bad we had to do something rapidly so the weekly wash had to be tackled. What I don't know about laundry isn't worth knowing. I've washed white shirts and collars, blue shirts and collars, bed linen, undies—everything! All with my bare hands! Of course the joke is that having washed them and got them properly dry there's nowhere to iron them so we're having to wear our things rough dry! They don't look too bad however if you fold them properly and put them under the mattress for a couple of nights!

The trouble is you see that we brought our electric irons with us but they're a different voltage and can't be used here until we get the necessary equipment to enable them to be re-wired!

Socially life is more than looking up—it's becoming almost impossible. Every night one company or another of boys out here ask us out to a dance. You see they're not allowed to fraternise and apart from us (about 80 wrens) there's no-one at all they can speak to or dance with! My goodness, talk about Ensa isn't in it. We dash back from the office at night, wash and jump into a truck and drive miles out into the country and disembark and dance all evening with different fellows who all say—"You're the first English girl I've spoken to for six months" or something like

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23 This epitomises Joan's recognition of the unforeseen opportunities that wartime service had afforded a young woman of her background.

that! They're so grateful for our company and they go to such trouble to make things nice. They give up rations so that we can have cream cakes and things like that and they spend their off time decorating the halls and altogether they look forward for about a fortnight to our one evening there! Honestly you can't refuse boys like that. They're all such nice boys and are finding it so difficult not to fraternise in as much as the kiddies here look rather sweet and they find it terribly hard not to give them a bit of chocolate or something.

Last night however I did refuse to go to a dance and went instead to a gramophone recital of classical music. Mostly it was Tchaikovsky but there was some Chopin too and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Another little sideline now for us to do in our "spare" evenings—I don't know where they come in but still—is to serve in the Red Shield Club where they've opened a canteen for the troops.<sup>24</sup> We're supposed to dispense tea, biscuits and kind words and a smile for a couple of hours!

One of the places to go to is the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and they have their own dance band which plays at nearly all the dances round about, and they've a crazy notion they want me to sing with them! I keep refusing but think I'll have to give in in a minute and sing—just to keep the boys quiet and happy! They won't be happy after they've heard me!

I've washed my hair once since being here but I couldn't get the soap out. Is it at all possible to get white vinegar at home because if so d'you think you could send some out to me because they say that's supposed to be a good rinse. Honestly I've never known my hair to have so much soap and be so sticky. It's clean, but dull at the moment. Have you any ideas?

We're having a dance to-night in Quarters for the Ship's Company because they complain that we're going to other dances and they're not getting a look in!

Work has just appeared now so I'm afraid I must stop this. Till I write again, which I hope won't be long this time, my love to Geg and the kiddies, and to you all.

Fondest love  
from Joan xxx

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24 The Red Shield Club canteens were established during World War II by the Salvation Army.



Fig. 6.17. Kaiser Wilhelm-Denkmal, Porta Westfalica, July 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

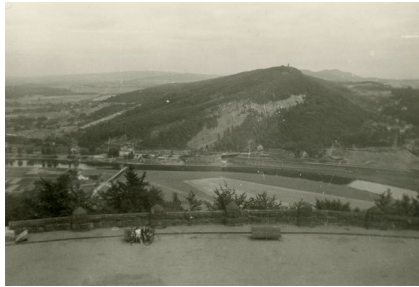


Fig. 6.18. View of Porta Westfalica from Kaiser Wilhelm-Denkmal, July 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

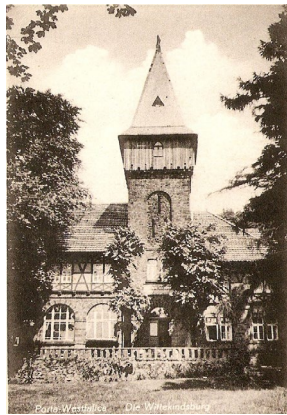


Fig. 6.19. Postcard of Die Wittekindsburg, Porta Westfalica, 1945. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

My diary tells me I last wrote to you on Friday 29<sup>th</sup>, so I've quite a lot of news to tell. I don't seem to have a letter on hand from you to answer so'll get straight on with my gossip.

On Friday night we had our house-warming at the Wrennery with a Ship's Company dance and it went very well indeed. Ginge and I caused a stir about half-time as she was dancing with the Admiral and I was dancing with the Chief of Staff dear old Frothy Faulkner! More panic than that. You know Ginge, well she was trying to impress something on the Admiral and began poking him in the chest with her forefinger. One of the sailors saw this and said to a Wren "Is that girl the Admiral's daughter?" Of course the girl said no, just a Wren and he said "But she's poking him about!" He was quite aghast! It was too funny. Anyway, we told the Ad about it and he said "We must never disappoint the matelots, so I hereby christen you Ginger Burrrough!" I thought it was so funny because the sailors there looked so horrified at the thought of anyone being at all friendly or familiar with an Admiral.

On Saturday Ginge and I went to another dance at a place called Stadhagen but we didn't enjoy it much as we didn't like the boys there, they weren't a very nice type. However, it was worth going for the ride which was really lovely.

On Sunday, Ginge had to work but I was off, so I went on an organised picnic! Apart from the fact that it poured with rain the whole time—it was grand! Seriously though it didn't worry us much as we went right up into the hills and tramped through the woods and the trees sheltered us from most of the rain. I was happy because I was up in those hills I've wanted to go to for so long and it was simply lovely there. Everything smelt nice and woody from the rain and after a while the sun broke through for short spells and we felt that life wasn't so bad after all. Anyway, we went by lorry up into the hills and stopped at a monument which is something or other to do with some Wilhelm or other!<sup>25</sup> Vague isn't it, but I couldn't find out what it was. Anyhow, from there we walked through the woods to a lovely chalet where we had tea. It was all most amazing, the German owners welcomed us and made everything very pleasant and the door (the main one by which you entered) had musical bells fitted so that when you opened the door

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25 Kaiser Wilhelm I-Denkmal, Porta Westfalica. Doubtless unbeknown to Joan Prior and her comrades, the hill on which the monument stands concealed an underground munitions factory which the British Army destroyed using high explosives on 23 April 1946.

it played a tune.<sup>26</sup> One of the Marines bought me some postcards of the Monument (where we started our walk) and the hostel (where we had tea) and I'm enclosing one of each with this letter.

Sunday evening there was an opening Guest Night in the POs' and Chiefs' Mess here so Ginge and I of course went to that. It was good fun really and we thoroughly enjoyed it. Incidentally, I don't know whether I've told you about The Band. Perhaps I have but can't remember. Anyhow Ginge and I have been "adopted" by the dance band of the Royal Warwickshire Regt which is really an awfully good band. Ever since we first went to a dance and heard them playing they're wanted me to sing with them, but you know me, more shy than that and I just couldn't bring myself to. Anyway, at this Guest Night on Sunday, one of the girls here, Joan Nightingale did get up and sing with them and they were thrilled to bits about it and asked her to go round to the various dances with them as their crooner. Well, why I don't know, but I got a bid mad about it. You see I felt I had a proprietary interest in the band and I s'pose I was jealous that she'd worked her way in, so, although it was really my fault for not having bothered before, I decided that sing I would.

On Monday night I went to a dance at which they were playing and did pluck up courage to sing a lovely song called "More and More" which is from the new Deanna Durbin film "Can't Help Singing". It seemed to go down quite well, although their mike is very poor, and I kept my fingers crossed. Last night, Tuesday, I went to a Commando Sergeants Mess with them and sang the same song and also "How Sweet You Are", so I'm gradually getting used to the idea, although I'm still awfully nervous. To-night the band are playing at their own HQ at Petershagen. I've persuaded Ginge to come with me so I don't mind so much. She and I harmonise very well—at least I sing and she harmonises—and I don't feel so nervous when I sing with her. What I've got to concentrate on more than the singing which either I can do or can't, is the "mike-side manner" as it were, because it's no good being able to sing if you can't "put a song over well". Still, no-one shall say I didn't try! Joan Nightingale still sings with them, but at least she's not getting it all her own way! Cat, aren't I?

On the domestic front, the food situation is little better, but I s'pose we mustn't grumble really. The bath and hot water question is cosily settled and the laundry (which just isn't) is doing nicely under the combined management of Thomas and Prior Ltd.! Next leave you can all slip off for the day and I'll do the weekly wash! Or will I?

I bought a new Wren Jacket a while back but it doesn't fit me at all at all, so Jack (one of the boys in the band) who's a tailor is

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26 Die Wittekindsburg, Porta Westfalica.

going to alter it for me—I choose my friends with care!

I really mustn't stop for more now as I've two jobs sitting on my desk which I've said I'll do but so far haven't touched. My usual policy is work first and then letter-writing but during the past few days there's been so much of the former that the latter just hasn't been possible, so I've taken the plunge and "made time". If I'm not careful I'll be "doing time" for slacking, so must go.

Till the next time, which won't be too far ahead, good bye. God Bless you all, and take care of yourselves won't you?

By the way, just before I go—hope everyone is keeping fit and isn't it about time Stan was taking a trip hospital way? How's the whole thing going—do let me know. Love from Ginge and of course from me,

Fondest Love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

Trust me to have a PS!

PS. I'm enclosing a chit for two pairs of stockings, so if and when, at your leisure Bess, you can get me some—will you please? No panic at the moment as I'm fairly well off for them, but if you see any just quietly snaffle will you? Thanks a million.

While I'm on the PS racket, might as well slip in an apology for the notepaper—I know it's noisy on the other side, but thought it wasn't too bad on this side so might as well make use of it as it's quite nice quality. Found this in the drawer of my desk too!

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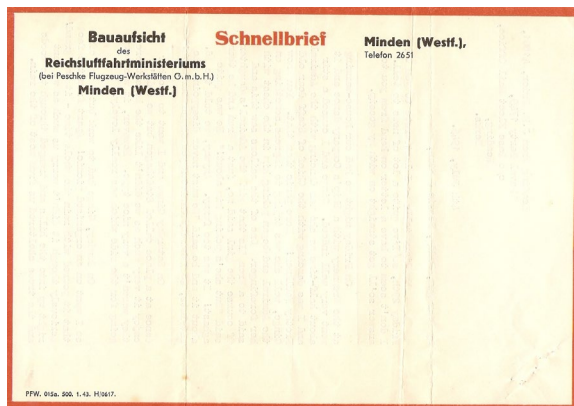


Fig. 6.20. Peschke Flugzeug-Werkstätten memo. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dear Bessie and Stan,

I was so very pleased to get your letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> July and to know that at last you were happily settled in Sandown.<sup>27</sup> You lucky people!

I wrote home last on Wednesday, 4<sup>th</sup> but I s'pose you were away then so haven't had news of me and my doings since I wrote on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> June, so when I've answered your letter I'll let you have all the gen.

Shanklin does sound deadly, but I s'pose now it'll soon be put into shape again, though. The place you're staying at sounds wonderful and I'm so glad you've a small gang to go around with, and that the weather isn't too bad. This last week here it's been awful—rain, rain and then even more rain. No I haven't heard from home about the walk with the wheelbarrow—come clean and tell your little sister!

Honestly, I think you'd better give the workmen a permanent billet in our house or something because they always do seem to be slipping in and out, don't they?

Brave Stan, going for a dip in the sea—here people shiver about going into the pool! It's a date. I'm certainly going to some of the Fire Station dances, but do they, or rather will they still hold them when proper peace returns?

Ginge sends her love to you both and still remembers the chips! She's awful busy at the moment and I can't get a spare moment out of her!

Sorry, I had to dash away to do a job in between so it's now considerably later in the morning. I want to try to finish this this morning as I'm actually half-day this afternoon and won't have time then.

Talking of which reminds me to tell you the events of the past week.

On Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> I went to a little place called Petershagen where the Royal Warwickshire's have a detachment.<sup>28</sup> They also have their own dance band which is quite good really, and whilst dancing (as I always do) I started to sing! Well this happened with about four or five different partners each of whom said I should be singing with the band! They forthwith kept slipping up to the

27 Sandown, Isle of Wight, where Bess and Stan holidayed with friends.

28 The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Warwickshire Regiment based at Petershagen also kept an unlikely mascot: an antelope by the name of Bobbie, as several photographs at the Imperial War Museum's collection testify.

band and saying "I've got a girl here who can sing!" Of course I refused—you know me! However, this went on for several nights at different dances where the band was playing and eventually on Monday last at a little place called Stadthagen where there was a dance, they persuaded me to sing. I sang "More and More" which is a lovely song from Deanna Durbin's latest film "Can't Help Singing". The next night I again sang with them the same song and also "How Sweet You Are", but honestly I get so scared and nervous that I don't think it's worth the agony beforehand! One of the other girls here who has quite a good voice also sings with them and doesn't seem to worry a bit about it so I guess it's just me! Anyhow, they've persuaded us to go out to their place this afternoon for rehearsals so's to really try us out—and boy, do I feel worried about it! Still I've persuaded Ginge to come with me so I don't mind so much. She and I harmonise very well—at least I sing and she harmonises—and I don't feel so nervous when I sing with her. Will let you know how things go. What I've got to concentrate on more than the singing which either I can do or can't, is the "mikeside manner" as it were, because it's no good being able to sing if you can't "put a song over well". Still, no-one shall say I didn't try!

Apart from these activities I've been to several more dances and had a very enjoyable time. On Friday last we held a dance in the Wrennery—a joint Ship's Company Dance and Housewarming—which was a great success. Ginge and I caused a bit of a stir because she danced with the Admiral and I danced with Frothy Faulkner bless him, the Chief of Staff. You know Ginge, and so it's not surprising to know that she was trying to teach the Admiral the Hokey-Cokey, Booms-a-Daisy selection and while impressing it on him she kept poking him with her forefinger! One of the matelots who was there saw it and asked one of the wrens if she were the Admiral's daughter! Of course it got to the Admiral's ears and he said "Well we mustn't disappoint the matelots whatever happens, so I hereby christen you Ginger Burrough!" I thought it was so funny because the sailors there looked so horrified at the thought of anyone being at all friendly or familiar with an Admiral.

On Sunday afternoon we had a picnic and my dear, it poured with rain! Still we went and tramped through the woods getting thoroughly wet and bedraggled but still happy. I was happy because I was up in those hills I've wanted to go to for so long and it was simply lovely there. Everything smelt nice and woody from the rain and after a while the sun broke through for short spells

and we felt that life wasn't so bad after all. We had tea at a hostel there in the hills and really enjoyed it.

That seems to conclude my social activities for the week. Last night I had a night in quarters as I was too tired to go out and make conversation with men who always tell you you're the first English girl they've spoken to for five months! First of all I had a leisurely supper and it was grand to be able to take my time over a meal instead of rushing through it to catch a truck to a dance. Also, for about the first time since we came here we had jolly good meals yesterday, with fresh vegetables, so as I say I enjoyed my supper. Then I took a cardboard box and went scrumping! At least I went looking for fruit. You see in the perimeter which is barred off for us they made all the German people leave and most of them had lovely gardens beautifully kept with masses of fruit in them. I picked raspberries (so big, as big as strawberries), blackcurrants, redcurrants and strawberries. Then I fancied some cherries but couldn't reach any. I scrounged around for a bit and found a ladder and from then on I was all set. I picked masses of cherries and then to make the cabin look nice some carnations. They grow in masses in long rows and are all the colours you can think of. Some are pure white, red or cerise or pink while others are variegated or have a coloured pattern round the edges—they're honestly the biggest and loveliest carnations I've ever seen and they smell heavenly! Well, having brought all these things in and arranged them I then did some much needed dhobeying, cleaned two pairs of shoes, had a lovely hot bath and so to bed. I really had a thoroughly enjoyable evening—it was such a change.

Well, time has truly flown and it must have used a Thunderbolt<sup>29</sup> because here it is lunchtime and I'm afraid I must end now.

Keep on having a lovely holiday you two, God Bless and when you're eating a luscious meal, or lazing in the sun—remember me!

All my love,  
From,  
Joan xxxxx

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Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

Received your letter of the 30<sup>th</sup> June, Dad, and yours of 4<sup>th</sup> July, Mum on the same day—this was due I think to you putting

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29 A reference perhaps to the US P-47 Thunderbolt fighter plane.

N.P. 1479 instead of 1749 on the envelope—still it got to me OK in the end.

Now, yours first Dad because you wrote first. What a pity Charlie thinks he'll have to be one of those to stay his full time there, although I s'pose if he came home he might be sent to Burma which would be worse really.<sup>30</sup> Yes, I was home when the coconuts arrived and they did look queer. Pineapples would be much more in my line I'm afraid—I love them. I'm so glad Geg and the children are all keeping well, at least that's one less worry for everyone isn't it? I've heard from Bess and Stan since they've been at Sandown and also have written to them there.

Now yours Mum. Yes, Bess told me about the workmen coming in. I think really she was amused because I don't think she thought that you believed her when she said they always come in just as someone goes away, but it does seem that way doesn't it? I hope for your sake that they're not making too much of a mess this time.

I do hope your cold is completely better now Mum as they're so difficult to shake off aren't they? Thanks a lot for sending the stationery to Mag.

Yes, Mum I think you're right about the late hours and so on. Both Ginge and I have begun to feel rather tired so we've turned over a new leaf and are starting a new programme.

You see the whole point was this. We'd never been to any of these different places before and so we wanted to go to the first one of each different company or unit who invited us out so's we could sum them up and see what they were like. Some we've enjoyed immensely and others we've vowed we'll never go to again and bit by bit we've got sorted out and now when the different invitations for various units go up on the notice board we choose only those where the boys were a nice type and where we had the most fun and avoid the others. This amounts to us going out late about two or three times a week which is OK. As for the rest of the time we're starting on an early-to-bed-early-to-rise programme. We've got a swimming pool functioning now and so starting tomorrow morning Ginge and I are going to get up early and swim before breakfast. She's a wonderful swimmer so I'll be in safe hands.

Yes, now don't you go picking and eating all the apples! Save some for my next leave now.

Have just this minute heard from Bill again. It's funny but his letters always seem to come when I'm writing to you. He still

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30 Charlie Snell, Joan's elder sister Grace's husband, was still with REME in Sierra Leone.

has no news of his father yet.<sup>31</sup> He's just taken part in an assault landing on one of the Pacific Islands with the Army and is writing more or less in the smoke of battle. Sent a snap too, displaying more muscles than that!

Ken's father is improving and is now walking, with sticks to help of course. Ken himself has just had leave again prior to his draft for places unknown.

The food situation has improved a great deal now and we mustn't grumble at that now I think. There are still no irons, but I mentioned it in a letter to Ken and his brother-in-law Fred who's over in Germany somewhere said if he could get one he'd try to get it to me somehow, so I don't know whether I'll be lucky or not—anyway it's a hope. It's such a miserable business trying to smooth over white shirts and collars without an iron and if we go ashore we must wear them.

I think your idea about the borax is good but where d'you think I'm going to get any out here Mum? But if you can get some at home I'd love to have it. Oh, and while I'm on the scrounge or at least asking you to try to get things, d'you think you could send me some Reckitt's Blue or something—I feel it might make a bit of difference to my shirts. I get them clean but not sparkling white if you know what I mean.<sup>32</sup>

Since last I wrote to you, Friday evening as a matter of fact, I went fruit and flower picking and I wondered about sending you some fruit but I've no means of packing it here and it's so ripe that I'm afraid it would just be one filthy mess by the time you got it. We have to eat what we pick within a couple of days otherwise it goes all soggy and squashy. I picked masses of lovely carnations too. I wish you and Dad could see them. There's one house here with a lovely piece of ground and these carnations grow in long rows—I think it may have been a market garden or something. Anyway they have the most wonderful perfume and the colours have to be seen to be believed. I've never seen so many. There are also flowers alongside them which look as though they might be single carnations and they're lovely too. I climbed up a cherry tree

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31 Bill Porter's father, William George Porter (1896–1974), served as His Majesty's Coroner, Singapore. On 12 February 1942 he was appointed to the Special Security Unit. After the fall of Singapore, he was interned by the Japanese, initially at Changi, and was subsequently transferred to the Syme Road, Internment Camp. He survived and was returned to England in November 1945 for medical treatment before resuming his position as HM Coroner in Singapore in early 1946, a position he held until his retirement in 1951.

32 Reckitt's Blue was a popular laundry dyeing agent for enhancing white fabrics.

and picked all the biggest cherries from the top! And the raspberries, red and blackcurrants of course were easy to reach. I do wish I could send you some.

Well, I think I must go now Mum because work calls. That's the thing about typing letters, before you get very far something crops up and sits on your desk waiting to be done, so there you are.

My love to Geg and the kiddies and anyone else you see whom I know and of course heaps of it to you both.

God Bless, and Fondest Love

From,

Joan xxxx

\* \* \*

Friday 13<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dear Mum and Paddy,

This is just a wee note so's to let you know I'm OK only I didn't want it to be so very long in between letters this time.

Now, where are we? Oh, yes, well I'm afraid as I only wrote on Wednesday and it's now Friday there's not a lot to tell.

On Wednesday I worked in the office until half past ten at night! So you can imagine how little I have to tell of that day! The main snag I found was that we have no lights in the office as yet and I nearly went blind trying to read my shorthand in the dusk! Of course I complained about it but so far nothing's been done. When I got back I was Duty Leading Wren in the Quarters and then had to go round checking everyone in, so by the time I got to bed I was really exhausted.

I've been talking of learning to swim for a long while now so Ginge said we must make a start sometime and we agreed that there was no time like the present. Yesterday morning, bright and early at half-six, we shot out of bed and went down to the very lovely pool we have in the grounds of the factory. Ginge is a lovely swimmer and aided and abetted by her I more or less found my feet by getting used to the water and getting a rough idea of the strokes and so on and then it was time to go back to breakfast.

Yesterday afternoon I was off duty because I'd been duty all day Sunday and so Kay and I went back to Quarters, had lunch, did some dhobeying and had a bath and then I changed into my swimsuit and put my frock on over it and my sandals, and off we

trotted to the Commanding Officer's garden.<sup>33</sup> He has a lovely little house with the most wonderful garden complete with swimming pool, and he keeps not exactly open house, but at least open garden to Wrens.<sup>34</sup> It was the first time I'd been there but it was so peaceful and lovely that I must go again. The pool is filled with clear water and the sides and the bottom are painted so that the water looks the most wonderful blue-green colour. I did manage to stay in for a few seconds but it had only been filled about an hour beforehand and the C.O. came out and advised me not to stay in long because he said it needed the sun on it for about 24 hours really before it would be fit to swim in. Oh, it was cold. Kay took a snap of me when I was grimly feeling my way in, so goodness knows what it'll turn out like!

After I came out I lay in the sun and dozed for a while and then dressed and did some darning and then did some more work on my frock. We came back to Quarters for supper and after that just as I was contemplating a lazy evening, the Mobile Canteen run by the Salvation Army Red Shield Club (it comes every night and picks up two or three girls to serve in the canteen) came and there were no names on the list to go, so I rounded up one or two people and I went along myself. I'd never been before and although it was a little tiring in a sense, it was worth it to see how the boys' faces lit up at the thought of a cup of tea, a bun and a smile. I really enjoyed myself on the whole exchanging smiles and jolly words with all sorts of odd people who came wearily staggering in.

I got back in at about five past ten and found the lights had failed. You don't know how I blessed those candles which gave quite a good light really.

This morning Ginge and I had decided to get up again and bathe but we overslept and weren't able to go.

Think that's about all now. How's everything at home? How's the garden Paddy and how's your cold Mum? Write and let me know how everything is won't you? Give my love to Geg and the kiddies and of course to yourselves.

All my love,  
From,  
Joan xxxxx

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33 The Commanding Officer of *HMS Royal Henry* (as their 'stone frigate' was called) was Commander Nathaniel Greer Leeper, RN.

34 Surely a remarkable act of largesse!



Fig. 6.21. The Melitta factory swimming pool, Minden, July 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.22. Joan Prior in the CO's private pool, Minden, July 1945. Photograph by Kay Chandler. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.23. Joan Prior at needlework in the CO's garden, July Minden, 1945. Photograph by Kay Chandler. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Friday 20<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dearest Mum & Paddy,

Well, at last I'm settling down to write—you can just tell how very busy we are in the office by the fact that I'm writing this in my own fair hand instead of using my faithful typewriter!

Now I believe I've two letters to answer, one from each of you, so let's begin.

First Paddy's because it came first.

About the letters—mail is taking about a week to reach us too! Isn't it rotten? Some of mine will take longer than others of course because sometimes they'll be detained for censoring & sometimes not.

The singing I'm afraid has faded out for several reasons. Firstly, Joan is really so good and loves it so much that I felt I wanted to stand down. Secondly, I couldn't stand the pace nor was I prepared to give up so much time to it. (Joan goes nearly every lunch hour for rehearsals & sings with the band every night which means she's never in till 11pm!). And thirdly, you can never dance. When you're singing with the band you don't get a chance to dance & I've got such a love of this graceful art now that I don't want to give it up. So I confine my activities to an occasional song, and singing to my partner whilst I'm dancing, which usually goes over very well!

The laundry I'm sorry to say is still no better and I'm thoroughly chokker with the whole situation!

I'm glad you went to Gravesend. Even though you didn't find Mr & Mrs Phillips in, the outing did you both good I'm sure, and you saw Mollie & her daughter. What a pity that Mollie's husband has been a prisoner of war for so long. Still he'll soon be home now, thank goodness.

Talking of which reminds me, has Eleanor (Mrs Duncan's niece) had any news of her husband's return yet?

Thanks for the cutting! Ginge & I screamed over it! Still, they do have a laundry at least even if it's plus a ghost!

I'm glad Geg & the kiddies are well & that Jacqueline is progressing so splendidly—my love to them all.

Now, for your letter Mum! I only received it to-day & am answering already! It didn't take long to come as it's dated 17<sup>th</sup> & it's only 20<sup>th</sup> to-day.

I can well understand you wanting a spring clean after the workmen had been "in" & although as you say I expect Bess will

say you shouldn't have done it—I think deep down she knows she would have done the same. Since I've been in the Service I've come to learn the value & necessity of having things shipshape myself & can see your point of view about the cleaning now.

By the way dears there are very definite rumours of leave so don't send anything on to me in the way of parcels in case I'm lucky in the "draw" & come home soon. If I'm not coming soon I'll let you know as soon as I know & then you can send things on.

I've altered my system of staying in to "every other night" & have kept it up for over a week. I still don't have much time for leisure during my evenings in because now I don't do anything like dhobeying in the lunch hour but leave it until my nights in which I find less tiring.

Yes, I'm afraid you were mistaken when you thought you saw Ken as he's still in Devon—and anyway he'd never be in Barking without calling to see you, I know.

I don't know whether to be glad or sorry at Bob & Flo's news in view of her previous experiences, but I s'pose they're both happy really.<sup>35</sup>

Ginge sends her love to you and a great big hug for you both. She thinks you're wonderful you know because you always mention her in your letters to me and she says it makes her feel she "belongs". How awful it must be to be like that & have no parents. I just can't imagine it.

We had a swimming gala yesterday & the Typing Pool entries (4 girls) in the relay race won first place! They were jolly good too! Ginge was in it, but you don't "know" any of the others.

Last Sunday I went on a motor trip in the afternoon with the Ship's Company to Hamelin. This is the fairy-tale town of Pied Piper fame & it's lovely. We arrived at about 4pm & went to a Beer Garden where we had tea. After that we went into the town proper & saw the "Rat Catcher's House" & wandered around the quaint old streets. Most of the buildings seem to have been built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century & are really lovely. The weather was grand & we got back for supper at six (back to the Beer Garden I mean) & after that danced till about 8.30pm when we returned home. It was very interesting—we saw the river Weser into which the rats were driven & also saw the door in the mountain into which the children were "lured". Up on top of the mountain is a watch tower

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35 Bob 'Nobby' Snell (Charlie's brother) and his wife Florence were expecting a baby. This suggests that Flo had been through previous unsuccessful pregnancies.

from which it is said a watch was kept for the children's return.

Well, I must go to sleep now as it's late. Goodnight & God Bless. My love to Bessie & Stan too. I'll answer your letter as soon as poss Bess. Maybe to-morrow if I can find the time.

All my love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

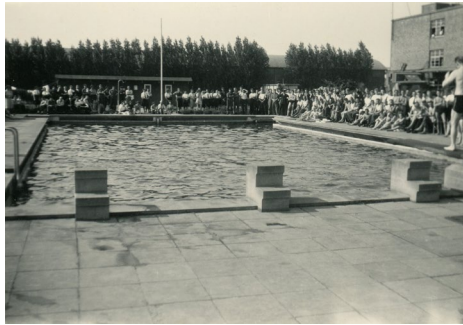


Fig. 6.24. Swimming gala at the Melitta pool, Minden, July 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.25. 'Gene, Eddie, Ted and the 4th man', Hamelin, July 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy,

Just a quick scribbled note to say I'm coming on leave!!!! 1<sup>st</sup> August is the great day and as yet we have no more details than that. Of course as soon as I know more I'll let you know. I'm writing this whilst waiting for the US Navy to take us to Bremen to a party & dance. It's an awful long way, but I'd love to see Bremen. That's the only reason I'm going really (but don't tell the US Navy will you!).

I'm so looking forward to my leave as I'm longing to see you all again. I don't think we'd better make any arrangements about going away, much as I'd love to, as I must see Ron and I s'pose that'll only be possible at a week-end and that will be in the middle of my leave.<sup>36</sup> It's an awful pity, but there it is.

I haven't got any slimmer (so the boys tell me) so I don't s'pose I'll be able to get into many of my civvies, but never mind.

I'm afraid the transport's just arriving now—I can hear it—so I'll have to go.

Will write again as soon as I hear any more definite news but till then I'll say bye-bye.

All my love,  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan,

I am sorry that I've been so long replying to your letter dated 14<sup>th</sup> July, Bessie! Honestly time fair skips along here and before you know who's had your dinner it's time to start work again!

The holiday sounded grand. I'm so glad you both had such a lovely time—you both deserved it anyway. My dear, I screamed reading your letter! You know how you usually write on the first page and then on the inside but on the far page and then the third page is on the back of the first, so to speak? Well you'd gone straight on and the second page was on the back of the first and the third facing the second inside. Well it read something like this—"and have had fun nights in the Freshwater and then

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36 Ron Smith's unit was now back in the UK, awaiting demobilisation, but Joan speculated that a weekend pass might be all he could manage. In the event, they were able to spend five days together.

walked to Colwell Bay"! and the next time when I turned over it was "went by train from Sandown to another hole right on the edge." I was in fits!

And what's all this about "Housey-housey"? Dear, dear, dear. You're a traitor to the cause. In the Navy there's no such game—well there is, but we call it "Tombola".

I roared with laughter over the picnic episode, with you clambering up and down cliffs and so on. Reminded me of that awful August Bank Holiday Monday at Barry and Coldknapp! Remember?

We too had a nasty thunderstorm, but not until much later than you did. Several days later I mean. Ginge is just as terrified of storms as you are and it's so difficult because there's nothing you can do to help. I was surprised to hear that you'd actually braved the storm enough to go and watch it!

The singing as you will know from my letters to Mum and Paddy has mainly fizzled out. I do sing just now and again, but I honestly haven't the energy to make it a habit.

I think that about takes care of your letter so will chatter on about events here. I may duplicate some things because if you're home as I 'spect you are, then you'll have read them in my letters to Mum.

Last Saturday I went to Warwickshire Regt's Company sports. They have so many companies to a regt. And theirs are A, B, C, D and S. S company was victorious at the end of the afternoon by 34 points over their next opponents! They had high and long jump, sprinting and relay racing, putting the shot, tug of war and all sorts of things. We had a lovely tea, with cream cakes and thin sandwiches and cups and saucers which would be quite presentable at home even! In the evening they held a dance and it was so funny because a lot of the boys who'd been running in the afternoon could hardly more they were so stiff!

On Sunday I went to Bremen to a dinner and dance given by the US Navy and had a grand time. Work is intervening now so I must away for a bit.

Intervening was the word—it's now the morning of 26th! Now, the US Navy dance. To begin with a very nice sailor came along and asked me to dance. That was only the beginning! You know what the Americans' idea of a dance is, don't you? Anyway, I told him I'd no idea how to jive and that I didn't jitterbug. He said he didn't do anything else, so we looked as though we were in for a cosy evening. I thought the simplest thing was to say I'd love to learn how and would he show me. It turned out that this was exactly the right thing to do because he didn't attempt anything

complicated but just taught me the basic steps and how to turn and so on and I found myself progressing, enjoying it, and not being thrown around the hall which was more than any of the other girls could say!

Actually, I found it very interesting and if they have another dance which Chester (that's the sailor's name) says they will, I'm going back for my second lesson!

On Monday I went to a Naval and Marine dance at which there were the most wonderful "eats" I've ever seen! Fruit Cocktail in tall clinky glasses with ice, sardines on toast, all sorts of cream cakes, sandwiches and—most peculiar of all—prunes rolled in a slice of bacon and served on toast!

On Tuesday I did dhobeying and ironing and sewing, and then at about 9pm when I was going over to Tea Boat, someone (one of our girls) stopped me and said "Come on up to the Fo'c'sle, I'm having my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party up there now". Well, to put it mildly I was amazed, but I went up and we had quite a happy party.

Last night I went to the cinema on the ship and saw Frank Sinatra and Gloria de Haven in "Step Lively" which wasn't bad. I enjoyed his singing, but then I always do, but as a film it was a bit much for me. After the flicks I went on down town to a dance given by the Sergeants of the RAMC<sup>37</sup> and thoroughly enjoyed it.

That's about all the news at the moment I think. We now have two irons which can be used after 6pm so I've managed to get my collars into better shape now. I think I'll have to bring my suits home though to be cleaned because there's no hope of that here ever! I asked Mum if she'd look through my things for me, but I've just remembered, d'you think my burgundy shoes could go for repair please? I seem to remember there's something wrong with them. That's another thing, this week we've just had a cobbler's instituted! Things, my dear, are looking up!

My love to everyone at home including both of you, be seeing you all soon,

Love and kisses,

Joan

Xxxx

PS

Just remembered. I wanted to ask you, is there going to be a dance at the Fire Station? I almost know the answer now because there never is when I'm home! Also I saw something in the "local rag" about a Fete in the Park on or in August week. How true?

\* \* \*

Friday 27<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dearest Mum &amp; Paddy,

I wrote to Bessie yesterday giving her all the news of my latest activities, but felt I'd like to drop you a line to-day just to let you know that so far the leave still begins on 1<sup>st</sup> August!

Last night I went to a dance at Petershagen and thoroughly enjoyed it. To-night I'm Duty Leading Wren so I'll be having a night in. To-morrow Ginge and I have a half day and we're going on a picnic with some of the boys from the Warwickshire Regt., ending with a dance in the evening at a little village called Lahde. Will let you know how that goes later.

Ginge unfortunately cannot come on leave with me on the 1st now but must postpone it till 6th! Isn't it a pity? Never mind, it's just one of those things I s'pose.

As there's still no laundry here I'm bringing my two sheets on leave with me so's you can send them to your laundry because they're so dirty it isn't true and I just can't cope with them here. At home of course it's different, but trying to wash a sheet in a handbasin without boiling water and no-where to dry it is too much for me!

I'm bringing my two bathtowels too because they also need boiling! Looks as though most of my luggage is going to be dirty linen!

I received your later dates 22<sup>nd</sup> yesterday Paddy so that's only four days which is better than they've been of late.

I too should like to catch on with the swimming, but at the moment things are at a standstill. The pool where we used to bathe has been closed for certain hours and we can't now cope in the mornings, and as yet I haven't had much other time, the lunch hour being mostly used up with washing and so on, but we'll find some way to get round it and then off I'll go again!

My goodness, Paddy, your diving was amazing! Ginge was absolutely amazed! She said she wouldn't like to dive 25ft. Into 7 feet of water! Come to think of it, neither would I!

I'll try with the carnations, Paddy, but I'm not very sure about the technical side of the matter—whether it's allowed and so on, but I'll try.

Don't think there's any more to say now, so will turn my attention to a little work! I'll be writing again before I come on leave, so until then, will say Cheerio.

All my love,  
Joan xxxxx

Monday 30<sup>th</sup> July 1945

My Dearest Mum and Paddy,

Received your letter Mum yesterday and was pleased to know that you'd at last got the good news! I'm afraid, however, that it won't be possible for you to meet me in London because I don't know when I'm arriving. As a matter of fact I don't even know when I'm leaving here! I know it will be some time on 1<sup>st</sup> August when I arrive in London, but whether morning, noon or night I haven't the faintest notion. Anyway, I'll be able to manage because I shan't have much luggage with me, and if I do find it too much or get into any difficulties at all, I'll ring up Mr. Barnett or someone and let you know and wait at an appointed place until someone comes. But I don't s'pose for a minute that that will happen—it's just in case.

I'm looking forward to seeing you all so much—and I'll be home August week too, which should be fun!

Ginge has had her leave cancelled and is now going on either 4<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> August. She's going home down to Wales this time and so it's not likely that she'll be coming to see us in Barking because she'll have all her work cut out at the Bank Holiday week-end getting on a train to go home she thinks. Anyhow, I've told her that when she arrives, if anything occurs to make it difficult to go home she's to come to us for the night and she says she'll do that, but as I say it's an unlikely eventuality.

She sends her love to you all and thinks you're one of the nicest families she knows! Kenn is still in England at the moment but is at Chatham awaiting sailing.<sup>38</sup>

I see from my diary that I last wrote to you on Friday. On Saturday Ginge and I and two of the boys from the Warwickshires went on a picnic, and walked 7km out of Minden. We had just got that far when a naval truck came along and picked us up, so we went into the next village of Lahde and danced there in the evening. It was quite a change really and we both enjoyed it.

Yesterday, as with every Sunday, I had yet another change! We were invited out by the Queen's Own Camerons to their place near Hamelin. Actually, it's the other side of Hamelin so I saw that quaint old town once again. About 40 girls went. And as I was in charge of the party (together with Sheila Beaty) we went in a Jeep with the Lieutenant, a Sergeant and the driver. We went out of our way and a long way round getting there but we had to go to a place called Bad Oeynhausen to pick up a Major who was coming with us. Anyhow, we finally arrived, and they've a lovely

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38 Kenn Walsh, RM.



old place there. They're in a dear little village and it reminded me of England—all old oak beams and so on. We had a lovely fresh salad tea, and ICE CREAM! Afterwards we danced and then the Sergeant—one named MacDougall! With a broad Scots accent—asked me if I liked shooting. I said I didn't know much about it but would try anything once, so we did. It's fascinating too. They're a really hunting, shootin and fishin crowd though. They hunt deer and wild pig and do a bit of trout fishing too. They were all very nice to us—even turned out in their best kilts! And they played the bagpipes and danced reels! When I come back from leave I've promised to go again, so I'll be having a Scots accent before I know where I am!

I haven't done any packing yet at all, but quite honestly I don't know what to pack! There's nothing to buy over here, therefore nothing to bring home, except clothes and there's no sense in taking them back and fore when I can get into civvies, is there?

Well I'm afraid I'll have to go now. It's my turn to make the tea to-day and it's nearly time for the Tea-boat to come alongside, so I'll have to be going.

Can hardly wait for my leave now it's so near and yet so far, but I can honestly say now, "I'll be seeing you".

All my love  
Joan xxxxx

## Leave

Joan Prior's pocket diary:

### **Wednesday 1 August**

Flew home from Buckeburg to Hamburg then Northolt.<sup>39</sup> Ron home.

### **Thursday 2 August**

Went to Park with Ron. Saw "Enchanted Cottage", R. Young, D. Maguire, with Ron.

### **Friday 3 August**

Wrote to Ken and Tommy.<sup>40</sup> Saw "29 Acacia Avenue", G. Harker, with Ron. Went to Park with Ron.

### **Saturday 4 August**

Went to dance at Ilford with Ron.

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<sup>39</sup> Joan Prior's first experience of flying.

<sup>40</sup> Ken Philbrick, RM and Tommy Atkins, REME.

**Sunday 5 August**

Saw Geg & kiddies. Ron went back.

**Monday 6 August**

Went to Fair in Park.<sup>41</sup>

**Tuesday 7 August**

Saw Geg & the kiddies.<sup>42</sup>

**Wednesday 8 August**

Went to tea with Winnie. Saw Mrs Snell in evening.

**Thursday 9 August**

Went to Shoeburyness with Mum, Paddy & Bess.<sup>43</sup>

**Friday 10 August**

Went to Town with Mum. Met Tricia<sup>44</sup> & saw "Weekend at the Waldorf".

**Saturday 11 August**

Should have met Ken! Went to Ilford with Mum.

**Sunday 12 August**

Went to tea with Geg. Ron came up to see me off & Mum & Dad.

**Monday 13 August**

Flew back from leave.

This time Joan and Ron's leave coincided, and for a few precious days they were together at last. Two films, a dance and walks in the park. Yet, the incidents of their courtship remain beyond my reimagining and largely unreported in the letters. And my mother revealed little of their intimacy in later years. They couldn't have imagined me then. I can't conceive of them now.

In the previous chapter, the embroidery of semi-fictions around these perfunctory diary entries, which are the only documentary evidence of Joan's periods of home leave, provided opportunities to speculate about her temporary readjustment to home life and its reckonings in the new year of 1945, and to imagine the bathos of

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41 USAAF Boeing B-29 Superfortress 'Enola Gay' dropped 'Little Boy' atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

42 Joan's sister Grace Snell and her children David, Terry and Jacqueline.

43 USAAF Boeing B-29 Superfortress 'Bockscar' dropped 'Fat Man' atomic bomb on Nagasaki.

44 Fellow Wren Tricia Hannington.

celebrating VE Day in a quiet Somerset village. But here that really won't do, if, indeed, it did there. A trip to Shoeburyness, falling on the day an atom bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, invokes more profound juxtapositions. W. H. Auden had anticipated this in 1938, the year before he fled to America, in 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. Here the poet reflects on the foregrounding of the quotidian in Brueghel's painting 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus':

About suffering they were never wrong,  
 The old Masters: how well they understood  
 Its human position: how it takes place  
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking  
 dully along;<sup>45</sup>

Breughel contrasted the hubris of mythology with the steady application of the ploughman at his labour. Auden understood it was about contingency: that someone will always be on leave the day the apocalypse comes. Perhaps it is our salvation; it is the quotidian that saves us from being implicated in historic events, even when we are (perhaps unwittingly, perhaps willingly) caught up in them. But wasn't that the desk clerk's plea at Nuremberg? Who isn't responsible? This is the question the poet Jean Cayrol asks in the narration of Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955). Indeed, historical subjects are always produced by historical processes. The question is *how* does history cast ordinary people as historical subjects?

One of my preoccupations in coming to terms with Joan Prior's correspondence has been the questions: what remains hidden beneath the cloak of self-censorship? What do we read between the lines? And are those secrets not the military intelligence she vowed never to reveal, but rather the personal ones? They amount to the same suppressions of course: things you can't tell your family. But in the end, as a historian, this is about the limitations of the evidence: the 'faithful Collins Naval Diary' afforded little space for confession; the weekly news-digest is bound by its own temporal immediacy, it brooks little in the way of

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45 W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (1938), *Another Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940).

considered reflection (although there are more occasions of that in the Germany letters than before).

What these sources offer instead is energy, *joie de vivre*. It is precisely because their account is fleeting that they capture the essence of the experience. Even if one senses that Joan's epistolary performance is contrived, like a wireless show, for family entertainment, their subjectivity is both their weakness and their strength. What is especially evident in her letters from Germany is a spirit of self-confidence and freedom which must have been, at least in part, a collective response to the end of a war that had stolen their youth (and the lives of many more) but offered compensation in companionship and new horizons.

So, in this chapter there is a newfound sense of independence in Joan's letters. The vigour and immediacy of the world remade comes to the fore, expressed in increasingly strident tones. Here is a self-possessed young woman, full of yearning. There is the awakening of a political consciousness (albeit a Conservative one in keeping with her family's values), a growing spiritual life (made manifest in confirmation), a keenness to find her place in this new world and as yet undirected aspirations for a future life that would never come to fruition.

There is also a darkness which is allowed to surface on occasion: 'life here is as grim as ever with yet another of our officers dead. He was killed yesterday in a car crash! Honestly, there's a Jonah in this ship, I know'. In naval superstition a Jonah is a bringer of bad luck; someone who jinxes things. Later, Joan is ribbed about this herself, when it comes to mechanical mishaps. Joe the Marine calls her a Jonah; Ginge calls her 'Joannah'. Suspicion often falls on the ship's padre in this regard too. Yet Joan is increasingly drawn to Christianity, and attends confirmation classes; 'fancy being confirmed in Germany in German church!' she exclaims, when the day itself approaches. And afterwards there are floods; a sign she might have registered, with hope of a new covenant in peace.



Fig. 6.26. The Class of '45, *HMS Royal Henry*, Minden, 15 August 1945. The best years of their lives? Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Monday 13<sup>th</sup> August 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Please excuse this awful paper but it's all I can find till I go to the office to-morrow & I wanted to get this off by the morning mail.

As you know, I left you at about 10.30pm & trolled in. I had to fiddle around for about a quarter of an hour after that, checking in, signing in, getting bedding & so on and finally arrived at our sleeping place fairly late. It was a long dormitory affair and we had 3 blankets, a pillow and 1 sheet on which to sleep. I also found a knife, fork and mug and went downstairs again. There I met Kay Frost (the other typing pool girl) and we went in search of tea. We had a cup of tea & cheese sandwiches & went to bed.

At about midnight, an ATS corporal came into the room & wakened us & told us that we could rise at 6am instead of 4am as we were going by a later plane which we were all pleased to hear.

We rose at 6, prepared our kit for departure, had breakfast, and off we went to Northholt (are there 2 'hs' or 1 in that—I never know!).<sup>46</sup>

We got there to find the weather too bad for flying and had to wait until 12.45 before finally taking off!

<sup>46</sup> One, in fact: Northolt.

We arrived in Germany at 4.15 and then there was no transport to take us to Minden. After a bit, however, Kay & I got a lift in an Army car right to Quarters and we got in at a quarter to six. We had supper at 6 and then I cleaned the cabin, unpacked, made my bed, cleaned my shoes and here I am at about 8.15 scribbling this. My cold isn't any better and so I'm having some aspirin with my tea at 9 and then a hot bath & straight into bed.

Life here is as grim as ever with yet another of our officers dead. He was killed yesterday in a car crash! Honestly, there's a Jonah in this ship, I know.

We've got the wireless in the cabin but so far I've not tried it as I've been too busy.

I've been looking through the notices etc, for the past week & have discovered that once more I've missed Bing in "Going My Way"!

Haven't time for any more now so will say "Cheerio". I'll write again in a minute.

All my love,  
Joan xxxxx

\* \* \*

Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

So, it's VJ Day at last! What a pity it didn't come during my leave because then I could have taken the 48 hours off that the bus drivers and dockers and railwaymen are giving themselves! I would have taken it too—permission or not. Honestly these people here make me sick—here it is, the end of the war and we're all sitting at our typewriters and carrying on as usual just as if it were any other day! So far, there's nothing on to-night either, no dance, party or anything, but that's the way the Navy works over matters of time off. As far as I'm concerned, however, this is VJ Day and I'm not doing any work at all!

Now, how are you spending VJ Day at home? Do write and tell me all about it! Wish I could see dear old London now. It was happy enough last Friday, but I 'spect everyone's going mad there now.

Here, the party spirit is definitely abroad. Everyone is terrifically noisy in the office and no-one will work, and we're just making it an unofficial day off spent in the office! It's fun really, because it's a kind of mutiny by the Wrens!

Big news—someone's just been in and piped "Splice the Main Brace" for the Wrens as well as Matelots! We'll all be typing upside down after that I should think! Still, it's only once in a lifetime (I hope!).

Things are just beginning to get organised here. We've a concert to-morrow afternoon and a Ship's Company Dance in the evening and that should be quite entertaining. We're having a bit of difficulty getting about here now because the weather's shocking. It's been raining every day for a week now as far as I can gather—and it's still raining. We live near the River Weser which has to be crossed almost every time we go to a dance or anything. Well, of course, all the bridges were blown by the Germans before we arrived and we've thrown pontoon bridges across temporarily. The pontoon bridge has now been swept away and we're more or less hemmed in as a consequence. I tell you—everything happens to me!

Yesterday I wrote to the Trolley-Bus people about my scarf and enclosed a stamped addressed envelope addressed to you, so you should hear one way or the other in due course.

Wonder of wonders! We've a half-day to-day. Now isn't that marvellous! Work all day to-morrow however, so we'll miss the afternoon concert, but never mind—I didn't really expect we'd get two days.

Tea has just arrived on the scene and at 11.30—as I've already told you, we Splice the Mainbrace! Never before has this been done in the History of the Royal Navy or Wrens!

Well, I'm afraid I'll have to stop this now because my tea's getting cold and I've a new copy of Punch to read, and I'm so excited that I can't type straight. Anyhow, I just wanted to write to you to-day—the most wonderful day in our History—the world at peace. I know the glamour will only last a few days because over here the grim reality of war will do on—even though the fighting's over—and war's mark will last for years. But to-day we're not thinking about that over here—we're only feeling thankful it's over and looking back on a job well done. (That's what they tell us, anyway!).

Have a lovely time over there won't you? My love to everyone and I do hope you're all keeping well. My cold is much better to-day—that's what two early nights, hot baths and plenty of Vick do!

Bye now,  
 Fondest love and heaps of kisses,  
 Joan  
 Xxxx PTO

Have just spliced the mainbrace! Actually I'm writing this after lunch in Quarters. We had one of those large tin mugs half full of rum—it was horrid! I didn't like it but the sailors made us drink it! As we left the office the sentry on the gate said that Kay & I were the only sober Wrens he'd seen come out—& after having had

lunch I see what we means—everyone's staggering round the Mess & singing! I don't think they should have made the Wrens have it if they couldn't take it, but there it is.

Just now we're going for a walk, that is Kay & I. Since I've been away we're allowed out on our own in the town, so it'll be fun exploring it.

Must go now because Kay's waiting, but I just wanted to let you know that the rum had no effect & that I've still kept my record of never having been "merry" in my life!

Bye  
Love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*



Fig. 6.27. Blown railway bridge across the River Weser, Minden, August 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.28. Damaged pontoon bridge across the flooded River Weser at Minden, August 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.





Fig. 6.29. Blown bridge across the River Weser, Minden, August 1945.  
 Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

\* \* \*

L/Wren J. H. Prior, 41801,  
 Naval Party 1749,  
 c/o B.F.M.O.,  
 Reading,  
 Berks.

Monday 20<sup>th</sup> August 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Here I am at last! I'm so very sorry that I haven't written to you all since VJ but I honestly haven't had a minute! You see work here is something terrific these days and as we all had a half day either on VJ itself or the next day, we got a bit behind-hand with it and haven't caught up yet. Added to that, we had a big Thanksgiving Service in the church in the town in Minden this Sunday and were all out of the office for the morning, which made things worse! However, I'm snatching a couple of seconds to dash this off and to let you know I'm OK, and ignoring a folder simply bulging with typing and a notebook half full of shorthand!

Right, now where were we? Well, I wrote you up to lunch time on VJ didn't I? In the afternoon Kay and I went down to the Sergeants Mess and had a party and a lovely tea there, and in the evening we had a dance in the Wrennery which went very well. A sad note during the evening though was that the boys in the Warwickshire's band are all leaving—the whole unit really, and as we've all been such good friends and such a happy crowd we felt a bit sorry to see them go. As a parting gift, Jack gave me the

1939-1945 Star and the France & Germany Star, but I haven't sewn them on yet!

The second VJ day, I was off in the afternoon, and one of the Marines here whom I know fairly well—one Danny by name, and Irish too!—said he'd run me into Minden in his truck to take my watch to be repaired. We whizzed down there, but the old boy couldn't repair it as he hadn't got the necessary part which was broken as far as I could gather. Still I'll try again at another place if I see one. After that I went with Danny round the countryside a bit, out to some friends of ours at Herford (I didn't look very hard for George!) and then back for the dance in the evening held in our new dance hall! It was grand fun. The place is a new canteen and the actual dance floor is raised up and roped up—very Nautical, but it keeps the space for dancing cleared of people who're just chatting or sitting watching.

On Friday evening I went to the cinema and saw Charles Laughton and Ella Raines in "Suspect"—which was most unusual, but quite good.

On Saturday Ginge came back—happy day! We haven't stopped talking yet!

On Sunday I was duty all day, but we went to Church in the morning—my dear, the Chief of Staff put his car at our disposal! He is sweet. Couldn't hear a word of the sermon because the man mumbled and there's such an echo in the church into the bargain!

Sunday evening I was Duty Leading Wren in the Quarters, and to-day here I am rapidly coming to the conclusion of the letter so that I'm off at six prompt! Reason? Ginge and I are going to try to get in to see Deanna Durbin in "Can't Help Singing", but each night so far it's been "House Full" by the time we've got there.

Can't stop for more now, though, except to say my cold's much better and I do hope you're all OK. Any news about the I.O.W. yet, and any news about my scarf? We've nearly finished the cake and oh, it's lovely!

Bye now, and lots of love to you all,

From

Joan

Xxxx

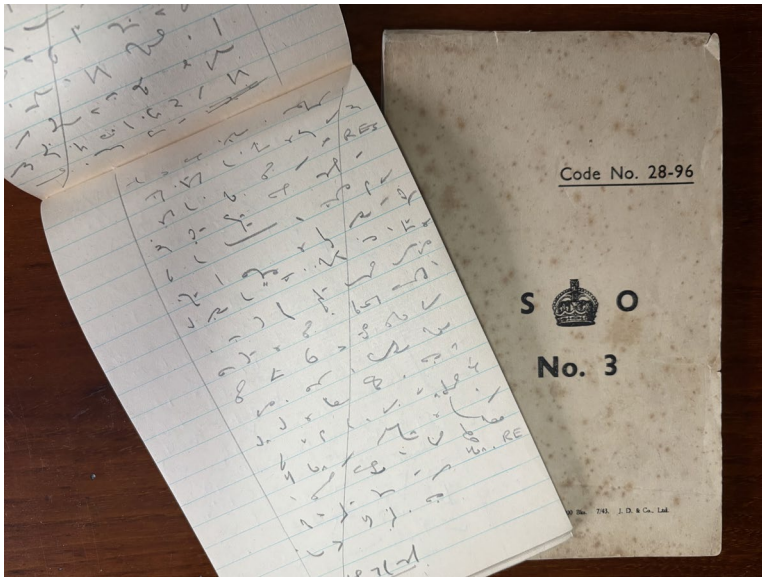


Fig. 6.30. Joan Prior's shorthand notebooks. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter written 17<sup>th</sup> yesterday, so will snatch the opportunity to reply while it presents itself.

I must say your VJ Days sounded most exciting Mum and Paddy! As you say it would have been such fun if I could have been there too—I did so want to be in London on either VE or VJ Day, but it was not to be in either case. However, as you probably now know I had a really enjoyable time here and one that I'll never forget.

I was very interested to hear all about your movements on VJ Day, and am glad you enjoyed "Me and My Girl", though I don't know whether I would have if I'd had to stand.

The festivities in the Park did sound fun too! Thank you Mum for the promised evening paper—I'll be looking out for it. By the way, talking of looking out for things, one of these days not too far distant you can look out for the cake tin's return containing who knows what! In plain language we've just finished up the last of the cake, and so the tin's empty and I'll return it to you as soon as possible.

Ginge's activities on VJ were nearly as eventful as her VE. Remember she was in Shaftesbury with her cousin Molly? Well

she was there again on VJ Day! She said there was dancing in the streets so she went out to join in and caused a fight! Not quite like that of course. It happened because they were dancing the Hoky-Coky and a sailor gave her a terrific kick on the ankle, breaking the skin, so she did no more than wade in and push him in the chest and nearly sent him flying. He thought it was the sailor standing next to him, so they started a fight! She had such a time making the peace again!

Got to go now as an enormous docket marked in red letters "Action This Day" has appeared on my desk. Reminds you of Nelson and "Every man this day will do his duty" doesn't it?

I can't remember exactly when I wrote you last, but will do on from Saturday. Ginge came back then. On Sunday we had a parade through the town to the Garrison Church of St. Martins-on-the-Hill in Minden and attended a Thanksgiving Service there, and in the evening I went to Evensong also. Otherwise I was Duty all day in the office an duty leading wren at night too!

On Monday night Ginge and I went to see Deanna Durbin in "Can't Help Singing" which we both thoroughly enjoyed although there's not an awful lot in it. It's in technicolour and she sings beautifully and the clothes are nice too. It's really nice quiet light entertainment.

On Tuesday I had an evening in and did all my dhobeying. On Wednesday Ginge and I went to a dance in the town and it was the best one we've been too since we came here. The band of course was the reason—it was smashing. They were all professional musicians who'd played in dance bands of repute before the war and who'd been together ever since. They do nothing else but play—and they sound like it too!

Last night I pressed my skirt (which I'd washed on Tuesday night) and took it up as it was a bit long and shortened the sleeves of my new jacket and sewed on my medal ribbons—they were Jack (the tailor's) parting gift to me!

To-night I'm s'posed to be going to a dance in Minden but I'm not sure that I want to go much as it's raining (still!) and I feel like an early night—especially now that we can listen to the wireless.

My cold's completely gone now, thanks be. I think it's fairly safe to wash my hair too, so I'll be doing that soon when I get a minute.

Hope you are all well at home and have recovered from the excitement of VJ! Must go now because "Immediate" has appeared in the place of "Action This Day" and they can't be ignored!

Will write again soon, until then,  
 Lots of love to you all,  
 From  
 Joan  
 Xxxx

P.S. Can't remember whether I told you, but when I got back from leave I discovered that "Going My Way" had been on the week I was away! I was so mad, but am all smiles now as it appears it's this coming week's film too! At last I'll see it—nothing shall thwart me this time!

\* \* \*

Monday 27<sup>th</sup> August 1945

My Dear Bessie & Stan, Mum and Paddy,

Received your letter written 21<sup>st</sup> yesterday Bess, and was pleased to hear all the news. I've also received this morning a bundle of assorted Sunday papers and I'm going to bed early with them to-night and catch up on all the news!

The weather has still been dreadful but is cheering up now—it's rained every day since I came back from leave till yesterday when it was dull but dry during the forenoon and after lunch the sun shone and it was very pleasant. This morning the sun has been shining all the time, so I hope it means that the wet spell has ended. It's not before time because the Weser is very swollen and is flooding.

Yes, the cold has now completely gone—so much so that I washed my hair yesterday afternoon and so far with no bad consequences!

My dear, I quaked for you when I read why you were writing in pencil! I remember you telling me once how you must take such case of Stan's pen—and then you do a thing like that! Still, seriously, it's such a nuisance to get them repaired these days isn't it.

How nice to see the Royal parade through London! I'd have loved to have been there!

What an amazing coincidence to me those people in that vast crowd! I saw "Weekend at the Waldorf" with Tricia when I was on leave—nice wasn't it? I remember the place. I often used to go there for lunch. Pinoli's I believe it's called—in Wardour Street.<sup>47</sup>

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47 Carlo Pinoli's Italian restaurant, 17 Wardour Street, London.

I laughed at the bit about the LPTB getting two and a half days' pay for every VJ day—but deep down I was mad!<sup>48</sup> When I think that I only had one day at VE and a half day at VJ at 2/4d a day—oh, well. I just have to laugh, because if I didn't do that I'd slam something at someone out of sheer temper.

The part sounded fun. I'd like to have seen it like that.

I've not see "I'll Be Seeing You"—but I've heard that it's good—and of course "National Velvet" I recommended to you, didn't I? I have been the Bob Hope film "The Princess and the Pirate"—saw it in Paris—it was fun! And after we'd seen it (I was with Ken) we went to a little cafe in Montmartre called "Les Filibustes" which means the Pirates, and inside it was just like a ship (one of those old-fashioned barques) with windows shaped like port-holes and drawings and frescoes of bearded men with cutlasses and so on—it was so quaint and so appropriate—I'll always remember it.

My dear, as I told you in my last letter home to Mum, "Going My Way" is on again here! Isn't it marvellous—at last I'm going to see it.

Ginge had a lovely leave and sends her love to you all—she's looking much better since her leave—she had such a cold before.

Think that about takes care of your letter. Now for activities since last I wrote, although as my Diary tells me that was only on Friday, there's not an awful lot to tell.

On Friday night Ginge and I went to a dance in Minden given by the Wireless Signals Company and had a lovely time. Everyone was very nice and we thoroughly enjoyed it! I won the first prize in an Elimination Waltz and got a mirror in a leather case (nice big one) with a stand up flap too—it's quite useful.

On Saturday we had our dance in the Wrennery. I didn't enjoy it all that much because the floor is concrete and makes your feet ache, and the band's timing was out and made the whole thing difficult, but apart from those tow considerations the evening went with a swing and I think everyone had a good time.

Yesterday I was off in the afternoon and washed my hair and Kay set it. Then I did a spot of ironing—a large spot—and then lay on the bed with a book. At about 4 o'clock Ginge came in from the office and went over to Tea-boat and brought back tea and cakes for us. After that I must have dozed off or something but suddenly I noticed that it was half past five and I'd shoes to clean, and a bath to have and I'd to change and have supper and be out by 6-30! Boy, did I have to steam. Anyway, finally all was done

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48 The London Passenger Transport Board.

and then—I unpinned my hair! It wasn't properly dry and came out of curl in the back, but it was clean and shining and smelt nice I s'pose so that was something. Eventually at one minute after the half hour I was ready and went out to find Danny (the boy I was going out with (he took me to Herford remember)) waiting. Having admonished me for being one minute late (it's a bad thing in the Navy to be late) I told him precisely why—because my hair wasn't properly dry and so forth—and so he said he couldn't spare odd minutes waiting about for Wrens who couldn't dry their hair in time and he'd have to see what he could do about getting me a hair dryer (hand-type), so we'll wait and see what happens now!

Nothing much more to tell now I'm afraid. Oh, yes, there is! There's a PT class starting tonight and I'm going to attend—trying to get rid of that extra 3 inches you see! Seriously thought I think the exercise will be good for me. Because of this, would you please send out my shorts as I really haven't anything suitable to wear out here.

Now I think that really is all. As I said before Ginge sends her love and of course I send bags of mine to you all. I hope you're all keeping well and being good too!

Lots of love  
From  
Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> August 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Well, here I am again with a little more news.

First and foremost I have at last seen "Going My Way"—it was wonderful!

Secondly and not far behind is that Ginge and I have moved cabins! We were in a tiny room next door to the Quarters Office before, and it was most inconvenient. If, as it quite often the case, there was no-one in Quarters Office when anyone called, they just came next door into our cabin—and it began to get embarrassing! During the past week we had two Americans, two Chiefs, one Sergeant and One officer and one Marine all calling for various things. They'd open the door and say "Can I speak to Peggy please" like as if we knew exactly which Peggy and whether she was in, out or indifferent! Or on another occasion the Marine said "I've brought the gear from Hamburg". Well, honestly we didn't

know what gear or where to put it or anything, but of course we had to cope, so that was one of the things. Another thing was that the phone in the Office kept ringing all day and we'd been driven to answering it just to stop it ringing and then we'd have to walk to the next street to find a girl whose boy-friend wanted to know if she'd go to the cinema to-night, or something like that. Anyhow, all things considered we decided we'd like to move, so when another room came vacant, the Officer told us and asked if we'd like it. Yesterday lunchtime we went along to view and decided "Yes!" So we've had to move once more.

It's in a private house and is a corner room with a balcony leading off which has a drying line and gets the sun all day. That is going to be a godsend as it will solve our clothes drying problems. We've a couple of chairs out there too so's we can sit in the sun if ever we get the time! Inside we have a kind of marble topped drawer arrangement with a mirror over the top, and a large white cupboard-wardrobe.

We've also got a stove, but haven't examined it yet to see how, if or whether we can use it in the winter. The doors which open onto the balcony are like French windows, but only the top half is glass, and there's another window too, so we're OK for fresh air.

You should have seen us moving though! It's quite a distance away although it's in the same street, but we must have looked queer trudging along with beds, just as they were you know, already made, and buckets and wash-basins and face-cream and gum-boots and clothes—oh, such an assortment! We had to make about fifteen journeys to and fro carrying different things each time. The beds of course were the worst problem, and we finally had to dismantle Ginge's to get it in, but mine was a wee bit narrower and we just only just managed it as it was—even though at one stage of the stairs we had to put half of it out through the landing window! Honestly with all my experience I'm thinking of taking a job at Harrison, Gibson's after the demob!

Anyway, by our combined efforts during the lunch hour and again after supper last night we managed to get settled in more or less, although it'll take us a few days actually living in the place to find out whether we've got things in the right spot or no.

Well, we had a cup of tea about 9 o'clock and then a bath—which we certainly needed—and so to bed, but not to sleep! We lay for a bit reading and Ginge's bed's right under the light and it began to be covered with moths and other insects which were singed by the light and then dropped onto her bed! All the time these moths etc were flying and flapping around till we thought



the best thing was to put out the light so's they'd go. It was such a hot still night that we think they must have been driven in or something. Anyway, we settled down and waited for them to fly away, but not a bit of it. There were so many that you could hear them flapping around! Then, came the next shock! A sort of creaking, ticking, buzzing noise! Oh, it was awful. On went the light and we looked round and there on the wall was the most terrific thing I've ever seen. It had a body about the size of a shilling or ha'penny, and long double-jointed legs shooting out all over the place, and every time it moved it made this queer noise—just like a Jeep that's left its motor running Ginge said!

Well, it was very high up on the wall and we decided to ignore it and go to sleep, so out went the lights and we lay quiet for a long while, then Ginge said "You awake?", "Yes" I said. Ginge said "I'm not very happy about that thing are you?" Oh, well, I thought we'd neither of us get to sleep with it there so, on light, and out I leapt. I got some of the VJ newspapers which you' thoughtfully provided and caught him and wrapped him up in it and took the whole things out onto the balcony and trod on it and then it away, and came back in to bed, and after that we seemed to go to sleep very quickly.

That was our first night in our new cabin. There isn't much more news as I only wrote a day or so ago, but as soon as there is, I'll let you know.

Tonight we've a dance at the Wrennery given by the Naval Communications Football Team who've come top in an Inter-Service League or something. Anyhow, they've something to celebrate, so their idea was to give a dance in the Wrennery.

Ginge and I are both keeping well and she sends her love to you all. I hope you've all keeping fit over there and not over-eating, over-sleeping or doing any of those other things I'd love to do.

I just thought I'd let you know we'd moved and also let you in on the fun we had. Always when we move something funny happens—we're just fated I think.

'Bye now, till the next time.

Fondest love and kisses,

Joan

Xxxx

PS. My love to Geg & the kiddies—I haven't heard from her yet, but I 'spect she's busy. Xxx

Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> September 1945

My dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Have just this morning received your letter Paddy written on 31<sup>st</sup> August, and, in spite of the pile of work waiting at my elbow have decided I just must try to drop you a few lines to let you know I've received your letters safely and that I'm OK.

I received Mum's letter written on 26<sup>th</sup> August a couple of days ago and have not yet had a moment to spare to answer it, so I'll answer that in this letter too. My diary tells me I last wrote to you on 29<sup>th</sup> August, and I'll continue with my events from there before answering your letters.

On Thursday last I went to see "A Song to Remember" a film featuring the life of the great composer-pianist Chopin. It was in Technicolour [sic] and the dresses etc were lovely as well as the music being beautiful.

On Friday I went to my first Confirmation Class. There's one other girl, Daphne Williamson, taking them too, so we had a cosy evening at the Padre's house learning the whys and wherefores. My next class is to-night. I believe the Bishop of Winchester is coming out here for the actual confirmation ceremony—fancy being confirmed in Germany in a German church!

On Saturday the Canteen which has been built actually on board for us was officially opened. Its eat-and-drink side is run by NAAFI and we have a staff of NAAFI girls out here specially to run it for us. Apart from that there's a large space with tables and chairs so's you can sit and eat or chat, a wireless, a dance floor—and we've now got our own dance band, and they have dancing two or three evenings a week there.

On Sunday I had a day off, but got up and went to church in the morning. In the afternoon Kay and I went on a Ship's Company picnic to a place called Detmold. We didn't actually go into the town but stopped in the country a small distance away, and climbed to the top of a terrific hill. It took us about half an hour to get up to the top where there was an enormous monument. Kay took a snap of it, but doesn't know whether it'll come out OK or not. It was very beautiful countryside with several small streams coming out of the hillside and one enormous stream that gushed from the cliff walls in a waterfall—it was lovely! We went to a German house where they had prepared tea for us from the bulk rations which we took, and we had it at little tables in the garden and after tea the German and his wife gave us a piano and cello recital which was very good.

After we returned from that at about 9pm I went on down to the Chief's and Petty Officers' Mess where they were giving a party to which I'd been invited. Ginge was already there as she didn't come on the picnic. The Chief of Staff came in, and brought his relief—he's leaving us soon unfortunately—and Ginge and I sat with them during their stay and danced with them—the new man seems very charming and I think he'll be OK but of course he isn't Frothy.<sup>49</sup>

Yesterday I was Duty in the office and then Duty Leading Wren in Quarters too, so I didn't get very far. There was dancing in the canteen last night to which Kay and Ginge were going, so I walked down with them when they came off duty at 7 and we had supper there—the nicest meal I've had since I came back off leave! Chipped potatoes (ordinary ones—Ginge says!) fried tomatoes and bacon! Nice, nice, ever so nice! They then stayed on for dancing and I returned to Quarters. To-night I've my second confirmation class, so I could see that if I didn't seize this opportunity, I might not write again for a couple of days! Never a dull moment is there?

Now for your letters. Mum's first because it came first. How nice the trip to Richmond sounded. I do love the river especially at this time of the year—it must have been so peaceful and lovely. How does Jacqueline keep so good? I must find out her secret—although I'm told I'm always smiling I think she beats me to it.

I'm afraid the paper-talk etc is not to be taken much notice of as far as demobbing is concerned—you know how they always get hold of the wrong end of the stick. I explained the position to you when I was home and as far as the Navy is concerned that still stands. The Messengers being a certain unwanted category will be out—Groups 1 to 49—by Christmas, but I'm a Shorthand typist category 328 and only Groups 1-15 will be out by Christmastime I'm afraid. You see the point is they want to get back to a peacetime footing with no Wrens at all, but although mostly that works out well, in our job it doesn't work out at all.<sup>50</sup> We've

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49 The new Chief of Staff was Commodore R. M. J. Sutton, RN.

50 As Hannah Roberts reports, 'at the end of the war the Admiralty was unwilling to maintain the WRNS' on the grounds of cost. However, this view was challenged (still on economic grounds) 'in March 1946 by the personnel department's view that women could be useful to release men for higher value work'. *The WRNS in Wartime: The Women's Royal Naval Service 1917-1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), p. 218. Joan Prior was clear in illustrating that while Wrens who had been employed in roles predominantly carried out previously by men were surplus to

still so very much shorthand and typing to get through in a day that we've all our work cut out and there are 20 of us working from 9 till 6 and some five or six people working till 7 every day, and they just wouldn't be able to manage it with sailors, so of course we shall stay until our job's finished. You can be sure I'll let you know the minute there's any change or new, but until then it's unwise to believe what you read or hear, because honestly you've got to be on the inside of this racket to understand how they work it.

That seems to take care of Mum's letter, now for Paddy's. I was in fits of laughter while I was reading your letter! I didn't mean to be and I know I shouldn't have been, but oh, the butterflies! I kept remembering how you kept muttering about caterpillars etc when I was home, and honestly I couldn't help laughing! I realise of course that it's quite a serious matter—fancy people losing their crops like that! However, thanks to you, those at home don't seem to be too bad, but as you say they do need a lot of attention. The beans sound too good to be true! Wish I could eat some right now! No Ginge didn't get her extra two days VJ leave—I told you didn't I that working with these people you just don't get a thing in the way of extra time off! Well, I was right! We've had that two days I think. I think you come off worst in the nightmares with caterpillars!

My love to Geg and the kiddies and to all of you, of course. Oh, and by the way. Thank you so much for the shorts. I'm sure they'll be lovely, and Kay will alter them for me if they're too big, I know, bless her heart.

Must go now, as I simply daren't do nothing any longer. Once again sending my fondest love to you all,

From  
Joan  
Xxxx

PS. Hope you'll excuse the typing but I haven't time to correct errors or to read it through.

\* \* \*



Fig. 6.31. View from 'the top of a terrific hill' at Detmold, September, 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.32. 'House where we had tea at Detmold', September 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> September 1945

My Dear Mum & Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

This is as much a surprise to you I expect, as it is to me—to find a real, honest to goodness, hand-written letter from me! Cos why? I'll tell you. Thelma, the Ldg Wren in charge, is on leave & I've been left to hold the fort! And boy, have we been busy or have we been busy! So this being Sat. afternoon I've a half-day and I'm

down by the swimming pool—Ginge is in swimming now—writing this on the grass, that’s why the writing’s so bad—it’s uneven! First things first. Thanks a million for the shorts—they arrived this morning & are wonderful. I’m wearing ‘em now. How much were they please? I’ll send a P.O.

Please could you send out my mauve chalk-stripe long-sleeved frock as soon as convenient, only I haven’t anything informal here, and in the cabin in the evenings I like to get out of my collar & tie. Also my many-coloured floral one if you can get it cleaned—& I’ll get Kay to shorten it.

Haven’t done much since last I wrote except been to another Confirmation Class—actual Confirmation is Sunday 16th September at Herford by Bishop of Winchester.

Last night I saw Somerset Maugham’s play “The Circle” with Yvonne Arnaud, Leslie Banks etc. It was smashing. Time for tea now. Will continue after. Where was I? Oh yes, the play—well, it was funny, I just laughed & laughed over it.

It’s now Sunday morning—I wasn’t able to finish this yesterday, as after tea we played ball, and then after supper I went to the cinema on the ship and saw a very good film indeed. It was called “The Woman in the Window” and starred Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett. After that I went back to the Wrennery where there as a lovely party going in honour of our anniversary. It was just a year to the day since we’d embarked at Pompey for the Continent and certainly needed celebrating. Everyone enjoyed it and we had a really merry & happy evening remembering old time or all the hundred & one crazy things that have happened since our “D Day” 8<sup>th</sup> September 1944.

I’ve got the afternoon off also, to-day, so I’m going to lay in the sun once more—at least, that’s if the sun’s there!

Now, I’ve a letter from Bessie to answer I think.

“Nuff said” about the beans! I can’t stand it. What wouldn’t I give for some now.

Once more I’ve done the quick-change act. When I went to see “The Circle”. Off duty at six, supper over by 20 past, bath over by 20 to seven, made up my face etc etc by five to and at the top of the road and whisked off in a car to the theatre by one minute past seven! Reason for the long gap between five to and one minute past is that I left a brand new tin of Yardley’s talc in the bathroom & had to go back for it. I wanted to see “Diamond Horseshoe” but haven’t had the chance. Dick Haymes is in it, isn’t he? My favourite singer No. 2 (next to Crosby of course).

Right, I’ll put “The Affairs of Susan” on my list!

The Sandown business sound more promising now, doesn't it?  
I was sorry to hear of Charlie's accident. I don't like the sound of cracked ribs. Broken ones can be set again, but cracked ribs can't have anything done for them.

I'll be writing again shortly (with the aid of a typewriter!) and until then will say Cheerio.

Take care of yourselves, and God Bless you all.

Fondest love

From Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> September 1945

My Dearest Mum & Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

I find myself with two letters to answer and hardly any time at all to do it in, but here goes.

Using the first-come-first-answered principle this is a reply to Paddy's letter of 12<sup>th</sup> Sept.

You say that it will be quite a novelty to be Confirmed in Germany—well that's true enough, but you might have known that whenever & wherever I'd been confirmed it would be out of the ordinary because of my capacity for tricky situations. I'll tell you all about it when I come to my general news. Thank you for taking all that trouble with my frock and for sending my other things—ten to one now, they'll ban the wearing of them in our rooms, but we can but hope!

Thank goodness the caterpillars are giving up the ghost at last! I was so glad to hear of Mum's increased appetite—soon she'll be earning the Navy name that Ginge & I are called—“Gannett” that means you eat an enormous amount. Everywhere we go, to dances, parties, or evenings in the canteen, all the boys are afraid to offer to get us food because they know we'll say “Yes please!” Anyway, you keep it up, Mum, no matter what anyone says or does—it'll do you the world of good.

Now for Bessie's letter of 17<sup>th</sup> Sept.

We dry all our clothes outside more or less. You see we've a balcony with a line across it and they dry there whilst having a roof over their heads so to speak against the rain. Even when there's no dry out!!!

My goodness yes, I will be glad when Thelma comes back, although I don't mind the responsibility & it doesn't get me down at all you know. I often think it would be better all-round this way,

as the girls are so much happier, but of course from my own point of view it's not so good because I don't have a chance to do any shorthand/typing.

Good old Stan—nose seems on the mend at last. I do hope as because apart from all other inconveniences it must be so painful.

I was sorry to hear of Stan's father's delay again—they have taken a long time haven't they?

How nice the long weekend at Sandown sounds—you lucky people! In the Navy we call that a "Friday while", but it'd be just the job now under any name.

Perhaps you'll get something fixed up about the other place while you're there too.

Thanks for sending the mauve frock. You seem to spend your life attending to my wants. Don't tell me you have to queue for clothes-cleaning! I can't believe it!

You're quite right—I'm sure the confirmation wasn't a bit like yours!

Yes, I want to see "True Glory" very much—it's on my list of "must sees". Also want to see "I Live in Grosvenor Square". Yes Ginge & I are, for once in our lives, completely cold-free! Hope you're all well too & that Mum's rheum has gone now.

Ginge sends her love to you all—you've got quite a "fan" in that girl—she thinks my family is wonderful—I s'pose it's 'cause she's never had one & can appreciate it more.

Now for the news from this end. One moment friends whilst I extract my Diary, that trusty friend & true.

On Thursday evening I saw a preview of an American film called "Fighting Lady"—the story of an American Aircraft carrier in Pacific waters. It was quite good.

Friday I had a quiet night & also Saturday except that I was then Duty Leading Wren.

On Sunday came the great day! 1345 I was driven away by the Padre in his PU. Kay Chandler came with me for moral support as Ginge had to work, and away we went to Herford. On arrival there was no-one to be seen in the Church, so because it was only 1430 & because the Service was not due until 1500 we went into a YWCA which we'd noticed & although the tea wasn't really served until 1500 they let us have some right away. Strangely enough the two women on duty there were the same people who used to run the YW in Paris where we used to get such nice meals, & they were so pleased to see us & made such a fuss of us. We had hot tea, thin paste sandwiches & lovely pastries & fruit cake as well. Well, we were sitting well back, eating & drinking when she asked us why we'd come, & when we told her she said that there wasn't



a Confirmation Service at Herford but that it was at Bad Oeynhau-  
sen! Well, of course there was more panic than that! We dashed  
out & jumped in the car & tore along the road at a terrific speed—  
we didn't leave there until 1450 & it was a good 15 kms away! Of  
course we arrived after the service had started.

The Bishop of Winchester took the service and was very  
nice indeed. Afterwards he saw us all individually—there were  
about 25 service people of both sexes and all three services—and  
stumped me completely by asking me who the present Bishop of  
Barking was! Fortunately he's a new man apparently and he had  
to confess that he didn't know who he was himself, although he  
knew the former Bishop quite well apparently and he's now the  
Bishop of Sheffield I believe.

After that we had tea (yes, another official one, this time!)  
and then began the journey back. Needless to say the Padre's  
car broke down—after all I was in it and all the vehicles I get into  
break down! We found that we'd a hole in the radiator and so we  
had to stop and plug it with a bit of tree! Everything happens  
to me! It was so funny because the old thing kept steaming and  
snorting and so on and we stopped twice and filled up the rad.  
with water and it didn't seem to make a bit of difference—and no  
wonder when we found the hole in the radiator!

On Sunday night I went to a dance at a place called Bad Ne-  
ndorf—the first time I've been out of Minden since I came back  
from leave!

Well that seems to take us up to the end of last week so I'll tell  
you the news from Monday on in my next letter as I've to dash  
to lunch now, and then begin my busy programme for this af-  
ternoon. The object is (1) wash hair, (2) do dhobeying, (3) have  
bath, (4) Teaboard, (5) rest (6) supper (7) cinema! Bet I don't get  
all that done!

My love to all at home including Geg and the kiddies and of  
course heaps to Mum and Dad.

God Bless you all, I'll be writing again in a minute—and till  
then,

All my love (and Ginge's)

Joan

Xxxx

Monday 24<sup>th</sup> September 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Now as far as my last letter went you'd had the news from my end up till Monday and so I'll go on from there.

I went to a dance in our own canteen on Monday evening and had quite a pleasant evening.

Tuesday evening, and Wednesday too, I went to a dance in Minden. It was one of our own dances but they hired the hall in Minden because they wanted more space and room really than we've got. It was a communication sections dance and they had to hold it on two nights so that all the men had a chance of coming as they're watchkeepers you see and half only were off on one night.

On Thursday I went down town and saw Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in a film called "Without Love" which was quite good but not super.

Friday of course, as you know I hate Friday, was the day of the week. To start with I had to go to a Flag Officers' meeting in the morning and they all said a lot and said it fast the way they always do. In the afternoon while my transcribed minutes were being read through I slipped away to play tennis. It's the first time I've had a really serious game for years and I loved it and towards the end of the game began to feel my feet once more.

I came back to the office about four o'clock and then the fun started. I had to re-draft my minutes and was still there doing it when the others had gone home. But that's not the half of it! It got dark, you know we've put our clocks back to correspond with yours now, and by six o'clock it was almost too dark to see to type. The electricians reported a breakdown in our local circuit to start with and there was no light in my office. I borrowed a torch from the electrician and sat typing by torchlight! The things I do for England, wasn't in it! Well, after a while at this, one of the officers came in and said that his light was working next door and shouldn't I be better off next door in his room. Well, off I trotted with my typewriter and put it down on his typing desk and then picked his typewriter up and moved it to another table—but my dears the place I'd rested my machine was only a ledge and when I removed his typewriter from the other side mine of course shot to the deck quicker than that! I finished off my job on his machine as mine was badly smashed and felt I'd had enough for one day, so I packed everything up and went down to the canteen to supper (incidentally all the lights had gone by this time & I had supper

with some boys by cigarette lighter light!), after which I went to the cinema and saw Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart in "To Have and Have Not"—I'd seen it before but I felt I just had to go somewhere to get out of the long line of accidents for that day. On Saturday I got to work on my machine and this is it that I'm typing on now so you can see it's not too bad, although I don't s'pose it'll ever be what it was before.

Saturday I wrote to you, and I had the afternoon off. I did my dhobeying as I said I would, and washed my hair and had a bath and did some ironing, so all round my programme was carried out to the letter. In the evening I went down town and saw "Don't Take it to Heart" with Richard Greene, but it wasn't very good I thought.

Yesterday I was up with the lark and went to my first Communion, and then I went to Morning Service because it was Harvest Festival. Our chapel was decorated so beautifully and I think everyone enjoyed it. In the afternoon I slept off the effects of my getting up early, and had a bath and then went to supper in the canteen and after went to the cinema.

I saw the finest film I've seen for years and thoroughly enjoyed it. It was called "The Keys of the Kingdom" and was the film of A.J. Cronin's latest book. The star was Gregory Peck and the cast was of well-known people who usually take minor parts—Edmund Gwenn, Thomas Mitchell, James Gleason etc. It was the story of a man's life from the time he was a little boy until he was a very old man—and it was wonderful. He was a fisherman's son and grew up to be a priest and went to China to start a mission there and eventually came back to Scotland when he was an old man. He was most unorthodox and had some queer friends and queer ideas and so was not popular with the Bishops and high officials of his church, but he stood out as a wonderful man and if you do get the chance to see it—take it. It's a most unusual and well-acted film.

That about brings my activities up to date I think and so I'll leave you now so's I can earn my bread, or at least justify my existence!

I'll write again soon, and now that Thelma's back my mail to you shouldn't be so erratic!

I hope you're all keeping well—and Ginge sends her hopes too that everyone's OK. Give my best to Geg and the kiddies—I'd love to see Jacqueline now! If only I were in Paris I could send things home to her too, but of course here there's simply nothing at all.

Must fly now though—Ginge and I send our fondest love to you

all—God bless and take care of yourselves won't you?

All my love

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> September 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Just a hurried line to say that I've just received my mauve frock—thanks a lot for sending it, and also for mending it so nicely whoever did it, because it was such a lovely surprise. I opened the box when I got in and got all set with needle and cotton to do the little odd things that I knew needed doing and when I sought out the actual places, they'd all been done—thank you so much!

I must apologise for this paper, but it's the first piece I laid my hands on and I'm in (as always) somewhat of a hurry.

Have just heard that Ginge and I are the lucky ones who're going away next week for a couple of days to a hostel in the Harz Mountains! Isn't it wonderful? We should go next Monday so I'll be writing again before then to let you know any further news we may get.

Bye for now,

Lots of love from Ginge and me,

God Bless you all,

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> September 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Have just received your letter of 22<sup>nd</sup>. Thanks a lot for same, although when it arrived I could hardly read it because the lights had failed!

I know just what you mean by hardly knowing the war is over except that there are no raids etc. We feel the same, or even possibly more than you do because our work's increased rather than decreased. Mum's quite right about the shortages and queues—they're awful from what I hear and read. Of course as you know I'm not Labour minded or even Labour tolerant, but I don't think we can blame the Labour Government for all these things—after

all they've only just taken over, and always when there's a change from one system to another the gap in between is difficult. We shall see the fruits of their ideas in about a year's time—and then what will we think!

Yes, I have received my frock—I thanked you for it in a previous letter, but I haven't yet sent the box back—I will though, to-morrow. Talking of frocks, I've nearly finished mine—the one I was making, remember? I'm trying to get it done now in time to take to Bad Harzburg with me on Monday.

Glad Grace is getting sorted out and put to rights again—it's such a business when the house is turned upside down isn't it?

Jacqueline's as good as ever I see—good for her, tell her to keep it up. By the way, I've never received any wool from Geg to make frocks for her, but I s'pose she hasn't been able to get any more from the shop. If you think of it though, Mum, you might tactfully ask her, in case she's forgotten, will you? It's not vital or anything, but it will give me something to do in these dark long evenings. I believe I told you we've put our clocks back here and it's dark about 7 now so I've been thinking that in the winter it'll be the best plan to stay in and knit, read or sew. At the moment I've got all I can cope with here in the sewing line because as I say I'm trying to finish my frock, and then I did start on some shorts a while back, but since you sent my others I haven't bothered to finish them, and then I've quite a lot of mending to do and if all that fails a lot of reading too! However, the winter's young yet—hasn't really started in fact—so I'm preparing for the worst. I've ordered a couple of table cloths and a couple of tray cloths from a firm of embroidery people who take bulk orders from the Forces and Hospitals, so that should keep me busy when it arrives.

At the moment I'm doing some pretty serious thinking about what they term "My Post-War Career". This week we've had a notice from the Base Education and Command Re-settlement officer saying that she wants to see all the Wrens individually for about ten minutes Monday morning. Since Ginge and I won't be here, she's going to try to fit us in on Saturday and Sunday morning. I don't quite know what she wants or why, but I think it's to find out whether we want help with our Post War job or not.

Of course, the whole thing's a problem really because none of us knows what we want to do. We've all got odd ideas, but none of them is very concrete at the moment, as we've not been face to face with the problem seriously yet. Anyway I'll let you know more when I've seen the woman.

Sorry, got to go now because A/Sec P has just given me a hor-

rible job which he wants urgently.

Ginge and I both still well and she sends her love to you all.

Fondest love from me and God Bless you all,

Joan

Xxxx

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Monday 1<sup>st</sup> October 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter dated 26th yesterday Mum & thanks a million for same.

Whatever do you mean, washing the blankets in glue? Ginge says p'raps you're afraid of someone taking them so you want them to stick to the bed! But seriously, what is the idea?

Now, since I last wrote I've been more than a little busy!

On Tuesday evening I went to see a film called "They Were Sisters" with Phyllis Calvert & James Mason—it was very good.

On Wednesday I had a night in and the lights were "off" the whole evening, so I'd had that.

However, I had my night in proper the next night & sewed more of my frock.

On Friday I had supper in the Canteen with some of the boys who've unofficially adopted me—there are about six of them & I've been having tea with them in the afternoons for a long while now, so we just sat & chatted and eat!

On Saturday afternoon I was busy cooking! Now, just a minute with those rude remarks of yours! Joan Nightingale, the girl who sings, is 21 today, and so she gave a party yesterday to celebrate it, and so Kay & I cooked cakes and cheese straws & biscuits for it.

On Sunday I again was up with the lark to go to Communion—it shakes all the girls 'cos they know how I hate getting up! S'matter of fact it shakes me!

I was duty all day in the office, and in the evening went to Joan's party. We had a lovely time, and I think everyone enjoyed it.

This morning Ginge & I were up even before the lark & packed, breakfasted & off in a lorry before you could say Bill Smith or something.

We left Minden at 8am & arrived here in Bad Harzburg at 12.30pm & had lunch. Then we came to our rooms (there are two other Wrens with us & we have two rooms for two which is rather nice) & we settled in. I'll tell you more about that when I've the aid of a typewriter! It was a pantomime!

The scenery is wonderful, although the weather is a fine drizzle which isn't exactly cosy, and it's very cold. I'm now waiting my turn for the bath before dinner & I think we're going to a concert after.

Ginge sends all her love & she hopes you're all OK. She says thanks for your love to her—you never forget—I think it amazes her!

Of course I too hope that everything at home is alright. I trust you're still eating as much as ever Mum! You gannett! My love to you all and I wish you could be here with me now—you'd love it. Germany certainly is a beautiful country.

Lots of love till the next time,  
From your own  
Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*



Fig. 6.33. View from above Bad Harzburg, October 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 5<sup>th</sup> October 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Well, here I am back at last from the "Rest Camp"! and I'll now try to snatch a few minutes to tell you the whole story of our holiday from the time I last wrote to you. It should make good reading if I tell it rightly because my goodness we laughed enough the whole time we were there. It's a blessing that Ginge and I

were there together or otherwise it wouldn't have been nearly so amusing.

I told you when I wrote that we'd just arrived and will go on from there. Well, we were shown to our room and it was so dark that I thought I'd put the light on which I did. After about two seconds Ginge said "Put the light on honey it's so dark in here" and of course I had to explain that the light was on! That gives you a little idea of the candle-power of the electricity in our room! Well, we laughed that off and then turned our attention to the beds, and honestly I just can't find words to give you a true picture of them. They were quite ordinary as far as structure goes, but the coverlets were the amazing part. They had one very thin eiderdown encased in a white cover and then one queer thing that looked like a giant pillowcase, only it was over the foot of the bed. It was a big square thing, all light and airy and feathery and only covered your feet! We immediately thought it was a pillow and then we discovered the pillow tucked away under the previous coverlet which was the most enormous pillow I've ever seen—at least the size of three normal pillows, but quite flat!

Well, we then laughed all that off and began to unpack. There was an enormous wardrobe taking up almost the whole of one side of the room and by some strange accident of design not one single hook or peg! It looked so funny to see this enormous cupboard empty except for the floor of it which was absolutely covered with things!

After that we again inspected the beds and thought how cold we'd be because there wasn't a sheet or blanket on them at all, but ultimately to our surprise we found that we were quite warm in bed, isn't it queer?

We then had lunch and took a stroll into the town or perhaps I should say village, and after looking round the shops decided to go to the cinema where we saw the News, a Mickey Mouse and a long film in German about the pre-war Olympic Games!<sup>51</sup> That last film was quite enjoyable though because there was some good riding, jumping, diving etc in it.

We then had a bath and changed into frocks (we'd been in bell-bottoms and jerseys all the afternoon) and went in to dinner after which we saw a concert which was really funny, given by Army personnel and called the "Barnstormers".

The next exciting event was going to bed—our first night in the

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51 Surely, although surprisingly perhaps given its Nazi propagandism, Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938).



new beds. Of course, I don't have to tell you that we had our usual inset troubled which almost reduced us to hysterics! I was flitting about the room swatting flies and beetles and all sorts of things before we finally settled down. I should tell you here that we had had trouble with the sink (there was a basin in each room) and I'd had to do a bit of plumbing before we could coax the water out of the tap at all and then we had to wait for about five minutes before the water ran hot! However, we weren't too dismayed by all these things, even when the water took an age to run away we weren't too disheartened, but the final insult came when after we'd washed before going to bed, about five minutes after we were in bed I should think, the most foul smell crept up from the basin and across the room to us! Honestly it was awful, and we had to keep our noses under the coverlet to bear it at all. We were helpless with laughter by this time as it really did seem the limit! Eventually however we got off to sleep and the next thing I knew was that someone had slipped in with the tea and it was morning. I'm always slow to wake up as you know, but I just managed to remember that I had to handle the tea situation by myself, and shook the last remains of sleep from my eyes and coped with the German woman who brought the tea in. The reason for my having to be at the alert was that Ginge had forgotten to pack her pyjamas and we were terrified that she might forget and sit up in bed, or that the German might throw back the coverlet to shake her! However, I managed to rise to the occasion and all went well. Tea was brought on two identical silver trays, each bearing a teapot, cream-jug, cup, saucer and dish of sugar. It was sweet and there was such a lot of tea too—enough for two and half cups each!

After that we got up, breakfasted, dressed once more in bell-bottoms and jerseys, and thought we'd go for a ride in the funicular railway which ran up the side of one of the mountains. I should tell you here, that the scenery was beautiful. We were lodged in little brightly painted wooden chalets and the mountains rose all round, very high and beautiful with their many hues of autumn colourings on the trees. Surprisingly enough there were not over many evergreen trees on the mountainsides and so the colours were really beautiful. There was too, as always in hilly districts, a large number of streams, pools and lakes running through the valley which fascinated me.

Where was I? Oh, yes, we were going on the "Sky-ride" as they call it. I don't know whether I've told you, but one of the Marines here, who works in the Engineer Workshop calls me a Jonah where vehicles are concerned, and vows that every time I get

in one it breaks down. It's awfully queer but he does seem right really because three times when he's been driving a party of us somewhere and I've been in the vehicle it's broken down—I'm not sure whether I told you all this before, I think I have. Then of course the Padre's car broke down when I was confirmed, and so I was just congratulating myself on getting all the way to Bad Harzburg in a truck without its breaking down, and I thought all the rest of the breakdowns must have been coincidence. Well, not a bit of it. What should happen but that the cage of the railway should fill up, Ginge and I stepped in, and away we went sailing up in the air, halfway up the mountainside, and then—the thing broke down and stopped! It was a scream! It rocked and tipped and then stopped still and we were up there for about ten minutes before it began to go again and it started in reverse and we got to the bottom once more, but they wouldn't take us up again until it had been tested, so we never got to seeing the view from the mountain top after all. Of course when I told Joe, that's the Marine, he just laughed and laughed.

I'm afraid it's time to go home now so I'll post this and continue the rest to-morrow, but so's not to hold this up I'll send this half off to-night.

Hope you're all OK at home. Have received Dad's letter last night but haven't got round to replying to that yet. Do that to-morrow too.

Ginge and I are both well and though you'd never believe it of course from the foregoing, we're much more rested after our little holiday—I think mainly because we had such fun!

Be with you again tomorrow—until then,  
Goodnight and God Bless,  
Fondest Love

From  
Joan  
Xxxx

PS Ginge threatening my life if I don't send her fondest love too!

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Fig. 6.34. View in the Harz mountains, October 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior.  
Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> October 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Well, here I am again this morning as promised to continue the tale of Bad Harzburg! I posted the first half of this letter last night and if work permits will send this half lunchtime. It thought it'd be too good to last—I've to do a job now,

Back again. Now, I believe I left you after we'd had that hectic ride up the mountain! Well, after that we strolled along and came to a hairdressers and all brave like we went in and asked if they could wash our hair. (I should say here that the water was beautifully soft—like silk—and we thought it'd be a good opportunity to get our hair washed). Well, it was a scream! A man did mine and he was one of the nicer Germans I'm tempted to think. Well, he grudgingly won me over anyway and you know what I usually feel about Germans. Anyway, this fellow was quite nice (or at least that's the impression he gave) and he spoke English. I got the shock of my life though when, after he'd set my hair, he offered me a cigarette! Usually they're always asking us for cigarettes! Anyway, he was a good hairdresser and my hair looked awfully nice when he'd finished it, although he said it was difficult to do because it was so soft!

Ginge had hers done too, by a woman, who also spoke a little English and her looked lovely when it was finished.

All that took up most of our morning and we lunched and then went for a walk and had tea at a cafe in the village called Cafe

Peters—we had ice cream, doughnuts (the English variety with sugar on and jam in the middle) and tea—it was very nice.

We then went back and bathed and changed and went down to dinner. Once more, in the evening there was a concert which we attended but it wasn't as good as the one the night before.

The only “domestic” difficulty we had that day was that the lights failed (don't they always?) in our room!

The next morning Ginge went riding and I went for a walk into the hills and came to a lovely waterfall—I found out they were called the Radau Falls—they were simply lovely!

That took all morning and I found Ginge prostrate on the bed when I arrived back. She gave me the most amusing description of the morning's riding you can imagine, and I'm going to ask her if she has the time to write an account of it to enclose with this, but she's terribly busy in the office now I know, so you may not get it.

In the afternoon after lunch we both went to bed and asked the German woman in the house to shake us at half past three as we'd arranged to play tennis at four, but she didn't shake us until half past four and it was pouring with rain then, so we just didn't bother.

That evening we went down to dinner and found there was a dance afterwards, and we thought what a change it would be to attend a dance in civvies, and after dinner wandered into the dance-hall. My dear, there were about 100 German women invited there because of the vast numbers of men who would obviously be without partners, and as we were all in civvies, no-one could tell the difference! It was too funny for words! A fellow would come up and ask us to dance in very halting German or in slow clear English, and because we both felt in the mood for teasing we'd murmur Thank-you in German or just nod our heads, and it was too funny the way the boys would go on for about five minutes trying to say something and then we'd laugh and come out with some crack in English and they'd just stop in the middle of the hall and gape! One boy had been dancing for about two dances with Ginge and not saying a word and then he said very slowly so that she'd understand “You are not bad” presumably referring to the way she danced and she said “Thank-you very much, what am I s'posed to do, break out in a rash?” all in one breath—it nearly killed him!

The next morning after breakfast we left for the homeward journey to Minden, and had a pleasant journey as far as Brunswick where we stopped at a Jewish Hospitality Canteen and had

quite a nice light lunch. We looked round Brunswick, which is fairly heavily bombed, and then back to Minden.

In the evening Ginge went to the dance in our canteen and I went to the cinema and saw "Broadway Rhythm"—George Murphy, Ginny Simms, Gloria de Haven, Charles Winniger, "Rochester", Lena Horne, Hazel Scott—oh, it was great. A musical, but very colourful and well worth seeing.

Last night I had a bath and an evening in, and to-night, except that I'm having supper with the boys in the Canteen, I'm also staying in and having an early night.

I think that about brings us up to date. We had four days which we'll never forget, although it wasn't quite what we expected, but nevertheless we enjoyed it very much.

I saw the Education woman about the Post War Careers and decided that I'd not take up anything new, but would get a good secretarial post in London or something like that—I think that's best really.

The Barking Merchant Navy week sounds great fun. I wish I could have been there to see all the festivities. Fancy Mum winning the crockery! There's no doubt about you is there, as they say in the Marines!

Well, I think that about ties up both your news and mine. I'll be looking forward to hearing about Bess & Stan's little holiday—I hope they had as much fun as Ginge and I!

Be writing again soon when I get a minute, but till then Ginge and I send our fondest love to you all.

My love to Geg and the kiddies when next you see them please—how's Jacqueline progressing, and how are David and Terry doing at school? I'll drop Geg a line as soon as I've polished off the rest of my correspondence, only I'm afraid I've not written to Ken for about three weeks, and I've not had time to write to Bill either and I feel I ought in case he's heard anything about his father.

Bye now, God Bless and take care won't you?

Lots of love,

From

Joan

Xxxx

PS Don't eat too much Mum!



Fig. 6.35. View from the 'Sky-ride', Harz Mountains, October 1945. Photograph by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Monday 8<sup>th</sup> October 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter dated 4<sup>th</sup> October, Bess, about ten minutes ago in the middle of the morning, so am taking advantage of a quiet moment to reply quicker than that.

At the moment life is just too hectic for words, but words there must be so here I am.

Ginge has twice started to write to you, but each time something has cropped up, so my letter to you describing our visit to Bad Harzburg is delayed on this account, because she was going to tell you all about the riding she did there!

Yesterday I was duty until lunchtime, but after that I finished all my outstanding ironing and washing, and then rested until 4 o'clock when there was a tea dance in the Canteen to which Ginge and I went. To-night I'm going to try to get in to see "True Glory" but I don't know how lucky I'll be because there are long queues every night for it.

By the way, don't be worried if I don't write for two or three days or so, because this week, possibly to-morrow or the next day, I have to go away to do a job and I don't know how long I'll be—probably only a couple of days I expect, but you never know, so I thought I'd warn you just in case I don't have time to write. I'll tell you more later, but I'm afraid can't say more now.

Now to answer Bessie's letter. Merchant Navy Week sounds wonderful, but then so it should be, bless them, they've done as

much as any Service in this War, and more than some. The fair sounds delightful, but I can't help feeling there's a conspiracy against me—they always have these gigantic fairs when I'm not there!

I'm so glad your weekend went so well—I must say being able to go out without a coat sounds almost a tall story to us out here, because already the atmosphere is icy and we've got the central heating on in the office. Unfortunately there's no heating yet in our house, but Ginge and I manage to keep warm with the aid of hot water bottles (which have been issued to us) and by putting our duffel coats on our beds at night. We're going to be issued with another blanket each though, so that'll be better. It's just not possible to describe how cold it is in relation to the time of year though. Yesterday was a simply wonderful day, with clear sunshine, but even then it was cold enough to make steam of your breath when you were out. The sky was the most heavenly clear-washed blue and the trees well turned to gold now looked lovely against it—the sort of day for a long drive in the country well tucked up with rugs.

Now, I've wandered from your letter. I'm glad the business at the I.o.W. is going along even if slowly, and expect you're more satisfied now that you've been and “seen for yourselves” so to speak.<sup>52</sup>

Lucky you, meeting the Sheffield man with the car—a car certainly is a boon isn't it? I'm all for the man from Sheffield though. Since I've been in the forces, and more particularly since I've been overseas, I've met all types from all parts, but the Northerners win hands down with me every time. They're so much more friendly, hospitable, kindly and make you feel you've known them years—I know a fellow here from Sheffield—used to go out with him in Portsmouth, remember? Al, his name is. Ginge, Kenn, Al and I used to make up a foursome there. And I know simply dozens of people from Liverpool—and they all come up to standard—Mr. Mason was from Liverpool too, remember.

Once more I've strayed from the beaten track and will get back as quickly as possible.

Mrs Frazel sounds the answer to a Wren's prayer! I'll most certainly pay her a visit on my next. I'm looking forward to it already, but I don't know when it'll be because not all the girls here have been home since my leave yet, and we can't start again until

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52 The Priors and Boneses were negotiating to buy a hotel in Sandown, Isle of Wight, on the basis of Bess and Stan's reconnaissance holiday in July.

they have, and even then I don't know of course how I'll come "out of the hat"—I was first out last time, but this time may be later. Still, it should be before Christmas I hope.

Well, the interview with the re-settlement officer didn't amount to an awful lot. With the winter coming on of course we'll be thrown more and more on our own resources as I don't suppose we'll be allowed out outside the perimeter for fear of trouble with the Germans, so she told me she's starting (or hopes to start as soon as she gets instructors) lots of classes in various things—cookery, baby welfare, sewing, leather work, shorthand-typing etc, etc, and wanted to know if I was interested in any. Well, if they start, I might try the cookery because it's always useful, although I've always been able to cope with whatever I've had to do in that direction since I've been in the Wrens—I think myself it's mostly common sense, but it won't do any harm anyway. I might take a refresher in shorthand-typing too—that also wouldn't do any harm, but I'll see I think when the time comes.

With regard to a post-war career, I've decided to scrub round that, as they say in the Navy, because almost anything you decided to do in that direction needs about a year's training, and I don't particularly want to go back to school again now! Also the position at home is a little unsettled as I don't quite know where we'll be living and so on, so I think it's best to leave the whole thing until the position becomes clearer and then take an interesting secretarial post somewhere near to home. I don't mind what turn it takes as long as it involves shorthand, typing and that little extra personal interest that I must have. Could be industry, business, private work, or even secretary to a novelist or something—just so long as it was interesting and out of the ordinary—and fairly well-paid—I'm tired of working long hours for little pay! Of course, I'd rather take a lesser paid interesting job, than a well-paid uninteresting one, but just the same that does come into consideration!

Think that about covers my post war plans at the moment—I'll be able to form some more definite idea I think when I'm out of the Service and see things from a civilian back ground once more.

Yes, the demobbing seems to be speeding along now doesn't it, though none of these things ever seems to affect us!

It seems that Stan is a nine-days wonder doesn't it? I too am sure he's had more than anyone else—it's amazing.

Hope he gets on better when next he goes—it must be so painful too!

I just have to fly now because work awaits. My love to Geg and



the kiddies, and to all my other Barking friends and relations.

Of course my fondest love to you all at home, God Bless and take care won't you?

Lots of love  
From  
Joan  
Xxxx

PS Ginge sends her love to everyone.

PPS In the local rag which I received last night, there was a para. about a "Mrs Florence Snell of Glenny Road" losing a purse or something and accusing a soldier, but she lost the case. Mentioned also the accused's meeting a son of Mrs Snell in Africa. Any connection between this and Flo, and Bob, or Charlie? Sounded most queer—d'you know anything about it?

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Friday 12<sup>th</sup> October 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

Well, here I am at last setting out to write to you, as I said I would in my last letter, as soon as I could.

I wrote to you last on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> if I remember rightly and said I might not be able to write for some time on account of I had to go away on a job and I was right. But here goes with the news from Saturday on.

On Saturday nothing eventful happened as I was Duty and on Sunday I had a halfday and went to the Tea Dance in our canteen.

On Monday I saw "The True Glory"—which was simply wonderful. If you get the chance, do go to see it. It makes history come alive on the screen.

But also I had more news about my departure (temporarily) from Minden. When I got back to the office on Friday morning I had to go to see Bobbie Walker the A/Sec, and he told me he wanted me to write up a Court Martial for him. I wasn't surprised at this as I'd done it before and as Ginge couldn't be spared anyway, I knew that left only me more or less, but when he said it was at a place called Plön, near Kiel—you could have knocked me down with a feather! He told me I'd have to go there and stay until it was finished, and also that it was (as I already knew), a naval base where I would be the only Wren!

I asked him where I would live and sleep and eat etc and he said he hadn't the remotest idea, and that I'd probably have to

slung a hammock in the Messdeck or something!

Well on Monday afternoon, he told me I'd be leaving by car at 9 o'clock on Tuesday morning and to take a toothbrush and a couple of things for the night because I'd have to stay there for a few days. Excitement wasn't the word, because of course, not only did I not know how long I was going for, but I didn't know what conditions would be like there and thought I'd be the only woman amid about a thousand men or something. Still he said he felt sure I'd cope, and so did I really, although I must say I thought it the limit really to have to send a Wren all that way—what the Navy did before it had the Wrens I can't imagine!

However, we set out and went through Nienburg, Verden, Harburg, and finally reached Hamburg in time for lunch. There I went to the Town Major and asked him if I could possibly get anything to eat and he gave me a meal chit and I went to a hotel—all by myself, and me not knowing a word of German!—and had a most delicious lunch, and then we were off again. Hamburg, by the way, is a treat. It's been bombed, bombed and then some. It makes you feel quite good when you realise that London, Pompey etc were more than avenged—I wish some of the worse bombed people at home could see it.

From there we came to Plön—a simply heavenly spot in this part of Germany—it's really beautiful country. The area is dotted with lakes and seas of all sizes and the actual base here is only a stone's throw from one of the largest of these lakes. There's sailing, swimming and fishing although of course I haven't indulged in any of these pastimes as you can imagine—not at this time of the year. Strangely enough though the weather's been simply lovely ever since I came and I'm thoroughly enjoying my stay here.

I arrived about 6 o'clock on Tuesday night and reported to the Sec. Lieut. Cdr. Rousseau, who is very charming, and he told me that the Court Martial wasn't until Thursday, so that gave me Wednesday to myself. He also put my mind at rest about my living quarters because there's a Naafi here on the camp and there are about a dozen Naafi girls here and I'm with them. I have a cabin to myself which is very nice and I mess with them, although I'm usually alone there too because my meal-times come at different times from theirs, but it's just like living in a hotel because the Germans wait on you hand and foot here—they cook the food, bring it to you at just the right time, watch unseen while you eat it and mysteriously appear at just the right time to remove that plate and put the next course before you—it's wonderful, honestly, I'm being spoiled!

On Wednesday morning, I went into the office just to see that everything was in hand for the next day, and then I went round to the Pay Office—and who do you think was there? Ted Grant, our PO who used to be in charge of the typing pool in France! Wasn't it strange! So I chatted to him for some time and then had lunch. After lunch I went round to the Transport Office and asked if there was anything going anywhere of interest as I had a gash afternoon and would like to see something of the surrounding countryside if possible. Well, if you'd gone to our place in Minden and asked that you'd have got a very definite and firm "NO!", but here I met the nicest thing in Corporals who said he'd make it his own personal job to take me into Kiel and see that, so off we went in a lovely cosy comfy German car and simply swept into Kiel through beautiful countryside. Kiel, of course, almost doesn't bear thinking about it's so badly shattered. It's worse even than Hamburg. We went all over the city and down in the dock area there's the queerest thing, a submarine has been blown clean out of the water by a bomb and put down absolutely undamaged on the quayside—it's so queer to see it there, high and dry!

However, even Kiel has its Naafi and we had a cheese roll and cup of tea and then made our way back to base.

In the evening I went to the cinema with another fellow, a Marine, I used to know quite well in France, too. Ken Hodgkins by name, although I don't suppose I've ever mentioned him by name in my letters because I never used to go out with him, but just knew him quite well in the course of work. Well, I saw him in the Canteen when I went for supper that night and we went into the town of Plön, which is about twenty-five minutes' walk away from the camp, and saw "Bring on the Girls" with Veronica Lake and Sonny Tufts and Eddie Bracken—it was in Technicolor, and was quite a good light film but not one I'd say you must see.

Of course, the next day the trial began, and it lasted all day—boy, did my hand ache by the time I'd finished? Still the main thing was that the Accused was acquitted and we all breathed more freely after that.

To-day I typed back my dictation of yesterday, and would normally have finished, but they wanted it in draft form first—can't think why—so I've to wait now while they approve it and then type it all again! Still I don't mind as I'm having a very happy stay here. Of course, it's a most queer sensation when you stop to think you're the only Wren, but mostly I just forget that and the boys seem to think I'm just the job because I stop and chat at the various tables you know in the canteen—they say they've never known a Wren yet who wasn't too "snooty" to speak to ordinary

ratings! I've had four offers since supper at six to-night to take me to the cinema to-night, but I've seen the film and I wanted to write this, so I've said "No" to them all! Still, they're a decent crowd of fellows and certainly make me feel very welcome and at home. I have supper every night with Ted and Ken in the canteen as the supper time for the Naafi girls is about five, you know so that they can be in the canteen when it opens at six, and that's too early for me as I'm still working then.

I don't know how long I'll be here for, maybe a couple of days more—I'm thinking of asking for a half day on Sunday! But honestly, just because I'm here I don't see why I should lose my time off—I should be off all day Saturday, no, that's wrong, half day Saturday and all day Sunday this week, so I reckon I'm entitled to a half day Sunday, don't you? Still, we'll see what happens.

I may, or may not, have time to write to you again before I go back to Minden, but if I don't you'll know I'm OK. I'm in good hands here—Ted's looking after me—and I'm in the best of health and the job here is going splendidly. Incidentally, I'm typing this in the Typing Pool here—all men of course—and there doesn't seem to be a rubber in existence, so you'll excuse any overtypes etc won't you?

Must close now as it's getting latish and I've to be up and in the office again in the morning.

My love to Geg and the kiddies, and also Bessie and Stan and of course to you Mum, and Paddy.

Take care won't you, all of you, and till I write again, God Bless you and don't worry 'bout me—I'm honestly quite OK.

Fondest love,  
From  
Joan  
Xxxx

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Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> October 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

This'll make you whistle I bet, but the fact is that I've been inoculated this morning & want to type as little as possible really, and yet I wanted you to know I was safely back again, so I decided to put pencil to paper & hope for the best.<sup>53</sup>

I wrote you last on Friday evening didn't I? Well Saturday I

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53 The original of this letter is handwritten, rather than typed—Joan's usual habit.

worked in the office, & in the evening, having had supper with Ted & Ken again, I spent the evening typing more letters—gradually catching up on my outstanding mail.

On Sunday I gave myself a half-day & the MT Corporal who took me into Kiel on Wednesday, also took me to Lubeck in the afternoon. It's a lovely city—bombed of course (remember our early RAF communiqués “our bombers last night raided Rostock & Lubeck”) but not so badly that its beauty can't be seen.

In the evening they have a fair there which is all lit up with coloured lights which in turn are reflected in the water—it's really lovely. I wish you could have the same wonderful opportunities that I've had of seeing all this.

On Monday night I went to a most amusing little country inn in a village called Preetz. It was quaint. The old lady who served us took a lot of trouble to amuse us—she made the parrot talk, she played 3 musical boxes for us—she had a puppet who waved his arms & legs & put his tongue out—she showed us ships in bottles—everything! I was amused!

On Tuesday morning—much to everyone's disappointment—I left Plön and arrived in Minden at about four o'clock in the afternoon. Was Ginge glad to see me! She nearly went mad.

This morning it shook me more than somewhat to find I was due to be “stabbed” by the M.O. and when I got to Sick Bay they told me it was so long since I'd been done that I'd have to have the full dose instead of just a maintenance dose. So just at the moment I'm not feeling too good, but I'll be OK by the morning I 'spect.

Will write again soon—till then, God Bless. Ginge sends her love to you all—be good—take care,

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

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Friday 19<sup>th</sup> October 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Well, here I am back at the faithful old typewriter again, and full of the joys of Autumn!

I scribbled—and scribbled is the word—a note to you on Wednesday telling you of my inoculation didn't I? I felt a bit queer after that, and went straight back from the office into bed on

Wednesday night with a couple of hot water bottles, a couple of aspirin and a couple of aching arms—we had Typhus in one arm and T.A.B.T. in the other!<sup>54</sup> Thursday morning too I felt rotten so I stayed in bed and came back to the office again yesterday afternoon and feel OK now.

Last night I went to the cinema here on board and saw Noel Coward's "This Happy Breed". I had seen it before in St. Germain but it was so good I wanted to see it again. It really is a cleverly produced piece of work—and is so natural all through. I can't remember whether you've seen it or not—John Mills, Robert Newton, Celia Johnson, Kay Walsh and Stanley Holloway are amongst the cast.

I seem to keep thinking of things I did whilst staying at Plön that I mean to tell you, but when I actually get down to writing I either can't remember them, or if I do, can't remember whether I've told you about them when I wrote from there, so if I do repeat some of the things I've told you before you'll know why.

My visit to Kiel I know I told you about, but can't remember in how much detail, so here goes once again. I know I told you how badly damaged the city was and the port, and I believe I told you about the submarine which was blown out of the water by a bomb and deposited undamaged on the wharf there—it does look funny! I also saw the Walter Werke where the V-2 weapons and rockets were made, and also the house where Admiral Doenitz lived. There were countless German ships in the harbour, afloat and scuttled, and also many well-known British destroyers etc, which of course I can't name. Another interesting thing was Goering's yacht which is now being used by the Admiral—it's a splendid thing, honestly—these Nazi officials certainly did themselves well. We then drove a short distance out from Kiel itself to the bridge spanning the Kiel Canal—oh, how I wished I had a camera with me—the view from the bridge was amazing. The Germans certainly know how to do engineering for this Canal is a huge thing stretching as far as the eye can see out into the distance and she can take the biggest ship in the Fleet!

I do wish you could all have been with me to see all these things—you know I'm awfully lucky, because the other girls here mostly haven't seen nearly as much of Germany as I have all told, and of course as you can imagine I just love going around and seeing the places that have been so much in the news for years.

At Plön they have their own Ship's newspaper and I've asked the boys there to send me a copy each week which I'll endeavour

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54 Combined tetanus and enteric prophylactic.

to send on to you from time to time as I'd like them kept and also I think you'll find them interesting.

The weather was glorious whilst I was there and the trees and countryside looked lovely in its Autumn colourings—one thing I'll never forget was the lovely sunsets there (probably the sunrises were even lovelier, but knowing me you can't expect me to vouch for them personally!). The sun used to go down across the lake and the trees and sky would be the most heavenly colours and the whole reflected in the waters. There were greens, yellows, red and purples in the sky and the water was honestly too beautiful to describe. Every night I used to spend about five minutes watching it, it was so lovely.

When I arrived back I found two letters waiting from you so I'll endeavour to answer them now.

The first was from Mum dated 8<sup>th</sup> October. The Blanket business sounds very complicated, but I'll bear it in mind in case the need arises, though where I'll get the glue from is a different matter.

Wasn't it queer, that business about Florrie's purse? I thought it must be something to do with the family when I read it, and it seems I was right. It just shows you you never know who people are these days. Everyone's dressed alike in uniform and it takes long practice to be able to pick out the genuine types I know. Still I am sorry it happened—not really surprised though because they're always having odd people in aren't they?

There's no particular hurry from my point of view about the wool for Jacqueline's frocks—I just thought it'd help Geg out to get some done soon. The thing is that at the moment I've finished my frock (all but the very fancy trimmings etc) and haven't anything to do. I can always find something like darning, mending etc though, but I thought I could fit some in now with greater ease than later on because as I believe I told you I've ordered a couple of tablecloths and a couple of tray cloths with will need embroidering when they arrive, and this week have ordered yet more winter handiwork.

There was a notice on the board saying that we were entitled to a dress length a year, free of coupons provided we made the dresses up ourselves, and the samples of the materials we could choose were attached. I didn't really like any of them, and nearly didn't put down for it, but I thought it was a bit silly not to take advantage of the No Coupon angle of the thing, so in the end I ordered some. It's 2/10d a yard I think, and is gray, fairly light gray, and is of some kind of thin fine wool, something like my mauve

striped frock only not so thick as that. Anyway, it'll come in useful for something or other I expect—the snag is we've got to make it up ourselves!

So I can see that by the time winter is upon us I'll be snowed under with all sorts of handiwork. Then I expect I'll find I just haven't the time in which to do it. That's always the way.

Don't think I've any more news at the moment, so will say "Bye now". Take care of yourselves, God Bless all the time,

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

PS Ginge sends her love to you all—I nearly forgot to put that in and she'd have slain me if I had!

\* \* \*

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> October 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

I've two letters to answer form you—one from Paddy and one from Bessie, but before I do I must tell you the latest buzz—that is it's possible (in fact probable), that I'll be leaving here on 21<sup>st</sup> November to come on leave! Nothing fixed or definite yet, but I hope to-morrow or the next day to find out more certain news of it. The main trouble is that with the gales and so on all leave from this end has been cancelled and that will out all subsequent leaves back too. However, we live in hopes—well, we live anyway!

Now I'll get down to answering your mail; Bessie first because it was written and received first. Pardon the typing but it's not my machine but one I'm borrowing in the Quarters Office and it's the most awful thing imaginable.

Your jaunting were certainly not tame and ordinary to me—I'd give a lot to be able to see "Out of This World" as I've read so much about it and love some of the music from it already.

"Nob Hill" should be good too from what you say and I'll certainly make a point of seeing "The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry" even if only to see the ending—perhaps that's why the title includes the word "strange"!

I was sorry to hear you didn't have more luck with the black-berrying—even though the weather etc was good it does help to get a lot of berries too doesn't it?

Stan's new hobby sounds good to me—persuade him to keep up his enthusiasm till I come home will you?



No, sorry, I've been very naughty about the cardboard box and the cake tin and I'm still hanging on to both, but soon as I can I'll make the effort and send them to you.

Think that about takes care of your letter Bess and will now turn to Paddy's.

Yes, I know, it is a pity I didn't have a camera with me—I'm afraid I've too many scruples, otherwise I could have had one by now, but still films are difficult to get now too, so one's not much use without the other it is?

Poor old Geg, she does seem to be having a long dose of "workmen", just the same as you did, but of course with the kiddies it's worse isn't it? Thanks for letting Geg know about the wool—probably I can bring it back from my next leave now. My goodness I won't recognise Jacqueline with all those teeth!

Yes, I have got the Burgundy suede sandals with me, I'm sorry I didn't reply to that, I meant to, but it must have slipped my memory.

Think that about takes care of your letter Paddy and now for the news of the week here.

Last Sunday evening I went to a R.A.F. concert at a place called Bad Eilsen—and it was very good indeed and I thoroughly enjoyed the evening there—when I came away they presented me with an enormous bouquet of bronze and white chrysanthemums! They're still decorating the cabin now and look just as fresh as ever.

On Monday I went to a dance in the Canteen, and on Tuesday I saw the film "The White Cliffs of Dover", with Irene Dunne and enjoyed it very much although it was a bit out of date.

On Thursday I saw "The Way to the Stars" with John Mills, Rosamund John and Douglass Montgomery and it was marvellous.

On Saturday I went to see another film called "Carolina Blues" but didn't think much of it.

The other nights in between I stayed in and went domestic and listened to the gale howling! My goodness hasn't it been awful? The windows and the frame of our balcony have been blown in and we're almost ankle deep in splintered glass outside, but haven't had the chance of clearing it up yet. That balcony is a mixed blessing though because although it's a boon for hanging and drying clothes, it does make a lot of work as the leaves fall and drift in deep piles all over the place. If only we can find the time for rehearsals Ginge and I are going to give a performance of "Babes in the Wood" there!

Thelma went to Brussels on Friday night for her "short" leave instead of going to Bad Harzburg and so once more I'm in charge again. Honestly, if ever I do two weeks together at my real job as a typist in the pool, I'll be amazed! Still, I always have liked

variety—and I'm getting it too. That's why I'm writing this tonight (Sunday) because when I'm doing Thelma's job as well as my own I don't have time to write in the office, and normally I'd have come back to the office one evening and done it then, but starting to-morrow night I'm going back in the evenings anyway for a while—about a week I should think—because one of the officers on the staff has written a book and is going to dictate it to me and I've to type it for submission to his publishers!<sup>55</sup> Honestly, the things I do for England! I only hope it's interesting and isn't technical. Still, if you don't hear from me for a few days you'll know it's because I'm too rushed won't you, so don't worry.

I've had a bit of an upset tummy for a couple of days so I went to Sick Bay this morning to see if they'd give me something to settle it a bit. They gave me bismuth and belladonna this morning and again to-night and I've to go again in the morning and have some more, but honestly it's much better already—it's amazing how a dose of something can work wonders isn't it?

Think that's all at the moment. Soon as I hear definite news about my leave I'll let you know, even if it's only a postcard, but it's very difficult to tell all that way ahead because of the weather delaying the sailings. We aren't going by air any more, and I believe we go by train to Calais and across to Dover and then by train to Victoria, but I'm not awfully sure—anyway I'll let you know all that in good time.

My love to Geg and the kiddies, and to all of you, and Ginge sends her love too.

Take care of yourselves won't you, and God Bless all the time.

Fondest Love

From

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Before I say anything else to anyone—"Happy Birthday" Bessie!—I have sent the nearest approach to the conventional birthday card to you, but don't suppose it'll arrive in time as I had some trouble in getting it and consequently it was only yesterday when I sent it

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55 John Fitzmaurice Mills, Lieutenant, RNVR (1917–1991).

off. Still, better late than never. I found it in a little German shop in Minden and managed to arrive at the conclusion that it was a birthday card and said "Heartfelt Greetings" or something queer! As you know my German is absolutely non-existent so you can guess how handicapped I feel in the shops here after France where I did feel more or less at home although not fluent!

Don't know how far I'll progress with this but at the moment the work is pretty grim and Thelma's casting wicked glances at me that tell me there's something coming in my direction any minute now. Still, I'll go on until the evil moment comes.

Seems I last wrote to you on Sunday night. Well on Monday I started the book. This officer, who's very charming and nice, has written a book about some of his experiences in the Mediterranean area and he dictates to me and then I type it back.<sup>56</sup> I went on Monday night and am going again to-night, he having been away in between.

On Wednesday I went to a Halloween Dance at a place called Bad Nenndorf which the R.A.F held and it was very nice indeed.

Last night I went to a Classical Concert which I also thoroughly enjoyed.

That seems to take care of my activities since I last wrote—nothing very much, but then I haven't had a very exciting week.

I just thought I'd write anyway to let you know I was OK and still in the land of, so to speak. Ginge had a bilious attack or something on Wednesday and was awfully queer. She staggered to the office in the morning but in the afternoon I made her go to bed and made her some dry toast and hot Oxo and she went to sleep after that and seemed to settle a bit. Anyway, she's OK now although she did look ghastly. She sends her love to you all.

I'll write again soon as I have something more to tell and in the meantime hope you're all OK at home and also that the weather has calmed down a bit. The gale here has completely abated now.

My love to Geg and the kiddies and of course to all of you. At the moment there's no more news of leave but the date is still 21<sup>st</sup> Nov as far as I can gather. There's a rumour now though that we may go up to Cuxhaven and sail from there to Hull which won't be so good for me, but I s'pose the Scots people will be happier.

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56 This semi-fictional memoir, entitled 'Double Seven', set in Suez, the Libyan desert and Sicily, survives in fragments across three of Joan Prior's shorthand notebooks. Although Mills was a naval construction engineer with expertise in explosives and demolition, his autobiographical fiction may have appealed to Joan because it followed the same Allied path and theatre of operations in which Ron Smith's Essex Regiment was engaged.

Anyway, before I come I'll let you know so's you can meet me in London, but we won't go into that now because I know nothing definite at the moment.

Time for me to go to lunch now—talking of food we've had our rations cut terrifically!—I 'spect you'll say "About time too!" but it makes me mad when I think of those dockers on strike over in England. If I had the handling of them I'd give them all a fair choice. Go back to work and work whilst their grievance is being considered and argued over, or be called up for military service in a week's time and be drafted abroad after a month's training. That'd shake them if they were sent to Java or the Far East, or even Germany come to that. They'd soon see which side their bread was buttered then!

Now I'll get down off my soapbox and say "Bye now" and God Bless and take care.

All my love

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> November 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan

Received your letter of 30<sup>th</sup> October yesterday morning and am snatching positively the first opportunity to write and say how sorry and worried I am about you Mum. What d'you want to go and have pains and things like that for? Can't turn my back for five minutes and you go and get something silly don't you? It's got to stop now—no more nonsense from you!

Seriously though I hope you soon do get well again, as I know how troublesome things like that can be. Funnily enough Ginge and I have had a similar experience recently. I believe I told you about Ginge being sick though it only lasted a day. I had terrific pains etc and tummy upset from Thursday to Monday the other week and had to go to Sick Bay about it it got so bad, but he said he thought it was a chill and gave me some weird concoction of Bismuth and belladonna and I was soon alright again. Funny how these things suddenly descend on you isn't it? Anyway I'm glad to see that you're getting a light diet and more or less all the comforts. When I had mine the MO said "Oh, and by the way, continue to eat, but only take a very light diet!" I nearly laughed in his face as of course they won't make an exception of one person in our Galley and light is definitely not the word to normally apply to our

food! Furthermore, there was no whisky and no hot water bottle! You lucky people!! (That last remark comes of having listened to Tommy Trinder in the Royal Command Performance last night!).

I last wrote you on Bessie's birthday last Friday and since then have had more than a hectic time one way and another.

On Saturday afternoon Kay Chandler and myself went down into the town of Minden which these days is beginning to come to life remarkably. The shops are opening and the people clearing up the streets and life is really coming back again—it's good to see it, believe me—I'm so tired of dead shells of towns. Anyhow, Kay wanted to have her hair permed at the hairdressers in the town and so she asked me if I'd go with her. Why, I can't imagine. In France it used to be because I could speak French, but I don't honestly know the first thing about German, so it didn't look as though we were going to have much success, but off we started, armed with a piece of paper on which was typed in German what we wanted done!

We managed to find the shop and went inside and the man read the note and then broke into a flood of German which neither of us understood. I told him we didn't understand (I learned that phrase straight off as I thought it'd be useful!) so he took us outside and pointed to the plate on the door and I saw the light and realised that Thursday was his early closing and he couldn't obviously make the appointment for that day. Kay then said that Wednesday would be OK so I told him Wednesday—knew the German for that by some fluke too! He then wrote on the slip that the appointment was for 3 o'clock on Wednesday 7th Nov and away we came. As we passed an art shop I saw a bookmark in the window that I fancied so I went in and managed to get the man to come out and pointed to what I wanted but he muttered something which I gathered meant it was sold—anyway he was very nice and went in again and found another almost identical, which I bought. Kay then decided that she wanted a birthday card and another pantomime ensued. I can manage when the things I want are in sight and I can point to them, but just asking for a birthday card right off like that stumped me good and true. However, nothing ventured nothing gained, so I began to search my mind for a suitable word whilst the German searched a little phrase book, but neither of us had much success, so in the end he went behind the shop and brought out an enormous German-English dictionary and I found the word "birthday" in it and he understood then and brought out some cards for us to choose from!

Honestly, there's no end to what you can do with combined patience, perseverance and good humour. I think the latter very important when shopping abroad. This old man was quite won over in the end and couldn't do enough for us. He tried to explain that he spoke Russian, Greek, Polish, Italian and German but not English or French (I'd tried him with both without success)!

After that episode we were quite exhausted so we went to the Salvation Army Canteen for a cup of tea and over that Kay discovered that the hairdressing appointment was for this next Wednesday and that she really wanted it for Wednesday week! So, nothing for it, but back to the shop to try to explain that. Eventually I succeeded and made quite a hit with one of the assistants there who hovered around getting chairs, and asking every so often "OK?" in funny English, and as a parting shot insisted on opening the door and bowing us out! More courtesy than that!

That completed our Saturday afternoon. In the evening a crowd of us from the office went to a fair which had just opened in Minden and had a grand time. There were hundreds of Germans there, especially children, as they'd not seen a fair for years and were most enthralled. There was a Wall of Death, Chair-o-planes, Roundabouts of all kinds, Dodgems, Hall of Mirrors, Tight-rope walker, Side shows and all sorts of fascinating things. It was fun!

On Sunday afternoon I went, again with a crowd from the office, to Hanover where there was Dirt-Track racing and we saw some very exciting races. I'm going again next Sunday if I can. No professionals, but even so, some of the boys who've been scratch DRs for a long while can certainly ride a bike.

In the evening I stayed in and did some embroidery, but that in itself is a story which I'll tell in a minute. Work just now. Sorry that had to be a bit abrupt but something was wanted urgently so I just quickly finished off the page and got weaving.

Now, the embroidery! It was a Penelope pattern and came in an envelope complete with silks, needles, pattern, material—everything. I've got a tablecloth and a traycloth and they're in that rather nice cut out style and are pansies. Should be quite nice when it's finished—it it's finished! It was like reading an Army survey map to begin with, because you've just got to work it according to pattern otherwise you might not have enough of a particular colour silk you see. Anyhow it took me about half an hour to work out ways and means, colours and

stitches and now I've actually started and it's going quite well.

That took up the whole of Sunday evening and kept me very busy.

On Monday Ginge and I had to go to take down minutes of yet another Flag Officers' meeting and it nearly drove us mad. You simply can't hear what the wretches are saying—the only person you can hear is the C-in-C and he's remarkably clear and concise. Still, we managed somehow although it took us all day yesterday and most of today also. Last night I finished typing the outstanding notes of the book I'm typing and to-night am reporting again to take more notes for transcription. So you can see that one way and another I've not had a moment to spare, and I must confess I'm feeling a little tired.

Must go now as it's supper time and I've got to get away sharply in order to get back by seven—what a life!

Lots of love to everyone, including you all and Geg and the kiddies. Next time I hear from you mind it's good news now, Mum. Hurry up and get well! God Bless and take care.

Fondest love

From

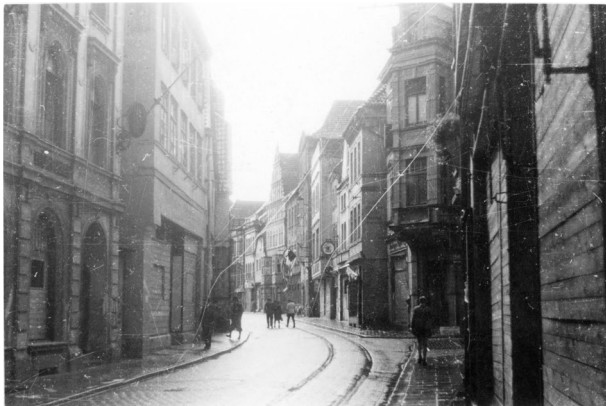
Joan

Xxxx

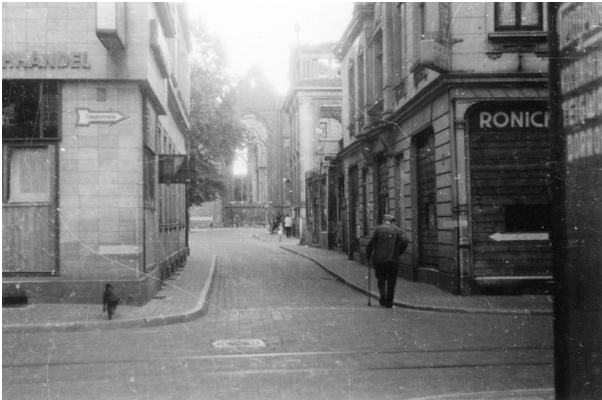
(PS Nearly forgot, Ginge sends her love and says to you Mum—this really is me sending this Mrs Prior—sorry to hear you aren't too well and hope by the time this reaches you you will be much better, sitting up and taking notice! Love to everybody, from Ginge)

Ginge came in as I was typing the PS & insisted on finishing it herself!

\* \* \*









Figs 6.36–6.42. Minden street scenes, November 1945. Photographs by Joan Prior.  
Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> November 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Am scribbling this whilst waiting for an officer. He sent for a shorthand typist at 2–30pm. I went & he asked me to wait “a few minutes”. At 3 o’clock he reappeared & told me to come back at 7 bells. Of course that completely foxed me, but one of the sailors told me it was 3–30. I went back & he dictated till about 10 to 4 and then told me to come back at 1 bell! I again made enquiries & found that this was 4–30 at which time I returned. He again asked me to wait a few minutes so I began this & he still hasn’t returned! Honestly, some men!

I got your letter Mum this morning & will have to re-read it again to answer it properly, but the main thing seems to be that you’re feeling better now. I’m so glad. Of course this isn’t the best time of the year to be ill is it as the weather doesn’t make you feel very bright. The first snow has fallen in Bad Harzburg—so it looks as though winter will soon be here now.

This afternoon the Wales v Scotland international match is on & as far as I can gather at the moment Scotland is winning. It doesn’t make any difference to me, but Ginge has got 30/- on Wales one way & another with various people so I’m hoping they win!

Ginge & I are both well at time of writing & she sends her love to you all & is pleased to hear you’re better Mum. I believe I told you we’d been allowed to order a dress length some while ago, well now we’ve been able to order another! It’s marvellous really as it’s coupon free—I only hope we don’t have to pay Customs dues on it, I’ll have to find out about that I think, beforehand.

I told you the embroidery had come, I believe, but I've not made much headway with it because I've been in the office late a lot, doing "the book" which is going quite nicely. I'm really enjoying it.

I'm chokker with this hanging about, so I'm going back to the office & he'll have to ring again, Commander, Royal Navy or not!

Oh, just at that moment he came back with two Germans & told me he didn't want me any more now, would I go back tomorrow? Still, it's given me time to scribble this short note to you, so I mustn't grumble.

Must got to supper now—then I'm returning to work on more of the book! Quel vie!

In my Naafi rations this week the washing powder was "Lux"! Isn't it amazing? Haven't seen it for years.

Bye now  
 God Bless  
 Fondest love  
 From Joan  
 Xxxx

PS Haven't time to read this through so excuse errors or nonsense!

\* \* \*

Monday 12<sup>th</sup> November 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

How's yo'all? This letter is mainly concerned with the settlement of the leave question (!!!!). Very formal ain't we?

Seriously though, things have happened to the leave and I'm afraid I can't give you any clear picture of the thing now unfortunately, but I'll tell you what's happened so far. As you know I was having 21<sup>st</sup> November. Well, one of the girls in the office whose fiancée is coming home after four years abroad in Burma asked me if I'd swop with her if necessary, her date being 1<sup>st</sup> December, and I said I would. She can't find out exactly which date she wants as the last she heard from him he was on his way to the port of embarkation, but whether he's actually sailed for England or not she doesn't know, so she can't exactly estimate when he'll arrive. We've arranged to leave it over for another couple of days to see if she hears further from him though.

Another thing is that the leave arrangements as a whole have been altered and I shall now come either on 20<sup>th</sup> November or 30<sup>th</sup> November, whichever date Stella doesn't want. Allowing for travelling I should be arriving at Victoria on 21<sup>st</sup> November or 1<sup>st</sup> December at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon I think. (I'm basing that on

the experiences of people who've been on leave on the same route recently, and that's about the time they've arrived). We're still going from here to Calais by train and from Calais across Channel to Dover and from Dover to Victoria by train. If I get any more detailed news I'll let you know at once, but at the moment I'm afraid I can't be any clearer than that. If you 'phoned the Victoria station and asked the times of trains arriving from Dover in the afternoon that might give you some clue, but if you can't find out don't bother to meet me because I don't want you to have to hang about for a couple of hours or something dreadful like that.

Would it be any good if I wired from Dover? I don't think so myself because it'll only take a short while in the train won't it? Actually if I come on 20<sup>th</sup> November it's only another 8 days from now and I doubt whether I'll get a reply from you to this letter, so unless you hear from me further, if you can manage it we'd better arrange for you to meet the train from Dover at Victoria at about 3pm. I know it's vague, but I'm afraid I honestly don't know any more about it. I mean if the weather's bad and we get held up at Calais or something it might not be till evening, or even till the next day. Isn't it difficult?

Tell you what. If you meet that train (the one mentioned above) on 21<sup>st</sup> November, and I'm not on it, don't meet any more on subsequent days. It might mean I'm not coming till 1<sup>st</sup> December, or it might mean there's been a delay and I'll be along the next day, but anyhow, if I don't come on that train I'll 'phone Mr. Barnett (R.3539) as soon as I reach Victoria and arrange to meet you and whilst you're coming up I'll go to a news theatre or for a walk or something. I believe you said Mr. Barnett would take a message any time, but if I've got the wrong man and number could you please wire me the correct number?

'Fraid if I say any more it'll only complicate things more than somewhat, so I'll re it at that. As far as I know at the moment I may arrive at about 3pm on 21<sup>st</sup> November or 1<sup>st</sup> December but owing to uncertainty of the weather it might not be then at all! (Talking of weather it's been snowing all day here!) Now I know why the Germans all go round in long, long coats!

Will write again in a couple of days to let you know which leave I'm having the November or December one. Till then, ta-ta for now.

All my love for everyone at 64 and Geg and the kiddies. Can't stop for more now as it's time to go home and I've to be back here again for seven for dictation.

Fondest love

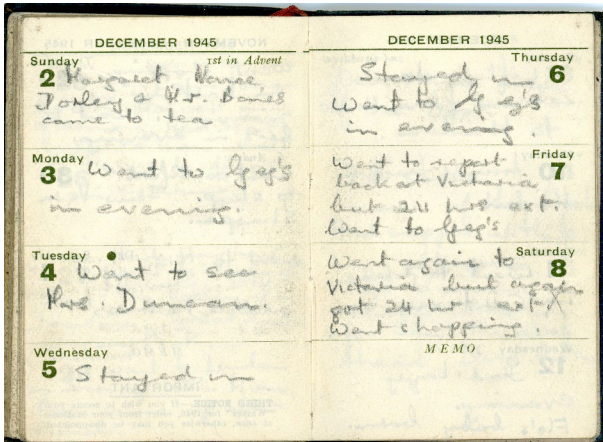
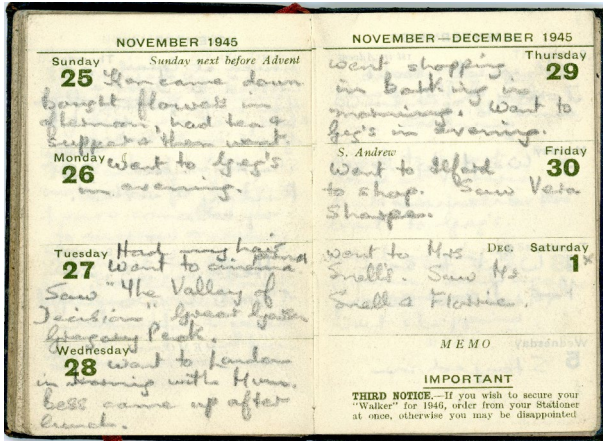
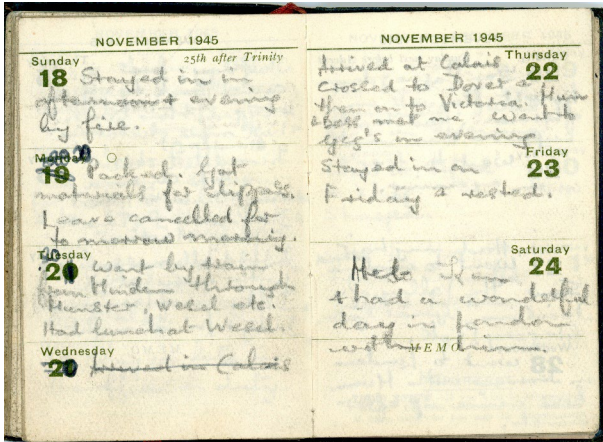
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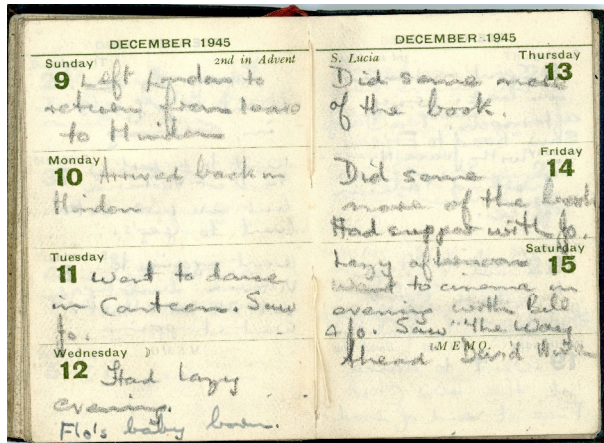
Joan

Xxxx

Ginge sends her love too! Xxx

Leave





Figs 6.43–6.46. Four pages from JP's diary covering her leave between 21 November and 9 December 1945. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

*The following despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on 4 December 1945, by Admiral Sir HAROLD M. BURROUGH, KCB, KBE, DSO, British Naval Commander-in-Chief, Germany.*

British Naval Commander in Chief, Germany,  
c/o Admiralty.  
4<sup>th</sup> December, 1945.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the enclosed copy of my report to the Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force, on the Final Stages of the Naval War in North-West Europe [...]

Tasks facing the Allied Navies after the Rhine Crossing.

6. With the crossing of the Rhine accomplished, a survey of the wider scene found the Allied Navies charged with the following variety of tasks:—

The provision of specialised seagoing ships and craft required for the maintenance of the Allied Armies in the field, together with the responsibility shared with the Commander-in-Chief, the Nore, for the protection of merchant shipping used for the same purpose.

The working of the ports through which the main stream of military imports flowed. Some 10,000 tons of stores on British account and 20,000 tons on U.S. account were passing through Antwerp daily, while the

main personnel traffic passed through Ostend and Calais in the British zone and Le Harve in the U.S. zone.

Preparation of Naval Parties to participate in the occupation of Germany including the provision of an operational Port. Party to open the port of Hamburg. Arrangements for naval representation on the S.H.A.E.F. Missions to Denmark and Norway.

The provision of naval assistance for the reduction of pockets had only nuisance value to the immediate war effort but important was attached to the early opening of the port of Bordeaux and operations were in train to this end.

The protection of the Scheldt Approaches.

Naval measures to bring speedy relief to Holland.

The planning of operations to occupy the Channel Islands after surrender, and to occupy Norway under a variety of conditions.<sup>57</sup>

Jo Stanley writes of this phase of the Wrens' service, 'although hostilities [had] ended, work had not. Many Wrens were needed in post-war Germany. [...] Wrens wanted to carry on with that shared shouldering of the navy's burdens, although some were also relieved by the end of being bound to selfless duty. [...] These sisters in arms had enjoyed new freedoms, exceptional mobility, camaraderie and a proud sense of having contributed'.<sup>58</sup>

That acknowledgement had been expressed by the Wrens' own director, Dame Vera Laughton Matthews, when she visited Germany in the company of her superintendent, Sybil, Lady Cholmondeley, in Autumn 1945:

We flew over flooded Walcheren and saw the tops of the houses and hedges showing over the miles of water. [...] The main places where WRNS were employed were Berlin, Hamburg, Kiel and Minden, where the Commander-in-Chief's Headquarters were, although he moved later to Hamburg. [...]

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57 'The final stages of the Naval War in North-West Europe', Supplement to *The London Gazette*, Tuesday 6 January 1948, number 38171.

58 Jo Stanley, *A History of the Royal Navy: Women and the Royal Navy* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the National Museum of the Royal Navy, 2018), p. 107.

The Hamburg party were working in the Naval Signal Centre and had moved on from Brussels. In the other places the WRNS Officers were employed as Secretaries and P.A.s, Signals, N.C.S. and Duty Staff Officers. In one department records were made of all German naval war material discovered. [...] Another task was the identification and restoration to their owners of Allied shopping commandeered by the Germans.

The biggest job though was in connection with the division of the German Fleet under the Potsdam agreement. [...]

In contrast with the terrible conditions of the Germans, the accommodation of our people was everywhere excellent, mostly in requisitioned houses, with German girls to wait on them. [...] What was clear was that it made one feel slightly sick to see so much comfort side by side with misery and degradation. It is not at all a pleasant feeling to be a conqueror.

But we had our lighter moments, notably at the British Naval Headquarters, in the pleasant countryside of Minden, where the children looked better nourished and the atmosphere was clear. The charming Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Harold Burrough, had a pleasant house within the perimeter, which was a good gesture, as many a leader lived in a magnificent *schloss* outside, unhampered by the Service regulations which bound his men. I thought this might account for the some of the undoubtedly good spirit among the Commander-in-Chief's staff. [...]

I was determined to sample the open-air swimming bath before leaving the next morning. It was October, but quite warm. I was creeping out of my room when I ran into Sybil. [...] So, ascertaining that the coast was clear, we slipped out and in. To my astonishment later I heard Admiral Burrough giving a dramatic description of the scene. "Don't tell me you were spying on us!" I said. He replied with dignity, "As a naval officer I have been trained to keep my eyes open, and when I hear ladies' voices on my lawn in the early hours, it is my duty to see what is happening."

I am sorry for anyone who tries to get the better of these naval officers.<sup>59</sup>

Not even the Director of the WRNS and her Superintendent, it appears, were immune from the voyeuristic indulgences of ANCXF's 'lido' culture, which certainly came from the top.

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59 Dame Vera Laughton Matthews, *Blue Tapestry* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1948), pp. 246–250.



Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> December 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

Well, I'm back! Never thought I ever should get here though. Sorry, but I couldn't find my Mabel Lucie Attwell's when I got in,<sup>60</sup> so have had to wait till first thing this morn to let you know everything's OK.

Now, I'll go right back and begin at the beginning, though truth to tell I'm so tired right now that my fingers will hardly find the right keys.

We left Victoria Station at twenty to twelve on Sunday, the four of us sitting together, and managed to get down to Dover, though we had a nasty moment or two on the train when the inspector came around for tickets. The girl-I-didn't-know had her ticket OK and I had mine—the only snag with mine was that the rubber stamp they'd put on it at Queen Anne's was dated 13<sup>th</sup> July 1945!—but he let that pass miraculously. Dot and Jean however, hadn't tickets as their warrants only carried them to and fro between London and Braintree in Dot's case and London and Ipswich in Jean's, and they'd given the last half up on reaching London so they hadn't really anything to get them down to Dover either! Well, my dears, this miserable old man said they've both have to go with him at Dover to the R.T.O.,<sup>61</sup> but when we got to Dover we managed to mingle with the crowd and give him the slip—he's probably still looking for them now!

The next bother was getting aboard the "Lady of Mann" as of course we hadn't any of the proper documents, but we managed to fox them somehow and the trip across was uneventful. The sea was very calm and we went aft to watch the foam of the wake frothing white against the green of the sea. The gulls followed the boat all the way screaming and diving and swooping, just skimming the water's surface by a hair' breadth. It was delightful. Most lovely of all though, having once seen the "White cliffs" fade out of sight, was the sunset. It was absolutely fiery and tinged the water with red and pink and even seemed to make the seagulls look gold and pink!

We arrived at Calais, disembarked and then went off to the transit camp in lorries. There they changed our money back into marks, gave us a ticket for Train Number Eight, and then pro-

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60 Postcards by Mabel Lucie Attwell, popular kitsch illustrator and a favourite of Joan's.

61 Regulating Transport Officer.

vided supper. It was thoughtful of them I suppose, but for my part they needn't have bothered—I couldn't face it! Still the tea was warming.

Then there was a mad dash down to the train! And I do mean mad, and I do mean dash. We had to go a good quarter of a mile to reach the train, down rough roads in the town and then across railway lines and then down by the dockside—I don't know what queer ground we didn't cover—and all that at a brisk pace and carrying all our luggage mark you! I just wouldn't do it. Everyone was sweeping past me struggling along panting and putting down cases, picking them up, changing bags from one hand to another and there was general confusion. However, I called to Jean, who also was trying to struggle on, but by this time was really worn out, and I asked a French boy aged about 18 I s'pose, to carry them down to the train for us. This he did, praise be, and I wished frantically I'd some cigarettes for him, but explained that I hadn't, but gave him my entire supply of francs. I've always nattered about having the coins of so many different countries in my purse, but by golly they do come in useful sometimes.

That got us as far as the train, and Dot and the other girl were already comfortably settled and we climbed into the same carriage. We walked along, but all the compartments were full, so we resigned ourselves to standing along with two ATS and two WAAF but the Traffic Control Sergeant came hounding along the carriages and made them get out as there was no standing allowed. Jean and I put down our bags and refused to move! The Sergeant said we'd have to get out and spend the night at Calais in the transit camp there, but again we said we weren't going to leave the train. He said he'd have to call O.C. Train (Officer Commanding, Train in plain language) so we told him he could do what he liked but we weren't going to move. Along came O.C. Train and he was a sweet, sympathetic Lieutenant-Colonel. He put an arm round both of us and said, "Now don't worry. You're cold (we weren't because we'd got very heated walking to the train!), you're tired (that was true enough!) and you're hungry (another lie!), but don't you worry, just tell me the trouble".

Well, in the end he said we could remain on the train as long as a seat could be found anywhere on it and despatched the furious Sergeant to find said seats. He came back and reported that there were just two at the other end of the train but that the seats hadn't any cushions on them and were just springs and nothing more, but we were in the mood to do anything rather than spend the night in Calais, so we trotted off the train, along the line, and

finally got in again. The carriage was full of ATS who were going to Munster (not so far from Minden) and we made ourselves comfortable for the night. We settled ourselves down on our cushionless springs and read for a while.

There was no heating in the train and although we had light, I began to wish there was heat and no light after a very little while, as the windows became thickly frosted on the inside with ice, and when I tried to scrape it off it was too thick, so finally I struck matches and melted it off! That's being cold!

The next morning we stopped at Wesel for breakfast and the Sergeant (Traffic Control) told us we'd have to move to another carriage after breakfast, and that he'd show us where to go. From that moment on of course, he completely disappeared, and we didn't see him either before, during or after breakfast, and finally the train began to move off—still with us in the wrong compartment! I decided that the best plan would be to walk through the train and ask in each compartment whether the people in it were Minden-bound and if so we would get in with them. We left our luggage where it was and started off. I took my torch because it was dark in some parts of the corridors and then, quite suddenly as we came to the bit from one compartment to another, we were lost in clouds of steam and loud hissing noises. I wasn't sure whether to go on or not because they're not like the English trains that are covered in between carriages—you can actually see the lines below as you walk across a narrow swaying plank—so you can guess that as we couldn't see in the steam it was difficult to know whether we'd hit or miss so to speak. However, just as we were deciding to turn back, a man came along from the opposite direction and bumped into me as he couldn't see me because of the steam. We all moved back and he turned out to be the new Traffic Control man—the other one had gone off duty at Wesel and not done anything about us. This fellow was awfully kind, and told us to keep our seats until the train got to Munster and he'd see what he could find for us in the meantime.

He came back later and told us that when the train reached Munster we'd have to jump off quickly as that compartment was being uncoupled and run into a siding, and then walk up the platform and into another compartment right at the end of the rest of the train, which would go to Minden.

This we somehow managed, struggling along with our suitcases, and jumped into the last carriage. There were no seats of course so we just stood up. After the train had left Munster the Traffic Control man came back to us again and told us he'd found

seats for us further down the train if we'd follow him. Well, honestly, it was the trickiest thing I've ever done, I think, walking through a moving train from one carriage to another carrying my luggage! Still, we managed that and finally came to rest in a compartment full of soldiers—much to the soldiers' delight. They teased us unmercifully about our duffels, our bellbottoms, and our determination to reach Minden as soon as possible!

However, we eventually reached Minden at a quarter to five (German time, that would be a quarter to four by your time) and by this time we were thoroughly exhausted. The R.T.O. there is absolutely sweet though. He's a Captain in the Army and got us hot tea and biscuits and really "mothered" us until the transport arrived to take us back to Quarters.

Ginge wasn't in of course at this time, and so I thought I'd light the fire, rules or no rules, but when I went down to the cellar for coal it was under water, so I'd had that!

However, I've since discovered lots of things which I'll recount later on, which make life easier than when I left.

I had supper, unpacked, and then had a hot bath, and went straight to bed, but was so tired I couldn't seem to sleep. Ginge and I chatted of course, our tongues going nineteen to the dozen. She was so glad to see me because the boys (the two Marines we have supper with) are going to be demobbed shortly and lots of Wrens and fellows we came over with are also going back and it really seems as though everything's coming at once and she was really chokker. On top of that of course, she's got a nasty cold and a really terrible cough, so on the whole she was feeling pretty miserable and I had a little cheering up to do. She sends her love by the way.

I had a most restless night last night too, because I kept waking up with the cold. Honestly, we have ice forming on the windows in the mornings! Isn't it awful? That's why I'm so tired to-day because I had such a bad night—and that's why I want the bedsocks or seaboot stockings rather!

That seems to bring my activities update up to scratch.

We had a Christmas draw and Ginge put my name down and I was one of the lucky ones and got a pair of fully-fashioned civvy silk stockings! Isn't that lucky? I can see Bessie's face turning green from here. We've also had bags, kind of hold-all's or grips or whatever you call them, issued to us. They're navy blue with two handles and they press-stud up with large fasteners and they lock and are quite handy. They're about two feet long and a foot deep I should say.

I've also drawn my extra blanket to-day! Can't have another

night like last night!

We've also had an electric kettle fitted up in our kitchen (the one on our floor of our house)—what a lot of 'our' about those last two lines!—which Ginge says is a godsend, but I haven't had the opportunity of using it yet as the electricity has failed again! Lighten our darkness is a very literal prayer here!

Good-morning! It's now the 12<sup>th</sup> December. What a good thing I got that other letter off to you—I thought this one would take ages to finish.

We've got a new wireless in the cabin as the other one got a bit squeaky, so we've called on our reserves! Never been so well off for wirelesses in all our lives! It's a lovely thing though and doesn't take up as much room as the other one.

Am going down town at lunch-time to-day with Sheila Beaty to try to buy some Christmas cards. Knowing the quality and quantity of my German I'll probably end up with a sheet of foreign stamps or some wallpaper—anything but Xmas cards! One of our girls has been down to get some and came back with cards saying in German "Best wishes for your betrothal", "Every happiness in your marriage" etc having got wedding cards instead without knowing it! So if I send you something about a Christening instead of Christmas, don't be surprised or alarmed.

In about an hour's time I'm going down to investigate my pay—will let you know presently how much I get. Probably be 3/6 instead in the £30-odd that I'm expecting!

Some work to do now, so cheerio for a minute.

Been down to pay and haven't yet got my hands on the cash but they tell me that I have a balance of £26 and some odd shillings and pence owing to me up to the end of November. That's about right I think as I've been paid about £22 since coming to Germany so that makes £48. I thought it would be somewhere around £50 since coming here so I'm quite happy about the whole thing. Have to go this afternoon to collect the money apparently.

Don't think I've much more to tell, 'cept that I went to a dance (Ship's Company) last night and had a really good time. There's a new band as our old one has been demobbed and it's first rate. Much better than the other one. It's amazing how many people here are being demobbed. Hardly any of the old face we came over with now either in WRNS or Marines and Matelots. Most of our Wren messengers have gone now and we have Marines in their places!<sup>62</sup>

It's snowing now and it snowed last night, so you can tell that the rig of the day is duffels and gumboots—one of the offices saw

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62 The Navy's replacement of demobbed Wrens with men was clearly underway.

me coming to the office this morning with my duffel at the alert and the hood up and told me if I only had a beard I'd be the image of "Happy" of Seven Dwarfs fame and ought to go around singing "Hi-Ho" just to heighten the effect! Isn't it the limit!

This afternoon I'm going to pay the "Parcel-man" a visit and use all my charms (if any) to wangle you another parcel. The list closed before we got back from leave for this month, so unless I can wangle it, you needn't look for any Camp Pie next month! Anyway I'll try.

Think that's all the news at the moment, but will write again soon.

Meantime, keep well, keep warm and keep smiling! You'll probably find it easier to do the first two where you are, but never mind, it can't possibly be as bad as last winter, that's one consolation.

Cheerio for now, my love to Geg, kiddies, Flo if and when you see her, and anyone else you see whom I know and of course large helpings to yourselves.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> December 1945

My Dearest Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

Sorry I've not had a moment to spare since I wrote you last to give you a lengthy account of my doings, but even now I've come to the point of writing, there still isn't much to say as I haven't been doing a great deal of any note.

However, we'll begin at the beginning which is as good as place as any.

Last Wednesday I spent a domestic evening putting things straight and getting cosy in the cabin.

On Thursday I came back to the office in the evening for more of the book, and again on Friday evening—it's nearly finished now though.

On Saturday I had a half-day so lit the fire in the cabin and did some mending and other odd jobs, then I decided I'd have a bath, but the water was cold, so I had supper and then went to the cinema in Minden with two of the boys here, Joe and Bill. I never go ashore without a strong escort! We saw "The Way Ahead" which stars David Niven, and although I'd seen it before I enjoyed it just

as much as the first time. It's a grand film.

Sunday I had the whole day off and started it well by having breakfast in bed. Ginge bless her brought me a cup of tea, a roll with bacon in it, and a roll with marmalade in it, and then I settled down to sleep again. I got up at five to twelve and put on bell-bottoms and a jersey and cleaned the cabin and lit the fire and then Ginge came in and we went down to lunch together. After that I lazed by the fire and listened to Transatlantic Quiz—wasn't it queer the way the American recording kept getting stuck and he kept saying the same phrase over and over again? I went to tea at about half-past three and intended to have a bath, but once again the water was cold. I then went down to the Ship to a Tea Dance in the Canteen and came back in time for supper. In the evening I went to the cinema at the Ship and saw "Road to Frisco" with Ann Sheridan, Humphrey Bogart, George Raft and Ida Lupino. It was an old film I think, but it was very good and I enjoyed it thoroughly.<sup>63</sup>

On Monday I again worked on the book in the evening, and to-night I'm coming back again to take some more dictation on it—this should finish it, and so if I can get it typed back to-night also, I won't have any more to do as he's going on leave soon.<sup>64</sup> I shan't be sorry in a way as it takes up such a lot of my spare time and also prevents me doing other things and there are so many things going on here in the evenings that I'd love to do if only I had the time. We've classes in German, Russian and French and all sorts of things, Dressmaking and so on and up till now I just haven't been able to take part, but as I say I might be able to in future.

I've had a dreadful cold but it's on the mend now, thank goodness.

I wound some of the wool ready to start Jacqueline's frock, but don't know what needles to use. I've got the pattern written out but it doesn't say anything about needles and I've got 3 pairs with me, 7s, 9s, and 11s, I think they are. Could you ask Geg which I should use please and let me know in your next letter to me please?

I had a delightful Christmas card from Bill, together with some snaps of the family—poor boy, it cost him 1/6d. to send them to me, isn't it awful?

By the way I managed to get round the "Parcel" man by smiling sweetly, well smiling anyway! And so you'll get your parcel

63 Released in the USA as *They Drive by Night* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1940).

64 The author, Lieutenant Johnny Mills.

sometime in January I expect. I'll send the next one to Mrs Duncan I think, what do you think about it? Only Geg seems to get a fair amount of sugar and jam which are the main ingredients, doesn't she? If you think I ought to send it to her though, I will. It really doesn't matter to me, only I thought we've consumed quite a lot of Mrs D's rations in all the many times we've dropped in for a cup of tea and it would be a nice way of repaying her.

Saturday, Sunday, Monday and to-day I've tried to iron a couple of blue shirts, but oh, no—the irons aren't working! Nothing daunted I've also tried on all four days to do washing, but again, the water's been quite cold, so I'm getting such a pile of things, especially hankies, that I'll have to have a day off soon to get them off my hands! The only solution I can see if the water doesn't heat up soon is to wash a few at a time in water boiled in the electric kettle! That'll be a performance if you like because you know how much water a kettle holds! Still, I'll have to do something soon.

We haven't had the midnight blue cabbage yet, but are getting other weird dishes to make up for it.

Doesn't seem possible that we're so near Christmas, does it? I'm not very excited at the thought myself as I haven't heard yet what sort of festivities are taking place here. The only unusual activity as far as I can gather from the normal routine is that I'm to wait on the men's messdeck on Christmas Day (with the other girls of course!) So that should start us off well—it's a good thing I worked in Lyons'<sup>65</sup> before the war, my training'll come in handy now!

Will write again in two or three days so that you get it for Christmas, but till then, God bless you all and take care of yourselves ever so!

Fondest love to all,

From Joan

Xxxx

PS Knew I'd think of something as soon as it was all folded up and in the envelope. First thing is of course that Ginge sends her love. Second is that you might be interested to know that I bought a dozen and a half assorted Christmas cards (or rather New Year's cards—they didn't have any Christmas ones) in the town in Minden and paid 16Opfgs which is about 9.5d in English money! I also got one or two English ones from the NAAFI and a couple of calendars or so and then Johnny Mills gave me some of his own

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<sup>65</sup> Lyons' Corner Houses, famous for their 'nippy' waitresses.



special design, so altogether my Christmas and New Year greetings haven't cost me much. I wish there were things we could buy for presents though, and I hope you'll all forgive me if they come Better Late Than Never, as it were!

'Bye now again,  
Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> December 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

As you can see from the fact that I'm putting pen to paper, Thelma is once more on leave and I'm "in charge"! She's a Petty Officer now, and more trying than ever, so the girls are having a good time while she's away.

I wrote you on 18<sup>th</sup> and the same night received your letter containing the sad news.<sup>66</sup>

I wrote to Mill at once and expressed my sympathy, but of course, you can't seem to find anything to say at a time like that. I'm afraid I'd already sent off a Christmas Card to Mill & George, but it was too late to do anything about it.

How's Nancy now? Never does things by halves does she?<sup>67</sup> Tell her I absolutely forbid her to be the worst patient on the Doc's books!

And now, getting nearer home, how's Stanley? You're a bright boy aren't you? We'll have a little less of the laying in bed if you please, and a little more running round the square with full packs! Seriously thought, I do hope you're feeling better Stan, especially wiv Christmas so near.

And again—honestly, this Sick List is never ending—how's the arm Mum? Better now I hope.

Having got all that off my chest I may begin to tell you of my activities. At long last the book is finished and I have only now to await the money for it. ('Ha—ha!' cried the villain!)

Last night I went to a dance which was quite a change as I haven't been to an "outside" dance for ages.

I'm sorry, but I'll have to finish this letter on the typewriter, because my writing's getting unreadable, and I'm sure I'm not

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66 Stan Bones's sister Millie's husband, George Rawson, died on 10 December 1945. See Chapter 5, footnote 26.

67 Stan Bones's sister-in-law.

making sense!

Oh, before I forget, Ginge's been made a Leading Wren! Isn't it amazing?

Going to lunch now—will continue this this afternoon.

This is me again—just couldn't make it yesterday afternoon as we were too busy. Typical, of course, I sent almost everyone off for a half day and then we had masses of work in! Still we coped successfully and here I am bright and breezy during a lull this morning (21 Dec 45).

How are all the patients this morning? That's right! I can see I'll have to get Nurse Dugdale into you soon!<sup>68</sup>

After we'd spent the evening (on Wednesday) at the dance we came home in a truck and as we were climbing out of said truck, Joan Nightingale said "Oh, look—there's a fire!" Well we all looked and sure enough flames were leaping up from the direction of the bottom of the road—diagram needed here I think [diagram]

It was a couple of huts and outbuildings in the grounds of a nursery-cum-market garden and was blazing away merrily.

I went in and said to the Duty Wren Officer "Ma'am, there's a fire at the bottom of the road!" Was she worried, was she interested? She was not. "What's your name—have you signed the list for the dance?" I complied with all these little interruptions by pointing out my name on the list and while she fussed round checking all the other girls in I ran down to the fire and had a look to see if anyone had done anything about putting it out, but of course, no-one had. So I ran back and there she was still sitting down happily, so I again told her and she said "Oh, I'll go and have a look at it!" By this time I was so exasperated that when she'd gone I phoned up the First Lieutenant and he also was the last word in efficiency. Where was the fire? Was there anyone living there? How had I discovered it? Honestly I'm sure he was filling in a form or something just like Robb Wilton does in his act you know.<sup>69</sup> Finally he promised he'd come down and have a look. Eventually the fire party arrived and then found they hadn't got the hose with them, and by this time the German Local Fire Brigade had arrived with polished jack-boots, beautifully cut jackets and breeches, black shiny helmets with elaborate flaps and side pieces!! You'd have laughed if you could have seen them. In the end they managed to get it all under control, but not before Joan

68 *A Date with Nurse Dugdale* was a popular radio comedy series of 1944 starring Arthur Marshall as an efficient and officious nurse battling amidst hospital chaos.

69 Robb Wilton was a famous film and radio comedian who specialised in deadpan Lancastrian procrastination.

Nightingale and I had aired our views on the whole matter, much to their annoyance!

Last night was spent in altering my frock and it looks much better now it's been shortened—everyone's frantically altering things here these days.

Thanks a lot for the Christmas Card—it came at such an appropriate time. On Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday the water was cold so I couldn't do any washing, and on Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday the irons were out of commission, so I couldn't do any ironing. Laundry was indeed a problem and then you card came!

Just to add to our difficulties the wireless has refused to function for some days and the electric kettle has gone on strike in sympathy!

I'm quite warm now with the extra blanket on the bed and even have gone to bed without a hot water bottle lately as it's turned much milder again and all the snow has gone.

I've written congratulating Florrie and Bob too.<sup>70</sup>

Don't worry about the cake, though. Poor old Bessie—you seem to have had quite a rough time, so knowing how tired you and Mum must be, especially with moving on your mind, if you don't get time to make the cake, don't bother. It'll be OK. It's sweet of you to think of it though.

Guess that's about all for now—will write again soon. Till then, Happy Christmas everyone, and God Bless.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

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Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

Guess what? Our Ginge has been awarded the BEM!!<sup>71</sup> Isn't it marvellous? It came out this morning, all official-like in an Admiralty Fleet Order—"His Majesty has been graciously pleased"—and so on, and we're so amazed we can hardly believe it's true; after all, it isn't the sort of thing that happens every Sunday, is it?

70 Bob and Flo Snell had a son, Laurence Alan Snell.

71 British Empire Medal.

I went to Communion this morning and there were only three of us there—isn't it a pity, the poor man gets up early and all that just for three people. We've got a new padre incidentally, named Keen, and he certainly seems to be.

How are all the patients this morning? Is Nancy progressing well? And Stan? And how's the arm Mum?

I had a lovely Christmas Card from Geg and the kiddies—I must write to thank her soon, but I never seem to get a minute really, what with doing Thelma's job & my own too! Anyway give them all my love when next you see them please.

I got the parcel safely this morning, thank-you. Jersey, pants, stockings and cotton wool. Thanks a lot.

I'm Duty this afternoon, but I've sent everyone else off. No sense in us all stinging in and spoiling a rather sunny Sunday afternoon is there? So in a quiet moment thought I'd pen a line to you and say 'Howdy'. At four o'clock, I'm going to the NAAFI for a 'cupper' but thank goodness it won't be their foul tea. They've taken to making coffee now, and it's much nicer. Don't know yet quite what I'll be doing to-night, but when I write again I'll let you know.

Seems to be about time I finished this off now, so take care of yourselves, God Bless you all, and heaps of love

From  
Joan  
Xxxx

PS Just to show you how much I love you all—here's my Christmas gift—they gave me the BEM too; wasn't it kind of them?

\* \* \*

Monday 24<sup>th</sup> December 1945—Christmas Eve!

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Your letter written on 20<sup>th</sup> arrived last night—just at the right time. Everyone here was congratulating us right & left, and it was so nice to get a line from home too. I never thought so many people would be happy because of our good luck, but honestly one person after another keeps coming along & whizzing us off for a drink—it's amazing. This morning, about ten minutes ago, a sudden celebration was held in the office, much to our amazement. Two bottles of champagne were produced, and a toast given by one of the officers who said, among many other blush-making remarks, that it was the most sensible thing Their Lordships had done for

a long while! It's all very embarrassing—I wish people wouldn't make a fuss, because it's only by a lucky chance—and others deserve it as much as we do.

Last night I was dragged to a celebration by the Chiefs & Petty Officers in their Mess—and tonight there's a Ships Company Dance, so it looks as though Xmas has really started.

Now to get down to answering your letter.

We also have a mild spell here now and although it would be nice to have a white Christmas, perhaps it's just as well from the comfort point of view.

I was sorry about the oranges, but console yourselves with the thought that we won't be having any either, although we don't have to queue up to be told that! I was glad about the turkey—I'll write and let you know what we are having (or have had, I should say).

I'm so glad to hear that Jacqueline is better, especially now at Xmas, as it was such a worrying affair for Geg.

What nice names Flo's got for the baby—Laurence Alan Snell—sounds awfully nice I think.

I'm glad that Nancy is recovering now, and also Stan. I hope that by now your arm is quite better Mum, it must have been very painful and needs looking after now.

Grace's new coat sounded wonderful—just wait till I'm buying civvies again!

Guess I'd better finish this now, because I've quite a lot of work to do and time waits for no-one!

My love to you all, and God Bless all the time.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

PS I think I'm going to Midnight Mass to-night—will let you know later.

\* \* \*

Friday 28<sup>th</sup> December 1945

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Here I am once more, all merry & bright after a very good Christmas indeed.

On Xmas Eve we had a grand Ships Company dance—and my goodness what a stir I caused in civvies! Honestly some people

didn't recognize me at first & there were more compliments than that flying around. We had a very good time there, and I was glad I wasn't on duty the next day.

I went to Communion on Xmas morning and then in the afternoon I went to a Tea Dance at Bad Eilsen. This is a RAF centre & we had a very nice time.

In the evening I went to a party given by the Sergeants and Warrant officers of the 5<sup>th</sup> Bn. Kings Own Scottish Borderers and had a grand time. I even danced an eightsome reel to the music of pipers and pipe majors! They were in full ceremonial dress, with tartans, plaid kilts, sporrans, white spots and cockaded hats & lace ruffles! It was such fun & I even enjoyed the bagpipes.

Oh, and at lunch time Xmas Day we served the men on the Mess Deck, and then returned to our own at which Wren Officers waited. It was delightful! We had goose, turkey, sauce & stuffing, roast potatoes and leeks, followed by Xmas pudding & custard sauce. What a difference from last year! The Mess was beautifully decorated & had a large Christmas tree with coloured lights & silver bells that really tinkle & all sorts of lovely decorations that you don't see in England.

On Boxing Day I went to a dance at an airfield just outside Bückeburg and had a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

The next day I gave myself a day off as I'd worked on Boxing Day all day, but I didn't go out. I did a lot of washing, ironing and mending and had quite a cosy tie. In the evening Ginge & I changed into civvies, lit the fire and read. About 9 o'clock we decided it was time we ate, so we went down to the Mess and brought back some bread. We toasted it by the fire & then I performed my famous trick—opening a can of sardines with a pair of scissors & a lot of determination. Ginge had had them sent to her together with a can of salmon & some cocoa, so we had sardines on toast!

Last night I again stayed in & did some alterations on my suit etc. There was the most terrific gale blowing last night too. Gosh it did shake everything. The door rattled, the windows, even the beds shook, and the fire simply refused to light for ages as every match I struck blew out before I could light the paper! Ginge had gone to the cinema but I refused to go out again in the gale, so when she came in we had cheese on toast and cocoa! (I brought the bread & cheese up from the mess after supper).

That about brings my activities up to date I think. By the way, could you do a couple of things for me (always providing they're obtainable of course!).

One is that I'd like a diary for 1946. Not a big thing—one I can put in my bag, you know, but it does help because I put down in brief what I've done and who I've written to & things like that so that I've got a rough idea of what to tell people when I write.

The other is that I've got to have some BEM ribbon. I'm told I'm improperly dressed without it & of course you can't get it out here at all, so if you could get it from one of the naval or military outfitters. It's pink & white, and you just ask for BEM ribbon. Could you try please?

I had some stationery from Peggy for Xmas incidentally.<sup>72</sup>

Guess that's all I've time for just now—will write again soon—Keep well, all of you & God Bless.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1946

My Dear Everyone at Home,

Well, how's the New Year going?

I'm afraid I can't quite remember when I wrote you last, but I'll begin on 29<sup>th</sup> December, when we had a Wrens Dance. It was a grand affair and went off very well & I think everyone enjoyed themselves thoroughly.

On Sunday I was Duty all day, but in the evening I went to a Ball given by the 7th Btn Cameronians & it was grand fun. Once more we danced an eightsome reel to the skirl of the pipes & I'm getting quite used to it by now!

On 31st December we had a Ships Company New Year's Eve dance which was marvellous. Just before Midnight they announced a Waltzy Medley in which they played grand appropriate tunes such as "One Minute to Midnight" etc & then at 12 the music stopped & the drums struck twelve & then everyone went mad rushing around & wishing everyone a happy new year. Then we did Auld Lang Syne & continued the Medley with "There's Going To be a New Day", "There's a New World Over the

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72 Cousin Peggy Cox, daughter of Grace Prior's sister-in-law Lucy Arthur.

Skyline" & "Halleluia" etc. The dance ended at half-past twelve & then Ginge & I with two of the Marines came back to our Quarters & put on the wireless & were just in time to hear the Midnight Watch Service and in St Paul's, & Big Ben striking twelve (we're an hour ahead of you, you see) & the crowds singing in London—it was grand!

On First of January I was duty all day but went to the cinema in the evening to see a film called "Laura" with Gene Tierney & Dana Andrews.

Yesterday I took part in a Quiz which was held in the cinema & was WRNS v Ratings. I'm sorry to say that the Ratings won, but they had the absolute pick of all the ratings here & several of them were University men & as we only lost 24 to 26 it's not too bad. However, as the prizes for the winners were cigars it's just as well that the men won!

Tonight I hope to wash my hair & do some odd jobs in the cabin—one thing I've to do it to unfreeze my laundry which I put out and which is now quite stiff!

The latest real & official information about demob is that up to & including Group 36 (in our category SH/Typist that is) are to return to UK by 25th February & up to & including Group 45 by 31st March—so as I'm only 48 it looks as though I'll be home about April or May-ish.

Can't stop for more now, but will write soon—God Bless, and take care won't you all. Hope Mum's arm's better now.

Fondest love  
From Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Although I wrote to you all on 3<sup>rd</sup> Jan. I've discovered some letters of yours which need answering so here goes, in date order.

The first was from Paddy, written on 27<sup>th</sup> December.

The tradition of the officers' waiting on the men at Xmas is not a Naval one, but belongs I think to the Army, although I believe the Air Force keeps it too, and our WRNS officers always wait on us—still, it isn't an old Naval Custom.



I started to make Jacqueline's frock on No.9 needles, but now I've had another setback. The pink bunny wool must have got the moth in it, or something, because it just falls apart about every four inches along, and I'm afraid to go on joining it in case it falls to pieces when it's washed. What d'you think I should do? Go on joining it; make it with all green; or Kay says she's some ordinary white wool here I can have if I like. Anyway, I'll leave it till I hear from you.

Your Christmas sounded wonderful as far as the 'eats' were concerned, but, this time next year I'll be home to help you eat everything up!

The next letter is from Bessie dated 31<sup>st</sup> Dec.

Sorry to hear Mum's arm is giving her so much trouble. Fancy bathing it in Epsom Salts!

Tell Stan that I had no ill effects after the champagne, and most certainly we must have a celebration on my next leave—I still can't believe it's true yet!

The weather sounds awful at home. It's terribly cold here, but very clear & bright.

Thelma hasn't arrived back yet, but I s'pose it's on account of the weather.

I saw "I Know Where I'm Going" with Ken when I was on leave. Wasn't it good? Especially the sea trip & the whirlpool.<sup>73</sup>

Now for the last letter. It's from Mum, written on 3rd Jan and containing Diary and ribbon. I got it last night & was very thrilled with it. The Diary is lovely & just what I wanted, and the ribbon is the right kind. I'm sorry you had such trouble getting them, but thank-you from me & from Ginge (for the ribbon).

Since last I wrote you I haven't done anything very exciting, but on Thursday night I stayed in & washed my hair & had a bath. On Friday evening I went to a dance in the canteen and yesterday I had a half-day and a whole day off to-day.

Ginge has got Fibrositis in her neck & shoulder (like Rheumatism, only she can't move her head at all). She thought it must be from sleeping under the window, so we moved our beds around & the cabin's ever so much nicer this way. We've got much more room & everything's very nice. We did that as soon as we'd had lunch yesterday, and we thoroughly cleaned the room & the balcony while we were about it, so everything's

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73 A 1945 Powell and Pressburger film starring Wendy Hiller and Roger Livesey.

shipshape now. We lit the fire & then had supper, & Ginge had arranged to go to the cinema, but I just couldn't bring myself to leave the fire so I stayed in & wrote letters all the evening. I'm so behind hand with my correspondence now that I'm not typing them in the office.

Ginge came in about half past ten & brought me up the letter with the Diary in it, and we had toast and Bournvita made with milk, and so to bed.

I got up at twelve to-day, & lit the fire & then we had lunch & here I am still lazing away writing in the warm!

I did try to do some ironing, but the irons weren't working so I came back here again instead. In about 20 minutes time I'll go down to TeaBoat & then have a bath & maybe do some dhobeying—we'll see.

I don't know whether I told you, but on Christmas day as we went into lunch, First Officer gave us all a little cloth bag with a drawstring in it and they were from people in Canada & contained comforts. This notepaper was in mine, together with a comb, a Tek toothbrush, some toothpaste, needles, a ruled pad of notepaper and powder puffs. Isn't it good of them? I wrote last night to the lady who'd sent my bag, thanking her for it, and telling her I'd write later on when I had more time. I do feel they should be acknowledged don't you?

Well, it's almost time for tea now, so I must say 'bye-bye' I think and get ready to brave the icy wind outside.

Take care of your arm Mum & I hope it's better by the time you receive this.

My love to you all, and God Bless & take care of yourselves won't you.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

PS Ginge sends love to you all. She's going on leave on 9<sup>th</sup> Jan so I'll be all on my lonesome for a while.

\* \* \*

64 Hulse Avenue  
Barking

Monday 7 January 1946

My Dear Joan,

*It seems by your letter of Dec 28 that you thoroughly enjoyed the whole of the Xmas festivities. It seemed that what with the dances you attended & the Xmas fare you had a real good time for which we are very pleased to know. A much better time than we expected you would have. We were talking about you when we were eating our Xmas dinner & saying how we wished you could have been with us to enjoy such a lovely dinner as we did not expect you to have anything like it. As a matter of fact you fared a little better than we did. We all had a very nice time in a quiet way. Mum & I were invited to Cooke St for tea on Xmas day & we all stayed until past midnight & then came home. On Boxing day we had Geg & the children round to dinner & tea & then visited 21 Glenny Rd & stayed there until 11 o'clock & so ended our Xmas for 1945. Florie's baby is going on very nicely & Mum has bought a nice little hair brush one like you gave to Jacqueline that you bought in Paris & she was very pleased with it. Bob is very proud of his son. You say Peggy has sent you some stationery which was very nice of her. She sent Mum 3 very large tablets of toilet soap (Wallflower) which are very nice. It has been very difficult to buy anything here as they require either points or coupons of which we are very short & then again if you did have them the prices are awful, nothing more or less than sheer robbery. Now here I am running on & have not said a word about the glorious news you sent in your last letter. It was great news that both you & Ginge have been awarded the B.E.M. & we indeed feel very proud of you. I liked the way you put it in regarding yourself rather like an afterthought in a P.S. message, but still as you said it was a lovely Xmas gift & may God Bless you for it. We have received your letter of Jan 3rd this morning & by the news it contains we see you have had quite a nice time during the finish of 1945 & the beginning of 1946 & we hope your remaining time out there will be just as happy for you. By what you say at the rate the demobbing is going on you will be home with us for good by the time your next birthday arrives & Mum says "Oh that will be joyful!" She has had a very nasty boil on her arm on the other side*

*the place that was bad when you were home & that is not quite well yet. But the boil is going on nicely & is almost well, the core came out on Sat. last. It is now about 6 weeks that her arm has been bad. Now Mum has made a cake for you & Ginge & she hopes & trusts that you will find it all right as it was cooked under rather difficult conditions. It just so happened that during the very cold spell which followed after Xmas the Gas works found it impossible to keep up the supply of gas owing to the people burning a lot more than usual they said that they had not got sufficient labour & so of course the soldiers had to go to their aid once more. Mum says she thinks it will be all right but if it isn't you will know why.*

*Hip, Hip, Hooray  
 The cake is on the way  
 It's made for two  
 That's Ginge & you  
 To celebrate a recent date  
 When your good news came through  
 The news was simply lovely  
 It filled us all with pride  
 And all the time the toasts were on  
 Dear Ginge was by your side  
 We do know what you have done  
 To gain the honour that you've won  
 We just know that you're two Wrens  
 Proudly wearing your B.E.M.s!*

*Dad*

*I will now close with our  
 Fondest Love  
 Yours affectionately  
 Mum & Dad  
 Xxx*

*Our Best Love to Ginge*

*PS Thanks for lovely card (New Year) received this morning. It made their mouths water.*

*\* \* \**

BERLIN.  
16.1.46.

My dear Ginge and Joan, darlings both,

I must apologise for not having written before to congratulate you both on your B.E.M.'s. However, now that the cheers of the mob have died away my little voice may make itself heard across the plains of Germany.

I hope you won't take heavy um at receiving a joint note of congratulation, but for two friends such as your own sweet selves I feel that it is only fitting.

With their hooks on their arms  
And their medals on their chests,  
They're the very choicest company,  
The Wrens that I love best,  
The B.E.M. they both have won,  
So what about a binge,  
And raise your glasses and lets drink  
To the noble Joan and Ginge.

(To the tune of Phil the Fluter's Ball)

Sorry about that it just happened, and I should be shot for that awful rhyme, especially the binge and Ginge, but never mind.

My hearty congratulations to you both, and I am so proud of you.

*love + best wishes.*  
*Enid*

Fig. 6.47. Letter from Wren Enid Lovell to Joan Prior and 'Ginge' Thomas, 16 January 1946. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.



Fig. 6.48. British Empire Medal, awarded to Leading Wren Joan Prior, December 1945. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

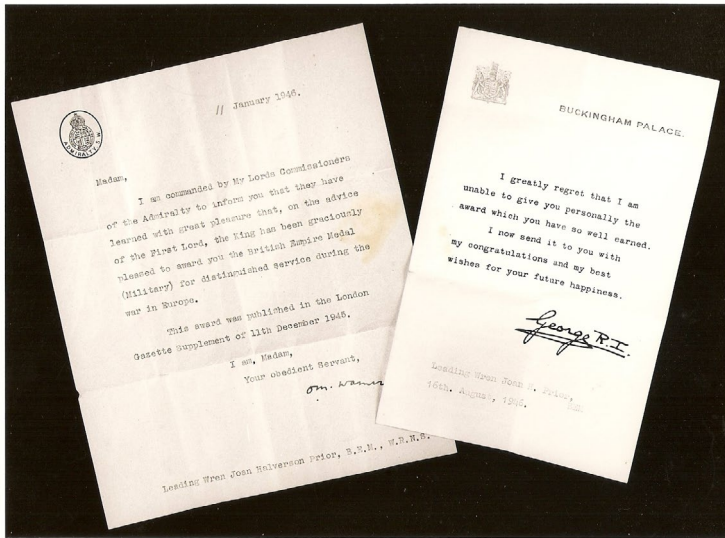


Fig. 6.49. Award Letter, 11 January 1946. Private Papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 18<sup>th</sup> January 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

This is a hurried note to say I'm OK & still in the land of the living in case you think I'm not, my not having written to you since goodness knows when. I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I haven't had a minute. Will write to you all about it later though. Cake arrived yesterday but I haven't undone it as Ginge will be back about 26<sup>th</sup> Jan so I'll wait till then. Thanks a lot though—& thank-you Paddy for your lovely letter. Will answer that too shortly.

Till then, don't worry, I'm OK—just hectically busy that's all!

The weather is foul—bitterly cold & blowing hard. Received your letter last night Bess too.

All my love till I write (probably Sat afternoon (tomorrow that is)) & take care of yourselves.

Fondest love & God

Bless

From

Joan

Xxxx

PS Hope your arm is better Mum.

Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> January 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie &amp; Stan,

Here I am once more as promised in my letter of yesterday's date.

Now before I go any further I must answer Paddy's letter of 7<sup>th</sup> Jan & Bessie's letter of 14th.

Your Xmas certainly sounded good if a little quiet for the first peacetime one, but nevertheless you managed to have a good spread which is one of the main items at Christmas isn't it?

The cake, as I said, arrived but I haven't opened it yet. I did like the verse you made up. I should never have thought of anything so clever if I were in your place. Thanks a lot, anyway.

Now for Bessie's latest. You say that the cake is made for Ginge & I "as you will see from the writing etc". Well it's beautifully & neatly packed but the labels on it only say me so I'm now going to remove the outer covering while you wait. Well, I've done that, and I'm now faced with a linen sewn-on cover! You are sweet to take all that trouble about packing it, but I'm not going to investigate any further till Ginge comes back. She should return on 27<sup>th</sup>.

The films you've seen sound good. I saw "Rhapsody in Blue" in Paris and loved it.

My perm is behaving beautifully & several of the girls have commented on how much nicer my hair is looking, but I put that down to the climate here because it's so cold & drying & my hair isn't in the least greasy now. As a matter of fact my hair & skin have dried up so much that I'm frantically rubbing creams & grease in at night to keep anything near like normal.

Mum & Stan do seem to be a fine pair, don't they? I can see I'll have to take a firm hand soon!

The weather here is queer. In a way, if I were home, I would say this last week was glorious. The air is very cold & sharp, with continuous frost; every morning & afternoon the sun shines & if it is directly on you, is quite warm; & every night the moon has been "full" & clear & oh, so bright. It's really beautiful. The great snag of course is that it's biting cold all the while. Every morning my toothbrush & face flannel are stiff with ice & the windows are iced over! How I hate getting out of my warm bed! The only consolation is that there's central heating in the office & everyone rushes there to get warm.

To-day I've a half-day, & I've lit the fire & so all is cosy. I found an old pot outside & cleaned it & am now boiling my hankies & a

shirt! When I've finished this I'll go down for Tea Boat & then just rub them through.

I've only been to the cinema once since I last wrote & then I saw "A Bill for Adano" John Hodiak & Gene Tierney with which I wasn't impressed. That was last Monday evening & since then I haven't had a moment to breathe. Ginge went on leave & I've had my hands full doing her job because of course it all takes longer when you're not familiar with it. Then on Wednesday we had a Flag Officers meeting which was something I've never had to cope with alone before!

Last Sunday, however, I had a half-day & went out to a party which had been advertised on our notice board. It was given by some Army officers who are starting up the German Film Industry again & they have a wonderful castle—the Schloss Varnholtz—which overlooks the River Weser.<sup>74</sup> It's a beautiful place & they've had it modernised to the extent of rebuilding the broken walls, putting in new ceilings, installing central heating & bathrooms etc & it's really lovely.

We had tea by an enormous log fire in an open hearth & the food was delicious & served by a staff of German waiters.

We chatted & danced & then had a buffet supper & then it was time to drive home after a very enjoyable half-day.

Lieut. Mills has started another book, & so I'm pretty busy in the evenings with that. He paid me £7.10/- for the other one which isn't bad considering the handbag etc is it?

To-night I'm having a rest though & I'm going to see "Blithe Spirit". I saw the play in London & I'm anxious to see the film now.

Guess that's all for now. Please take care of yourselves, & God Bless. Will write again soon. Till then,

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

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74 The leading German film company, UFA, had its Berlin and Potsdam studios taken over by the occupying Soviet forces in April 1945. This was an attempt to establish a western base for UFA and its headquarters was at the Schloss Varnholtz between 1945 and 1949.



Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> January 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

I received your letter written on 20<sup>th</sup> last night, & as you'd mentioned going to see Ginge off I wired you this morning her time of departure. I hope receiving the telegram didn't alarm Mum—I nearly didn't send it in case it did, but in the end I did send it off. Ginge of course knows nothing about any of it, so if you didn't manage to get there, it won't matter. I hope though that you won't get there & find she's gone or going on another day—they're so fond of messing around as you know.

Last Saturday, after I'd written you, I went to see the film "Blithe Spirit" & thoroughly enjoyed it. I even liked it better than the play which is unusual for me as you know.

On Sunday I had a half-day so I lit the fire, did some dhobeying & bathed. It began to snow & in the evening I went to the office from 6 till 7 to take some dictation from Lt. Mills & then I typed it back after supper.

On Monday evening I again put in a couple of hours on the book. Then I came back, lit the fire & thoroughly cleaned the cabin.

On Tuesday I again had dictation from Lt. Mills & typed it back. He's being demobbed in a fortnight or three weeks & it's a rush to get it done in time really.

Last night I went to my first opera & loved it. It was light opera & was sung by a German Company—the Brunswick State Opera—& was, of course, in German, but their acting was so good that it was very easy to follow & their voices were lovely. The scenic & lighting effects were beautiful & there was a lovely transformation scene—I thought of Mum; she used to love them so in pantomimes—& the whole thing was pleasing. Of course, with my usual brilliance I haven't told you what it was—"Hansel & Gretel", of fairy-tale fame.<sup>75</sup>

To-night I got the fire going again & did some dhobeying & now have settled down to this. I've got a heap of ironing & mending to do, but if I don't absolutely stop & get down to writing it just doesn't get done & I know you'll be anxious.

These days I haven't a minute to spare in the office so can't drop a line to you there.

A couple of nights ago I had a very nice letter of congratulation

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<sup>75</sup> *Hansel & Gretel* (1893) is an opera by the German composer Engelbert Humperdinck.

from Mrs Snell, which I must try to find time to reply to.

Also I had a sweet letter from Millie—again I haven't had the time to reply & simply must. People will think I'm so ungrateful & rude.

I am sorry to hear about your arm, Mum. It does seem a trial. Of course if the weather is as cold there as here, that doesn't help things to heal. I had a wee piece snicked out of my finger on a filing cabinet & it took over a week to even close up because of the cold, & my skin's as hard & dry as anything. However, I do so hope the arm gets better soon now.

Fancy having boils in your ears again! I remember at Benfleet you had same, & these odd things are so lowering too. Makes you feel so miserable & wretched, doesn't it? Let's hope it all clears up soon anyway.

I was sorry to hear of Charlie's breakdown, but let's hope he'll soon be home fit. I shouldn't think it's too serious if he's only going for three weeks & then coming home. He must be well enough to travel.

I think that about takes care of your letter.

With regard to my demob up to Group 50 will be out by 30<sup>th</sup> April, so I shall be home for good some time towards the end of April. I'll try to make it as near the 30<sup>th</sup> as I can as it'll be nice to have my 56 days' leave during May & June as the weather may be better then, although when it comes to the point, I don't s'pose we'll have any choice, but just be sent out when we're told. Unfortunately a new order has come out saying that if you're due to be demobbed you can't have leave during the two months before, & as I'm due to go again about March it means I'll miss it & won't have another leave before I come out. Still I s'pose we can't have it all ways.

I'm trying to get a short leave to go to Brussels in February, but don't know whether I'll be lucky or not.

I'd also love to visit Berlin before I leave, but don't see any chance as yet.

Anyway, now it's come so near, I'll be glad to be home again. I've loved every minute in the Wrens, but by the time I leave it will have been three-and-a-half years, & I'm a bit tired of chopping wood, fetching coal, working all day & then washing, ironing & mending in my spare time etc. I know countless housewives have had to do it during the war, but as I say, I won't be sorry to have a break from it.

All things considered I'm very much looking forward to Civvy Street & there's only one snag. I've found in the Service—& so

have countless others—a wonderful friendly spirit amongst total strangers. I hope everyone coming out of the forces keeps that up, & that in five years from now people won't not know the man next door, or at the end of the street. I, for one, am determined to keep it up, but as I say, except for that I'm looking forward to April more than that!

I've got 3 more months to serve & by that time I hope to have a bank balance of £100. I probably won't have, knowing me, but I think it helps you save to have a target so that's mine. At the moment of writing the figure is £78.19.1 so I'll have to steam!

Must close now as it's late & I think my milk is boiling. When I light the fire I boil milk & make Bournvita, & enjoy it!

My love to you all & please take care won't you? God Bless all the time,

Fondest love  
From  
Joan  
Xxxx

PS What's our new address? Twice I've wanted it & haven't known it & it looks so mad not to know where you live!<sup>76</sup>

\* \* \*

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> February 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Once again I'm afraid I'm hopelessly behind with my correspondence and have to begin by making an apology.

Since last I wrote, however, I'm afraid I just haven't had a minute to spare as Lieutenant Mills is being demobbed and we've just had to slog away at this second book to get it finished in time.

On Friday 25<sup>th</sup> I spent the whole evening on the book, and also on Saturday, when I was Duty Leading Wren, but I typed it whilst I was on duty in the Quarters Office.

On Sunday I went to a party given by the Petty Officers in their house and had a very enjoyable evening. Ginge came back at lunchtime and we spent such a chatty afternoon I didn't have time to write then either. She says by the way that she hopes she wasn't abrupt with you at the station, but of course, she wasn't

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<sup>76</sup> Grace and Harry Prior and Bessie and Stan Bones were about to move to Sandown, Isle of Wight.

expecting you, but not only that, Jerry apparently turned up and she wasn't expecting him either, and I think it made things difficult or something. Anyway, she was very pleased to see you and told me, incidentally, that you weren't looking at all well, Mum, but I 'spect with your arm and ears, you can't be looking too grand. I do hope you're all better now anyway.

On Monday and Tuesday evenings I spent the whole evening on the book, and on Wednesday I took part in a Quiz which lasted all evening. It was 3 Wren and 3 Men ratings, against three Wren and three Naval officers. The officers won by one-and-a-half points in the end after having had an extra 'round' because at the real end we were level.

On Thursday I went to the cinema to see "The Affairs of Susan" which I thoroughly enjoyed.

On Friday and Saturday afternoon I did some of the book again, and in the evening on Saturday saw "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" which I'd never seen and somehow felt I should.

Last night, Sunday, Stella, Naomi and Sheila (three of the typing pool girls) threw a party in the Wrennery to celebrate Naomi's impending demob (this month) and Stella's recent engagement. It was quite a good party I s'pose, but as the men folk were all officers, none of whom could dance, I wasn't particularly impressed! Neither was Ginge!

To-night I'm going to a farewell party given by Lt. Mills, as he's leaving in the morning.<sup>77</sup> Will write you all about that later, but at the moment I'm going in fear and trepidation because I'll be the only Wren there amongst the gang of Naval officers, but he insists, so—I'm going. My invitation card, incidentally, is the most enormous thing I've ever seen and you simply must see it when I come home. It'll give you some idea of how crazy these boys are!

After to-night, my life will simmer down into the more quiet lines to be desired, as I shan't have any 'book' to type and I'll be able to get my share of staying in at nights as well as of entertainment.

The weather here has become rather limp and tired and has done nothing but rain consistently for days. It's much warmer and has completely thawed, but the most fierce wind has come to stay and simply lashes the rain down. However, I think I like it better than the cold.

I've written just now to Mrs Snell, Millie, and Bob (from whom I had a letter) and now feel I can begin my correspondence with new heart having crossed a few off the list anyway. I've also writ-

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77 Lieutenant Mills was released on 14 February 1946.

ten to Aunt Lucy thanking them for the stationery they sent me for Christmas and telling them all the gossip—including the fact that we're moving, though I've not gone into details, merely saying we were going to live in Sandown, nothing more. I couldn't give them the address as, once again, I found I didn't know it! Please let me know it soon.

I'm going to Brussels next Monday with a girl named Jean Howard. Mum must remember her, as she's the one we lent the money to on the station, and the girl I travelled back with, remember? I couldn't go with Ginge as she's only just come back from leave and they won't let her go again so soon. I'll see what I can do in the way of finding gifts for one and all there, but I'm not over hopeful at the moment as they say that the prices are terrific, and they only let you take £15 anyway, I s'pose that's so you don't spend too much! Still, I'll try to see what I can do.

I received your letter dated 28th yesterday, and now to answer it. By the way, I was paid £6.5s for this second book because it's not nearly so long as the first, and am quite satisfied.

I hope you've more coal now. Ginge said that they hadn't any when she was on leave in Swansea, and it seemed queer when you think of how near to the coalmines that is!

We cut the cake and it was delicious. It was still new and moist and hadn't gone a bit funny for keeping it which was a blessing. Everyone said how nice it was, and it was too! Ginge's was very nice, but not so fruity or pretty as yours. Thank you all very much.

The buying does sound fun, and you do seem to have got hold of some bargains which is quite a triumph these days, I should imagine. The carpets sound lovely—and the divan sounds just what I wanted. How nice of you to buy it for me. Starting Civvy Life in a new bed!

The gong too, sounds the last word! Who's going to bang it?

Once more, I am sorry about your arm, and ears, Mum, but perhaps they'll soon be better now. At any rate, let's hope so, as it's so miserable isn't it when you don't feel well, and such a handicap.

I think that about takes care of your news, and mine, so I'll have to stop now to get on with some work.

Please write again and let me know of any more purchases you make, and how everything's going, and how you are Mum, and in fact all the news.

Till then, take care of yourselves, and God Bless you all.

All my love

Joan

Xxxx

PS I haven't forgotten Paddy's birthday, but haven't been out to buy a card, but I'll write to-morrow, the great day, & send a card as soon as poss.<sup>78</sup>

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Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> February 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter posted on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, the day before yesterday, and here I am once more settling down to a good old chat.

Best news of all is that Mum's arm and ears seem to be on the mend again now. Let's hope they both get thoroughly better by the time you move.

Well, I finished the book on Sunday afternoon last, and Johnny Mills left here early Tuesday morning. He gave a party before he left, on Monday evening, and invited me. I didn't really want to go as I knew I'd be the only rating there, but he was so insistent that in the end I went, only to find that there were only three other women in the whole party! Still we had a really grand evening and a good deal of fun, people telling imaginary fortunes and all sorts of things!

He gave me his address before he left—he lives in Cornwall—and I've to send him my address and then when the books are published he's going to send me a copy.

On Tuesday I had a lazy evening in by the fire and went to bed early, having written to Bill Porter. He is now a civvy incidentally. Well, almost. It takes them about three weeks to be demobbed in Australia apparently. Then they have a scheme whereby service people can have training in a trade or profession at the Government's expense and are paid £4.10s a week whilst doing this! Bill's taken a course in Radio Engineering and then entering the Merchant Navy as a Commissioned Engineer or something. I haven't got his letter with me at the time of writing and I can't quite remember. Anyway, it sounds worth doing, and also it gives him the necessary travel without which he's lost.

On Monday night, to my amazement, I received a letter from Tommy.<sup>79</sup> You remember we met him that Christmas at Mrs

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78 Harry Prior's birthday was 5 February.

79 Tommy Atkins, REME.

Snell's house? I did correspond with him for some time when I was in England and when I first went to France, but it kind of petered out, neither of us bothering to write at all, and then suddenly, as I say, I got this letter. It had been all round the world to reach me because it had my old address on it, but reach me in the end it did. I replied yesterday as I thought it would be only courtesy to do so, though it means another one on the already too long list for me to cope with! He's in Ceylon at the moment and not enjoying it too well, I gathered.

Last night I went down into Minden to the cinema with Ginge and we saw "I live in Grosvenor Square" starring Anna Neagle and Rex Harrison. Bess recommended it once I remembered and so we took a chance and saw it and we both thoroughly enjoyed it too. We laughed and laughed and then laughed, though the rest of the audience didn't seem to be as amused as we were.

To-night we're going ashore to see an Ensa show called "Eve on Leave" and are hoping for the best whilst fearing the worst. I've got a half day to-day because I was duty last Sunday and so I'm going to get up to date with my dhobeying—not before time!

No, our awards were not in the King's New Year's Honours List, but are operational awards for active service. The New Year's Honours are for other things like long service in a Government department, or special gifts the nation or something, but the others are operational, which means for some special service in the forces, and includes the DSOs, and so on. I don't think there's any chance of going to the Palace for it as they now send them through the post with a letter from the King.

Thelma is being demobbed on 25<sup>th</sup> February, and I gather I'll have to take over her job, although no-one has said so in as many words. I'm not keen really because you don't get any shorthand-or-typing in, but if I have to take it, then I'll type all my letters, just to keep limber fingers, and also go to the shorthand classes that Ginge gives, for high speed dictation to keep up with that, but of course I'll be happier if someone else takes over really.

I'm afraid I'll have to end now because it's lunch time, but as it happens I have come to the end of my news anyway.

Take care of yourselves and God Bless you all.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

PS Ginge sends her love.

Monday 11<sup>th</sup> February 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Well, here we are—and here we stay! I don't know how long this letter will take to reach you, but I'm writing and hoping.

Now for a little explanation. You must have heard of, and perhaps saw, a film called "The Rains Came"—well, I did, but I needn't have bothered because they've come! Honestly I've never seen such floods and rains in my life. It's been raining solidly now for about a week, all day, all night and of course the thaw has melted the snows in the mountains and simply flooded the River Weser, this river has overflowed and well I just can't find words to describe it.

At Gelsenkirchen the dam has broken from the pressure of the water and has flooded the Ruhr to an amazing extent. Nearer to us, Hannover is completely cut off from all directions. Here in Minden it's like being in Venice with about two feet of water in the streets, and there's only one way out of the town now, as only one road remains open. Bridge after bridge has been washed away and the current is so strong that it carries everything before it.

Last Saturday night we had organised a dance in the Town Hall in Minden, but when we got there, the water was up the steps of the Town Hall, and after about an hour was on the floor, so it was either dance in gumboots or abandon ship! Needless to say, we did the latter!

On Sunday Ginge and I had the day off and we stayed in bed until half past twelve. Then we jumped out of bed, and Ginge went and got some coals and I cleared out the grate and we got thoroughly filthy doing it, only to find that we had no water. There wasn't a single drop in all the Wrennery! I ask you, it's a bit much isn't it? I don't mind when there's a war on, but it's a bit late in the day for games like that. However, we had to wash so we trotted out into the street with soap, towel and nailbrush and washed in a puddle—there were enough of them goodness knows! But it comes to something doesn't it when you've got to wash in muddy water in the road!

Once of the Marines called for us after lunch and took us out (on the only existing road) to see the extent of the floods, and it's unbelievable. You can see the whole valley of the Weser is under water with just the chimney pots of houses showing. The goalposts on the football pitch went way under on Saturday and they're what, about nine feet high, I imagine.

It's even swept away large chunks of Hitler's famous Autobahn (super by-pass roads) and also the latest bridge to be built by our Engineers and called Ben Ghazi Bridge.



This morning we've got water back again thank goodness, but how long for we don't know. My leave to Brussels has been postponed as there's only one Bridge left across the Rhine and they're watching that day and night because it's so shaky!

Thousands here are homeless now, and you see hayricks, bits of farms, bedding, furniture and all rushing past on the swirling waters until they meet some obstacle and are dashed to matchwood and splinters.

I said at the beginning of this letter that I hoped it got to you because of course the airfields are under water and no planes can operate, but we're still hoping for mail.

On Thursday Ginge and I went to see an Ensa show in Minden called "Eve on Leave" and it was very funny and quite good for Ensa.

On Friday we went to see Betty Grable and Dick Haymes in Billy Rose's "Diamond Horseshoe" but neither of us enjoyed it very much.

On Saturday, as I say, it should have been the dance, but things went wrong, and on Sunday we went to view the damage. In the evening I went to the cinema here on the camp with one of the Marines and saw "Ten Little Niggers" the Agatha Christie thriller. It was very good.

To-night I should have gone to Brussels and won't! Sounds Irish, but it's quite sane really. As I don't know when I'll be going don't worry if the mail from me is erratic. It may not be getting through, or I may have gone to Brussels in a hurry or something.

Incidentally, there was no water again at lunch time, so goodness knows when we'll get our next wash!

Honestly, though, life is 'ard, isn't it?

It's affecting the office too because our signal machinery won't work and we're not receiving or sending many messages, but I s'pose we'll manage somehow. The gas is off and the electricity flickering low, but still we live!

I hope you get this otherwise you'll be worrying because you won't be hearing, but if this gets through and you don't hear for a while, don't worry.

I hope you're all keeping well at home and not having any hanky-panky there.

Be writing again soon,  
All my love, and God Bless,  
From  
Joan  
Xxxx

PS (Always forget this! Ginge sends her love).



Figs 6.50–6.52. Flooded countryside around Minden, February 1946. Photographs by Joan Prior. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> February 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter of 10th February last night, and am taking advantage of the lunch-time lull to reply, or at least commence replying.

The "House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street" sounds quite good. I saw "Sun Valley Serenade" ages ago—before the war!—and loved it. It was Glenn Miller's first film I believe.

The materials you bought for bedspreads intrigued me, what is "silk canvas"? The colours sound delightful. You seem to have been very successful so far with your shopping between you, and from your letters it would appear not to have been as difficult as I had imagined.

Millie seems to have been a tower of strength as far as snipping and sewing is concerned, but I expect it takes her out of herself and gives her some interest and something to think about. I can just imagine Mum patching the mattress! I can see the house is just as mad as ever—but I like it that way. The madder the better!

As you can see I still haven't gone to Brussels, but am now going on Sunday (17<sup>th</sup>)—I hope!

I can imagine how busy you are with all those letters to answer and once you get busy with other things as well, you'll be almost at your wits end I should think. Still, when I get home in April I'll be able to cope with odd things for you like that. Haven't decided yet quite what I'm going to do but I intend to take my full 56 days leave definitely as it's probably the last long holiday I'll have for a while.

Thank goodness the coalman's been! We often think about you over there with next to no coal—it's simply awful. And the food situation sounds really grim. We too have had cuts of course, but nothing as bad as yours.

I am pleased to know that Mum's arm is much better and hope that before long it will have completely healed up again. Let's hope that it won't be so long before her ears are quite better also.

I must try to get Jacqueline something when I'm in Brussels. I did send a Mabel Lucie card but as with Dad couldn't get a proper birthday one.

The bracelet you bought sounds awfully nice. Girls are so much easier to buy things for than boys aren't they?

The news about Terry, whilst not being good, is better than was feared isn't it? He does seem to be losing a lot of weight though.

He ought to take Cod Liver Oil & Malt, I should think.

Of course, tell Millie, I understand her not writing. I should hardly think she had the time to eat and sleep at her present rate of sewing.

Since last I wrote the outstanding thing here of course is—No Water! On Wednesday night Ginge and I had a night in and lit the fire and by dint of much scrounging managed a wash in water left from our hot water bottles. It smelt a bit rubbery but after all it was wet!

On Thursday—Jacqueline's birthday—I went to a dance and had a very enjoyable evening with some Scots people near here. The water came on for a while so I managed a wash and we filled a couple of buckets just in case.

I'm afraid it's now Saturday morning—I didn't have the time to finish this last night.

The big event was that I managed a bath last night. The water was bright orange, but after all what's a little thing like that? Then I went out to an airfield near Bückeburg (I often go there dancing) and had a delightful evening. I feasted on buttered rolls, cheese and gherkins, and doughnuts with jam and cream filling, and tea! I could hardly move, let alone dance afterwards, but the boys have got used to me going out there now, and they know I'm always hungry and so they arrive at the dance with all sorts of things, seize me the minute I get out of the transport, and proceed to feed me—and I do mean feed me! They literally put the food into my mouth! I tell them they only do it to stop me talking for a few minutes, but I must confess I enjoy it really as after the journey there I am always hungry. They're a grand crowd of boys though, and it's things like that I'm going to miss in Civvy Street, just arriving somewhere at a dance and being sure of a welcome from almost strangers and no questions asked. They just accept you and then after the dance we whizz back and that's that for another week.

Actually I'm seeing them all again this afternoon as their team is playing ours at football on their ground and I'm going over to watch. Quite honestly I don't know who to support as I know quite a number of both teams! I think I'll support the Navy though in true traditional fashion.

To-morrow night I should be off to Brussels, so I shan't write again before I go, but will send a card or something from there.

By the way I don't know whether or not I've told you, but I've sent off another food parcel and addressed it to Brackla as by the

time it is delivered you're sure to be there.<sup>80</sup>

By the way (that's the second time I've said that) we've a new girl in the Typing Pool named Brenda Vaughan and she lives in Netherfield Gardens.<sup>81</sup> Do you know her or her people at all? She's an awfully nice girl, plumpish and fresh complexioned with brown hair and as she's only been here a day or so I haven't actually had a chat with her yet.

When you've completely moved I'm going to start sending parcels of clothes etc home as otherwise when I'm demobbed I'll have far too much to carry. So you can watch out for a stream of little parcels!

I must fly now because the transport for the match goes at half past one and I've to get back and clear the grate and light the fire and so on (with old Ginge's help, of course!) and have lunch all before then, so I'll have to steam.

I'm glad to hear that everything's going on so well, and hope it continues to do so. Take care of yourselves and God Bless you all.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Monday 25<sup>th</sup> February 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Whew! Thought I was never going to get started on a good old chat with you. Bet you did too. Well, are we all safely installed in our new abode? You must write and tell me all the details in your next letter. I'm addressing this one to Brackla like you said.

The faithful old Diary says I haven't written you a proper letter since 12<sup>th</sup> Feb and that's awful. Anyway, I'll begin from there.

On Jacqueline's birthday I went to a St. Valentine's Dance in high hopes, but it was quite an ordinary affair and although I enjoyed it I had expected some sort of special carnival dance and didn't get it!

We were still in the 'no water' stages then, and on Friday I went out to the airfield at Buckeburg to the usual weekly dance and had a very nice evening.

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80 'Brackla' was the name of the hotel in Leed Street, Sandown, Isle of Wight, which Bess and Stan Bones had taken over with the assistance of Grace and Harry Prior. Joan joined them once demobbed.

81 Netherfield Gardens is a residential road in Barking, Essex.

On Saturday, as I told you in my previous letter, I went over there again to see the Air Force play the Navy at football and I'm sorry to say we lost 6-3! Still we had a lovely tea of chips and ham afterwards!

Sunday night at half-past seven we (Jean<sup>82</sup> and I) left the Wrennery and began the trek to Brussels. We went to Bad Oeynhausen by road and then caught the train to Brussels. The journey was quite comfortable except that we were put in a carriage full of Poles and they didn't stop talking (in Polish) from the time we got in until the time we got out I swear. Still eventually we got to sleep through it all. We stopped at about 2am at Krefeld and had breakfast! Honestly I'm living the most peculiar existence these days. Anyway we were hungry and had porridge, bacon and eggs, bread and butter and marmalade and tea, and then on without a break to Brussels. We arrived at about two minutes to ten in the morning and had time to go to the Hotel Cecil (the YWCA) check, in, get our rooms, have a bath and unpack before lunch.

The lunch was wonderful, and indeed all the time we were there the meals were excellent. The waiters soon got to know us quite well, because we asked for water with every meal and that seems to be most unusual. One queer thing that we did have which I loved was Chicory. I'd always connected it with coffee somehow, but we had it as a vegetable with roast meat and baked potatoes, and it was delicious. I asked (in my beautiful(?) French) the waiter what it was and he said "Chicre" so I presume that's what it was!

That afternoon we explored and found the shopping centre and also located the Montgomery Club. This is an enormous NAAFI only it isn't like the usual run of NAAFIs. It used to be a Belgian royal palace and it's a magnificent place. The rooms are beautifully furnished and decorated and there are lovely flowers everywhere. Tulips, daffodils, lilac and all sorts of lovely kinds of flowers. There's a dining room, a tea lounge, billiard rooms, table tennis rooms, rest rooms, a library, a hairdressers' and beauty parlour, music rooms and practice rooms for those learning the piano—it's honestly amazing.

In the evening we went to the other big Service Club there called the 21 Club. There's a grand dance floor there and two bands and the whole thing is very gay but much too crowded. We weren't very keen on the place really so left early, and as we were walking back to the hotel, through brightly lighted streets, with

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82 Wren Jean Howard, not Irvine.

dozens on coloured lights and neon signs flashing on and off, I heard someone calling "Joan, Joan", so I turned around and there were two of the boys from the airfield at Buckeburg! They'd been on seven days leave and were going back the next night. Of course I was more than pleased to see them and they took us under their wing then and there and showed us a few of the city's more select night spots and then took us back to the Hotel. We got in just before twelve and had arranged to meet them at 9.30am the next day!

Bright and early we appeared (incidentally, the whole time we were there it rained and on the last day of our stay it snowed!) and we went shopping in earnest. They took us back to the Monty Club for lunch and then we went to the cinema in the afternoon seeing James Stewart and Margaret Sullivan in "The Shop Around the Corner".

They had to go back at seven that night so Jean and I went to the Ensa Garrison Theatre and saw a very good play called "Just Married"—it was a farcical comedy really and was very funny.

The next day we shopped all day and explored even more of Brussels and in the evening again went to the cinema this time seeing Rosalind Russell and Melvyn Douglas in "Married but Single" which was very funny.

The next day our programme was the same, we wandered around Brussels sightseeing and shopping at the same time, and caught the train back at eight o'clock that evening. We had a very comfortable journey back and arrived at a little after ten the next day at Bad Oeynhausen having again broken the journey at Krefeld for 'Breakfast'.

The city of Brussels itself is quite nice but there's no comparison with Paris at all. As a matter of fact, to be honest, I much prefer London to Brussels. I bought some photographs so you'll be able to see what it's like for yourselves. One thing that amazed and amused me is that they sell a terrific number of 'hot dogs' at night in the streets. On every corner they stand with their barrows and sell them, and they're delicious. They're new crisp rolls, hot sausages with mustard and onions! Another thing (keeping to food) that I loved were the Brussels Sprouts. They're much smaller than those we get at home, the biggest being the size of a grape and most of them being much smaller than that!

In the way of shopping I bought for myself three pairs of gloves and two pairs of silk stockings. I bought a kind of Meccano set for David and a teddy bear for Jacqueline at the Gift Shop run by the

NAAFI and they send them home straight away for you, so Geg will receive a parcel addressed to Jacqueline, inside which will be those two things. If you could explain this to her as she'll wonder why Terry hasn't got anything, but I got a little dog that moves when you press a little button for him at a civilian shop and haven't sent it off yet. I found toys very difficult to get and also I hadn't the remotest idea what to get Paddy as it seems to be a city that caters for women shoppers only! In the end I got a penknife. I got stockings for Mum, Bess and Grace too. I also found a sweet little silk frock and bought it for Jacqueline for her birthday and a leather wallet for Paddy for his birthday, but when you'll see all these things I don't know as I'm not sure about the regulations for getting them home yet.

I think that about takes care of my Brussels trip, but if anything more occurs to me I'll let you know later.

When I arrived back I found that Ginge had been to Berlin in the meantime to attend a meeting there for the Admiral and had just got back. That night I went to a dance at the airfield at Buckenburg and again had a lovely time.

On Saturday I had a half day and so did Ginge and we went to bed for the afternoon—I, because I was so tired, and Ginge because she wanted to rest her leg. She played hockey on the Friday and fell and took the skin off her knee and ground the asphalt of the pitch into it and it was paining her a lot.

On Saturday evening we both went to an Engagement Party given by one of the Wrens in our office, Margaret Burdon, who got engaged to John Hall, one of the Marines on the camp.

Yesterday morning Ginge's leg was so bad that I made her go to Sick Bay and they kept her in. I went to see her lunch time and again last night and she's got it strung up in a sort of cradle affair and it's giving her a lot of pain apparently. It's swollen badly up the rest of her leg now and personally I'm afraid she's got water on the knee although they say she'll be OK by about Wednesday and don't seem very worried about it in Sick Bay.

I, once more, have been 'diverted' down below to Ginge's job again—honestly I never seem to be in the pool these days. I'm either away on a job, or away on leave, or doing someone else's job or something. Still I don't mind really, 'cept that I'm a good deal harder worked down here than in the Pool!

I once said "Everything happens to me"—and I was right! Guess what's happened now? Once of the boys breezed up to me this morning and said that he'd been asked to ask me to be



bridesmaid at a wedding out here! Imagine it! He, apparently, is to be Best Man and the Bridegroom whom I know, but not very well, wants me to be Bridesmaid! I gather that he's marrying a German girl whom he's been engaged to since about 1936 or something queer, but at the moment I'm in a complete haze and daze about it. I've said I'll do it though, and will let you know the details later.

Think that's about all my news so I'll now turn to Paddy's letter of 15th Feb which was waiting for me on my return.

I'm glad you got the parcel safely. What a pity it didn't have peaches in it! Still we'll see what happens next time shall we?

Better still is the news about Mum's arm and ears. I'm very relieved to know they're so much better.

With regard to the party, no, on-one told my fortune—I saw to that and kept well in the background!

So pleased to hear that Charlie will soon be home—gosh, I bet Geg's pleased too! It's a good thing he's better now though as the climate there's so bad it's a wonder he's kept as fit as he has really isn't it?

I won't have to take over Thelma's job after all because Edith Baker one of the girls in the pool has been made a Petty Officer and she'll be in charge. She's a very nice girl so we should be quite happy under her and of course it suits me personally so much better.

The rivers here have now returned to their normal places, and the floods are subsiding, although many fields are still covered with water. Some of the girls took snaps of the floods and I'm trying to get some prints of them.

I sent a card to Jacqueline, but she doesn't seem to have received it. The tea party sounded lovely—wish I'd been there!

My love to Geg and the kiddies when next you write or see them.

Must go now because I've a lot of signals to file. Take care of yourselves, and God bless you all.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx



Figs 6.53 & 6.54. Floods in Minden, February 1946. Photographs by Joan Prior.  
Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> February 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Received your letter Bessie yesterday and am taking advantage of a rare spare moment to scribble a few lines in reply.

I can well imagine the panic stations at home and Ginge & I thought and talked of you on "Moving Day"—gosh, what a nightmare it must have been! I can hardly wait to hear the details as, if previous "moving days" are anything to go by, something is sure to have gone wrong. Either Jimmy creates complications, or Mum loses her handbag, or something!

Your shopping has honestly been blessed hasn't it? You seem to have got just the things you've wanted all round. I'm awfully pleased because usually these days shopping is a thankless task & it's nice to know that it's sometimes a lucky day!

Thanks a lot Mum for the divan (once again) and also for the new eiderdown—I remember the bedspreads very well & like them very much—& green is still my favourite colour, although nice pinky shades are running it a close second now.

Millie certainly has worked like a Trojan from the sound of things. I bet you're all jolly pleased she was able to help so much.

I might have known that the workmen would arrive! They always choose the most difficult moments don't they?

That one particular morning was funny wasn't it? As you know Ginge's in Sick Bay & as she doesn't know which way to best kill time I gave her your letter to read & she laughed & laughed over it!

The good news about Mum's ears and arm still keeps coming I'm glad to see. I hope the arm improves more rapidly though.

How nice of Flo & Bob to buy Jacqueline a little suit. How's their babe by the way?

Yes, it's very true, that I'll be luckier than most on account of having so many people in the house, but of course after one's been in Civvy Street for a while I s'pose you get adjusted to it again.

How nice of Mr. Eyre to 'organise' the cutlery for you like that—it is a help.

I've had a chat with Brenda Vaughan & of course she knows you quite well, but I haven't seen much of her as she's in the Typing Pool & since she's arrived I've been doing Ginge's job & have lost touch. She's a very nice girl though, & wishes to be remembered to you.

As I'm writing this I'm looking out on to a snow-covered world. It really looks very pretty & strangely enough it isn't very cold.

Talking of colds, I seem to have got a really lovely one, but I can't complain I s'pose, as it's ages since my last.

Ginge seems to be progressing & a good deal of the swelling on her leg has gone down, although she still can't bend it at all. They thought it was fluid at first, but have now decided against that & as the swelling seems to be subsiding it seems they're right. She sends her love & hopes the move goes along O.K.

This wedding I was telling you about seems to be proceeding apace. I saw the bridegroom this morning & he says my dress will be ready this afternoon, he thinks, & the shoes are being made now! It's a funny business though because as far as I can gather he's marrying a German girl whom he knew when he lived in Germany before the war, in 1936 I think he said. She's from Hamburg, but he's got her a house in Minden & everything seems to be cut & dried so to speak, although I understood that our boys weren't allowed to marry Germans.

They're having a big reception afterwards in Minden Town Hall as well, so I s'pose it's all right. But honestly I do get myself mixed up in some queer situations! Will let you know more in due course!

I went to the cinema on Monday night & saw a peculiar film called "Flame of the Barbary Coast" starring John Wayne & Anne Dvorak & didn't enjoy it all that much. The usual Barbary Coast story & the San Francisco earthquake etc.

Tonight I hope to go to see "A Place of One's Own" with James Mason, Margaret Lockwood etc. which should be quite good.

Must get on with some work now, so will say Au Revoir.

Good settling-in, in the new home, God Bless, & take care won't you?

All my love,

Joan

Xxxx

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Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> March 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

Well, how'd the move go? I bet it was quite a job, thinking of everything—& it being so far too!

I'm doing all I can to squeeze in another leave, but at the moment it's not very hopeful.

Quite a lot has happened since I last wrote & I'm afraid I've been very pressed for time—hence the delay in writing.

Last Wednesday I saw "A Place of One's Own" starring Margaret Lockwood, James Mason & Barbara Mullen & thoroughly enjoyed it.

On Thursday I spent the evening with Ginge & on Friday too. She was in Sick Bay all on her own & of course found the time lagged with no-one to speak to. During all this time I was, of course, doing her job.

On Saturday afternoon I visited her & in the evening went to the Ship's Company Dance which was a great success & which I enjoyed very much.

On Sunday I paid my last visit to Sick Bay, & in the evening did some embroidery.

Ginge was back at work on Monday & I "handed over" to her in a short while—only to be grabbed by the man in the office next door to Ginge. His secretary, a Second Officer, WRNS, was going on leave on Tuesday & he wanted me to deputise (I haven't had any time to think straight since!)

Monday night I saw (for the third time!) "Frenchman's Creek". We seem to be getting a run of films we've seen before.

Tuesday night I did some dhobeying & last night saw "The Woman in The Window"—another good film.

Just now I've a pile of work waiting, so I must finish this later.

That's better. Yesterday—of all things—I got put on the "staff" of the Ship's Newspaper! I'm dealing with everything concerning WRNS—& believe me it takes some doing! I tell you—everything happens to me!

I've got so many letters to write I don't know which way to turn. I've had so many this last week. Two from Bill Porter, another from Tommy, one from Reg Wood (Britannic fame) one from Bob (Nobby) Snell, and so on. So you can see I'm beginning to get desperate. In the normal way I'd rattle them off on the typewriter, but I hardly like to with a Captain, RN sitting in the same office, so I'm resorting to the pen and paper in your special case, & just leaving the others for the moment.

Yesterday afternoon, I had to sew on his medal ribbons! Goodness knows what this afternoon will bring forth, and I've got to have my Magazine columns ready by Saturday morning!

The weather's been very grim here lately, with continuous snow & ice, so everything looks very pretty & everything feels very cold.

I'm afraid I'll have to say 'bye now, as I've 'slacked' long enough for one day. Do write soon & tell me all about the move.

Till the next time,

God Bless & Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> March 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie &amp; Stan,

I expect by now you're all wondering what on earth has happened to me, but I'm afraid I've been so rushed that I haven't been able to settle down, since exactly a week to-day, to write to you.

As I told you in my last letter, I'm now temporarily working for Captain Lloyd—& believe me it's a really full-time job!

Last Friday Ginge & I had our hair washed & set, down in the town of Minden, by the Germans, and they did it very well too. Ginge actually had hers permed, but mine of course was only shampooed. Guess how much it cost me? I'll bet you were wrong! The equivalent of 1/-! Isn't it amazing? Just shows how much profit they make at home, doesn't it?

On Sunday afternoon Capt. Lloyd invited me to his house for tea, & I went, taking my embroidery with me. I had a simply lovely tea, with real fresh honey from Denmark thrown in! We had a good old chat & listened to the wireless, & then I came back for supper.

On Monday night I decided it was time for a break for entertainment, so went to see "Out Of This World"—which I believe Bessie's seen.

On Tuesday I went to the Handicraft Exhibition (more about that later) and last night saw another film "Indiscretion" starring Barbara Stanwyck & Dennis Morgan.

To-night, as you can see, I'm getting down to this.

During all this time, apart from my office work, which keeps me jolly busy, I've had other things thrust upon me—they've made me a reporter on the staff of our Ship's paper "The Minden Mainbrace"! So of course I have to spend a lot of time writing articles, getting 'news' & so on. Hence my visit to the Handicraft Exhibition! I certainly have to keep my eyes & ears open & have to include all arrivals, demobs, drafts, engagements etc of all the Wrens.

Then I'm on the Mess Committee & people keep slipping up to me & saying "Why can't we have coffee after lunch?" or "The light won't work in my room"! & so on, so that keeps me jumping too.

I'm writing this in the Fo'c'sle whilst waiting for the gramophone recital to commence—I'm anxious to hear it because they're playing Debussy's "Claire de Lune" which I love.

That's most of my news except that by the time you get this I'll

have a new “boss”—in fact, much too our disappointment, we all will. Admiral Burrough has been made Commander-in-Chief, The Nore, and is going on Saturday & taking his Secretary, John Ellerton, with him! We are having a new man, Vice Admiral Walker, who's got a hook for a hand on one arm! Ginge & I (Ginge more particularly) are very upset because we know them so well, and they've always been very friendly to us.<sup>83</sup>

Guess that's about all my news for now, so I'll turn to your letter of 4<sup>th</sup> March, and also one that I've just received dated 11<sup>th</sup>.

To start with, I was amazed to know that it only takes about three-and-three-quarter hours (or at least under 4) from Waterloo!<sup>84</sup> That's not at all bad is it? However, the next part of your story isn't so smooth running is it? How downhearted you must have felt after coming all that way & finding no beds. I was very sorry too for Stan over the actual removal—what a good thing he's got a lot of patience.

I can imagine so well all of you on your hands & knees & with brooms and dusters making the place look spick & span, and I shall make a special point of noticing the tiled deck (I mean floor) in the hall. I'm sure the whole place will look charming. I'm just longing to see it!

I'm glad Jimmy managed the journey quite well & behaved nicely.<sup>85</sup> I hope when it's my turn, I do the same!

There's no more news of the wedding except that they're awaiting permission still.

The news of Mum's arm is jolly good—I'm so pleased it's really making headway after all this time.

Now for your second letter. My goodness, yes, of course Bessie would be forgiven—if there were anything to forgive! The apologies are graciously accepted, and I understand perfectly what a busy time she must be having, so shan't expect to hear from her for a wee while.

When I'm home, I'll help her with all that sort of thing (mail

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83 As Madsen reports, 'the First Sea Lord demanded major reductions in establishments and personnel by April 1946. Consequently, the position of British Naval Commander-in-Chief Germany officially came to an end. On 15 March Burrough handed over command to Vice-Admiral Sir Harold T.C. Walker, RN, who adopted the designation of Vice-Admiral Commanding British Naval Forces Germany. [...] Burrough reviewed the Royal Navy's achievements in control and disarmament of the *Kriegsmarine* during his tenure [...] with great satisfaction'. Chris Madsen, *The Royal Navy and German Naval Disarmament*, pp. 144–145.

84 From London's Waterloo Station to the Isle of Wight, via Portsmouth (train and ferry).

85 Jimmy the cat!

& so on). As a matter of fact, I have been seriously considering not taking a job this summer at all, but helping you & “having a rest” from set hours & “Aye-aye, Sir” and so on. I know it’s lazy of me, but since I’ve been in the Wrens only Ginger knows how hard I’ve worked because only she has done the same—the others don’t realise how near to breaking point we came—nor how tired we both feel when the pressure slackens, as it does now & then & more and more recently. You see, we two seem to bear the brunt of everything, and I shall most certainly need to take quite a long rest so to speak. But I know if I “seize up” altogether, it will not do me any good, nor will I be happy doing nothing, so I thought I could help you & help myself to recover at the same time. It’s only a thought, and knowing myself, I’m quite likely to have decided otherwise by the time I am demobbed, but at the moment that’s how I feel.

My goodness, what a lot of hard work you have put in already. I hope you’re none of you overdoing it & getting worn out—‘specially you Mum—you’re such a demon for doing everything twice! (Missed me!).

When I was in Brussels I saw the most delicate and lovely glassware (tumblers, wine & cocktail glasses and so on) and longed to buy some for you because it was all so ridiculously cheap, but I was afraid of it getting broken either on the journey back to Germany with me or on the way to you in England.

I’m pleased to hear that the birds are with us once again. I can imagine how pleased Mum is too. How’s the garden? You haven’t told me what it’s like at all Paddy.

I’m so glad Charlie is so near to coming home again. I had a letter from Geg & so have all their latest news.

I’ve had yet another letter from Tommy, written on 25th February & as he’s in Ceylon that’s not bad is it? He’s a Sergeant now, by the way. I must confess, however, that I don’t understand it at all. He doesn’t write me for ten months, and then I get three letters in about a fortnight! Isn’t it queer? Who said women were unpredictable?

I’m afraid it’s time for me to lay my head on my pillow now—the loveliest moment of my day I always think—Ginge & I have to be in the office at 8.15am tomorrow, so I must get plenty of sleep while I can!

Goodnight. Sleep well, and take care of yourselves all the time. Don’t work too hard please, though knowing you all, that’s a futile request. God Bless everyone at “Brackla” and with you all say “Roll on the time when I’m living there!” I’m going to do so many things (in theory!) this summer I can hardly wait. I want to learn



to swim; and I'm going to sunbathe (when there's any sun!); & I want to continue dancing & reading; and I want to learn to play the piano and to ride. I think that's all—it's enough isn't it? Seriously though, I would like to make all those things a part of my life, so there's no harm in trying is there? Oh, & I forgot—music too. I'd like to begin to collect a gramophone library as well as a book library. I know you're always saying I've too many books, but I thought if I joined a really good Book Club, I'd acquire good books gradually, but regularly.

Anyway, I must go now, I've rambled quite far enough—you've surprised me in a pensive mood to-night & I wandered on and on as a result.

All my love  
From  
Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Monday 18<sup>th</sup> March 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

This may have to be just a quick short note, so in case it is I'll get off my chest the main reason for writing, right away.

This morning I send a parcel off addressed to you. It's in blue & white paper & is box-shaped. Well, the point is, you can open it or not as you please, but the stationery inside took my fancy in Brussels, & is for me. OK? Thanks. I also sent off Geg's parcel with the baby's frock in it & hope it arrives safely.

Last Friday the new Admiral arrived—complete with hook—and also the new Secretary.

In the afternoon I went to a Mess Committee Meeting & took the minutes & haven't had time to type back the minutes yet!

In the evening, I, as usual, went to B.151 airfield & had a very nice time there.

On Saturday morning the C-in-C said goodbye to us & left. Ginge went down to the airfield with them & saw them off.

We both had a half-day and lit the fire after lunch & stayed in all afternoon and evening.

Yesterday was one of the loveliest days imaginable. The first really fine, warm, sunny day we've had. St Patrick's Day too! I had a half-day and one of the boys from B.151 came into Minden & met me & took me out to tea at the Malcolm Club, Buckeburg. We had a nice time there & then came back into Minden to the

cinema in the evening. We saw a good film too. "Junior Miss"—it was very amusing.

To-night Ginge & I are going to cut out our dresses, suits or what-have-you. I don't know what to make with my grey.

I think that's about all my news. Oh, the letter you forwarded to me was from the YWCA. They've been so good to us over here that I thought I'd like to keep in touch with them after demobbing.

Can't stop for more just now. God Bless, take care, and keep smiling.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

How are we? Good. Now let's see, I wrote you on Monday, didn't I? Well, Monday night Ginge & I began dress-making (?) & we cut out suits and sat & tacked furiously in odd places and at odd times until our next class (Wed for me).

On Tuesday I sent a postcard to Johnny Mills giving him our I.O.W. address, because he said he'd send me a copy of both books when they come out in April, so if a couple of books arrive for me, don't send them on, just keep them please.

On 5<sup>th</sup> January (according to my faithful Collins Naval Diary—what would I do without it?) I wrote to Keyser-Bandar about the two pairs of FF stockings every ex-Service woman is s'posed to get. The scheme is that they send a card enabling one to get them, to one's home address. I've never heard from you that you've ever received some, so I wrote on Tuesday morn & queried it, and also gave my new home address, so if that comes, hang on to that also, please.

On Tuesday night I saw a rather poor film "Czarina" with Talulah Bankhead.

On Wednesday Ginge was Duty Leading Wren & I went along to dress-making. I had the first fitting, alterations were made & I began re-tacking—it seems to go on indefinitely!

On Thursday I was Duty Ldg Wren so that put an end to any intended activities.

On Friday (last night) I went to the weekly dance at B.151

airfield.

This morning 2/O White came back, so I'm once more in the good old Typing Pool!

Ginge's gone to a football match this afternoon so I've done all my outstanding washing & right now I'm going dressmaking again. Will finish this later.

Here I am again! Went dressmaking—& much to my amazement it's looking jolly nice—but still a long way to go of course.

Tonight I've just had my hair washed & set & am now sitting on the bed writing this in my 'jamas. I've done my exercises—& thereby hangs a tale! I moaned a bit when I was measured for my suit, so Ginge said "Why don't you stop moaning & do something about it?" From then on I gave it thought, and yesterday decided to have a shot at harmless slimming! I do four exercises every night—only takes five minutes—and watch what I eat (as far as I can here) and how much I eat. For instance, as it's no longer very cold, I've given up porridge at breakfast. You know at home I never eat a big breakfast, while here I always have a plateful of porridge, then a fried cooked breakfast, then toast & jam & tea. Honestly, it's no wonder I've put on weight! So—no porridge. Next, no elevenses! I still have tea, but nothing to eat. Next, I have lunch, but—no biscuits & chocolate back in the cabin afterwards! Next, tea in the afternoon, but nothing to eat! Next & last, no soup before supper. I just eat supper, sweet and toast—which is enough of a second dinner a day for anyone, so I'm told! How long it'll keep up for I don't know, but I feel fine on it so far, but can't see myself doing it at home on your cooking!

Am trying to get to Brussels again, this time with Ginge, on 8th April—but I'm not yet sure whether they'll let me go on account of it being so soon after my last trip. Will try to get you some more stockings there, so could you please let me have your sizes next time you write, just in case I go. Last time I got different sizes ranging from eight-and-a-half to 10—& hope they'll all fit one of us, but I would like to know for certain please.

Ginge sends her love to you all and hopes everything continues OK at Brackla.

Oh, have just received your letter of 19<sup>th</sup> March, Bessie—thanks a million but, boy, will it take some answering! Must have a wash now though.

Back again. My goodness, 200 letters in three weeks, ain't hay! How do you do it?

I'm sorry to hear that Mum's arm is so queer still—it has been a long job.

I'm so glad you're eating more now Mum, too—and getting more milk to drink—it'll do you the world of good.

Thanks for the invitation to help a little & laze, but we must discuss it seriously when I'm home, because I'm developing quite an interest in the whole business & shall probably get quite busy of my own accord once I've had about a month of lazing. Still, it's nice to know I can please myself for a while anyway. I wish there was something I could do for you all now, when it's so hard for you all—I feel so inadequate out here. But if there is anything, do let me know please would you?

Yes I know only too well what furniture moving can be like—I've done quite a bit of it in my time & I generally have the same trouble—helpless with laughter!

The garden sounds marvellous & I'm longing to see it! It seems such a long while since I've been in a really nice one.

My goodness, what a delightful surprise the gramophone was! You do spoil me you know! Thanks a lot—it's just what I've wanted, but please no more presents like that—you mustn't keep spending your money on me, buy something nice for yourselves.

Gosh, you do seem to have been lucky with your shopping. Wilton stair carpet! It's amazing!

Ginge thanks you for the invitation. We'd love to celebrate our BEMs! The only snag is that she's due for leave early in April (I have to do her job while she has it) & then not again till she's demobbed in September, but will have to see what we can arrange somehow. On her next leave in April she has to go to Mollie's as Mollie (her cousin) is expecting a baby & wants Ginge there to look after the family.

Gosh, the bookings are good, aren't they? I'm so glad & am looking forward to being able to help too.

It's a jolly queer feeling you know not being able to visualise home at all—especially when I'm so soon to see it. I can't picture it at all, except from your descriptions of course.

Can we see the sea at all or is it tucked away out of sight?

Must go now as I'm so sleepy.

God Bless you all, take care of yourselves, and heaps of love from Ginge.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan

Here I am once again! Please ignore the colour of the paper—it's what Peggy sent me for Christmas & is really lovely paper, if only it weren't for the colour.

Last Sunday I went to a dance at B.116 airfield (as distinct from B.151 where I usually go) & we had a delightful time. It takes about an hour and a half to get there, but as I say, it proved to be worth it.

Incidentally, the reason this is being written & not typed is because we're so very busy in the office I just haven't time there nowadays.

On Monday night I went to the cinema and saw "The Wizard of Oz" with Judy Garland. As I'd never seen it before I was quite amused by it.

On Tuesday evening leather-work classes started & I went along & am now making a hand-bag! If it turns out OK, it's for you Mum, but don't bank on it as I've never had anything to do with this sort of thing before. (It's dark brown calf).

On Wednesday I went to the cinema and saw Abbott & Costello in "The Naughty Nineties" and laughed a good deal, but it's the same as their usual stuff really.

I also had a letter yesterday from Johnny Mills to say that the publishers want to combine his two books into one volume & also want him to add to it, so it won't now be ready till the Autumn!

Yesterday morning our 'Gift Shop' opened & I bought myself a pigskin-backed clothes brush, & I also bought a leather photo-frame & a wallet (I bought a wallet last time it opened, so I'm getting quite a little stock of gifts for you all at home).

The weather here has been simply glorious these last few days, & we've had plenty of sun.

Haven't heard from you for some little time, but I s'pect you're jolly busy one way and another just now. Never mind, I'll soon be home now.

Till then, God Bless and take care of you all.

All my love

Joan

Xxxx

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> April 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie & Stan,

I received your letter of 28<sup>th</sup> March last night, and am snatching a brief moment to start to reply although I'll probably have to break off before long to do a spot of work.

I say, what a pickle we're in about the Kayser-Bondor business! I shan't do anything about it for a bit, and presumably they'll either reply to me, or you, to the effect that they've already sent me a chit, or they'll send another. In any case, I'll deal with it then. So don't forget to let me know if you hear from them at all please.

Ginge expects to go on leave about the 17<sup>th</sup> April and of course I'll be going down to do her job. Incidentally, the demob has now been changed by Admiralty Order so that my group comes out between 9<sup>th</sup> April and 20<sup>th</sup> May—and, we've been 'warned' that it'll be nearer 20<sup>th</sup> May than 9<sup>th</sup> April because 'they don't know what they're going to do with the Wrens', and I s'pose are going to hang on to us for as long as they can. Still, unless it's further changed by signal I'll definitely be a civvy by 20<sup>th</sup> May. In any case I shall have to wait until Ginge's leave's over.

I'm so glad we can see the sea from some of the rooms and that it's near enough to hear anyway.

I am so sorry about Charlie not being able to come home after all until the next boat calls in! What a blow it must have been to them all. Never mind, let's hope for better luck next time.

Fancy Jacqueline's ear being bad again! I wonder what it is really. Hope it gets better soon anyway.

Must go now to do a little work, but I'll be back again as soon as possible.

Here I am again for another five minute I expect.

Last Thursday, (when I wrote you last) I went dressmaking in the evening and quite enjoyed it once again.

On Friday, I got ready to go to the dance at B.151 as usual, and the transport didn't come! So I stayed in instead.

On Saturday I had a half day so Edith Baker and I went for a walk on the outskirts of Minden and ended up with tea in the YWCA.

On Sunday I had the whole day off and stayed in bed during the morning. After lunch we set off in the bus with a lot of sailors, marines and wrens, and went out to Rinteln (near Hamelin) and stopped in the country and went rambling and exploring the beautiful wooded hillsides, coming back about an hour later to

where the bus was parked and then we had a picnic tea and after that drove back, arriving in Quarters at about half-past six. It was delightful. The weather was wonderful and we walked miles and all in the most delightful scenery.

In the evening Ginge and I went to a party in the PO's Mess and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

To-night I'm expecting to go to see "Perfect Strangers" in Minden.

Last Saturday evening Ginge and I went to see George Formby in "I Didn't Do It"—and it was terrible. Every time I see a George Formby film I vow I'll never see another, but this time I really mean it; it was just so much trash.

By the way, I'm wanting to send home some more parcels, but just haven't the paper and string. I wonder if it'd be possible for you to send me out any? Don't go to the bother of buying any or anything like that, but I wondered if you'd used any in the moving that was now spare and if so could you parcel it up and send it, as we just can't get any here at all.

Must go now once more, but will continue this to-morrow morning. 'Night now.

Morning everyone! Slept well? Good. Well, last night I trotted down into Minden to see "Perfect Strangers" and what d'you know? It wasn't on! So, that was another evening gone west. Still it was a lovely warm night so we went for a walk and ended up at the usual port of call—the YWCA.

The weather here too has been delightful. A real foretaste of summer, and I've been out without a jacket several times.

Must run away again now, as work won't wait.

Take care of yourselves, and God Bless.

Lots of love,

From

Joan

Xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> April 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

Having written to you on Tuesday, 2<sup>nd</sup>, I discovered later that I'd not answered your letter of 25<sup>th</sup> March, so here goes.

I see that by this time, Stan will be down with you too, and things will finally be settled before the "first arrivals" come. I bet you're getting excited!

The bookings certainly seem to have mounted up, and thank goodness too, because it would have been awful if nothing had happened wouldn't it?

Glad you've made a star on the garden Paddy, and also on the kitchen garden—fresh lettuce, tomatoes and beans are things I only dream about!

I was sorry to hear than Mum's arm had been so bad again! Isn't it a nuisance? Never mind, p'raps it'll be better from now on. Let's hope so anyway.

The trip to Ventnor sounded wonderful.<sup>86</sup> I can see I'll have to explore all these places when I come home. Also, from what the girls here tell me, I'll have to get my 'cycle out. Kay said it took her five hours to get from Yarmouth to Cowes once, and she said all the trains are like that! Is it true? Because she's always pulling my leg and telling me weird stories about the Island. She says that in winter you're often cut off from the mainland by fog and rough weather and so on, and things like that, so probably she's leg-pulling over the trains too!

On Tuesday evening I stayed in and did all my outstanding washing and ironing and had a bath.

Yesterday, I went down to the town in the morning and bought some Easter cards, and then had my hair washed and set. In the evening I collected another issue of material. It was obtained from a German factory once more, and this time it's very thin summery material, quite silky and smooth, but it's not silk. Still it'll make quite a pretty summer frock, I expect. It's quite an indescribable pattern, so I'm enclosing a snicket to show you.

Last night I went to the Ensa show "Radcliffe's Revels". Radcliffe himself is very good but the rest of the show wasn't up to much.

To-night Ginge and I, together with two other girls Pearl Dudley and Daphne Williamson, are going to Brussels! We'll get there about ten o'clock to-morrow morning and will be leaving about seven o'clock on night of Monday 8th, arriving here about lunch-time on 9th. In view of all this I shan't be settling down to write to you a letter of any length at all during this time, I s'pose, but will send you post-cards from Brussels to let you know I'm OK and so on.

I'm going to have a shot at buying you some glassware this time. I should think if I got them to pack it up in the shop and send it straight off it'd be OK, although of course I don't know whether I'll be allowed to. Still, I intend to have a try.

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<sup>86</sup> Ventnor, Isle of Wight. A coastal resort town to the south of Sandown and Shanklin.



This week I reached my target in Savings, having not got a balance of £112.4.1d! But to-day I'll be drawing out £15 to spend in Brussels, so I'll have to wait until next month before I finally reach my £100 target!

Got to go now, because it's nearly lunch time.

Will send you a p.c. to let you know when I arrive safely in Brussels. Till then, take care of yourselves, don't work too hard, and God bless.

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

P.S. Sorry, have just come back from lunch and have forgotten to bring back a piece of the material, but I'll send you a sample when I return from Brussels!

\* \* \*



Fig. 6.55. Hand-painted Easter Card purchased in Minden. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Friday 12<sup>th</sup> April 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

At last! D'you know, we're so busy that in desperation at this moment I've just put what I've done of a job on one side, what's still left to do on the other and am writing this. As the popular

phrase says "I couldn't care less!"

Well, now for the news of my trip to Brussels. Ginge and I and two other girls Pearl and Daphne went, and we left quarters on Thursday evening and went by road to Bad Oeynhausen where we caught the train. We breakfasted at Krefeld at about 2.30am! We arrived in Brussels at about ten o'clock on Friday morning and had nice time to check in at the hotel, change our money, have a cup of tea, bath and change before lunch. After lunch we all went out and shop-gazed. The first afternoon there I always have to do this to get used to seeing so many wonderful things about. Lashings of flowers, ice-cream, cream cakes and dreamlike pastries, clothes, furniture,—oh, everything!

In the evening we went to the Opera House (beautiful place) and saw "Madam Butterfly" which was delightful and very well acted and sung.

On Saturday morning Ginge and Pearl had their hair washed and set whilst Daphne and I went shopping.

In the afternoon we all went to Antwerp and shopped there too. It seems quite a large city, although not so compact as Brussels, but more of a river port.

In the evening we saw a film called "His Girl Friday"—Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant. We'd missed it before and it was jolly good—I laughed till my sides ached.

The next morning, Sunday, the others all did various odd things about the place, but it was so sunny and warm and lovely outside that I couldn't stay in. I walked for about an hour and a half, down to the Gare du Midi and back. There was a market place with the market in full swing when I got there, so I just couldn't resist browsing round and looking at the many and varied wares. I bought some apples and munched these as I went. Suddenly I was accosted by a queer-looking old soul with wispy hair tied up in an old scarf. She had a grubby face and hands and was altogether odd. However, she turned out to be English and had married a Belgian and had lived there for years. I must tell you more about her when I'm home because I can't convey her quaintness on paper. Anyway I managed to get away from her after about ten minutes and got back as promised in time to have morning coffee with the girls. We still had a little time before lunch so we wandered out and round the Botanical Gardens, but they're so small and now I've got used to Kew seemed quite insignificant really.

After lunch we went to the Montgomery Club and showed Ginge the place, because of course she'd not been there before,

and then had tea and went to the tea-dance there.

In the evening we saw another Cary Grant film, but instead of comedy as the night before, this time it was most dramatic. Called "Suspicion" with Joan Fontaine. Very good I thought.

On Monday morning we again shopped (you could go on like that for weeks there!) and in the afternoon we went on an organised tour of the city which we thoroughly enjoyed. We saw so many queer and quaint places that it's impossible to record them all. Parliament, Monuments, Stock Exchanges, Palaces—oh, and Belgium's political and monarchical history is sheer bedlum! The guide told us Belgium had only been independent since 1831 before that Belgium had belonged to Holland, before that to France, before that to Germany, before that to Spain... and so it goes on and on—it fair amazed me. Then he got onto the Royal Palace question. There are several apparently and he told us they were unoccupied now—the King was in Switzerland, and in his own words "the most of the Belgians would prefer it he stay there!" Then we came to a place where he said their ruler lived! Not understanding quite I asked who it was and he said it was Prince Charles, the Regent, who is the King's brother! Isn't it complicated? Apparently he's very popular too.

Then we saw two amazing places, the Japanese Pagoda and the Chinese Restaurant. They were built for the famous Paris Exhibition and were afterwards given to Belgium.

He then showed us the Hotel de Ville (Town Hall) and took us inside into a courtway and while we were all standing round he said to one of the ATS in the party "Are you married?" She replied that she was not and he led her to the centre of the courtyard and made her stand on a large flat round stone and said "You will be married, before this year is out". Apparently it's an old Brussels legend.

Then we all had to go to see what he called "a Brussels superstition" (He pronounced things so peculiarly we were in fits of laughter). Anyway it turned out to be a statue of a man reclining with a dog at his feet and although most of it was dull, in parts it was bright and shining brass as though it had been polished. He told us that if we wished for something we had to touch the man's head, foot and the dog's head, and it would come true and then you could see why parts of it were shining because it's where countless people passing touch it for luck!

Then he took us to see Brussels lace made and I bought a hanky there, just to say that I've got some Brussels lace. It's so expensive normally that I hadn't bought any before.

After the tour we spent the last few hours shopping and then caught the train back.

Having told you so much about shopping I'd better tell you what I really bought. I always feel when I get back that I've got a lot of things I don't really need and aren't much good, but here's hoping anyway.

I got a fountain pen with a gold nib (approx cost in English money £1.10s); a length of material (moss green woollen stuff)—enough to make a skirt (?/-); one pair of fully fashioned civvy silk stockings each for Geg, Mum and Bess, and two pairs for myself. (Prices of those varied a bit, some cost 8/6d others 3/6); a man's wrist watch (sounds mad, but I just had to have the time out here, and I couldn't get a ladies one at a reasonable enough price) It's luminous, has a second hand, is Swiss-made, waterproof, anti-magnetic and made of Stainless Steel and cost £4.10s. So far it's kept perfect time, so I'm hoping I got a good bargain. When I get home I'd like mine repaired and then Dad can have this one; some *Soir de Paris* perfume for Bessie in a transparent Easter egg; some earrings for Geg; a brooch for Mum. It's so easy to shop for women there, and so difficult for men—ties for instance cost about £2 each! I did manage to get a couple of packets of razor blades—and that's about all! Oh, and I got myself a pair of beige all-leather sandals for a little less than £2.5s. I got lots of little odds and ends with the rest of my money, a couple of leather purses, some notepaper, combs, kirbigrips, Easter cards, pencils and so on—and then of course, ice-creams (incidentally they must make their ices with honey because they all taste of it) and cinemas etc.

Oh, I can't tell you how many times I wished it were possible for you all to be with me and to see now the things you haven't seen in years at home. And they're so nice about things. The shop assistants make it seem as though they've been waiting all day for you to walk in and now their day is complete! And the window displays—it's really a fine art. Just now they're all dressed for Easter and they have little rabbits, chickens, Easter Eggs, trees,—oh, all sorts of things. Almost everything is displayed in Easter eggs of varying sizes, and one of the shops even had rows of bells (plaster of course) all swinging backwards and forwards and then at the same time a record on of pealing bells so that it seemed as though these bells were ringing.

And outside one store they had huge lights at night blazing out the words "*Joyeux Paques*"—Happy Easter. They do make so much of it. Another store had little notices on some of the purely "gift" counters, where perfumes and so on were Easterised saying

“Little nothings which you can give with pleasure for the Easter festival”—I’d like to see a shop in London having such a nice thought—and more important, displaying it.

And the flowers in the streets! Lilac, tulips, wallflowers, violets, cowslips, lilies of the valley, hyacinths, and sprigs and branches of fruit blossom.

Last Wednesday I went to see a film called “Dead of Night” which was most peculiar but very good I thought. Had a good cast: Mervyn Johns, Googie Withers, Michael Redgrave, Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne, Sally Ann Howes (Bobby Howes’ daughter) and Roland Culver. Very creepy but awfully well acted.

To-night there’s a Ship’s Company Dance as we’ve been honoured by a visit from the Chatham Division Royal Marine Band! Big ships! They “Beat the Retreat” in Minden yesterday and impressed all the German population thoroughly as they were resplendent in their “blues” and had those white helmets with gold tops you know and of course the drums beating the retreat were most solemn and impressive!

Your letter dated 4<sup>th</sup> April was waiting for me when I got back from Brussels. I don’t know what to do about the Kayser-Bondor Card. Better hang on to both for the time being I think till I get back.

The wireless was right then about the warm spell ending, because here it’s gone very cold again and we’ve having quite a bit of rain too.

Unfortunately I haven’t yet got beyond the initial stages of the leather work as there’s some hold up in getting the glue to stick the lining in with, but I expect we’ll get on OK when that comes. I’m now being initiated into the art of learning to use a machine, although the PO in charge says she thinks I ought to make it by hand as my sewing’s so neat that you can’t tell the difference!

Mum is having a sessions of boils isn’t she? I do hope they soon get better. Why don’t you buy some of those “Curboil” tablets that Dad had when we were on holiday that time and he had a boil? They seemed to do him good didn’t they?

You do seem to have had a lot of work to get through in the house one way and another—I’m so glad the bookings have come in well because the first season is a kind of test really isn’t it? Once that’s over you feel you know more or less what’s coming another time.

I’m sorry about my demob too, but Ginge’s going on leave on 15<sup>th</sup> so she should be back by end of April or beginning of May and after she’s back I can expect to go any time between then and 20<sup>th</sup> which is the latest date.

Must go now because it’s lunch time and I want to get this off in the post.

My love to you all (and Ginge sends hers too!). God Bless, don't work too hard.

Fondest love  
From  
Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> April 1946

My Dear Mum, Paddy, Bessie and Stan,

I received your letter dated 11<sup>th</sup> April on Sunday night, and your Easter cards last night. They were lovely! I knew Bessie had sent the little one because of the daisies on it—thank you very much for both of them, I've got them just in front of the mirror now in the cabin. Such nice words too.

Last Friday night we had a dance and were allowed to wear civvies for it, and we had a marvellous time. I thoroughly enjoyed it. On Saturday I was Duty all day in the office, and in the evening stayed in and did some sewing. On Sunday I was duty all day too. Oh, we overslept in the morning! Put the clocks on an hour on Saturday night, and woke up at 8-15 instead of 7-15 on Sunday morning.

In the afternoon we were told we could go back to Quarters and we'd be 'phoned for it we were wanted, so when I'd had lunch, Ginge (who'd got a half day) and I thoroughly spring-cleaned the cabin. Scrubbed the floor and polished it, and swept and dusted and indeed turned everything out. That's where our balcony come in useful because we just move everything out onto the balcony and then have an empty room to contend with.

In the evening we stayed in, Ginge finishing off her packing, because she went on leave on Monday morning, and I took over her job.

On Monday evening I went to see "The Road to Utopia" the latest Bing, Bob Hope and Dot Lamour film, and thoroughly enjoyed it, although I don't think it was as good as they "Road to Morocco".

On Tuesday morning I had my demob medical, such as it is. The MO just asks you if you feel OK and then signs the papers to say you are!

Yesterday I went to dressmaking class in the evening and am getting along beautifully with the slippers! Remember I had them on my last leave? Well, I've finally started to make them!

That seems about all my news, so now I'll turn to answering your letter.

Glad to hear that you're optimistic about the boat services to

the mainland. Of course, as I told you, I expect she was only pulling my leg.

I'm so pleased that Mum's arm seems to be getting better—it's honestly about time isn't it?

How wonderful the trip round the island sounds! I'd no idea that things like that were coming back into being again. Things certainly are looking up. You'll have to remember all the things that were pointed out to you and then you can point them out to me when I come home.

I'm sorry that Charlie is being delayed so much—perhaps it won't be long now though. I must write to Geg and ask her for a snap of Jacqueline. I sent her a parcel, as I believe I told you, but she hasn't acknowledged it and I'm wondering whether it's arrived safely. I'll need to write and ask her I guess.

My goodness, you are busy on the house aren't you? From what I remember, though, the job will look lovely when it's done, as your combined forces will give it quite a professional touch.

My goodness, by the time you get this your visitors will be installed, won't they? You must let me know how you cope with the first arrivals! I'm glad Mill and Margaret are coming down for Easter, it'll be a nice break for Millie won't it?<sup>87</sup> Give them my love please. I sent their Easter cards to their home address, so I don't know whether they'll leave before the cards arrive, but if so, tell them they're not forgotten.

Thanks for the brown paper and string. You see if I don't send a lot of stuff home that way I don't know how I'm going to carry it all. I've my black suitcase, two kitbags, my little brown case, and two grips or hold-alls that I've got whilst here, and only two hands to manage the whole lot. So if I can get enough stuff home by parcel I'll turn in the kitbags here empty you see.

The violets and primroses sound wonderful. There are quite a lot of flowers out here including daffodils.

Must finish now to go to lunch! Will write again soon, till then,  
God Bless,

Fondest love

From

Joan

Xxxx

PS (Always have one, don't I?)

Could you send (if you've got time) my floral frock that I made

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87 Stan's widowed sister Millie and her daughter Margaret.

last year out to me please? It's not really important, so if you are rushed, don't bother, but I remember that there's something wrong with one of the skirt seams, and the dressmaker here says she could put it right for me if I had it here, so I thought I might as well get the 'professional touch' if poss.

Joan  
Xxxx

\* \* \*

8. 1886 (W) (Established—January, 1946.)

**ORDER FOR RELEASE**

**(W.R.N.S., Retired and Reserve Members of Q.A.R.N.N.S., V.A.D. Members)**

H.M.S. James Halverson Smith  
(Date) 31 May 1946 124 C  
(See Note 1.)

To J. H. Prior (Name)  
A/SG. MR. R. C. (Rank or Rating)  
Official Number 41801

*Insert—*  
"Class A" or "Class B" or "Compassionate" or "Compassionate"

- You are being discharged from Service as a Class B release. (See Note 2.)
- The date of your discharge will be 26 July 1946
- You have been granted leave as follows, starting on the day after the date of this Order :—  

<u>Always</u> foreign service leave expiring on.....	} expiring on the day of your discharge.
<u>20</u> days' resettlement leave )	
<u>10</u> days' transfer leave )	
- You are free to take up civil employment at any time after the date of this Order, which, unless you are being released in Class B, is the date on which your reinstatement rights are effective. (See Note 3.)
- If you are a Class B release you will be transferred to industry for urgent reconstruction work as a.....(Industry Group letters.....) Occupational Classification No.....) and you are to report in person at the local Employment Exchange at..... within 7 days of the date of this Order. You will not be required, however, to take up your reconstruction employment until after your leave has expired, but you may do so if you wish at any time after the date of this Order.
- You may wear civilian clothing at any time after the date of this Order, and you are to cease to wear uniform after the date of your discharge.
- Your home address is noted in official records as follows :—(See Note 4.)  
BARACKA, 1 LEED STREET, SANDHURST, BERKSHIRE
- Your Service Certificate if you are a rating will be sent to you after your discharge.
- You should carry this Order with you until your Service Certificate is received, and you are to produce it when required.

*Delete para. 5 if a "Class A" or "Compassionate" Release.*  
*Insert Exchange noted in personnel address.*

A. G. Halverson Smith  
(Rank).....  
Commanding Officer.

Fig. 6.56. Leading Wren J. H. Prior, 41801. Order for Release, 31 May 1946. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Jeremy Crang explains that, 'Like their male counterparts, the bulk of servicewomen were to be released in groups determined by a combination of age and length of war service (known as category A release) with the oldest and longest serving generally being demobilised before the rest'.<sup>88</sup> Yet priority was accorded to married women over

<sup>88</sup> Crang, *Sisters in Arms*, p. 201.



those who were single, and rather than the 'demob suits' provided for their male counterparts, women were given 'a cash grant and clothing coupons in order to purchase a civilian outfit to suit their individual tastes'.<sup>89</sup> As Summerfield and others have noted, gendered assumptions for both men and women about the return to 'civvy street', underpinned by the Reinstatement in Civil Employment Act (1944) while apparently offering security—an accommodation of those returning from service life—took little account of the changes the experience of war had wrought on individual lives and particularly young adults, for whom it had been a remarkable, dangerous and unpredictable education.

Joan Prior left Minden for the last time on 15 May 1946 and returned to England via Calais and Dover. She was demobbed by the end of that month. Johnny Mills wrote to her subsequently asking if she would consider going down to Cornwall to be his amanuensis. She politely declined. His war stories were never published. Ginge stayed on in Minden until July 1946, turned down an offer to go back to work for General Sir Frederick Morgan, and returned to Swansea and her old job at the City Corporation.<sup>90</sup>

My mother kept only two of Ginge's letters. They say all that needed to be said, perhaps.

L/Wren P.M. Thomas, 59429,  
 Naval Party 1749,  
 c/o B.F.M.O.  
 Reading, Berks

1745-Wednesday 15th May 1946

Hello Joannah,

Well darling, by the time you receive this your troubles as regards the journey at least, will be at an end.<sup>91</sup> That at any rate is one pleasant thought to me as I sit here now.

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>90</sup> 'The Reinstatement in Civil Employment Act of 1944 obliged employers to offer both servicemen and women the civilian jobs they had occupied immediately before their war service on terms and conditions no less favourable to them than if they had not joined the forces'. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>91</sup> Joan left Minden for the last time on Wednesday 15 May, travelled via Calais to Dover, thence to Chatham on 16 May for medical and was given 13 days' leave. She travelled to Sandown, Isle of Wight, to be reunited with her family. She returned to Chatham for demobilisation on Friday 31 May.

Joannie I can't begin to describe my feelings—I've choked back the tears a million times if I have breathed at all. To say I miss you just doesn't describe it. I hear you saying odd things like "You are an old devil, Thomas", and to walk back through from the Mess, through the jumble of jungle that is fast developing is dreadful.

But this is supposed to be letter-of-cheer-like when you arrive home, so let us not be down in the dumps please.

As you can see from the top of my letter it is almost 6 o'clock—this time last night we were dashing through one file after another—see there I go again.

Well, how did you find everything? Did you see John, was the journey too devastating, my dear, and how are you liking "Brackla"? I should love to see your face as you read this—I know it so well already, each expression. Honey I'll just have to keep on the impersonal side, otherwise I shall say things that I know will upset you all over again, so here I go.

Panic reigned (if it does it with a 'g' in it I don't know for sure) well anyway it did, upstairs to-day. Stella had to go off to Herford—Elsie just didn't come in at all, she is out with Andy somewhere, which left the brilliant little P.O. in charge, with Pearl, Margaret, Beryl, Brenda and Rita there, plus Kay. They have had one immediate after another, and the dear little Moira went into Chief Bennison and flapped like a mother who had just seen a horse sit on her baby thrush that "they couldn't cope". He bigheartedly said that if they really found they were in a state he would send somebody in from Registry! That would have finished it for me. If the state hadn't already existed, it would then have come into force a bit sharpish. Anyway they seem to have got through the afternoon, but each and every one of the girls has been dripping to me about Moira—I can imagine too. Kay, Pearl and Rita are all due to go on leave next week, which will leave 3 of them there—I dread to think!!!!

Honey child all I have done is pay my respects to the Aunt all day after our efforts last night—it is getting something monotonous!

Had tea with Joe, Mitch and Mellor,<sup>92</sup> and they all asked to be remembered to you when I wrote.

Well dear with the usualness of the place it is now Thursday, 3.45pm to be exact. I wonder at what stage of distraction you are now?

Last night Pearl, Joe, Mitch and myself when to see "When we are Married", and I'm honestly sorry we didn't go after all, as you would have loved it. I know I enjoyed it and kept thinking you would have

too. Pearl had a typhus and T.A.B.T. in the morning, and was pretty groggy when we got it, but this morning she was completely out—so she stayed in bed. Margaret Goddard too was in the same state, so you can imagine the Typing Pool to-day can't you?

Captain Lloyd wished to be remembered to you, he's sorry he missed seeing you, and wants your address in case he is ever at the Isle of W. (Free cups of tea that's what these people are after—be sure they get no wavy chips!!!).<sup>93</sup> He had heard of the customs episode, and was most surprised at ME. Just saw Captain Behague in the corridor, and he passed me by as if I smelt like the smell on the way down to the N.A.A.F.I. Dear dear me—have I suffered for that!!

I had a letter from Clark last night announcing that Peggy and Jake had become engaged over the week-end, but adding ..... "Peggy's ring aint 'arf as nice as Crimea Churchill". He's rather sweet—I love that man!!!!

Well old thing the retinue returns from Nuremburg this afternoon, so I must away and show willing.<sup>94</sup>

Will write again soon, meantime enclosed from Elsie Redding, she's sorry she forgot to give them to you.

All my love to Mum, dear Dad (now.....) Bessie, Stan and everybody, but largest share for yourself my Sweet—I "goshed-oh-goshed" this morning and everybody thought I was mad.

Write soon dear, and have a lovely homecoming, parcels will be following as soon as I get the strength to carry your last effort into the office. Prior if there is one thing I'll remember about you next to your sweetness, IT'S YOUR BLINKIN' PARCELS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I'm off this time, but def:

All my love dear,

Ginnie

PS Love from Too-Ra-Loo & Flower to yourself & Tico.

\* \* \*

5 Church Park,  
Mumbles,  
Swansea.

Thursday 25th July 1946

Dear Old Joannah,  
And about time too. Overdue by many months. I cannot begin

<sup>93</sup> Who had previously invited Joan to his quarters for tea.

<sup>94</sup> A delegation of officers from Minden had attended the Nuremberg Trials where Wrens performed a variety of roles including transcription and translation.

to make any excuses Joan, because none would be really sufficient reason for this lack on mail on my part. I can though offer some very good runners up, which I think you would put in the copy book as current.

First and foremost I am back at work, hence the typewriter (if it can be called such). Like the Swansea Corporation its outlook is D I M—but perhaps with the aid of your Wren training for deciphering the impossible, and remembering Mrs. Duncan, you will survive. I hope so old girl.

As I say, I am back at work, and how!!!!!! I thought I would come back for a rest Joan. If I tell you I have worked harder within the past 2 weeks than I ever have since I left London and General Morgan, perhaps you will appreciate how things are going. We are at the receiving end of Objections to the proposed new Town and Country Planning. Swansea is to be rebuilt, so they say, but from the objections coming in, I ha ma doots lass. Anyway they have to be scheduled in property, etc., and I imagine I can safely have something to occupy myself from 9.30 until 5.30. They broke the news to-day that “you will have to work overtime in a short time”, whereupon I broke the news back “You’ve had that chum, I’ve done all the overtiming I’m ever likely to do”.

Still enough of that. Glad to get your letter, and to know things are going so well with you all in your new venture. My best regards to your dear Dad and Mum, and Bessie and Stan. I’m really awfully glad that things are going so well Joan. It is bound of necessity to be hard work for you all, but you will have an easy time when the winter comes, and I know you, you will be quite content then to sit back curled up near a roaring fire with a book. So don’t despair- you are off to a flying start all of you, (so will this machine be in a minute)—and between you and me you aren’t missing much of the summer being busy yourselves. I figure that it came (the summer here I mean) about 10.15, one Tuesday morning—I slipped into a shop to buy a paper about that time, and when I came out we had had our summer. It has rained and rained, in fact it is blinking well more like November here—all grey and ‘orrible (with an ‘O’).

Well just to help cheer you up, and to make you love me a bit more, I am enclosing an account of an escapade wot occurred to a friend of yours “You are an old Devil Thomas” I can hear you almost from here.

The paper doesn’t give a true account though Joan. We were all nearly drowned, Uncle Jack and myself especially. I went down three time, and gave up. Clark got me back to the overturned

boat. Thing was we started off for Oxwich, on a lovely morning, with a bit of a breeze, which you need for yachting. All went well for about an hour when up sprang more than a breeze, so we downed main-sail and up jibbed (ahem). Turned around and endeavoured to come back. Swansea Bay is almost a complete horseshoe, and the wind was too strong to allow us to get around the head, so we got blown off our course towards Port Talbot. The Coast Guard Department should definitely get rid of all the beds in their establishment, because short of having Nelson there with a shade over the only good one they couldn't fail to see us. Anyway, no help arrived, so we had no option but to drift. We drifted all-right. We got almost to the shores of Porthcawl, and then all of a sudden we had it. The wind was bearing hard and straight into Porthcawl, and the waves were breaking about 300 yards from the shore. One wave 30 foot high broke on top of the boat and the boat turned three summersaults. The only blessing was that we all came up outside of the boat (which was upturned by this time). The mast broke, and that and the rigging was caught with a rope AROUND MY THROAT. Billy was caught in the sail, Clark got him out of that, Uncle Jack was swept clear of the boat, Clark and Uncle Jack had rather nasty knocks on the head where the boat came down on top of them, but I couldn't move being caught in the ropes of the mast and the boom. Anyway Clark got me out and I swam back to the boat. We were a hell of a way from the shore, still about 300 yards out. Billy and his pal Peter and Clark got back right on the boat, upturned, and Clark was trying to get me on, but each time another 30 foot wave came it washed me right away from the boat. About this time I packed in—I had the impression then “couldn't care less” I had no strength left at all. Anyway I eventually got back to the boat and after everybody was washed off about 5 times the boat started to right itself. Uncle Jack by this time was done in. In fact I just grabbed him in time. I was all in. He couldn't stand when we got him to the shore. As you know he is a member of the lifeboat and a marvellous swimmer, he says he has never seen seas like that in his life. We once ashore (three-quarters of an hour in the water) Clark and I set off for help—we walked for 1½ hours over sandunes (the paper gaily says “people saw us wading ashore”) before we saw anything breathing. Then the first thing we saw breathing was a cow (and he was doing something else besides breathing too).

Eventually we found a works, telephoned the Police, they put me to bed suffering from severe shock, and took all our wet things. Gave Clark a hot drink and then he set off back to the

shore to find the other. I was worried stiff about Uncle Jack. When we left to get help he couldn't stand and was gasping for breath. That was what got me. I know what a good swimmer he is, and I thought things must be bad for him to go down. I honestly caught his hand and pulled him to the side of the boat as he was on his way down, he couldn't open his mouth. Well Clark got back and found them and brought them back to the Works (but by this time 3 hours had gone). I felt sorry for Clark, he had concussion and walked with me for 1½ hours looking for help, all dripping wet and completely exhausted, then walked back to the shore another 1½ hours and then back to the Works, another 1½ hours. The Police had been looking all over the coast for us, the wireless had broadcast, planes were up from Fairwood spotting, and when we got back to Mumbles by taxi from Porthcawl, the whole of Mumbles was out—there were about 50 people around the car when we got out of it.

Anyway Joannah, the old girl is still breathing, but I honestly thought it was the end. I was never so grateful to God in my life as when we all got on to the dry land.

I had my watch on all the time and so far it is still going. Clark had his wallet with all his petrol coupons for our trip, which we had to dry out. I had bell bottoms on too, which didn't help any. Honestly darling I hope nobody ever has to experience what we did. Uncle Jack told us when he got around a bit that we had experienced exactly the same thing as the disaster of the Lifeboat in 1903. Apparently in exactly the same conditions, with exactly the same tide and wind, and the said kind of boat, a lifeboat overturned at that very same spot in 1903, and of 9 in the boat only three reached the shore, the rest were drowned.<sup>95</sup>

So you see old thing, I haven't exactly been doing nowt since I came home. Still everything is O.K. now, we are all fine. I had my first reaction to it last night—when I went through it all in my dreams, but I imagine until I get near the water again the shock will bring that back. I cannot even look at the sea from the bus now—but Clark insists I bathe at the first available time, get my face into the water and I'll be O.K. We shall see. Still don't worry old girl, the old Thomas “the old devil” is O.K.

I was never so glad to see the other old Thomas in my life though.<sup>96</sup> If ever I knew I love that guy I knew it then Joan.

Well, now to let you know what has happened since I came

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<sup>95</sup> The Mumbles lifeboat disaster of 1903.

<sup>96</sup> Ginge's fiancé Clark was also named Thomas.

back. (These typewriters are all dead slow in tension, all words running together, see? Forgive pliss).

Came back, went to Nore, had 14 days leave straight away. Met Whitty whilst there, and got your lovely note, told you that though.

After my leave went back to be demobbed. Met Barry and was in the same cabin as Belle. Belle and I had two days in London, and met Dally and Joey. We had a chance meeting with Dall actually. We popped into the Vega for lunch, and who should be there but old Dall. We 'phoned Joe, and she came up the next day, so we lunched in the Troc, but unfortunately I had to leave them then to get my train. At Chatham I also saw Mary Yeogh and Terry Lovatt, and Marie Edwards came in the day I left.

Wasn't it dreadful about Doreen Marshall? I was stunned. She was such a nice girl too. I honestly didn't know what to do about it.

Well, went over to Admiralty House to see John, found he had gone to play cricket somewhere. Admiral B. also out. Saw the Flags there who was very nice—had heard a lot about this "Ginger", whom Captain Ellerton kept on throwing up when he wanted anything done in a hurry apparently. Anyway Flags told me that I might find them at the Army and Navy that night, so I tried. Went there, found only Admiral Burrough, Lady Burrough and one of the daughters. They were very nice, made me stay with them in the lounge and have a few drinks, and then insisted on driving me back to the W.A.G.S. where Belle and I were staying. I was more disappointed than that (I know there should be two p's in disappointed, but the typewriter skips Joannah, I honestly ain't slipping honey). Where was I, oh yes, John, I made Admiral B. promise to let know the old John bless him the efforts I had made to see him. I must write him sometime.

Apparently they had all been to a re-union of A.N.C.X.F. John and Mrs E. were then dining with Bobby. The Ad said that there were quite a lot of people I would know at the re-union (officers only, no ratings allowed). Leslie Fairburn was there amongst others, but not the Commodore. The Ad was very disappointed about that. Lady Ramsay too was there apparently. Wonder whether Tricia went? Bet she did—can just about see her there now.

Well old girl, must get moving on this letter as it is nearly time to go, and the boss says I have to assist him in painting the bathroom tonight (bless him). We are getting our flat all worked out. Have bought up to present one lovely carpet, bedroom suite, oak gate-legged table, three-piece drawing room suite, kitchen table, and a few chairs (ain't it a scream). Wish you could be with us

some time Joan. This by the way is a Remington, so perhaps you will appreciate my plight.

Well old girl the "day" now is to be 7<sup>th</sup> September on a Saturday. It is to be VERY QUIET Joannah, no reception of any kind, and about 8.30 in the morning. I'm not issuing invitations to anybody, any of the friends in Swansea who want to come to the Church are welcome, but it is almost the same as a register office wedding only the actually ceremony will be in the Church. Clark and I are then going straight away from the Church. Have booked at Ilfracombe for the fortnight.

Now my love, you know that if you would like to come down I would be only too delighted to have you. On the other hand, I know how things are with you there, it is a hellish journey Joannah, and the wedding itself will be all over in a flash. I am not asking you to come down, because knowing you you will then think I will be offended if you don't. I will put it this way. If you yourself would LIKE and can easily manage to be there, all you have to do is let me know old girl, you can stay with me, and we can meet you, and you know I should love to see, but it is honestly to be awfully quiet Joannie, and I know how busy you all are there, and what coming all this long way for just a few hours would involve. So you please don't think I shall think you have forgotten me darling. We know each other well enough, and I think you will know what I'm trying to say. Had it been a real wedding, with a reception afterwards where the bride and groom could have a chat with the guests, then I should have been very insistent that you came, and very disappointed if you hadn't. You let me know what you would like to do Joannie.

And now I am afraid for this letter anyway I must close down.

Remember me to Dad and Mum and Bessie and Stan and everybody. I miss you very much Joan, especially when I hear such things as "Porgy and Bess"—the Inks, or "Dad old Debil Consequences"—also heard "Why is your big head so hot—California". I love those things, they will remain always very dear to me.

Write me soon, will have more time in the next letter for consequential chatter. Don't worry about any of us about the business of the shipwreck. Thought you might like to see though that "Thomas, the old devil" finally made the headlines!!!!

All my love and write soon please.

Ginnie.

P.S. Haven't the heart to read this through Joan, hope it is O.K. Am longingly looking at the REMINGTON then at the edge of the table!!!!



Ginge married Clark Thomas on 7 September 1946. Joan didn't attend. They remained in Swansea for the rest of their lives.

In 1947, Joan rekindled her relationship with Ron Smith, who completed his apprenticeship as a lithographic printer with Messrs George Berridge and Co., 174 Lower Thames Street, after leaving the army. They were married in Barking on 24 April 1948 and settled in Sandown, Isle of the Wight with her parents, Grace and Harry Prior, just down the road from hoteliers Bess and Stan Bones at 'Brackla'. Ginge didn't make the wedding but sent a telegram.

Ken Philbrick returned home to Brighton and married Ivy Rose Stone in April 1949.

Bill Porter eventually married Alice Boller of Mogilla, Bega Valley, New South Wales in 1951. On his retirement from the Navy in 1958 (at the rank of Chief Petty Officer), they settled in Fairfield, New South Wales. Bill never returned to England. Joan and Bill never met nor wrote again. However, Joan kept Bill's letters, whereas there are none from Ron. Admittedly he couldn't, didn't write much. He was a man of few words. But she had words enough for them both. Besides, she didn't need his letters because she had him. What need of keepsakes except as reminders of what is lost?

John Fitzmaurice Mills turned up years later presenting TV series for budding artists. He published books on the subject and guides to antiques and collectables too. As far as I am aware, my mother never saw him on television nor made the connection with the name. After all, by then he was a shadowy figure from another life. Long forgotten.

110, Westcombe Park Road,  
Blackheath, S.E.3.

19th March, 1948.

My dear Joan,

I know that I should reply formally to your wedding invitation, but I wanted to write you a little note, so away with formalities!!

First of all I should love to come to your wedding and its awfully nice of you to ask me - I have made a note of the 24th April and I shall be there, complete with confetti.

I really am awfully pleased that you are marrying Ron - I know I've never met him, but I'm sure he is the right one for you and I was quite upset when things went wrong between you. I expect you are awfully busy getting everything ready - are you getting married in white?

I got engaged to John on my birthday and we are hoping to get married in October. I really feel quite sure of what I am doing because I see John every single day (or rather evening) and we have done so now since last May, so I feel we ought to know each other very well indeed and we never seem to row, though we vary quite a lot on subjects like politics, etc. but we find the best thing is not to get into too heated an argument about them.

Have you and Ron got a house or a flat yet? We are going to aim at a furnished flat when we get married, though one doesn't seem to get a furnished flat under about £4 per week and its such a lot of money to pay out just for that., before you start on other things.


Well, Joannie, I expect you are up to your eyes in work for your wedding, but if you have time drop me a little note if you can and tell me all your news.

The very best of luck and lots of love,

Betty  
JK

Fig. 6.57. Letter from Betty Currie to Joan Prior, 19 March 1948. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Charges to pay \_\_\_\_\_ s. \_\_\_\_\_ d.

POST  OFFICE

No. \_\_\_\_\_ OFFICE STAMP

RECEIVED

TELEGRAM

Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words.

At \_\_\_\_\_ m **7**

From \_\_\_\_\_

By \_\_\_\_\_

To \_\_\_\_\_

By \_\_\_\_\_

107 10.15 SWANSEA P 15

SMITH 7 LEED ST SANDOWN =

= CONGRATULATIONS AND BEST WISHES TO YOU BOTH

= GINNIE AND CLARK + + 7 LEED GINNIE CLARK +

G.N.P. Co. Ltd. 81-7228

For free repetition of doubtful words telephone "TELEGRAMS ENQUIRY" or call, with this form at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be accompanied by this form, and, if possible, the envelope. B or C

Fig. 6.58. Telegram from Ginge and Clark to Joan Prior, 24 April 1948. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Penny Summerfield suggests that:

Servicewomen were a group with a particularly uncertain post-war identity. Within the traditionalist discourse they were assumed to be longing, like other women, for a return to conventional femininity, symbolised in their case by the exchange of uniform for the pretty frock. Modernisers on the other hand looked upon servicewomen as a wild card, possibly longing to settle down in homes of their own, or alternatively ready to forge for women a new form of feminine citizenship.<sup>97</sup>

Conventionally, romantic novels (those intended for a female readership) end with marriage. As Maryanne C. Ward writes:

A careful reader of endings will begin to notice that at closure many of the admirable characters of nineteenth-century fiction find themselves at the end of their adventures removed from the world of the novel into tiny, frequently named, enclaves as timeless as Tennyson's *Lady of Shallot's* tower. The evil of the world has proven too strong and pervasive; the

<sup>97</sup> Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 260.

only strategy which insures quiescence is a retreat into some domestic bower.<sup>98</sup>

Yet these are rarely satisfactory resolutions, for 'marriage in comedy/romance signalled regeneration, both personal and communal. Our unease with Victorian endings is frequently that we cannot read regeneration on either the personal or the communal level into a particular marriage'.<sup>99</sup>

For many Wrens leaving the service, marriage was still the conventional resolution of their peacetime lives, despite the unimaginable paths that war had taken them along. And many found the readjustment to civilian life every bit as challenging as their male counterparts who had endured combat.<sup>100</sup> Nevil Shute's Janet Prentice, Agatha Christie's Lynn Marchmont and, latterly, Rosamunde Pilcher's Judith Dunbar in *Coming Home*, all suffer post-conflict traumas, though of very different intensities.<sup>101</sup> Many, like Edith Pargeter's Catherine Saxon, recovered from war the enduring pain of personal loss as well as the resolve to pursue progressive social change.<sup>102</sup> Certainly an idealistic role model for Summerfield's Modernisers camp.

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98 Maryanne C. Ward, 'Romancing the ending: Adaptations in nineteenth-century closure', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 29: 1 (1996), 15–31 (18).

99 *Ibid.*, 17.

100 Yet as Penny Summerfield notes, 'any problems of readjustment which servicewomen might have had were rendered invisible [...] and were marginalised in the parliamentary discussions of demobilisation in November 1944'. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, pp. 257–258.

101 Nevil Shute, *Requiem for a Wren* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1955); Agatha Christie, *Taken at the Flood* (London: Collins Crime Club, 1948); Rosamunde Pilcher, *Coming Home* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995).

102 Edith Pargeter, *She Goes to War* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1942).

**S. 458.** (Established—December, 1944.)

**W.R.N.S. EMPLOYMENT CERTIFICATE**

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Name (in full)..... PRIOR, Joan Halverson

Rating on discharge (in full)..... LEADING WRN

This rating has been employed in the W.R.N.S. from.....  
 16.9.42 to 31.5.46

on..... WRITER (SHOCKWAVE) DIVISION

Character during service †..... VERY GOOD

General efficiency during service †..... ABOVE AVERAGE

Efficiency on discharge †..... ABOVE AVERAGE

**SPECIAL REMARKS.**—Power of command, intelligence, initiative, energy and any other qualification not otherwise recorded † :—

A very good shorthand-typist, and a thoroughly reliable Leading Wren. She has always been most helpful in the Quarters outside her own work and is most public-spirited. She was awarded the B.B.M. last year.

*R.N.*  
Commander, R.N. Captain.

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† To be recorded as for men—see Art. 610, K.R. and A.I., clauses 3 to 7.  
 ‡ To be completed in the establishment from which discharged to shore, or to Depot as a preliminary to discharge to shore.

N. 13338/44

(19/12/44) (501) W/L 18526/D7851 50M 7/45 S.E.R. Ltd. Cp. 671.

Fig. 6.59. WRNS Employment Certificate, 31 May 1946. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

Joan Prior is perhaps closer to one of Summerfield's own interviewees: 'rather than seeing her years in the WRNS as a liberation from protective parents, Edith Dixon depicted them as re-educating her in the virtues of a sheltered home life'. She reflected that the hardships of service life 'made me very very much more appreciative of my home afterwards'.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 262.

Despite Joan's stated career ambitions—'could be industry, business, private work, or even secretary to a novelist or something—just so long as it was interesting and out of the ordinary'—these aspirations are supplanted by her enthusiasm to join her family on the Isle of Wight: 'when I'm home, I'll help [...] with all that sort of thing (mail & so on). As a matter of fact, I have been seriously considering not taking a job this summer at all, but helping you & "having a rest" from set hours & "Aye-aye, Sir" and so on'. Finally, her strong sense of duty prevailed. Joan Prior's personal experience, as she became Mrs Smith and settled into a life that—for Londoners—was both backward and bucolic, was remembered in a telling incident.

While still living with her parents and Bess and Stan at 'Brackla', mucking in and helping out with the brisk hotel trade that they had to learn on their feet in the first seasons of 1946 and 1947, Joan enquired about secretarial opportunities at the local Labour Exchange when she went to sign on the first winter. On perusing her CV, qualifications and wartime service, the advisor did his level best to dissuade her from entering the world of work. Any situation worthy of her accomplishments would be in Newport, and that would entail a costly daily commute of over nine miles by bus or train. Then, after tax, National Insurance and other deductions, local salaries were much lower than she could have expected on the mainland, and good opportunities were few and far between. No, on the whole, she would probably be better off drawing the dole over the winter months, as countless others did in the local seasonal economy. Nothing to be ashamed of. In my mother's retelling, this story became evidence of both the in-built indulgences of the Welfare State's benefits system and the natural indolence of Islanders. As to my father, there was no work here for lithographic printers either, it turned out. Yet this little enclave, this diamond empire, became the settlers' chosen backwater. This is what they'd fought for then: the British seaside holiday. Bucket and spade. Punch and Judy. From victory, they made their retreat.

Penny Summerfield concludes pragmatically, for this generation of servicewomen:

Whether they saw themselves with regrets, as subsequently marginalised by the traditional construction of femininity in relation to their former position of centrality to the war effort, or as making the further transition

from wartime to peacetime opportunities, which modern versions of femininity invited and applauded, depended not on simple determinants like social class, age or education. It depended on how they 'took up as their own' the models of what it meant to be a woman, available to them during and after the war.<sup>104</sup>

In this way, like those countless heroines of nineteenth-century fiction, for many there was a certain contingency about the resolution marriage brought, despite its inevitability. Not that they did not love and marry for good reason. But that marriage, as in the novel, represented the foreclosure of the diverse possibilities of experience that the war had presented, and its quality of continual coming-into-being. The war had destroyed much, but it had also brought much into being. The peace brought peace, and for that there was much relief and rejoicing. But it also marked a return, a going back to where they had come from in some way, however altered it might have been. And that return, that settlement, never quite banished the memory of the happy state of unresolved potentiality, of what else might have been. At life's crossroads, the routes untaken offer limitless travel in the landscapes of our imaginations: like meeting in my mother a woman I never knew; like following the footsteps of those other fathers I never had.

Though the decades and family life had estranged them, years later—around the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in 1994—Joan and Ginge met for the first time since their emotional demob parting. Thereafter, they lost touch again. Typically, my mother wouldn't be drawn on any personal responses to their brief reunion. It was simply 'nice to see each other again'. As ever, 'mum' was the word.

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104 Ibid., p. 285.

# Epilogue: Keeping Mum

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Into the closed mouth the fly does not get (epigraph in Joan Prior's 1945 diary).

I'm sorry for the modern spy, she has a lousy deal,  
The modern general's very often lacking in appeal. (FISH)<sup>1</sup>

I come to her in white, and cry Mum; she cries Budget, and by that we know one another. (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1623, v. ii. 6)

It has been the aim of this book to do two things. The first task was to gather archival sources, supported by secondary literature, in order to contextualise the cache of letters, photographs and documents left by my mother, to produce a narrative of the experiences of the Wrens of ANCXF, as far as possible, in their own words. The purpose of this enterprise was both to pay tribute to the substantial role of the WRNS in Operation Overlord and beyond, and to recount those events from a female perspective as a history of women's war work.

The second task was more elusive and personal. This is also family history. And it is inseparable from the nature of the letter as historical evidence. The letter is not merely subjective; it is also performative, mercurial and ephemeral. It hides as much as it reveals. It is duplicitous. It is partisan. It is provocative. It is affective. I became fascinated by the epistolary performance of the young woman who would, much later, become my mother, in the act of becoming herself. Of making herself up. And I was intrigued by the nature of her relationship with Ginge and how she (re)presented Ginge, an orphan, to her family at home: my grandparents, aunts and uncles, who are themselves sometimes cast

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1 From a poem 'I'm sorry for the modern spy', attributed to 'FISH'. Janet Sheila Bertram Swete-Evans, 'Sheila Swete-Evans papers, 1889–1988', Rubenstein Library, Duke University, Durham. <https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE003167710>



in pantomime roles. Ginge is an invention; never Phyllis. Ginge might almost be a codename in a racy wartime thriller by Johnny Mills.

Much has been made, in recent histories, of the secret war—the importance of code-breaking, espionage, underground resistance, propaganda, bluff and double-bluff. This intelligence war has had tremendous mileage, from Fleming's Bond and Le Carre's Smiley to the rehabilitation of Alan Turing, the derring-do of double-agent Garbo and a host of factual and fictional accounts of women working undercover. Practically, of course, this offers the opportunity to explore war dramatically through stories of individual bravery, heroism and ingenuity. The female sub-genre has proved particularly fertile, though its sexual politics invariably tread a dubious line between a progressive celebration of strength, courage and personal sacrifice and the salaciousness of sex as a weapon of subterfuge, portraying women as preternaturally devious—both qualities making them ideal spies. Not for nothing is the monumental tribute to the British SOE (Special Operations Executive) on the Albert Embankment, a bust of Violette Szabo. As Juliette Pattinson reminds us, its inscription ends with the words: 'in the pages of history their names are Carved with Pride' invoking the 1958 feature film made from R. J. Minney's biography of Szabo.<sup>2</sup> But, with no disrespect, this is the glamorous face of secrecy. I'm interested in its more prosaic form.

Just as there is a moral and philosophical distinction between causing death and not saving a life, so there is a difference between keeping a secret and not divulging knowledge. The former is fixated on the activity of protecting particular information from disclosure. The latter is a matter of disposition, which requires little attention to the differential value of knowledge. In fact, this demeanour is disinterested in the secret itself. In the era when the cause of freedom of information is locked in mortal combat with the ethics of personal data protection, the notion that there are things that are better left unsaid is quaint indeed. Yet that sense of profound propriety—the sanctity of the unspoken—made it relatively easy, in wartime, to 'keep mum'. Self-censorship became second nature.

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2 Lewis Gilbert (dir.), *Carve Her Name With Pride* (1958); Juliette Pattinson, "'A story that will thrill you and make you proud": The cultural memory of Britain's secret war in occupied France', in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, ed. by Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 133–154 (p. 149).

War was just like sex: it was everywhere, but you didn't talk about it. But, of course, keeping mum did not mean keeping quiet. It became the practised art of speaking freely yet saying nothing of significance. In this, my mother was a past master. It was a technique of self-presentation and evasion that she learnt as a wartime correspondent.

The use of the phrase in wartime propaganda caused controversy even at the time.<sup>3</sup> First, in the series of Careless Talk Costs Lives campaign, was 'Be Like Dad, Keep Mum', which enraged the Labour MP Dr Edith Summerskill in 1940. She raised the matter in the House, cross-examining Duff Cooper of the Ministry of Information:

Dr. Summerskill asked the Minister of Information whether he is aware that the poster bearing the words "Be like Dad, Keep Mum," is offensive to women, and is a source of irritation to housewives, whose work in the home if paid for at current rates would make a substantial addition to the family income; and whether he will have this poster withdrawn from the hoardings?

Mr. Cooper: I am indeed sorry if words that were intended to amuse should have succeeded in irritating. I cannot, however, believe the irritation is very profound or widely spread.

Dr. Summerskill: Is the Right Hon. Gentleman aware that this poster is not amusing but is in the worst Victorian music-hall taste and is a reflection on his whole Department?

Mr. Cooper: I always thought that Victorian music-halls were then at their best.

Dr. Summerskill: Is the Right Hon. Gentleman aware that if he goes to modern music-halls, he will find that this kind of joke is not indulged in and that this suggests that he is a little out of date for the work he is doing?<sup>4</sup>

Then, there followed in 1942, 'Keep mum—she's not so dumb!', attributed to artist Gerald Lacoste. An attractive reclining blonde female is featured at the centre of a social circle of officers from each branch of the Armed Forces. According to The National Archives, the 'image [was]

3 'Keep mum—she's not so dumb', The National Archives, London. Catalogue ref: INF 3/229. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3454442>.

4 *Hansard*, Vol. 371, Wednesday 7 May 1941. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1941-05-07/debates/8297352e-62c8-4414-ad5b-78362685dd96/Poster>. For a fuller account of the Careless Talk Costs Lives MOI campaign see Jo Fox 'Careless talk: Tensions within British domestic propaganda during the Second World War', *Journal of British Studies*, 51: 4, (2012), 936–966.

intended for officers' messes and other places where the commissioned ranks met. At the end of May, *Advertiser's Weekly* noted that "sex appeal" had been introduced in the form of a beautiful spy, who they insisted on "christening Olga Polovsky after the famous song"<sup>5</sup>.

The campaign was intended to issue a pejorative warning that 'when in the company of a beautiful woman, remember that beauty may conceal brains'.<sup>6</sup> But the implication was far more crude: a man might reasonably assume that most attractive women are dumb blondes, but some might actually be treacherous spies. At best, while you may be able to trust your fellow officers to be discreet, you can't trust a woman to keep a secret.

If my mother did not give much away about her wartime service, she didn't throw much away either. She was a hoarder. And for that I am grateful. Thanks, mum, for keeping so much.



Fig. 7.1. 'Keep Mum she's not so dumb', MOI Careless Talk Costs Lives campaign poster, 1942, INF 3/229, courtesy of The National Archives, London. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3454442>.

5 The National Archives, London. [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/home\\_front/INF3\\_0229.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/home_front/INF3_0229.htm). For the song, see Mudcat. <https://mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=10087>

6 Ibid.

Mum's the word. It is a Middle English word. It appears in Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Its etymology suggests a connection with mumming and miming. From whence, mummers' plays and pantomime (from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*) or dumbshow. Gestures without words.

The tradition of mummers' entertainments does have words, but the dialogue and dramaturgy are of a very simple form. Each of the archetypal characters self-presents to the audience; their entrances and exits are not motivated by narrative but each character introduces the next. Their main dramatic engagements are comic-violent tableaux. The victim of each staged fight is restored to life by the magical ministrations of a doctor. Thus, the central theme, as far as it goes, may be said to be death and resurrection. But the adversaries are pantomime goodies and baddies, St George representing England and his assailants stereotypical infidels (the Turkish Knight) and traditional enemies (the Noble (French) Captain). In some versions, these warring historical characters are framed by their unlikely 'parents', Father and Mother Christmas. Each duel fought is preceded with the dictum: 'a loven' couple do agree/To fight the battle manfully'.

As the Isle of Wight antiquarian William Henry Long noted, in his introduction to that island's own version of the Christmas Play, 'Father and Mother Christmas appear in old great coats, the latter wearing an old bonnet and skirt. They walk in bending, and as if decrepit through age, with the backs of their coats well stuffed with straw. This is necessary, as during the performance they furiously belabour each other, Father Christmas wielding a cudgel, and Mother Christmas a formidable broom'.<sup>7</sup> Thus the defence of the realm enacted by St George's sword is parodied as conjugal strife in the manner of Punch and Judy: an international conflict played out as domestic violence.

Thomas Pettitt's research into the 'pre-history of the English mummers' plays' suggests that:

The overwhelming majority of the folk-drama performances recorded and described in the last couple of centuries—the mummers' plays—are winter-season calendar customs (All Souls, Christmas, New Year, Easter) involving perambulations of the community by small groups of local men, who, disguised or costumed, entertain the households they visit

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7 W.H. Long, *A Dictionary of the Isle of Wight Dialect* (Newport: G.A. Brannon & Co, 1886), p. 100.

with an in part semi-dramatic show, in return for which they receive largesse in the form of refreshment or money, the latter sometimes devoted to financing a feast for the mummers and their associates on a separate occasion. Within a typology of auspices, therefore, the mummers' plays belong alongside other seasonal house-visit begging customs (*quêtes*) such as Souling, Thomassing, Clementing, Pace-egging, and the like, from which they are distinguished by the semi-dramatic elaboration of the show offered to the households visited.<sup>8</sup>

As such, these events may be considered to represent both an affirmation of the Rabelaisian spirit of misrule, Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and their paradox—the recuperation of the social order.

There is a stage in the battle with dementia when the forces of present consciousness finally give up the fight and begin the long, slow retreat into memory. Joan's father, Harry Prior, reinhabited his younger self. His first staging post was one of the succession of tobacconist's shops they had run at Chadwell Heath, after he took early retirement from the brewery. He sat in his tartan dressing-gown with a blanket over his knees; the family—Grace Prior, Bess and Stan, Joan and Ron—gathered around his chair in the geriatric ward of the hospital. 'Well,' he'd say at last, 'It's no good me standing here talking, time's getting on. I'd better go and lock up the shop'.

'But Dad,' they'd say gently, 'You're not in the shop now'.

'What are you talking about?! I lock up every night. D'you think I don't know where I am?!' he would retort, indignantly.

At last his regression took him back to childhood. His schoolboy days. Suddenly, he burst into tears. 'Dad, what on Earth's the matter?' Sobbing inconsolably, eventually he'd say, through quivering lips, 'That boy stole my cap and he won't give it back!'

My mother wasn't temporarily transported like her father. Her last articulated memories remained just that, recollections of her past. But she recalled the same scene from adolescence over and over again, as if returning to something unresolved. It was the day in Cardiff when she visited the City Hall with Aunt Lucy and, later, got caught with Peggy in a downpour in Roath Park. Something about a group of boys. Her rendition of the scene grew increasingly vague, as if glimpsed

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8 Thomas Pettitt, 'This man is Pyramus: A prehistory of the English mummers' plays', *Medieval English Theatre*, 22 (2000), 70–99 (72–73).

through thick fog. Further questioning triggered nothing. Yet something happened that day that marked her for life. I will never know what it was.

It would be easy to paint a picture of the care home as a demeaning psychiatric ward scarred by under-funding, staffed by immigrant slave labour with a poor grasp of English on zero-hours contracts and presided over by an SS-style matron played, as in the lurid Pete Walker exploitation horror caricature, by Sheila Keith. Or, more moderately, in *Play for Today* manner, as a drab exercise in British social realism characterised by meaningless ritual, miscommunication and utter, life-draining tedium. Nothing happens, endlessly.

But it was not like that where mum was. The rooms were light and airy, the décor modern but homely. Here privacy is respected. Occupational therapy is meaningful and constructive. Food is excellent. Staff are professional, dedicated and respected. Birthdays are never forgotten. Individual interests are catered for. Music is used creatively. There are no voices that call out ceaselessly in the night: 'Nurse! Nurse! When's my daughter coming?' They looked after mum well. I had no complaints. In short, as a departure lounge for death, it couldn't be faulted.

In any case, mum had already left in many respects. She had no voluntary control over her body and had long since lost the ability to bear her own weight. Immobile, apart from the involuntary twitches and contortions her limbs rehearsed as a symptom of the Lewy body form of dementia, she spent most of her time in bed, levitated by an air-filled mattress. Her sight and hearing were poor, but her wiry little frame still had a pointless tenacity in its grip on life. She had no cancer; her heart was strong. She had to be fed a non-solid diet, but her appetite was undiminished. Physically, at least, she was not giving up anytime soon.

But mentally, it was a different story. Her eyes glazed over. There was no recognition. No visual response to any external stimulus, visual, physical or aural. On occasion, perhaps, there was the most fleeting, distant trace of a flicker of attention, triggered by a voice: her devoted carer bringing her meals or medication; very occasionally, perhaps, mine. But we were calling to her from a long way off by then, across a vast ocean of emptiness, from another world. Where she is there is no

language that we would understand. At her most animated she issued guttural noises that sometimes, briefly, coalesced into a rhythmic pattern, or strange 'ah, ahs' that might have the remotest cadence of a melody. Like the faintest echo of a song. Yet these utterances always appeared random, purposeless and without connection to mood, discomfort, physical pain, need. They were unchanging, never motivated by desire or distress. And she slept for long periods. Quite contentedly, as ever. Childlike, almost, at ninety-seven.

This, then, is the last rite of passage for a generation for whom war was the finishing school of youth. At Christmastime the home always made a special effort. The decorations are lavish, there are presents all round and the kitchen pulls out all the stops in providing traditional fare. Carol singers visit during Advent and the local curate brings Christmas communion, accompanied by a female chorister who plays electric piano for the hymns. Last year, on Boxing Day, a local amateur drama troupe came in to perform the Isle of Wight Christmas Boys' mummings' play in the main lounge. They were a well-meaning if motley crew, and what may have been lacking in the casting department, and the learning of lines, was redeemed by the gusto of a performance that was not short on commitment. And, like much folk art, the text is as forgiving as its audience. The residents who were able to follow this surreal intervention in the afternoon, encouraged by their carers, clapped and cheered. One white-haired lady, with polished rosy cheeks, definitely officer class, cried, 'Bravo! Encore!' as if she were at Glyndebourne (and perhaps she was). And in the entertainment that ensued, St George gave an enthusiastic rendition of 'The Road to Mandalay' in perfect military Mockney, which prompted requests for 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' and 'Pack Up Yer Troubles'. By this time the Turkish Knight (a music student and son of the local hospital's Registrar) had sat down at the piano, and the capers concluded with 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World' and 'We'll Meet Again', summoning a collective, quavering vibrato. Some, who had no voice left, mouthed the words silently; others who'd forgotten the words hummed the tunes. The young carer who held my mother's hand throughout, couldn't hold back her tears and fumbled in her pocket for a tissue. Mum, cosseted in her special padded chair, had remained impassive during the performance, but was roused to make some audible guttural noises in the songs. It was conceivable

she was trying to join in. Then, as the final applause descended into a hubbub of chatter, and tea was handed round, she opened her eyes briefly and looked into the invisible space of the middle distance and said, quite clearly, 'Yes, yes, I know'. Then, as swiftly, the veil descended and she was gone again. 'And what do you know?', her carer asked hopefully. But it was too late. And in any case, that wasn't what Joan had meant.

I had already signed the form that says 'Do Not Resuscitate', ready for when the time came. But COVID came first, swiftly and callously. The cabinet-in-crisis decided the elderly could be sacrificed—that generation who had given up their youth long before. Restrictions on funeral arrangements dashed her long-held wishes for the military honours to which the Association of Wrens entitled her with a Royal Navy guard of honour. In the event, it was just me and mum at the crematorium, the coffin draped with a white ensign. So, two years later, the year of her centenary, the family held a memorial service and organised, belatedly, the committal of her ashes at sea.

The deposition is conducted by a RN Chaplain on board a Fleet tender that sails from Portsmouth Harbour at 14:30 every Wednesday. The Directorate General Royal Naval Chaplaincy Service provides precise guidance for funeral directors regarding the preparation of the casket:

1. The ashes should be packed initially in a strong plastic bag of sufficient gauge to prevent tearing. The bag should then be placed in a named rectangular container made either of solid wood or veneered chipboard.
2. To ensure that the casket will sink immediately it is committed to the sea it must be neatly drilled with holes of no less than ½" diameter in the bottom and on both sides, also below the casket lid.
3. The casket should be weighted inside with some form of heavy metal so as to achieve a total weight of 15lbs for a casket of the approximate dimensions of 10" x 7" x 5" and pro rata for a casket of a larger size.
4. To prevent damage in transit the contents, including the weight, should be securely packed to prevent any form of



movement and the removable lid or base should be securely fastened with countersunk screws of not less than 1" in length.

When it comes to death, one wouldn't expect the Royal Navy to be anything other than eminently practical. After all, it wouldn't do to have the casket washing up on the far shore, inscrutable as an archive, like a message-in-a-bottle in indecipherable shorthand.

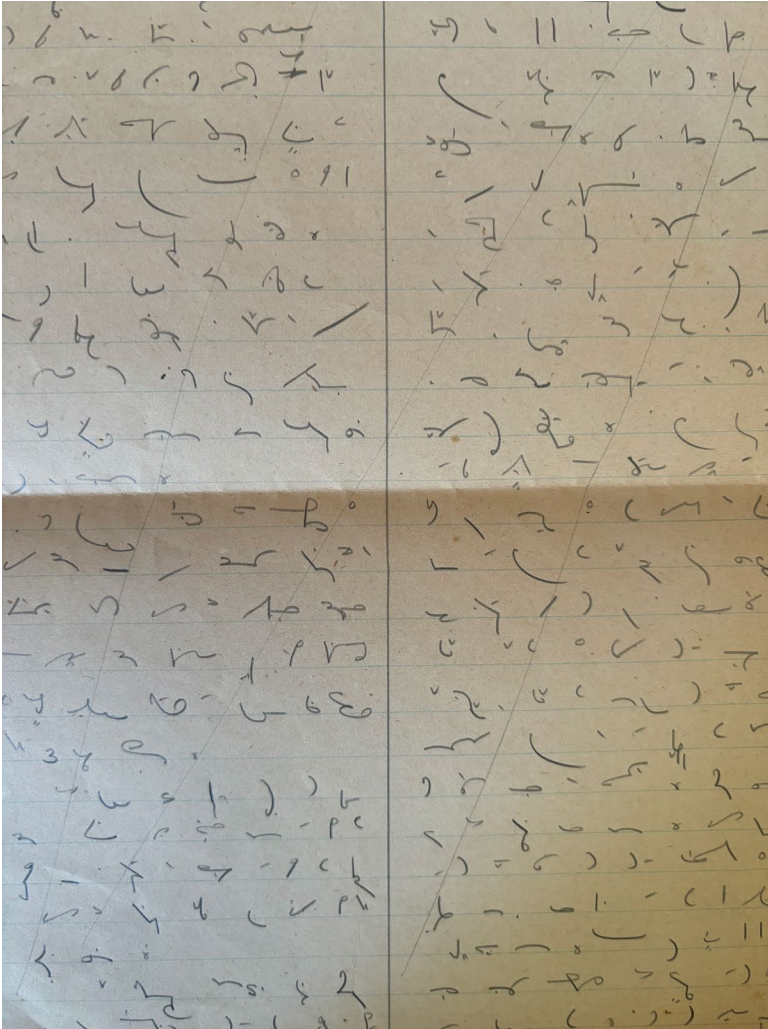
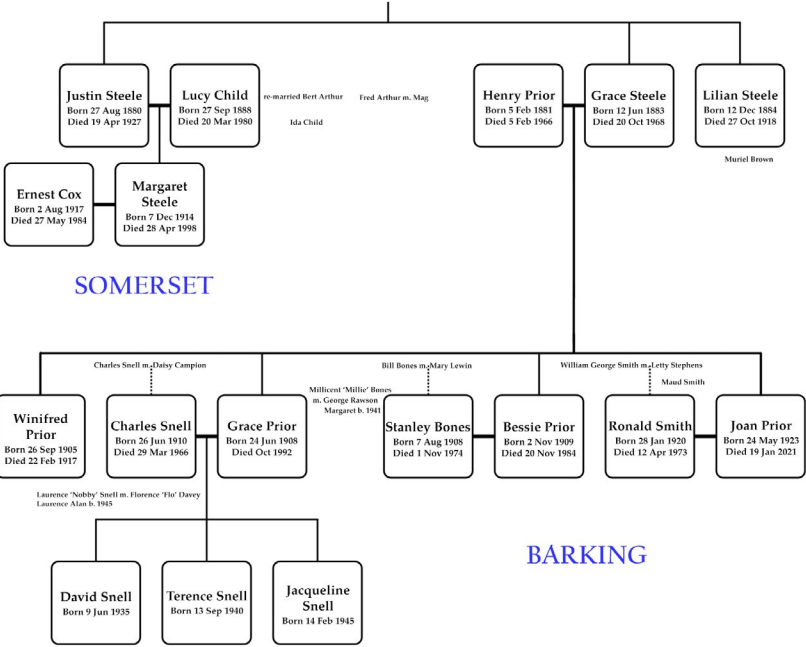


Fig. 7.2. A page from Joan Prior's shorthand notebook. Private papers of Joan Halverson Smith.

# Select Family Tree





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This book was peer-reviewed by two anonymous referees. Experts in their field, these readers give their time freely to help ensure the academic rigour of our books. We are grateful for their generous and invaluable contributions.





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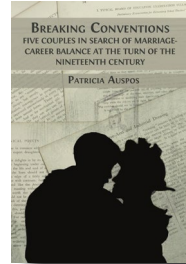
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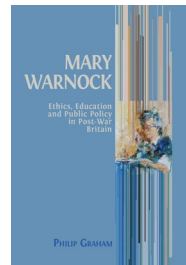


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