Those Girls & Their Finest Hour

Custodians of Air Power Supplement

75

ROYAL AIR FORCE
Battle of Britain

“Upon this battle depends . . . our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire . . .

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say,

This was their finest hour. . .”

Winston S. Churchill
18 June 1940

Spitfire IAs of 610 Squadron, Biggin Hill. Identifiable aircraft are N3289/DW-K and R6595/DW-O. Image dated 24 July 1940.

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“To me the RAF is the Battle of Britain. I was stationed in Dover - that’s where life began for me in the summer of 1940.”

Yvonne Axon

“You don’t expect to be special. We joined up to save the country. You just do a job and get on with it.”

Joan ‘Grog’ Arundel

AMES Type 1 CH East Coast 360ft transmitter aerial towers at Bawdsey, Suffolk.
Photo dated May 1945.
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Contents Image: BBMF Hurricane Mk II LF363 in Battle of Britain No 1 Sqn colours alongside Spitfire Mk IIa P7350 currently flying as 'EB-G' and representing 41 Sqn (Mk IA N3162) as flown by Plt Off Eric Lock who scored three kills in one sortie on 5 Sept 1940. © John Dibbs.

ROYAL AIR FORCE museum

Front Cover Image: This bronze figure of Joan 'Grog' Arundel is just one of nine life-size figures 'on duty' in the Filter Room recreated at the Bentley Priory Museum, Stanmore; and is part of the Museum's exhibition galleries. Photographed by Cpl Jimmy Wise RAF.

Close up of survillance window, Bentley Priory Museum, Stanmore.

Their Finest Hour

The Royal Air Force is proud of its WAAFs – each one of them does the work of one man, and does it darned well. They helped us to win the Battle of Britain.

On 28 June 1939, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) was created from the Auxiliary Territorial Service. The WAAFs were initially offered fairly mundane jobs, but one job was far from mundane – so secret that not many knew about it. The job was Clerk Special Duties and, after selection, WAAFs were trained as Radar Operators, Plotters or Tellers.

Initial training for Radar Operators was at RAF Bawdsey. Extracting information from the radar displays was a very skilled task. The Radar Units were on the front line of the Battle, but designated as Air Ministry Experimental Stations (AMES) to preserve secrecy.

August 1940 saw the start of a number of direct attacks against Radar Units including Dover. After the attacks on 12 August 1940, Air Chief Marshal Dowding signalled the Radar Units expressing his satisfaction and pride in the behaviour of the WAAF personnel in the face of attack.

Those selected as Plotters and Tellers were trained at RAF Leighton Buzzard – the Headquarters of 60 Group. Here the WAAFs were further selected to be either Filter Plotters and Tellers, or Operations Room Plotters and Tellers. The terms

Plotters and Tellers do not do justice to the importance of these vital operational roles.

The system of telling information from the radars to the Filter Centre and then to the numerous Operations Room across the Dowding System using landlines and a formatted telling sequence was time consuming. But as time was of the essence, both the Plotters and Tellers had to be quick, dexterous and precise so as not to cause additional delays that could cost lives.

Throughout 1940, WAAFs were increasing being employed on front-line Radar Units and at Fighter Command, Group and Sector operations rooms and within the Filter Centre based at RAF Bentley Priory. Additionally, they were being employed in training roles at RAFs Leighton Buzzard and Bawdsey.

Petticoats in the RAF!

An extract from a broadcast made by a Group Captain on the BBC Home Service, 27 June, 1941, talking about the work of the WAAF on a fighter station in 1940-41 and their importance in RAF operations. RAF Museum.

As an officer of some 26 years, I sincerely believed that war was a job for men, that in war women could tackle the more quiet and comfortable civilian jobs and leave it to fathers and brothers and cousins to fill the fighting services. Then, at the beginning of the war, came the news that we, the Royal Air Force, were to have women: women in our operations rooms; women driving our transport, and our teleprinters; in our offices, manning our signals, even invading our messes. Petticoats in the RAF!

When the first trickle of WAAFs drifted into my station, I was inwardly rather resentful , and slightly amused, believing that it couldn't last, that it might be 'pretty pretty' during the quiet days, but when the going got tough the folly of it would be seen. How wrong I was. Long before the Battle of Britain was half-waged I was converted. Long before the respite came in November I had cause to thank goodness that this country could produce such a race of women as the WAAFs on my station.

Let me give you an example. In the daylight mass-bombings of August and September of last year [1940] in a flimsy building on the aerodrome, I saw my WAAF Plotters with their earphones pressed to their ears to keep out the inferno of noise from the torrent of bombs that were bursting all around, steady and calm at their posts, plotting – not a murmur or movement from a single one, though the whole building was literally rocking and each one knew that she and the building might at any moment be airborne. But that was last year; those buildings are now no longer in the target area.

When I look back, how stupid I was to resent the first intrusion of WAAFs, but I didn't know then what I know now. Those men I valued were wanted for work elsewhere. That first trickle of WAAFs was a sign of strength, not weakness; it meant expansion. From that moment onwards I welcomed every succeeding batch of airwomen at my station, and I know every Commanding Officer does today; for it means more and more men released, to form more and more squadrons to fight the Hun. Yet the same efficiency is maintained and often increased. As month succeeds month I hope to see thousands more of these women come in to give us a hand to fight the Battle of Europe.

Last year was the proudest and happiest of my life, in command of a Fighter Station. I venture to say – and I hope they're listening – that last year was also one of the happiest years in the young lives of many WAAFs who served there with me. The Royal Air Force is proud of its WAAFs – each one of them does the work of one man, and does it darned well. They helped us to win the Battle of Britain.

Courage and High Order

On 18 August, as reported in the media, Sergeant Joan Mortimer – also known to her friends as Elizabeth – was manning the switchboard in the Armoury, RAF Biggin Hill. Although surrounded by several tons of high explosives, she remained at her post relaying messages to the defence posts around the airfield. Before the 'all clear' had been given she walked and ran around the airfield with a bundle of red flags to mark any unexploded bombs so that aircraft would know where to land. A bomb exploded nearby and winded her, but she soon recovered and carried on planting flags. Even after she was ordered to leave the area by an officer, she carried on.

Also according to accounts at the time, Corporal Elspeth Henderson was on duty in the Sector Operations Room, responsible for supervising other WAAF Plotters on the progress of incoming enemy bomber formations when the Luftwaffe attacked RAF Biggin Hill, 1 September 1940 – she is also reported to have acted with gallantry during the raids the preceding day. She maintained vital contact between airfield operations staff and controllers at Fighter Command Headquarters, Uxbridge, despite bombs exploding on the airfield. Later that afternoon on the 1st, the Ops Room took a direct hit. Despite being knocked over by the blast, she carried on with her work throughout the raid. But as fire broke out and with her commanding officer and the rest of the staff, she left the burning Ops Room through a broken window and threw herself to the ground as more bombs exploded. The next morning, the Operations Room had been relocated to a local butcher shop. Using hastily repaired telephone lines and signal equipment, Cpl Henderson maintained contact with Fighter Command Headquarters. Sporadic raids continued until 7 September before the Luftwaffe turned its attention to London.

Another WAAF, Sergeant Helen Turner, also remained at her post in the adjacent emergency telephone exchange until she had to be dragged away to safety. Despite ongoing attacks the squadrons remained operational, taking off from badly-damaged runways.

All three women were later awarded the Military Medal for their 'courage and example of a high order'. Sgt Mortimer's citation states: 'This airwoman displayed exceptional courage and coolness, which had a great moral effect on all those with whom she came in contact'. The commanding officer of Biggin Hill said: "These three girls have shown amazing pluck."

Throughout the entire Second World War only six Military Medals were awarded to the WAAF, all earned during the Battle of Britain.

Opposite: Officially commissioned painting by Laura Knight of Section Leader Corporal Elspeth Henderson and Sergeant Helen Turner both awarded the Military Medal in 1940.
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Left to right: Sgt Joan Mortimer; Cpl Elspeth Henderson commissioned as Section Officer (Flying Officer) prior to the announcement of her award; and Sgt Helen Turner.
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Eileen Younghusband

Courtesy of Eileen Younghusband.

Early in 1941, aged just 19, Eileen volunteered for service with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, and after brief technical training, was sent as a Filter Plotter to 10 Group, RAF Rudloe Manor when she learned the essential role that the Filter Centre would play throughout the war. Later as a Filterer Officer she was posted to Fighter Command HQ at Bentley Priory. Her watch covered the D-Day landings and subsequently she received the first Big Ben warning of the V2 rocket to land on Chiswick on 8 September 1944.

Based on an interview with Jay Myers. Additional material from 'One Woman's War' by Eileen Younghusband (Née le Croissette). Candy Jar Books 2011; and 'Top Secret – The Filter Room', 2003.

'Must be under twenty-one, with quick reactions, good at figures – and female'.

These were the prerequisites for members of the WAAF seeking to work as Plotters, or Officers in the Filter Room. The women chosen ranged from psychology and science students, young actresses, county debutants, grammar school high flyers, to daughters of famous people – novelists, painters, musicians and vicars. But they were without exception dedicated to their work.

The whole team of officers and other ranks who served in the Filter Room contributed essential work in the defence of Britain throughout the whole war and were quoted by Churchill as the linchpin of the Dowding System. This was a team operation . . . the plotters, raid orderlies and tellers responsible for the display and forwarding of the information from the Radar Station, to the Controller who identified the tracks; the Filter Officer who supervised the action on the table and who was in constant contact with all the Radar Stations; and the Filterer Officer whose job was to interpret, collate and correct the information instantly into tracks of all aircraft approaching or leaving our shores.

The fact that the fighters were based in aerodromes as near the coast as possible ensured that they could conserve fuel if given details of the position of incoming enemy planes. They would take off at the last minute, fight the battle for the maximum period, and then return home safely before running out of fuel.

The Filter Room team constantly upgraded the picture, and the information they produced was told to the Group and Sector Operations Rooms and the Observer Corps. This was used for interceptions, air sea rescue, gun-laying, air raid warnings, balloon operations and notification to the War Room and US forces. The linking together of the chain of Radar Stations, the Filter Rooms and the Operations Rooms had created a formidable defence barrier around our coasts.

The Filter room at Stanmore had handled most of the Battle of Britain raids and the Blitz. There were six further Filter Rooms covering the rest of our shores. Several of the airwomen and officers I met were volunteers from the day war started. They had been chosen because they were young, quick-witted and bright. There was no time to train them in those early days, they learnt on the job.

We all kept our work secret; it was impressed on us how vital it was that the enemy should not know how the system worked. As far as my family were concerned, I told them I was covered by the Official Secrets Act. We had very little communication with the other parts of the Group Headquarters since all Special Duties personnel lived a somewhat isolated existence from the rest of the camp.

A Filterer Officer was the officer actually working on the table, directly estimating position and height for example, using arrows and changing the information on the raid plaques where necessary. Identification would be added afterwards when the controller had identified whether it was bomber, fighter, army co-op, coastal command, hostile or a doubtful raid. The mental stress and physical strain were intense. The Filter Room Plotter Officers had brothers, boyfriends, cousins who were in the squadrons of fighters or bombers they could see on the table. They would track out 500 bombers and perhaps only 450 returned, but they never let us down. There was no hysteria, no crying they just went on doing their job hour after hour. It was frenzy. It was organised chaos.

Ops Room Plotters, who were connected to Sector Ops, received the final filtered mathematically calculated information from the Filter Room. They displayed this on the Ops Room table – with their long rods – 'the end' of all the processes that happened in the Filter Room. Unfortunately the Filter Room has never had the same coverage as the Ops Room.

Those girls, those Filter Plotters . . . I can never speak too highly of. They were wonderful. I am so proud of them and I feel that their story has to be told.

11 Group Filter Room, Fighter Command, Goes to Belgium

Four days after D-Day in May 1944, Germany launched its first Vengeance Weapon, the V1. Once more the Filter Room tracked these unmanned aircraft. Easily recognised, they flew on a direct course until they ran out of fuel, fell to the ground and exploded, causing terror and death.

On the 8 September, the V2 (the second Vengeance Weapon) and a supersonic rocket, was launched. It landed before it could be heard. A new type of Radar could identify a point on the flight curve. Using this information married to the fall of shot position, the Filterer Officer extrapolated the curve back to the launch sites, initially ramps in the Pas de Calais region. Patrolling fighter aircraft were then able to bomb these launch sites. Pat Robins (Patricia Clark) and I have memories of tracking these weapons in late 1944.

Eileen at work in the Filter Room, 1944. Fighter Command HQ, Hill House, Stanmore.

A WAAF working on the table in the Filter Room, 1944. Both photos courtesy of IWM: AMY 157. 'The Scope and Purpose of the Filter Room'.

By late autumn, Allied troops had overrun this area capturing the launch sites. The German recourse was to launch the V2s from trailers drawn by lorries, constantly changing the site. They used beaches, woodland or even car parks in the centre of towns.

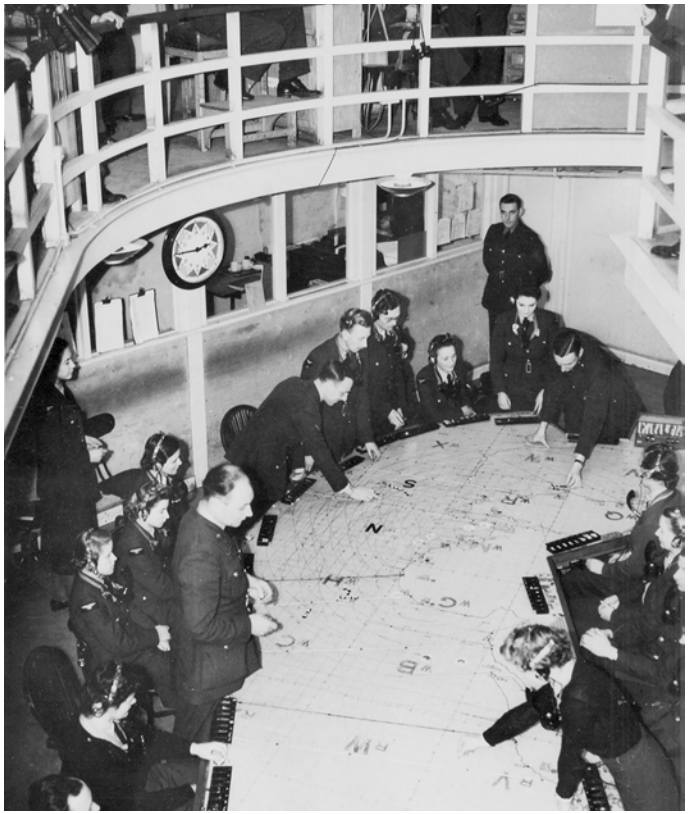
By late November, London was out of reach of their trajectory; the main target changed to Antwerp. This was our only viable port as Calais and Boulogne had been destroyed before the German army retreated

Three hundred more rockets would land on Antwerp than on the London area. Immediate action was required. Early in December eight WAAF Filterer Officers, of which I was one, were sent under Filter Room control to Malines (Michelin) in Belgium, midway between Brussels and Antwerp.

Soon we came under the control of 33 Wing, 2nd Tactical Air Force, working with the Royal Engineers. Our only weapon was a slide rule containing a special formula. We traced the flight curve back to the launch sites. Time was of the essence, two minutes to calculate the fall-of-shot site; less than six minutes to trace the flight curve back, and two minutes to pass the information to Intelligence who would order patrolling Mosquitoes to bomb the lorries.

The Germans were running out of launchers as the bombing of the Ruhr factories had halted replacements. Despite our aircraft being grounded in early January 1945 due to bad visibility, by early March virtually all launch pads were destroyed. The V2 threat was over.

Meanwhile, the Rundstedt offensive had begun; its intention was to regain control of Antwerp and cut off our troops north of the line from the Americans on the French border near Carcassonne. We were too busy to be aware of the possibility that we could have been captured or even killed!



HQ Fighter Command Filter Room.
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Eileen today. Photographed by AC Cathy Sharples (RAuxAF).
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Yvonne Axon

Yvonne Axon was a radar operator at Dover during the Battle of Britain.

Based on a talk given 13 September 1991 at the Ikley Arrow Archery Club Dinner.

To me the RAF is the Battle of Britain. I was stationed in Dover – that's where life began for me in the summer of 1940.

Radar means sending out certain impulses or rays up into the air. They bounce of the aeroplane; you measure how long it takes to get back; and you know how far away the aeroplane is. It was terribly primitive then.

We had five hours on, 10 hours off. We sat in a very dark room in front of a cathode ray tube with a horizontal line about an eighth of an inch thick with a ratio gauge of about nought to fifty. A little wiggle along that line meant an aeroplane – on the other hand a flight of sea gulls or a good cloud did exactly the same. You had to 'judge your wiggle'. It was jolly hard work.

We were connected directly to Fighter Command, telling them what to put on the table. In other words we said I think we have an aeroplane – well it could be three, or it could be a squadron, or could well be a group of sixty fighters.
They all looked very much the same. You had to sound terribly confident. If what you said was right, then the fighter boys were sent up to that spot or where that spot would be in five minutes' time. We were always there in the right place at the right time – that is, most of the time.

On average during the summer, we were either dived bombed or strafed about 10 times a day. We didn't have any shelters and sandbags outside the door and of course our enormous masts were only too visible. Things got terribly busy of course at that time. Aeroplanes really did come falling down around us and the station did get very damaged.

The women's huts were about half a mile away from the main operating station, on the cliff edge and because we were so top secret, the top brass wasn't allowed to come and visit us. We got shot up quite a lot and had bullet holes in our beds. The Dover people thought we were digging for oil.

Top: WAAF radar operator Denise Miley, plotting aircraft on the CRT (cathode ray tube) of an RF7 receivier at the Chain Home Station at Bawdsey.
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Oval: Life in the RAF began in the summer of 1940.
Below right: Yvonne today. Photographed by Sgt Neil Bryden RAF.

Patricia Clark

Picture courtesy Patricia Clark.

Patricia joined the newly formed Women's Auxiliary Air Force in 1940 and was assigned to Special Duties. She was sent to Leighton Buzzard with five other girls for training as Plotters. Her first posting was to 10 Group Headquarters, RAF Rudloe Manor where she worked in the Filter Room, first as a Plotter then as a Filterer. She served there for three years before being posted elsewhere ending up at Stanmore where she was assigned to duties plotting V2s. After the war she wrote under her maiden name Patricia Robins and later Claire Lorrimer.

Based on an interview with Jay Myers. Additional material from 'You Never Know', an autobiography by Patricia Robins (writing as Claire Lorimer). Pen Press Publishers Ltd 2006.

Whenever the wartime work of WAAF Plotters has been pictured on film, television or in newspapers, it is the Operations Room that is depicted with arrows indicating information about incoming enemy aircraft. As these positions were relayed from the Filter Room where we worked, we felt it was unfair and historically incorrect that we in the Filter Rooms were not likewise depicted.

When it became necessary for the male Plotters to be released for active duties, we females were recruited to replace them. At first there were doubts as to whether females would be capable of coping with the work, but it soon became apparent that we were more than capable of doing so. Our work was highly secret as was all aspects of the Dowding System concerning Radar, and we were obliged to sign The Official Secrets Act. As most of us were very young, our parents wished to know what we would be doing once we left home and we were not even allowed to inform them of anything except our whereabouts. We worked shifts including an 8-hour night shift and had occasional 48-hour and 72-hour passes as well as a week's leave.

> Lights often failed and we made do with candles. It was extremely cold at times on night duty, but we were allowed to wear our Great Coats.

The information received by the Plotters in the Filter Rooms from the coastal Radar Stations was processed by the Filterers and relayed by an operator on the telephone to the Ops Room. From the map references relayed to the Ops Room the squadrons could be scrambled to deal with the approaching enemy aircraft. Speed was, therefore, essential, and the urgency of our work became even more apparent when the Blitz started.

I think there were about 30 around the table on a shift. We were an assorted bunch of young women from very varied backgrounds, but there was never any discord between us as we were all dedicated to our work and on duty totally concentrated on what we were doing.

On occasions, we would receive SOS signals from one of our planes damaged so badly that it was about to come down in the channel. We were then able to plot its anticipated ditching position and the Ops Room could alert the necessary rescue craft.

When weather prohibited flying and there was no activity, plotters remaining attached to their ear phones were permitted to occupy themselves with books, embroidery, letter writing etc. I had been working briefly as a junior sub-editor on a magazine and thought I would try my hand at writing short stories in order to augment my service pay. To my surprise they were published, and I continued to do this whenever time permitted. When the war ended I progressed to writing novels as a career.

I spent the first three years of my war service at RAF 10 Group near Bath. At Rudloe Manor, an appropriate Filter Room had not yet been built and when I started work there it was in a barn converted for the purpose. Lights often failed and we made do with candles. It was extremely cold at times on night duty but we were allowed to wear our Great Coats. Not long after I had arrived, an underground block was built with a spacious Filter Room, canteen, and other necessary facilities. Non-commissioned personnel, i.e. the Plotters, lived in Nissan huts containing iron bedsteads. Three square straw-filled pallets known to us as biscuits served as mattresses. A year later, I was commissioned and had my own room and even a girl known as a 'batwoman' to clean my buttons, my shoes, room etc.

Is it wrong to say that I enjoyed my war work? It was certainly exciting as well as exacting; and I would recommend any girl looking for an interesting and adventurous career to join the Air Force.

Photographed by SAC Lee Matthews RAF. © UK MOD Crown Copyright 2015.

Joan 'Grog' Arundel

Picture courtesy Joan Arundel.

Grog joined at the very beginning of the War and learnt filtering on-the-job at Bentley Priory, Stanmore. She served at 11Gp and 13 Gp. 'One of the first officers I met, writes Eileen Younghusband, 'was Flight Officer [Joan] Grogono, known to all as Grog. She was issued with a beret, an armband with WAAF on it and a raincoat. She wore her own clothes for several weeks before the uniforms arrived. Starting as a plotter, she was moved to teller and promoted to Corporal within a few weeks. She did almost every job there was in the Filter Room except Controller, which was confined to male officers. She was one of the first commissioned Special Duties WAAF and soon was working on the balcony as a Filter Officer. She can still recall the names of all the Radar Stations on the south coast that reported to 11 Group Filter Room from the outbreak of the war, and even the colour of their plots.'

Based on an interview with Jay Myers. Additional material from 'One Woman's War' by Eileen Younghusband (Née le Croissette). Candy Jar Books 2011.

I was an ordinary airman, but I learned how to filter by watching. I never went on a course. I could do things if I could see how they were done. I wanted to know how to do it. A plot had to be converted from a trace to a full reference, but I didn't realise it at the time.

It was very noisy at Bentley Priory and you had plotters all 'round. I think we had 10 Radar Stations then during the Battle of Britain. For 30 years we weren't allowed to talk about it. My family never knew what I did, so we never talked about it. We had people living in our Mess who were Wrens – they didn't know what we did either and they were part of Bletchley Park.

I used to go into London and saw people sleeping in the Tubes. They went out during the bombing and there was no house when they got back. But nobody complained and they went to work. The bomber pilots had the worst time because their chances of surviving were only one in three.

You don't expect to be special. We joined up to save the country. You just do a job and get on with it. The people who were filtering to start with were very young and had to learn a lot more when they got onto the plotting table. There wasn't anything special about it. You just did it. We all got on extraordinarily well; there was no sort of bitchiness. Everybody worked together. It's a different atmosphere altogether in war time.

When the Filter Room was underground, we also lived underground. Once, when somebody put something wrong down the loo, it overflowed and we had to work around in the swill. You never thought about it. What happened, happened and we accepted it. At one time we had a run of German Measles and they would come around and take the temperatures of people. Another time they thought we were underground too much so we had to be tested for radiation light.

We couldn't have any cleaners in the Filter Room so we had to clean the floor ourselves. We used to put wet tea leaves down and sweep them up. And nobody ever polished the table. We were too busy. But when the weather was bad and nothing happened, you used to sit upstairs. We even played cards once or twice.

When it was all over and I left the service I don't think we realised how shocked we were. I worked for a very short time. I went back home, but once you've been in the Service, you can't go back home again. You're treated as a child. We weren't any more . . .

I wanted to do something for my country.

Fighter controllers at work. WAAF plotters pictured at work in the underground Operations Room at HQ Fighter Command, Bentley Priory, in North-West London.
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Bronze figure of Joan 'Grog' Arundel at the Bentley Priory Museum. Photographed by Cpl Jimmy Wise RAF.
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Ruth Ure

Photographed by SAC Lee Matthews RAF.
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Ruth Ure was 21 years old when WWII broke out and immediately left her secretarial job and started working for the Red Cross', writes Emma Read. 'In 1940 she and her best friend Mary joined the WAAF and after a short period of training she was sent immediately to her RAF station, RAF Northolt. In July 1940 she started work as a plotter, guiding our fighters on to the waves of enemy aircraft as they swept across the Channel.

Ruth stayed as Plotter throughout the Battle of Britain before being commissioned and becoming a Cipher Officer in the War Cabinet office working directly with Winston Churchill. This job took her to Marrakesh in 1943 with Churchill, when he was recovering from pneumonia and a heart attack.

After the war Ruth spent two years as a Lady Clerk at Buckingham Palace, where one of her jobs was typing up speeches for King George VI. She remembers spending Boxing Day at Sandringham, as well as visiting Balmoral and Windsor.

Based on an interview with Jay Myers. Additional information from Emma Read, RAF Association.

> The work was very demanding and needed long periods of concentration . . . We certainly earned our cup of tea after a six-hour shift!

I joined the RAF in July 1940, I was just 21. We had been given uniforms with collars, cuffs and everything just as the men. Everything was similar to the men except we had skirts.

You started the shift at 9 o'clock in the morning and you did your shift until three in the afternoon. You had times off for lunch or family. When we weren't on duty learning how the plotting went, we were free and out in the summer kicking a football around. I also played hockey with the airmen – I'd never played hockey before.

The work was very demanding and needed long periods of concentration. In the back of your mind was fact that being on a fighter station we could be attacked at any time. We certainly earned our cup of tea after a six-hour shift!

The Filter Room was above ground and separate. It was only a one-storey building. It was all silent. We were all under headphones. We didn't call out anything. We were listening to what we were told and what the plots were for, in our area. I was aware of the Dowding System, oh yes, but you couldn't talk about anything.

It was all very important, all very serious. Don't forget, once the Battle of Britain had arrived there was no playing football or anything like that. We came off duty from three to nine and

being very tired. Then we had the night duty to cope with from nine to nine and you stayed there for 12 hours except for breaks. That's why they moved you around on different shifts. You had your own room, but you never had any hot water because the people coming off night duty used it all.

Standing there silently and having your phones and plotting in the right place was quite difficult. Directly when the Battle of Britain began we knew it was serious and we knew what was happening. This was War. And we were proud to be in uniform.

Oh yes, I saw fighting. They didn't come over us as much as other stations. We did have fighting above us, but we didn't have any actual bombing on us. Looking back, I think of my Service as a WAAF as a very proud time. I was a member of the Air Force and I was doing an important job. And I was there before the war started and when it stopped.

Everything was so different 75 years ago.

WAAF Officers' School, Gerrards Cross, May 1941.
Back row (left to right): Fay Muckleston, Mary Saunders, Joan Rayner, Elaine Lewis, Dorothy Brown.
Front row (left to right: Rosemary Baercrombie-Smythe, Pat Liddell, Betty Cameron, Ruth Ure and Leslie Adam. Picture courtesy Ruth Ure.

Barbara Saks

From 1943, Barbara was selected to work at Bletchley Park. She served in Hut 3, Block D – one of four WAAF officers working around the clock – to decrypt the German Enigma messages during World War II. She left in October 1945 to take an assignment helping compensate post-war survivors.

Based on correspondence with The Association of RAF Fighter Control Officers.

Picture courtesy Barbara Saks.

I joined up as Barbara Brown on 22 April 1940 and, after two weeks basic training at West Drayton, I was then posted to Kirton-in-Lindsey as a WAAF Plotter in May 1940.

The Operations Room was a large, high-ceilinged room, with the huge, sloping Sector Table Map occupying most of the space. My position was on the East Coast at the top of the table, because I could plot upside-down easier than the right-way-up, facing the upper deck and the Controller and Officer Liaisons, and the lower deck and Non-Commissioned Officer Liaisons.

On the wall was a large clock, each five-minute section coloured red, yellow and blue. Our plastic plotting arrows matched the colour of each five minutes, and if the plot was 15 minutes old, the former arrows laid down were removed, and we started again with red. Squadron numbers on duty were illuminated up on the wall near the clock. There were four duty watches of plotters, A, B, C and D watch, mixed RAF and WAAF. I was on 'A' watch. We worked around the clock on various shifts for three days, then had a 24-hour stand-down from 1pm one day to 1pm the next.

15 September 1940 was a Sunday. It was my 23rd birthday. 'A' watch (my watch) was on duty in the Operations Room at RAF Kirton-in-Lindsey, on the morning shift, 8am to 1pm. It was the usual slow Sunday morning, two or three pilots practicing take-offs and landings after breakfast. Nothing unusual.

Then Intelligence came through that the Luftwaffe was sending over a second wave of bombers and fighters, bigger than the first, and a message went out all over Britain for every available pilot and plane to report to the South. We had two squadrons of Spitfires and two squadrons of Hurricanes at that time, and they were all scrambled. We plotted them off the table.

> We had two squadrons of Spitfires and two squadrons of Hurricanes at that time, and they were all scrambled.

Then came news that most of our pilots had returned to base and a few who didn't. Among those was a friend of mine - a quiet man with a great sense of humour. Then later came the news that he had been shot down, ditched in the Channel and had been taken prisoner, but no one knew where. Thus ended my Battle of Britain Day experience.

Above: Bentley Priory Operations Room, Fighter Command HQ, Stanmore. Warnings were initiated by the Air Raid Warning Officer who obtained information of the approach of hostile aircraft from observation of the plotting table. Working with a specially designed glass-top table on which was affixed a tracing of the warning districts in the UK, and using a transparent protractor graded according to speed, he estimated the time it would take hostile aircraft to enter a particular district.
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Left: Barbara Saks. Courtsey the Association of RAF Fighter Controllers.

‘Those girls, those Filter Plotters . . .
I can never speak too highly of. They were wonderful. I am so proud of them and I feel that their story has to be told.’

Eileen Younghusband

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