

STEPHANIE HIGHAM

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Third Officer Pigott and Buster

'When I was nine my father resigned from the Army¹ and decided to live on the Continent because of my mother's poor health. We went to Vienna for two years where we had governesses and then moved to Rome and always went to Carinthia in southern Austria for the long summer holidays. As children we spoke German rather than English - much to the annoyance of our parents. In those days, girls were not supposed to have careers so that when war broke out, my only qualifications were fluent German, Italian and French.

When there was an appeal by the Admiralty for German speakers I enlisted and was sent to Queen Anne Mansions for an interview. After a German test I reported to the Royal Naval College, Greenwich on 11 May 1941. Our course lasted two weeks and we had to learn the English and German naval ranks, parts of ships and other naval subjects. As well as this, we did squad drill, kitchen fatigues and learnt naval history and organization. This was the time of the fire raids on London and we had to spend every night in the cellars, sleeping on mattresses on the floor packed in like sardines. We were then kitted out and sworn in as WRNS.

¹ Stephanie comes from a military family. Her grandfather was Lieutenant Colonel Charles B Pigott CB DSO (1859-97), 60th Rifles and 21st Hussars. He was in the column sent up the Nile to rescue General Gordon but it arrived too late. He died age 40 of yellow fever. Her father was Major Berkeley Pigott (1894-1982) 17th/21st Lancers. She was married to Commander Walter E Higham (1897-1990) who served in the RN Submarine Service from 1918 to 1933.

On 16 May 1941 I was posted to Winterton on the east coast with two other Wrens. We were billeted in private houses and our landlord and his family slept in their Anderson shelter whilst we had their room. Everyone except me passed out as an Acting Petty Officer, Special Duties,¹ but I had to return to Greenwich on 19 June and retake the test which, luckily, I then passed.

Our social life was hectic and we seemed to go to parties every night, often coming back to go on night watch. Our job was to listen for E-boats that might attack our convoys. Unfortunately we did not hear much but during the day time we picked up a mass of German radio transmissions (R/T) coming from the Russian front which we took down and sent to the War Office. The locals thought that we projected pictures of ourselves on to a screen to lure the E-boats ashore. On 1 July the First Officer in Charge visited us and read the riot act; in future we must wear uniform and be in early. I don't think this had much effect on our life-style!

All the parties and boy friends came to an end when I was transferred to Fairness, North Foreland, Kent, on 3 December. I arrived with five pieces of luggage and a dog to a decidedly frosty welcome. What a change it was - just like going back to boarding school. No late nights, no parties and no social life - apart from a game of golf with the other Wrens. We had to spend a night on duty in an isolated tower on the cliff edge, at the end of a phone, so that if any traffic was picked up by the watch keeper, we could swivel our aerial and take a bearing and thereby, with a cross bearing, fix the location of the transmitter. My little dog Peter was in great demand to spend the night in the tower as it was really quite frightening being by oneself and not knowing if the approaching footsteps were a German Secret Agent who had scaled the cliff from the sea or an amorous Home Guard! The dog always remembered his time with the Wrens and greeted anyone wearing black stockings with great joy.

On 4 January 1942 I was sent to Greenwich for a refresher course and then to Dover where we worked under the castle in a tunnel next door to the plotting room, and lived in Dover College. Dover was shelled throughout my time there and the siren would not sound until after the first shell dropped - all a bit nerve-wracking especially when a large piece of shrapnel came through the wall of our brick shelter just above our heads. Luckily no one was hurt but the shelling did mean our off-duty nights were often disturbed. The work was much more interesting and we could always look into the plotting room and see what was going on in our area. One summer's day two of us went for a bathe at Abbotscliffe. There was no one else there and it was not till later that we were told that the beach was mined.

¹ The WRNS Special Duties (SD) Service was created in the summer of 1940. Its task was to intercept enemy naval wireless traffic and to pass the information to the Naval Intelligence Centres. It formed a part of the larger 'Y' Service providing an enemy signals interception network serving the Royal Navy, Army and RAF. The SD Service was set up and guided by Lieutenant Commander Frederick Marshall RNVR. Serving Wrens, with knowledge of German, were called upon to volunteer and were trained by Marshall and his staff at Greenwich Naval College and later at RNTE Southmead, Wimbledon. Most of the Wrens were then posted to wireless interception stations along the south and south east coasts of England. Approximately 400 Wrens passed through the naval 'Y' Service during the course of the war.

On 25 October 1942 I was transferred to Command HQ in Portsmouth. Our quarters then were in the lovely old Manor (now Council Offices) in Fareham. We had our own panelled mess room and a lovely garden to relax in. Every day we went to Fort Southwick on the top of Portsdown Hill with a view of the whole of the Solent and then proceeded to descend a flight of a hundred steps into the underground tunnels in the chalk. We worked 24 hours on and 24 hours off which meant that for one of the duties we were on duty in the office all night and the other time we did the afternoon, then went to bed about 9pm in a bunk in one of the tunnels and after breakfast we did the morning watch and then changed over at lunch time. Whilst on duty we came up for a breath of fresh air and had our meals in a Nissen hut inside the walls of the old fort. Our office was just one door away from the main plotting room of C in C Portsmouth - the next door office being occupied by a Staff Officer, Commander Peter Scott, who allowed us the use of his bunk in his cabin when he was not there and, in exchange, we sewed his buttons on for him! The tunnels were cut into the chalk and lined with corrugated iron which made them very damp and when the ventilation broke down it was very hot and airless.

We received traffic intercepted by Ventnor and Portland Bill stations. This mainly consisted of reams of four-letter code which we had to send to Station X (Bletchley Park) by teleprinter. There was also a certain amount of three-letter code which was a straight substitution code and I spent many an hour trying to break it and send the results to Station X who then sent us the correct decode. This code was used by the local naval establishments, harbour masters and lighthouses in the Channel Islands and on the French coast. They would ask for the lighthouse to be switched on and off at set times from which, according to which lighthouse it was and what time, we could deduce if E-boats were planning a sortie or a coastal convoy was expected. Very occasionally R/T traffic emanating from E-boats was picked up. It is only now when the secrecy period has ended that I realise that the four-letter codes were the naval Enigma code. It was a great disappointment to us all when the two German battleships, *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*, steamed up the Channel in complete silence and undetected.

In January 1944 I went before a selection board for a commission. As it turned out I was not allowed to leave Portsmouth to go to the Officers' Training Class until after the invasion had taken place. I was sent to Ventnor and Portland Bill to meet the Wrens we talked to daily on the phone and to see how their stations worked. I was also sent for a week's course to RAF Kingsdown where we learned about German aircraft R/T from our WAAF counterparts. When we saw the conditions they lived in - a Nissen hut with 20 beds, one iron stove to heat it and the loo two huts away - we were glad to be Wrens.

In April the troops started to arrive along the coast and soon every verge and lane was crammed with men and vehicles. From the beginning of April not one of us working in the Portsmouth Command was allowed to leave the area and no one was allowed in.

On 9 May I was told that I would be going to Officers' Training Course the following Saturday. This was, not surprisingly, cancelled on the Friday. The invasion night proceeded, from our point of view, peacefully with no R/T or three-letter code messages to tell us that the Germans knew what was happening. When we came up to the top of the downs after the night watch the sea was empty instead of being tightly packed with ships. The traffic we picked up became more interesting with

reports from the local garrisons, harbour masters etc. and long messages of exhortation from Hitler for all to die at their post for the Fatherland!

On 12 August 1944 I was sent to the station at Southwold where I promptly went down with tonsillitis and was more of a nuisance than a help to them. I was just about well enough to get to my Officers' Training Course at Framewood Manor, Slough. The course successfully completed, I was sent to Greenock as Assistant Admiralty Berthing Officer - a job I knew nothing about and had to be taught by the duty Wren. The living conditions were terrible; a Victorian villa with 12 of us in one room and, as I was the only watch keeper, I could never get any sleep in the day time.

After having had my tonsils out, I was sent as Assistant Duty Staff Officer to C in C Western Approaches at Derby House, Liverpool. This was a very interesting job as all the Atlantic convoys and naval ships were controlled from this HQ. We were visited by Churchill and the King and Queen. I was then drafted to Freddy Marshall's establishment at Wimbledon (footnote p.150) and met many of my old friends there. We were given the job of translating captured German documents - highly technical ones such as the working of the V1 and V2, the effect of frostbite and medical experiments, etc. We used large technical dictionaries to look up all the unknown words and only hoped that if there was a choice of words we picked the right one and that the scientists, engineers and doctors, etc. could make more sense of what we wrote than we did.

We heard that some of us would be able to go to Germany as interpreters and I applied to go and was sent on an interpreter's course for four weeks. Then, after a medical examination, I was given numerous inoculations and kitted out as if I was off to the North Pole. We flew to Hamburg and then proceeded by car to Flag Officer Schleswig-Holstein's HQ at Plön. The Royal Navy had taken over a very modern German training barrack situated on a lake. One block was the Wren Officers' Mess. I shared a large room with another Wren Officer and our two large dogs. We were thoroughly spoilt being about one girl to four men and a choice of parties to go to every night with champagne and caviar!

I worked in the Admiral's interpreter's office where we translated messages to and from the German Admiral who had been left in charge of the German fleet in Kiel harbour. There was one day when things nearly went wrong. Under the peace treaty, a third of the German Navy had to be handed over to the Russians and when the time came to do this, the German sailors mutinied and refused to go. Our Admiral had to send some of our own sailors with the German ships to guarantee that all their crews would be returned to Germany.

I was able to act as interpreter at one of the War Crimes trials and at various meetings. Life was hard work during the morning with riding, sailing, shooting or skiing most afternoons and parties at night. Unfortunately this came to an end on 23 April 1946 when I had to return home to be demobbed.'