

Mary Hall's WW2 Memoirs

This document was prepared from a typescript in February 2019 by Andrew McLean, one of Mary Halls nephews. Mary Hall (nee Carlisle, 9 May 1921 – 11 December 2011) was married to Rear Admiral Geoffrey Hall, the twentieth Hydrographer of the Navy.

Captain J. E. Moore, Royal Navy, asked me to write down memories of my time as a Wren in the Western Approaches Command. John has recently retired from being the Editor of Jane's Fighting Ships and is now working on several books.

One of these is 'to tell the story of the people involved in the Battle of the Atlantic, who they were, where they came from, how they joined and were trained, what they did, how they lived, what they felt etc.' He says 'Amongst the Services which have received little recognition are the WRNS and the Surveyors... Would you spare an hour to write down your memories of such things as – volunteering, - training, - uniform, - who selected you as a plotter, - who wrote your reports, - what do you remember of the crisis convoys, particularly ONS 5 in April/May '43 (the hub of the book), - how much convoy diversion took place in Derby House, what was the organisation there, how many watches, - where did you live, where did you eat and was the food eatable, what were you paid, could you wear civilian clothes at any time. did you visit the ships? These are just a few of the points on which I am ignorant and feel should be included!'

These notes are an attempt to answer the questions and are written specifically for John. He and Barbara live in Sussex and see Iain and Jill fairly frequently - hence the references to Iain.

Volunteering

I volunteered for the WRNS in 1939. I was told firmly that there were no vacancies, that I would anyway be hopeless as a cook or a steward and I should get on with my education. This I did, but in vacations from Oxford I kept on trying, and mis-spent my reading time working in a canteen in Liverpool's dockland - an education in itself.

In my last Oxford year I was interviewed by Chief Officer Nan Currie, a formidable lady if ever there was one. (In her explanation of the difference between a mobile and an immobile wren she said that, if the former, I might be sent anywhere - even to Aultbea. Oh, said I, how lovely. I'd take my rod and go fishing. How stupid can you get!)

Chief Officer Currie told me that they had their eye on me for the Western Approaches plot. I was to finish my degree course and then they would call me up.

I went for my 'medical' in my last vac - cheating in the eye test by learning the card in advance. Just after my last exam in Oxford I had my call-up papers.

I always suspected that behind this planned timing was a family friend - Richard Rankin. Iain will tell you about him. He was a Liverpool businessman turned Paymaster Commander RNR on the staff of NCSO. His primary official job was liaison with Convoy Commodores - if you have John Keegan's 'Price of Admiralty' he is in the photograph of the convoy conference, standing at the back. He was a behind-the-scenes person, a splendid raconteur and known as leave-it-to-me Rankin. I think he kept an avuncular eye.

Training

In my day each command had its own preliminary training base; later, all Wrens went to a central one at Mill Hill. The Western Approaches base was in Blundell Sands, down river from Liverpool, where several houses had been requisitioned.

A group of about 26 of us arrived by train and had a fortnight of head inspections, squad drill, floor scrubbing, lectures on potted naval history, traditions and naval phrases, air-raid drill, 'suitable conduct' and all.

(A friend of mine in similar circumstances received the unforgettable advice from a CPO - Always beware of a sailor who asks you to walk with him on a fine day, and carries his raincoat. He's up to no good).

We were taught to use naval terms for our quarters - the deck, galley etc, and cabins which were all called HMS this or that. When the training officer came to the sick bay being HMS Stork guess who set off the unseemly mirth and caused a severe frown.

I think some training was given for specific jobs – secretarial and so on. But plotters (only me at that time) and I think coding Wrens too learnt their later expertise on the job.

Uniform

I can't recall the precise timing, but at some point we must have been accepted as Wrens. Several of my group had already gone home by then, by their own or the Navy's choice. We that were left were taken to Liverpool, to the uniform store in Liver Building to be kitted out. We were given everything, but everything including blackouts (never worn on the plot). Wearing uniform presented some problems of course, but a Fleet Air Arm cousin had taught me how to put on a stiff collar with its mystery of studs; and I carefully chose uniform a size or two too large and then took it to Mama's tailor in Liverpool for a slinkier fit.

We still had the pudding-basin hats in those days - the round caps came later; and the cap ribbons had proper ships' names, before the anonymity of plain HMS. We were Eaglet. and the fun thing was to have the tiddly bow so tied that it masked the T and we became Eagle. Sailors were expert in tying tiddly bows over a threepenny bit, and one could always find a friend in Derby house to oblige. We were very proud of our distinctive category badge. I kept mine for a long time and it may still be around, though temporarily mislaid,

Pay

As I recollect, the pay of a Wren was 32/- a fortnight. We had to go to the Liver Building for it - to 'Captain's Requestmen and Defaulters' - cap in hand.

I was later rated up to Leading Wren which was quite a ceremony.

WRNS Quarters

Wrens in Liverpool were housed mainly in Sefton Park, a tram-ride away from Pier Head. Transport was of course provided for work and we were collected from the various houses that had been taken over,

I was in Ackerley House, and memories are a bit of a jumble now. We slept in 'cabins' on double bunks, all with the Admiralty blue and white anchor covers - nice and shipshape. I was first in a huge noisy room with some odd bods indeed - another step in my education. Then luckily I met a childhood friend from Hoylake. She was a coder, Joy Buckley. Iain will know. She and some like- minds were in a small six-bedded room; one was just leaving to go to Greenwich, so Joy asked me to join them. Judy was one of that room, other congenial folk came and went while I was there.

We were mostly watchkeepers so the need for day sleep was appreciated by all and life became much more pleasant.

Meals were adequate but not exciting, and were often rushed. There were entertainments of varying sorts - service concerts, dances and so on. Joy Buckley called hers a Daily Mirror Romance when she met Michael Lyne at one of the dances. He is now an Air Vice Marshall retired. They once lived in Legbourne when he was stationed at Manby and are now at Coleby on the Lincoln Edge, so we meet from time to time.

On one occasion we 'hosted' an entertainment for Eleanor Roosevelt - a jolie laide but ever so democratic and even talked to me for quite a time. There was a large parade in her honour next day, on a windswept Pier Head, and she wrote in her 'Diary' about the Bonny Lady Sailors, which caused some amusement.

While I was in Ackerley House I received my first letter from Geoffrey. I remember using the very public telephone there to ring Tony in Greenock to ask who on earth this was, writing in such an extraordinary fashion - and had she a photograph. She had.

Off Duty

I liked being stationed in Liverpool. It was near enough to Heswall for me to get home when there was a break between watches. In Liverpool itself there were Service Clubs and canteens which were welcoming, cinemas, hotels, live theatre and wonderful concerts. Here we could sit behind the orchestra for 6d and sometimes even attend rehearsals. Malcolm Sargent was the principal conductor but others came and went, the most memorable being Sir Thomas Beecham.

The old Overhead Railway¹ was still running - Iain will tell you about pre-war trips - and was used to visit various friends in ship. For me it was usually as an officer's guest and we had to wear Civilian clothes to be in the wardroom.

On one very stormy occasion - the tail end of a gale - I took 4 or 5 Wrens to a corvette in Gladstone Dock to go out on some Hedgehog² trials. I was the L/Wren of the party and stayed on the bridge most of the time. It was quite an experience.

Quite often, especially in winter when I would not otherwise have seen daylight, I took sandwiches mid-day and went on a ferry across the Mersey and back. It was fascinating to see the ships one had been plotting, some looking a bit battered.

One stormy day I was the only passenger on the top deck and the dear ferryman came out of his wheelhouse for a chat. 'Real-sailors' weather, isn't it, miss'. I loved that.

1 Liverpool's Overhead Railway operated from 1893 to 1956 and served the Docks area

2 The 'Hedgehog' was a ship-borne anti-submarine weapon, which fired bombs ahead of the ship.

The Western Approaches Plot

The Western Approaches Operations Room was underground in Derby House. Did you ever see it? I expect it has been described often, and some day I hope to see its reconstruction in the newly developed Albert Dock. Skip this bit if you know it all.

The main Atlantic Plot was on one long wall two stories high and northern convoy routes were reached by ladder. (NB Jackie Broome's cartoon). The floor space was occupied by various work tables.

The wall opposite the plot was divided. At floor level, up a few steps, the Duty Commander had a glass-fronted office, taking up about 2/3 of the length of the room. (Our nearest scrambler telephone was here). Next to the Duty Commander, left side if looking at the plot, was a smaller office, also glass-fronted, for the RAF.

The top half of that wall, above the Duty Commander, was the Commander-in-Chief's room, and the all-seeing eye could be quite intimidating.

The AOC had a smaller office up top at the RAF end.

The wall across the right-hand end of the Operations Room had a plot of the East Atlantic as far south as Freetown, and another ladder.

The wall at the LH end was the domain of the RAF.

At floor level in the RH wall was the door to the Chief-of-Staff's office, another door to Sec/COS and then a passage leading to a rabbit warren of other offices.

A large open way to the Convoy Room was in the right-hand end of the main plot.

The Duty Captain's desk was at floor level between the Duty Commander and the Chief of Staff, near the main door into the Operations Room,

The Plot was a bit of a show-piece for visiting VIPs, various foreigners, students from Captain Roberts' Tactical Course, and even Dartmouth cadets from Eaton Hall. I was lucky enough to be on watch when the King and Queen came round. Curtseying with a handful of pins and coloured elastic did seem a little bizarre. At least I wasn't stuck up a ladder.

A duplicate plot was set up in Knowsley as a fall-back if Derby House was put out of action, but was never used, some of the plotters went there to check equipment, but not me.

In Derby House the Atlantic was coloured dark green with white lines of longitude and latitude, and the land biscuit colour, Mercator's projection. There was a large globe in the Chief of Staff's office, and gnomonic charts³ in the Convoy Room.

The main plot was a diagram showing the state of things at 4-hourly intervals. It was for Western Approaches only - we followed the fortunes of other convoys, PQs⁴ etc, on a chart table at the back of our bit of floor.

3 Gnomonic charts show great circle routes as straight lines; these are the shortest distances between two points.

4 PQs were outbound Arctic convoys. QPs were homebound Arctic convoys.

Convoy diversions were worked out in the Convoy Room. Several chart tables were there, as I recollect, and much conferring of staff at times of crisis. We were given the resulting changes of route to put up on the main plot as quickly as possible.

Plotters Organisation

A WRNS Officer and a Wren were always on duty, day and night, and a second Wren during the day. The plotters worked in watches - in four watches if we were lucky, and very long ones at that, because of the need for continuity and a long turnover. The Wrens' timing was 8am to 6pm and 6pm to 8am. During these watches we had time off for meals, and a bit of a snooze at night if we were lucky. The Officers had the same length of watch but changed watches an hour later.

There always had to be an Officer or Wren in the plot so we boxed and coxed for meals, otherwise worked together. In addition there was a day Wren who worked 9-5. One's turn for this duty came round in sequence and one was Day Wren for about a week at a time.

I felt rather claustrophobic to start with, being underground so much, but the job was fascinating and I soon became acclimatised.

Ladders

The ladders we used were 'step ladder' type set sideways to the plot and were moved along a sort of tramline, top and bottom. One quickly got used to them and acquired a splendid balance, seeing how far the elastic would stretch when putting up the convoy routes.

Sadly this balance eluded some of the WAAF. They used only one of the ladders, about midnight, to chalk up flight schedules for the next day's convoys.

One night a naval crisis signal came in and the Wren plotter took hold of the nearest ladder and rushed it eastward to the trouble spot. The WAAF lost her balance, fell and was killed. I came on watch at 8 the next morning. The Wren had been taken off in shock, so half the routine night work had still to be done, and everyone was much shaken.

After the tragedy safety harnesses were fitted to the ladders and were a positive nuisance.

The Job

The Atlantic Wall Plots were diagrams. They showed:-

1. The position plotted by DR of all ships and convoys.
2. The routes of convoys etc, (In very sensitive ship- and convoy- movements the route was not put on the plot in advance. The destination of TORCH was not shown when the convoy sailed⁵).
3. The 'Admiralty Guess' position of U-boats (?Ultra?⁶).
4. The actual position of known U-boats.

5 Operation Torch was the Anglo-US invasion of French North Africa in November 1942

6 ULTRA was material obtained from German Enigma-encoded traffic at Bletchley Park

5. The position of ships and convoys attacked,
6. The position of ships sunk.
7. The direction and speed of the wind.

The positions of convoys, HM ships, etc were moved every four hours.

Each type of convoy had a route of different coloured elastic - HX, SC, ON, ONS and 'specials' like the QM (Queen Mary) and QE (Queen Elizabeth), very fast and unescorted, and HM ships.

Each convoy was represented by a plastic clip showing the name and number of the convoy, and slotted in were the names of all the escort vessels on cardboard slips - yellow for destroyers, yellow/dark red for frigates, dark red for corvettes, green for trawlers, pale grey for 'sloops' and so on. 'Rescue' ships were shown, and MAC⁷ ships where appropriate. Air cover was indicated by a small plane.

As more escort ships became available Support Groups were formed and had their own clips on the plot.

Every afternoon came the 'Admiralty Guess' of U-boat positions which were plotted as white lozenge-shaped symbols. When a signal came in with definite news of a U-boat sighting or attack the symbol was black.

The symbol for a sunken ship was vaguely ship-shaped, red for ours, black for a U-boat.

Winds were shown by white arrows with tails indicating the wind force. Very occasionally, and usually near the Azores, we had a CALM.

Watchkeeping Officer and Wren worked together. Signals were brought by messenger and were logged. Some needed immediate action – to correct a position on the plot, or to show an attack on a convoy. Other signals were of future movements, giving routes of convoys, times of sailing, names of escorts etc, These were entered in a family-bible sized diary and dealt with in due time.

The signals were then initialled and filed.

A signal originated by SO Movements was made each day, giving the estimated position of ships and convoys at a specified time. If the true position was wildly different corrective signals came back, with a coded weather report in the t.o.o., but wireless silence was kept as much as possible.

The plotting Wren had also to prepare the plot for showing future movements, particularly putting up convoy routes - pins in the position where convoys changed course and elastic stretched between. This was more easily done with two, one Wren to move the ladder and one up top to stick in the pins and stretch the elastic. A similar routine was followed when we moved the convoys and all to the next position four hours on, the floor Wren reading out the speed of the convoy and the one up top moving all the symbols. I still have my much cherished personal dividers.

7 Merchant Aircraft Carrier: former merchant ships with an improvised flight deck added on top.

The Day Wren helped with all this, as necessary. She also had to see that all files were weeded out and up to date, and that all the symbols, ships' names cards etc were in order - and sometimes acted as guide to visitors.

You ask about ONS 5⁸. I can see its position on the plot, having a photographic memory, and the cluster of U-boats round, but I cannot recall all the details. Each convoy we plotted seemed to be a crisis convoy, especially when we knew some of the men (and women) involved, and I think it is only with hindsight that one is aware of the turning tide.

Tail Piece

I am not sure who wrote our reports - probably the chief plotter, 2nd. Officer Barbara Grylls in the first instance.

Sometime in the summer of 1943 I was told to go to an Officers' Selection Board in Liver Buildings. I protested strongly, and then was sent for by the Chief of Staff (Admiral Mansfield) to be told that if I was suitable to be an officer I was not to question the wisdom of my superiors.

I left Derby House in December 1943.

Postscript

I went to Greenwich at the end of 1943 - three fascinating weeks; memories of bombs, the Painted Hall, squad drill in the snow by the arches under the Queen's House. I was lucky because shortly after that the WRNS Officers' quarters were bombed and the course moved away to Stoke Poges.

I ended my course as a Third Officer - (lucky again, some were stuck as cadets for a bit longer) - and I was sent to Portland to be a Plotting Officer and then a Duty Staff Officer in the base there, living in Greenhill House in Weymouth.

Portland was a Coastal Force base then - HMS Attack, and all the spring of 1944 was looking towards D-Day. The plot was a RADAR plot on a flat table. It covered a small part of the Channel and was quite a change from Derby House, but fascinating and immediate, and much closer to the ships, and MGBs⁹.

We were also on the fringes of the D-Day planning, and involved in various exercises - including being on the eastern edge of the US Exercise Tiger¹⁰, which was a stormy night of great confusion. Weymouth Bay was a gathering point as June approached and strange things came and anchored there, to become parts of the Mulberry Harbour.

8 ONS 5 was the 5th of the numbered ONS series of Slow trade convoys Outbound from the British Isles to North America. The North Atlantic battle surrounding it in May 1943 is regarded as the turning point of the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II. The battle ebbed and flowed over a period of a week, and involved more than 50 Allied ships and their escorts, and over 30 U-boats. It saw heavy losses on both sides. However it was almost the last Allied convoy to do so, while losses inflicted on attacking U-boats and U-boat groups became a besetting feature of the campaign; As such it is seen as the point when the tactical and strategic advantage passed to the Allies, and ushered in the period known to Nazi Germany's Kriegsmarine as Black May.

9 Motor Gun Boats – small fast warships.

10 Exercise Tiger: April 1944, Slapton Sands, Devon. At least 700 American servicemen died in this rehearsal for the D-Day landings.

Life was very full and the spring was lovely; I picked cowslips on my birthday and came to love Dorset.

But that is another story.

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

The Western Approaches Plot

I was in Derby House as a Wren Plotter in 1942 and 1943.

A WRNS Officer and Wren were always on watch on the Plot and a second Wren did a 9-5 day. The watches were long, 8 am-6 pm, 6 pm-8 am for the Wrens -- the Officers changed watch an hour later. The job was absorbing and it was a great privilege to be there.

The main Plot -- of the North Atlantic - was in the Operations Room on one long wall two stories high, and northern convoy routes were reached by ladder. The wall opposite the Plot was divided. At floor level, up a few steps the Duty Commander had a glass-fronted office taking up about two-thirds of the length of the room. Next to the Duty Commander, left side if looking at the Plot, was a smaller glass-fronted office for the RAF. The top half of that wall, above the Duty Commander, was the Commander-in-Chief's office with glass front. Next to him, at the RAF end was the AOC. The wall at right angles across the left end of the room was where details of RAF flights were chalked up. At the other end of the Operations Room were: the Duty Captain's desk, the Chief of Staff's office, a passage with Staff Officers' rooms, and access to the Convoy Room.

On the Plot itself the sea was coloured dark green, the land masses were biscuit coloured, and the lines of latitude and longitude (Mercator's Projection) were white. The Plot showed the routes of convoys in different coloured elastic; the positions, plotted by Dead Reckoning, of convoys and of independently routed ships; the position of U-boats "guessed" by the Admiralty (from Enigma?); the position of known U-boats, of convoys attacked and ships sunk and the direction and strength of the wind in the vicinity of each convoy.

A convoy was represented by a clip showing its name and number. Slotted into the clip were names of the escort vessels on coloured cardboard: destroyers -- yellow, corvettes -- dark red, frigates -- yellow/dark red, trawlers -- green, sloops -- grey, etc. Rescue ships were shown, and MAC ships and air cover where appropriate. U-boats were lozenge-shaped, white until positively identified -- and then black.

The weather, if known, was indicated by large white arrows, the tails showing the wind force.

We plotted by Dead Reckoning and the position of everything was moved every four hours.

Thus the PLOT was a diagram enabling the C-in-C and his staff to have a picture of the whole North Atlantic at a glance, with the relative positions of convoys and U-boats, the size and composition of convoy escorts, and support groups easily identified.

My recollection is that the Operations Room was quiet -- no clatter, and spacious -- no clutter on the floor. There were 2 tables for convoy files, signals, symbols, etc, but they did not obscure the Atlantic.

The value of the Plot was its simplicity and its clarity.

P.S.

I left Liverpool, reluctantly, 2 December 1943. A three-week course at Greenwich (steeped in history) was fascinating, but very cold - 'squad drill in the snow'!

January 1st 1944, I was appointed a third officer and sent to Portland as a plotting officer and then a Duty Staff Officer.

All 1944 was dominated by D-Day - the planning, exercises, build-up, the actual invasion and its aftermath. It was an absorbing busy and sometimes tragic time.

Geoffrey came back from the Far East early in 1945. We met at last, and married on All Souls Day!

I left the WRNS in September 1945.

DERBY HOUSE

2001

What a lot of work has gone into the reconstruction. It is impressive. I can only speak with knowledge of the Plotting Room. I never saw other parts, like the signals area, during my time in Derby House so cannot comment on the authenticity there; but I thought the 'Education Room' was a good idea for schools. I hope that the Cinema room will start showing films again and set the Atlantic scene.

There are, however, some obvious errors.

The main Plot is not quite what it was!

The Commentaries – these were interesting, but not always correct. There were some odd comments in the Operations Room. The girl who lost her balance and fell was not a Wren but one of the WAAF. The noisy hubbub at the end of the commentary contrasts with my recollection of purposeful quiet.

Wrens – if there have to be models they should be correctly dressed. WRNS ratings had black buttons on their uniforms. Officers and Petty Officers had tricorne hats (different badges) and no white cap covers were worn during the war. Category badges should be correct. The teleprinter operator would have had crossed signal flags, not plotting dividers.

The RDF – RADAR Plot on a "massive table" is a nonsense. It can be seen from wartime photographs that there was no place for it in Derby House. Whoever dreamed up this Plot was either confusing Derby House with the Liver Building (which was the headquarters of Flag Officer, Liverpool, and, like all ports, would have had radar coverage to track coastal shipping) or, the Plot is a deliberate hoax, set up by someone who has seen too many films of the Battle of Britain. It should not be there at all.

Admiralty charts were not on the walls, but on tables in the Convoy Room, which, sadly, has not been included in the reconstruction.

The Souvenir Brochure is, of course, out of date and presumably will be replaced. There are some errors in it too – whatever is the curious little diagram on the 'Contents' page? – HMS Stork, Enemy Lines, Atlantic Ocean mean little there. The "massive table" had no place at all. Western Approaches did not command the Russian convoys except in the Atlantic.

The floor plans in the brochure are inaccurate but understandably so; and I do not remember there being so large an RAF presence. It is, however, good to have the Derby House part in the Battle of the Atlantic preserved.

I hope it will eventually become a more accurate record of the historic past, and visitors will not be confused by odd flights of fancy, which bear no relation to fact.

Mary Hall