

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with May Longworth (ML) • WRNS

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 01.12.2005

K: Could I begin then by asking you your name?

ML: Anne May Longworth.

K: And when were you born May?

ML: I was born in 1921.

K: And where were you born?

ML: At Timothy Fold Farm, Lever Edge Lane, Bolton.

K: Oh, so you were a farmer's daughter?

ML: No, no my father had retired, and bought this house, and just ran it as a home. He had one or two pigs and hens because that was his hobby. Previously he'd been in Russia as a mill manager, a cotton mill manager.

K: Who did he work for?

ML: Oh, I can't remember, I was only a little girl when he died so I haven't got much of his background information.

K: Did your Mother work?

ML: No, I had four brothers and so, she was fully occupied really. We also had her father living with us, and my father's Mother, so it was quite a house full, so she didn't do other work.

K: And were your brothers older than you?

ML: Yes I was the youngest.

K: And so, where did you go to school?

ML: I went to St Bede's, Morris Green, which is still there, and from there, when we'd left the farm, I went to St Paul's at Astley Bridge for about 6 months. I took the second part of the scholarship there and then I went to the Municipal Secondary School which became County Grammar, and is no longer there.

K: Did you move to Astley Bridge?

ML: Yes.

K: Where did you live in Astley Bridge?

ML: There was just Mother and I by this time, my brothers had either married or left home. We lived in Ruby Street, just an ordinary cottage in Ruby Street then, and that's where I was during the early part of the War.

K: What did you do when you left school?

ML: I went as a shorthand typist to Wolfenden and Naylor who were accountants in Mawdsley Street, and then from there, when I was 18 I went onto Bolton Leathers which was an associate company of Walker's Tannery, the big tannery in Bolton. We were working on War contracts making leather for the boots and shoes for the forces. So we weren't required to go in the forces, at the beginning it was a reserved occupation. Later, when I became 21, my boss advised me to volunteer for the services if I wished to choose what I did, and so I chose the Wrens.

K: So what year would that be?

ML: 1943, March 1943

K: Was it very hard work in the leather industry?

ML: Well, I was only in the office, you know. It seemed hard for the men, yes, and smelly work.

K: And were they working long hours to produce these boots for the War?

ML: They did work quite a bit of overtime, yes.

K: So you volunteered for the Wrens?

ML: Yes.

K: And where did you enlist?

ML: I was sent for, to go to an interview in Manchester with the Wren Officer, and she was there to sort out what you'd be best suited for. I thought that I'd have a complete change and I said that I didn't want to do office work. So she asked one or two questions which I thought were rather peculiar at the time. She said 'do you know how to mend a puncture?' I'd had four brothers and they'd all had bikes and I'd often have to hold spanners and so on, and watch them sticking puncture repair things on. So I knew all about that, how to use spanners to get the inner tubes out and so on. I said 'Oh yes', so from there she said there is a very new thing opening in the Wrens. They wanted to train Wren air mechanics to replace some of the men who had been working on the aircraft carriers and were now based on shore for little breaks. They wanted them to be able to go back to the aircraft carriers and they wanted Wrens to carry on their work. So she said I would be an air mechanic and was in the very early entries of air mechanics.

K: And that appealed to you?

ML: I didn't really know what it meant, but I was hopeful. I was quite interested.

K: So what training did you have?

ML: We were sent to a little place called Mill Meece near Stafford, and the base was called HMS Fledgling and engineers who were still in the Navy taught us different branches of the work. They divided us into groups, you could either be an engineer, that is working on the engines or you could be in the radio or the actual airframe. There were various other things, and I was chosen to be an airframe mechanic. For training, we were given a little piece of metal to begin with, an irregular shaped little piece of metal, and we had to file it and use micrometers to get it to an exact rectangle, the measurements they told you. That was the first little bit, and then in the training we had to learn how to splice metal cables which would be used to work the rudders and the ailerons of aircraft for the Fleet Air Arm. We were shown how to dope the linen that covered the wings of the early aircraft, the biplanes. When you are doing that you had to drink a pint of milk a day to combat the dope, they called it, that they put on the material to preserve it. There were lots of other little bits of training and at the end of each section we had an exam. If you didn't get through you had to do that fortnight again, till the end of the course, which I think lasted about 4-6 months. I'm not quite sure how long it was. And then we were sent to a base and my first base was at Inskip, near Blackpool. There we were put into a gang with about 3 other Wrens, making 4, and a Royal Naval Engineer over us to supervise. We had to do the checks on the aircraft more or less like you would do a check on a car, like an MOT. You'd do it from a book, and you had to check the various bits, and the first aircraft we worked on were called Swordfish. They were biplanes and you would wonder really how they stayed in the air - because they just seemed to be metal wooden struts and linen covering things - but they did!

And then the next place I went to was on a short course to Worthy Down, near Winchester and that was an aircraft checkers course. Working from a manual you had to check every little bit of the aircraft, that it was present and where it should be, and check the parachutes which were stored in the wing over the head of the pilot. They had to pull a rip cord to let that be free if they needed to use it. At Worthy Down the Wrens were sleeping in bunks, double bunks in cabins, and I was in an upper one. We were told that in case of an air raid, we must jump out of the upper bunk and get in the lower one so that we were covered. Strangely enough there was an air raid while I was there. There wasn't a great deal of damage, some of the planes were struck but mostly it was from blasts from windows blowing in and things like that. You'd see people with their arms in slings and cuts and bruises, but I don't think anyone was killed during it. After that I was transferred to Scotland, to Evanton, on the Cromarty Firth. We were working on Seafires which was the Spitfire which was used in the Battle of Britain, with an adaptation, which was an oleo leg underneath the aircraft which when it went on the aircraft carriers, would hook onto the cables that went across the aircraft carrier, so that it didn't run off the deck of the carrier. We had to check every part of that, and it was there that I was when VE Day came.

K: What do you remember of VE Day?

ML: Well I remember it came over the Tannoy system in the hangars to say that victory had been declared in Europe, and everybody went mad, and we were allowed to go back to our quarters. That evening everybody got dustbin lids and one thing and another and we did the biggest ever conga all round the camp buildings, across the stream up there, all round and there was a great deal of hilarity, so that was very pleasant. I remember as we were going back to the quarters from the camp we came across a man driving a steam roller. I don't know what he was doing but we said to him 'You must go home, we've won the War, you can go back home!' and he was absolutely staggered. So that was what I remember of VE Day.

K: I didn't actually ask you what you were doing the day War broke out, did I?

ML: No, I was in church on the Sunday morning and the minister suddenly said he had got a message. He repeated Mr Chamberlain's account of what had happened, and he said, 'I am very much afraid that we are now at War with Germany.'

K: And which church was that?

ML: It was Mawdsley Street Congregational, it was in Great Moor Street, but it is no longer unfortunately.

K: What squadron were you in or what unit? Did it have a name?

ML: In Scotland, when I was there, I think it was Nightjar, HMS Nightjar, that's another bird.

K: And at Inskip what, can you remember what it was called?

ML: I can't remember what we were at Inskip. We were Fledgling and then Nightjar in Scotland; I can't remember the one in between.

K: And what rank were you?

ML: When I went in I was just a Wren but at the end I was a Leading Wren. You had to have some tests on what you knew about your work .

K: And did you like your uniform?

ML: Did I like it? Yes I think it was the best of the three. It was navy blue, and for work of course we had navy blue bell bottoms which were very rough serge and navy blue shirts and very good pullovers which were oiled wool and we needed them as it was very, very cold on the airfield up in Scotland. We quite often had snow, and when the snow was heavy we had a very good entertainments officer and he used to organise parties to take us to Strathpeffer, which is a spa town. There were hills behind it and we used to go to the tops of the hills and come down on toboggans and that was great. In summer when we were up there on fine Sundays he would organise trips to Rosemarkie on the Black Isle, and there we would have picnics on the beach, so that was very nice. We also had dances in the big hangars in the evenings and cinema shows as well. If you were fortunate enough to go with a non-commissioned officer, or an officer, you were allowed to sit on the upholstered seats at the back. If you were just with an ordinary matelot you were on forms at the front, so you looked out who you were going with. It was all very enjoyable, but also the work was very hard. I can remember in the sick bay in Scotland there would be girls sat with their feet in bowls of water to ease their chilblains and others inhaling Friar's Balsam for blocked sinuses and so on, it was extremely cold.

K: Did you get much leave?

ML: It just depended; I think it was supposed to be about every four months, but more often it got to six months. It depended on what work was needed, and you'd get a week's leave at once, which went very quickly.

K: Did you come back to Bolton?

ML: Yes, I came back to my Mother's house in Bolton, and once or twice I went to Sheffield. My friend lived in Sheffield, so sometimes we went to her house and we did walks across the Yorkshire moors which was very nice.

K: When you were in Bolton before you joined the Wrens, do you remember any air raids?

ML: Yes, I used to go to night school for book-keeping and short hand typing, and I can remember going home up Blackburn Road and you could see the flares over the Manchester area. Before we got to Blackburn Road I can remember going underneath the Market Hall, there were some shelters and we stayed in there until things quietened down a bit and then eventually we got home to Astley Bridge. The people who lived opposite to us on Blackburn Road itself, had a reinforced shelter with bunks in and we stayed there for a while until the all clear went.

K: You don't remember any other air raids in particular?

ML: Only the one when I was at Worthy Down. I don't remember any actually in Bolton because I wasn't in Bolton

K: Did your Mother mention any air raids at all?

ML: No not really, although I think there was one. I think part of Blackburn Road, where it went over the river, where it goes down now to Waters Meeting, I think that there was something there, but she didn't talk about it a great deal. While I was in the Wrens my Mother used to travel around to various friends because she was on her own and she used to go quite often to a farm in Rawtenstall, and sometimes to a friend in Knott End.

K: What about food?

ML: In the Wrens?

K: Yes.

ML: There was always plenty food, though it wasn't always what you would have liked to eat. We seemed to get an awful lot of macaroni cheese, but one thing which was surprising we always had plenty of sugar, but it was brown sugar, Demerara sugar, and that seemed to be in good supply. We had it on our porridge and there were a lot of potatoes of course. I don't remember there being any coffee. We had tea and at night there was cocoa, but I don't think we had coffee at all.

K: VJ Day, did you celebrate that in any way?

ML: VJ Day - I think I was due to come on leave just at that time. I don't remember a great deal about it except being relieved that the whole thing was over.

K: Were your brothers in the services?

ML: My brothers were all older than me, in fact my eldest brother was 21 years older than me, and he was the Borough Treasurer of Chorley, and so he was reserved. The other two brothers were engineers and they were working on War work, but my third brother was in the Army and he was in Africa quite a lot, and Italy. I can remember he sent me a telegram on my 21st birthday from somewhere abroad.

K: When you were 21 were you in the services then?

ML: No, that was just before I went.

K: So what was your birthday like in Bolton?

ML: I belonged to a church and it happened to be on a Monday and we had a Monday group that went walking and so on. So we all went walking and then at night we came back to my Mother's house and she somehow or other managed to get a cake together and I think we had pasties. There was quite a crowd of us there and it was very enjoyable, but not the great celebrations they have these days.

K: What did you do for entertainment when you were in Bolton?

ML: Well, we went to the Hippodrome, dances at the Palais, old time dances, modern dances and to the pictures, that's about it I think.

K: Do you remember any kind of particular shortage of food in Bolton?

ML: We always seemed to manage, there was very little meat, my Mother used to seem to pad it out with stuffing and things like that you know. The thing we missed most was the fruit, the oranges, the bananas, and things like that. We always had adequate, but of course the butter and so on was very much rationed.

K: So when did you leave the Wrens?

ML: I think it was 1945 or 46, it was just at the end of the VJ anyway.

K: And did you find it hard to adjust afterwards?

ML: Yes, I went back to the tannery, to the office, they by the way had paid a retaining fee, it wasn't very much but it was helpful, and the Managing Director had just lost his private secretary and he asked me to be his private secretary. So that was what I did until I got married. Then when I got married we seemed to automatically leave and that's what I did then.

K: Many people worked at the tannery for years didn't they, they had a thirty years club didn't they?

ML: Yes, they did,

K: Yes, I know in the Museum we've got a big photograph with all the members of the thirty years club in it, a lot of photographs.

ML: Really?

K: Yes, you'll maybe know some of those people.

ML: Yes, possibly.

K: And I think they had a little badge as well that they wore. Light Leathers, was that part of it?

ML: Yes, it was an associated company.

K: Was that in Weston Street?

ML: It was. We made the upper leather, high grade upper leather. After the things that we did for the War were heavier stuff, but Walker's Tannery themselves were mostly sole leather, the underneath, we were the upper.

K: You've told me what you did after the War. Is there anything you'd like to mention that we've not mentioned, or more detail about your Wren service?

ML: I remember it as being quite a happy time. Everybody was worried who had somebody serving in the War of course, and when I was down at Worthy Down it was quite upsetting because one or two of the Wrens had come from London and they were given compassionate leave because their parents and relatives had been killed in the War. Some of them didn't really know where they were going to go when they got home because their houses had been demolished, so it was really quite upsetting to see them. Mostly I remember the good times and everybody was very friendly and the men were very respectful of the Wrens. At any rate I don't know what it was like in the other services, but the person in charge of the hangar would always insist that there would be no bad language anywhere near the Wrens. I don't know how the men liked it but it was alright for us.

K: You would be doing, I suppose, men's work more often?

ML: Oh yes, so that they were free to go to sea on the carriers.

K: Is that heavy and hard work?

ML: Yes, it was quite heavy at times. Particularly when you'd had one of the wings off, a whole group of us had to support the wing while the lock nuts were put in place to secure it back to the aeroplane. That was quite heavy, and we had to push the aircraft out from the hangars onto the airfield to be tested, so that was quite hard.

K: Was there an emphasis on keep fit as a result?

ML: No not really, we didn't have a great deal of spare time. Sometimes when there was a rush job on we'd be in the hangars until ten o'clock at night. The cooks on duty at the Wrennery were always quite annoyed with us because they had to keep a hot meal for us because we'd only had sandwiches from the NAAFI van that came round at lunchtime, so they weren't very pleased at having to work late.

K: Do you ever miss that kind of work?

ML: No, can't say I did.

K: You were doing your duty...

ML: That's right, and your hands got very sore you know, especially when it was cold. You got bits knocked off and nails broken and so on, we had to use this stuff, I don't know whether it's still going, it's called Swarfega to get the oil off your hands.

K: I think Swarfega is still going.

ML: I can remember the smell of it.

K: It's quite a nice smell isn't it?

ML: Yes.

K: It works very effectively doesn't it?

ML: Yes

K: You married after the War didn't you?

ML: Yes, 1947.

K: There was still rationing wasn't there?

ML: Yes, there was, we had ration books.

K: Unless there's something you think we've not covered, just look at the photographs and see if there is anything I could ask you about them. So the first photograph there is first divisions on the quarter deck

ML: That's right, that's Mill Meece.

K: That's Fledgling, HMS Fledgling?

ML: Yes.

K: You can see the padre there in his white robe, and the captain's sheep dog beside him, if you look carefully. And in the second photograph is that at HMS Fledgling as well - Air Mechanics, First Class?

ML: I'm not quite sure whether that was Inskip or Scotland, I rather think it was Inskip. Although that one might still have been at Stafford because the whole contingent of us is there, whereas later there were just 4 of us that went to these different places.

K: This photograph says 'Sundays with the Young family'.

ML: Yes, that's at Stafford.

K: Were they just friends?

ML: My friend and I at Mill Meece went to church on the Sunday night. We had our bikes there, and we cycled into Stafford which was about 8 miles I think, and went to the Congregational Church there. After the service two people came to us and said 'would we like to go for tea the next Sunday?' which we did, and we were invited every Sunday throughout our stay there. This couple were enormously kind, not just to us but to WAAFS and RAF people who were in that area. They had us to their house very often and I remained friends with them until their death, just a few years ago, and I am still in touch with their daughter.

K: How nice.

ML: Yes, they were lovely people; they'd been to stay with us several times.

K: And those other photographs of your friend are they of Joan?

ML: Yes.

K: HMS Hunter, was that the Scotland one?

ML: Oh, it must have been, you forget some of the names you know, this was just the first person I worked with when I went on one of the gangs.

K: Just tell me about this photograph, it says 'just replaced the rudder'.

ML: Yes, we'd done a big repair job on the rudder, Oh I forgot to tell you that when we were at Inskip, if you'd done a big job, such as replacing a rudder, the test pilot could ask you to go on the flights with them and, being at Inskip they used to fly out towards Blackpool. These young pilots used to like to show off a bit and they'd do a bit of banking, very steeply, quite often round about Blackpool Tower. So you used to be holding your breath keeping your eyes on this repair job that you'd done and hoping everything was alright. We used to have a sort of belt on over our overalls with a chain and that hooked into something on the deck of the aircraft, because they were open cockpits at that time. I suppose that was to make sure that you didn't drop out. It was quite scary really, until you'd done it a few times, you know!

K: Did you get paid extra for that?

ML: No. I can't remember how much it was. Two and four pence sticks in my mind, but whether that was per day or what, I'm not quite sure. It was very little I know.

K: Would that be a Seafire?

ML: Yes, it was.

K: So that would be one of the major jobs that you did.

ML: Yes.

K: This photograph 'just replaced the rudder' - did you go up in this particular plane?

ML: Yes, I did, because I remember I kept looking behind.

K: Unless there's anything else you want to mention, we'll finish now, and thank you very much May.

ENDS