

Seventy years on, ATS girls meet again

Their wartime work was often unglamorous. But now, at last, a new book is highlighting the vital supporting role played by the women soldiers of the Auxiliary Territorial Service. **Steve Snelling** spoke to an indomitable few Norfolk survivors about their life-changing experiences.

It wasn't so much a baptism of fire as an icy initiation into the wartime ways of army life far removed from the comforts of home. Seventy years on, the memory is still enough to make Joan Awbery shudder.

In a January 1942 letter home to her parents, she exclaimed: "What a life! I think I have been deported to Siberia; snow, frost, everything frozen up, including the lavatories. I am wearing my own vest, the Army vest, shirt, pullover, cardigan, coat and skirt and I look very fat but I'm still COLD.

"Last night I slept in pyjamas, wool coat, dressing-gown and ankle socks and wrapped in a blanket. The fire wouldn't burn. I tell you we are getting toughened.

"We have been issued with six pairs of knickers, three wool and three silk. The wool are meant to be worn first (I think) and then the silk so it's a bit scratchy. Just as Betty and I ran across the parade ground this morning her silk ones dropped off so I think I shall reverse mine for safety..."

Recoiling from the mind's-eye images of one of the worst winters in living memory, Joan re-imagines a bleak scene in a Nissen hut with a tortoise stove that barely warmed up and shivers a wry smile. "It all came as a bit of a shock," she says.

Now in her 90s, though with the spirit of someone half her age, Joan is among a dwindling number of women who served King and Country during the second world war not as a factory worker, nurse or a Land Army girl, but as a khaki-uniformed member of the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

Perhaps the least well-known part of a military trinity of services that includes the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), the ATS has received scant publicity and still less acclaim down the years in spite of the enduring presence of its most distinguished recruit - Her Majesty, the Queen.

But Joan and a

sisterhood of local veterans are hopeful that all may be about to change, thanks to the publication of a new book.

Girls in Khaki, by Barbara Green, is a largely anecdotal and highly readable history of the ATS during the second world war which not only chronicles the force's myriad achievements but also offers an engaging and entertaining portrait of the astonishing range of vital supporting roles undertaken by the nation's female soldiers during six years of conflict.

The memories extend from the farcical to the fearful with a smattering of contributions from Norfolk-based veterans that together shed light on a neglected branch of the services which grew from 17,000 to 200,000 women who did everything from clerical duties to helping maintain communications, from manning anti-aircraft batteries to ferrying all manner of military vehicles around the country and from waiting on mess tables to reconditioning live ammunition.

For many, wartime service broadened previously limited horizons and proved a truly life-changing experience. "As an only child coming from a small Cambridgeshire village, it felt as though the whole world had suddenly opened up for me when I joined the ATS," says Joan Awbery, who now lives in west Norwich.

"It was a great eye-opener meeting so many people from such different walks of life. There was a really good mix and we all got on whatever our background and whatever we'd done in our lives before."

Between nights interrupted by the frightening explosions of V1 'flying bombs', Joan Whittingham, a lighthouse keeper's daughter who began the war as an apprentice hairdresser in Gorleston, had the unlikely job of checking tanks and Bren gun carriers to ensure they were properly kitted out for the D-Day landings.

By way of letting off steam, she and her fellow ATS inspectors were allowed to have a

“I loved every minute of it. You were doing something that was important – and it was exciting as well.”



Memories: Former ATS girl Joan Awbery, and, left, pictured in her ATS days.



go at steering a truck over nearby fields. "That was good fun," observes Joan, "as none of us had driven before."

Marjorie Spears wouldn't have missed it for the world. A Norwich girl born and bred, she was just 17 when she volunteered. "I was in a reserved occupation at Jarrold printing works and didn't have to go,"

she says, "But I lost a brother I was very fond of who was killed serving in the RAF and couldn't settle. Everyone said I was rather stupid to volunteer, but I never thought so."

A spell as a 'batwoman', an officer's servant, was followed by arduous hours of toil in the Colchester garrison cookhouse. "You'd have to be up at 3 o'clock in the morning and you'd work through till about three in the afternoon and then you'd go back again at 6 o'clock to help get supper ready," she says. "They were long days, but when you're young you don't think about it."

"I made a lot of friends and the soldiers were very good. They were preparing to go out to Burma. Half of them were frightened because they knew what they were in for, but they'd do anything for you."

"I grew up fast. I was more or less a schoolgirl when I went in the army and I was a married woman when I came out."

She wasn't alone in finding love as a by-product of war service. Irene Warren, from Cringleford, met her future husband

of 64 years at a dance while based in Camberley as a driving instructor.

Aside from the romantic interlude, there was one other memorable brief encounter during her spell as a member of No 1 Company at the Motor Transport Training Centre - with a young Princess Elizabeth, the most famous of all ATS trainee drivers.

"She did the whole course, including the anti-gas training, first aid, map reading and all the usual things that went with a driving course, with the exception of PT and drill," recalls Irene. "It was the King's orders that she wasn't to do those, which I thought was a great pity."

Even then, it was no push over. "The course was mostly taught on lorries and field ambulances, with crash gear boxes and no power steering, which made them heavy work," says Irene.

Unlike the rest of the ATS students, however, the princess had her own special instructor - the camp commandant, with whom she regularly dined. "She didn't stay in camp," says Irene. "She'd be taken home to Windsor Castle every night and fetched again each morning. But we, more or less, saw her every day she was on the course and I did, in fact, get one of the vehicles ready for her to drive."

Beryl Manthorp wasn't in quite such regal company, but her own career was not without distinction. In three years of wartime service, the Norwich dance



teacher who taught physical training in the ATS rose to the rank of sergeant major. "It was an experience you never forget and you never regret," she says.

"The things I liked about it best were the general companionship and the feeling that you were doing something. What ever we did in the ATS, we were all helping the war effort. Our lives had meaning, not just because we were in the army but because we were all fighting for England."

Indeed, some were literally engaged in the fighting. For although the women in the ATS did not bear arms, a large number did serve in anti-aircraft, so-called ack-ack, batteries where they plugged a gap in manpower by carrying out every duty except those involving heavy manual labour and the actual firing of the guns.

One such ATS gunner was Elsie Blanchflower, a Norwich laundry worker who had to get her father's permission to join up as a 17-year-old. As a height-finder in a 'mixed' battery, meaning it was operated by men and women, she spent much of the war on a cliff-edge gun site between South Shields and Sunderland.

"It was wonderful. I loved every minute of it," she recalls. "You were doing something that was important - and it was exciting as well."

"When I was a kid I had always wanted to join things. I wanted to join the brownies and the guides, but my mother had died when I was four and there was never

enough money for me to do it. So, the ATS was my chance."

Fulfilment, however, came with its share of danger. She still remembers the scream of a dive-bomber that seemed to be targeting her post. "It was the scariest moment I ever had," she says. "I was high up on a seat working the height-finder and I slid off, ducked my head down and fully expected to hear a bomb explode or feel bullets hitting me. But nothing happened, it just flew off. It must have dropped something somewhere further along the coast."

Encounters with enemy aircraft were not uncommon. In all, Elsie's 473 (Mixed) AA Battery, Royal Artillery, was credited with shooting down eight German planes, one of which she saw splash into the sea.

For Elsie, and thousands like her, the war was an adventure, the greatest of her life, and the prospect of returning to her old humdrum lifestyle was not a happy one. "I didn't know what I wanted to do," she says. "But I knew I didn't want to go back to laundry work. Not after that sort of life on the gun site. It was a big part of my life, or at least my teenage life."

She wasn't alone in finding it hard to settle after leaving the ATS.

Joan Awbery recalls: "I felt like a fish out of water when I came out because of the loss of companionship which had been a great asset for everyone."

Her war had been a varied one. Before

Back together: Former ATS girls sharing their memories at the group in Norwich. Seated are Beryl Manthorp, left, and Peggy Bell, behind them from left: Marjorie Spears, Lorna Lansdowne, Joan Awbery, Joan Whittingham and Irene Warren.

Pictures: BILL SMITH



Royal visit: Princess Elizabeth at Irene Warren's ATS camp.



Then and now: Former ATS girl Beryl Manthorp.

joining up she had served in canteens and collected money for savings certificates. "I thought there must be something more I could do, so I joined the ATS when I was 21."

It was one of the best decisions she had ever made. After the initial hardships of basic training, which came as a shock to the system for most new recruits, she served as secretary to "a very unpleasant brigadier" before transferring to an Army Kinema Service unit, organising mobile cinemas for camps across East Anglia.

"They were mostly training films with the odd feature film," recalls Joan. "Much of it was dreadful stuff, but it didn't really matter. The men were usually so cut off from everything they were grateful for anything."

From cinema work, she volunteered for overseas service and found herself posted to Brussels as a secretary in the Army Legal Service, a role that would eventually take her into post-war Germany. "Brussels was wonderful, and VE Day there was really special. We partied all day long. Everyone was so welcoming to us. It was extraordinary. You'd have thought we'd won the war on our own."

Something of that spirit still remains. A dozen former members of the ATS, the youngest of them in their 80s, continue to meet in Norwich and they are still finding fresh recruits. "We acquired two new members just recently," says Joan, who served 19 years as secretary or chairman of the local veterans' branch before calling it a day at 90.

"One of them was aged 87, the other one was 92. So, it's never too late."

Girls in Khaki: A History of the ATS in the Second World War, by Barbara Green, is published by The History Press, priced £12.99.

The price of war



The ATS suffered its heaviest loss of life in a single incident during an air raid on Great Yarmouth.

In the force's worst tragedy of the war, 26 girls were killed or fatally injured on May 11, 1943 when bombs dropped by low-flying Focke-Wulfs reduced their seafront hostel to rubble.

Rescue workers clawing at the debris managed to find only one survivor, a 22-year-old Pte Doreen Chappel who was dug out alive.

The dead, who were all attached to 103 AA Brigade, included Lilian Grimmer from Great Yarmouth. She had swapped her leave with a friend who wanted to celebrate her 21st birthday.

A polished granite plaque dedicated to their memory was unveiled in 1994 amid much pomp and ceremony at the spot where the ATS made its greatest wartime sacrifice.