

Hilda Pearson - Radar operator 1943

During World War II, I trained as a Radar Operator and in 1943 I was posted to Bawdsey Manor. I understood at the time that Hitler did not know what this place was, despite the radio masts, and it was not a target for bombers, so while I was there we only received two stray bombs, one of which caused damage to one of the Red Towers on the Manor but there were no casualties.

The WAAF girls occupied the first floor of the Manor House, while the men lived in wooden huts in the grounds. We worked in the Receiver Block, a building with no windows and only one door, where the only people allowed in were the operators and mechanics with an Officer in charge. We worked in four shifts over 24 hours, with most of our free time being spent in having a meal and sleeping.

As far as I remember, the crew each time consisted of three operators, two mechanics and the Officer in charge. One operator would sit in front of the receiving screen wearing a headset and mouthpiece which was connected to the main Plotting Room at Fighter Command, and she would be reporting every movement that she saw on the screen using a special formula of words and symbols. Next to her sat another operator as assistant and backup. The third operator would be waiting her turn to take over. The Officer in charge was connected to Headquarters by telephone. The mechanics were kept busy doing mysterious things to the machinery, on which no speck of dust was allowed – between us we did all the cleaning of the room as no domestic staff was allowed in.

This was a time when organized groups of bombers would leave East Anglian airfields for Germany, returning later in smaller straggling groups or single planes, some of which might be showing a special distress signal which we could pick up on our screen and an Air-Sea-Rescue unit would be notified of its position.

I loved the time spent in this Operations Room, which was so interesting and at times, of course, very exciting. We were all very conscious of what important work we were doing and treated it most seriously, working together as a team. On working days we wore a battle-dress top and trousers, which was the first time for most of us in trousers, which were not the usual wear for women in those days.

Recreation

Occasionally we would be entitled to a day pass, which we could spend in Felixstowe or Ipswich, and more rarely a Forty-eight hours pass to travel further. We could walk and sit in the grounds of the Manor, but there was no access to the beach as the perimeter was surrounded by thick rolls of barbed wire. One day somebody found a cupboard under the stairs at the Manor which contained a tennis net and some old racquets and balls, so the net was duly erected on the disused tennis court and we had some fine games of elementary tennis.

If you spent time at Bawdsey Radar Station or have stories to tell about events in and around the station please do get in touch with us!