**Memories of World War 2**

**Interview with Pat Pern, born 1921, conducted by Georgina Doherty on 21 10 2020 via Zoom**

Note: Words of interviewer are recorded in italics

Transcript:

*Right, we are now recording, Pat. We are recording Patricia Pern talking about her memories of World War 2. Pat Pern was born in 1921.*

*Pat, can you tell me about any memories you have about what life was like for you at the very start of World War 2?*

Yes, I was eighteen when war started. And I wanted to be a nurse but in those days nursing was a very drudgery, domestic sort of thing and my family put me off that, so the next thing was to work as a medical secretary at a hospital. Well, just before World War started we’d had Munich in 1938 and it was pretty obvious that there was going to be a war, so the hospitals were getting up plans whereby if there were casualties from air raids they could evacuate the patients out of London. I’m a Londoner incidentally, and so I was very lucky, I got the job as secretary to the senior consultant at Charing Cross Hospital, which was then in The Strand, and to, um, assist him while he got up the plan. Well literally just before the war started the plan was finalised and of course the war came and it could be put into action. Fortunately the secretary to the Registrars at Charing Cross Hospital left and I was offered her job which I took over.

Well, the first year of the war was very quiet, there were no air raids and it was just normal stuff. The top wards of the hospital were closed and this evacuation plan was that every week the air raid casualties who were fit to travel would be evacuated to what we called the Zone. We took over a large mansion at Ashridge, which I think is now a business centre or something like that. That was to be the base hospital where the casualties could go. Well, after Dunkirk, it would have been the winter of 1940-41, the air raids were really bad, the Blitz in fact, and so every Friday a fleet of ambulances would wait outside the front of the hospital. The casualties would be brought down from the wards on stretchers into the front hall and be loaded onto the ambulances to go out to the country. We were very, very busy, it was not a very good time really. Of course I had to do all the notes, the registrars would dictate – we did shorthand in those days – and the notes would go with the patients and I had to keep a list of which patients were going out. So that was a weekly occurrence. Meanwhile, um, most nights, well in fact all nights, were spent in an air raid shelter, I lived in North West London, but life sort of continued – the theatres were open – and every morning one chugged up to work, the transport was running. People got going terribly quickly to clear away the debris from the areas the night before. Um what else happened…..

*When you say you um slept most nights in an air raid shelter (*Pat – Every night*) was that at your own home, you didn’t have to go to a public shelter?*

No, in the garden.

*The garden, Oh right….*

An Anderson shelter. You trundled down there with your knitting and your thermos flask and the sirens would go about six at night, as soon as it got dark and the all clear would go at about six in the morning when you would rush back to the house and get ready to go off to your jobs. (4.08). Um, that was literally the whole of the winter, 40-41. But people seemed to, you know, get to work on time, transport was running, there didn’t seem to be much disturbance. But, um, I was helping at a canteen on Victoria Station, a forces canteen, I used to do that two evenings a week, and that could be very difficult, because the sirens would go about six o’clock and then the ack ack guns would start off in Hyde Park , which of course was nearby, and the searchlights would start going and there was an awful racket used to go on, and then I used to get back to my house on the bus and some nights we just - you couldn’t move, we were fixed at Victoria Station until the raids died down a bit. That was a very difficult time. I also remember I’d been away one weekend and I got to, um, I think it was Victoria and the sky was completely alight, and that was December, the night of the big fire in the city, when the city was razed to the ground. Anyway, that was the blitz.

*Was it… I mean I imagine it was quite a frightening time – what were your feelings, what were the feelings of people at the time?*

Well yes, looking back, I’m sure my mother, my parents, must have been terribly worried, but when you’re young, you cope with it totally differently. (5.48) And you know, we sort of, the sirens would go and we’d start running to find an air raid shelter, and it was quite a giggle really, but looking back it really, it wasn’t that good. But in 1941 my brother was in the Fleet Air Arm and he’d been in the Taranto raid, the big anniversary is just coming up, when he was on the Illustrious, an air craft carrier, and they sunk the Italian fleet in November 1940,…. yes 1940, and he was in that raid, he got the DSC for that. Well, the Germans were so furious to think that the Italian fleet could be sunk by Swordfish planes that they blitzed the Illustrious in the Mediterranean in the beginning of 1941, my brother was killed. And then I thought, well, I really would like to join up because all my friends were going but I was in what was called a “reserved occupation” which meant you simply couldn’t be released – it was like the National Health today, so I kept worrying and worrying them and finally, in 1943 they said that if I could find a replacement, they would release me because the air raids had died out by then. So I rushed off to the labour exchange and found a refugee girl and thought “she’ll do” (laughs) and, um, joined the WRENS. So in 1943 I went into the WRENS when life really changed.

*So, when you first joined up, um, I mean was there a bit of a delay from actually signing on – where did you have to go, presumably you had some basic training of some sort?*

Yes, we went to Mill Hill which was, um, I’ve forgotten what it was, it was some Government station and it had become the training round for the WRENS and, um, we, er, learnt how to salute and how to march (laughs) and, um, it was a fortnight there. And then they asked me what I thought I’d like to do and of course I hadn’t the faintest idea and they said “Well have you got a bike?” and I said “No, I haven’t got a bike” “If you had a bike would you clean it and look after it?” and I said “Oh yes, I expect so” so they said “Well, you’d better be an air mechanic”! (laughs) That’s why I had a bike! So off I went to a Fleet Air Arm station in Lancashire where I don’t really think I’d ever been north of the border, so, being a Londoner, I think it was rather like going abroad! (laughs) And it was pretty grim, it was Nissen Huts and a huge, huge camp of course. And so I started off by, um, cleaning sparking plugs, charging batteries, hopping on and off aircraft, I thought well really this isn’t for me and so I changed categories and I became a coder. And then I had to go off to Warrington and do a coding course. And another rather strange thing was while I was waiting to be posted we went to Newport - Newton Ferrers – a place in Devon, that’s a holding depot, and I was sent to Plymouth to the lighthouse on Plymouth Hoe. There were two WRENS who were on duty there every night to watch out – they then had what they called buzz bombs, they were little bombs with lights on – and you had to go to the top of this lighthouse, it sounds quite impossible now, and watch out all night to see if these little lights were being dropped. The Germans dropped these, they were an absolutely, um, they hadn’t pilots, and it was soundless, noiseless, and if we saw lights being dropped, I don’t know what we did, I suppose there was a phone up there, but I just can’t remember. So there we were stuck on this lighthouse on Plymouth Hoe every night watching for buzz bombs.

Well, after that I was sent to Chatham and that also wasn’t too good because we were working underground. Have you ever been to Dover Castle and seen the workings there? There’s a tunnel – it was just like that at Chatham. There were lots of e-boat battles - the Germans were trying to get their little e boats up the channel, up the Thames and we had signals always coming through as to where they were (10.38). One couldn’t speak about what one was doing.

And the final thing was I was posted to Ceylon. Wonderful, wonderful! After wartime London, you know, lights and food and, wonderful, so that was a really, really good time. And came, um, home in 1946, I was in Trincomalee for VJ day and that was an amazing experience. All the fleet was lit up. It’s a huge harbour and the ships were sounding their sirens and it was really great.

*So just taking you back a minute, so, um, you heard that you were going to be posted to – did you know you were going to Ceylon? Did they tell you where you were going?*

No, we, um, one other reason why I changed category was that air mechanics weren’t going abroad, and I really wanted to get abroad. So myself and my friend, we were together all the time during the war, we immediately volunteered for overseas. But we had to do six months coding in England before we could go abroad. But after six months we did go. Then we went to Chelsea which was another holding depot where we were issued with white tropical uniform. But we weren’t told where we were going until the very night before when all the doors were locked and you weren’t allowed to use the phones because it was all very sort off secret although it was at the end of the war, the end of the European war. And then we went to Liverpool, I think it was Liverpool. It took us all night to get to Liverpool, we went all over England (laughs) to fox the enemy. And, um, then we were five weeks at sea, getting to Ceylon.

*Right, so what was it like on the boat?*

Wonderful! (laughs). It was a liner, which had been adapted as a troop ship, but I think there were only fifty women on board and, um, we really didn’t have to do anything at all - it was such a contrast, of course, from wartime England. Then when we arrived in Colombo we were posted to Trincomalee - do you know the Island at all? It’s now Sri Lanka.

*No, I don’t.*

Huge harbour, Trincomalee. And, um, again there were very few WRENS there so we had the time of our lives! (laughs). At the moment I’ve got all the letters I wrote home during the war to my mother. She must have wondered what on earth I was up to, because we couldn’t say what sort of work we were doing so of course it was all play, you know, we went on board ship to a drinks party, dinner at the officer’s club. It’s awful, I’m really ashamed when I read them! (laughs)

*So, what were you doing out there?*

Coding. Coding and decoding messages all the time. We were on shifts so we worked at night, night shifts. I should mention that in the tunnel at Chatham we did a twelve hour night shift which was absolutely deadly. You went on at eight and came off at eight in the morning. If you could imagine working all night underground and no meal, no hot meal, we were issued with one sandwich to take on watch with us and it was pretty deadly. And then you were off and then did so long each day on warning and then you did your nightshift again. But in Ceylon we only did a six hour night shift - you went on at two in the morning which wasn’t so good but you did it. That’s why I’m ninety-nine – toughened up! (laughs)

*So the messages you were decoding, were they being sent by the Japanese?*

No, they were Ger – oh well I don’t know, do you know nobody’s ever asked me that? I suppose they were because the war was still on. Mostly our ships I think who gave positions as to where the fleet was. There was one very sad occasion, we did a mock invasion of Singapore soon after I got there, and um, I had a boyfriend on one of the ships in this invasion and a message came through to say this ship had been sunk. And it was a kamikaze - you know about that, the suicide bombers they were using and oh, loads of ships were sunk in that, it was a total disaster. And he turned up at the Wrenery some time later and he was very lucky, he, you know, he wasn’t killed he’d been saved. And his teeth had been blown out and he lost everything but, you know, he was lucky to be alive though because their ship just was cut in half. Awful things happened. (16.08)

Another really memorable thing was that I was on leave later, after the war, the Japanese war, and they were sending the prisoners of war from Japan over to Trincomalee to rehabilitate them before sending them on to England and we happened to be on leave then and they said would you look after them and entertain them. It was incredibly sad, they were very, very thin a lot of them had lost their teeth and their hair was, well there was practically no hair, it was straggly and of course they had been out of action for many years really and it was very difficult because we used to go around in trucks singing all the popular songs, they had no idea of what had been going on in England. They said “Whatever you do don’t give them anything to eat, don’t give them your chocolate ration or anything”, because they had been starved, of course, and they had to rehabilitate them and feed them and give them a different diet and feed them up. That was quite an experience.

*So you were saying that there was quite a celebration–(*Oh Yes!) *– on VJ day. Can you tell me a bit more about that?*

Well um, I was on duty, we didn’t have much news at all, I mean we didn’t have a daily paper or anything like that. But we sort of had an idea that they were negotiating to end the war because we had signals. Anyway I was on night watch and this signal came through “war finished, war ended” and we were a bit stunned actually because it was a bit of an anti-climax, you know when you’ve been expecting something and “woof” it suddenly happens – and um, so I looked over the harbour and thought, well this is it, we’ll be going home soon. And then that night a friend commandeered a motor boat, because there were boats all over the harbour, the harbour was jam packed by the end with ships, they’d all been coming into the harbour, and we whizzed around the harbour and there were all these searchlights going and fairy lights and fireworks and every ship said “Come on, come on board and have a tot”. We drank so much rum celebrating (laughs) that was really great.

Then we came back in 1946 and I was home for about two months and went to Vienna to work. I joined the Allied Commission and that was another great experience because it was just after the war and there were the Russians and the Americans. Busy time, but that’s another story.

*Well, I mean you can tell me a little bit about that in a minute if you would like to. I’m thinking, when you got home to England, what was it like seeing your family again? (19.16)*

Well we were totally – I don’t know how to describe it – I suppose disorientated, because we were of the generation when we really moved around in our own little circles before the war, and I had been abroad, because when I was young my father was very keen on France, we used to go to France every year for holidays, but that was quite unusual and I suppose I would have taken the usual path, you know, got married and stayed in London. So for us it was quite an education. You mixed with all sorts of people which was terribly good, um, went to places you’d never have gone to otherwise and to go back home was, you know, a pretty dull thought. Mother was very – I mean we were all very happy at home, I had a very good home life, but we didn’t want to go back to that life any more, I think a lot of us wanted to travel and we had no, um, advice actually as you would now on what to do. You were just really thrown out and get on with it and you know, do what you like, so I did go home, of course, but I thought “Oh Lord, what do I do next?” And we missed the companionship because, you know, you were with, you made terribly good friends and you learnt to mix, which a very good thing.

*How did you come to get your next job, then, after the war?*

Well um, how did I come…..well there was the German Commission which was called the Control Commission for Germany and then there was a similar thing in Austria but it was called the Allied Commission and why on earth they were treated as allies I can’t imagine because they welcomed Hitler with open arms! Anyway, they were different days, they wanted - there was a huge recruiting drive, they wanted hundreds of people, I heard about this and their recruiting office was in Kensington. I went up there and um, I thought “Well that sounds quite a good idea to go abroad again to join the Austrian Allied Commission”. (21.45) And again I was very lucky because, um, I called in the office one day, they said “we’ll put you on the list” and the very grand title the Controller of Fuel Power and Public Utilities in Vienna – he was a permanent Civil Servant, it was the Economic Division – had come over to London to look for a PA and I happened to be in the office at the time so he just interviewed me and said “You’ll do” sort of thing (laughs) “Can you come next week?” so I said “Yes, of course I can” so off I went. And it was very, very interesting because, um, you were working with…every month they had a big quadripartite conference of Russians, Americans, French, British and Austrians and this thing lasted all day, and we had an interpreter, I had to take verbatim notes which wasn’t very easy and um it was a very…….

“Did you ever see the film *The Third Man*?”

*“No, I haven’t seen that, I’m afraid”*

“Have you heard of it?”

*“I’ve heard of it, yes, yes”*

It was exactly like that, exactly (laughs). All sorts of intrigues were happening and it was ..er there was a lot of bombing there at Schonbrunn Palace, we worked in Schonbrunn Palace for a while. But, um, I learnt to ski there, weekends you could go off skiing, and, um, there was the opera you could go to frequently, although the opera house, the actual opera house was gone. And it was a very interesting two years of my life.

*It sounds absolutely fascinating, I have to say. So ..er..after two years you just left?*

I met my husband there.

*Ah, you met your husband, right, ok. So in those days…*

He was regular army

*Right, ok, so you met your husband, your future husband anyway, and married him, I suppose…*

Well I

*Then, did you have to give up work?*

Oh no, I didn’t work after I married. We were travelling too much. We lived in Egypt for a time, in the Canal Zone, and we were in Germany for three years and then we were in, um, Egypt and Cyprus and then we came back to England. That was the end of our travels really..(laughs). But I had the choice of marriage or a job in Paris (laughs). I already thought I’d move on from Vienna and I’d been into Paris to have an interview for an organisation called UNRA, United Nations, and they said, um, I think this was December or something, they said “well , you can start in the spring” because I had to give notice and various things and then I decided, well, it was about time I settled down, so it was marriage, I’m afraid, not a job in Paris! (laughs) Because he was in Vienna too, he was dealing with the refugees in Vienna. And then finally Battle.

*Well, Battle’s a contrast, I would imagine. (laughs)*

Yes, well you know we had a farm outside Battle between…at Coghurst, that area and, um, it was nice to be settled at last, we’d had about twenty-five moves off and on and to actually be in one place and to bring the children up here, it was, er, a nice idea really.

*Well, thank you very much Pat. That’s been really interesting and most informative I have to say. What a fascinating time you had in the second World War and indeed your talking does seem to show that..um..there were good times as well as bad times, definitely.*

Well the thing is that you had to, you just had to get on and do things. You know, there was no “oh, I don’t think I want to do that” or “I don’t think I’ll get up early today”, you, you had to get on. And I think, um, people had a very, very good attitude to life then. That it was very important that we did all pull together and, um, do things that we probably, well we wouldn’t have done normally. And of course in those days there was no TV, all our information was virtually by radio, and Churchill was simply, simply amazing, you know he inspired everyone that this is, this is important and it was a very um, it was, of course I’m not for wars, but it was really a war that had to be fought because of the Nazis. And, um, also I must say I suppose you could say it was our University, because not many people my age went to university, you had to be very clever and you were either a teacher or that’s about all the… what choice you had and I certainly didn’t want to be a teacher, so we learnt how to mix, how to tolerate people, how to accept loads and loads of things which people don’t nowadays somehow, they don’t like something they’re just not going to do it. In some ways, but of course life is very, very much easier now, you can, you have such a huge choice but then we hadn’t a great deal of choice of things, but there we go…

*Well, thank you very much, I’ll stop the recording now, ok?*

Well I hope you learnt a little bit of how life was. (28.11)

END OF INTERVIEW

**Post interview addition**

After the interview Pat recalled that she hadn’t mentioned that during the blitz, while she was working as a medical secretary at the Charing Cross Hospital, the surviving members of Ken “Snakehips” Johnson’s band were brought to the hospital following the direct hit on the *Café de Paris* nightclub where the band had been playing. Johnson was killed. She described their skin as pitted with injuries from the glass – their broken instruments had been placed beside them. She commented that the band had been wonderful to dance to.