

"Sopley in the Sixties" - A trip down memory lane

by Frankie Patterson

This summer, the Heritage Centre received a visit from a former WRAF (Women's Royal Air Force) RADAR Operator, who was posted to RAF Sopley in the early 1960s, Frankie (Frances) Patterson. She kindly agreed to share her memories of her time at the Camp and has now written a personal account on her time there, which we are delighted to print in full below.

"Down the Hole", where she worked, was in the huge underground bunker, on the north side of the Camp, where all the processing and display equipment for the RADAR covering the UK was situated. This was a major Air Traffic Control Training Centre throughout the early to mid-1960s.

Younger readers will be intrigued by her description of a life without mobile phones or computers, when a 'posh frock' cost more than a week's wages (you could only afford one!), and a pint glass of 'scrumpy' (rough, strong cider) at the nearest pub, half a mile away across the fields, cost 7d (3.5p to today's money).

Sopley in the Sixties - By Frances Patterson, nee Warboys

I was posted to Sopley in late October 1961, having completed a course on Air Traffic Control at RAF Shawbury. My companions and I found it odd to be posted to a Radar Unit when we had been trained to work in a Tower, and especially so when there were ADOs (Air Defence Operators) who were trained to work with radar in radar units. But such were the ways of the RAF. As it turned out, we didn't know how lucky we were!

There were four of us, young (17), wet behind the ears and excited to be starting out in a new career. We were among the first regular service WRAFs to be stationed at Sopley, previously there had been Local Service girls who lived at home and travelled in to work. The Local Service branch was being closed down, and we came in to take their place. We didn't really know them or mix with them, as we never considered them to be real Servicewomen. The men on the camp did not welcome us at all. They didn't want us there and were very suspicious about us. However, in time they got used to us and stopped behaving like idiots.

So, we arrived and were given our billet, 39/22, the second from the end on the left-hand side. The WRAF quarters were on one side of the road and the men on the other. The quarters that were situated behind the dining hall were for Senior ranks and Officers, and also comprised the Sergeants Mess and Corporals Club. The Sick Bay was also situated there.

Each billet contained two rooms with four beds and two single rooms for more senior personnel. The ablutions, between the two four-bed rooms had baths, washbasins and toilets. Between each pair of billets there was a laundry room which had a washing machine and spin dryer, irons and ironing boards and drying racks. Each girl had a bed, a wardrobe, a bedside cabinet and a chair. It certainly doesn't sound a lot, but we didn't seem to notice. We had done our training together and had become friends before arriving and settled in very happily.

The next big thing was going to work. We kept watches, which I liked, it suited me. Down the Hole. The first day you worked 8am till 12pm, and 5pm till 11pm. The second day it would be 12 till 5pm and then 11pm till 8am next morning. Then a 'sleeping off' day. The two days were then repeated, and after that a 72-hour pass. I liked the watchkeeping rhythm and it meant that you were off when other people were at work, which I liked.

We would catch the transport outside the guard room (a full-size RAF bus) and be taken to the hole, where we would be given a token (like coal miners do) on the way down, and hand it back as we left at the end of the watch. Personally, I took to the work and enjoyed it, and once I had become competent enough (about a year) I liked to sit on Consul 1 where you coordinated all the traffic and wrote it up on a display board.

One of the other jobs I did was pretending to be an aircraft to help train new controllers. That was on the Mullard flight simulators, conveniently situated opposite the canteen. It made a change, and it was quite good fun. This job was days, not watchkeeping, but it was only for a fairly brief period.

Social life was pretty good, as I recall. We used to go to the Carpenter's Arms (the Chippy's), which was a small local pub then, before the big restaurant extension had been built. We walked there across the field opposite the camp gates, which is pretty much a housing estate now, and I do remember it was absolutely pitch dark with no light whatever unless there was a moon. Everything was celebrated at the Chippy's, and if you were penniless, you could buy scrumpy for seven pence.

Around Christmas time 1962 I was on a night watch when one of the Controllers offered me a mug of tea. I refused and said I didn't want one. "You'll want this one" he said. It wasn't tea. And nobody was flying except the odd American, because nobody had told them it was Christmas, apparently.

I remember that Christmas of 1962 very well. My friend and I had gone into Bournemouth to buy posh frocks for our Christmas dinner, and we each spent more than a weeks' wages on them. Hers was royal blue, and I think of it whenever I hear the song "She wore blue velvet". Mine was a deep crimson and I absolutely loved it. The night of the dinner it started to snow. Just a slight flurry of powdery flakes, and it looked so beautiful in the moonlight. But it didn't stop. It went on and on relentlessly. It was, of course, the beginning of the now famous winter weather of 1962/63.

Before very many days had passed, we had swapped our posh frocks for trousers and battledress and were taken out with shovels to dig out the unfortunate souls who had found themselves marooned in their cars unable to get through, some now completely submerged. They were taken back to camp and given bacon and eggs in the dining hall, and we got a tot of rum. Which we thoroughly deserved!

One of my other abiding memories is of coming in one night and finding one of my room mates standing on a chair wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown, and dark glasses, trying to light a cigarette from the light bulb. I don't think that worked any better than the time she attempted to roast chestnuts on an upturned iron. Full marks for trying though!

In those long-forgotten days before mobile phones, you had to join the queue for the phone box outside the guard room, it seems almost unbelievable now.

I did my fair share of jankers too, though I can't remember what for. Probably getting in late. We had to be in camp by 2359, but it wasn't unknown for people to get in through a gap in the perimeter fence. I remember polishing a piano and turning up for parades at the guard room. On one occasion there was me, at 5' 2", and a stores person (male) who was about seven feet tall, and we were given the order Right Dress. Which was farcical.

There were love affairs, and there were marriages, and there was heartbreak from time to time. I am still friends with the girl with the blue dress, we're both grandmothers now. My boyfriend from Sopley stayed in touch. He was a year older than me. Sadly, he died last year.

Nobody who was ever posted to Sopley wanted to leave. Ever. It was the happiest posting imaginable, and everybody loved it, without exception. However, our destiny was not ours to choose, and we all went away to other adventures near and far. Eventually we were replaced by ADOs, which was logical, and we went our various ways to continue our lives.

But I do count myself one of the very fortunate few to have been stationed at RAF Sopley, and I always will.