

Listening to the Enemy 2: The Wrens' War in Ventnor

Last week's local history page described the WWII wireless interception ("Y") station at The Heights on Whitwell road, staffed by Wrens from the WRNS Special Duties (SD) Service. Like their WAAF counterparts at the radar station on Ventnor Down, these women were a critical part of the secret electronic war – but their experiences were quite different from their air force counterparts.

At its peak in 1944, the WRNS numbered 74,000 officers and ratings, mostly clerks, drivers, domestics and mechanics. But only 400 served in the SD service throughout the war, in small remote units around the British coast, like the one at Ventnor. They had to be fluent in German, especially the north German dialects spoken by most sailors, but not pose security risks – a rare combination. They also needed a good ear, and the ability to cope with long, lonely night-time watches. Others worked as radio mechanics maintaining the equipment used by the operators. Most of the SD Wrens were "officer material", but the need for their special skills meant their opportunities for promotion were limited.

The Ventnor Y Station at The Heights was known to locally stationed soldiery as "Castle Wren". There were two officers with a small complement of cooks and stewards, three radio mechanics and the German-speaking watch-keepers trained in radio telephony and wireless telegraphy. The quarters were comfortable, and although relatively isolated and further from town than the radar station, the Wrens enjoyed a social life with the Royal Marine commandos stationed in Ventnor and the 7th Somerset battalion in Niton. Barbara Burford, second-in-command of the Y Station from early 1943, married her counterpart from the 7th Somersets. Vivienne Jabez-Smith recalled the anxiety after many of "their" Marines failed to return after the Dieppe Raid in 1942, but they later turned out to have been taken prisoner.

Jabez-Smith also recalled an occasion when a strafing Messerschmidt shattered the display window of the best cake shop in town, rendering the wares inedible. Burford was strafed on one of her bi-weekly trips to town to collect cash to pay the Wrens. Rosemary Geddes recalled that two British planes that patrolled the coastline seldom seemed to be there when the Germans attacked. The Wrens called them "George" and "Margaret" after a play then running on the London stage, in which George and Margaret never actually appeared.

Besides the threat of attack, which everyone in Ventnor shared, the Ventnor station was an exciting place to be based. In 1940 the Wrens were issued blue overalls to don in the event of a German landing; they were to pretend The Heights was actually an orphanage. In early 1942, Geddes picked up some German aircraft activity that turned out to be connected with the daylight dash of the German battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* up the channel, but the opportunity was lost because aircraft transmissions were the bailiwick of RAF Y stations.

The officer in charge at Ventnor on D-Day was Pauline Knight, whose nickname "Pluto" came from her habit of wearing her earphones on her cheeks, making her look like the Disney cartoon dog. She recalled standing on St Boniface down with a Polish officer watching the invasion fleet steam out from Portsmouth and Southampton. "We had been down at 'The Heights' as our quarters were known when the watchroom phoned down to say the screen was completely blotted out and we knew that 'this was it'. The island had been completely isolated without passes for a week or so." Rhoda Brown recalled walking home from a dance in town around 11pm along the cliff path: "I shall never forget the sight – the whole sea was completely covered by craft of all shapes and sizes all travelling to the French coast. It was a bright night so we could see very well and it was a most impressive and rather frightening sight. When we got back to the Wrenery – which was high up on the cliff road – our Officer told us that we had to sleep in our clothes that night as we didn't know what repercussions there would be ... it was very exciting to be on watch with our operators as they could tell the progress of our troops and when our people took over an enemy position the German transmitter was put out of action and afterwards taken over by our people, so we were able to monitor how the battles were going."

The Ventnor Y Station, as well as others along the south coast, shut down a few months after D-Day, surplus to requirements. With their linguistic skills, many of the Wrens were reassigned to Bletchley Park or to units

involved with translation of enemy documents captured in France and Germany. We are lucky that so many of them wrote or recorded their experiences so many years later, after the veil of secrecy was finally lifted.

Jeff Mazo, *Ventnor & District Local History Society*. Sources: Gwendoline Page, ed., *They Listened in Secret* (2003); Sinclair McKay, *The Secret Listeners* (2012); Mike North, *The Royal Navy and the Royal Marines on the Isle of Wight* (2012); *WWII People's War* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/>). Individual Wrens who later married are here referred to by their maiden names.