

Sergeant Jean Grantham, Women's Auxiliary Air Force, 1941-1945

My mother was a wireless operator during the war, based at RAF Mere, Branston. It is only recently that I have begun to appreciate the life-changing times that she experienced. However, I have always known of her life-long friendship with 'Aunty Nancy'.

The information in bold is from Jean's service record obtained from RAF Cranwell.

Civil Occupation: Hairdresser

Next of Kin: Mrs A Grantham (mother)
48 Ashley Gardens
West Hartlepool
County Durham

Description:-

Height: 5'4 3/4"

Chest: 35

Hair: Black

Eyes: Hazel

Complexion: Dark

Official number: 2095065

Date of Enlistment/Service commences: 4 June 1941, enrolled ACW2/ Wireless Operator (Middlesbrough)

I know that the 'Hartlepool hairdresser' (my mother) found a very different lifestyle in the Lincolnshire village of Branston; a new career involving difficult work and secrecy and a lifelong friend in Nancy Westwood.

Jean left school at the age of 15, finding work as an apprentice hairdresser. A clever, able student, as the middle child of three, she was unable to continue her education because there was no spare money from the family income to pay the fees. She started work in 1930 in Isaac's Hairdressing Salon where she learned her craft, including the intricacies of the 'Marcel Wave' and wig making.

Her family was active in the Methodist Church, which offered activities such as choir, social events and outings. Along with her brother and sister she became part of a large group of friends. Her boyfriend, Henry, was part of this group and it seems that her late teens and early twenties were happy years.

In 1936, however, her father's sudden death affected the whole family. He left home as usual one morning for his shift as a railway guard, felt unwell at work so returned home where he died that same evening. This was obviously a great shock for the family: Jean's sister immediately returned from working in London; her older brother, a trainee draughtsman, was still living at home.

Upon the outbreak of war, in 1939, Jean realised the necessity of making a decision about her future: her work as a hairdresser was not a reserved occupation and she did not want to work in a munitions factory.

Tragedy touched her life again in 1940 when boyfriend Henry died after a long illness. Her brother planned to marry in 1941 and her younger sister, who worked in the food industry, agreed to live at home with their mother, which left Jean free to enlist in the forces.

On 4 June 1941, two days after her brother's wedding, Jean reported for training as a wireless operator in the WAAF. She was nearly 26 years old.

Service Record Information

1941

5 June: Reserve

25 July: B'North

8 August: Loughborough

27 November: Wireless Operator

December: 61 WIU (Wireless Intelligence Unit)
Renamed Cheadle (n.b.Cheadle, Wireless Station, Staffs)

13 December: Station Cheadle

1942

This was the year which began her lifelong association with Lincolnshire, especially Branston. The following information comes from the website of the Branston History Group:

'RAF Mere, Branston - a top secret Y Service telegraphy station where wireless operators listened in to German air to air and air to ground communications, there was 24 hour continuous monitoring. The Y stations were a network of stations that gathered intelligence which was sent to Bletchley Park for processing.

The station consisted of wooden huts until 1949 when the present ruined brick building was built. There were four wireless masts arranged in a square.

A 'Norton' motorbike courier left Branston at 5.30 hrs with a sealed package to be delivered to Cheadle, Cheshire by 8.00hrs. This journey was made daily and information was then sent on to Station X Bletchley.'

'The work of Branston Mere's Y Station was nevertheless technically difficult for the operators, who had to work often long hours in hot and claustrophobic conditions underground. The Germans, for example, obscured the source of the radio messages by daily altering the call signal and the frequency used; these had to be relocated at midnight by searching the entire frequency band.

Besides technical competence, the operators had to maintain absolute secrecy about their work, as it was vital that Germany remained unaware of how they intercepted vital intelligence messages.' Source 'Branston Remembered' published 2000

'None of the residents of Branston knew the exact nature of the work and it was only recently that the experiences have been written and talked about (for instance the operators were unaware of the codes such as D2600 for Hitler's own aircraft).

M18 monitored the operators and it was known that at least one member of Y Station who talked too freely disappeared!'

When she was first posted to RAF Mere, Branston, Jean was billeted with a family also named Grantham, who lived on Lincoln Road.



Figure 1 House on Lincoln Road

She soon met her future, lifelong friend, Nancy Westwood, whose family owned a shop in the village. Nancy was a very kind, lively, optimistic person, and Jean was 'adopted' by Nancy's mother and sisters who provided home comforts after the long shifts, especially the night shifts, at the Mere. She became part of the family.



Figure 2 Jean Grantham & Nancy Westwood

Service Record Information

1 April: ACW1

1 August: LACW

23 November: T/Cpl (T=Temporary?)

1943

24 March: Admin School Melksham (A) (n.b. WAAF NCO Admin School until 30/6/1943)

4 April: Cheadle

The above dates show the courses that she attended whilst she was based at Branston.

Her memories of this time were both happy and sad: there was a good social life when her hairdressing skills were much in demand as the WAAFs got ready for dances and socials. When she returned home to Hartlepool on leave, she was able to take fresh eggs and other produce which were very welcome in a time of food rationing. She never knew how she would arrive home after long shifts at the Mere: sometimes it was by ambulance or in a US army jeep. However, there was the knowledge that the aircrews she came into contact with often faced death on a daily basis.

1944 1 July: T/Sgt

Figure 3 Sergeant Jean Grantham with John Westwood (Godson) and his cousin



My aunt (Jean's sister) told me that when Jean was promoted to sergeant, she did not enjoy using the Sergeant's Mess because it meant she was separated from her friends. She often asked to borrow a spare jacket from an ACW, therefore, so that she could be with her friends.

1945

27 July: 105 PDC Release
Effective Date of Release: 22 November 1945

She returned home to Hartlepool, where she opened her own hairdressing salon. She maintained a lifelong interest in wireless/radio: in the days before transistors, she could use a soldering iron to repair our old wireless set. My younger brother told me how she would tune in our wireless to listen to radio communications between the trawlers off the coast of Hartlepool.

Nancy's mother and Jean's mother became friends and there were visits to Branston and Hartlepool. I grew up knowing that my mother would disappear for a weekend each year in order to attend the reunion in Lincoln.

Figure 4 Reunion Programme

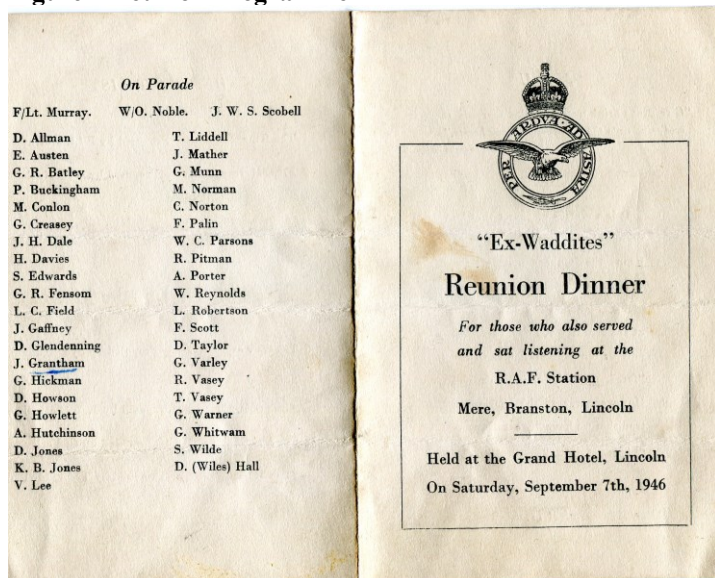
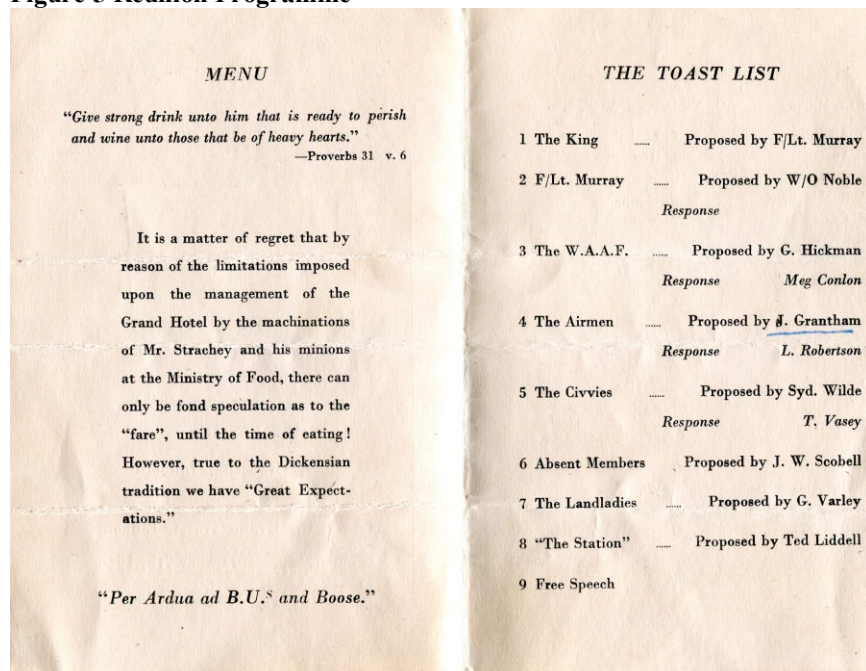


Figure 5 Reunion Programme



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