

Tape 271
Mrs Capel

BUT WHILE I AM HERE I SHOULD TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY OF SPEAKING TO MY FIRST FIRST WORLD WAR WREN MRS CAPEL.

Could you tell me please how it was that you had experience in the Wrens in 1918?

Well, my sister and I joined the Wrens feeling that we wanted to play our full part in the war and we were sent to Cranwell which was totally unprepared for 300 girls who descended upon it and we were flung into huts which were not really ready for our occupation. They could only offer us grey Army blankets with no sheet or pillow covers and we were horrified to find that the earwigs were still dropping off the practically unfinished roof which landed in your bed and sponges and parade the next morning with a series of girls clutching their legs or scratching their heads or shaking their arms to get the earwigs out of their clothing.

Where had you enlisted?

We enlisted from Camberley.

And where was this that you did your work?

We were sent straight to Cranwell after we arrived up in Sleaford in the little railway which is now non existent long before Cranwell, in fact, Cranwell was then an air station.

What particular qualifications did you need for enlistment?

Well, my sister and I joined as driver/mechanics. We had had about 8 lessons in driving cars. We then went for one week to London.

Eight lessons based from your own home?

Yes, based from our own homes. Entirely private lessons. We then went to London under the auspices of the Wrens where we had a week in driving tenders round the busiest parts of London which was an extremely alarming experience and after a week we were passed as first class driver/mechanics.

And your work at Cranwell was driving Crossley tenders?

Yes, which stood out all night in the bitter Lincolnshire winter and which was extremely hard to start by starting handles. Of course, self starters in those days were quite unknown and we used to get our various youngmen to come early in the morning and start up our cars for us.

And you were transporting naval officers from where to where?

Naval and Royal Flying Corps. By that time they had got a certain amount of Royal Flying Corps people there as well and to all the surrounding aerodromes on their various businesses and sometimes out to dinner.

And can you tell me something about the peculiarities of the Crossley tender? Were they easy to drive or heavy for women?

The Crossley tender was fairly heavy for women and of course, extremely difficult to start with the starting handles and no windscreen wipers. So, in the bitter snow and wind you had to open the windscreen to see where you were going at all.

Now service for women was still relatively a new thing. The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry had been of course, pre-war but nevertheless you were not at that stage such a familiar object as to pass without notice?

Oh no. We were the first women to be posted to Cranwell at all and were a matter of enormous interest to the men whose huts were cheek by jowl with ours and rather frowned upon because Cranwell in a way was considered a little bit of a funk hole but it was a very nice place for the men to be who didn't particularly want to serve in the war and they were very afraid that these girls coming would oust them out of their transport jobs. So, to start with we met a good deal of opposition but that passed when they saw that we didn't appear to be ousting them and also I think they thought it was quite fun having girls in the transport yard.

Did you mess with them or not?

No, we messed entirely alone. We had mess orderlies who went to what was then called the galley. Of course, all was naval terms in those days at Cranwell and we used to get our food in big containers and carry them down to mess decks.

To what extent were your social relaxations chaperoned?

We were not allowed to speak to officers but you could go out with the men as much as you wanted and the Americans who then arrived at Cranwell very much as if they owned the whole place and were winning the war but they were very charming but in spite of the fact that not being able to speak to officers I managed to get engaged to my husband.

One last question, the uniform?

The uniform we liked very much. It was dark blue just like the men's Navy uniform. The drivers wore a coat and skirt of navy blue and in the winter you wore a navy blue hat with a peak and in the summer you put on the white cap cover.

One final point which perhaps you would like to record and that is you have some photographs which I hope I am going to be able to get copied for our archives and one of them includes a very strange phenomenon. Would you like to explain that for me?

Yes, I will. They had a photograph of the entire transport yard. The men and the women in the transport yard. All the drivers and mechanics and there was one man who was not there because he had been on leave and had unfortunately died while he was on leave but when the photograph was printed there is quite a clear picture of half this man's face standing at the back amongst all the capped men and he has no cap on and that photograph has been seen by a lot of people and there is no doubt to the people who knew him it was quite recognisable.

Even though this photograph was taken subsequent to his death?

Yes, subsequent to his death. Much to everybody's shock there was the picture of him standing at the back. Just half his face with no cap on but to those who knew him well which we all did it was quite recognisable. I still have that photograph.

Well, Mrs Capel you have added an unique something to our archives. You are my first Wren and I am very grateful for that experience. Thank you.

Well, thank you very much.