



SKYWATCHERS OVER BRISTOL THE WOMEN WHO JOINED THE ROC 23 GROUP 75 YEARS AGO *by Jenny Morris*



*23 Group Crew B Women outside Clifton Park GHQ probably in early 1944
Front Row right to left Valerie Earl Audrey Wallis Marjorie Gay O/O Claude Westcott
C/O F Webster*

Walking into 23 Group Centre in December 1941 at the age of 17 was like joining a 'gentlemen' only club recalls **Marjorie Gay** (nee Earl). Now 91 years young Marjorie was one of the first five women recruited to the Bristol Crew on 29 December 1941. I had the unique and great pleasure to meet with Marjorie in February of this year. Two ROC members exchanging experiences from different eras but with the same enthusiasm and passion for the ROC as if we had known each other for years.

The first women recruited with Marjorie were Binnie Bisp, Phyllis Clutterbuck, Edna Lea and Dorothy Palmer.

In 1937 at the time of the Munich Crises Captain Ernest Esbester, tasked by the Bristol Chief Constable, to set up an Observer Centre housed in a derelict glass roof building in Little King Street near to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre. Captain Esbester recruited men from the 'Old Stiffs' a club of men who had held Commission rank in WW1. Further male volunteers quickly joined to form the 6 crews who by the outbreak of hostilities were fully trained and operational. They became skilled plotters tracking the raids reported from the Post Observers watching the sky over Bristol, expert tele printer operators and tellers who relayed within seconds the plots to the RAF to scramble the fighters.

The all -male crews during the quiet hours between raids enjoyed the esprit de corps familiar to these veterans playing cards, the jokes, cigarettes and a drink in their bar. Into this atmosphere the first group of young 17 year old women reported for duty. Marjorie remembers initially the men made it perfectly clear that they did not take kindly to the invasion of women. Not helped when the men had to give up their bar to make room for the women.

Early in January 1942 the 2nd group of five women joined the first recruits and their initial three week training begun upstairs away from the operational room. The training officer was **Obs/Off Theodore Edward Victor Bosanquet**. A very kind and lovely man Marjorie recalls he quickly made them welcome and put them at their ease. The girls were trained to plot, tele print and tell. Once trained in the basics they sat alongside the men to be mentored on live raids until competent.

The 2nd group of recruits included **Marjorie Tarrling, Audrey Frazer** and Marjorie's sister **Valerie Earl**. Audrey and Marjorie became firm friends. Later Marjorie was bridesmaid when Audrey married Stan Wallis and Audrey was godmother to Marjorie's daughter Sally. All who served on the Crews at 12 Group Lansdown will know **Audrey** and **Stan Wallis** stalwart members of Crew 1 until they retired in the 1970s. Marjorie also remembers Joan and Eric Moulder who served with her in the Bristol Centre during the War another link to my era as Joan and Eric served on my Crew until the 1980s.

The women quickly gained the confidence and acceptance of the men especially when they demonstrated they could handle the telling and plotting at speed and under the heavy pressure of the large raids hitting Bristol during this period. The huge raids over Bristol had begun in November 1941 ending at Easter March 1942. The raids aimed at Bristol Temple Meads Railway Station, the busy port and docks, the Bristol Aircraft Factory Filton on the City outskirts and the RAF Squadron based on Whitchurch Airfield. The Centre and residential areas of Bristol were devastated day and night the crews had to pick their way through the raids to report for their shifts.

Alongside the men the women worked the shifts 06.30 to 1430, 1430 to 21.30 and 21.30 to 06.30. Normally 6 on duty they worked 1 hour on and 1 hour off. Marjorie lived in Knowle some 5 or 6 miles from the Centre and recalls on occasions she had to walk due to transport disrupted by bomb damage. On one such occasion she recalls being strathed by machine gun from a very low flying German aircraft.

A Teller reporting the raids to the RAF became Marjorie's favourite and highly skilled duty. During D Day it was so busy Marjorie remained on duty without a break for 4 hours. Cups of tea brought to sustain her at her operational station on the balcony overlooking the plotting table.

On another occasion she was so proud and regarded it to be a great honour considered sufficiently trustworthy, at such a young age, to know and use the top secret code 'Diver'.

Fortunately no one was injured when the Centre was hit by an incendiary in 1943. The operational centre was quickly relocated to the basement of a building in Clifton Park Clifton with croquet on the lawn and a kitchen in the cellars. Bunk beds with wire mesh but no mattresses in part of the cellars. **Joan Moulder** recalled rest periods spent in a chair with a blanket. Rosie, the cook, Marjorie remembers her lovely roast beef dinners.

Other wartime women Marjorie mentioned included her younger sister **Bernice Earl**, **Phyllis Clutterbuck** who in 1944 appointed woman personnel officer in the rank of Obs/Off. **Elsie Cole** many will remember served on the crews at Lansdown. **Betty Nutt** a Yeovil Association member now living near Glastonbury served in Bristol 1943 to 1945. A mention must be made of another wartime lady whilst she did not serve in Bristol does now live in the City **Rita Head** an active Association member who served in 24 Group (Gloucester)/M2 Himbleton/Crowle 1943 to 1945.

On leaving Bristol Commercial College Marjorie started work as an admin assistant for BAC in their Cannons Marsh office. She wanted to contribute more directly to frontline war work. In September 1941 spotted the advert in the Evening Post for women to join the ROC her boss told her she would not be accepted it was therefore with some satisfaction she was able to hand in her notice when told to report to the ROC Centre Little King Street on 29th December 1941.

In 1944 at St Martins Church Knowle Marjorie married **F/Off Denis Gay** a Lancaster Bomber pilot they had known each other from their school days. A Guard of Honour provided by women from the crews. Tragically Denis was killed in a bombing raid over Germany and never knew their daughter Sally.



To my surprise her ROC service did not end on leaving the Corps in 1945. The 23 Group reformed in 1947 Marjorie her two sisters Valerie and Bernice together with Audrey Wallis re- joined the Bristol Crew now based in their new GHQ in Kings Square Avenue off Gloucester Road. I have tried to locate the building and was amazed when Marjorie without hesitation was able to tell me it was a prefabricated building on the left hand side of the road opposite the building that houses Mickleburgh Pianos. Needless to say it is no longer there. Furthermore the 4 ladies attended the first training camps under canvas at Thorney Island and Waterbeach. Their experiences in post war ROC is a story for another time. Talking to Marjorie one of the first women to join the ROC in Bristol 75 years ago a remarkable lady full of wonderful snippets of her ROC life during those dark days was a tremendous privilege and a great pleasure, thank you **Marjorie**.



Mrs Marjorie Gay February 2016