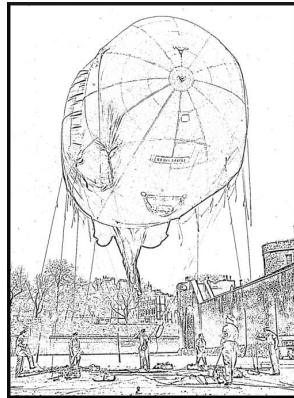


Chapter 4



Postings

The South of England

ca Alan ↻

IN FEBRUARY 1942, Lyn and Florence were posted to a balloon site between Fareham and Gosport in the south of England, not far from Portsmouth. The site was located in a farming community on Fareham Road, within sight of the Isle of Wight. Because of the space available, it was a Category 1 site – a Cat. The crew of sixteen had a Nissan hut in which everyone slept and a wooden hut used as a cooking and dining area. Much of the military activity was of the internecine type:

ca Lyn ↻

WE HAD THE WORST NCO [non-commissioned officer] in the world, a corporal. She was a real pill. She was so mean and nobody could stand her. She was in her twenties and officious. She'd just joined up and she was an administrative type and had been put on to manage us girls. She was very insecure because she would panic at the slightest thing. If something went wrong with the winch, for example.

I was sitting at the table and one of the girls and I were talking and this NCO started trying to make an ass of us. She made some crack at me and

thumped me. The last person to thump me was my brother. So I picked up my tea and threw it in her face. She was going to call the headquarters to get me arrested, but the other girls backed me up. They said that she was in the wrong and shouldn't have thumped me.

Alan

GUARD DUTY WAS PRETTY ONEROUS. The women on the site did two hours on and four hours off, around the clock unless, of course, they had exchanged guard duty for cooking duties. The women on guard duty were armed with a truncheon and a whistle with which to call for help, very much like the English Bobbies. The women had also been trained for two weeks in unarmed combat. Lyn and Florence finally had their first encounter with the “enemy”:



Balloon in the moat of the Tower of London. Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London (CH9443).

Lyn

ONE NIGHT WE WERE ON GUARD, Florence and I, and they called to say, “Keep your eyes peeled, escaped prisoners of war!” They would get uniforms and bicycles and come down the highway, so we had to keep our eyes open for those.

That same night, two sailors came onto the site. They came in on the back end of it. They were drunk and one of them had a knife. He tried to pop the balloon. The balloon was down for inspection. This one guy was slitting it. It was in the air compartment so it really wasn't serious but it was bad enough. Florence hit him over the head with a truncheon. That's all we had, a truncheon and a police whistle to protect ourselves. She nailed him with this thing and the other fellow took off, went over the fence and was gone. We took this fellow and put him in the air raid shelter as we didn't know what to do with him. I thought she'd killed him and she thought so too. He wasn't dead but we had to call headquarters and report it. They came and picked him up in an ambulance and took him out of there. It was in the paper the next

day or the day after. It didn't pay to go messing around those balloon sites because you might get hurt. So we had a reputation of going to battle with the navy.

They did, at one time, consider giving us rifles but they were too heavy. . . .

They had some pistols. The girls couldn't handle rifles – they'd beat up on the shoulders. Anyway, the girls didn't like them. We asked for some pistols but they wouldn't give them to us. I think part of that was because the duty officers used to come sneaking around at night and try to catch you off guard. I think they were afraid they might get shot if they ever gave us any armaments.

ca Alan no

THE WOMEN SOON DISCOVERED that the best thing to have on the site was a good dog for warning them of intruders. Most sites were not fenced in. Later on in London, a German Shepherd dog would come and stay on the site. It belonged to a policeman but it would hang around.

ca Lyn no

AT FIRST WE DIDN'T KNOW to whom he belonged but when he wanted to go home, he'd get on a double decker bus and go upstairs. They knew him throughout the area and didn't bother him. He'd go home for awhile and then he'd go to another site where women worked. He wouldn't go where the men worked. He'd come and stay for a month and patrol. He was a very good watch dog and would let us know if anyone came on the site. We knew a fellow who worked in a dog biscuit factory and he would bring us the broken ones, big sacks of dog food, and we'd feed the strays that hung around the site.

ca Alan no

ON THE FAREHAM SITE, the crew had to do their own cooking and every day someone took a bicycle with a basket on the front and cycled down to the flight headquarters where food was issued to them.

ca Lyn no

IT WAS ALWAYS A SURPRISE PARTY because we never knew what we were getting. On one occasion we got some fish and it was off. It had been around for awhile. We didn't even try to cook it. We buried it in a hole back of the hut. The duty officer chose that time to come around. They used to come prowling around. Sometimes, if they came during the day, they might ask how the food was. On this day the duty officer came around to check on the food. "How was the fish?" he asked. We took him out to the burial place and told him it wasn't fit to eat. I don't know what we ate that night but you had to depend on the rations all the time and the food was lousy.

ca Alan no

APART FROM STOPPING AT THE LOCAL PUB for a drink when in town to pick up supplies, there didn't appear to be much social activity at the Fareham site, due perhaps to its relative isolation in the countryside. However, a sports meet was organized in which members of various units were "invited" to take part.

↪ Lyn ↩

I HAD BEEN VERY ACTIVE IN SCHOOL – running, jumping, etc. – and they had all that information on my records because I used to high jump and run in relay races. An officer came around looking for “volunteers” for the big sport event that was being organized. Nobody was volunteering so he picked me out and said, “I have information that says you’ve done some of this.” I said it was true but that it had been a long time ago. He said, “Well, you can come in the sports lorry or you can come to headquarters and scrub floors.” So I went on the sports lorry. I think I won something in the relay and perhaps in the obstacle race. I was a basket case. I thought I was in pretty good condition with all the physical work I did but, then, I hadn’t done much running in a long time. I was stiff as a board when I got through with that. I had helped the site, so to speak, and I hadn’t had to scrub floors at headquarters.



Crew on a balloon site in central London; Lyn is third from left. Overalls were standard wear on site.

London, 1942

↪ Alan ↩

IN JULY 1942, LYN WAS AGAIN TRANSFERRED, this time from the Fareham site to one at Bethnel Green in London. There were only eight women on this site instead of the usual sixteen. The balloon site bed had been a tennis court and the crew had the use of what had been the club house or pavilion. A large field and a reservoir adjoined the site, making it a fairly open. The women had an air raid shelter nearby and further up a hill from the site sat a row of large, detached homes, the one beside the field being the flight headquarters. As the hut on the site was too small to accommodate the entire crew, three of them had to sleep at the flight headquarters. This building also had space for recreational activities with a piano and pool table. It was here that my sister learned to play pool.

↪ Lyn ↩

The wooden hut that we lived in – some of us lived in – was down close by the balloon bed. There were rats all over our place because of this reservoir. You could hear them because there was lots of water under our hut. I guess it used to leak out of the reservoir. You could hear them splashing around under there at night. One morning I got up and I actually had footprints across the sheet of my bed. Our beds were just iron cots but we had these three straw “biscuits” they call them – they were like three spare mattresses that you slapped on – and a straw pillow. They weren’t the most comfortable things, but then again, when you were so tired, you could have slept on the floor.

But we had to keep everything clean. We had duties and when we weren't working on the balloon, we had to do other stuff. We didn't have flush toilets there. We must have had outside jobs. Most of the sites had those and we had to take care of them. Once in awhile, we'd get flush toilets but that was a luxury.

Alan

WAAF MEMBERS WERE EXPECTED TO ATTEND CHURCH PARADES when told to do so. They were directed to a place of worship according to whatever religion they had put down on the forms when joining up. The choices included Roman Catholic, Church of England, Jewish, Muslim, and others. We had not been a churchgoing family, although we were nominally Church of England members. Lyn was finally forced to come to terms with the religious question while in the forces.

Lyn

ON ONE OCCASION, my girlfriend and I were coming back from breakfast and church parade. Being on church parade was just a matter of showing up there. We didn't normally go to church in our family, and the preacher nailed us after the service. He said, "What are you looking so happy about? You're not supposed to be happy at this time of the year."

I said, "Well, if you can't be happy at this time of the year, I don't want to have any more to do with Easter or anything else."

That didn't go over too well.

We didn't show up for church parade one Sunday after that and the flight sergeant in the orderly room, a girl, sent somebody down to tell us that we were wanted up at headquarters.

We went up there and were told that we were now on a charge for not showing up at the church parade.

I said that I didn't think it was necessary as we had our own duties down at the balloon site.

"Well, you're going to have to scrub the floor in the recreation room because you disobeyed the order to come up here for the church parade."

I said that I wasn't going to scrub any floor in the recreation room. My friend backed me up on it. So the two of us were now in deep trouble.

"You are really on a charge now, and you are going to go on report to the commanding officer."

"Go right ahead! We don't care!"

So we went back down to the site and, sure enough, we got a call the next day. We had to appear. We were under arrest, close order drill and all that stuff. We went back up there to see the CO. He was just a bully type. We didn't have much truck with him because he was the flight commander. We never saw him as a rule.

My girlfriend went in first and came out crying.

I went in and he started in on me. “You disobeyed an order of the flight sergeant. You were supposed to scrub that floor in the recreation room, weren’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

“And you disobeyed the order?”

“Yes, I did sir.”

“If I told you to do it, would you do it?”

“No, sir, I wouldn’t.”

“Do you know that I could have you shot for that?”

“Yes, sir, I know that.”

“I can make an example of you to the whole squadron for disobeying an order.”

I said that I understood that too but I wasn’t going to scrub that floor.

I was just mad at him.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. You just can’t get away with disobeying orders. I’m going to stop all your sleeping-out passes for a month.”

“Very well, sir,” I said.



Women on hydrogen cylinders. Lyn, front row centre with puppy on her knees.

I clicked my heels, saluted, turned around, and left. That was really funny because we never got sleeping-out passes on that balloon site and he didn’t even know enough to know that. But he had told me he was going to shoot me and all that stuff and he could have, I suppose, because I had made up my mind that I wasn’t going to scrub that floor.

ca Alan no

A LITTLE WHILE LATER, Lyn and her friend had an opportunity to chuckle at the expense of their CO. The military authorities would test the security of their own facilities from time to time. This was designed to detect any lapses in security and to design systems that would better support the war effort.

ca Lyn no

I WAS STANDING GUARD ONE AFTERNOON. I was up by the winch and a fellow came over. He had no business on the site but he wanted to know where the headquarters was so I told him. I shouldn’t have because he could have found it just by walking.

He went into the switchboard area and took the keys to the armoury. He then went into the armoury and took a whole slew of guns and ammunition, loaded it up in his car. He had some kind of official car, and left.

Then they called the CO, that clown that was going to shoot me, and told him that they had just wiped out his armoury and he'd better get cracking to see what's going on at the headquarters. This is a true story.

The CO wanted to know who told the guy where the headquarters was and they said it was the balloon site that had directed him up there. They couldn't do anything about us because we really didn't give out any information. But he had walked right in there, through the orderly room into the switchboard, got the keys that were on the wall. He took those, marched into the armoury. Nobody was paying attention to anything. The CO wasn't even around and the guy wiped them out, took all the stuff he wanted and left, and then called. That did my heart good because he was such a bully, that guy. He had it coming.

War Games

ca Alan

ALONG SIMILAR LINES, the military would arrange for war games in which one group would be assigned the task of infiltrating and capturing the headquarters of the opposing side. While there was no real threat to the personnel involved, apart from the effects of ridicule and failure on one's reputation, the games could be fun and could provide a real scenario in case the enemy really did come calling in like manner.

ca Lyn

THEY DECIDED THAT THEY WERE GOING TO HAVE a mock invasion, "handbags" versus the army. So everybody was briefed. The army were the invaders and we found some of these guys sneaking around. We decided that if we caught some of their guys, we'd put them down in the air raid shelter. Some of them set up a machine gun nest in the house next to the headquarters. So we collared that lot. They didn't expect girls to show up. We took them back and made prisoners out of them. We had a lot of fun with that. It was a one-day event. We couldn't take too long because we had operations. We had a lot of fun spying on those guys. They were working on getting into the headquarters without being captured but they didn't succeed. We caught a couple of them in the next garden and we received lots of commendations for that.

ca Alan

ACROSS THE ROAD FROM THE HEADQUARTERS was another house which provided accommodation for members of the headquarters staff in the upper levels and a dining area down below. At first the women on the balloon site prepared their own food but after awhile they were instructed to go to the dining room for meals. Some of the crew resented this because they had to do kitchen patrol work such as peeling potatoes and washing dishes. Lyn was on this site for only a short while before she was moved to another at Stoke Newington, again

in London and again for only a very short while. She was seventeen when she was sent on a training course.



Woman with puppy on balloon site.

Driver training

by Lyn

I WAS SENT TO CARDINGTON, which was a big station outside Bedford, about forty miles north of London. It was a driving and mechanic course. Our site was mobile and the winch was on the back of a truck and it could be moved around. So one person had to know how to drive it in order to move it in the event of an emergency. So yours truly was delegated for that. They also had the results of my exams from Liverpool and I was in the top three on the course so I qualified to go on the driving course. It was a quick study and I learned very rapidly. So it was into Cardington I went and learned to drive a three-ton truck. That's how it started out and I think it was about a six-week course where we learned mechanics, oil changes, etc. We'd have to take the trucks with an instructor who was a qualified driver and do different trips. We'd go and pick up balloons in their packages and take them various places. I had to learn to double clutch – they had a stick shift. I liked it. I didn't have any trouble with it and I

enjoyed the courses and the weather was nice. It was sunny. We had a lot of free time in the evenings and we'd go into Bedford which was completely taken over by Americans. It was the 5th Air Force and they had a base there, outside of Bedford. It was very difficult to get into a movie house or a restaurant because the Yanks were there. Bedford was a pretty town, as I remember, and had a river running through. It was very, very nice. We used to get the bus outside the camp gate and go in and come home that way.

When I got the "duty driving" to do I got to drive these three-ton trucks with balloons on the back and air force guys to manhandle the balloons. We had governors on the engines so that you couldn't drive more than 35 mph on those trucks but I got involved with an American convoy. What they'd do is to wrap themselves around me. They'd pass, then they'd slow down, so I had them in front of me and behind, and they would get up very close and the fellows who were in the back of the truck, they'd try to get on the "rig" of my truck or to get into the back of my truck. It created quite a commotion.

I was in the Bedford one day and I was passing an American truck. Their's were all metal, the racks on the back, and our's were made of wood and I sideswiped him. Of course it just took a great chunk of wood off the side of my truck. I blamed it on the Americans. I said they just didn't know how to drive on the left. There was no feedback on that. I said it was an American that hit me and I got away with it.

Anyway, I completed the course and graduated and because I think I was in the top three I was kept on the unit for two more weeks. It was a kind of plum for having learned to drive. I got staff cars and got to pick up officers.

They had an Italian prisoner of war camp in that area and I was delegated to go and pick them up early in the morning, at about seven AM, and take them to a farm. They worked there all day then I'd drive the truck out and pick them up and take them back to camp – prison camp. They were northern Italians, they were all blondes, and they used to sing their heads off and there was only one guard with them and I had a truck-load of these guys. They used to bring me apples, produce, edible stuff like nuts, apples, pears, and things they got on the farm. They were very happy. They didn't want to get back into the war again. They were quite content to be doing what they were doing. So, I spent two weeks driving for the camp before I was sent back to my unit, which was back in Stoke Newington.

✎ Alan ✎

LYN WAS STILL SEVENTEEN YEARS OF AGE when she finished the course at Cardington. Among women, the majority of whom were older, her youth was not really noticed as she was tall and socially adept so that she fit in very well with the other women. Others did notice her, however, as a tall, blue-eyed blonde who was full of life. Even her brothers, who typically are not given to complimentary remarks about sisters, agreed that Lyn was a good-looking girl. As Bedford had been “taken over by the Americans,” it stood to reason that they would notice her if she went to town.

✎ Lyn ✎

ALL WAS NOT ALL WORK AND NO PLAY. I've forgotten who the gal was but she was another one who managed to survive the driving course without killing herself. There were wrecks up and down that road like you wouldn't believe with girls driving too fast, getting on the wrong side, or something like that. Anyway, she and I decided to go into Bedford to have a drink in one of the pubs. We realized, after we had a drink or so, that we really didn't have enough money to cover us on this bill. But there were a couple of Americans at the bar that had been giving us the eye. I'd been kind of turning up my nose at them until I found out that our bill was coming due so I started acting a little more civilized and they came over to the table and said, “Hi, Waffy (a typical Yank expression). How about you have a drink with us?” So we said, “Fine!” We just used them unmercifully but then they asked where our camp was. We told them and they offered to escort us home. So we got them on the bus with us.

I actually thought that the bus turned around at the camp but the last time I saw these guys, they were heading on down to Hitchin or some place miles down the road. They were looking at us out through the back of the bus as it drove away. We were at the camp. We were home and our bill had been paid

but we weren't really too keen on the Americans at that time because they commandeered everything. There was nowhere you could go without them taking over. They were very friendly but we thought they were pushy.

ca Alan

WHEN LYN HAD BEEN IN TRAINING at Liverpool she had gone to a Christmas dance and had had her first drink of Scotch. She thought it tasted terrible and it made her feel sick and depressed. She began to cry and had to go back to the hut. However, in Bedford she soon got over that experience.

ca Lyn

I MET ONE VERY NICE FELLOW. We were having a drink, one night, with



Typical winch truck and trailer loaded with hydrogen cylinders from which balloons were inflated. At age 17, Lyn became a winch operator and driver of this kind of vehicle. Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London (CH8329).

some of the guys from the camp. In the course of the evening, we met some Americans. This fellow was from Atlanta, I think. I had a very bad case of laryngitis, a very bad case. He and his friend said that I needed a drink of Scotch. After my experience in training I had confined my drinking activities to shandies, a fifty-fifty mix of beer and lemonade or ginger beer. But I went along with them and had some straight Scotch with water on the side. I sipped on that and actually did feel better. My throat felt better – in fact,

everything felt better. From then on, if I wanted to have a drink, I would have Scotch with water back. I saw this fellow a couple of more times. We never got any meaningful relationship going, or anything such that you might have today, but he was a gentleman and he had the old south way of talking to you, in that south, syrupy accent.

Back to London

ca Alan

AT THE END OF OCTOBER 1942, Lyn returned to her previous balloon site at Stoke Newington, carrying her new license that declared that she was now a balloon operator, driver, and mechanic. Not much had changed in her absence: they were still short of crew and the war was still going strong. She was there until just before Christmas when she was sent on a course to prepare her to be a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO).