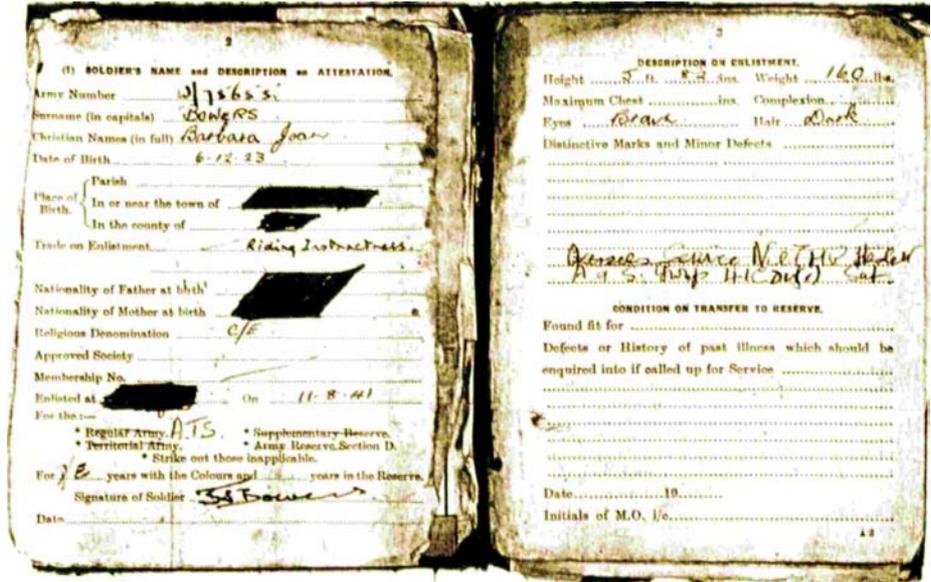


Surname: Cawthorne	First Name(s): Barbara	Army Number: W/75655	
Maiden name (if applicable): Bowers	Name used during service: Bowers	Rank: Sgt	
Main base: Sunderland Glasgow Winchester Southampton London Singapore	Training base: Oswestry Anglesey St Neots	Enrolled at: Northampton	
Platoon/Section:	Company/Battery: 473 (M) HAA Battery	Group/Regiment: 135 Reg Royal Artillery	Command: Ack Ack Command
Year(s) of service: 11/8/1941 to 29/1/1947	Reason for discharge:	Trade: Height finder Switchboard operator	
Uniform Issued: Skirt Jacket Cap Pyjamas Khaki bloomers Corsets Bras Slacks Boots Gaiters Leather jerkin Steel helmet Bras Gas mask Khaki lisle stockings	Photo: 		
Description of daily tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See details below. 		

Pay book:



Memorable moments:

- My generation well remembers where they were when the chilling words of Neville Chamberlain came over the wireless: “We are now at war with Germany”.
- His announcement was immediately followed by the wailing of air raid sirens. That moment would change the pattern of life for all of us.
- Our family lived in the South of England. When the sirens went off, I remember my mother saying: “Go and fill the bath”. I suppose she imagined that we were about to be firebombed any minute.
- Our family split came fairly soon. My father, who was well beyond call-up age, joined the RAF. My mother and my two younger sisters went with him into married quarters, while my elder sister went off into the Land Army. I was sent off as unpaid help to various parts of the family. I was too young to be any use and not trained for anything. I was sixteen when I saw a poster showing a steel-helmeted girl behind a gun. The poster was recruiting for the ATS, for girls to man ack-ack gun sites. I knew that was for me, but getting in was another thing. I was underage, but you did not have to produce a birth certificate to get in. So I enlisted and went for the medical. The final part of the induction process was to swear, with your hand on the bible, in front of an officer, to serve King and country. While I was doing this, the old major who was conducting the swearing in looked me straight in the eyes and said: “You’re not old enough”. I blushed (in those days one did). That gave me away and I was out.
- I was determined to enlist. So I went to the recruitment office in another town, only to be sent to the same centre and come up against the same old major. This time he let me through.
- So there I was, just sixteen and being issued with my army kit – khaki bloomers (passion killers we called them), awful pink bras that flattened everything you had, pink corsets (with white bones), khaki lisle stockings and, of course a skirt, jacket, cap and hideous pyjamas.
- The first four weeks consisted of drill, endless marching, button polishing and folding one’s blankets in the correct order. You were also given a number – mine was W/75655 – which you would remember for life.
- We were a mixed crowd of girls, but most were a wonderful bunch of cockneys. At the end of the first four weeks, I was issued with a stripe – because I was tall. I was now a Lance Bombardier. We were to be in the Royal Artillery, the only women to be part of a regiment.
- Our first posting was to Oswestry, where we met up with our male gunners. We

were issued with slacks, boots and gaiters, leather jerkins, steel helmets and gas masks and we became 473 HAA Battery 135 Regiment RA. There was more square bashing. But, more importantly, we became height finders, predictor operators and spotters.

- Then to firing camp on Anglesey in November. I still have memories of standing for hours on the cliffs in the bitter cold, waiting to fire a target towed behind a plane, and to be marched in squads before dawn to the cookhouse with a knife, fork and spoon. On to one plate was slopped porridge, and egg and bacon. We were there for four weeks before going on our first leave. I was now promoted to Sgt Gunner.
- The whole battery was sent north to the Sunderland area. All movements were made at night in packed troop trains. We slept in Nissen huts near the gun post. The docks were being bombed night after night. When the alarm sounded the gun post was manned in minutes. The moment the aircraft was spotted, the height finder would shout "on target" and give the height and range of the plane. The predictor girls would work out the fuse and shout this to the gunners who set the shells. Then all hell was let loose as the four huge guns fired at the same time.
- During this time, we were credited with bringing down eight enemy aircraft, one of the first mixed batteries to do so. I was one of those in the regiment to receive an honour for this – I was awarded the B.E.M.
- We remained in the north, being sent to Glasgow when that town was being raided.
- As the build up for the invasion, we were sent south. Our guns were in the fields near Winchester. The girls were billeted in tents. Another sergeant and I slept in an old chicken house, as it was near the huge generator which we had to start when the alarm went. While waiting for action, we had an inspection by the Princess Royal. I always remember getting ordered to prepare the loo for her – one small tent and a bucket, which had to be burnished until it shone. But the final order was that an inch of sand to be put in the bottom, so that no one would hear her tinkle!
- We had no leave or even a pass during this time. All roads were packed with lorries and tanks nose to tail. Once the invasion began, we remained on alert and thought our next posting would be in France.
- I was on duty the night the message was relayed: "Pilotless planes approaching". That began weeks of trying to shoot down V1s. If the fighters were up, we could do nothing.
- We were moved nearer the coast, then near Southampton. Our next move was to London. We were on a site on number two polo grounds at Hurlingham. We were there the day the war ended. So we made our way to Buckingham Palace – along with crowds and crowds of other people.
- The war with Germany was at an end and the artillery batteries were disbanded. We were asked to volunteer to retrain in signals to go to the Far East. I was sent to St Neots and trained as a switchboard operator. I was sent with 37 girls to board a troop ship – it was taking three thousand Dutch troops to Java. We were being sent to Ceylon, but at Trincomalee orders came for us to continue to Singapore.
- When we docked there, we were taken to Changi Camp, where we took over all telephone duties from the men. There were Japanese prisoners everywhere. An amazing year was to follow. Singapore was a thrilling place to see. Towards the end of the year, I caught malaria and spent some time in hospital before being sent back to England – amazingly on the same troop ship as the man I had met and fallen in love with. After more time in hospital in England, I was finally demobbed in York.

Photos:



ATS snapshot
No 2 Coy, Changi, Singapore May 1946