

Surname: Latham	First Name(s): Doris	Army Number: W/146017	
Maiden name (if applicable): Prestage	Name used during service: Prestage / Latham	Rank: Sgt	
Main base: Knebworth	Training base: Honiton Taunton – basic Taunton - searchlight	Enrolled at: Honiton	
Platoon/Section: Initially Whitwell Herts site	Company/Battery: 301 (M) H.A.A Battery 342 (M) H.A.A. Battery 495 (M) H.A.A. Battery	Group/Regiment: 93 rd S/L Regiment, Royal Artillery	Command: A.A. Command
Year(s) of service: May 1942 to 6/9/1945	Reason for discharge: End of War	Trade: Assistant Battery Instructor	
Uniform Issued: Jacket Skirt Trousers Boots Putties Shirts Underwear (passion killers) Socks Kit bag Fur coat Overcoat	Photo: 		
Description of daily tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No shifts – permanently available – P.T. when possible. • Maintain equipment – Barrack room duties – Issue N.A.A.F.I. treats (Cigs and make-up) • Learn electrics – radio telephone, switchboard. • Direct beam – learn to identify aircraft – attend courses. • Maintenance of site equipment. • Crew health. 		

Pay book:	Not available.
Memorable moments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1942 the 93rd (M) S/L Regt RA was the only searchlight regiment manned by women. We were unique and had to prove that we could do the job and stand the conditions that only men had coped with previously. The War Office had said that we wouldn't be able to cope and weren't capable – it was to be a very lonely and hard existence. Ack-Ack Command had more faith in our ability and General Sir Frederick Pyle won the day. As he wrote in his book, Ack Ack: 'To place a dozen girls in some bleak and desolate spot, five miles or more from the nearest town, with night sentry duties to carry out in a countryside abounding in noises eerie to a townsman was another thing. How would they deal with possible intruders, with saboteurs, with all the sudden imponderables inherent in the rural life. As it happened we need not have worried. The now famous 93rd went into action for the first time in the middle of 1942.' • The main stumbling blocks were the fact that the diesel generators which supplied the power for the S/L equipment were too heavy for women to turn over (it was feared that it would spoil their child bearing chances) and the fact that we would have to live on very isolated sites with little contact with civilisation. We even had to learn pick and shovel drill during training in order to dig our own latrine pits. As a concession to our femininity, self-starters were fitted to the generators, thus that obstacle to our efficiency was removed. As to loneliness, everyone coped remarkably well, probably because we felt that we were really doing something useful. We also had to justify our worth in the eyes of the War Office and to dispel their doubts for good. Consequently, morale remained high throughout. • There were six detachments to each troop, four troops to each battery, three batteries to the regiment. Each detachment consisted of 14 girls commanded by a sergeant with a corporal as assistant. The equipment in their charge cost thousands of pounds. Each troop was commanded by an ATS subaltern (equal to a 2Lt or Lt). At battery level, admin was in the hands of a male captain and the command of the regiment was a male Lieutenant Colonel. Each detachment had a male radio mechanic housed in a hut at the other end of the site well away from us. • Guard duties were carried out by the girls without any defensive weapons, so how we could have defended ourselves and our equipment against trespassers or marauders remains a bit of a mystery. After one or two minor incidents we were allowed to carry a short stick, but it would have been quite useless had we been attacked. • Our only contact with the outside world was a small radio transmitter and receiver on which detachment personnel would give and receive messages from the troop officer. The radio set was manned hourly during the day and constantly at night so that the troop officer could warn of the approach of enemy aircraft. A dispatch rider visited each detachment daily with details of the number and colour by which friendly aircraft could be identified, and also delivered personal mail. This took rather a long time being routed through battery HQ and troop first. The ration lorry visited the detachments twice weekly to deliver what will now seem to be meagre rations. • Obviously, the function of searchlights was to illuminate enemy aircraft to aid the gunners, but their secondary role was to show the way home to the nearest aerodrome, for crippled, friendly aircraft returning from operations. A permanent hazard was that enemy aircraft would fire along the beam of light to extinguish it.

- The work was very varied and interesting. We learned the rudiments of electricity, radio circuits, mechanics, radar, Morse code, plotting and had to be able to recognise a minimum of 50 aircraft, both enemy and friendly, on sight, in good, bad or indifferent light.
- Initially the searchlights had to be aligned visually, supplemented by sound locators. Later, more sophisticated equipment appeared in the form of radar equipment, known affectionately as 'Elsie'. Movement of the searchlight was manual, rather after the way guns were aligned, though latterly mechanical means were provided whereby one person could elevate and track on her own, remote from the searchlight itself.
- From the point of view of the operations network, searchlights were linked to the sectors operated from RAF Biggin Hill and Tangmere as part of Ack-Ack Command. Defence of London was the purpose and for perhaps obvious reasons sites were in remote country areas, with access to command posts from troop officers across ploughed fields, at the top of church towers and the like – height above the surrounding countryside being important.
- Clear skies at night meant no sleep but virtual continuous 'stand to', with daytime swallowed up on care and maintenance. Broken cloud meant broken sleep and hazardous nightly journeys, with all the noises of night time in the country to give the town girls the jitters. There were long periods of boredom and others quite frightening.
- I remember the friendships – removed all social barriers.
- Married R.E.M.E. Sergeant June 1943 – had to be separated (no fraternising). Went into the 342 as one of us had to move.
- Offer of wedding at Hatfield – Sergeant's mess refused because of our families.

Photos:



Judy Ratcliffe and Doris Latham



Judy Ratcliffe and Doris Latham at the front