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| Surname: Troke | First Name(s): G. Ursula | Army Number: W/128471 & (Commissioned) W/366510 | |
| Maiden name (if applicable): Merrill | Name used during service: Known as 'Pat' Merrill | Rank: S/Sgt SQMS Subaltern (1946) | |
| Main base: Various Regtl Pay Offices | Training base: Honiton | Enrolled at: Exeter | |
| Platoon/Section: | Company/Battery: | Group/Regiment: Att. R.A.P.C. | Command: Mainly Southern |
| Year(s) of service: Feb 1942 to June 1951 | Reason for discharge: Completion of engagement | Trade: Clerk | |
| Uniform Issued: Jacket, Skirt Greatcoat Groundsheet Shirts Tie Bras Suspender belt Striped Pyjamas 3 white knickers 3 khaki knickers 3 vests Stockings Brown shoes Flat hat Pullover Kit bag Tin hat Gas mask Button stick Knife, spoon, fork, mug Housewife (‘hussiff’) Shoulder bag (later) Side hat was not issued – you bought it if you wanted it for ‘walking out’ off duty. | Photo:  | | |

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| Description of daily tasks: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PT at Knightsbridge and you could swim in the Serpentine if you preferred. • PT in Exeter, done in the street. • No fatigues (unless as a punishment). • Fire-watching roster. • Details of duties in R.A.P.C. attached. • Most of the work of the R.A.P.C. was pretty basic – all done by hand. Historically the soldiers pay accounts were kept in alphabetical order on big sheets (AFN 3085) and (AFN 3086) for wives and dependants, in big ‘binders’ opened by a key (winder). |
| Pay book: | <p>Not available</p> |
| Memorable moments: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the R.A.P.C. Offices were scattered around the country and were formed for the Infantry Regiments originally raised in the area. I was lucky to be based in the South, Exeter, Ilfracombe, Salisbury, Devizes and eventually Nottingham. I joined early in 1942, trained at Honiton in Devon and my first posting was to Knightsbridge, right next door to Harrods. The ‘office’ was once a big store called Gooches in the Brompton Road, over the Knightsbridge underground station (opposite the Fulham Tavern which once had a doodle-bug fall on it). • When I arrived at the Brompton Road entrance to the Knightsbridge station, with my kit bag slung over my shoulder like a ‘jolly-sailor’ a young curate asked if he could carry my bag, as he did not think it appropriate for a young lady to do so. Bless him, he would have had a busy time once conscription started in mid 1942! • The pay then for an A.T.S. private was 1s 4d – being 2/3rds of a man’s pay per day, or today about 7p. When I volunteered as a pay clerk, I imagined that I would be going behind the lines, paying out pounds, shillings and pence! – or francs! • Our hostel was in Lennox Gardens, near Hans Crescent and I shared a top-floor room with three other girls. Two double bunks in the room, bare boards and a ‘soldiers’ box to hold your belongings and doubled as a seat. All the girls I ever worked with were fine hard-working lasses, fun to be with and respectable. Each morning you stripped your bed, folding your blankets and sheets in a certain way, so that it looked like a liquorice all-sort. Hard if you had gone out straight from work and coming in late had to re-make your bed in the dark – unless a kind room-mate had already done it for you – especially if you were top bunk. • There was a lull in the war at that time, as far as London was concerned, doodle-bugs had not yet started. The country was recovering from the fall of France and preparing itself for the next onslaught. But there was never any doubt in our minds that we would win in the end. Morale was high. America had come into the war and their servicemen were arriving to join the combat. London was humming. The Germans in the meantime were ‘consolidating their positions’ in France, and using their Air power trying to dent our morale by bombing famous places like Coventry and Exeter and carrying out hit-and-run sorties to bomb our seaside resorts from the French coast. • There wasn’t the excitement being in Pay, like our sisters on the guns or driving lorries. If you came in under the Process System, as I did in Knightsbridge in 1942, it was pretty uninspiring at the bottom of the pile. The Process System was introduced to sort out the men from the boys, and the wheat from the chaff, and was used to assess abilities. Process 1 – Filing. Process 2 – Checking AB64s. Process 3 – Completing AFN 1483, and so on until you were the stars of the show, dealing with Part II Orders and maintained AFN 3085 (Soldiers’ account record) and AFN 3086 ditto for wives and dependants. Remember, that the accounts were maintained by hand, entries were posted from Acquittance Roll |

Slips and the account ruled off quarterly and balanced; elementary book-keeping. The actual Acquittance Rolls were received into the Clearing Wing. Here each slip (about 6" x 1/2") was numbered and torn off. Batches were sent to the Posting Wings there to be debited to the soldier, initialled by both the posting clerk and the Section Officer, to flutter back in due course to the Clearing Wing, there to be stuck like butterflies to the corresponding A/Roll.

- So, there I was in Knightsbridge doing a boring job – checking soldiers' Pay Books (AB64 Pt II) and having a fuller social life than I had ever known at 21. But I hadn't joined up for this. I felt that I had previously been doing a more worthwhile war job in the Exeter Food Office, especially after the destruction of that city in May 1942. In my quest for more demanding work I ended up in the Exeter Regimental Pay Office! Not my intention at all – but that is a long story. It was my first introduction to the 'left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing', the lack of understanding between A.T.S. Admin and employing departments.
- Eventually I landed happily in the Non-Effective (N/E) Accounts Section of 32 Coy R.A.P.C. Exeter. Here I had more interesting work, dealing with the accounts of the dead and missing and prisoners of war. This also gave you more contact with their dependants. Here I progressed through all ranks from L/Cpl to Warrant Officer (S.Q.M.S.) – the highest we could go. As the latter you wielded a 'franking stamp' and could do an officer's job of authorising payments of entitlement to the departing Army after the war was over and soldiers released. This had to be prompt and accurate. As wing leader I was responsible for the work of men and women (both civilian and military) but not involved with the welfare or care of the service women.
- Excitement came one bright sunny day, the last one in 1942, when a lone plane streaked up the Exe to drop a stick of bombs in Holloway Street, a street of tall oldish buildings, behind which was an old TA drill hall, our office. At the time, I did not think he was aiming at us, just dropping his bombs before going home for morning coffee. However, it has recently come to light that this was part of an organised daylight raid by five fighter bombers carrying one bomb each. It appears that their target was Newton Abbot and not Exeter. But if the pilot had aimed a few yards to the left he would have got the jackpot and so would we. There were about sixty of us there, mostly women. At the first 'whoosh' we dived under the tables then the glass ceiling came down together with all the lights that had been strung across the hall by bits of string to be over our desks. The Section Officer kept a stiff upper lip and didn't dive, and the back of his Service Jacket was badly ripped by the flying glass. We emerged from under the tables our hair plastered with dust and our stockings ripped. In no time at all the WRVS canteen arrived and we were soon salvaging the papers and evacuating the building. Before the day was out we had set up shop again in the vacated premises of the Fifty Shilling Tailors, still with our white hair and bloodied knees.
- A group of ladies in Topsham ran a forces canteen of their own in a hall up a lane off the Strand. A long table would be spread with all sorts of goodies provided by these ladies – all home made – you were on your honour to pay 1d for each item you took. The canteen was open once a week and was a haven. It was under the leadership of a lady who was known universally as Auntie, but was in fact Maude Gliddon who had founded the canteen and ran it. Afterwards we played table tennis with the Marines who came up from Lympstone. There were 2 or 3 tennis tables and a piano. We also formed a cycle club with the Marines and sometimes cycled to Dawlish where we could get egg and chips for 1/- from a Forces canteen near the beach. After a beach ball game we put our bikes in the luggage van and went back by train to Exeter. Such carefree fun in troubled times!



The A.T.S. girls are from Exeter Pay Office.
The young men are Marines from Lymestone.

- Eventually the war was over and the battered City wanted its buildings back – the Brewery, the museum and the Fifty Shilling Tailors and the houses where we were billeted. The girls moved to an old Ack Ack site at Alphington. It had become near derelict. The girls had ground sheets on their beds because of the leaking roofs, and in bed you could easily see outside through the cracks in the walls. Our shoes stuck to the floor-cement on frosty nights. An American Naval Construction Battalion nearby took pity on us and lined the floors in the Sgts' Mess with felt. It was peace-time but conditions were worse.
- You may be thinking we were not as tough as the girls who previously manned the guns there; we could have done that too, it was a way of life. Boots and Battledress would have been better for us, we were still trying to do our jobs as clerks, attempting polished shoes and pressed skirts in the mud and climbing up into trucks each morning showing our ETBs. The trucks took us to the re-located Pay Office at Bye-Pass Camp some miles away for our breakfast in an open cook-house. There the power lines were inadequate for the demands of a large office. On dark evenings we worked by candlelight to conserve the electricity for the Burroughs Adding Machines which were operating then. Our numbers were rapidly depleting with the departure, on early release of the elderly and unfit men in the Corps. It was mostly girls who were left, and overtime-by-candlelight was the norm.
- In 1946 the War Office decided that R.A.P.C. girls with experience could be commissioned into the R.A.P.C. direct without first becoming A.T.S Admin Officers. A break-through at last.
- Because of my N/E experience I was a natural for the Release Section, you know how it is in the Army – being in the right place at the right time – promotion came quickly. Then some repatriated ex POWs came to help us. Volunteers had been called for from those awaiting Release. They were willing, though green in Pay matters, so a modified Process System came into operation. We needed to be careful in the use of their military titles. They were not privates but sappers, gunners, troopers, bombardiers etc – lest we forget. Their stay was short but appreciated and, as in all things, it is the spirit that counts.
- Spring 1946, primroses and bluebells were in bloom at High Leigh Hall, Cheshire, the home of the R.A.P.C./O.C.T.U. Here came nineteen lasses, mostly senior N.C.O.'s (A.T.S.) who had worked in Regimental Pay Offices throughout the country during the War. The War Office had decided that these 'girls' could now be commissioned at Pay mistresses in the R.A.P.C., believed to be exceptional in

now having a mixed O.C.T.U. There were two intakes that Spring. Before No. 1 course departed a farewell dinner was given, and the top table was decorated with primroses and bluebells (the colours of the R.A.P.C.) and the other two legs decked with rhododendrons from white through all shades of pink to purple, gathered from the grounds. Then the nineteen 'lady cadets' went off for a month to join the A.T.S./O.C.T.U. at Windsor, where H.M. Queen (the Princess Elizabeth) took the passing-out parade. We were proud when she especially mentioned the nineteen R.A.P.C. Officers.

- Service life had taught us to be adaptable, and caring and sharing with others. My experience helped me greatly in civilian posts, managing salaries, wages and records for 'Dorothy Perkins' Head Office (then a private company) supervision of accounts departments in various local Government offices and whilst in Hong Kong 1959/63 a shipping company created a job for me, which included a department of Chinese accounts clerks, who eventually seemed no different to me to the sections of 18 year old National Service 'boys' I trained in 1948.
- We learnt to live in many situations during our service, from dilapidated Nissen huts to grand houses 'requisitioned for the duration' empty hotels, rat-infested suburban houses and in 'lodgings'. In 1947 I was fortunate to be the first woman to be a patient at the Convalescent Home at Osbourne House (I.o.W.) which had been given to the nation by King Edward VII. It had hitherto been the prerogative of male officers of the armed and civil services. Many women enjoyed this privilege afterwards. In the hard winter of 1947 I was in the military hospital at Shaftsbury, Dorset. We were cut off by snow and lived for several days on a diet of dried chicken, powdered milk and tinned peaches. Emergency rations left behind from when it was a wartime American military hospital. No helicopter drops in those days.
- Life was not exciting in 'Pay' but nevertheless I enjoyed it after all, and served for nine years. 1942 – 1951 and made many friends, several, sadly, now 'marching on'.

Photos:



The passing-out parade shows Kathie Stubbs (who was later posted to Manchester) talking to HRH The Princess Elizabeth (as she was then).



*Back Row: Cadets Pollard, Not Known, Grove, Merrill, Stubbs, Gillies and Johnstone
Centre Row: Cadets Townsend, Chatfield, Bailey, Judd, Basketer, Henshall, McCreadie and Kirton
Front Row: Cadets Scott, Thomas, SSgt Taylor, Capt Watson, Capt Chance, SSM Lillie, Cadets McKecknie and Patterson.*



This photo was taken outside the cinema in Exeter on V.E. Day 1945, on a bomb site where there was dancing in the street. 4 ATS and the WREN and the WAAF with us were the Young Sisters. Their mother 'adopted' three of the A.T.S. in the photo – she was so kind to us and cared for us like additional daughters.

That day we swapped bits of our uniforms to do the Palais-glide together. Sadly Winnie heard that day that her boyfriend – a Norwegian pilot – had been killed. The joy went from that day and I remember sitting on the steps of a ruined church in Dix's Field thinking of those we had met and who would not be coming back.