

Title: She had a lovely war

Story:

The wartime experiences of Margaret Edith Fox

In the twenty-first century it is now common for young adults of eighteen or so to embark on gap-years to see more of the world or broaden their horizons by leaving home to study many miles away. In the first half of the twentieth century these experiences were only for the rich. Bizarrely the horrors of war widened the horizons of many young people who would have stayed in their hometown and settled to narrow family life.

In July 1989, a few days after her death her two sons met with the minister who was to give Margaret's eulogy at Swindon Crematorium. In giving a synopsis of her life, one remark from my brother, David Palmer will always stay in my memory: 'She had a lovely war' For many years she spoke fondly of her days in the WAAF and the wide experiences she had. It came as a shock, therefore, when researching for this memoir I discovered that she joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force on 18 April 1941 and was given a 'Compassionate Discharge' on the 10th October 1942. All the stories she told of her time in the WAAF took place in just under 18 months.

However, during that time she went to many different parts of the country, made and lost many friends, learnt to drive, was married and became pregnant.

Margaret enlisted in The Women's Auxiliary Air Force on 18th April 1941. Her father had died aged 49 from the effects of being torpedoed in The First World War when she was ten years old. Her mother had died in January 1940 aged 54. Margaret had left school at fifteen and had tried nursing at a 'home for crippled girls' in Margate but had returned to work in Vye's grocery shop in Faversham, where during The Battle of Britain the shop assistants would leave their posts to watch Spitfires and Messerschmitts having dog fights over the Kent marshes.

After her initial training Margaret worked in the Air Ministry Communications section in King Charles Street Whitehall in the autumn of 1941. She was mainly employed as a messenger taking communications to various parts of Whitehall. Some of these trips were taken via basements and underground passages. She told of becoming lost in one of these passages on one errand and being stopped by a large military policeman before she went through a metal door. She was redirected with a kind warning not to get lost in that particular passage again. She later realised that she had nearly stumbled into the Cabinet War Rooms.

Before she left Whitehall in December 1941 Margaret ordered a RAF diary for 1942. Fortunately, this has survived and provides a reliable source for a memorable year.

In December 1941 Margaret was posted to Blackpool for an intensive driving course. The RAF had taken over a BSM driving school to provide rapid training for the many WAAFs who had joined up that Autumn. Margaret spoke of cold mornings when the fleet of instructors' cars were pushed by a padded jeep to the gate of the compound and made to free wheel down the steep hill to bump start them. The standards were very high, Margaret drove very well until her sixties, her hands were always at 'ten to two' on the steering wheel unless they were signalling out of the window! One reason she stopped driving in the 1980s was because she could not understand how to use indicators. To say that she was also taught basic car mechanics was an understatement. In typical RAF fashion she was expected to strip-down the engine of a Bedford truck, lay the components neatly on a tarpaulin, and then re-assemble the engine, start the truck and drive it.

The first entry in her new diary is for the last day of 1941: she received 51 marks in her test and had successfully passed the course.

On New Year's Day 1942 she started a week's leave: she left Blackpool at eight in the morning and reached Faversham eleven hours later.

It is not recorded anywhere, but it is assumed that at this time she and my father Don Palmer intended to be married. There was no formal engagement, she did not have an engagement ring. She lived at Don's family home, 23 Cyprus Road Faversham when she was on leave.

On 8th January 1942 she reported for duty at RAF Thorney Island in Chichester harbour. For the first month at Thorney Island Margaret appeared under-employed and bored. She wrote that it was a very nice camp, that she is living in a house, it was cold and snowed, she went to the pictures in Chichester, the Naafi and YMCA dances with her new friend, Jenny. There was the occasional excitement when planes return damaged, and she had to drive an ambulance onto the runway. On 6th February she went to Faversham for 72 hours leave. I assume that during this time Don suggested that they marry because a week later on 13th February:

'Telegram from Don very excited at the thought of getting married'.

Margaret arranged a week's leave and went to Faversham on Sunday 15th February.

On the Monday the couple went to see Canon Clarke who advised them to go to Canterbury to apply for a special licence as there is no time for banns to be published.

On Tuesday 17th February the Special Licence is issued to them in Canterbury:

'Went to Canterbury got licence bought ring in afternoon'.

On Wednesday 18th:

'Charlie and Nan trying to arrange wedding with us'.

Charlie was Don's brother, seven years his junior and a RAF corporal. His fiancée was sixteen-year-old Nellie May Evans who worked in Aircraft Production.

It was probably seen as being helpful to the war effort to arrange a double wedding with a single celebration. It was quite remarkable how the communications for these arrangements must have been made. Especially as there was no telephone in the Palmer household.

Margaret was legally a minor. Vic Fox her elder brother was her legal guardian but because he was on active service at RAF Brough in Yorkshire, he could not attend the wedding. He had to send his written permission, witnessed by a solicitor, by post.

On Friday 20th She made arrangements for the wedding cars and obtained a permit from the Food Office for the reception.

Charlie and Nan arrived at 23 Cyprus on Saturday 21st. The two couples stayed up until 5am talking.

Final arrangements were made on Monday 23rd. Then on Tuesday 24th February 1942:

'My Wedding Day'

'The happiest day of my life. Everything went splendidly.'

Don said, 'I do'.

The Faversham News of 27th February 1942.

DOUBLE WEDDING

Brothers as Bridegrooms

The Army, the Air Force, the W.A.A.F and Aircraft Production were represented in an interesting double wedding which took place at Faversham Parish Church last Tuesday afternoon.

The bridegrooms are brothers, the sons of Mr. and Mrs. E. Palmer of 23 Cyprus Road, Faversham. The elder one, Donald Gordon Palmer, is a Gunner in the Royal Artillery, and the younger one, Charles Martin Palmer, is a Corporal in the Royal Air Force.

Gunner Palmer's bride was Miss Margaret Edith Fox, of the W.A.A.F., daughter of the late Mr. And Mrs. Fox of Nelson Street, Faversham, formerly of Canterbury.

Corpl. Charles Palmer married Miss Nellie Evans, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. B Evans of Smallfield near Horley, Surrey. She is engaged in an aircraft factory.

Both the bridegrooms and also the W.A.A.F. bride were in uniform. Miss Evans wore a grey costume and accessories to match. The Rev. C. T. Spurling officiated at the ceremony.

Miss Fox was given away by her brother, Mr. Donald Fox and Miss Evans by her father, Gunner Palmer's best man was his cousin, Mr. S. Harrison and Corpl. Palmer's was his friend, Mr. Arthur Hills.

The wedding was of a quiet character, the subsequent reception at 23 Cyprus Road being confined to a few friends.

Gunner Palmer has been in the army for about 18 months and had previously been in the employ of Messrs. Vye and Son for four years, as was Miss Fox before she joined the W.A.A.F. a year ago. Corpl. Palmer has been in the Air Force for three and a half years. He was formerly a member of the St. Saviour's Sports Club.

On Thursday 26th February 1942 she and Don left Faversham early by train to visit their sister-in law Elsie Fox in Wimbledon. She then had to report back to camp.

'Elsie was pleased to see us. Don saw me off at Waterloo. I was very upset.'

Friday 27th February:

'Very miserable all day wrote to Don. I must cheer up.'

Saturday 28th February:

'Still very miserable cannot forget our lovely 10 days leave.'

Wrote to Mum'

She does not mention whether her original 7 days leave was officially extended. I assume it was. From entries in Don's army pay book he was granted 14 days leave from 12th to 27th February. Perhaps she was more upset having to return to duty before he did.

Margaret called her mother-in-law, Alice, 'Mum' for the rest of her life.

There were a few more days of depressing entries, but letters from Don and cinema visits cheered her; though she thought the cinema in Emsworth was a terrible place.

Some days were busy. In mid-March three planes crashed and she had to remove all the radio equipment. She went to typing lessons in Chichester but did not pass the 'trade test'. She enjoyed driving a Bedford truck:

'Drove Bedford to Ipsley 30 miles out of S'hampton had a lovely time.

Radiator ran dry on lonely road'.

Ipsley does not exist. Signposts and village name signs had been removed because of the threat of invasion. She said that she often got lost when driving: she was once directed out of Winchester by a policeman who noticed that she had driven past him several times.

There are two more mentions of dry radiators in RAF vehicles.

She and Don wrote to each other several times a week. She sent him parcels of cigarettes. But there is no evidence that they were together after 26th February. Margaret had a weekend's leave from 24th April when she went to Faversham, but Don had no leave until 20th July. By that time the entries in Margaret's diary had dried up. There are three pages that have red ink notes, which were written in advance, for her brothers' birthdays, and on her birthday, 1st December:

'My 20th birthday. I wonder what is happening now.

Is the WAR OVER?'

Sometime in the early summer of 1942 Margaret was posted to RAF Hornchurch in Essex. She told tales later of being lost in more towns which had no signposts, of daring disregard of authority on the London Underground by vaulting barriers and of friendships with airmen from Poland and Canada as well as Britain which were tragically ended when they failed to return from missions. All this experience was concentrated into eighteen eventful months.

She received a compassionate discharge from the RAF on 10th October 1942 when she was three months pregnant. Margaret returned to 23 Cyprus Road Faversham to live with her in-laws. At the beginning of April 1943 she was admitted to Kingsfield House Nursing Home Briton Road Faversham to have her first child.

Jill Mary Palmer was born on 2nd April. She was badly deformed, her spinal cord was exposed, a defect associated with Spina Bifida known as Myelocle. Margaret returned to Cyprus Road without her. Jill died four weeks later on 30th April. Her funeral took place soon after paid for by the services' charity, SSAFA. She was buried in a small grave under a cypress tree in Faversham cemetery.

It was not the time to buckle under and let emotions get the better of you. It was the time of 'Keep smiling and Carry on'. Margaret did not return to the Air Force but used her driving skills to be a milkwoman. She worked for Faversham Co-op delivering milk to the surrounding villages. From her reminiscences she enjoyed this work because she met many different people. She was regarded with envy because she was able to drive a vehicle. Most private cars had been abandoned in garages because of petrol rationing. One of her customers would persuade her to let him drive her milk van to the end of the lane and back because he missed driving his own car which was left wheel-less jacked up on bricks.

She did not forget her daughter, nearly every spring she would remember her birth commenting something like: 'Jill would have been 20 this week'.

Sometime in the last two war years Don and Margaret moved to a rented home of their own: 56 Ospringe Road Faversham. It was far from luxurious: only one cold-water tap, no electricity, no bathroom just a privy in the garden. Don was posted to Germany after D-Day and was rarely home on leave. In the middle of August 1945 just as Japan surrendered Margaret returned to Kingsfield House where I was born on the 19th.

Margaret was apprehensive that I was healthy and was overjoyed when she heard Don's army boots on the pathway outside.