

CHAPTER 9

THE BARRACKS' WRENS

SHORTLY after the outbreak of war the first batch of the re-formed Women's Royal Naval Service, seventeen in number, arrived in the Barracks. They were Writers for the Certificate and Drafting Offices. From then onwards the number of Wrens in the Barracks increased rapidly, until on D-Day, when there were 2,000 Wrens in the Portsmouth Command, it reached 800. At first the Wrens in the Barracks were controlled from Coronation House at the top of Kings Road, the W.R.N.S. Headquarters in Portsmouth Command, but after a few weeks Mrs. Horsey, a First Officer who remained in charge until April, 1945, moved into the Barracks, occupying what had formerly been the Navy Week Office. Although the Barracks was the last establishment in Portsmouth to agree to have Wrens, their services proved subsequently to be indispensable.

After the arrival of the first batch, it was decided to use Wrens as Officers' Stewards, Cooks, Ship's Cooks, and as Writers in the Pay Division, the Commodore's Office, the Regulating Offices and the Signal Distributing Office. Later there were Wrens in the Mail Office, the X-ray Department and the Welfare Department, and a small number also served as Drivers and Teleprinter Operators. At first all the Wrens were immobile, that is, they were recruited locally and lived at home, but by degrees the Barracks received more and more mobile Wrens, and by the end of the war there were very few immobile ones left.

The first Wrens suffered a delay of almost a year before they were issued with uniforms. The uniform originally proposed consisted of a navy blue skirt with a jumper top, a sailor's collar and the Sea Guide's hat, but when a photograph of this rig appeared in a national daily paper

quite naturally it caused consternation among the Wrens! Fortunately the proposed design was abandoned and the navy blue coat and skirt, with the collar and tie, adopted instead. When King George VI visited the Barracks in December, 1939, he was surprised that the Wrens were not then in uniform, and it was not until six or seven months later that any came through.

Some time later, after the uniforms had been issued, Mr. A. V. Alexander, who was then the First Lord of the Admiralty, raised the question of the design of the W.R.N.S. hats whilst inspecting the Wrens in the Barracks. He invited suggestions for a new hat and as a result a small unofficial committee of Wrens was set up in the Barracks under Mrs. Horsey. They considered various designs submitted by the more artistic Wrens and decided on a beret as first preference. Their choice was sent to the Admiralty and the beret was adopted later together with a replica of the Officer's hat for Chief Petty Officer and Petty Officer Wrens.

One of the first quarters to be taken over for the Wrens working in the Barracks was St. Michael's Orphanage. Dover Court in Kent Road was requisitioned for the Drafting Office Wrens when their office moved to Southsea, and when the Barracks took over the Pier Hotel the Rawledge Nursing Home was acquired to house the Cooks and Stewards working there. Later, when the Pay Divisions moved back into Portsmouth, to Commercial Road Buildings, the Pendragon Hotel was acquired together with part of Lennox Mansions and a house in Villiers Road. Bowlands, the Royal Naval and Royal Marine Maternity Home near the Queen's Hotel, also housed Wrens, and a cot was endowed there after the war to record the fact.

At first the Wrens were recruited and enrolled, after a probationary period, in the Barracks. They were paid once a week in the Gymnasium and when their uniforms arrived they were kitted up in the Barracks. Later recruiting and training were taken over by Headquarters. Wrens were drafted to the Barracks as required, and the issue of clothing was taken over by the W.R.N.S. Supply Department. All Wrens in the Barracks had to attend drills once a

week until they were passed out by the Drill Instructor and Mrs. Freeman, a Third Officer, who worked in conjunction with him; a contingent also took part in Divisions each week. The Wrens marched in many war-time parades and when the various towns near by held Victory Parades in 1945 it was the Barracks that supplied the W.R.N.S. contingent. Every Wren attended a gas course and went through the gas chamber; there was also a W.R.N.S. fire squad and they manned a hose during the air raids.

Even during the worst period of the bombing, however, recreation was not neglected. Hockey, tennis, and netball matches were arranged and the outdoor swimming baths at Hilsea were used during the summer of 1940, before they were closed for the rest of the war. The Wrens were then given the use of the swimming bath at the P.T. School once a week and they held regular races there. When the tennis courts in Government House were bombed they were allocated courts on the U.S. ground; there was a netball court in the grounds of St. Michael's Orphanage and evening netball matches also took place in the Gymnasium of the Barracks. Several sports meetings on the U.S. grounds were organised by the P.T. School and there were also shooting facilities for the Wrens both in Barracks and at Stamshaw Camp. Towards the end of the war the Barracks' Wrens organised a concert party which went out to France for a week under Third Officer Timm to entertain the troops.

The Wrens came through the trying war years with flying colours. Although some of them were bombed out of their homes during the blitz on Portsmouth, one had her husband killed beside her in an air raid and several of them lost husbands or close relatives on active service, their keenness never slackened, and it was characteristic of all Wrens in the Barracks that they went willingly about any extra duty that might be required. At the peak during the war there were 75,000 Wrens: today there are less than 3,500. In Portsmouth there are now about 200 living in the Duchess of Kent Barracks and less than 100 of these work in the Barracks. They are employees in all clerical categories, in the Supply Section and as Dental Surgery

Attendants. There is a W.R.N.S. Personnel Selection Officer in the N.S.C.W. Section and a small number of Chief Petty Officer W.R.N.S. Welfare Workers in the Family Welfare Section.