

FROM BLUE TO GREEN

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THE BLUE

As another year starts and another birthday flashes by I feel the time has come for me to hang up my uniform-this green uniform of the Womens Royal Voluntary Service(WRVS) I have worn so proudly for almost thirty years.

As I look back over those thirty years my mind travels to a time leading up to the day I first wore a uniform of a different colour that of the Women's Auxillary Air Force(WAAF)

I was sixteen years old when war was declared living in Lowestoft with my parents and younger brother. My childhood had been a happy one with family picnics on the Denes and outings to nearby beauty spots. We had no cars in those days between the wars and every trip was by bus or train, that in itself was exciting in those unsophisticated times. One of my greatest treats was to be taken sailing with a favourite uncle, and many happy hours were spent on Oulton Broad and the surrounding rivers. A love of the Norfolk Broads was born and has been with me ever since.

With the onset of war everything in this small town was turned upside down overnight and brought changes to us all. My first awareness of these changes came when I tried to take my usual walk on the beach only to find the army putting up barbed wire and planting mines. I can still remember the feeling of outrage when I was told "Sorry miss the beach is out of bounds for the duration".

My father being a reserve army man was called up two days before war was declared, and before long my brother became one of the evacuees. I was working in the largest drapery store in the town and with the thoughtlessness of youth thought the whole thing very exciting. (It became less so when we had to spend night after night in air raid shelters). Suddenly the whole town was full of uniforms and we had never had so many partners at the local dance hall.

The phoney war passed and the bombing began. Lowestoft is the most easterly part of the country and as such nearer to the other side. On days of low cloud the German planes were over us before the siren gave its frantic warning. I remember vividly cycling along hearing the drone of a plane and thinking 'thats not one of ours' As I watched it came out of the clouds and to my horror I saw the bombs begin to fall. My bicycle was thrown aside and I flattened myself on the ground beside it. That time fortunately not too much damage was done but in the weeks and months to come Lowestoft was to take a terrible battering. After surviving the Dunkirk evacuation my father was posted 'somewhere in Scotland' prior to going overseas again later.

Mother joined him and eventually I too left this poor old town and travelled north.

I longed to join one of the women's services but wise old Dad before he left this country once again asked me to stay with Mum as long as I could 'before this lot is over you will be called upon to do your bit' were his words and suddenly we heard that my age group, 18 to 19 year olds, would shortly be called up to work in munition factories. The thought of being closed in all day was unbearable to me and I knew the time had come to decide which service I would try for. The Royal Air Force was my choice and I hurried into Glasgow and on the 5th May 1942 I signed on to become a member of the Women's Auxillary Air Force service number 2074939!

At that time all trades except cooks and balloon operators were closed. Balloon Operators were urgently needed to take over from the men who had been manning them as they were required for overseas duties. I decided the cookhouse was not for me and although I knew nothing of the work of a balloon operator agreed to have a go. I told myself if I did not like it I would ask to do something else. How little I knew at that time of service life. To become a balloon operator one had to be a certain height and AI physically fit. As I passed on both accounts I was in and another Aircraftwoman 2nd class was born. Shortly after I was on my way with several other raw recruits to Bridgenorth where we spent a couple of days being kitted out with uniform, WAFFS FOR THE USE OF as it is written in service jargon. Our caps caused the greatest laughs. At that time they were peaked and none of us wanted to wear them at the same angle. We were soon told in no uncertain terms that they were to be worn squarely on our heads, hair above the collar and never were we to be seen without them. (At a later date I was stopped in Harrow High Street by a WAAF officer for being hatless and was given a severe telling off.

The next day with kit bags packed and gas masks over our shoulders we were on our way to Morecombe for square bashing. Learning to salute (longest way up shortest way down) and trying to remember which were officers and which were NCO's In those first few days we saluted everyone in Air Force blue just to be on the safe side! and how we marched! up and down the sea front day in and day out until the day came when I could march no more. The hard issue shoes had caused a blister on my toe and as the poison from this began to travel up my leg I was taken into the RAF hospital - a former hotel situated on the sea front. The rest and treatment soon had me on my feet again. The highlight of that stay came when I was allowed to sit on the balcony and watch my colleauges marching past. As the sergeant in charge caught sight of me she gave the command 'Eyes Right' and a smarter response would have been hard to see. Once I returned to my group I came in for a lot of leg pulling about 'this WAAF who received a special salute after only two weeks in the service' At Morecombe we were billeted in private houses and our posting to Cardington gave us the first taste of life in camp and the mystery of the missing bath plugs! All camps appeared to have this problem and we soon learned to keep a spare face cloth to stuff into the plug hole.

Almost as soon as we arrived we started our balloon training-tying knots-making grommets-trying to remember the length of the wires - the capacity of the gas cylinders -lifting 40lb sand bags without damaging our backs-the excitement of being taught to drive the winch and the fear and pride when we were at last allowed to pay out and haul in those monster balloons that were soon to dominate our lives.

I also remember Cardington for the injections and inoculations, rowing on the river during those precious hours of freedom, walking around the town always with our gas masks and trying to look as if we had been in the service for years instead of just a few weeks

We finished our training and then came our first posting. Mine was to a site off Ladbroke Grove West London on what had been a childrens playground surrounded by high spiked railings. Our crew of ten lived in one nisson hut with another used as a kitchen. The food rations were brought to us from Squadron HQ and we took turns(two at a time) to be cooks for a week. Our average age was 18/19 years and as most of us could hardly boil an egg we had some very peculiar meals! We survived-and eventually most of us could conjour up something quite edible. The hard physical work in all weathers made us so hungry we tended not to be over critical. Baths-one a week-were arranged at the home of the local doctor. The rest of the time we did the best we could in a rather bleak wash house on site.

Our duties on site included guard duty each night. Two hours at a stretch-armed with a truncheon-and the company of a dog and cat abandoned by their owners and adopted by us. Air Force rules laid down two members on duty at all times but we soon found we could get more sleep if we agreed with our partner to do the guard solo. After the duty officer had departed-having made sure all was well we rearranged the rota! Several times we nearly came unstuck when the lone guard decided to nip inside and make a cup of cocoa and an off duty crew member returned from a night out and could not get in the locked gates. How did we ever manage to scale those spiked railings and not get impaled? There must have been a guardian angel watching over that site.

The boredom of site life was broken by visits from SHQ staff Officers and NCO's-WAAF and RAF, looking after our welfare and training.

Kit inspections were always greeted by groans. One of us always seemed to be short of some small issue item and many a time the same pair of stockings or gloves would be surreptitiously passed from bed to bed (where our kit was laid out for inspection) while the officers back was turned. On one occasion I inadvertantly burned a pair of stockings by trying to dry them over the kitchen stove. For this crime I had to report to SHQ which was at Winfield House in Regents Park. I was marched in under the escort of two 6'2" RAF corporals to face the WAAF officer and receive my reprimand, 'Sheer carlessness' I was told and had to forfeit one days pay. As one of the RAF escorts was later to become my husband the whole incident caused a lot of mirth, not only at the time but in later years when ever we remembered it.

The work of a balloon operator was hard especially during stormy weather when it was too rough to fly the balloon. To secure it we had to anchor it by attaching 40lb sandbags around the base. What misery it was when it was not only blowing but raining hard as well, and even more miserable when we were called out to do this in the middle of the night and especially for those of us who had just got warm and dozed off after guard duty.

In spite of the grumbles we worked well together considering the mixed bunch we were. All from different backgrounds, but sharing our problems and joys and always trying to find ways of passing the hours between duties. Many a scary evening was spent around a makeshift ouija board with a tumbler as a pointer.

Off duty was spent mostly in the West End. London was full of service men and women of many nationalities all trying to forget the war for a few precious hours. There were many clubs to visit for a meal and entertainment. I was lucky to have the company of my future husband who knew London well and we spent many hours between air raids walking through the old city of London as well as the West End. The underground stations were used as air raid shelters and the platforms were always packed with families with sleeping bags, blankets, thermos flasks etc., who took up their positions in the evenings before the night time raids began. Many of them had lost their homes in the Blitz and at that time had no other place to stay. What a wonderful spirit those people had - the cockney humour was always there no matter how bad things were.

From time to time we were sent to other sites in the Squadron. The one that sticks in my mind was in Regents Park not too far from the Zoo where a few animals were still housed. It was a spine chilling experience during a night guard to hear one of them roar. Regents Park was a favourite haunt of young lovers and many a couple were scared silly by wandering too near the site and having the WAAF on duty confront them with uplifted truceon and a breathless 'Halt who goes there' It was hard to tell who was the most scared. We would never do a single guard on that site.

In the autumn of 1943 twenty four of us from the Squadron Balloon sites were chosen to take part in the British Legion Festival of Remembrance to be held in the Albert Hall in November in the presence of the King and Queen. We were to do a display of continuity drill. The training for this was hard as all the moves had to be done without any commands. This meant each member of the team counting silently all the steps and moves. For weeks we were put through our paces by an RAF Flt Sergeant until we were foot perfect and twenty four WAAFS moved as one. (I practised during my night time guard duty, it passed the time.)

The 11th November arrived and with great excitement we were taken to the Albert Hall, each one of us convinced we would be the one and only out of step. At last it was our turn and with legs that felt like jelly we began our descent down those steps and into the arena. What a relief when we arrived at the bottom to find we had all started on the right foot and were all in step. Slow marching, quick marching, about turn salute the Royal Box and not a sound except our marching feet.

Suddenly it was all over and the applause was deafening. How proud we felt as we gathered for a welcome cuppa and heard a Grenadier Guards officer remark to our officer that his men could not have done better.

By this time I had earned my 'props' and became an LACW (Leading Aircraft Woman) which meant very little except a small increase in pay.

We were often detailed to attend Church Parade, a welcome break from site duties. The one that remains in memory was when we were joined by an American G.I. band and the fun (although it was not meant to be) of marching through St Pancras to the strains of St Louise Blues and American Patrol was never to be forgotten.

Having marched so many times to a traditional RAF band we made the most of the change and swung along in great style. Many a jitterbug fan was sorely tempted to break ranks and dance in the street.

Gradually the bombing in London eased and it was no longer necessary to have so many balloon sites. Sadly I said Goodbye to the friends I had lived and worked with for so many months and then I was on my way to RAF Mildenhall where I was to work in the orderly room as a clerk u/t (under training).

Mildenhall was the home of Lancaster bombers and the distinctive drone of their engines was very much a part of camp life. We counted them going out on raids and waited anxiously to them returning. How quickly the news spread when one was missing. Looking back I realise how brave those men were and so young. Volunteers were asked to help in the canteen next to the briefing room to serve tea coffee or rum to the returning crews after a night raid. Needless to say I volunteered! It was fascinating to listen to the remarks as each crew arrived back and we shared the excitement of a successful raid and sadness when they brought news of planes shot down.

The dances at Mildenhall were fun even though some of the aircrew came straight from de-briefing still wearing their flying boots! We had a cinema on camp and many a performance was interrupted by the shouts and jeers from the air crews in the audience at the exploits of some screen heart throb performing impossible feats with an aeroplane.

Off duty times were spent mostly on camp and we found plenty to do to keep us occupied. I enjoyed helping in the camp library - another voluntary job! Many pleasant evenings were spent walking around the camp perimeter-three or four of us chattering about boy friends and catching up on camp gossip.

The camp was about seven miles from Shippea Hill station where I caught the train to Lowestoft for leave. Our orderly room staff shared a battered bicycle to get to and from the station. I became friends with two airmen also from Lowestoft and it was great to have their company when their leave coincided with mine and we had many a laugh riding those old bicycles along that flat Fenland road.

Many years later I was to walk in a room and hear a voice say 'Hi Doreen want a ride on my crossbar' It was one of my airmen friends. He too remembered those rides.

When I was the only one off the train it was a long lonely ride not helped by the station ticket man telling me it was not safe to cycle on my own 'You could be put in a sack and thrown over the hedge before you know it'.

By this time American air bases were operational in East Anglia and the G.I's became a familiar sight. I think they found we girls in uniform just as strange as we found them. How brash they seemed until we became used to their loud Yankee voices. They were generous to a fault and our train journeys were enlivened by these young men showering us with chocolate, cigarettes, and of course gum! Our own rations of these luxuries were very meagre and we found it hard to refuse. Several girls on camp had American boy friends so they were given nylon stockings. We envied them so much and a lot of bartering went on amongst us, a cigarette ration for a pair of stockings.

Working in the Orderly Room helped our social life as the RAF boys knew we dealt with the leave passes and they thought if they chattered us up enough we would have their passes ready half an hour earlier. If the Flt Sergeant was not around their flattery usually paid off.

December 1944 was very cold and on Christmas Eve several of us were given permission to attend Midnight Mass at the little church in the village. It was freezing hard and the moonlight as bright as day. It was hard to remember that not long ago we had dreaded a full moon, known as bombers moon when we had the worst air raids but the war was in its last stages and that danger was past. Our carol singing on the way back to camp would not have won medals but it lightened our steps and we had no complaints from the night creatures in the fields. A night to remember.

In March 1945 I married my RAF corporal. I borrowed a wedding dress. I was the third bride to wear it. My family pooled their precious clothing coupons so I could have a going away outfit. A wedding cake seemed out of the question but again the family came to my rescue and for months they saved their food rations and we had a cake to be proud of, no tiers of course, rations were very sparse. I had an uncle serving in the Merchant Navy and by some devious means he bribed the chef on his ship to make a second cake and by a great stroke of luck it arrived in time for the wedding. The sun shone for us and we had a few precious leave days for a honeymoon by the river at Richmond Surrey.

At last the war was over and in August 1945 I took my last journey as a WAAF when I travelled to Wythall to be de-mobbed. I had enjoyed my service life and made so many friends but now I was looking forward to setting up home and family life.

The Green

During those years in Air Force Blue I frequently came across the 'Ladies in Green' the WVS as they were then. They were always a welcome sight at railway stations at all hours of the day and night, serving tea and always with a cheery word and a smile. They looked after evacuees, visited camps and sites around the country and their Food Flying Squad van was always there after the bombs had fallen serving hot meals and lending a listening ear when needed. They were as much a part of the war years as the armed services. I little realised at that time how this Voluntary Service would become such a large part of my life.

The next sixteen years passed happily and all too soon our son was in his teens. About that time we were invited to a neighbours house for drinks and there I met a lady who told me she worked with WVS. Immediately I was transported back to those war time days and I remembered the cheery ladies who had crossed my path so often. Suddenly I felt very strongly that here was something I could do. The next day I made enquiries and was put in touch with the Centre Secretary for Smallburgh RD.(this was before re-organisation) and she set the wheels in motion. Membership at that time consisted of many ladies who had joined at the outbreak of war when most of them were in their middle years and by the early sixties the majority of them had reached 70 and 80 years old. As soon as I had shown an interest in joining a rather grand lady who was the Centre Organiser for Smallburgh RD came to see me. She looked me up and down and the announced 'Well we've nothing glamorous to offer you' I muttered that I was not looking for anything glamorous and if I had been I would not have turned to WVS as I remembered how hard they had worked during the war, and I did not think there was a lot of glamour in serving in a canteen which was all I felt I was qualified to do. I was then told that help was needed in the County Clothing Store in Norwich 'It's a mucky job but no one has actually caught fleas from there' I was told! I was intrigued, decided to have a go and spent the next four years one day a week in the company of some lovely ladies working in that Clothing Store. I was greeted very warmly, due in part I felt because I was younger and fitter than any of the members there. A few months later we were joined by another younger member and we struck up a friendship which continues today.

There was a very happy atmosphere in that place in spite of being ruled with a rod of iron by the County Clothing Organiser even though we were all volunteers! One of our favourite jobs was baleing garments ready for distribution overseas in case of any disaster. The bales were all marked with a special code so that everyone knew exactly what they contained. If the code said 100 coats then 100 it had to be not 99 or 101!

We saw a different side of life working at that store. Some people were so grateful, like the nice lady with three children whose husband spent his life in and out of prison. She was so

apologetic because she could not save enough to buy her children clothing. That family were always given the best of everything from our stock. At the other end of the scale were the very dirty men who only wanted clothing to sell to get more drink, usually meths! I soon realised why Clothing Organisers had to be so tough, they had some very difficult people to deal with. One gentleman came to us demanding a suit. As we had none in his size he was offered a jacket and trousers but we were told these would not do. He had to have a suit as he was going to his daughters wine and cheese party! He eventually took the jacket and trousers and we were left wondering whether he took a bath before going to the party!

Gradually I found I was becoming more involved with other WVS jobs. The Smallburgh secretary was leaving the area and she encouraged me to take her place. She was a very experienced member and taught me so much. I can still hear her saying 'date Doreen (she pronounced it D'reen) so annoying if one looks at a paper and does not know if its this year or last' How right she was. Also at this time I joined a party of members who paid regular visits to the local Cheshire Home. We would spend one day a week ironing and helping in any way we could, turning out cupboards, washing up, and reading and writing letters for the residents. This Home had not long been opened and they were very short of staff. We made many friends there and always left feeling very humble and thankful for our own good health.

One of the first big events I attended was the 25th anniversary of WVS. Norfolk celebrated with a big garden party at Carrow Abbey in Norwich. For the first, but by no means the last time, I saw WVS with its hair down and I realised the sense of humour that was apparent during the war was still around.

Another big event was a visit from our founder Chairman Lady Reading in July 1965. I had heard so much about her and found all the stories of her strong personality were not exaggerated. She was a brilliant speaker with a great sense of humour. In later years I was invited to other meetings she attended and was fascinated to note she never sat idle, always working at a piece of embroidery (she was an expert needlewoman) but never missing a word. She liked to end a meeting with a slightly risqué story which of course we all enjoyed.

1966 was the year the Queen made us 'Royal' and we became the Womens Royal Voluntary Service but it was to take several years for this new title to become familiar to the general public. A frequent remark was 'we thought you had died with the war' Several times I was stopped and had my hand shaken by complete strangers usually ex service men who recognised the uniform and wanted to say thank you to WVS for the help given to them and their families during the war. To them the service would always be WVS.

At the end of 1967 my friend from the Clothing Store became the Norfolk County Organiser and soon after I joined her as County Secretary an appointment I was to hold for the next eleven years

Our first few months were spent fighting opposition from some of the older members whenever we wanted to change anything or start new work 'You young things come in and try to change everything' we were told, much to our amusement as we were hardly in the first flush of youth but no doubt to 70 and 80 year olds we did seem young.

Meals on Wheels was to become a challenge to us. When we started there were approximately twelve rounds in all the County and by the end of our eleven years there were 100 plus.

Childrens holidays became another challenge. We felt this was such a worthwhile service. Society was not so affluent then and many children seldom had a day away from home. At first we dealt with children from London and many were very deserving cases. The hostesses we found were wonderful and would take children year after year. One farmers wife, who later became a WRVS member, gave a holiday to five year old twin girls. They came back to her year after year and were still in contact when the girls celebrated their 21st birthday

As time passed we heard of children living in the Norwich area who never had a holiday and some had never seen the sea. It was becoming very costly to bring children from London so we decided charity begins at home and from then on we were kept busy dealing with children from our own and neighbouring counties.

1974 brought the re-organisation of Local Government and it was decided WRVS would follow the same pattern. Away went Centres and County Boroughs and in came Districts. It was also decided that this was the time to make 65 the age for members to step down from an appointed job. This caused a lot of heartache to our older members and many of them were convinced this was something thought up by the County Organiser and her Secretary to get rid of them! The dust settled and with our seven District Organisers the work in Norfolk continued to grow.

The years rolled happily by until the day the County Organiser decided it was time for a change and she resigned. As we had worked together for so long I decided I too would like a change. I had often thought I would like the job of a District Organiser and as luck would have it North Norfolk was at that time without one. I approached the Area Organiser and she agreed to me having this new appointment.

There was no office in the District and apart from Meals on Wheels, very little WRVS work was being done. What a challenge! I asked if it would be possible to open an office and was told 'prove the work is there and we will look into it'. For nine months I worked from home - not easy in a small bungalow and a District the size of North Norfolk, but with the help of two new members we gradually increased the work. At last I was told to look for a small office and after much searching found a small room in a building in North Walsham which also housed the Citizens Advice Bureau and a department of the Education Welfare so we were in good company

What fun we had turning that little room into an efficient office. we were the most dreadful scroungers and would pounce on anything we thought would be useful. Money, as always, was in short supply so we searched the junk shops and the good people of Nth Walsham got used to seeing us carrying tables and chairs through the town as we were reluctant to pay for the delivery of our bargains!

I discovered a room on the opposite side of the corridor to our office was used by an Estate Agent as a postal address only and as one of the partners was an old sailing friend he agreed we could use the room as our own. In return we re-addressed his mail, about three letters a month! A few months later they opened another office nearby and WRVS officially took over the extra space.

Gradually more new members joined us as District Staff and the work increased. We started Trolley Shops, Luncheon Clubs, Rural Transport, and not forgetting a small clothing store in an out building at the local police station. We had a close working relationship with the police, especially one young sergeant who agreed to be the guest speaker at one of our District meetings. He arrived back from a working holiday in America the night before the meeting, apologised for jet lag and then asked if the flower arrangement could be moved in front of him as he had just discovered the zip in his trousers was broken! I worked with him on a Crime Prevention committee and he always said he would never forget WRVS and Nth Norfolk in particular!

Several times our emergency teams were called out when high tides and gales brought the sea in. As with most emergencies it was usually the middle of the night when we were called. The North/East coast is very cold and bleak in the wee small hours but as always our members took it in their stride and especially two young and very glamorous members who arrived in curlers and the remains of a mud pack! Duty called and they came as they were!

In 1978 WRVS celebrated its 40th birthday. A great many of us were puzzled as to why we were celebrating 40 years - why not wait until the golden anniversary? Amid much laughter we were told that as so many of us were getting older we might not be around in another ten years!

It was a grand excuse for celebrating and this we did in great style. A service of thanksgiving was held in St Pauls Cathedral and I was lucky enough to be one of those attending. On arriving at the steps of the Cathedral we were delighted to see, and hear, the band of the Gurkha regiment. WRVS had close links with the Gurkhas and it was a great thrill to have these brave men sharing our day. The Queen Mother and other V.I.P.s joined us but to me the biggest thrill was to see that lovely Cathedral full of green uniforms. After the service we made our way to Westminster Hall to hear tributes from politicians and church leaders and to meet up with old friends from other parts of the Country.

Wearing our green uniform opened many doors that otherwise would have remained closed. It did sometimes cause problems when members of the public seemed to think the uniform automatically made one an authority on every possible subject! I had one embarrassing moment when I stepped from the WRVS car and a group of workmen nearby asked what we volunteered for. Without thinking I replied 'you name it we do it' and then had to beat a hasty retreat as some of their suggestions did not come under the WRVS umbrella! It must have had something to do with the black tights!

The year working in North Norfolk were very happy ones and gave me a lot of friends. I found how loyal these friends were when in 1984 my dear husband of 39 years died. Looking back I realised how much help and support I got during that sad part of my life. Twenty months later I decided I must turn my back on the Broadland village I had loved and had lived in for twenty five years. It was time to turn the page and start another chapter of my life.

I left North Norfolk and another challenge was set before me. The South Norfolk District was without an organiser, the previous one having retired two years earlier, and I was asked to take over. This District office was housed in Tombland, Norwich along with the County Office and two other Districts so I did not have to start looking for premises.

South Norfolk was very different to North Norfolk, both in locality and people. I had a lot of barriers to break down especially in a small market town in the west of the District. WRVS had a small office there with a Local Organiser who had been left too long on her own and she seemed to have forgotten she was part of WRVS. I faced a lot of resentment when I suggested we try to increase the work, but eventually the members accepted me and things improved.

The District secretary was an experienced member and without her help the work in that District would have been much harder. She tackled all the paper work we had and always had a cup of coffee ready for me when I walked in the door!

I had another taste of opposition when I approached an elderly Meals on Wheels organiser and suggested we should start a Luncheon Club in her village. I was told I must be 'out of my tiny mind' as her helpers were too old to do any more and according to the dear lady all the young people were too lazy to help anyone! After a lot of ground work a Luncheon Club was started in the next village but unfortunately not run by WRVS.

However we had one great success when I was allowed to open a small Local office in Wymondham and under the leadership of a very good Local Organiser WRVS was soon well known around the town and the work increased.

Soon after I started working in South Norfolk changes were taking place in the County Office and WRVS was fortunate to find a young and very attractive girl to be the County Organiser. This was a great joy to those of us getting older and who welcomed the thought of a fresh new look at things. I was lucky enough to find another great friend in this young lady and we found in spite of the age difference, we shared the same sense of the ridiculous.

It was always said (laughingly) that to be a good organiser one had to be a bit of a 'bossy boots' and this was hilariously proved during an Emergency Exercise at the Norfolk County Hall. Among the helpers was the County Organiser, an ex District Organiser and myself. Suddenly the three of us were at the sink jostling to do the washing up and each convinced she was the only one who could do the job properly! The laughter this caused when we realised what we were doing will live long in the memories of us all. One of the most endearing things about WRVS is the ability to laugh at itself. Always there is someone who sees the funny side of an awkward situation

In 1988 WRVS celebrated its Golden Jubilee and this called for celebrations up and down the Country. On 26th May a service of Thanksgiving and Re-dedication was held in Westminster Abbey. How quickly the ten years had passed since we were celebrating our 40th birthday. We in Norfolk were very proud of our young County Organiser as she was chosen to be one of the escorts for the WRVS standard. Again the Queen Mother joined us and again I thrilled at the sight of all the green uniforms. After the Service tea was served in the Abbey gardens and we all had a chance to see and speak to the Queen Mother and the Duchess of Gloucester. As we made our way to the station for the journey home it was fun to see so many WRVS members on the streets of London. We caused great interest to a coach full of German tourists who sent their courier over to ask who we were!

Norfolk had its own Service of Thanksgiving in Norwich Cathedral on 8th June. This too was a very moving experience and one that will live long in our memories.

And so to 1989 a year that was to be a most eventful one for me. The first excitement came in June when I was awarded the British Empire Medal in the Queen's Birthday Honours. The presentation took place at the Norfolk County Hall in Norwich in September when relatives and friends joined me for this wonderful occasion. After the ceremony my WRVS friends put on a super lunch at the County Office. Friends from the Districts joined us and I was very moved at the affection shown to me.

Before this great day I had another 'Royal' day to remember. In July I was invited to attend a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace. There was only one problem - a RAIL STRIKE! London was overflowing and almost at a stand still. Not a room to be had anywhere even if I travelled by coach the day before and I was not brave enough to try and drive there amongst all the extra traffic.

A good fairy in the guise of our County Organiser came to my rescue. Being a Londoner driving in the capital held no fears for her and she was determined I should attend this once in a lifetime event. ('I'll get you there even if I have to march you all the way' was her remark) .

We set off in the WRVS car at 7.30am and made our way to WRVS Headquarters in Brixton where we had been invited to take lunch before setting out for the Palace. It had been arranged that the twelve of us attending the Garden Party would be taken in convoy in the WRVS cars. This caused quite a stir when we alighted at the Palace gates, all in our green uniforms, and joined the other guests, the men in their top hats and the ladies in garden party dresses and fabulous hats! The sun shone and we had a wonderful time, excited at seeing members of the Royal family and many celebrities, from politicians to theatre personalities, admiring the gardens, and waiting in line to see the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. We were rewarded with a special smile when Her Majesty spotted our uniforms.

All too soon it was time to leave, and then the fun began! The traffic was horrendous. My 'chauffeur' friend had parked with the other official cars near by (she had had an entertaining afternoon talking to the chauffeurs of the limousines which had brought dignitaries from the south coast). We started off and two hours later we reached Hyde Park Corner - a distance of two or three miles! Because of the strike the traffic was solid and it was impossible to even open the car door. It was very hot and we only advanced an inch at a time. A lot of cars overheated and this caused extra confusion. In spite of all this the atmosphere amongst the drivers was wonderful - no one got bad tempered and inevitably, because of the WRVS car we were asked 'Where's the tea' If we had had an urn on board we could have done a roaring trade. Never had we spoken to so many strange men in cars! What an amazing people the British are - it took a rail strike to bring back the 'bulldog' spirit I had seen in the war years.

Eventually we arrived home, tired, and very grubby after sitting in all the car fumes for so long. A journey that in normal circumstances would have taken two hours had taken six ' four of them to get out of London. I was filled with admiration at the way my young friend had managed to drive in such dreadful conditions and I will be forever grateful to her for making this special day happen.

1989 was also the year I returned to my roots at Lowestoft. As I walk the beach and familiar streets I see many ghosts. Now I have come full circle and looking back I realise how much I enjoyed my years in both the 'Blue' and the 'Green' I will never forget the friendships formed in both services, some I am happy to say are still strong today. As to the future - who knows - but whatever is in store for me I will always have these wonderful memories and who could ask for more.

Doreen Harris November 1992