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[Archive List](#)

[Timeline](#)

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A Posting to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) - Memories of a Wren by agecon4dor

You are browsing in:
[Archive List](#) > [British Army](#)

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 People in story: [Freda K M Wade \(nee Litchfield\)](#)
 Location of story: [Colombo and Trincomalee, Ceylon](#)
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[Archive List](#)

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[British Army Category](#)

- Recommended story [What's this?](#)
- Story with photo



WREN Section, St Joseph's College Drafting Office, Far Eastern Fleet, Colombo, Ceylon - September 1944. Ldg Wren Litchfield, 2nd from right, back row.

This story was submitted to the People's War Site by Jane Pearson, a volunteer from Age Concern, Dorchester on behalf of Mrs Freda Kathleen Mary Wade (née Litchfield), and has been added to the site with her permission. Mrs Wade fully understands the site's terms and conditions.

I was born in Dorchester on 8 January 1925 and was living there when the war started. My father was a Leading Stoker in the Royal Navy from 1914 to 1918; I had two younger brothers. At 16 I volunteered to be an ARP Messenger and when I was 17½ in 1942 I passed a Selection Board at Portsmouth to join the Wrens (WRNS). I was billeted in Southsea and had to report to HMS Victory where, in the mornings, I learned to march on Southsea Parade — we had a RM Colour Sgt who used to shout like hell at us - and attended lectures on life in the Royal Navy in the afternoon. Then I was sent to Bournemouth where I was stationed at the Royal Marines Pay Office. I volunteered for overseas service one month after arriving in Bournemouth and left England on 23 September 1943. I had thought I was bound for South Africa but instead was destined to go to India and Ceylon.

Our party consisted of 120 Wrens, though altogether there were approximately 4,000 people on the troop ship — the Reina del Pacifico, formerly a liner — bound for Port Said. We sailed from Liverpool proceeding to the north coast of Scotland where we joined the convoy. We were told we couldn't go up on deck because there was a VIP coming on board; this turned out to be King Peter of Yugoslavia. He was going out to Port Said and he and his entourage occupied half the ship. Because of this we, being the only women on board, were given the Officers Quarters, the officers had the Sergeants Quarters and the sergeants were put in 4-tiered bunks in the alleyways. This created a lot of ill-feeling towards us amongst the Other Ranks and we were not at all popular. We were not allowed to stay in our cabins during the day and were allocated a small area of deck apart from the men. We were not allowed to talk to them and as a result they thought we were snobs. We had to take it in turns to get up

at 6am to scrub the Mess decks. It was a terrible journey taking 8 days, the weather was rough and I was seasick a lot of the time. I lived on bread rolls and ginger ale.

The convoy travelled through the Mediterranean to Port Said where we got off our ship and were bundled into the Custom sheds with our luggage and then boarded a train to Ismailiya. This journey took us all day and we had no food or water. The train was slow, kept breaking down and was packed with people. When we got to Ismailiya we were piled into trucks and driven to the camp. Arriving there at 10pm, the meal awaiting us was cold meat, salad and sweet potatoes that had been ready since mid-afternoon. We lived there under canvas on HMS Phoenix for three weeks, waiting for a ship to take us to India. The ships were lined up in the Bitter Lakes and, as it was one-way traffic due to the narrowness of the Canal, they had to wait their turn to travel down it. Early one morning, we were picked up by trucks and travelled down to Port Taufiq at the far end of the Canal, where we boarded the HMS Mooltan (a liner ship before the war). This ship was very old, there were no stabilisers and it creaked and groaned the whole time.

I come from a Service family and had grown up with stories of in-fighting in places like Bombay, and so when we had disembarked and made our way to Bombay railway station and I saw walls stained red up to a height of about 18", I thought it was blood and that there had been some trouble. But later I learned that the real reason was that the local people, after eating curry, chewed betel nuts and then spat them out causing this red stain on the walls.

We spent a day in Bombay. Discipline was strict and if we went anywhere we had to have a male escort. There was a steward who had to go and collect his false teeth in Bombay and he offered to take four of us with him, having obtained permission from the Wren Officer in Charge. We saw the Hanging Gardens where the pharsees put the bodies out on racks for the vultures to pick at. There was a terrible smell everywhere; rotting fish, rotting vegetation, bodies and stagnant water and the old joss sticks that they burned in the bazaars. It was not a place for a woman to walk alone.

We joined the midnight train to Madras. The train had four couchettes per compartment (a couchette was a couch covered in rexine — a synthetic covering that was used on furniture before vinyl and plastic) so there were four of us in every compartment. There was no glass in the windows, just an iron grill to prevent anyone from getting in. If we wanted to eat, we had to wait until the train stopped at a railway station, get off and walk along the platform to the buffet car. We would have our meal as the train travelled on and when it stopped at the next convenient station, we would get off again and walk back to our compartment — there were no connecting doors between compartments. One thing I remember vividly about this journey was that when the train pulled in at railway stations the professional beggars would appear. In those days children were purposely mutilated to beg and there were some really terrible sights. There were children with their hands twisted or their legs twisted — I was quite horrified.

When we arrived in Madras, we were split into two groups of 60. The first group of 60 got on the morning train to Colombo, but there were still 60 of us left who would have to wait for the midnight train. There were some European ladies on the platform, who had formed themselves into an equivalent of the WRVS. When they had assured themselves that all 60 of us were there and no more were coming, they split us up and took us to their houses. I and one other Wren ended up at the house of the Danish Ambassador. "Could we please have a bath?" was the first thing we asked when we got there. We had been issued with navy blue dresses for the journey and by that time they were dirty and smelt revolting, but we had no option but to put them back on after bathing as our white uniforms were packed in our cases which were still at the station. The lady who had brought us to the house had her cook make up sandwiches for us and they were parcelled and tied up in banana leaves — a far better method than cling film! The next day we boarded the train again, transferred to the Talaimannar Ferry across to Ceylon and finally another train down the coast to Colombo. The journey from Bombay to Colombo took three days and three nights.

It was November by now and the time of the north easterly monsoon. There was a Force 9 gale blowing and torrential rain. We piled into trucks and were taken down along the Galle Road to St Peter's College which was on the outskirts of Colombo. This was to be our home for the next six months. We were put into what were intended to be wards; they were long cabins in the grounds of the College built to house the casualties from Burma. The floor was made of cement, the walls of bricks

to waist height and then it was just wide open — no windows. The roof, which was made of plaited palm leaves, overhung by a few feet to stop the rain coming in. Later we were put into other quarters nearer to Colombo when they became available.

We were under a tremendously strict regime while living in quarters. We were under guard the whole time. We were not allowed to go “ashore” unless we had a male escort and if we did go out we had to sign a book giving details of where we were going and who we were going with — and we had to be in by 10pm! A lot of dances were held and trucks were sent to take us to them and bring us back. There was no bottled water and no antibiotics. If you had dengue fever — a mild form of malaria — you just had to get on with it. I had it twice. For breakfast you only had one egg and one rasher of bacon a week. We used to have “train smash” which was tinned tomatoes with fried bread, or “cowboy’s breakfast” — beans on toast. We were allowed one slice of bread, a teaspoon of marmalade and a teaspoon of butter. We were always hungry! As a consequence if we were asked out we always said we would like to go for a meal — we got quite a name for this. We were not allowed to sunbathe and if you got burnt you were not fit for duty which could result in loss of pay. Our uniform consisted of three dresses, for use off duty, and six shirts and six skirts for work. In the monsoon weather you could not dry clothes in the sun so they were dried in huts with woodsmoke. Our washing stank of woodsmoke and the dhobey used to starch our dresses, which were made of thick drill, with rice water so that they were like a board to open up before putting on! We wore white canvas shoes that had to be blanched, and ankle socks.

The quarters we lived in did not have windows, just bars. You had to make sure you did not put any chairs near the window as in the night the natives would come with poles and help themselves to your clothes. We had mongoose running around in the rafters and grey baboons swinging from the trees outside. One day I was in the toilet in the Wrens quarters and saw a huge tarantula (its body was as big as my hand) on the curtain. A guard came in and shot it.

After two days settling in we were all given our situation work, split up because we were girls and then detailed to our respective work places. We were signallers, coders or writers — I was a writer. My work place was at St Joseph’s College in Darley Road, Colombo. I was attached to HMS Lanka (under the command of Captain Harris), in the Drafting Office of the CinC Far Eastern Fleet (Admiral Sir James Somerville) and I was paid 15/- a week. They were bringing people from East Africa to Ceylon which was the stepping off point into Burma. Before this the administrative side had been in Singapore, then they moved to Mombasa, and now they joined us and formed their HQ in Colombo. Lord Mountbatten set up his HQ in Kandy. The plans for the invasion of Burma were made in the Botanical Gardens at Kandy and Lord Mountbatten lived at the Swiss Hotel there. The Governor of Ceylon at that time was Sir Geoffrey Layton.

My job was to keep up to date the records of all the men on the ships. For instance, when a ship went down we would take a whole batch of cards (those of the ship’s crew) and put them in the “dead section”. Then as information came in we would retrieve the cards of the men who had survived and update them. We worked in three enormous classrooms whose walls were lined with tables holding boxes of cards. We worked from 8am to 1pm and 2pm to 5.30pm. I did this for a year. Then I was promoted to Leading Wren and sent up to Trincomalee to HMS Highflier to work in the dockyard in the Captain Superintendent of the Dockyards Office - Captain Boyle.

There was an office in Colombo where you could apply to take leave (7 days) at one of the tea estates. The planters up country, most of whom were Scottish, opened up their houses under a hospitality scheme for members of the Armed Services. Transport was arranged with the Army, if a truck was going in that direction, or a railway warrant would be issued. You would then travel by truck at 5am to Colombo Fort railway station to board the day train to Diyatalawa or Nuwara Eliya. Transport, usually a vehicle driven by the planter’s wife, would be waiting to take you to their bungalow where you lived with the family.

I got married on 9 September 1944. My husband was a Major in the Ceylon Army Services Corps. We were married at Christchurch, Galle Face in Colombo by Gilbert Jessop, Chaplain RN, HMS Berunda. In civilian life he had been Vicar of Fordington, Dorchester - the church where I was christened! My husband was the CO of a company of Ceylonese who were responsible for feeding 13,000 souls every day.

This was the build-up to the invasion of Burma, which never happened as the atomic bomb was dropped, though we didn't know that then.

We lived in a bungalow out in the sticks on the edge of Trincomalee — our nearest neighbours were Italian POWs and East African troops. We did not have sanitation, just "thunderboxes" and a supply of wood shavings. Water was delivered in the morning by tanker; a bath was filled, and we made this do twice. We had a lead-lined ice box which was delivered from the cold store near the dockyard. Ice was delivered in blocks wrapped in sacking.

I remained there until I came home to the UK, by now pregnant with my first child, in July 1945 for demob. I went immediately to Scotland to see my husband's family. I was in Dundee when peace was declared and I remember all the ships berthed along the River Tay were sounding their hooters and making an enormous noise.

(To see a second picture of the Entire Drafting Office, Far Eastern Fleet, Colombo, Ceylon, go to story heading "Drafting Office, Far Eastern Fleet").

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