

### **Doreen Offord (nee Evans)**

It was in March 1942 that I received an official looking envelope, and, on opening it found a letter from the Department of National Service stating that as I had reached the age of 18 and was then in a non-essential occupation, I was given two options – either enlist in one of the Women's Services or become a munitions worker. I wanted to join up as a W.A.A.A.F. but my father wouldn't hear of it. In fact he almost exploded, "I know the kind of hanky panky you'd get up to once you left home. No! But you can sign up for munitions work!" So that was that and in next to no time I duly reported to the Small Arms Factory at Welshpool where I was allocated a position on the nickel inspection bench and instructed in the work I was required to carry out, i.e. to closely examine the bullet tips from the hundreds dumped in front of me, and reject any that showed any faults. As it turned out, this was very easy work but dead boring. However, it later transpired that I was allergic to the nickel dust, which caused continuous bronchitis attacks, so I was transferred to Midland Junction workshops munitions annex.

The annex was an enormous building where the W.A. Government Railways manufactured Garratt Engines in one section of the building and the munitions worked turned out 25LB shells in their section. As a result, the noise level was absolutely deafening, especially when the riveters were at work on the Garratt engines.

For some unknown reason, our building was infested with rats; as we quickly discovered whenever we started our shift. As soon as we entered the building, black oily rats would emerge from the oil sumps on the lathes and scamper off into the unknown. Did this phase our girls? NEVER! Like all the other hardships, we just took it in our stride.

When I arrived in the shell section, I was quickly introduced to a single purpose lathe and taught the intricacies of all its accessories and how to set it up to cut a special size groove that would later take a copper driving band. The foreman demonstrated what had to be done, then gave me a shell and told me to carry out the cut, and that he would check the accuracy when he returned. After completing the cut I felt very proud of my workmanship and when the foreman showed up, I produced my masterpiece. The foreman picked up the shell, examined it closely, then extracted a piece of chalk from his pocket and wrote "N B G" in big letters on the side of the shell. In my ignorance I asked, "What does N B G stand for?" He replied, "No B....Y Good, now start again". He then impressed upon me the need for absolute accuracy. I soon found out that in this job, you learn fast, and I was soon turning out an average of 270 shells a shift. But it was jolly hard work as each shell had to be handled twice. The first time when the shell arrived at my lathe on a conveyor belt, I lifted the shell on to my lathe. Then, when I had completed cutting the groove, I had to lift the shell back on to the belt, (very good for the waistline, but no good for the back).

All the time during the cutting process a white milky like antiseptic would flow on to the cutting tool and this fluid would smell to high heaven. Although

gloves were supplied, they soon became shiny and slippery and shells would slide from your grip and could cause an accident, so we reverted to using our bare hands. This had its drawbacks because the handling of the rough metal of the shells often wore the skin off one's fingertips, leaving them raw and bleeding.

Conditions for female workers were generally very primitive, full length overalls were worn with thick-soled boots and the whole outfit soon became impregnated with the smell of the antiseptic cutting fluid so it was not unusual to see people avoiding us on public transport by moving to another seat or giving us most peculiar looks. This too we soon learned to live with.

No provision were made for women to take tea breaks, nor were there any lunch rooms set up for meals. We sat on a duckboard behind our lathes and made do as best we could.

In the winter time the weather was bitterly cold, so for heating, the management provided old oil drums with holes punched in the sides and stoked them up with wood taken from the floor boards of old cattle trucks and being saturated with animal urine etc. when they were set alight, the smell was absolutely putrid!

Finally my back could no longer take the strain of continually lifting the shells and Dr. Jolly, the government doctor, examined me and decreed, "Get out as soon as possible". This I did. I regretted the loss of drawing a man's pay, and I regretted losing many close friendships, but how lovely to feel like a woman again!