

## KAY SAYLES

### "ONE CARTRIDGE KAY"

On the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Kay Sayles, whose maiden name was Kathleen Clamp, was just 18 years of age and living with her parents in Doncaster.

This was a momentous time in the history of Great Britain, as we were faced with the real threat of invasion from the forces of Nazi Germany, who had rapidly conquered and occupied most of the other countries of Europe.

The defence of this county and the preservation of the Home Front became of upmost importance. In the light of this threat, Winston Churchill clearly saw the significance of the role which could be played by women in the defence of their homeland and called on all able-bodied women to step forward, whether it meant working on the land, working in the munitions factories, working as fire watchers, driving ambulances or enlisting in the female branches of the armed forces to name just a few significant roles, they were successfully encouraged to volunteer.

Kay chose to join the W.A.A.F., where she trained as a Flight Mechanic and on completion of her training, she was posted to 51 Maintenance Unit at R.A.F. Lichfield where she stayed for the duration of the war.

The majority of her time was spent mainly on the preparation of Wellington Bombers and other aircraft for missions over Germany and occupied Europe.

She became a very skilful mechanic which earned her the curious nickname of "One Cartridge Kay". This was due to her skill of only needing to use one cartridge to fire up a Wellington when most mechanics had to use three.

Her job would have been especially gruelling during the winter months when pilots and crew arrived for early morning take offs. She and her fellow colleagues would have had to scrape the frost and ice off the windscreens, open a panel, crank the engine, using a hand crank, until the engine fired. If this failed, the whole process would have had to be repeated all over again.

Once the engine was running, they would remove the crank and secure the panel, before sliding back along the cold wing to remove the wheel clocks. Once their tasks were completed, a thumbs up was given to the pilot and the girls waved them off.

Many years later, Kay found this wonderful black and white photograph of herself published in a book called "The W.A.A.F. in Action" published in 1944. It shows her in her blue dungarees screwing up the cowling of a Bristol Beaufighter which was about to leave Fradley to attack enemy shipping. A rare and very interesting insight into the job of a female Flight Mechanic.

Emotions would have been high when these aircraft had been fully prepared for take-off as it was inevitable that many would fail to return.

These were young men and women far from home, thrown together by war. Congregating in the local pubs or dance halls in Lichfield, romances were common, lots of fun to be had, but tinged with the inevitability of death for many. Kay herself married her future husband Harry Sayles in 1944.

After the war and demobilisation, Kay stayed on at R.A.F. Lichfield as a civilian, before finally returning home to Doncaster.

For many years she became involved in organising W.A.A.F. reunions in York and also spent many hours tracing Australian aircrew or their relatives at the time when there was no internet and other resources available. She communicated mainly by letter and then by

telephone calls. It must have taken a lot of time, money and effort on her part, but she was determined to keep these wartime friendships and memories alive.

She became a very early member of the R.A.F Lichfield Association founded by Derek and Angela Smith and was a regular and enthusiastic attendee at their numerous reunions over the years. She relished the task of always inspecting the young recruits who provided a guard of honour on these occasions, moving down the line with words of encouragement for all.

She also did a lot of charity work in later life for which she was the proud recipient of an M.B.E.

In more recent times, her surname has been used as a road name on one of the new housing developments in Fradley "Sayles Grove". Sadly, she never lived to see this and would have undoubtedly been very proud. She died on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, aged 95.

Kay was a very friendly person, an extrovert personality, fun loving and always remembered her wartime days at R.A.F. Lichfield with great fondness. Her memories are an invaluable source in our attempts to try to recreate what it was like living and serving in wartime Fradley.