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WOMEN IN WAR

WiW Group Newsletter No.39

Autumn/Winter 2023

Elżbieta Zawacka - Polish university professor, scouting instructor, SOE agent, freedom fighter during World War II and brigadier general in the Polish Army!

(Source: General Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation)

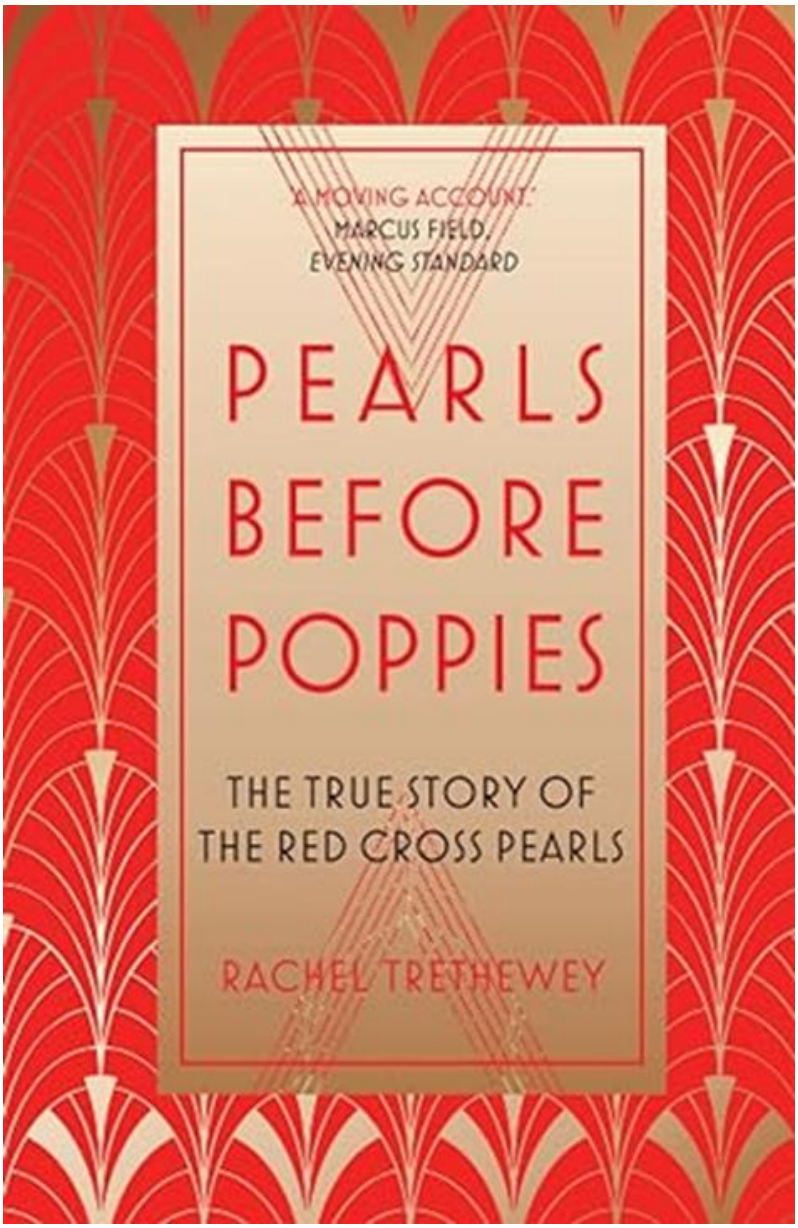
In this issue, Cita Stelzer reviews ***Pearls Before Poppies: The True Story of the Red Cross Pearls*** by Rachel Trethewey, Susanne Bayliss continues the story her father's of service in the Polish and British military during the Second World War, Georgina Natzio tell us about her family's experiences across the Empire, Robert J. Mack introduces us to his published poems, Alla Sirenko celebrates the success of her fund-raising concerts for Ukraine, and Clare Mulley has a new book coming out, ***AGENT ZO***, a biography of the fascinating soldier, SOE agent and instructor, Elżbieta Zawacka.

Newsletter edited by Paul Strong and Celia Lee

Reviewed by Cita Stelzer

Pearls Before Poppies: The True Story of the Red Cross Pearls

By Rachel Trethewey. Published by The History Press, 2018



We have Rachel Trethewey to thank for informing and reminding us that there indeed were pearls before poppies. The emblematic little red flower is now sold to provide the Royal British Legion with funds, in its words, "to support the armed forced community in lots of different ways". But in 1918 it was not poppies but pearls that provided support for the heroes of the Great War, that from 1918 served as Remembrance of the sacrifice made by those killed or wounded in defence of Great Britain.

I recall from my days in London that it was impossible to find anyone not wearing this emblem of support, not only politicians who would not dare to leave their homes without a red-paper Poppy in his buttonhole or fastened somehow to the outer clothing of British women, and that included Americans eager to show their appreciation for British contributions to victories in two World Wars.

The practice of supporting the military community did not begin with these paper symbols, but with pearls. In 1918 a group of aristocratic British women decided to raise money for the benefit of casualties of the First World War by selling some of their pearls for the benefit of the British Red Cross. What was known as the Red Cross Pearl Appeal quickly became immensely popular.

The copiously illustrated weekly society magazine, The Queen, in its 30th March 1918 edition, explained the appeal of pearls as "the vehicle of mercy and of healing with their tender beauty, ... and how great is the need for which these treasures will supply". (p 32) Trethewey tells us that by the end of May, some 2,000 pearls had been donated. (p 87)

Much credit goes to Mary (known as Molly) Northcliffe (later Lady Northcliffe), wife of the politically powerful press baron and owner of the Daily Mail and Times newspapers. Lady Northcliffe proposed that women donate a single pearl from their necklaces, the pearl to be sold in aid of the wounded of the war and the families of those who had suffered losses. She took to the pages of the Daily Mail, with its many women readers, to mount an Appeal that Trethewey notes "combined the glamour of the aristocracy humanized by the pathos of war". (p 21). Glamour, indeed. Queen Mary was President of the Pearl Appeal and Lady Randolph Churchill (nee Jennie Jerome) herself an American was one of the committee's members. The goal of the Appeal was to gather a single pearl from each donor and combine them into one necklace to be sold and the proceeds donated to the British Red Cross and its care for the wounded soldiers.

It proved too modest a goal. The Great War (1914-18) had touched almost every person in Britain. It had taken the lives of almost one million soldiers; another two million were wounded. As Simon Heffer notes in his history of Britain between the wars, many of the hundreds of thousands who gathered to celebrate victory in the year in which the Pearl Appeal was launched, "included many enduring various degrees of loss: widows, orphans, bereaved parents and siblings."

Many learned of the Appeal from the "mass audience" for Lord Northcliffe's newspapers, and its popularity soon spread throughout the country. But not all women had pearl necklaces, so the author tells us that in many cases an entire village would donate the equivalent of one pearl, or local well-off women – mayoresses or wives of High Sheriffs -- would donate a pearl on behalf of their individual towns. Hundreds of thousands of women who had taken jobs in factories during the War organized and pooled their resources to contribute the equivalent of one pearl. The national newspapers reported competition between areas of the country to determine which areas were ahead in pearl-donating. Like the red poppies appeal today, virtually everyone could and did contribute. According to the author, the Pearl Appeal "united the donors in a common cause" of grief and remembrance. (p 86)

The success of the drive overwhelmed its initial sponsors. So many pearls of varying quality were donated that it became necessary to enlist "the top society jewellers" to rank all the pearls and string them into multiple necklaces to be auctioned off. One was created with a clasp made of rubies, donated by the sister of Lord Kitchener in remembrance of his death aboard HMS Hampshire, sunk by a German U-boat in 1916, off the Orkneys Islands.

The Appeal officially ended on the 11th of November 1918, the day peace was declared. At a gala sale on 19 December 1918, Christie's auctioned off the forty-one necklaces strung from all the donated pearls. Hundreds lined the streets outside the auction house, waiting for the three-day exhibition to open. As was the custom, Royalty had a private viewing before the general public was admitted. Trethewey tells us that the sale raised nearly £100,000, (close to £4 million in today's money) for the benefit of the British Red Cross. Some of the more famous and expensive necklaces had a future: these pearls came straight from the oysters' and were "the real thing", as they had been donated before 'cultured' pearls appeared from Japan.

The now-more familiar red poppy appeal began in 1921, for the benefit of the Royal British Legion, uniting several old charities into one that cares for all the members of the British armed services and their families.

In a nod to the concerns of environmentalists the old paper poppies are now available in plastic – and these can be recycled. More permanent enamel poppies are now in fashion, with prices that are funding the Royal British Legion's work.

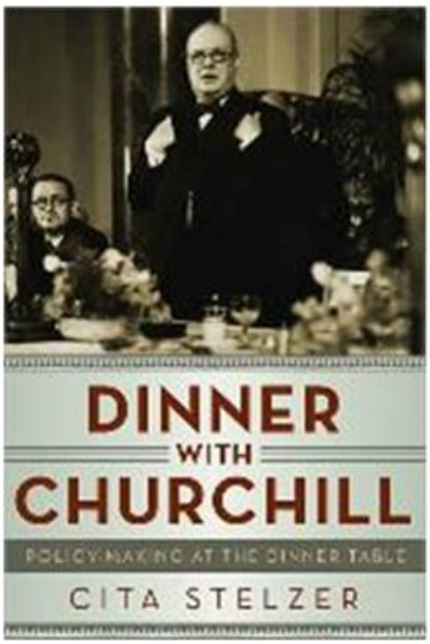
Queen Elizabeth II was its Patron for many years. King Charles III is now its President in his role as head of the British Armed Forces. But these two British charities started with a pearl in 1918, with an idea from the wife of a press baron.

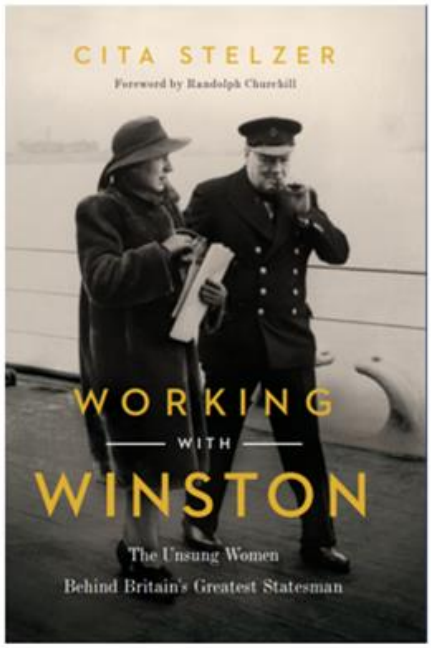
There is more to this tale than can be summarized in a brief review. Trethewey writes movingly of the poignant suffering of those at war and the anguish of those at home, at all levels of British society. She details the styles and mores of what was a class of society accustomed to a deference that would become another casualty of war. Women refused to return to the domestic occupations they had left behind at the factory doors, there was no work for the partially wounded, and few of what we now call safety nets. But there was a national willingness to honour those who bore the scars of victory over Britain's enemies.

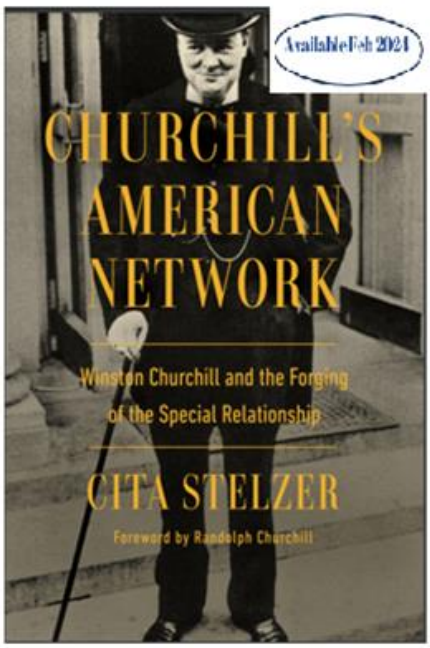
Pearls before Poppies: The True Story of the Red Cross Pearls by **Rachel Trethewey** is a marvellous reminder of the British spirit, and it ought to be better known. Today's charity bazaars and concerts are popular all over the world and they had a beginning in Britain during the First World War.

Lady Northcliffe was appointed Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire (GBE) and Dame of Grace, Order of St John (D.St.J) during 1918.

Cita Stelzer is author of several books







Susanne Bayliss from Toronto, continues her father's Mieczyslaw Ruchlewicz's (Mike's) Second World War period story: he arrives in the UK, after his long voyage through the Mediterranean, and begins training as a fighter pilot.

PART 5:

ENGLAND (1944-1945)

Gibraltar was not as impressive as I expected. We were moored some distance from the rock. The Atlantic was windy, cold, and often noisy with anti-aircraft guns and anti-submarine depth charges, but the hills of Greenock, Scotland wore a beautiful cloak of "green, green grass." That and the clouds were a welcome change from the sights of the Middle East. We marched from the port to a railway station, led by a Scottish military band, cheered on by the people of Glasgow. On the train British ladies brought us tea, biscuits, and genteel conversation. It was late at night when we arrived at Blackpool. Organisation was superb except that someone forgot to arrange for our lunch and tea that day. We were led to various bed and breakfast establishments, mostly in small groups of three or four. We were famished, so as soon as we dropped our gear at our new home, I went out to see what I could find to eat.

When on the way to our little hotel, I saw a fish and chips shop open nearby. I did not know what they were selling but now I found out. Unfortunately, I did not have enough money for a full fish and chips treatment. The vendor was helpful, suggesting that I should just have chips. They were delicious. I was surprised that he wrapped them in newspapers, but I did not mind it. No one else seemed to, either. This was but one of many surprises I had already encountered, in this strange but friendly land. The other was that after sleeping, so often in the last two years, on bare soil or sand, I now had a clean bed with perfectly white sheets, in a hotel.

In the morning, we had breakfast served in a spotless dining room, as if we were guests on holiday. It was all amazing to us, including the collection of little bottles and things in the middle of our table which was covered with a clean white cloth. When tea was brought in there was a problem. We did not know what we were to add to it, milk or the contents of one of the little bottles, which looked like containers of some fruit juice. Since there was no milk inside, and the other three at my table looked to me for leadership, I plunged in and poured some of that "juice" into my tea. This time my surprise was even greater, but it was not a pleasant one. The juice turned out to be vinegar.

To join the air force and to change the khaki uniform to a blue one was easy, but to set one's course on the most desirable though uncertain future of pilot training was not. A series of hurdles was arranged to test us. Any one of them could make me a second, third, or fourth-class member of the flying fraternity. First, I had to pass a medical examination. Everything went along well until I was told to blow air into a tube with some mercury in it and to hold that mercury at a certain level, for a minute or longer if I could. It was surprisingly difficult to do. I thought I would burst by the time a minute passed. I do not remember a longer minute in my whole life except other occasions of the same test later on in the Air Force, and some sessions at a dentist. The test was of that nature.

At the end of the examination, I was asked if I really wanted to fly. The question surprised and baffled me. I thought everyone wanted to and that everyone knew I did. Was it a trick question? "Very much so," I said thinking fleetingly that I might live to regret that answer, but nothing and no one could have made me give a different answer. Next, candidates for pilots had to be segregated from the lesser mortals such as navigators, radio operators or air gunners. The test had several parts, including some of the type: 'if your father's stepmother married your grandfather's brother, what would your relation be to the brother's wife's sister' or something like that. All the questions had to be answered very quickly.

Then there was the all-important interview with the colonel in charge of the whole selection process. After speaking with me for a while, on various subjects, suddenly he asked me if I would not rather call myself Rychlewicz. "General Sikorski's adjutant is called Rychlewicz, what do you think?" he said. I said, "No sir, my name is Ruchlewicz and I'm going to stick with it." Now I think it may have been another psychological trick question.

It was the happiest day of my life - so far - when I was notified of being accepted for pilot training. Some of my cadet friends were less lucky. I commiserated with them but could not help feeling even greater satisfaction at my good luck because they had failed, especially with respect to one or two who were so cocksure of themselves before the test. I was ashamed of that feeling and tried to suppress it. I succeeded as soon as I reminded myself that there was a long and uncertain road to travel before I got my wings. And so, it was! The road was hard and long, especially long, but not at all unpleasant.

**Dad, Mieczyslaw Ruchlewicz's (Mike),
having arrived in the UK to train as a pilot
(Source: Author)**

For a year and a half in the Middle East, I'd had English lessons at the JSK [Junacka Szkoła Kadetów - Young Soldiers Cadet School, connected with the Polish Army in the Middle East 1941-1943]. Even aboard the Multan, I practiced my English on some British airmen. One, a Scot, gave me some serious lessons in exchange for my help with his Russian. So, when I arrived in England, I thought I had enough knowledge of the language to get by. It was a bit of a shock to find that it was not enough to carry on a conversation. Aboard ship, I'd made it a rule to listen to the BBC news, broadcast through the ship's loudspeakers, several times a day. At first, I could not even distinguish individual words. They all seemed to form a continuous stream of sound. At the end of the sea voyage, I still could not follow a whole news broadcast.

From now on, I took every opportunity to improve my English. In Blackpool, I even made it a practice to read the shop signs as I walked along its streets. I read English books, newspapers, and periodicals, almost to the complete exclusion of those in Polish. On top of all that, like many of the Poles and other servicemen In Blackpool, I frequented the Tower. It was a complex of entertainment facilities, comprising dance halls, restaurants, a marine museum, a wrestling and boxing exhibition arena, not to mention the extra amusement provided by Americans and their English girlfriends in the darker, but still very public parts of the buildings. It was a good place to practice English and dancing simultaneously, and to start new friendships with the English girls. There were more girls per square metre than in most other British towns, Blackpool being a popular holiday resort for the working classes of the north of the country. I, too, met quite a few of them. In fact more often than not, after an evening at the Tower, I would come back to my little boarding house joyfully and painfully in love, with yet another new girlfriend.

For some reason we were moved from one bed and breakfast place to another quite frequently. Our landladies were strict, some more than others, and all very conscious of the bottom line of their accounting. They rationed our food very carefully and rather skimpily. We were famished most of the time. Our pay was insufficient to supplement the meals provided at the boarding houses, until we were officially in the Air Force. At the last place I stayed the whole family of the landlady belonged to the Salvation Army. They often practiced on their trumpets and drums. At night, if one was late for the locking of the doors at 11:00, it meant a night in a bomb shelter on the Promenade, a dreadful experience.

I was late several times. Luckily the older airmen told us about an emergency entry into the place, through a window whose latch was made ineffective although in appearance it remained as before. Most of those airmen were flying personnel, recuperating after a tour of operations and fighting squadrons, both fighters and bombers. Nearly all were very young except for their eyes which were sad and tired, with premature wrinkles around them. They were the eyes of old men, strangely contrasting with their young faces. In fact, those boys' whole demeanour was sad. I felt great pity for them and even greater admiration. I would have done anything to be one of them but to achieve that I had to travel the same road they had. I was most impatient to do so. We, the candidates for their mantle did not dare to fraternize with them. We just watched them discreetly and kept a respectful distance. It was difficult to do for we were dying to hear their stories.

Firbeck is a charming little village about fifteen miles east of Sheffield, between Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire. A small Polish Air Force camp near the village was now our home from home. The place was idyllic, set in a little forest, by a stream. It was summer. We arrived there from Blackpool in lorries. We were the creme-de-la-creme of the last crop of those who managed to navigate successfully the selection hurdles at the Blackpool Polish Holding Base. What a difference in my situation. After leaving the cadets I was a nobody, and now, not only was I a member of the famous Polish Air Force, but a member of one of its most valuable and respected groups, a pilot under training. I was satisfied.

Dad, Mieczyslaw Ruchlewicz's (Mike) with a friend (Source: Author)

On our first parade, in a small clearing at this beautiful spot, a tall, middle-aged flight sergeant stood before us, and after dispensing with the routine orders of the day allowed himself a few words on a personal note. We found out later, that he was a strict disciplinarian and that this was to be his only departure from the official procedures. In a quiet voice, slowly and with some shyness he told us that we were his - and he mentioned the number which I now do not remember - course and that he found it difficult not to show his feelings every time a new group of young people come to his unit, because so many of them are now no longer in this world. He talked a little about his sons in Poland, saying that in some mysterious way we were to him like his sons. After we were dismissed, there was little of the usual noisy exchange of comments on every possible subject. Everyone left the parade ground quietly, in a somewhat pensive mood. We were impressed by this obviously good, sensitive, and upright person that we, perhaps, did not expect to find in every NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer]. He seemed to me a typical father figure. We all immediately felt much respect and even affection toward him. He never did anything to alter that first impression.

The chirping of birds and the rising sun, gently wiping away the rest of the night shadows, woke me up. Their morning performance was sweet music to my ears. Soon the loudspeakers would proclaim the beginning of a new day for us and the noise of the barrack's occupants getting up, talking loudly, and getting ready for the morning parade, would drown the music outside. There were several huts in this enchanted English forest. It was a sort of a rest camp or, perhaps, just a holding facility designed to slow down the flow of the training program. It was ideal for both. In our case it was probably the latter, because so far, the only aeroplanes we saw were those of the course ahead of ours, doing their night flying from our little airfield, located between our camp and the village of Firbeck.

I watched them intently whenever I could and, after a few weeks, I felt I could fly those Tiger Moths. We were encouraged to watch them and strangely enough, our instructors' prediction was proving itself right. Although we were never close enough to touch them, gradually I acquired a certain familiarity with them, so much so that I really felt I knew what was going on inside their cockpits when they flew by, just a few feet over our heads. They came to Firbeck from RAF stations further south, to avoid possible German night intruders who even now, in the summer of 1944, were still capable of surprise night visits aimed at shooting down our aeroplanes in circuits over our own airfields.

A Message from Home: Translation of the postcard below sent by Bronek in Kazakhstan April 4(?), 1944; arrived at RAF Firbeck July 22, 1944 (Dad, Mieczyslaw Ruchlewicz, had arrived in UK January 1944), Bronek his brother and their mother Zosia, had remained behind in Fiodorowka. The postcard was recently translated for me by Nicky Wodkiewicz, Dad's friend, mentioned in the memoirs.)

Dear Mieciu,

We are writing to you every week and we don't know whether you receive our letters.

The news about us – we are healthy, we are working, we live from day to day.

Pray to God that he will allow us to see you again dear Mieciu.

We have received parcel from whom we don't know – is it from you or our father?

We thank you very much for that parcel in which we have tea, raisins and ... It was very welcomed to receive that gift just before Easter holidays.

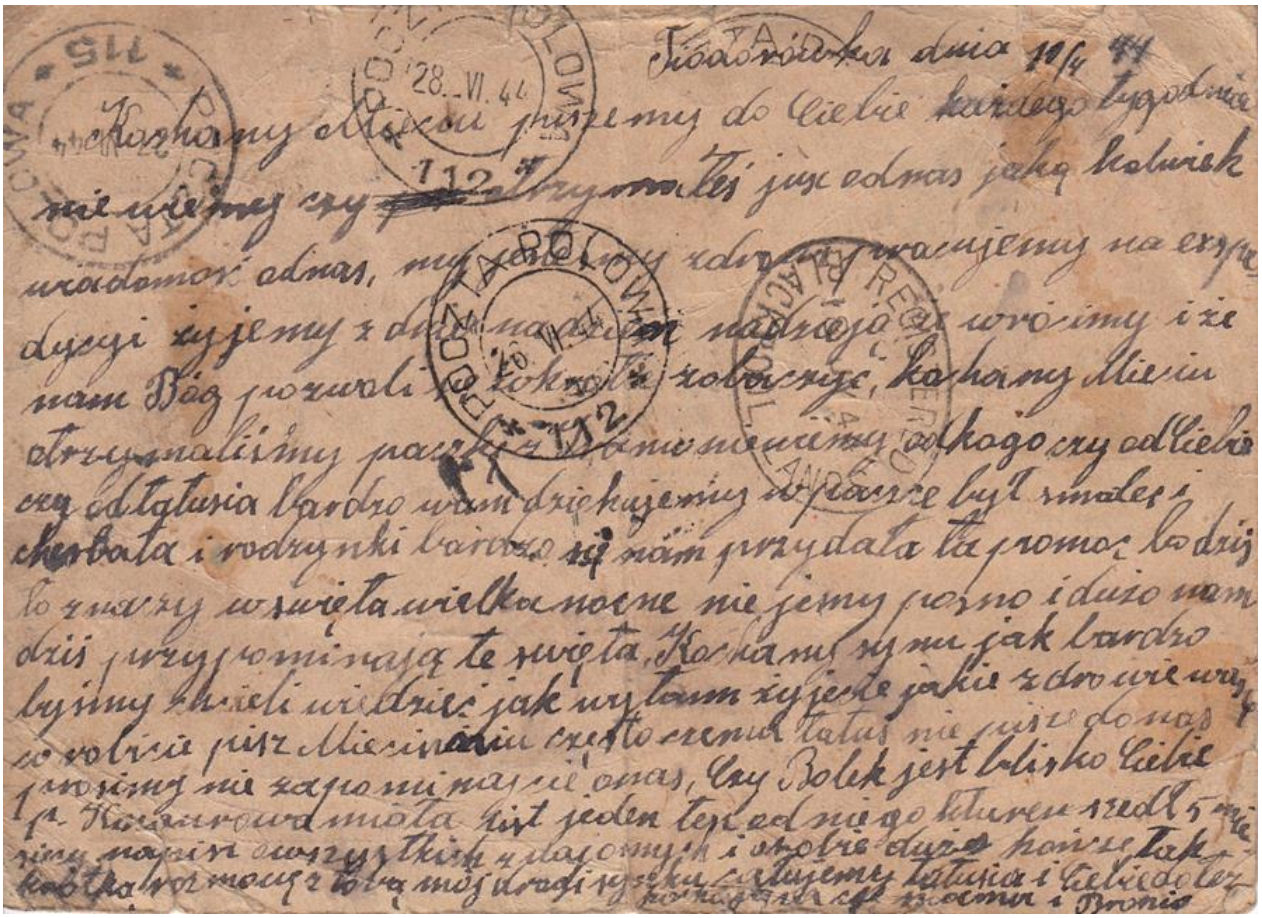
We are eating… not very much … .

How much we wish that we could see … we would like to know - please write and tell us how you are living and how is your health? Write to us more often please and why our Father doesn't write to us. We beg you not to forget us.

Is Bolek near you in England? His mother also had only one letter from him – she received that after five months.

Write about you a lot and we have to finish this conversation my dear brother. We kiss Dad and you,

Bronek



Our main occupation at Firbeck were lectures on subjects we would study more thoroughly on our future courses. I was now also a satisfied owner of a second-hand bicycle. It was necessary to have one if I wanted to continue my practice of the English language and dancing. And I did want to, but the buses were few and the nearby towns too far to walk to. This particular Saturday, I was on my way to Rotherham. I had a date there and was late. Down a steep hill I went as fast as the hill would take me. At the bottom of the hill the narrow lane turned left. Suddenly, around the corner, there floated into view two women abreast on bicycles. I tried to pass them on the left and they moved, first in one direction and then the other. To miss them I manoeuvred harder than the speed allowed, and it sent me sliding on my left side over the sharp stones embedded in the asphalt. Much skin separated from my body during that slide, but I would not see the doctor for fear of being transferred to a later course. It was a torture to walk, yet I had to walk without limping and without screaming. For days, there was a lot of my raw flesh rubbing against the rough cloth of the RAF uniform. Still, I didn't hit the women on their bicycles.

From Firbeck we went to Hucknall for another course and then to miserable Croughton. It was winter and that was the main reason why it was miserable. In summer, in the lovely English countryside, it was probably very nice. At Hucknall we were near the airfield but not allowed on it. At Croughton the airfield was farther from our camp and also out of bounds. In addition, we shared the camp with Italian prisoners of war which we found rather disturbing, even if they did have barbed wire around their part. That wire was only symbolic anyway. They were not in a hurry to swim the channel to fight for Il Duce. They worked on farms in the area and came and went as they pleased, more or less. We also shared the kitchen with them. Their food was the same as ours which was our only consolation for the humiliation of sharing the camp with prisoners of war.

Our huts were in open fields and that, although providing a nice view of the countryside, was not an advantage that cold winter. On a couple of occasions there was no water in the wash huts, the pipes having frozen solid, burst, and forced us to go unshaven and without showers, even cold ones, for days on end.

At the camp all the amusement we had was in the form of 'ground subjects' lectures and that was not exciting at all - except when a Harvard from our Newton No.16(P) Flying Service Training School would come over our camp to cheer us up. We were hard at it, one afternoon, during yet another lecture on navigation when suddenly, there was a tremendous roar just over our hut. We knew instantly what it was. To a man, including our respected and liked navigation instructor, we ran out to see our older colleague doing a perfect climbing slow roll, from the top of our huts' level, up. It was followed by more aerobatics at low level. I do not remember now which exactly but all of it thrilled us and increased, if possible, the impatience with which we waited for the day when we too, at long last, would be flying like that.

After a few days' leave we arrived back at Hucknall, to start flying, at long last. The war was coming to an end and a constant fear of not completing the pilot training in time to take part in it hung over our heads like a permanent black cloud. That worry was with me all the time, beginning at joining the Polish Air Force. It poisoned my every waking hour. Only occasionally did I allow myself the luxury of a daydream in which, even if the war ended too soon, we would continue our training in Poland.

It was one of the saddest days of my life when peace in Europe was announced, and the whole British nation celebrated victory. We did not. We had nothing to celebrate. We were left alone to mourn the loss of our sovereignty and of our country. We now knew for certain that we would not be going back to Poland as organized armed forces. I, myself, had suspected it as soon as Stalin broke off diplomatic relations with our government in 1943. We did not know what we were going to do, where to go. I was prepared to go anywhere except back under Russian rule which now, thanks to our faithless western allies, extended also over Poland.

Some Britishers commiserated with us and were ashamed of the part their government played in our misfortune. Most found it quite easy to brush aside any such lofty feelings and concentrated on their own problems. All advised us to go back home. Newspapers became quite hostile to us. It was not pleasant for Poles to be in Britain at that time. I have often regretted that I did not have enough strength of character and courage to go back then. We should all have gone back although those that did suffered greatly from the communist state. Many soon found themselves on the way back to Siberia. Many were murdered by the communist police.

It was impossible not to think about all that. It was constantly on my mind, except when flying. I remember well the relief I felt once in the air, by myself, when my mind would be completely occupied by flying. Those were the only hours of peace I had then. To the last couple of days before our flying training started, we did not know whether we would be allowed to continue or whether our whole program would be terminated, and we would remain ‘erks’ (the lowest form of life in the RAF) for the duration of our stay in the Air Force.

Then suddenly, came the excitement of receiving my very own parachute and the rest of the flying kit. It was a proud feeling to be handed all those wonderful things by the pretty WAAFs [Women’s Auxiliary Air Force] on the other side of the counter. I felt they looked at us quite differently now. We felt different; very happy but even more worried than before, lest the powers-that-be change their minds and not allow us to fly after all...

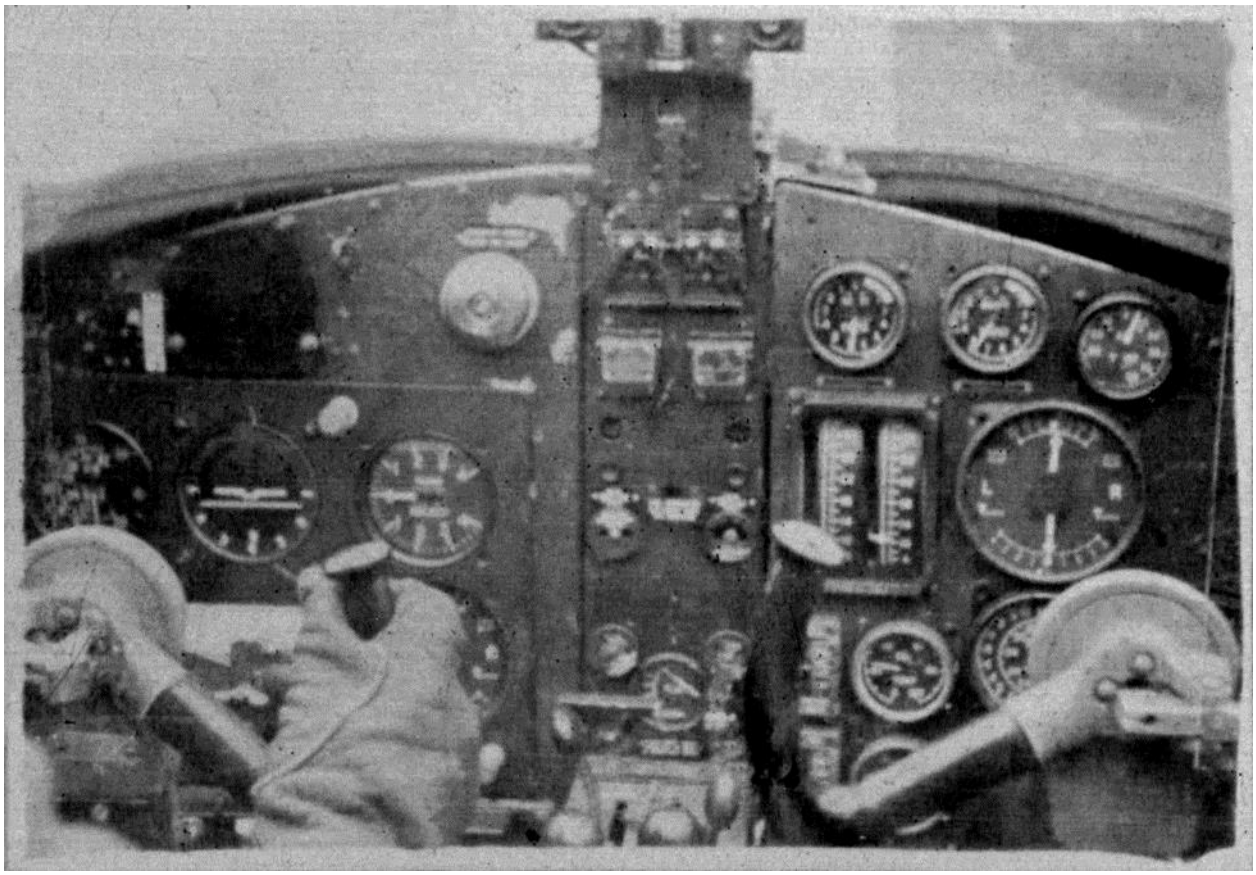
When warrant officer Gluchowski pushed the Tiger Moth's throttle forward to start my first excursion into the British skies, I did not know what to do with myself, where to look. I just sat there, in the rear cockpit, afraid that I might miss something of this unrepeatable moment. I felt I should be doing something with my hands and feet in order to participate in what was going on. I wanted to do something memorable, something befitting the occasion. Above all I did not want to miss the slightest bit of the experience, but to take in all that it was possible to gather of this tremendous event. I had to decide quickly because we were beginning to move forward. I settled on looking over the side of the Tiger Moth. I watched the grass moving faster and faster, past the trailing edge of the lower wing. Then suddenly, I noticed that the grass was also moving away from me. Before I became conscious of the reason for it a question sprang to my mind: "Why?" And immediately followed the answer: "I'm flying!" But that was not the answer, nor was the technical explanation I learned as part of the Theory of Flight lectures. That "Why" hung there between me and the grass until height obliterated the grass and later, other details of the earth we left so easily, so far below. It was May 11th 1945. It was thrilling, unusual, yet so very natural.

Dad, Mieczyslaw Ruchlewicz's (Mike), in the centre in the white shirt) with Tiger Moth and colleagues (Source: Author)

I had never flown before, but I felt it was just as I imagined it would be. It was marvellous. I wanted the flight to continue indefinitely. My instructor was really a kindly man, although I was to have serious doubts about that later on, when he tried to teach me to fly. For now, he took us on a very gentle flight around the airfield, over Hucknall, showing me Nottingham in the distance, the famous five chimneys near the airfield, and some other features of the countryside which he advised me to remember. I would remember everything, every minute of that flight. For years I remembered every flight. Even now, I remember many of them.

From now on, I lived with a new anxiety, the fear of failing to learn to fly quickly. I had ten, perhaps twelve, officially prescribed hours of flight with an instructor, to learn enough to do my first solo flight. In my bones, I knew I could do it but the instructor never seemed to know what instruction I needed, when. I knew exactly what I needed to be shown and to practice but I did not dare to tell him. If I had dared, I felt sure, I could have made much faster progress. As it was, he was getting quite impatient with me and did not hide it. One invaluable piece of advice he gave me, when I was trying to master the art of putting the Tiger down on three points, was to watch the left side of the engine cowling to see how it moved in relation to the horizon just before touchdown. After that my landings were not bad, he said.

One day, watching me do circuits and bumps, he bet his fellow instructor standing next to him, that I would land and land well, every time around, after a circuit. Most of the others would abort many of their landings just before or during the attempt. I did not, except that one time. As I was about to touch down something moved me to go around again. There was no reason for it, but I did go up for another circuit. Friends told me later that warrant officer Gluchowski was not amused by it. In fact, he was furious as I found out for myself later on. It was strange. To this day I remember exactly how strong the sudden urge to abort the landing was, as if someone physically forced me to do it.



Cockpit image - possibly an Airspeed AS.10 Oxford training aircraft used by the RAF to train Commonwealth pilots (Source: Author)

I was really worried now because he had four of us students to start with and now, I was the only one left. He'd kicked out the other three as unsuitable. In the following days, I was informed over the tube in the Tiger Moth that I flew like an old cow or like a left leg and sometimes like the left leg of an old cow. But I was not thrown out of the course. After eight and a half hours of dual, I was given a chance to defend myself against the Flight Commander, Flight Lieutenant Tanski, who would decide whether to let me go solo or send me to sweep the hangar floors.

To be continued…

Meeting the Empire's End

By Georgina Natzio

The British Empire wound itself down from its highest levels during its concluding years, broadly with dignity, even as some within the newly-identified countries began to institute civil wars in a struggle for the governing powers that were being transferred. Inevitably this involved British governmental officers themselves in resistance to violence whilst working for the provision of peaceful transfers. Conflict was inevitable. However, the Churches, many travelling missionaries, the medical fraternities, and sororities, together with those in education, all contributed massively to the wellbeing of everyone in colonies and dependencies about to enter a post-imperial world. This applied as much to the imperial military and governmental societies, as locally to the peoples of the occupied nations themselves. For a wide range of social structures within the nations that were being departed from were naturally beginning to undergo profound changes as new leaderships emerged.

The deep diplomatic work, military study, the management of satisfying social contacts being brought to a close was officially, largely a male preserve. On the other hand, women present with their husbands, or separately as nurses or occasional female doctors, the latter married and unmarried; female teachers, clerical workers, were all involved in Great Britain's forthcoming departure from vast areas of territory worldwide, all worked towards maintaining their standards of service to Britain and the Imperial possessions to which they had been posted. This perhaps sounds a somewhat pedestrian description of very real events and times involving inter-family overseas separations, increasingly over successive centuries in many, if not all, of the countries forming integral parts of the former British Empire. Everyone, as the time for departure arrived, in 'employ' during this era of departure was affected, as can be imagined, including those locally-employed from their own territories. Many local people did work in Empire offices and other diverse kinds of employments run by the British. The chief preoccupation here is with the families supporting the professionals mentioned. Trading and commerce sometimes established over centuries, was another matter and a different ethos existed for connected families, although all the British families in overseas employments shared similar interests and stresses.

The late 1940s and early 1950s era, chiefly under consideration here, was emotionally and physically formed by post-war recovery from social trauma and upheaval - after enormous turbulence and in some places, surviving further unrest. British women were deeply involved in supporting the military as wives and as lynch-pins of the families of churchmen, doctors, surgeons, industrialists and financiers, while a slowly increasing number served in uniform within the military on land, at sea or in airforce support some, as we know, working in coastal artillery batteries or in the air as pilots, as had been the case during the Second World War. For many in these professions their times of appointment could last for at least two years, sometimes longer. It could be argued that successful and ultimately peaceful governmental and social transfers could not have happened without the females working in diverse jobs as well as maintaining households. Their households were another source of employment for local people, and in consequence resulted in close associations between the different nationalities.

Some countries neighbouring those about to be newly identified as independent were inclined to try to take advantage by clambering in on moments of sensitive change with attacks for their own territorial gain. Some of these attempts at take-over, or acquisition of territory went on for a long time and did a considerable amount to delay the main, underlying British departure processes. Up until then military wives, for example, went a considerable way to support their husbands as all the many-layered changes took a large amount of time - even by taking up work in recently-established government offices with new ministers and local contacts, as this writer's own mother did in Accra, Ghana, while from the early 1950s onwards, matters were moving steadily, by and large, towards independence.

Be that as it may, this writer at the time aged five, experienced life in Accra, in company with staff who were Ghanaian and Nigerian. These people were uniformly kind and thoughtful and will always be specially remembered with gratitude for the day they saved my life from being attacked by a marauding snake, as I ran towards the house from the school bus. A senior member, the Steward, nursed me during one of the absolutely ferocious thunderstorms common to the area. These went first with a monumental clap of thunder, followed by a lightning ball hurtling down from the sky, dividing itself into two sharp bolts which sank into the earth. Once our telephone was struck by such lightning and the local telephone exchange was severely damaged.

From about the mid-1960s onwards in Malaya (later Malaysia) and Singapore, there were difficult moments as neighbouring territories fought to establish themselves alongside. As the departure process here was quite long drawn-out, military wives had considerable responsibilities in maintaining morale amongst their companions, involving sociological and charitable work within their communities. At the same time, all three, armed services were represented there, and it can be imagined that naval, army and air force wives had similar but different elements to work out in the process of sustaining morale across the board. So they did!

It wasn't just a matter of playing tennis, more one of promoting social contact amongst themselves, guarding health, and the provision of entertainments that began to mean much to the men and women who joined in. Naturally, domestically, there were bad and good times, but among most, efforts were made to treat their local friends and domestic workers as well as they could. On each side, some managed better than others. Some local people in British employ even spent some of their hard-earned wages on sincerely given gifts for the departing British families they had got to know. And the same was true in reverse. So for some of us who were present at these times, there were bitter-sweet moments as we said goodbye with mutual goodwill and respect arising from a kind of contact which enabled both local peoples and departing British to have learned about each other's cultures at a deep level.

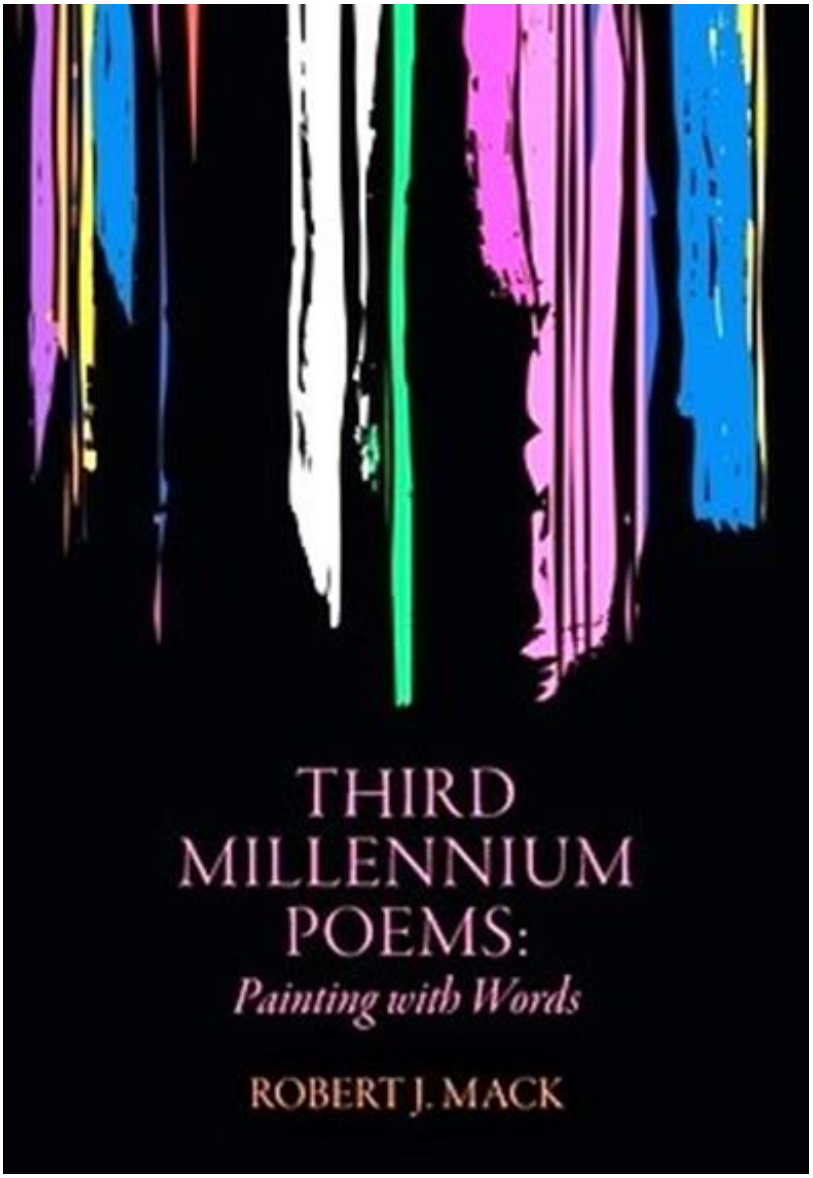
But these foregoing notes are merely a prequel to the situation of military lives led in places as far away from each other in time and location in this writer's experience as North Rhine Westphalia (Northern Germany) and Somerset County in southern England. Stasis for wives was a common occurrence, getting on with life wherever, or in whatever shape or form it took. As the women formed their own groups and societies in England, easy travel helped them to reach extended families and fulfil obligations to them when required. Northern Germany was of course a separate issue. Some military families were present from the late 1940s when times were highly sensitive and military dependents were moved around in military transport to run errands, attend meetings, even to go shopping, and so on. But in early post-war North Germany these women lived in discrete groups not meeting the local people they lived amongst and for many whose culture was unwelcome. Yet much later it took considerable adaptation to lead the same kind of

life in, say, rural Somerset, for the sense of being a stranger in one's own country came as a bit of a shock.

This writer didn't help matters much by carrying out student work in a nearby egg-cracking factory for the cake industry. Messy but educational, working with Somerset countrywomen, in hair protection scarves and overalls. One or two had themselves been in uniform during the Second World War or later. On one occasion my father sent his driver to fetch me in his official car to attend another appointment. The women workforce in the factory were highly amused as they witnessed the young Corporal's arrival and her collection of their young student co -worker's departure, still wearing overall and hair scarf.

This family was extremely fortunate in its wartime experiences. Our mother eventually left London for Sussex, although her sister remained in the capital city as an ambulance driver during the Blitz among other bombing raids. Our father who served in the Royal Artillery in Tunisia, was present at the Salerno Landings moving on into Italy, where members of the gun crews died picking fruit from the trees which had been mined by the German army. His unit moved on, finally coming to rest in the north, where a little later at the War's end, his wife and eldest daughter safely joined him from London. His last posting in Somerset, England, a rural district he knew well, came to him as a great pleasure. He was able to teach his second daughter how to fish, a joy to them both. The Empire and its outreaches say, in India, where he himself had spent his early years seemed a long way away.

Image of British troops landing at Salerno in 1943 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



ROBERT J. MACK is our latest member of the Women in War group. Known to his friends as Bob, he is a poet and essayist. He was an editor and publisher for a financial services corporation before retiring from his corporate life. His other works include essays in American Thinker, an article in Visiting Nurse Service of New York Magazine, an article in Annapolis's newspaper The Capital, and his two previous books of poems: ***Ah Poems*** and ***Second Millennium Poems: The Age of What?*** Bob is an American living in Port Jefferson, New York.

Cover Art

Bob says: 'My book of 161 poems, entitled ***Third Millennium Poems: Painting with Words***, represents a creative period in my life over 8 months during 2022. The poems examine all facets of life, including our current culture. There are what I hope you consider astute observations about what makes us human beings and about the wisdom necessary to keep that humanity. There are some wise words in many poems from the character Uncle Runt, a fictional Texas rancher that I created and use as a stand-in for my thoughts and emotions. Many of the poems have allusions to God's influence.'

In Bob's book of 260 pages of poems there is something to suit everyone's taste. But most importantly, they are rooted in the real world and all that entails.

Veteran (page 40) is a tribute to Veterans Day. Conscription ‘Blues on page 116, typifies the young, nervous, enthusiast, joining the army as a raw recruit in 1966, and headed for the Vietnam War and contains the lines:

On a terribly sunny day in March,

we all gathered at Penn Station,

The 1966 NYC contingent of draftees

Bound for basic training in the South.

As Bob is an American, his book of poems is enriching in that it provides an insight into the thinking of a people with who we are familiar in that they speak English, but their culture is often different from that of the British or the European. Bob takes us inside his world – inside the world of the US. Celia Lee

Robert J. Mack (Bob) newest member of the Women in War group

(Source: Author)

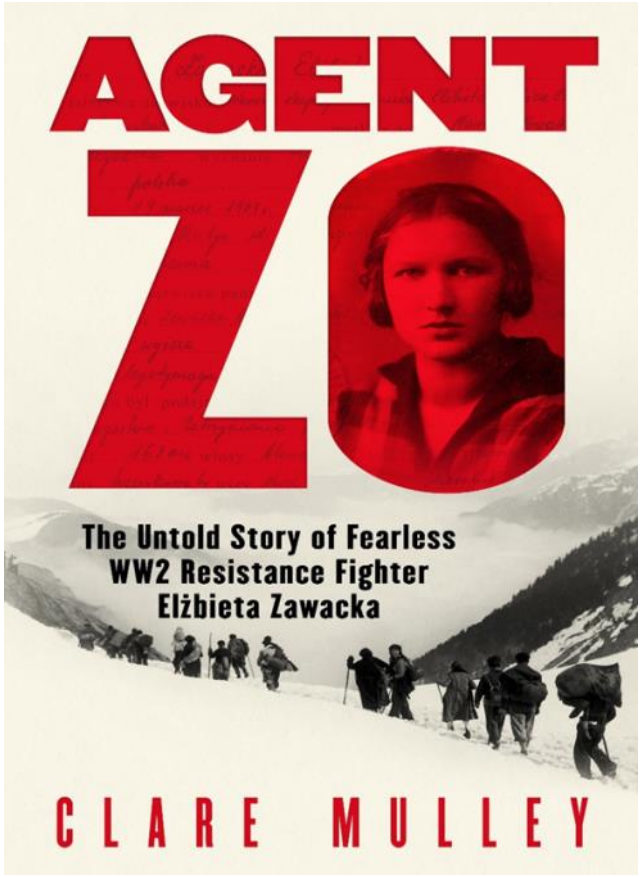
Ukraine Fund Raising Success!

Alla Sirenko (centre) Photo Alla Sirenko

(Source: Author)

Alla Sirenko's fund-raising concerts for Ukraine have borne fruit. Pictured here with medical staff, Alla is at Lviv Children's Hospital, Ukraine, personally delivering the portable ultrasound equipment paid for by her fund-raising concerts carried out in the UK.

SOON TO BE PUBLISHED BY AUTHOR CLARE MULLEY



Clare Mulley's next book, ***AGENT ZO***, is a biography of Polish General Elżbieta Zawacka, aka Zo, a fearless resister and soldier during the Second World War, who promoted women's right to serve in a military capacity. ***AGENT ZO***, aka Elżbieta Zawacka and Elizabeth Watson, was the only woman in the Polish special forces, the 'Silent Unseen', who were secretly trained in British country houses during the Second World War, and the only woman to parachute from Britain into Nazi-occupied Poland. This didn't faze her. She had already spent three years serving in the resistance behind enemy lines across Europe, while being hunted by the Gestapo, and she would go on to serve in the largest organised act of defiance against Nazi Germany: the Warsaw Uprising. After the war she was demobbed as one of the most highly decorated women in Polish history. Yet the Soviet-backed post-war Communist regime not only imprisoned her, but also ensured that her remarkable story remained hidden for over forty years. Now, through new archival research and exclusive interviews with people who knew and fought alongside Zo, Clare Mulley brings this forgotten heroine back to life, transforming the way we see women's agency in the Second World War. ***AGENT ZO*** will be published by W&N on 16 May 2024.