

Mildred Schutz

Mildred was working at SOE (Special Operations Executive) during the Second World War when she was asked if she would like to take further training and go into the field. To do this you first have to become a FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry), also known as the Women's Transport Service (WTS).

Born in St. Mary Cray, Mildred and her much younger sister moved first to Stansted in Kent and then to Walton-on-Thames. Their father was a farmer. After leaving school she went to business school and then got a job working for a shipping company, which was a protected job. It was while working there that she was asked if she would like to work for the Inter-Services Research Bureau. After passing a series of interviews, she was selected for



work in SOE and then, after a few months, for further training to go into the field. She was particularly attracted by the idea of parachuting into Europe, although her subsequent violent seasickness precluded her from this.

Having passed the training, Mildred was kitted out in a suit from Harrods and a hat from Bond Street (for the first and only time in her life), and was told that she would be sent overseas. She was 19. However, just as she was setting off from Walton to London on the first stage of her travels, the famous German spy Lord Haw Haw broadcast information about the operation, giving out the names of the FANYs, including Mildred. Because of this, Mildred's cover was blown and she could not be used in the field, but instead

she was to 'infiltrate on foot'. She travelled for ten days by troop ship from Liverpool to Italy, living in fear that the Germans would bomb the ship carrying the FANYs, as Lord Haw Haw had promised. She arrived just as Vesuvius had erupted.

From there, she went to Bari on the Adriatic coast in a civilian lorry, and then on to Monopoli, where she started work as secretary to the Colonel in charge of dirty tricks (issuing poison pills, authorising military training and providing ammunition). The operation was to organise the local resistance and to enable escaped prisoners to get back to their own countries.

Mildred stayed in very Spartan accommodation during the bitterly cold winter of 1944. She slept on straw on a canvas camp bed with only one blanket, in a room above a greengrocer shop. Washing was done in a small hand basin with only cold water.

Her job involved being a look-out for an officer surveying local land for potential air strips, getting

signals through by road when the signals had been blocked, whilst dodging boulders being thrown down on the road and machine gun fire.

At Christmas in 1944, they found a shelled out building with an out-of-tune harmonium, an organist and some chairs and held an impromptu carol service there for every nationality, including German and Italian POW's. All the different nationalities sang Silent Night in their own language. "We were all praising God and yet fighting each other."



Mildred in her wartime uniform

When Mildred came home, she returned to her job in the shipping company, although she would have preferred to do some work related to what she did in the war, as some of the other FANYs did. She had been given strict instructions not to talk to anyone about what she had done in the war, even her parents. The information was sealed for 50 years.

Mildred met her husband Reginald at work and, although she thought she was not going to get married and stay tied to the kitchen sink, she did indeed marry in 1952 and went on to have five children. Her husband died of a brain tumour in 1983.

She subsequently formed a strong friendship with Bob Frost, an RAF rear gunner shot down in Belgium who got back to England through France, over the Pyrenees, into Spain and Gibraltar, and then to England. Mildred met Bob when re-tracing one of the escape routes on the Adriatic side as members of the ELMS (Escape Lines Memorial Society).

Mildred moved from Surbiton to Worcester Park in 1957 and has lived in the same house ever since. She regularly attends St. Mary's, and her children went to Sunday School there before they moved on to Crusaders.



Mildred photographed for the Special Forces Exhibition in 2020