Meet ATS Servicewoman Shirley Hamilton

Well. It's official. War is over in Europe. So I suppose the war is over for me too.

And that was quite a party yesterday – everyone was dancing in the streets, climbing lampposts, such jubilation everywhere! You certainly cast off a bit of that British reserve then!

So let me introduce myself – Shirley Hamilton, pleased to meet you. In the ATS we only ever had a surname. That's the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the women's army, as I'm sure you know. I came all the way from Jamaica to serve in England.

You're interested in my story, how I came to be here? Well I suppose I've got a bit of time now, so I can tell you.

For me it all goes back to the headline in the *Daily Gleaner*, you know, the Jamaican newspaper? It said: 'This is an Empire War, it concerns every man, woman and child in the British Empire, so that every citizen of the Empire can, and should do their bit to help.'

From that moment I was hell-bent to go. We were taught that England was our mother country. And if your mother had a problem you had to help her. We were taught British history, British geography, British literature, and sang *God Save the King* at school assemblies. We were brought up to respect the Royal Family. I used to collect pictures of the King and Queen and the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret.

And my brother had gone to England and it seemed natural that I should follow him there. He had seen a copy of Hitler's book – *Mein Kampf* – which said that black people and Jews were semi-developed and he said: 'If that's the way you think, I'm going to join up, shoot your tail off and come home!' He joined the RAF.

And the war affected us in Jamaica you know. We had blackouts, rationing and shortages too. I remember in Kingston town, at a place they call Parade, they had two lists put up - a list of men reported missing and a list of men reported dead. And that list would go on and on - sometimes you'd go and you'd see the name of your cousin or your friend's brother reported dead.

With my brother already gone to England my family were against me going too, but I'm strong-willed and determined, so I listened to what they said, but I still wanted my chance and I knew I'd take it if it came. In 1943 there was a recruitment scheme, I got an interview and it went like a charm. My education stood me in good stead, and we had enough money for me to pay my own passage to England as I was told I would have to. Those with a more elementary education were not considered, and only 24 of us were selected from Jamaica, so it felt like I had really achieved

something. Although my father wasn't at all keen at first, when he heard that I had been accepted, he said it had been his idea all along!

On the journey to England I met Miss Curtis. She was from Bermuda – and had applied to the ATS in 1941, She received a letter from the War Office accepting her, subject to a medical, but she couldn't take up her place until 2 years later. In the meantime the War Office had found out she was black, and refused to accept her. They came up with all sorts of arguments, that the climate would be too cold, that she would fail her medical, that she wouldn't be able to adapt to British life and customs, that shipping shortages meant she wouldn't be able to come, but in the end, the Colonial Office made it clear that if she and others like her… like me … didn't come it could lead to political unrest in the West Indies – there had been strikes and protests in Jamaica the year before the war broke out. So her struggle had made it possible for the rest of us!

Hearing her story made me feel even prouder to be going. I wanted to be a part of the effort to fight for a better world. Going to England was a new adventure for me, an opportunity, an escape. At last I could do something about the war, not just sit at a desk. I was a teacher in Jamaica, mathematics was my specialty. I'm good with numbers and calculations you see.

We made our way to England by ship of course, stopping in New York for a few days before joining a convoy of ships to cross the Atlantic. In fact we didn't land in England, but in Greenock, in Scotland, in October. I have never been so cold. But I was determined not to show it! We were soon on the move again, heading down to London as it turned out, we were never told where we were going until we got there – 'Loose lips sink ships,' they said in America, 'Careless talk costs lives,' when we got to Britain. All for our own protection they said.

The trains in wartime were always crowded, once you got in you were sort of jammed up for the journey. When we arrived we had to travel by the Underground. We didn't know what that was – so we asked a man where it was, and with a startled look on his face he said – 'There…' so we followed his directions to 'there' and found it alright – and when we got to it, with all our bags, there were moving staircases to take you down there. So one of us was at the top putting the bags on, and I was at the bottom, grabbing all the bags off as quickly as I could! You can't imagine the confusion we caused!

We were all very smartly dressed; after all, we were starting a new career and wanted to make a good impression. I had my mother's pearls on for good luck.

After a short time in London, we were off to Guildford for basic training.

This came as a shock to all of us I think.

We weren't used to such a regimented life: make your bed the army way, clean your shoes the army way, drill… you got it, the army way…

They were going to send me on a secretarial course, to do administrative tasks, but I said that I didn't come all this way to do what I was doing at home, so they made me take an aptitude test, and that's when they found out that I was good at maths, and I was recruited for anti-aircraft radar operations – I was one of just a few of the first batch of us to do non-clerical work. I know my father would have been pleased!

I was in a mixed anti-aircraft, or Ack-Ack battery made up of both men and women. Something that had not happened before the war. Our CO said he wasn't at all happy to be in charge of a mixed section of gunners, but he'd have to accept it and so would we.

We were proud of what we were doing and had the privilege of wearing a white lanyard instead of the orange and brown lanyard of the ATS… That meant something.

I said before that in the ATS you were known by your surname – in gun training we didn't even have that – we were just numbers! 'Number 1 pay attention to what number 3 is doing!' And so on.

They tested our physical strength and technical capabilities and our performance under firing conditions, we went to lectures on army discipline, security, aircraft recognition and we had to pass everything, including drill.

When we were being trained on instruments, if any women didn't reach the required standard they would be sent back and found some other work - something we all feared and which did happen to some.

They didn't send me home though. I remember clearly the first time I heard the guns fire – it was frightening, but exciting – it made it real.

Mind you, the noise was deafening – great heavy anti-aircraft guns blasting away non-stop – and the acrid smell of cordite all around.

When in action we women carried out all functions short of actually firing the guns – this was because we were forbidden to do this by Royal Proclamation! We were subjected to all the dangers of working on such a site, although not given full combat status.

When I was first in England we were facing German bombing raids, and the guns were deployed against enemy planes, but with the launch of the second front and the D-Day landings in France those ceased. But they were replaced with something else. I'm talking about the Doodlebugs of course.

They were flying bombs, V1s, powered by an engine with a certain range… when the engine cut out there was short a silence, then they fell and exploded on impact. When we were walking we'd have to listen out for that sudden silence, and if we hear it to dive for cover.

To combat them a continuous line of guns was set up along the south coast, we'd fire up to 6,000 feet and the RAF sent fighters to intercept them too, they would fly above 6000 feet. It was quite a challenge, as they were small targets compared to planes, and few at high speed. As the raids were continuous, the firing was continuous, there was very little free time then!

At last the launch sites were overrun and destroyed, but there was worse to come.

The V2s were rockets, that travelled at supersonic speed - far too fast for us to do anything about them. There was no time to dive for cover, no tell-tale cutting out of the engine. But as our forces advanced finally the threat of the V2s ended too.

And now the war is over, I have to think what I will do next.

In Jamaica, there had been strikes and unrest just before the war, which might make you wonder why I volunteered to fight for our oppressors – well, my father told me that Norman Manley said that with the war there should be a suspension of such things until a more appropriate time… and that for now it was time to fight a worse enemy.

Well I think that more appropriate time has come. These are exciting times in Jamaica – we have our own constitution now. There have been elections too. My father is a big supporter of the People's National Party, but they lost the elections, to the Jamaican Labour Party. Well, whichever party is in power, we are well set on the road to independence… I think Norman Manley's time will come, and if it does, my father will probably say that was exactly his idea!

Perhaps I will go back to Jamaica. But I think not yet. There are opportunities here that I won't find at home. Some more study, some more training, and better job prospects too.

We've been well treated here, people seemed to have been glad that we came. There are so few black people in this country that sometimes schoolchildren would come up to me, and ask me the time, just to hear me speak. I've made some good friends too, and had no real problems. What do you say here? 'Keep calm and carry on.' I think I did, in everything I went through.

Well I haven't decided yet, whether to stay here or go home, but I can say I enjoyed my time in the ATS, if it's appropriate to say I've enjoyed the war! And to all my colleagues and friends I'd like to say:

'Thanks for the memories
Of the day we went to war
In Army haute couture

A uniform and underwear
Of the kind our mothers wore.’

[She laughs, fade to black.]