

Eiddwen Rees

Royal Ordnance Factory, Bridgend, S. Wales.
The Welsh Arsenal.

I started work as a nurse at Bridgend Arsenal in 1941. I was 24 yrs of age. After my training I worked in 2 hospitals, later I married and had a baby daughter. She was born a week before war was declared in 1939. Because I lived with my mother, I was liable to be "called up" and my mother would be expected to look after the baby. My husband was now in the Air force. However, it was 2 yrs later that I became an "Industrial Nurse". I did not know what to expect as working in industry was very different to hospital duties. I travelled every day by train including week-ends, it took about 1 1/2 - 2 hrs to make the journey. Travel was much slower then. I worked 3 shifts. Mornings, afternoons & nights. When I was on the morning shift, I got up at 4.30 to catch the train which left at 5.30 My shift began at 7 - 2pm. There were 12 sections in the Arsenal, each with offices, canteens, Aid Rooms. I worked on a section called "Smoke Section" and I was on the green shift, there was Red & Blue besides. There was 1 nurse on each shift, several hundred people worked on each section and on each shift. In an emergency I could call on 2 trained first Aid girls to help. Only once did that happen when there was an explosion in the work-shop. The surgery where I worked had a bed, medicines & dressings & ointments. It was basic first Aid really, but an explosion was something very different to deal with.

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Only one explosion happened when I was on duty. I will never forget it, I was on the afternoon shift, Nov. 15th 1943. It was a lovely sunny afternoon, when suddenly there was a terrific bang, there was an explosion in one of the workshops, it was so severe the roof came down and the walls collapsed, blocking 2 entrances. There were 14 people in the workshop at the time. The dense chemical filled smoke meant the disoriented workers could not see how to get out of the burning building. But help was at hand. About 50 yards from the burning workshop, Bryn Jenkins a maintenance fitter from Llanelli was working, he threw down his tool-box and ran to the burning workshop, he was unable to get in, luckily, an Auxiliary Fire Unit had been exercising nearby and was able to lay down a curtain of water to protect him. Groping his way through the suffocating smoke, Jenkins was able to lift & carry to the door not less than 4 people ~~to the door~~ and did not leave the building until he had handed all the victims over to the stretcher-bearer. Harry Tankum of Trelewis, Rhosell was killed, he had only worked there two weeks. A year later, Bryn Jenkins received the highest honour that can be awarded to a civilian, the "George Cross Medal". All the injured were brought into the "Kid Room" suffering from burns. A concrete wall collapsed and killed Harry. With the help of my two first aiders we dressed the burns and ordered ambulances to take them to the Adim Surgery where they were examined

by Doctors and sent to Chepstow Burns Hosp:

I stayed with the injured until they had all been transported to Hospital

I returned to my section at $\frac{1}{2}$ past 9
— What a day!

Not one bomb was dropped on the Arsenal during the whole of the war. This is remarkable, because from July 1940 - Aug 1941 bombs dropped all around. Many other communities within a radius of 5 miles of the Arsenal, some several times.

I believe this was "Divine Intervention"

There were many more deaths on different sections and many injuries from explosions, such as amputations of fingers, arms, hands & eyes.

One girl had been married for only a year, after only 3 days of working at the Arsenal she was involved in a horrific accident in which 5 people were killed and 14 injured. Gwen lost her sight, one arm and the other was rendered useless. She endured 46 operations.

She learnt Braille and trained as a singer. St. Dunstan's arranged for her to have lessons once a week in Hereford Cathedral. They called ^{her} the Dunstan's Nightingale. On a lighter note, the workers enjoyed "Music while you work" while they were having lunch at the canteen.

I've always been glad I had the opportunity to work at Bridgend, I spent 3 happy years there in spite of the misery that was brought.