

Joan Constance Knight Sandy (widely known as Jane Knight)

Jane was a quite remarkable person and we all have our own special memories of her. Some of the things you have said to me about her in recent days are

“a lovely lady,”

“a real character,”

“a constant reminder of how the old guard behaved,”

“an inspiration.”

These thoughts help to create a picture of Jane Knight the person: very much an individual and from a generation made of stern stuff. She had a long and very full life and it is my great privilege today to pay tribute to her.

At the outset let me say she was a lady full of surprises. Today's service sheet reveals one of them: none of us knew until after her death that she had recently changed her name by deed poll to add her maiden name, Sandy, to the name by which we all knew her. This I think was important to her and very much reflected her love and respect for her parents. Her father was a soldier, initially in The Buffs, and Jane inherited from him the notions of duty, loyalty and service that guided her throughout her life. Also as an Army child, she became used to moving around. Sadly her mother died when she was 9 but father remarried and Jane greatly loved her stepmother.

She was her own woman who always knew her own mind and, quite remarkably on 27th September 1938, the very day the formation of the Auxiliary Territorial Service was formally announced, Jane jumped on her bicycle and went to the Aldershot drill hall to volunteer. She was somewhat economical with the truth about her date of birth to ensure she was seen as over 18. Furthermore, when she was later enrolled into the 1st Hampshire Company ATS, she was technically still at commercial school.

Shortly afterwards her company went to camp with 2nd Battalion the Lincolnshire Regiment at Tidworth of which she had vivid memories especially of the rain, but she had some fun as well. There was a demarcation line between the men's and women's camps but it was only defined by some marker flags. In Jane's words: “In their off-duty moments the girls used to get together with the boys sitting side by side, each on their own side of the imaginary line.”

At this time the ATS was taking over many jobs in the Army to free up men for overseas duty. They were looking for girls with specialist qualifications. This was not a problem for Jane, but she did observe that qualifications appeared not to be necessary to become a cook. Jane's father had seen to it that she had a good start in life and she was Pitman qualified, with distinction, as a shorthand typist. As a result she was channelled into one of the emerging signal companies – something she was most unhappy about at the time. Nevertheless she became a teleprinter operator and moved around signal centres across the UK from Brighton to Preston. She was promoted lance corporal but promptly busted – she believed she was framed - but by the end of 1941 she had got two stripes and the pay to go with them. Her further leadership qualities were recognised and, after Officer Cadet Training, she was commissioned as a war substantive subaltern in October 1942. She now worked in a supervisory capacity in the larger communication centres and by 1944 was in London District – and meeting the Guards for the first time.

Then occurred probably the most traumatic event in her life. On Sunday morning 8th June she went to morning service in a packed Guards Chapel. Just after the service started at 11.00am it was hit by a V1 Flying Bomb, a Doodlebug. 121 military and civilians were killed and 141 seriously injured. Jane was posted as missing but in fact, injured, had been dug out of the rubble and taken home. In later years, many who knew Jane well were unaware of this major incident in her life which shows what a private person she always was. If you asked her about things she would tell you but would rarely volunteer information about herself. She was modest about her experiences and achievements.

Thankfully her injuries were not severe and a few months later she was on board a Cunarder converted as a troopship bound for Naples and the 8th Army. There she was employed as a Signalmaster and Jane was proud to be one of the first women to carry out this role. She arrived in Italy just after the battle for Monte Cassino and talk of that must have been in the air and so Jane did feel caught up in it. She also came into contact with Indian Army signallers with whom she formed a bond that was to last throughout her life. She served in Italy until the end of the campaign in May 1945 and qualified for the Territorial Efficiency medal.

A year later, no doubt frustrated by inactivity, she resigned her commission to take up a post with the little known United Nations organisation (UNRRA) dealing with the rehabilitation of Germany. She spent three years travelling widely as a secretary and PA to senior figures who were dealing with the enormous refugee problems and this matched the compassionate streak in her nature.

In 1949 a new chapter opened when, perhaps with memories of her earlier journey to Naples, she joined the P&O Steam Navigation Company in the purser's department. Over the next 12 years she worked her way up to Assistant Purser. It was a period of her life she greatly enjoyed and it obviously satisfied her craving for travel: she sailed the world many times and there are few countries she did not visit. On one memorable return voyage the Australian cricket team were on board. Jane got on famously with them. Her favourite seems to have been Neil Harvey but she thought the captain, Ritchie Benaud, a bit stand-offish. Back in the UK I think she went to see some of their matches and they responded by inviting her to a memorable dinner in the team hotel – the Regents Palace.

Probably influenced by the death of her dear father in 1961, she left P&O that year and there followed a period of varied employment including a spell back in Germany with the Women's Voluntary Service and four years in the office of the Agent General for New South Wales in London.

With a more stable lifestyle, Jane entered into marriage in 1969. She married Keith Knight who had himself been a trooper in the Lifeguards. They settled in Maidenhead where Jane helped with his business but very sadly the marriage did not last. However, she kept contact with members of Keith's family throughout the rest of her life, including her niece Ann Marie, whom we have met today. For 20 years Jane carried on in business, running the Three Counties Accommodation Agency based in Kingston. She thought it was boring but it paid the bills and I am sure its success owed much to her photographic memory (her words) and her critical eye: Jane expected things to be right and never shrank from letting it be known when they were not.

In the last period of her life – the time when most of us here today knew her – a new side to her character came to light: her great love of animals. Her favourites were cats and her last one, Slater, who led her a merry dance, has been described as “a cat with attitude.” Her compassion was again in evidence through her support of a whole range of animal charities to which she was very generous.

Earlier I gave you some quotations: there is another one – “a wonderfully eccentric lady.” Indeed, she did have a charmingly English eccentricity. For example, those who have cats sometimes need a cattery when they go away and might be expected to choose one near home. Not Jane. Hers was in Dorset. It is an excellent cattery but its location certainly complicated her arrangements for getting away on her various trips. Depending on your point of view, her habit of going down to the coast at all times of the year for a dip in the English Channel may also be considered a touch eccentric. None of this, however, can take anything from the sharpness of her mind which was active and alert to the very end.

In many ways she used those last years to retrace her steps both physically and spiritually. She continued to be an avid traveller. She went several times to commemorations at Monte Casino and attended reunions of one sort or another in India with Indian Signals, Holland and Gibraltar plus one or two P&O reunion cruises. Her sense of purpose never flagged: at Monte Casino it became her custom to lay a wreath at the memorial on behalf of the Master of Signals, much to his surprise and also RHQs when she sent them the bill.

Jane had a real affinity with all the regiments she came into contact with. At dinner nights we held here in Aldershot when most of us would stand for our own regimental march, Jane stood for almost all of them. She also threw herself wholeheartedly into the Associations of those regiments including of course the ATS, WRAC, Royal Signals, Indian Signals and, as far as I could tell, those of most of the Foot Guards regiments. She certainly marched proudly and smartly with their veterans down Whitehall on Remembrance Sunday for many years right up until 2008.

She was well known throughout the Royal Signals Association and granted Honour Membership. In particular she supported the three branches whose standards, along with the ATS standard, honour her today: West London, Reading and Aldershot.

She served on the committee of Aldershot Branch for about 20 years, regularly making the journey from Maidenhead for meetings and often needing to return late at night. It was a journey not without incident: Jane always enjoyed a joke about her brushes with the police in Camberley who one could believe were laying in wait for her. She was not unduly worried about that sort of thing – she talked them out of any drastic action they might be considering. There was one famous occasion when she arrived in a police car for a church service in a remote Hampshire village. She had run into a spot of bother at a roundabout in Basingstoke and had worked her magic on the officer attending the scene to get her to where she needed to be on time.

These light hearted incidents help us to celebrate Jane’s life. She was a unique blend of softer human qualities of humour, compassion and generosity but beneath these was a steel core of courage, toughness and resilience. She lived life to the full and I think enjoyed it. Above all she was guided by her personal code of service to monarch and country and intense dedication and loyalty to all of the organisations to which she belonged over the years. We shall not forget her.