

'I feel like a witness to history'

Olivia Barnes received the thanks of the Association's General Secretary for her work with recording oral histories of QA nurses. Steve Bax turned the tables to ask Olivia about her own story.

When asked how she signed up for the task of capturing the memories and experiences of QAs for future generations to enjoy, Olivia explained: "I joined the Heritage Committee of the QA Association about 10 years ago, purely because I've got an interest in history generally, not just military history. Kieran Spires, who was the chair of the committee, had an idea for an oral history project. It will eventually be stored at the Museum of Military Medicine when it moves to Cardiff.

"I was a clinical researcher for 25 years so I am very meticulous about taking consent and following the protocol. Several training days were held for volunteers, and I did my first profiles a couple of years before Covid. The length of service of my interviewees could be a year or 20 years, regular or reserve, it is all equally valid and important."

Olivia has completed 29 QA interviews to date and picked up another five at the Reunion Lunch to add to her waiting list. She has conducted interviews across the country from as Glasgow and Kent, often travelling the distance to speak to her interviewees face to face.

She said: "I offer people zoom but usually they prefer face to face, and I personally think it's better." Her shortest interview was 35 minutes, and her longest three hours and 15. One of her favourite interviewees was Netta, aged 102 who "talked for two hours without taking a breath".

Olivia continued: "We know the history of the Corps, the key dates, and what we stand for. The project is about recording personal experiences because everybody sees things differently their perspectives are fascinating. It is interesting to me how people who serve two years feel as much into the QA's as I do after nearly 30.

"Some of the older ladies said their parents were against them being a nurse and didn't see it as a good career. I don't remember a day when I didn't want to be a nurse. And I wanted to be in the army too. None of my family were in the military – they are farmers – and we didn't have a TV growing up, so I don't know where I got it from. I've loved every minute of it."

Olivia joined the regulars in 1978 and embarked on a three year 'short service' in Catterick and Hanover. She left and joined her forces husband in Germany, working as a civilian at BMH Rinteln for two years. Later she spent more than 20 years in the Reserves, including a stint as matron and second in command of 306 Field Hospital and as an SO1 patient tracking at AMSTC Strensall.

Olivia lives in Nuneaton with her husband and has stepchildren and step-grandchildren.



Kind-hearted husband and wife take disabled people sailing

Among the guests at the Victory Services Club were Peter and Carol Pocock, attending the Reunion Lunch for their second year. The couple met through a shared love of sailing, and interestingly, Peter switched from the RAMC to QARANC While Carol did the reverse.

Now retired, they spend the summer months taking disabled people out on the water and in the winter, they teach first aid. They attended the reunion in Cardiff last year after reading about the Association on social media.

Carol said: "Even though I was RAMC, the pharmacy technician trade I was in is relatively small, so I didn't know anybody. I trained with QAs and knew more of them, so did Peter, so we joined the Association last year, and it's been great because we've met so many people."

One of Peter's favourite moments was meeting our Patron, Sophie, Duchess of Edinburgh and sharing a few laughs.

Carol joined the Army in 1982 as a pharmacy technician. The RAF and the Navy had no vacancies for a qualified chemist supervisor, but the army were taking on women for the first time. It was a proud moment for her father, who had served with the Royal Navy in World War II. "After I qualified and got moved up to Corporal, he told everybody I was a colonel!" said Carol.

She was interested in sailing before joining the Army and a friend suggested she should meet Major Pocock, an instructor. They went on to marry and Peter taught Carol to be an instructor and then a coach assessor. They are now involved with Medway Sailability, an organisation which helps disabled people experience the joys of sailing. "We call the boat Able Spirit because the sailors' bodies may be disabled but not their spirit," explains Peter.

He joined the army at 15, intending to be a sickbay attendant until he could join the fire brigade at 18, but once he was in the RAMC, he never looked back. Peter served for 35 years, with postings to Yemen and Northern Ireland, and he became a Lt Col in the QARANC in 1992. Later, when he and his wife received redundancy, they bought a boat with the money.

Peter was a key figure in helping the General Nursing Council for England and Wales to create a radical new syllabus for mental nurse training and was awarded the ARRC in recognition.

