

# FORTIES POST

*A Salute to the '40s*

## AN ARTIST OF RECORD

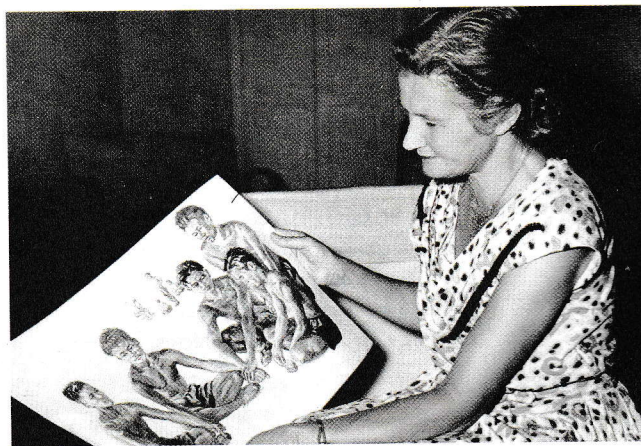
Artist Elva Blacker produced an unrivalled record of daily life on RAF stations during World War Two. **John Greeves** outlines her fascinating life

**E**lva Blacker was a war artist but it would be many years before she was given the recognition her skill deserved. During World War Two, she produced more than 1,000 portraits and sketches which the RAF acknowledged as “an unrivalled record of daily life on RAF stations.”

Her work served as a social history of daily life, personnel, and captured the intimate wartime panorama. Typical work shows Nissen huts, offices and sheds, where personnel undergo briefings, carry out radio communications or, in the case of pilots, are simply relaxing. Composite young faces are fixed in time, along with individual portraits of the men and women in RAF blue. Nothing of the “ordinary” is ignored.

Elva worked in watercolours and inks, and oil painted on boards, or whatever came to hand. Many of her drawings are made in ink and pen, using tonal shading. Some are delicate, refined and subtle; others portray a much bolder hand.

Born in Carshalton, Surrey in 1908, she was the daughter of William Harry Blacker, a photographer who ran a shop with a studio



**Elva, pictured with a sketch made in Singapore, travelled widely.**

in Sutton. The family initially lived above the business but later moved to a large, five-bedroom house at Egmont Corner in Sutton.

The family was comfortably middle class. William and his wife Clara did everything they could to ensure their two sons, Maurice and Tony, attended university.

Elva's dream of becoming an artist was denied. She was to follow her father into the photography business. “It was always being dinned in what clever brothers you were...” Elva once wrote in exasperation. At the age of 16 she was sent to Regent Street Polytechnic in London to study photography.

She not only studied photography at the

Poly, and worked for her father, but also attended evening classes as a part-time student at the Sutton and Cheam School of Arts. When her father died in 1930, she was further obliged to take on the business to support the family and especially her brothers at university.

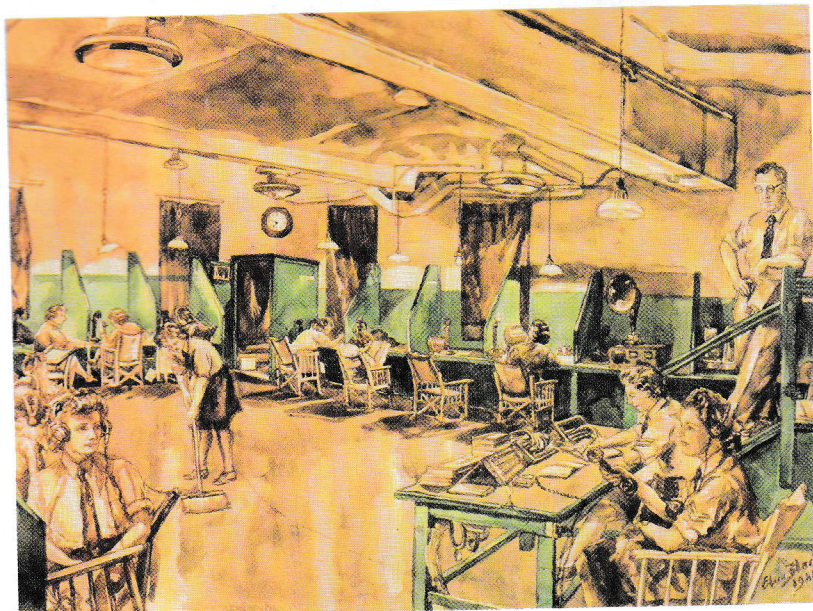
Elva worked long hours and weekends and increased the shop's yearly profits in the first year by £150 (£6,750 in today's money). In return, she received £1 per week. Eventually, both brothers left university and had successful careers in the Malayan Civil Service.

During the 1930s, Elva's photography and painting ran in parallel, and she exhibited in London, in the Paris Salon and at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh. Buoyed by a new optimism, she entered the Slade School of Fine Art in 1936, to study oil painting and sculpture, only to face other set-backs.

She had to revise virtually everything she had learned about art. Furthermore, “She didn't fit in, everyone was much younger,” Rebecca Jones, Elva's great-niece, tells me. Elva wrote: “They seemed to talk a different language to me but at least I could sit and listen.”

Although it was clear she didn't fit in at





Left: Elva Blacker who continued to paint until her late 60s at an exhibition of her wartime sketches. Right: Elva's work, such as this illustration of personnel at work in the Communications Room at RAF Biggin Hill, offers an eyewitness account of wartime life.

Slade, there was no doubting her ability: "Even before this time she was considered an exceptional miniaturist," Rebecca says. She had three miniatures accepted by the Royal Academy and six for an exhibition at Piccadilly for the Society of Miniaturists exhibition. The family still owns a beautiful miniature of George Bernard Shaw painted during this period.

When war broke out in 1939, Elva's ambitions to become a professional artist again appeared to be thwarted. She drove vehicles for the Blood Transfusion Service, until 1942 when she was called up. She joined the Waaf as a motor transport driver and after training was posted to Fighter Command at RAF Biggin Hill to drive ambulances and was later assigned as the personal driver to the chief intelligence officer on the station.

**“ Her wartime art could easily have been hidden away under the stairs. ”**

During this period at Biggin Hill and later at RAF Manston, she was given the unparalleled opportunity to record daily life on the RAF stations. Her output of sketches and portraits was immense, using whatever media was at hand. Nowhere, it seems, was off limits.

Rebecca explains by way of contrast, how other war artists often adopted war themes or generated imaginative work from memory. Elva captured the nuances of daily life as it unfolded.

"Elva was actually recording it as it

happened, almost photographically," Rebecca says. "She wasn't trying to tell a story of a particular event, rather she was documenting what she saw happening around her."

Called up aged 34, she was a decade older than most of her compatriots. She had no interest in going to the pub or dancing with servicemen much younger than herself. As Rebecca remarks: "She was horribly shy, and in a letter Elva wrote, she refers to a couple of men she'd like to have known better, but she couldn't spare blushing and talking to them without getting in a state."

Her real connection with people came through her art which allowed her to chat casually to people while she sketched or painted them. Towards the end of the war Elva extended her service and worked as an educational and vocational training instructor. She was demobbed in 1946 with the rank of sergeant.

After the war, she moved back to the family home in Sutton and decided to pursue painting as her career. She was friendly with Dame Lilian Baylis who managed the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells theatres in London and used her contacts to paint people from the world of theatre.


In her mid-40s and being more financially independent and secure, Elva developed a passion for travel. She travelled to Canada and the United States, producing animal portraits to generate income.

In 1957, she departed from Liverpool to attend a vegetarian congress in Bombay (being a vegetarian all her life) but didn't return home, touring India on a motor bike for 2½ years, as she painted and sketched and lived from hand-to-mouth.

She also travelled to the far east, where she painted landscapes and portraits including the first ever Yang di-Pertuan Agong (king of Malaysia) before returning to India, a country she loved and felt at home in.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, she was a free spirit coming and going as she liked. She took a great interest in other people and humanity issues and was a member of Soroptimist International, a global volunteer movement that helped and raised money for good causes like Save the Children.

Elva always had a fascination for speed and was involved in several accidents, the most devastating occurring in 1961. That injured her face and led to double vision, though Elva, who died in April 1984, continued to paint up to her late 60s.

The entirety of her wartime art could easily have laid dormant and never been discovered under the stairs of her home had it not been for the endeavours of retired Colonel SH Woods who met Elva on a sketching holiday. He wrote to the RAF Museum (020 8205 2266, rafmuseum.org.uk/london) about her large collection of work which was instantly recognised as the largest record of life on an RAF station produced, more so than the commissioned war artists of the period. Even today Elva's wartime art creates an enduring insight and understanding into the operations and personnel of an RAF station during wartime Britain. 

**A website dedicated to the memory of Elva Blacker, maintained by her great-niece Rebecca Jones, can be found at [chasingelva.com](http://chasingelva.com)**