BACKLER Gertrude Joan (known as Joan),

Wren, 85688
Women's Royal Naval Service
HMS Blackcap
Place of Birth: Haverhill
Date of Death: Thursday, 4th May 1944
Killed on active service
Cemetery: Haverhill



Gertrude Joan Backler (known as Joan) was born on 29th August 1924 at 23 Duddery Hill, the daughter of Albert Percy Backler and Gertrude Florence formerly Bigmore and older sister of Albert Peter (known as Peter).

She was baptised in the Old Independent Church on 28th September 1924.

Both of Joan's parents had associations with Haverhill dating back at least 5 generations (and possibly more) to the early 1700s. Many of her ancestors worked in the town as silk, cotton or hair weavers and bear the family names of many people who still live locally. (Backler, Bigmore, Scott, Basham, Farrant, Page to list just a few.)

Joan's mother, Gertrude Florence Bigmore, was born in 1897, one of the six surviving children of James Bigmore and Hebzibah formerly Humphrey who were both employed as Umbrella Silk Weavers. The family lived at 3 Meeting Walk. At the age of 13 Gertrude Florence was already working for a gents clothing manufacturer (probably at Chauntry Mills) as a tacking thread remover.

Her father, Albert Percy Backler, born 3rd May 1896 at 13 Crowland Road, was the son of Haverhill born Albert Backler and Alice formerly Scott who was from Saffron Walden. By 1911 the family were living at 87 High Street and Joan's grandfather who had earlier found employment as a Mat Maker was now working as a Blacksmith's striker. Her father aged 15 was working as a bootshop assistant.

On 23rd June 1923, after seeing service during WW1, first in the army and then transferring to the RAF in April 1918, Albert Percy and Gertrude Florence were married. Albert had presumably returned to his former employment for in 1939 he was employed as a boot and shoe assistant and the family were now living at 53 Withersfield Road.

Joan was a pupil at Haverhill Secondary School and attended the Old Independent Church Sunday School, later joining the Church choir. As she grew up she had wide-ranging interests and became involved with several local organisations. She was one of the first cadets in the Women's Junior Air Corps, attaining the rank of Unit Sergeant which was the highest rank possible for her age. She was a member of the Dramatic Society and also played cricket for JWAC.

On leaving school she was employed in the Egg Department of Mr F Sainsbury, Little Wratting where she proved herself to be an efficient worker.



In 1943 there was a government appeal to women to 'release a Sailor for Active Service' by enlisting in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and in October Joan signed up as a Wren Telegraphist. To join the Women's Royal Naval Service you had to have achieved the School Certificate which, in those days, meant you had to gain passes in English Language, Arithmetic and one foreign language. Wren Telegraphists were trained at HMS Cabbala, Lowton St. Marys, Leigh, Lancashire. It was a 6 month long course and they had to pass out in six subjects - Procedure, Coding, Receiving, Transmitting, Technical and Theory. They were trained to transmit and receive at 24-25 words per minute.

At the end of April, having completed her training as a Wren Telegraphist, Joan was posted to RNAS (Royal Naval Air Station) Stretton, known as HMS Blackcap (All Royal Naval Air Stations are named after birds) situated 3 miles South East of Warrington in Cheshire.



On the 4th May 1944, just three or four days after joining HMS Blackcap, Joan was taking a message by bicycle to the Control Tower during a heavy rainstorm. Somehow, she got onto the perimeter track and collided with a Miles Master (training aircraft) of 798 Squadron.



The Control Tower HMS Blackcap

Joan died from the injuries sustained in this accident, aged 19 years.

Joan was buried in Haverhill Cemetery (*Sec. U, grave 24*) with Full Military Honours.
Her coffin, which was draped with the White Ensign, was carried by nine soldiers of a Scottish Regiment.
Following a service in the West End Church, the cortege was preceded to the cemetery by the Regimental Pipe Band who played the dirge "The Flowers of the Forest".

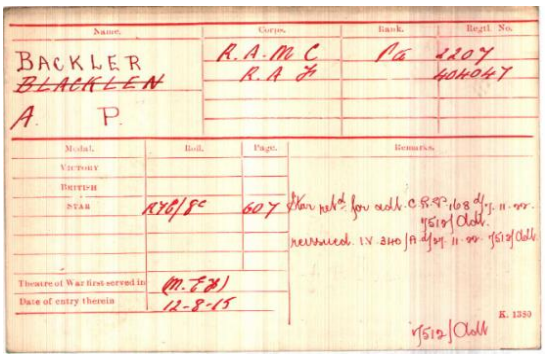




The South West Suffolk Echo 13 May 1944 reported that "the very large concourse of friends and sympathisers who gathered in the West End Church and at the cemetery bore testimony to the high regard in which Joan was held in the town".

Photo of Joan's father R.A.M.C PTE 2207

R.F.C / RAF 404047



Information regarding the accident kindly provided by George Rose, Birkenhead RBL.