

PATRICIA NOELINE ELLAM (Nee COWGILL), BSc (Eng), ACGI (1936-1998)

Written by her husband, Squadron Leader Clive Ellam, MSc, CEng, MIMechE, MRAeS, RAF Rtd.

Patricia Noeline Cowgill was born in Bradford and attended Bradford Girls' Grammar School. Noting her talent for mathematics, the school suggested she should apply to read maths at Cambridge and was disconcerted when she said she would rather read Aeronautical Engineering at Imperial College, where she would be 'among all those men'; her response was, in effect, so what?

She did indeed read Aeronautical Engineering at Imperial College, graduating in 1958 and, so far as we could establish, was the first woman to do so, although other women had preceded her in other fields of engineering. In her first year, Noeline found herself attending lectures with about 140 men; she always reckoned that at the first lecture she had gained control of the situation because she knew the men were going to be surprised and they did not.

After graduating, she joined me (being already my fiancée) in the design office of A V Roe & Co Ltd at Chadderton, Manchester, where she was appointed as a project aerodynamicist and was engaged in studies for possible future aircraft types including a long investigation into vertical take-off variants of existing aeroplanes.

We married in 1960 and in 1961 Noeline gave up work prior to the birth of our son, remaining a housewife until 1971, after the birth of our younger daughter. That autumn I took up a commission in the Royal Air Force Engineer Branch, while Noeline returned to work as the part-time Applied Maths teacher at a local girls' boarding school. The contract was for one year only but during that year Noeline discovered a previously unsuspected vocation for teaching and decided to seek further employment in further education.

This she did successfully, working in three different colleges (reflecting our Service moves) and teaching subjects as diverse as pure and applied maths, engineering science, workshop technology and welding technology.

In 1979, she joined the Ministry of Defence as a 'Burnham Lecturer' in the Apprentice Training Wing of No 1 School of Technical Training at Royal Air Force Halton, where she taught general engineering science and aircraft propulsion technology but not, to her everlasting regret, aerodynamics.

Noeline remained at Halton until 1994, eventually becoming the senior civilian lecturer in the wing. Her previous experience of further education had convinced her that much of the delivery was of a dubious standard; seeking to play a part in improving matters, she persuaded her superiors at Halton to allow her to act as a BTEC Moderator and continued in that role until her death.

In 1994, RAF technician training was transferred away from Halton; to avoid redundancy, Noeline took up her final post as Head of Mathematics at the Army Apprentices School near Harrogate training technicians for the Royal Corps of Signals, retiring in August 1996 when that establishment closed.

Post retirement she became active in the Women's Institute and, particularly in the U3A movement, becoming the founding Chair of a new branch in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire and serving in that role until her death; she was also a member of The Newcomen Society and we attended most events together.

Noeline died from a brain tumour in November 1998; her funeral service was held in St George's C of E Church, RAF Halton and was attended by many of the ex-apprentices she had taught, some of whom had made long journeys from their RAF postings to attend.