

**Interviewee: Dorothea French**

**Interviewer: William Francis**

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Interviewer: This is William Francis interviewing Dorothea French on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2010. So where were you when the war started?

Dorothea: I lived at home with my mother and father and two sisters in Sidcup, in Kent. We were on the borders of London. If we'd lived another mile away which was at Eltham we would have been evacuated during the war, we children, but because we lived the wrong side of the line we weren't. So we were in a danger zone during the war.

Interviewer: Did you move around during the war? Or did you just stay put there?

Dorothea: I stayed put till I joined the Land Army, I mean we used to go to school and things like that and, of course, I went to work when I was about sixteen – fifteen and a half something like that. I can't remember really. But it's a long time ago [laughs].

Interviewer: What kind of experiences did you have during the war?

Dorothea: Well, I joined the Land Army as you know, I went to several farms in – in Kent and also in Hertfordshire. I enjoyed it better in Hertfordshire, I – I went to some good farms. I must tell you a rather interesting story, if you want to know it. When I first went in the Land Army I knew nothing I was as green as grass, I was seventeen and mothers never taught us anything in those days about sex or anything, never, so I was as green as grass. I knew nothing. I was as innocent as they come. When I went to my first Dairy Farm we were – the farm – the – what's his name? The farm – the cowman, he said to me 'Come on', he said, 'We're taking the cow down to the bull today'. I said, 'Yeah, alright, alright', you know. Well, when we got there and I found out what was going on I could not – did know what to do with my face. I was so embarrassed, cos I, you know, looking everywhere but where – what was going on, cos I didn't want to know and the farm – the farmer – the cowman he thought it was hilarious. He said, 'How do you think we get milk and how do you think we get calves and how do you think we go on from one generation to another? This is normal', well, I – I mean, to me it wasn't [laughs]. So that was – that was the beginning, after that I went home one weekend and I said to my mother, 'Why didn't you tell us all this?', she said, 'We don't talk about things like that', she said. Well, they didn't in those days. Mothers didn't – didn't, well, nobody used to talk about sex in those days. It just wasn't talked about, you know. So I learnt the hard way.

Interviewer: What – what was your parents experience during – during –?

Dorothea: Well, my father was a – a Railway Policeman, so I expect he had a few experiences. He was a wonderful dad, he looked after us very well. He'd been in the First World War and was injured in his knee so he knew what war was all about. My mother never went to work after she got married

so she looked after us very well. She was a very good mum and she took care of us. Dad built a big hole in – in the ground for our air raid shelter and looked after us very well. So what experiences they had, they didn't really – he had a few after the war, he won the BM, actually, for bravery. He was at Hither Green goods yard, I don't know what year that was, and he was on duty at night and he was walking around the goods yard and saw this van, this truck, was on fire, and when he went there it was full of ammunition. So there was a man walking behind him and he said, 'Come here and give us a hand mate, will you', he said, 'Not me, mate, but I'll go for help', which he did. My dad climbed on to the – into this thing and said – and just put it out. Well, when he finished he'd got had – burnt hands and burnt coat and, anyway, when he got home the next morning my mother said to him, 'I've told you about this smoking before, you'll have to give it up' [laughs]. He never said a word and a few weeks later he had a letter to say he'd been awarded the BEM, British Empire Medal for bravery, but he was supposed to go to the – to the Palace to get. In those days you did and cos my mother was looking forward to that as well and the Queen dying – it was the year the King died, I don't know what year that was, and he had to go and see the Labour Minister which wasn't quite the same. Anyway, he's got it. I got it in the end, I can tell you a story about that but that's nothing to do with the war. Come on, off you go.

Interviewer: How did you feel about war when it first broke out?<sup>1</sup>

Dorothea: Well, we weren't very happy about it, you can imagine, when you're children you don't really know what's going on and what happens. I think we were frightened a little bit by it because we didn't know what was going to happen. So I don't – I don't think even the air raids we didn't know anything about. My father couldn't help us because he'd never experienced it either, air raids. He – I mean, he knew about war and fighting but he didn't know anything about air raids so until they happened, that's when we got frightened really. That was the worst bit. So when they did happen, my goodness, we – they used to come over as to go to London and if they couldn't drop them in London they used to come back and drop them on the way back and we got quite a lot of those and landmines and things, yes.

Interviewer: So – so which kind of air raids did you experience, like, V1, V2, the Blitz?

Dorothea: Well. No, it was first of all it was the ordinary bombs, you know, the ordinary ones and there were quite a few of those. I mean, we were lucky; we didn't get bombed as such. We had a few loose tiles and a few windows cracked but we didn't have anything really serious in our house, you know. But we had them all around us and then they brought these landmines in and they were bigger and they – they used to fall not quite on – we never had them on us but they were around us. So you heard all the noises and things of it, you know, and the aircraft – anti-aircraft guns and all this. It was quite noisy but in the end, you know, as children we used to sleep. We – it became commonplace, it sounds ridiculous but it did, because it was happening every night. So, you know, in the end I don't think we so much frightened, we felt safe in the – in the Anderson shelter if you understand. It wasn't

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<sup>1</sup> 5 min

a very comfortable place but we had beds in there and we kept warm. I mean, it was – my mother if there – if there was a lull in the – in the proceedings, she used to go in and make us a cup of tea and milk or whatever we used to drink and we managed, you know. It's just one of those things.

Interviewer: So what specific memories do you have of the air raids? Was it, like, houses being bombed out or near misses or family or friends on the road or –?

Dorothea: Well, nobody came – nobody very near got really damaged. They got their houses damaged like we did but nothing very serious and not right near us. But – cos people at school, you know, used to hear things at school that people had got bombed out and things like that but I didn't have any friends who really had any real trouble. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: So what – what – what was the consequences of air raid in your area? Like impact on housing and schooling?

Dorothea: Schooling, no, things went on as norm – we weren't evacuated, you see, because we were the wrong side of the line so we just had to carry on. We used to have air raid shelters of course, they were built over – there was brick-built things with little, just like, what I call them public toilets now, that's what they looked like. They were just – just brick-built edifices, you know, and they – they were used – a lot of them were used after the war as public toilets because they were there already and all they had to do was muck about with the inside, you know. But it's amazing, really, they were very well built, better than some of the houses these days, if you understand. And that's where people used to have to go when – if there was an air raid when you were out. You always found there was an air raid shelter quite near. There were an awful lot of them in those days.

Interviewer: How – how did you feel when air raids were happening, in anticipation of them and when the siren went afterwards to sound the all-clear?

Dorothea: Well, you – you used to hurry up – if you were out anywhere you – you'd find the nearest place you could go to in an air raid shelter because you were quite frightened to be out because, I mean, when they did come, by gum they did, you know. So you always had – went to the nearest shelter, if you were in London, you got the – the Underground stations and you used to go down there. People used to just let you in, you know, I mean, you never had any trouble about buying a ticket or anything. They used to say, 'Come', they'd open all the gates and let people in but you only could go to a certain place where they allowed you on a certain platform or something, deep down, you used to go down, right down to the bottom, you know. If – if there'd been a bomb at the top, you'd been all buried alive, you know, but you always went to the nearest place which you went – could get to and, of course, when the all-clear went, you came up and hoped<sup>2</sup> everything was alright. It wasn't sometimes. If you were in London, which I often was, I mean, find the shops were damaged, like John Lewis and a few others and I was in Oxford Street cos I worked at – around London and, you know, and it was pretty grim. Mm.

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<sup>2</sup> 10 min

Interviewer: What kind of jobs did you have in – before you started – joined the Land Army?

Dorothea: In what?

Interviewer: What kind of jobs did you have before you started work with the Land Army?

Dorothea: I was in the office, I was an office worker. I – I did shorthand and typing at school and I worked – I didn't have many jobs, I'm trying to think where I did work, now I can't remember. I think I worked for a place called General Motors, it was called, it was an American firm, I think I earned fifteen shillings per week in those days, which was an average wage, you know, for a youngster. Luckily my dad being on the railway, I got free, not free – but cheap tickets on the railway. So I'd get a season ticket for £1-1-9d, that's what I remember, £1-1-9d, which was old money and that lasted for three months. That wasn't bad, was it? [Laughs].

Interviewer: So in 1943 what – what made you go and join the Land Army?

Dorothea: Well, I was seventeen then and I went to see if I could join the WAAF and they said, 'No, you're too young'. I was only seventeen. 'Wait for six months and then you could come and join us', but I couldn't afford to wait that long, I wanted to do something for the war and my dad said to me, 'Well, why don't you join the Land Army, you like being outside', and so I said, 'Oh, yes, that's a good idea', so I did. I joined up in to the Land Army. That's why I went because I was too young to join anything else and I wanted to do my bit for the war. So that's why I went.

Interviewer: Did you receive any training before you –?

Dorothea: No.

Interviewer: Or any advice?

Dorothea: No. You just went on to the farms straight away. You didn't go anywhere. They just posted you to a farm.

Interviewer: So where were you first posted?

Dorothea: I went to Edenbridge to a farm, I can't remember the name of the man. He was a Lieutenant Colonel in the army in the First World War and he had this farm, he was a very nice man. Lieutenant Colonel – I can't think of his name now. Him and his wife, they had a lovely farm. A nice – it was dairy herd Jersey cows which were lovely cos they, you know, they – they're the best milk you can get. So I was there for quite a long time I went there and they taught me how to – to milk – a cow, as I told you. That's where I learned about sex and, as I say, they looked after – there's one thing, I know, I stayed in a house right in the middle of a field with – with a lady whose husband was in the army and when I got to the farm, the – the owner said to me, well, 'You can't live here cos we don't have room for Land Girls', he said, 'We don't have room for visitors or anything. So you'll have to go and live nearby and there's a very nice lady, Mrs Jeffery, who lives in the field at the back called Skipridges (??), one of my cottages'. But he didn't tell me it was – you – you had to go across the

field, you – you couldn't go by road because there was no path. You had to cross – that's where she lived and then she had to push pram and everything across this field and if it was dirty, my god, the mud, you know. So I went to live there and I was very happy with her, she was a very nice lady and looked after me very well. My mother and father used to come and see me and she'd look after them as well and she'd look after them as well and so they were great friends for the rest of their lives and I still write to her now. I send her a Christmas card and things. We don't have a lot to do with each other now but I still keep in touch with her, you know, which is rather nice.

Interviewer: So what particular responsibilities did you have in –?

Dorothea: You didn't have any, none. Oh, no, you had to do what you were told. You had to get there early in the morning, six o'clock, to bring the cows in from the – from the fields in the summer, in the winter they stayed in. But it was TT-tested herd so you had to – it was a very – and cos it was very, very stick in the mud, you had to do everything to the – to the book, you know. So before you ever started milking, you had to make sure the cows were clean, their udders were clean, the farm had – the farm building, the cowshed, was spotless so if there was any mess in there<sup>3</sup> it all had to be cleared up. And I was down before you started and they used to bring the hose and – and you had to lift the cow's toe tail while they hosed underneath. Poor things, so I've often felt bad that – but you never took any notice. They did it and then you – you sat down and, of course, your hands had to be inspected before you started to make sure they were clean and then you started milking. They didn't have, at that time they had Alpha Laval milking machines but they'd come out, they were very new and if a cow had been hand-milked before they'd been put on the machine then they wouldn't let down their cream. They used to let you have the milk but the cream had to be done so you had to go round what they called stripping. So cows that had been put straight on the machine when they started to be milked they – they'd give you the lot. But the cows that hadn't, you had to strip them all and get all the cream out, you know, to make sure that there was nothing left in the bag cos if – if anything had been left on the cow it would cause trouble and they used to get diseases and things so you had to be very careful. And you didn't – and another interesting thing that I did find out, when cow had a calf you took that cow straight away from that calf, you didn't let her stay with it because if you'd once let that cow have the calf to – to milk for the milk she'd never give you any. She used to hold on to it so we had cow – cows who hadn't passed their test cos they had to have be tested every year for – to be a certain limit, you know. They couldn't be a – over a – they had to be a certain range to make sure the milk was pure and all that. Well, if they didn't reach that stage then they were used for cow – for the calves for so to –. They used to have calves regularly but the milk was used for the – for all the calves, if you understand? So the cow never had her own baby ever because she wouldn't have given you any milk. It's interesting innit?

Interviewer: Mm. So what other kind of responsibilities did you have around the farm? Well, not responsibilities, what was you told to do?

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<sup>3</sup> 15 min

Dorothea: Well, we had – only had to deal with the cows. We didn't have anything to do with any – we didn't do any field work or anything because that was our job and believe me that was full-time because you had to start at six and then when it's all – when the milking was all finished you had to clean everything up and then you put the milk through special strainers and things and put it in to containers, it took all the morning. Then you went home for lunch, then you came back in the afternoon and it all started all over again so you didn't finish until about six o'clock at night. So it was a very long day, by that time you were worn out, believe me.

Interviewer: What – what did you enjoy about the job?

Dorothea: Oh, it was lovely because it was in the open air and you made a lot of friends and you weren't alone, there was always two or three of you, you know. They, I mean, we – we weren't alone of the farm. There was some boys and there was some girls, we used to have a good laugh. We enjoyed life, we didn't do a lot but – and we all had bikes so we used to go out for rides sometimes and keep away from everybody, you know.

Interviewer: What kind of things did you dislike about – about the job?

Dorothea: Well, nothing really. I can't say I disliked it, nothing really, because there was always something new and always something a new baby being born in the cowshed, you know, you used to look forward to that. In fact that was the first time I ever saw a baby being born and that was a cow, you know. But you had to be there in case there were any complications and you didn't very often call the vet because that cost a lot of money. Farmers weren't very well paid in those days, they didn't get a lot of money for their milk, I don't think. They used to come and collect it every day, in big churns, you know, used to – do you remember seeing the big milk churns? And, of course, all those had to be washed out, of course, and if they brought them back dirty, which they often did, we'd have to sterilise them. We had a sterilising machine, they – you'd have to fill them up – not fill them but you made sure they had – with boiling water and then they used to on a sort of pump [unclear], they used to be sterilised, you know, so nothing was – everything was absolutely hygienic, you know, because it was very – very – and all the milk we had from that firm – farm went to Dr. Barnardos home.

Interviewer: So did you have the same sort of job around – around the other farms you worked at<sup>4</sup>? Or was it all similar –?

Dorothea: I always went to a Dairy Farm, because some of them weren't very far. I went to another one, the chappy asked me if I'd go to his farm, it was only a small farm so I – I left this one and went to another and when I got there it as filthy and it was a – it was suppose to be a TT-tested and the – when I got into the – into the cowshed the next day, I said, 'Well, aren't you going to clear all this mud up before you start?', 'Oh, no, we don't bother, we don't bother with that'. I said, 'Well, well, you must, surely', and this girl said, 'We don't bother', so I stayed there a week and that was it, I left. But in the meantime I had a lady who used to work on the farm and she'd asked me if I'd like to go to

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<sup>4</sup> 20 min

Harpenden to work because that's where she was going and I had to change counties. I didn't particularly want to but I liked the sound of this one, you know. So I went to another farm, called Ladybrey – I think the first one was Ladybrey farm, lovely name isn't it, Ladybrey, that was the name of it. The second – when I went to Harpenden, I can't remember the name of that farm but it was a Scottish couple had it and they were just outside Harpenden, upon the – in the fields, you know. I loved it there, that was a very nice farm and there were several of us there, two or three girls, you know. I went there with this – I didn't get on with this girl very much – this one I'd met, she was a bit officious, is the word. So we didn't have a lot to do and she left very soon – shortly after and went to a farm with animals, horses. Well, I was gonna go there but they said I mustn't because it wasn't war work, you had to – if you were in the Land Army it had to be war work and looking after horses was not so that was it. So I stayed on the farm and while I was there, I met a couple from Luton, who worked in Luton, the man had a business and they lived on Harpenden – Harpenden on King's Bourne Green, where I was and they belonged to – and I was a singer in those days. They – we were talking about singing and she said, 'We belong to the Luton Choral Society', she said, which was run by Arthur Davies who also ran the Luton Choral Society – Luton Girls Choir, which was very famous in those days, well, they were renowned, you know. So I went to see this Arthur Davies and he gave me a – an audition and said, 'Do this and sing this and do it this way' and, you know, and he said, 'You've got a lovely voice and, yes, I'll have you in my choir'. So I had to find a white dress for when we did our concerts, you know. My – I – I – we – you had clothing coupons in those days and I didn't have the money – the money or the coupons to buy a white – a long white dress. So I had a friend who turned out to be my sister's sister-in-law in the end and she said to me, 'Well, I'll give you my wedding dress', she said, 'but you must take great care of it', she said, 'I'm giving it to you hoping you'll look after it'. So she gave me this dress and it had a train on it so I had to have it taken off, the train, you know, and I had this dress for all the time I was in the choir which was a lovely dress, really, and it – I had a picture once but I can't find it now. I was looking for it but so I was in this choir for a long time and then I heard when I left the Land Army that this Arthur Davies, the – the conductor, he left in his will, because he started the two choirs, he left in his will that he wanted both choirs disbanded when he died and so they – that was the end of it. It's such a shame because they were both good choirs, you know. It seems an awful shame doesn't it, especially the Luton Girls choir because they were well-known, you know. So that was interesting.

Interviewer: So what kind of other activities did you do outside of working in the Land Army?

Dorothea: Working?

Interviewer: What was daily life like?

Dorothea: Well, you didn't have much time really. In the evenings you were so tired you – you just went home and talked to your landlady or listened to the radio or whatever. But you – and you did knitting, I did knitting for – knitting for the troops and making socks and all that, didn't go out much. I mean, it wasn't a job you could – you were out in the country anyway, you know, there was nothing about and if you went anywhere you had to go on your bike. So my – I had a bike, luckily, and that's

what happened. And on the last farm I was in<sup>5</sup> Harpenden – in this Scottish one, we had to pigs, one for the government and one for the farm. So when we were looking after these pigs we used to weigh them every week to make sure they were the same weight because we weren't gonna give the government a bigger one than we had ourselves, you see. So we used to weigh them to make sure they were both the same weight. Well, when they went to the [unclear] when they were fully grown and – the one came back and the other one went to the – wherever it was going for the rest of the people, you know. When we got ours back, well, the farmer's wife had it and she – we never thought anything about it but about a week after I was going on holiday and I had a note from the – from the farmer, he said, 'Mrs Blair' that was his wife, 'wants you to see her before you go home. She's got a parcel for your mother'. 'Oh', I thought, 'that will be nice', I didn't know what it was or anything. Anyway, I got this parcel and it was quite a big one, he said, 'Now, don't leave this on this on the train', she said, 'You promise me you will take great care of it but don't leave it on the train', cos I had to go from there to Sidcup, you see. So my dad always met me at the station, always, to carry me luggage cos he had a bike as well, cos that's the only way we could get home, you know, from the station. So I had this big parcel as well as me luggage, well, weekend stuff, you know, and he said, 'What's in there?', I said, 'I don't know, got no idea, it's for mum', you know. So when I got home my mother said, 'What's that then?', so he said, 'Well, she's brought for you from the farmer. Don't know what it is'. When she opened it, oh, and she'd said to me before this, 'Darling, I'm terribly sorry but all we got for lunch tomorrow is corn beef', 'Well', I said, 'that's alright', didn't mind what I ate, you know, didn't matter in those days. You ate what you were given and that was it and I said, 'Well, that's alright'. So my dad said, 'Well, you better open that parcel and see what's in it', when she opened it, she burst in to tears. She'd never seen anything like it, there was half a leg of lamb – pork rather and there was some back and some other bits and chops and some offal and, oh, she just – the tears and my dad said, 'Will do that with this, and we'll have that for Sunday and we'll do this for that and we'll keep it. Make sure we'll use it all', you know, so he was a great organiser my dad. So we had lovely dinner that weekend. So that was nice wasn't it?

Interviewer: So what – what kind of meals did you have whilst you were working for the Land Army? What was the rationing like?

Dorothea: Well, rationing was pretty strict but, of course, we had things of the farm like vegetables and things. I mean, the landladies didn't do too badly because if they looked after us they were lucky, you know, because they didn't have too much trouble and they had plenty of vegetables. That's what we lived on really, very little meat. But vegetables, if you were on a farm, you always had plenty to eat, you weren't short. Eggs, we did have eggs and things like that. I'm just trying to think what else we used to have. Bacon now and again when we had a pig, you know, but nothing – nothing very elaborate. We – at Christmas time we didn't have turkeys on our farm, we had chickens but we always killed a chicken, they always killed a chicken for Christmas and I always had one to take home – Christmas.

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<sup>5</sup> 25 min

Interviewer: So whilst you were there at Christmas were you allowed to go home?

Dorothea: Oh, not all – not every Christmas. No, no. You had still – we still did the work every day and they still came and collected the milk every day so, no, you didn't have Christmas off but you used to have – you had time to go to church, they made sure one of you went either morning or evening and someone would take you in the van or whatever, you know. So – cos when it was dark none of us went anywhere on our bikes, well, we did have to get home, you know, from the farm but you didn't go anywhere on your bike at night because there was no – no streetlights or anything and there were – although there were not many incidents but you never knew whether there was going to be one or not, you know. Where we were out in the country we didn't hear many – we didn't have so many air raids out there.

Interviewer: So what kind of experience of air raids out – in the countryside and [unclear]?

Dorothea: Well, not – say quiet really it was a very quiet life outside of the farm, you had – you were busy all day but you didn't have much time in the evening, you were really glad to get home and have a rest because you were at the go all the time.

Interviewer: So did you feel though that you were kind of taken away a bit from the war? Did you feel –?

Dorothea: You felt you were doing your bit for the war effort because<sup>6</sup> you were looking after other people and looking after our own, you know. Looking after the people in England, you weren't – you weren't wasting your life anyway.

Interviewer: Was that the feeling – the general consensus for everyone else?

Dorothea: Well, I suppose so. I don't know really what other people thought. We never used to talk about it actually. We just got on with it and if you enjoyed it all the better, you know. Well, we had a – we had – we were lucky because we didn't have to do any washing, our landladies did all that. But we wore dungarees and shirts that the Land Army provided and you had a nice pair of trousers and great coat and a hat to wear when you went out. And socks, shoes everything was provided so we didn't have to worry about clothes because you had a uniform to wear, ummh.

Interviewer: So what kind of – do you have any specific memories about being in the Land Army that you took away from that experience?

Dorothea: Only that – that I'd enjoyed it and when you say memories. I mean, you do have memories but not anything you can, I mean, you had friends that you used to, I mean, my last job, funnily enough, was I left the farm and went home to live because something had happened and I can't remember what it was now but I must have had a disagreement with somebody about a job I was doing and I said to my mum and dad, 'I'm not going anywhere now, I'm going to stay here and if they

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<sup>6</sup> 30 min

won't find me a job here I'm not going anymore'. So they found me a job in a nursery to grow tomatoes. Well, I'm good tomato grower now and I did that for nearly, I suppose, six months altogether and I met a very nice lady there called Joyce and we've been friends ever since and she was twenty and I was – I must have been nineteen and a half/twenty by then. She was a year older than me and she was getting married to a [unclear]. So we've been friends ever since, I was godmother to her first child and we – we – both of us had to learn how to grow tomatoes and believe me that's hard. It's hard work, cos you got to plant them, you got to make sure they've got a string attached to them to go up to the roof, you know, and when they get to four – so many trusses you have to take them all – the top off. Oh, it's quite an interesting job and look after them and fed them and all that sort of thing. Make sure they got no side shoots so that you get value in the tomato. That was an interesting job too and that was Evans Nursery in Sidcup which isn't there anymore – so.

Interviewer: So once the war ended were you – did the Women's Land Army stop? Did you exit or did you carry on for a while?

Dorothea: We had – we had to carry on for a while but not for too long, it was about, I suppose, six months or something like that. Perhaps six months, I'm not sure but they told us when we – when we could leave because when the men came they said to us actually, 'When the men come back from the war and they come back to work, you must leave because you're taking their work from – you're taking their job from them, you see'. So when the war was over and the men came home, most of them came back to where they worked before because that was what they knew so we had to leave then because we – our job was done, you see what I mean?

Interviewer: How did you feel about giving your job back to them then?

Dorothea: Well, we knew. We knew that it was gonna happen so we didn't think about it, really. We just knew that it was gonna happen and that was it. So you, I think everybody that did it was quite – probably quite pleased because they'd done a good job. We had to do a good job otherwise nobody would have been fed, would they? So there we are.

Interviewer: What would you say changed as a result of the war?

Dorothea: Probably, I grew up quicker. I grew up quicker than I would have done normally because you learned a lot of things from – from life on the farm, believe me. You – you had to make sure that the calves were born every year and things like that. I mean, after my first experience I didn't worry after a while because you got used to it [laughs]. But there we are. So you do – did learn a lot, I mean, I learned how life went on, you know. I also – you get a – a sense of values how much it costs for everything and I think you never lose that. So although it doesn't make you exactly mean but you're careful after that. You – I think you got respect for food and things like that, I mean, I won't waste anything. I only<sup>7</sup> have enough food for me if you understand, since my husband's been dead, I only – I

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<sup>7</sup> 35 min

only cook enough for what I need – what I know I need. I don't waste a thing. So it does give you a feeling of respect and you don't waste money on food that you don't want.

Interviewer: So would you say that describes your war?

Dorothea: Yes, I think, yes, I had a good war. I mean really. I didn't have – do you find that interesting by the way?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Dorothea: Oh, you do. I didn't know whether you would or not. I mean, I didn't know whether what I said was enough, you know. Oh, good.

Interviewer: So in terms of your area when you got back home from working with the Land Army, how did you find your area in Sidcup had changed?

Dorothea: Not a lot really cos everybody, all the kids had grown up, some had left home and gone in the army, some were still there. I wouldn't say it had changed a great deal cos I lived in Sidcup, don't forget for the last year.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Dorothea: So, I didn't really take much notice so and I never went back to any of the farms that I worked at – so.

Interviewer: So once the war finished and you finished in the Land Army, I think you said you joined the Women's Royal Air Force?

Dorothea: I went in to the Air Force, yes.

Interviewer: What year did you do that?

Dorothea: 1946-49.

Interviewer: And what kind of experiences did you have there?

Dorothea: I had a wonderful time in the Air Force, I enjoyed – actually, I've had three careers, I had the Land Army, then I went in to the Women's Royal Air Force, it was called the WAAF in those days, Women's Auxiliary Air Force it was and while I was in it they changed the name to the Women's Royal Air Force so it – it got promoted. I was a policewoman, when I went for my interview, I went to see the WAAF, this WAAF officer, and she said, 'What do you want to do?', I said, 'Well, I'm a shorthand typist so I want clerical work'. She looked at my list of the thing and she said, 'I see your father's a policeman', I said, 'Yes', she said, 'Would you like to be a policewoman?', I said, 'Yes, I think I would'. So she said, 'Well, we'll write you down then as a – as a policewoman, who'd like to be a policewoman'. I said, 'Yeah, that would be fine, mam. Thank you very much'. So when I joined the Air Force I had to go for training to Staverton, was the name of the place, for a month to make sure

you knew where to march and how to look after your clothes and be smart, you know. Then I went to the Police School which was near Cheltenham. I can't remember the name of the place now, but it was a – the Police College, Police School, where you learnt how to do, self-defence and how to – you had to learn the rules the same as the police. You had to learn all the background to -- if anybody did anything wrong and you have caution everybody, you had to do all those things that the police had to do so if you arrested anyone you had to make sure they were cautioned and you had to make sure they didn't have any firearms on them and things like that. You had to search them, cos we only dealt with women, we don't – we didn't deal with men. We – we were on the women's side, you see, and you had to make sure they were safe before they were arrested so that they didn't bring any firearms on to the thing and cos drugs weren't no – didn't have anything about drugs in those days. I don't think we learnt a lot about drugs because there was no such thing in those days, which was good. So there was quite a lot to learn and I was posted to London cos the year I went in 1946 we had a terrible winter and that was when I'd finished my course and everything, was in the winter and although nobody was posted to anywhere but London so we all got to London to Princess Gate Court which was the – that was in Exhibition Road, right behind the Albert Hall. So when I got there I thought, London, I didn't want to stop in London, anyway, we got there and this Flight Sergeant, very, very posh and very strict, so I said, 'scuse me, sergeant', I said, 'How long do we have to stay here'. So she said, 'If you're no good we shall get rid of you very – very shortly but if you're any good we'll probably keep you'. I never moved, I was there all the time. So I was in London the whole of my three years but I enjoyed it<sup>8</sup> because we used to have some wonderful experiences up there and when there were any tickets going for the Land – Albert Hall for any promenade concerts and things we used to be able to go cos we were only round the corner. There were a lot of incidents, I can't tell you them all now, but, yes, we used to have quite a good time. Cos, mind you, there was a lot to do and you used to have to pick up women that had gone absent from different police stations and bring them in and put them in the cells, you know, and things like that. So it was quite an interesting job. Then I became a – I was a Corporal because all policewomen were given, once they passed their test and everything and were policewomen they had to be given stripes. So you were a Corporal from the word go and then you were promoted after a while if you were any good and I became a Sergeant. I never really got to the stage where I was a Flight Sergeant because I'd left by then. But you had, I think, to do a good two years as a Sergeant before you became a Flight Sergeant so I became a Sergeant and I – I thoroughly enjoyed every bit. The last year, well, more before that, actually, I was working – I was on – I didn't go on patrol very much. I used to – I was in CI – CIB which is SIB which is Special Investigation Department. I did that job for quite a long time but then one day the Flight Sergeant – the Sergeant, no, the Officer in charge, her name was – what was her name? I can't think of it now – and she sent for me, she said, 'I think, sergeant, you do shorthand and typing', I said, 'Yes, mam', she said, 'Well, next week I want you to come and work for me', she said. So I did, I worked for her for a while and one day she said to me, 'The Wing Commander wants to see you', so, 'What have I done wrong?', you know, 'He wants you straight away so go in to see him'. So he was a little Welshman

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<sup>8</sup> 40 min

and he was a – he was a sod, he really was. Not to me but he was to the men, he was awful. So I went in there and he said, 'I want you as my – I understand you're a shorthand and typist. Tomorrow I want you to come and work for me', so, 'Yes, sir'. I haven't got any choice, you have to do as you're told, you know. So I did and one day he said to me, 'I've got six men, to have this morning', I said, 'Oh, yeah', they've all done something wrong I've forgot what it was now, 'So they're coming at such and such time', I said, 'Yes, alright, sir'. So anyway when they came and I showed them in and I was going out, 'Stay where you are. Don't you go out', so, oh, he tore these blokes of a strip, I – I – it was awful. I had to sit and listen to all this, you know, and then when they – I forgotten what they got, they got some sentence, they had to do something, you know, he gave them a punishment and, of course, when they gone he went like this to me, 'How did I do?', I said, 'Don't – sir, don't you ever do that to me again', 'What have I done', so I said, 'You've embarrassed me in front of all those men', I've said, 'I've got to live with these people, you haven't', I said, 'Don't you ever do that to me again. If there's anything wrong, let me go out. I don't want to know'. So I never told him whether he'd done good or not. He hadn't, I mean, to quite – he'd humiliated everybody and I don't consider that good. He could have told them off but not the way he did, he swore and it was awful. So anyway, I gave him his cuppa, come up and I never minded telling anyone if I thought it wasn't right and so I got quite a reputation, really, for telling the truth, and I – even when I was in the BBC I did the same thing [laughs].

Interviewer: So working in the WAAF was that kind of – did you take a lot of your experiences from the Land Army in to – in to the –?

Dorothea: Not, really, you know, because it was a different life, I mean, if you were in the Land Army you didn't have to do as you were told, if you – well, you did but it wasn't quite the same. You were left to your own devices and once you learnt how to do a job then that was it, you did it. But nobody was standing over you and giving you orders, well, when you were in the WAAF you had – you were supervised more or less all the time because when you were out – even out on a job people used to come around and see if you were doing your job properly, you know. So whatever you did, you had to do it right otherwise there was – you'd be on a charge, you know.

Interviewer: What – what's your main memory of being in the WAFs?

Dorothea: What's my memories?<sup>9</sup>

Interviewer: What's your main memory, what would you say?

Dorothea: Well, I thoroughly enjoyed it, I mean, I can't say that discipline never worried me cos it was something even at school I never minded discipline and there was – it was quite harsh, discipline isn't good in the – in the Air Force or wasn't then. You had to do as you were told or else, you know. I would think discipline was the most important thing but I never minded it but other people – some people used to resent it and they didn't last long. They used to be posted if there was any trouble, you

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<sup>9</sup> 45 min

know, but never bothered me. I just got on with it and that was it, if I had anything to say I'd say it, whether it was right or wrong, you know. But I never got – I've never been – went on a charge. That's what I remember most. I never got charged for anything which was quite something. So I was pleased about that.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time Mrs. French. Bye-bye.

**End of Interview.**