

Interviewee: Eileen Rogers

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 05.10.2010

Interviewer: This is Malin Lundin doing an interview with Eileen Rogers on the 5th of October 2010.

Eileen: 2010, yes.

Interviewer: Would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

Eileen: Yes, December 1923.

Interviewer: Ok, how old were you when war broke out?

Eileen: I was fifteen coming up to sixteen. Yeah.

Interviewer: Where were you living?

Eileen: In Erith. West Street, Erith.

Interviewer: And who were you living with?

Eileen: My mother. Yeah, just my mother.

Interviewer: Ok, can you remember the day that war broke out?

Eileen: Yes. Thinking back, I think, it was a Saturday or a Sunday but I can remember the siren going during the day. We'd got a Catholic Church right opposite and they were — they'd just come out of church so it was 12 o'clock and once the sirens went, which they were, not for a raid but just to try them out we think. And they all dispersed but some of them went in the pub [laughs]. But, no, it was a Saturday, I think it was a Saturday when the war broke out, yeah. And everybody sort of said, 'Where do we go?', 'What are we going to do?', you know. But nobody did anything.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt that first day of — when war broke out?

Eileen: No, not really. It was sort of a bit exciting, really, to think that we was at war! Which was on the radio, 'We are now at war' but I mean, I didn't mean anything particularly at that time. It was just another programme on the radio, yeah.

Interviewer: So when the sirens went that first day, did you go down the shelter or?

Eileen: No, we had no shelters. We had no shelters at that time. It was after a week or so when all the Anderson shelters came round and we had to dig a hole in the garden but at the time we lived in rooms in the house and there were a couple of other families.

Interviewer: Were there any communal shelters in the area?

Eileen: Yes. The school that I used to go to at the end of the road they had a — I only went in one but otherwise it was the Anderson but the only thing was with the Anderson when you were in it, because you were warm, the stainless steel shelter used to drip. You used to get condensation so we lined it with wallpaper to stop the drips coming down because we had a mattress on the floor in the Anderson, yeah.

Interviewer: So what were you doing at this time? Had you finished school?

Eileen: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Were you working?

Eileen: Yes, my mother — actually I would have liked to been a hairdresser but because the little shop that was near us at the time which I used to help in before, you know, at school time. She said, 'Would you like to come and live — would you like to come and work with me?' and I said, 'Oh, yes.', so she said, 'Ask your mother', so when I spoke to her she said, 'How much wages will you get?', I said 'Well, I don't know'. So when I went back she said, 'We could give you half a crown a week' but that wouldn't suit my mother. She said, 'No, no', because there was a big factory just across the road that made dry batteries. She said, 'No, you're going to work over there', so that's where I went to work.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in the factory?

Eileen: Until it got bombed.

Interviewer: And what time was that?

Eileen: When I was — seventeen, it was about a year that I worked there — yeah. They dropped incendiaries on it and it all went up — yeah.

Interviewer: Did you have many air raids in the area?

Eileen: We had a lot of air raids but we didn't get bombed very much. We had a few sort of — at the bottom of our garden was a hole¹ that made sheds — all wood and the river was there so when the air raids were on the aircraft used to come up Essex way up the river. We were this side and Essex was that side — yeah, so we didn't — we didn't have many houses blasted or anything like that but when the factory got bombed and set alight I hadn't got a job. So I worked — I found a job in a — we called it — I can't think of it now. During the war or just before the — just at the beginning of the war shops and Woolworths and the big stores used to have boxes where people used to put their foil from the cigarette package or their old toothpastes in or anything in there for the war effort. So the job that I did, we used sort it all out. All the old boxes used to come in to the factory and we used to sort out the lid and the paper from the cigarette packages and that sort of thing. Yes, I worked there for a couple

¹ 5 min

of years, until I was eighteen and then I went in to Fraser and I worked in there for a few months and I volunteered for this job do from when I was eighteen until the war finished I worked on the spotting.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit — what that job involved? What were your main duties?

Eileen: Well, there were a group of four women. Two on daytime and two night time and we had a map of about a yard square cut off and marked out into one mile squares and we were attached to the phone which we had headphones and we were attached to the gun sites, as we called them down at Dover and on the coast and they used to — if — if the air raid sirens went they used to give us a warning through our headphones and after a time they would give us, what we called, a plot. And we would mark it on the map and the map itself, although it was a yard square. Erith, which was our area, was in the centre and we had two circles, one of ten miles and one of twenty-five but what we did — when we plotted the aircraft and how many they were and which direction they were coming and if they got in to the outer circle we had a bell which we would ring once which all the factories that was on our list would take warning of that there was an air raid coming our way. But when the plot went in to the second circle of ten miles and the plots were coming across Erith then we would give them two rings and they would take shelter until the all clear. But the reason was the factories, when the air raid sirens went, the factories used to put their employers — employees down in to shelter and they stopped work. So, cos the factories didn't get any work while they were down there so we used to give them a few hours while the aircraft was over the — overhead or just going or coming our way and they would come up from shelter. So that saved the factories, you know, all the waste of work. Yeah, so we — at night time we had a little office in the factory but during the day we would be on top of the foundry, you know, we had a little wooden box but we did have a man spotter with his binoculars and he would be² out in the open air but he was there to keep an eye on the factory and incendiaries and anything like that. So we sat underneath with our map and he stood up on top with his binoculars [laughs] — yeah.

Interviewer: Did you go down to the shelters with the workers when —?

Eileen: No, we stayed in the — either in the office or the box on the roof.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Eileen: Well, I was thinking about that the other day. I was never scared, even during the war, I was not actually terrified. I used to go dancing in the British Legion halls and came home with the flairs. The flairs that you used to drop and I used to say, 'Thank you very much', you know, drop the flairs so I could see the way home instead of going through the blackout. Yeah, I used to walk miles really during the blackout.

Interviewer: Did you feel safe walking in the dark?

² 10 min

Eileen: Yes, I used to come home from the gun site where they had and see the search lights over the sky and hear the air raids and – no, not really terrified, frightened at times, of course, but not really terrified.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was? That you weren't that scared.

Eileen: I don't know. Perhaps because I was a teenager, you know, we enjoyed the dances, walked home, got the last bus home and [laughs] and that sort of thing.

Interviewer: What was the best part of your job would you say?

Eileen: Well, I suppose, it was the — the fact that, you know, we used to walk through the foundry and the men would say, 'We're gonna have one today. We're gonna have an air raid', 'What did you think of that one last night, was that a good one or —?'. There was always a feeling of, 'it wasn't that bad', 'Did you get a bomb?', 'Did we get a bomb.', and you know — yeah. No, there was always a feeling of comrade — yeah. People would talk to each other and yeah.

Interviewer: Were there many women working in the factories or the foundry as well or was there mainly men?

Eileen: Yes. No, in the — the, what we called the 'Gallery' in the Fraser & Chalmers there were women working on the milling machines making — when I was first there — making bridge blocks for guns and things, you know, they were all women. Yeah, quite a few, before I became a spotter [laughs] — yeah.

Interviewer: So do you know if these women — were they conscripted into work in the —?

Eileen: Yes, I shall imagine that some of them were there because if we hadn't have been on, what they called, munitions, we would have been conscripted in to the services. Actually, that — I have a photograph there of my friend, who now lives in Australia, she was in the ATS. Her and I were friends and she was a cook and she was a cook for the — I have a photograph there of her and I when we were ten and what she looks like now. [Pause]. When her and I were ten and she was in the ATS and that's her now.

Interviewer: So is that her?

Eileen: Yes.

Interviewer: And that's you?

Eileen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok, when was the last time you saw her then?

Eileen: About twenty years ago, I suppose, now. I talk to her on the phone — yeah. We lost, I mean, this was when we were about ten or eleven and we lost during the war we lost with the railings of the fences. They took them for ammunition and guns — yeah.

Interviewer: Did you spend a lot of time with her during the war?

Eileen: Yes, before she went in to the army — yeah.³

Interviewer: Where was she posted then?

Eileen: Um —

Interviewer: Did you stay in Britain?

Eileen: She wasn't far away if I remember. Not too far away. Yeah, you'd see her when she was on leave. I was friendly with her mother and she used to come on leave and we would have a little — we'd go to the British Legion and have a dance — yeah. Yeah but — yeah — things differ don't they.

Interviewer: So what would you say was the worst part of your work?

Eileen: The work?

Interviewer: Yeah, the work that you did.

Eileen: No, we enjoyed it actually. Yes, yeah. The only — the only night that was a little bit terrorised I suppose was the — when they — when we were given a plot with pilotless aircrafts and we all sort of 'Umm, what is that?' and that was the doodlebug. So — that was the only night that we was a little bit worried. 'What is it?', you know, if it is pilotless — yeah. But on the day that I got married we had a rocket [laughs]. We had a rocket in the evening, just down the road, so that dispersed all the sailors that my husband had invited [laughs] to the reception which was in the house of course — yeah.

Interviewer: So what kind of hours did you work? Did you work day or night shifts?

Eileen: Yes, we worked the night shift and that was from about half seven round to the next day, which was about half seven in the morning and we never left our post until the others came in, you know, when we was up in the — on the roof or down in the office — yeah. We all changed over, you know, 'We are here you can go' — yeah.

Interviewer: Ok, so how did you meet your husband then?

Eileen: At a dance, really. I used to — I used to dance with a young fellow that used to go to London to learn to dance and he used to teach me what he'd learnt and then he started a little dance school and my husband came there to learn a few steps. I met him there and we all, a group of people, you know, were all together. Yeah, that's how we met. Yes, at a dance.

³ 15 min

Interviewer: So your husband he was in the Navy?

Eileen: Yes, he was in the Royal Navy.

Interviewer: Was he on leave when you married then?

Eileen: He was on a weekend leave and spent the honeymoon at Danson Park. They had a lake and [laughs] — yeah, they had a lake there and you could hire a little rowing boat and we had a rowing boat out and he had to go back to Chatham on the Monday morning. Now that was the honeymoon from the Saturday to the Monday [laughs].

Interviewer: How did you feel about that? That he had to go back?

Eileen: Well, I was working so I had to go to work and, yeah, we managed.

Interviewer: But you continued to work even though you got married.

Eileen: Yes, I worked until the end of the war — yes. We were disbanded. Yes, I did. I worked afterwards till — the end of the war — yeah. Then what did I do? Oh, I went to the WVS.

Interviewer: After the war?

Eileen: Yes, just after the war. I joined the WVS, you know, the Women's Voluntary Service. I've got a long service medal for fifteen years. Yes, a medal [laughs].

Interviewer: What did you do with the WVS then?

Eileen: In the beginning I — we were joined with the Civil Defence and we used to go out on exercises. At that time the⁴ — the teaching was about nuclear so we would talk how to protect yourself and how to protect the people that were in the house and so on. You think from nuclear bombs or the aftermath of nuclear and we used to go, combined with Civil Defence and WVS on exercises all day on a Sunday and my husband would look after — I had two children and my husband would look after them. He joined the St. John's Ambulance so we were both working sort of wartime things after the war — yeah. Yeah, that's right.

Interviewer: So you were — you finished your war work when the war finished?

Eileen: Yes, 1945, I suppose, when I got married — yeah.

Interviewer: So did you — did you finish in May or did you finish a bit later on?

Eileen: — I don't really know. I think it was June. I think it was the beginning of June when they had the Japanese one. No, that was September that was wasn't it. No, I don't really remember what date it was.

⁴ 20 min

Interviewer: How do you feel about your war work?

Eileen: Well, I feel that I did a – a bit to help [laughs]. You know, with the factories and that, yes, while we were — while we were on spotting there was a factory in Plumstead that made motorbikes called 'Matches'. They invited us, well, it was only two of us at the time, to go along and they made us a little tea in the afternoon, a cup of tea and a biscuit, and took us around the factory that we used to give them the bell to go down to shelter — yeah. I enjoyed it.

Interviewer: So when was this? What year was this that you?

Eileen: Well, it was during — during the war — yeah. Yeah, they just — they just invited us because we was a help, you know, with the production of the motorbikes — yeah.

Interviewer: Then you received a cheque from the company as well after the war? Was it for five pounds?

Eileen: Well, the boss for the companies, apparently, they all contributed. I mean, they were twenty — twenty firms. They were all situated along the river: Calendars and Allworks and Thorntons and all of those along the river and whoever it was [laughs] must have gone around there and they all contributed and the four of us got a five pound — a big white five pound note [laughs] for all our work — yeah.

Interviewer: Did you like you were recognised for the work that you did?

Eileen: Yeah, yes — yes. Yes, I do — yeah. Yes, we had many sort of, not recommendations but letters and things that — to say thank you for being there — yeah.

Interviewer: Have you met up with the — with the girls that you were working with?

Eileen: No, I am afraid not. One — the friend that I had, apart from the ATS one, she went to America and I lost her. Yeah, she died out there. She went to California.

Interviewer: Did she marry an American soldier?

Eileen: She was married over here. No, she married over here and they emigrated. Yeah. But I never met the others. One got married and she was in Croydon somewhere. Yeah, you lose touch with people.

Interviewer: But you were all young girls?

Eileen: Oh, yes. We was all much of the same age. The — we were companions, really. Before and not only that — before we went on night shift we would go to the — where they used to do the — Erith⁵ used to have a regatta every year and there was a place on the river, or near the river, that had the rowing — racing rowing. We used to go out before we went in to night work and go out on the

⁵ 25 min

river on these boats, little rowing boats, not little rowing boat but the — like they do in Oxford and Cambridge. We used to go out there for, you know, a bit of fun [laughs]. Yes, it was a bit of fun cos at that time the ships on the river — or the river was quite busy with ships coming up and down. Every time a ship went by, they caught a few waves and if we were sitting in one of these racing boats it used to rock and we used to lose the oar [laughs]. They used to call it 'Captain of Crab' when the oars used to sail away in the water [laughs]. Yeah, we used to do that before we went to night work so we enjoyed, you know, different things — yeah.

Interviewer: So you were just a teenager when the war started did you — do you feel that — like — that the war changed you?

Eileen: No, I don't think it did. I don't think so. No, we had problems with the blackout and with the lights and different things out on the street but — and the fog of course — yeah. No, on the whole, I suppose, it was because I was a teenager. I enjoyed the war really, you know, what we did and what we had to do. There was always something different going on and, yeah, the — Mr Churchill and everybody used to listen to the radio. My mother used to listen to Henry Hall on a Saturday night before we went out [laughs]. She used to sing at one of the worker men's clubs and she would practice her song that she was going to sing [laughs]. Yeah, so, I mean, that was all we had. We never had tele or anything like that — no. Yeah.

Interviewer: So what would you say were the worst challenges — the biggest challenges on the Home Front? Was it the blackout —?

Eileen: Well, personally?

Interviewer: Yes, personally.

Eileen: I don't really know. I suppose it was just to keep going, you know, yeah. I think — I think Churchill and that because we used to listen to him. It was more inspiring than, you know, you gotta keep going — yeah. But the rationing was a bit naughty, you know, the rationing of the food but then even that was challenging because although you were short if there was anything going along that was — if bananas came in, 'Oh, somebody's got bananas!' you know. But if you hadn't got a green ration book and you weren't pregnant you couldn't have a banana [laughs]. But, no, it was always — well, I say a challenge but, really, especially if they had broken biscuits and they weren't on the ration. You could go along and get some of those or queue up, I mean, there were queues everywhere [laughs]. My mother used to send me over the shop to get tabben (??), a basin of cracked eggs not, you know, cracked but they would be cheaper, you see, but they weren't on the ration so you could get a few of eggs and that. Yeah, yeah so —.

Interviewer: So how would you summarise your experience of the war?

Eileen: Well, I — I must say that looking back on my teenage days I enjoyed them but then I didn't know anything else⁶. I mean, today, or a few years ago perhaps, teenagers wouldn't 'Oh, I couldn't do that', 'I wouldn't do that', you know, I mean, they have, of course, you get the advertising now but we never had perfume during the war. In Woolwich market there used to be a little Indian man and he had a little stall with about twenty bottles and you used to put a drop of each one or whatever you wanted in to a bottle and shake it up and we used to go there on a Saturday, my friend and I, and get a bottle of 'In Paris' and he used to put some of that one and some of that one and shake it up and put it in a little tiny bottle and it was lovely or we would get — in Woolworths they used to sell a card impregnated with perfume and it was called 'Funana' but it was Egyptian. It was like you would wear musk today and it was just a little card and we would buy it for a penny and we put it down our blouse [laughs]. So that was the only perfume that we had but it was — it was a challenge getting things, doing things — yeah. Yes, it was. But as I said, on the whole, we enjoyed it, you know, it never worried us particularly, the bombing and that. I mean, we used to hear about it but we never read about it but you hear about it. I have seen more since, I suppose, since sixty/seventy years on the television now, you know, the documentaries. I think I've seen more of the war damage since now — since it's been on the television than I knew about during the war, really, because we never had papers — newspapers, you know, like that. Yeah.

Interviewer: I don't have any more questions is there anything that you want to add that you feel like you haven't had a chance to talk about?

Eileen: What? From the war? Yes, of course. No, not really. No, at the end of the war — it went on for quite a long time but I do think during the war because of the rationing we were healthier than what we are — what we are in the last few years. You know, we only had a certain amount and you made it last. I mean, if — if they had, what they call, offal in the butchers which was liver or, what my mother used to call, lights. She used to get that in and we used to fry it and different things but today if I mention — if I mention anything like that to my granddaughter she says, 'Urrgh, Nan you didn't eat that!', 'urrgh, urrgh' [laughs].

Interviewer: Who used to do the cooking then, was it you or your mum?

Eileen: Well, cos my mother was at work. She worked at Fraser, the same as what I did. No, we shared it although we had a canteen. I must admit that the social services, I think it was during the war, they would set up a canteen and we would go along from the factory and have a dinner. Oh yeah, we didn't have to cook a dinner as such except weekends — yeah. And then we had entertainment in the lunch hour. We had the Squadronaires and people like that come down to entertain us with war work — yeah. But —

Interviewer: What kind of food did they used to serve in the canteen?

⁶ 30 min

Eileen: Mince. Mince beef. It was all mince beef and mash⁷ or baked beans something like that. Yeah, something easy.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy the food?

Eileen: Yes, well we were hungry [laughs]. Yeah. No —. Yeah, I suppose we used to get hungry but it was something that you got used to, really, because it was so many years, yeah, but when my father was at home, he — I suppose that was the beginning of the war, really, and we lived in, as I say, in a house, we lived in rooms, and from the shelter he went in to the house to get some sandwiches and while he was in the house a bomb or an incendiary was dropped, which shook everywhere. On his way back to the shelter he'd taken cover under where the old stove or fireplace used to be. When he got down the shelter not only was he covered in sot but all the sandwiches were covered in sot [laughs]. Yeah, so we never had a sandwich. But — but for warmth in the Anderson shelters we used to have flower pots, the — you know, not the plastic ones of course but the old ones we had and we used to put a candle in — a candle in the middle and then put one on top and that used to get hot and that used to be like a fire. We used to have two or three of them, all these flower pots with the candles in, in the Anderson shelter to keep it warm cos we used to be down there for a few hours — yeah.

Interviewer: Who used to be down the shelter? Was it you and your mum? Did you say that you were living in rooms at the time?

Eileen: Yeah, we had an old couple and they would never come down and they always stayed in the house. Yeah, they did.

Interviewer: Do you know why they didn't go to the shelter?

Eileen: No, I think, I think myself that they were old and couldn't get down like they used to get in to the shelter. Yeah, they never came down. So the — the people next door they had a shelter but they would come over to our shelter sometimes and play card and things. But they had a dog next door and as soon as they air raid sirens went. He used to go up on the top of the shelter, because it was covered in earth, and howl whenever they heard these sirens going.

Interviewer: Did they used to take him down to the shelter? The dog?

Eileen: Well, the used to. Yeah, they used to. But the thing was we grew vegetables on the shelter because it was covered in earth. We used to grow cabbages and things. It's a pity we didn't have cameras in those days to take photographs of different things — yeah. Like we used to buy — we used to buy baby rabbit and feed it through the year and have it at Christmas for meat — yeah. I don't know he used to kill it, somebody used to kill it [laughs]. Yeah, yes that's right. — So it was quite an experience the war, yeah, but I didn't regret anything I did — yeah. So there we are we are left now with the — all our memories.

⁷ 35 min

Interviewer: Have you talked to your family and your children and grandchildren about the war?

Eileen: The — yes. My granddaughter she's got two boys they're my great-grandchildren and the eldest one he's had quite a few projects at school and he's taken my ration books and my clothing coupons in, yeah, and he does say to me sometimes, 'What did you do in the war, Nanny?' [laughs]. Yeah, but they don't quite understand today. Of course they don't. Yeah.

Interviewer: But is it more recently you've started to talk to your family about the war?

Eileen: Yes, yeah. Yeah, they do speak about it, yeah, but they don't understand really what — what we did during the war. Well, I don't think that anybody could understand it, really, unless they was in it. Yeah. Yeah, but, no, I've got no regrets.

Interviewer: Ok, well thank you for talking to me. I'm going to turn this little thing off.

Eileen: Oh dear, I had forgot about that.

End of Interview.