

Interviewee: Gladys Coleman

Interviewer: Jennie Bendall

Location: University of Greenwich

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Interviewer: Ok, so it's Friday 6th August 2010 and it is Jennifer Bendall interviewing Gladys Coleman about her experiences in the Second World War. So Gladys, where were you when the war started?

Gladys: I was living at Welling and I was a shorthand typist working for Southern Railway at Orpington.

Interviewer: Ok, and who were you living with?

Gladys: My mother.

Interviewer: Your mother at the time. Ok. How old were –?

Gladys: And two sisters.

Interviewer: Two sisters.

Gladys: I was, when the war – I was called up, you know, I was conscripted, I was twenty.

Interviewer: And we know that you were part of the Auxiliary Service.

Gladys: Yes, the ATS, the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

Interviewer: Ok, did you have any experience before hand or any training before hand going in to the service or?

Gladys: No. No, you just – you just were called and then you went to sort of a camp where you decided what you'd like to do if possible and I said I'd like to be a driver so I was lucky enough to be trained as a driver of all kinds of vehicles, you know.

Interviewer: So the outbreak of war – what year did you joined the service?

Gladys: 1943.

Interviewer: 1943. And where was it based? Was it in Welling as well?

Gladys: No, when I went to train that was London first of all. It's a long time [laughs] – long time ago, and then you went to a sort – like a holding camp and then you were interviewed and you decided what you liked to do and then normally they managed to get you somewhere where you wanted to go, so I went to North Wales to train as a driver. So I was very lucky really.

Interviewer: So obviously you left your family over in Welling when you went over to North Wales.

Gladys: Yes, my mother lived in Welling for a long time after I'd joined.

Interviewer: How did you feel when you went over to North Wales? Were you excited?

Gladys: I didn't really – I didn't really want to go but when I got there and I applied to be a driver, I was quite happy about it. I didn't mind then and then when I went to North Wales I was really thrilled to bits because that's what I wanted to do. Or else I think the second choice was radar on the guns but I didn't – I didn't really want to do that.

Interviewer: Apart from the driving did you have any other kind of responsibilities in any parts?

Gladys: Maintenance of the vehicles. You had to check the oil and change the oil and water, rear axle and that. I don't know how I did it then [laughs]. But I was young. I really loved it, I mean, I loved the job.

Interviewer: So how long were you out in North Wales for?

Gladys: At first, how long? Oh, the training course I think was six – six or seven weeks in North Wales and you had to have tests then at the end. If you didn't do them very well I think you had what they call a check test but I didn't have one of those though. I was lucky enough to go right the way through. Then you have a test on the maintenance side of it.

Interviewer: So after those weeks of training, where did you go after that?

Gladys: Then I was posted to Hoo near Rochester as a driver as a searchlight battery cos shortly after that the searchlights were disbanded, I think, so I went on to heavy anti-aircraft side. It's a wonder I can remember really [laughs].

Interviewer: So what kind of, obviously it's seems a strange question, but what were the main things you enjoyed about the job and being part of the war effort?

Gladys: I liked – I liked being a driver. It was really nice and at first I was just driving like utility cars and the Major of the unit had a man driver for some reason and he used to give him a day of [laughs] and it was nothing in it but he used to give his driver a day off and I'd used to take him around the different searchlight sights¹ then cos that was in the early – that was in 1943. Major Raa, I don't know where he is – he's probably dead and gone now. He was a very nice gentleman he – I think they all liked him at the – even if he was the commanding officer [laughs].

Interviewer: We have also been told as well that you have obviously qualified on many different kind of vehicles?

Gladys: Yes, you had driving lessons on utility vans and then you had like 1500 weight little lorries and then the biggest was the 3 ton lorry. You weren't allowed to drive anything heavier than that, that

¹ 5 min

was the limit on it. You had experience on all of them but I used to like the lorries best [laughs]. The big ones.

Interviewer: So how long were you in Rochester for? Up until the end of the war or?

Gladys: No, I moved around a lot. I think I went quite a number of places because I think searchlights were disbanded then and the anti-aircrafts when I first joined up and then I went to Manchester, I think, Salford I think. I'm just trying to think of all the different places, you suddenly get uprooted. Oh yes, I went to north Wales that was the training part of the vehicles. I'm just trying to think, I went all over. I went to Lincolnshire, Brigg in Lincolnshire and I went to Stranraer in Scotland cos that was like – I went with the unit because it was a firing camp, you know. They had to go there, it was just an expanse of sea so that they could fire in to aircraft going across with flags and they had to fire at the flags so that they didn't hit the planes. I didn't join it, I had to go with it because I was a part of the unit. And after that where did I go? I went to New Castle for a while and drove up there. Then I think – I'm trying to think, it's a long time ago. Yes, I had –

Interviewer: But obviously – it kind of sound like you were based in various parts of the UK.

Gladys: Yes, if the unit, well, they seemed to change the units around a bit. Or perhaps to get people experience of being in different places. But I did go to lots of places and I think towards the end of the war a lot of people were demobbed but I wasn't. I think you had to wait longer so I was stationed at South Darenth or actually Longfield. It's funny I live only a couple of miles from that place now and it's still an open space there where we used to be, that was the heavy anti-airgun site there. But that was when the war was over and then I just stayed there until I was demobbed but I wasn't demobbed until 194 – September 1946. That was a long wait to have to go through – because of the people, they slowed down the demobs and they were more anxious to get home but I was quite near to home so I didn't mind really being in it.

Interviewer: So how long would you have been – you were sent – you went to Scotland, Newcastle, how long were you there for each – kind of each part?

Gladys: Individual places?

Interviewer: Yes.

Gladys: Newcastle I think I was there for a couple of years, I think we left in May and then Lincolnshire, I was probably there a year. Well, we used to go and pick vehicles up that the unit wanted. That was quite nice cos you had all different kinds of vehicles, I had an American Chevrolet, I had a left hand driver and had never [laughs] – but it was quite ok really. I think when you're young you climb to task to anything, don't you [laughs]? It was quite good really. A long time ago.

Interviewer: So when you were away, obviously, did you get to come home and visit, obviously, family?

Gladys: Yes, you used to have like leave every, about every three months or if anyone was very ill, like the men, their wives were perhaps ill at home, they would get some compassionate leave and you'd get special leave but I don't think you got anymore than you were entitled to. They'd just bring the dates forward². I think you used to get about ten days or something like that, every three months I think. We used to get a bit fed up though towards the end of the three months but I loved it really.

Interviewer: So are there – are there any kind of specific memories that you have in each of the places any kind of key events you can remember being somewhere or kind of just any anecdotes that you have? We been told that you have some amusing stories of all the different bits you were at so?

Gladys: Not really [laughs], there's this one here but it's rather a lengthy feat to tell. But we had to – when I was just outside Dartford at Green Street Green we had a 1500 weight vehicle that we had to deliver rations to the sites where the men manned the guns and we loaded [laughs] – I laugh at it now – we had to load it with the men's rations and it was liver one of them was dropped in the dirt [laughs]. The officer there who was sort of supervising it said we could wash it and I think it was washed and delivered to the sites. But the men didn't know about it [laughs]. Sorry, it's funny to remember now really [laughs]. And then I think when the war was over because I was at – just outside Dartford, we decided because the men – it was a mixed heavier anti-aircraft battery and the men were on the other side, it was a big camp, and we were on this side so when war was declared we thought we'd go and tip the men out of their bunks. We'd never been where they were but we found out and we tipped them all out of bed because it was the end of the war. And everything was – the next day they came and tipped us out so that was quite funny I've written on this thing here but it was so funny [laughs]. I think that was all. Oh, yes, when I was married in 1946, the – I didn't know – I had moved to Boswell Hill then, which was at Plumstead, and I didn't dream that they would do it, but they brought my lorry, my 3 ton lorry, to the church. I don't know where they got all the starting handles from the MT department and covered them all in silver paper and made a guard of honour. I have just got one picture remaining, I don't know where the others are, where we were holding silver starting handles and they brought my lorry to the church, St. John's Church at Welling [laughs] which was quite surprising really. It was lovely, it was a lovely surprise, I knew nothing about it [laughs].

Interviewer: So that was 1946?

Gladys: 1946, September the 7th 1946.

Interviewer: What had your husband – what had he been doing in the war?

Gladys: Well, he was sort of – I think he was grade four, believe it or not. And he still remained working for the railway where I used to work in the underground part at, it's still sort of an underground, it was all controlled by radio. It was the railway, next to Orpington Railway Station and he stayed there cos his job was important, really do all sorts of different things. But he used to come

² 10 min

to visit me, it was funny really [laughs]. It wasn't like the lady visiting the gentleman it was the other way around.

Interviewer: So did he come and visit you kind of when you were –

Gladys: Yes, when I was stationed, I think towards the end of the war, I was stationed at Rainham near Gillingham and he used to come down there. But in other places – I was in Lincolnshire – he couldn't sort of come up there. I used to come home on leave I think every – about every three months.

Interviewer: So obviously – it sounds though you had a great time and a good time but obviously as well it was during the war and it must have been some times that were kind of –

Gladys: My mother had rather a hard time cos I think my father had died and she had to work and cos there was the bombings and that she used to go over the road into like a surface shelter. But funnily enough it didn't bother me when the – if I came home on leave and the bombs were being dropped. I think when you're young you probably don't worry about that. So she used to go over to the surface shelter and I used to stay in bed and sleep all through it. Because Danson Park gun site used to fire the guns³ that the only time that I did sort of stir and wake up a bit. Am I boring you?

Interviewer: No, no. It's excellent. Thank you. Other things I suppose kind of, obviously, you were sent off to all these different places and you obviously doing a hard and good job but kind of about the social life. Did you have a kind of – were there things for you to do or was all kind of more –

Gladys: I didn't really have very much money to go anywhere. I think I used to smoke then and we used to have a sort of sweet ration I think I had 7.6d in old money a week. Well, if I bought the cigarette rations and the other thing that was spent nearly all of it so I really didn't have much chance to go out anywhere. But we used to have things going on in the camps, you know. I'm talking about a variety of them, you know, as I was stationed in different places.

Interviewer: How many other women were there in the different places you were stationed with the Auxiliary Service? Were there a lot of you or?

Gladys: There were – there was quite a number of ATS girls because they did radar and all sorts of things really. Oh, office, well, I used to be a secretary before I joined up and when of the girls who was a secretary she couldn't go on leave because the commanding officer wanted her to work so I said, well, I'll do it for a week while she went on leave. So they were one short of one driver. I didn't like it so much, I used to like the driving part really, better.

Interviewer: So you say you weren't demobbed till a bit later. What did you do kind of once the war had finished? Kind of did you go back?

³ 15 min

Gladys: Oh, I – let's see what did I do? – I got a job as a shorthand typist/secretary at Clarke & Espen Estate Agents at Woolwich and I worked there for quite some while. I was already married in September while I was still in the Army. I worked there for about three years and then I had my daughter so I left then and gave up work for a while.

Interviewer: I suppose really the last thing is just in a couple of sentences how would you kind of sum up and describe your war experience?

Gladys: Well, I suppose I – it all seemed hard work to me cos when I was working all the time I didn't really have very much money at all. I don't think anybody did really. It was a lot of adventure really for me, you know, doing the job that I liked and learning all different things. I used to have a moan I think everybody did but I thoroughly enjoyed it. I thought it was a wonderful experience. It was three and a half years, I mean, we used to say we'll be glad when we get out of here but [laughs] it was really – it was interesting, you know, there's lots of things. You went to different places, we used to get a bit homesick sometimes.

Interviewer: I was gonna say, yeah, obviously that must have been hard being –

Gladys: Yes, I think you never had very much money then so you just had cigarette rations and sweet ration and nothing – well perhaps go to the pictures I think. Then the rest of the time you just sort of moseyed along I suppose.

Interviewer: That's brilliant. Thank you. I think we can say we're done on that one if you're all ok. That's brilliant, thank you Gladys.

Gladys: Look at the old slats, of course, you couldn't get slats very easily then either because there were no films and you were lucky if you got a film but anyway. Thanks for interviewing me.

Interviewer: That's ok. It was brilliant.

End of Interview.