

Interviewee: Alice Wylde

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 29.07.2012

Interviewer: Ok, this is an interview with Alice Wylde and the interviewer is Malin Lundin. The date is 29th of July 2012. So Alice, if you would like to tell me your date of birth please?

Alice: October 1920.

Interviewer: And where were you born?

Alice: Brighton.

Interviewer: In Brighton. And where were you living when the war broke out?

Alice: Walworth Road – Westmoreland Road in Walworth Road in London.

Interviewer: And who were you living with?

Alice: My mother and father.

Interviewer: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Alice: Oh, yes. There were eleven of us eventually but only seven came to – she only brought up seven. Different things happen, you know.

Interviewer: So were you one of the oldest children?

Alice: One of the?

Interviewer: Oldest children? Or were you a younger one?

Alice: Well, I was the eldest girl. Eldest girl and I had a brother a year older than me, my brother Bill.

Interviewer: And how old were you when the war broke out?

Alice: Nineteen.

Interviewer: Do you remember the day? The 3rd of September?

Alice: Yes, I do. Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Alice: Well, it was – my father was forty-nine and he joined – they took him in the Army again at forty-eight and they stationed him at Kenley Aerodrome. Then the second year, August 1940, he came out of – came out of the Kenley Aerodrome and dive bombers came through and they smashed his legs.

He was on a bike, he used to bike – he used to – they put him in the Royal Queen's Regiment and he used to cycle home every Sunday for his Sunday lunch, back to Walworth Road. August 8th, 1940, they shot him up – all his legs and he died – on his bike – and he died three days later in Purley Hospital. He had a military funeral but I could never get a photo. Nobody would take one. That was it.

Interviewer: Did you attend the funeral?

Alice: Oh yes, yes. He had all the right, you know, graveside rifle fire and all the rest. Very touching. But I couldn't get a photo. That was it. I joined the Fire Service in 1939.

Interviewer: What had you been doing before the war broke out?

Alice: Oh, my trade? I made fur coats. At the age of fourteen I left school and went to work with my aunt to Bond Street, to where she was working, and we worked there for a while, making fur coats.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy it?

Alice: Yes, oh yes. I did forty-nine years of it.

Interviewer: So did you actually – during the war – did you work full time in the Fire Service?

Alice: Yes, I packed up my job and I went – stationed at Fount Street in Olney Road – in Walworth Road, SE17. It was Fount Street School and we took – they took it over and I was stationed there.

Interviewer: How come you joined the Fire Service?

Alice: Well, they wanted – I was called up and they wanted me to go in the Land Army and I didn't want to dig potatoes so I joined the Fire Service.

Interviewer: Did you want to join any of the other services?

Alice: No, no. Cos it was on my home ground, I only lived round the next turning. It was very exciting, you know, a lot of it was very exciting. They – the air raid wardens were supposed to be the enemy and we were the goodies and they had all railings round and when we put the hoses on they went down like nine pence and we were the winners [laughs].

Interviewer: So what were your duties in the Fire Service then?

Alice: My duties? We had a board with three – three different, what do you call them? Oh dear.

Interviewer: You had a board?

Alice: A board with three different watches. Red, white and blue and one was of twenty-four hours on forty-eight hours off. And they were stationed at the school and I had to stay there as well for forty-eight – no twenty-four – no for the week. No, twenty-four hours and then twenty-four – oh dear, I have

forgotten. So many days off – twenty-four hours off and then we went back. But we were stationed at the station – at the¹ school where we were.

Interviewer: What were your daily duties? What did you do?

Alice: Well, writing in a book and having to know where every man was – every man on the watches what they were doing and where they had to go. If they were off or on and if there was a raid and there was a fire or something you had to know what appliance to send out to what particular fire, you know, heavy units for big fires and stirrup pump things for small fires. We had to learn about gasses – all gasses and what not. So it was quite exciting.

Interviewer: So did you work in the office in the Fire Service?

Alice: In Fire Service.

Interviewer: Or did you actually go out during the raids?

Alice: No, no. Behind a desk, behind a desk all the time.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of women working in the Fire Service?

Alice: Oh, there were about three women. Yeah, three women and they had different times off like I did, like twenty-four hours off and forty-eight hours on, that's what it was. We had to all parade, to parade and was dismissed and all of that when it was our time off, just like an army thing. But it was exciting.

Interviewer: Did you have to do any training before you joined the Fire Service?

Alice: Yes, we went to a – the Fire Headquarters which was at Lambeth Bridge in those days. I don't think it's still there. But we had to go there for our training and then we were sent back to our – on our home ground. Luckily –

Interviewer: What kind of training did you do?

Alice: Well, what we were doing as we worked in the offices behind the desk that's what we learnt in the headquarters. I was in there till '45 and in the meantime I had met a Canadian and I got married.

Interviewer: So where did you meet your husband?

Alice: At a dance, yeah, afternoon dance. Most of the girls used to go shopping but I used to go dancing, afternoon tea dance. For two hours. We used to have a short – when we were on duty we had two hours short leave every afternoon to do what you wanted to. Well, most women went shopping and I went dancing. I enjoyed myself.

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Interviewer: So you met your husband in 1943?

Alice: Yeah. No, I met him before that.

Interviewer: Ok, what year did you meet him?

Alice: Age?

Interviewer: What year?

Alice: What year? Oh, '42.

Interviewer: '42.

Alice: '42, yeah. We got married on – 1943 in Olney Road, which was round the corner and the church that we had to go to had been bombed. That was in Olney Road in Walworth Road and it had been bombed and we had to go to a little room, like a vestry. Like a vestry instead of going to a proper church cos it was bombed. And that's where it was, here you are. That's the church behind. That's where the church was and it was bombed and it was all – that's where it was.

Interviewer: Was it difficult arranging a wedding in wartime?

Alice: Oh no. You did it indoors. We did it inside. We didn't have – hire halls and this nonsense. Stayed up all night making jellies and all sort of things. We didn't have a great deal of people coming. Just the Fire Service people and relations.

Interviewer: And what were you wearing? You were wearing – is it a fur coat?

Alice: Oh, that's a fur coat. That's a –

Interviewer: Did you make it yourself?

Alice: Yes, I made that fur cape, Indian lamb – Indian lamb that was. And that one with my daughter – with my sister, my sister-in-law, where is it? That was a mole bolero. I also made that but I loaned it to her to get married in. And that's a mole bolero like this. But this was a – this was a cape.

Interviewer: And what kind of dress were – did you make the dress yourself?

Alice: No, I had the dress made and I had the hat to match² in a local place, Camberwell Green – it was a shop in Camberwell Green that used to make dresses and everything and I went there for a fitting and everything so that was it.

Interviewer: Did you have time for a honeymoon after the wedding?

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Alice: What did we do? We went on a working honeymoon, so we did. We went to – there used to be Toc H, that ran during the war, and they gave you holidays if you wanted but you couldn't go unless you worked. So we had to wash up dishes and all. We went up to a priory somewhere up north. But it was a nice afternoon – it was a nice – anyway.

Interviewer: So where was your husband posted when you met him?

Alice: Canada House in Trafalgar Square. He was with the – on the switchboard in Canada House. All the DRs, the despatch riders, were stationed there as well. So it was quite local.

Interviewer: What year had he arrived in Britain?

Alice: Oh, I can't remember. A couple of years, I suppose, whatever.

Interviewer: Was he stationed at Canada House throughout – till the end of the war?

Alice: All the time. All the time, yeah. He went to Canada before me and I followed him.

Interviewer: What year did you go to Canada?

Alice: '46. 1946.

Interviewer: And you brought your - two children as well.

Alice: Two children with me. Well, there you are. That's going before – just before.

Interviewer: And how old were your children then?

Alice: One was two and a half – she was two and a half and she was about fifteen months old – a bit younger. Quite young, quite young.

Interviewer: Were you happy going to Canada?

Alice: Oh yes. But it was a handful. It was a handful on, you know, on a big boat and I took a little pushchair and you used to sit one in the seat – the other one sat in the seat with putting her legs underneath and the baby sat on the chair – on the –

Interviewer: You went alone without your husband?

Alice: Oh yes.

Interviewer: What ship did you go on?

Alice: Queen Mary and it took four days to come across.

Interviewer: And were there a lot of other –

Alice: Oh yeah, it was war brides and we stationed at – docked at Halifax in Nova Scotia and then we had a journey right the way to where I was going to go and live. I went to live with his parents.

Interviewer: How was it arriving in Canada?

Alice: The what?

Interviewer: How was it when you arrived in Canada?

Alice: Oh well, that was the most uncanny thing. We got off to have a meal and they gave us a meal. Well, the steak they gave us was, well, we couldn't eat it. It was too big. We all had rations here. And it was a great big steak and I couldn't eat it and they had so many different pies, about thirty different pies, you know. They made pies like anything. Anyway, they were lovely. We couldn't eat it all cos our stomachs weren't used to it.

Interviewer: Did you husband come and meet you when you arrived in Canada?

Alice: Yeah, well, the in-laws came and met me and drove all the way to Edmonton, Alberta, where I stayed for six months with them and then we found our own – oh I was going to find that wasn't I?

Interviewer: We can have a look at that later.

Alice: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you went – you lived with the in-laws for six months and then you found –

Alice: Well, I like – I'm a city girl and it was right on the outskirts of Edmonton and I didn't like it. It was too lonely and whatnot. So we left the children with them for a few months went to Edmonton, Alberta, to find a place to live and we found a little house. Found a little house and –

Interviewer: Did you start working?

Alice: Oh yes, what with two children to look after, yeah. Absolutely [laughs], absolutely.

Interviewer: What did your family think about you marrying a Canadian man?

Alice: Well, nothing they could do about it could they, really. Your [unclear] was cast, you know, you wanted to go and that's it.

Interviewer: Cos you still had your mother – she was alive?

Alice: Oh yes. Yeah, my mother was alive and my father was gone, of course. My father, well, I told you about him.

Interviewer: So how was it living in Canada?

Alice: Well, funnily enough, the lady next door – where we lived in Edmonton, Alberta, we'd finished when we found a little place to live. We took the children – we went up and got the children and come down, come to Edmonton. There was a Scotch couple living next door, from Scotland. Mrs George, her name was and her husband. It was quite like home, you know. And I had friends that lived in London and they also went to Canada, Edmonton, Alberta. So we had – we had friends over there. I had a friend over there and I [unclear]. But she liked it.³ We belonged to the Canadian Legion and we used to help out with things and all sorts of things, yeah. It was interesting but it was so cold and so long. I wanted to come home after four years. He joined the Army and I didn't want to – I didn't want to be an army wife. So I didn't go back and I divorced him in 1953 – 1953 I divorced him.

Interviewer: And you took the children back to England with you?

Alice: No – I took them with me, yes. Otherwise I wouldn't have gone. I brought the children home. There you are.

Interviewer: Was it a different experience being – being with your husband in Canada than it was being with your husband in England?

Alice: Oh yeah, different again. Being a Canadian – being Canadian and this and that he had purity one Christmas. They gave you – everything was on ration but you could only tell them what you wanted and you got it. It was no problem. Like, we used to have extra wood for the fire and all that in the bedroom when you had to, you know. It was one of those things. The Canadian and the – the allowance we got was very good so it wasn't bad.

Interviewer: So you moved in with your husband after you got married or did you stay with your mother?

Alice: No, we bought – we found a flat quite close to my mum, across the road. In a little place called – we lived in Hillingdon Street, my mum, and we stayed with them for a while but then we found a place and it was in – just across the road from my mother's place. So we had our own flat.

Interviewer: So did you stay in the Fire Service when you had your children as well?

Alice: Well, no. I packed up because I couldn't look after children and be at work like that so I packed it up.

Interviewer: So how was it living in London during the war then?

Alice: Oh, nerve-racking. My brother Ron, I showed you a picture there, he was in the photos. He came home on leave in the weekends and all he done was help people with the bombing. Picking up

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casualties and all sorts of things. Everybody helped, you know. That's what he came home and done until he went back in the navy again. It was all – everybody helped one another.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any – did you have a lot of bombing in the area where you lived?

Alice: Oh yes. It was quite a lot, yeah. Oh yes, I can't remember them but Old Kent Road I think had it bad and all that. But it was all, you know.

Interviewer: Did you have to go down to the shelters during the night?

Alice: Oh yes. We went down – oh no, we had one on the street. What do they call them? Oh gosh. I forget what they call them now. But we had one on the street and then –

Interviewer: Was it a communal shelter?

Alice: Yeah. Air raid shelter, air raid shelter. Yeah, we had one on the street. So that was it. But a couple of times before I met my husband I used to go dancing a lot and used to go to various halls. But there was one in particular, Empire – the Empire Ballroom in Tottenham Court Road, you couldn't go home because of the bombing so they segregated men one side and girls the other and we spent the night there. It was quite, you know. No funny business or nothing. It was just staying the night instead of, you know, going out and getting killed.

Interviewer: So how – how was your experience of staying in the shelter during the night?

Alice: Well, everybody had such a comrade effort, you know, helped one another. Yeah. Oh yeah.

Interviewer: How did you feel when the air raid siren went in the evening then?

Alice: Well, pleased to go out and go home, innit?

Interviewer: So how was it becoming a mother during the war? When you knew that London was being bombed?

Alice: You had to take it didn't you? Take it and, you know, when we got back from Canada they're all ready for schooling so they went to school in the turning cos I came back to live with my mum again. She was on her own at the time. My dad had gone and she was glad to have the company.⁴

Interviewer: Were you ever evacuated when you had your children?

Alice: No, no. Four of my brothers and sisters were. They went to Exeter in Devon. A little place called – oh I can't think of that. A little farm place. My brother Albert, younger brother, he'd won a trade scholarship down there and he joined the – he worked for Young and Austen, which was a very good company in those days and they did Clarence House when the Princess got married and he got a

⁴ 20 min

lovely letter from them for all the work they'd done. But he worked on Clarence House. So it was, you know, excitement.

Interviewer: Were you ever given an offer to be evacuated when you had your children?

Alice: I was too old. I was nineteen when the war started. I was in the Fire Service.

Interviewer: Later on when you had your children in the end of the war? Your children must have been – your first child was she born in '44.

Alice: End of '43. End of '43.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any thoughts of sending her away and going with her when she was a baby?

Alice: No, no. Well, it was coming on to the tail end of the war, wasn't it? '44 to '46, you know. I mean, they was – I forget when they came back but they were there for a few years.

Interviewer: How was it coping on the Home Front with the rationing and the blackouts and the bombing?

Alice: Well, you – we used to get bundles – what they called bundles from Canada. Cos when I met my husband, his parents knew about it, so they used to send us over boxes of whatever. Bundles for Britain. It was always food, you know. So we used to be alright. They used to send us a big box of – now what's the name of that? Mackintosh red apples, every Christmas. A big box full. They were lovely. So we thanked them, you know. There you go. But I must tell you when my daughter – when she became twenty-one, my daughter that died, when she became twenty-one, she took her computer. That was the first computer, now what did she call it? Comptometer operator, that was the forerunner of the computer and she took it over to start work and she worked in Toronto. But she went to live with her grandparents when she first went over there and she said – she wrote me a letter – and she said 'I drink too much, I smoke too much and my skirts are too short. The Queen ought to ban them' [laughs]. There you are. But she didn't stay there too long with her grandparents because they were very, very religious. She went to Toronto and worked there and I used to go back and forth with her. Go up and see her, so I was there quite often.

Interviewer: So going back to the beginning of the war. How did you feel when you knew that the war was about to start?

Alice: Well, you were getting prepared for it, weren't you? You know blackouts and all the rest of it. And, of course, my dad was alive when it first started and, apart from joining up in 1939, he'd – they took him on which was quite good when he was forty-eight years old. So, this is it. What else?

Interviewer: How was your experience of being in the Fire Service?

Alice: Well, it was something new. Something new, something you learnt, you had to learn and what not, and you just got on with it. You just got on with it.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy it?

Alice: Yes. We used to have a lot of – we used to have a little play at the end – Christmas – a Christmas play. And used to sing – I used to know all the songs and everything. I used to sing them and they used to love them.

Interviewer: And you wore a uniform as well when you were –

Alice: Oh yes, absolutely. On duty all the time you had your uniform on.

Interviewer: Can you describe the uniform to me?

Alice: Well, I can't tell you – it's there [laughs].

Interviewer: You had a hat.

Alice: A forage hat with a badge on but I couldn't save anything cos when I went to live with my mother we had a break-in and they took everything. They took me badges and all sorts of things.

Interviewer: Was this during the war?

Alice: No, this was after. When I was – with my second husband I went back to live with⁵ – didn't work out – and I went back. Anyway, but you just got on with things, you know.

Interviewer: Did you feel like you were – that – that your part in the war effort that after the war that that was recognised? That your effort in the war was recognised? Did you ever receive any form of recognition?

Alice: No, and funnily enough, when I went to the Imperial War Museum to find out where he was. They had nothing about fire women and I told them. I said, 'You've got books about everybody but you haven't got anything about the Fire Service, why not?'

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Alice: Well, we had our moment. I mean, they had – I was invited to go to St Pauls Cathedral when the fiftieth anniversary came up. I saw Princess Diana with the two boys, quite young. So it was all, you know, it was nice to be looked on at that sort of thing. You got a letter to go, you know. And this is it. You still kept in touch with your mates that you used to work with, you know. I know that one of the girls, a big tall girl, called Grace Butcher, she was in all the shows and everything, and she joined ENSA and became involved in that sort of work when she left. I went back to my own trade.

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Interviewer: So when – was that in Canada or was that when you returned?

Alice: Oh, I worked in Canada. Yes, I worked in Canada and I went to – I went into a shop, it was on the High Street, and thought I'm gonna, cos I wanted to come home so I thought I'm gonna find a job and I'm gonna pay every time I get me wages I'm gonna put it in the travel agent and when I got enough I'm going home. I did this and when I went in there, there was a man named Mr Ford, Mr Ford, and he had a daughter and he came from up north somewhere. He was English. He sat down and he says, 'Let me see what you can do' and I showed him, worked, and he said 'Oh yeah, you can come on – come work for me'. His daughter was engaged to a Mountie. His present to her was a muscat fur coat. So she said to me, 'You can make it for me'. So I made it for her and I felt good. But when I came back, and I came back about '49 – '50 I went back to my old trade. The kids were at school and I went to work. There you are. Then the Fire Service – all the – all the fur trade all packed up because there was a lot of trouble about, you know, they were painting doors and putting paint on judges and all sorts of things. So they packed it all up and I didn't want to – I was sixty-three at the time and I didn't want to work anymore. But I probably would have gone on to about seventy. But I packed up sixty-three and that was it.

Interviewer Did you feel that your experience during the war – working in the Fire Service and losing your father – that that changed you at all?

Alice: Oh no. It made you more independent. Oh no. I've always been independent and I still go on buses and all sorts of things. When you're not well, you stop indoors that's all [laughs].

Interviewer: And if you had to summarise your wartime experience in a few sentences?

Alice: Well, I must say I had a happy experience. I mean, apart from war and the people who got killed and all sorts of things, I did enjoy myself. As I say, I still went dancing in the afternoon, you know, I enjoyed it. So what can you say to that? You shouldn't really say that should you? That you enjoyed the war. But I did. And I've had a very exciting life, you know, in one way or another.

Interviewer: So you say you went to dances during the war. What else did you do to entertain yourself?

Alice: Oh no, that was it. Oh no, just that. You used to go in uniform, two hours in the afternoon. Only when I was on – only when on the days I was off – on the days I was off I dressed up as a dancer, you know, a dress. But when I was on duty and I went for a couple of hours to a dance you went in your uniform because all the uniforms were there. All of them.

Interviewer: And you met your husband at a dance?

Alice: Yeah.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of Canadians and Americans at the dances?

Alice: Oh yes, they were stationed – they were stationed everywhere.⁶ They were stationed everywhere.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you thought about Canadians and Americans before you met your husband?

Alice: I didn't like the Americans. But I liked the Canadian. More like English.

Interviewer: What did you not like about the Americans then?

Alice: Oh, they're too brassy, you know. No, too sure of themselves. Yeah, no, wasn't for me.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of English girls who met Canadian and American men that you knew of?

Alice: No, I didn't know anybody that married a Canadian – American – I didn't know anybody that married an American. There you are.

Interviewer: Ok. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that you haven't had the chance to say?

Alice: Not really. I think I've said everything. I think I've said everything.

Interviewer: Thank you very much then. I'm going to turn the recorder off.

End of Interview

⁶ 30 min