

**Interviewee: Eileen Powles**

**Interviewer: Andrew Sinclair**

**Location: University of Greenwich**

**Date: 06.08.2010**

Interviewer: That's it. Well, thank you very much, Mrs Powell, for coming along today.

Eileen: Mm, my pleasure.

Interviewer: I've got a little crib sheet here saying that basically you were called up in September 1942.

Eileen: Oh, yes. Yeah, well, females were conscripted December '41 and I got in September '42. At last [laughs]!

Interviewer: And did you have a choice as to what you could join?

Eileen: I can't hear you.

Interviewer: Did you have a choice as what you could – what – whether you wanted to go into the army?

Eileen: I worked in the Food Office which was a reserved occupation, you see and I didn't think I was gonna get away. I thought everybody was going, you see, all my friends and everybody was going. Anyway, the government had decreed that ten percent of the staff in Food Offices between the age of twenty and thirty would have to go and in the Ramsgate Food Office there was two of us. The lady who got the option she started a week before me so she had choice. Unbeknown to me she went up to the boss or was called up to the boss came down the stairs and says, 'The boss wants you'. I thought, 'Oh God, now what have I done', you know, you think, don't you, you've done something wrong. Up I went and they tells me this story and then he said, 'I'm very sorry but Miss Wood doesn't want to go', I said, 'Oh, Mr Presitt, I wondered why I hadn't been called on you'. I was the right age group. 'Well, I have reserved you twice' [laughs]. I could have killed him [laughs]. There's me sitting downstairs issuing ration books and Identity Card and things, itching to get away, anyway, so that was it I was then able to get away, you see. That was September '42, yeah.

Interviewer: So – so you joined the Army?

Eileen: Well, I wanted to be an MT driver but as I didn't have a license they said, 'Oh, we haven't got the petrol to train you. What else can you do?'. Well, I had one job as a ledger clerk in the dairy where I was and they had a little [unclear] thing, oh, a signal machine and that was it, signals. So then I went to Signal School in Kingston. Guildford was the training centre where you did your six weeks basics. Kingston was the Signal School and then there were eighteen of us on the course and they had

eleven for Cardiff and seven for London and the seven for London were compassionate and at that time my mother was in hospital so I got London which was very nice because it was Knightsbridge.

Interviewer: Oh, very nice.

Eileen: [Laughs]. They closed Knightsbridge Underground Station nobody could go in. But the trains run along the bottom and then as you went down we had our GOR, Gunner Operation Room, where we gave information to the gun sites. Then further down there was a little single position, you know, plugging away, 'your number please'. And they came round asking for volunteers for overseas. Well, I was free, white and twenty-one and I thought [laughs] we'll have a go. I had no idea what was gonna happen plus the fact that I daren't tell my parents cos I was the youngest of four. The last one had – had – how do you tell your parents that the baby's flying the nest [laughs]. So I didn't. I didn't say anything because to be honest I didn't think anything would come off it. As I say I was called up September '42 and this was November '42, very quick but I thought, 'Oh, that's nothing'. So I didn't say a word and the next thing I know, 'Go and have a FFI', you know, twenty – fourteen days embarkation leave and you got to go and report back to the holding unit. So how do you tell your parents, after you've been home a fortnight that you're going overseas. So, ooh, I didn't [laughs]. Well, not until I was going out the door, I said, 'Cheerio mum and dad, this embarkation leave. Bye!' and I was gone. I don't know how they reacted, I really don't. I don't know how they, you know, the baby of the family. Anyway, so then we went to this transit camp in London and I don't know if you've ever seen them but the – the kitbags were like sausages.

Interviewer: Yes.

Eileen: Yeah, mind you they were very good because you had to roll everything. You see, we learnt to – and nothing got creased, see, which I still do today. I still roll my clothes. And then they used to say, 'Right, outside twenty minutes, you're going. Pack up your kit.' Twenty minutes, they only ever gave us twenty minutes. God knows why<sup>1</sup> it was ever only twenty minutes. So we'd go outside and they said, 'Yeah, that's just practice. Go on back'. Then one night at ten o'clock, we were all getting ready for bed, 'Outside in twenty minutes'. Outside we went and got in this three tonner, went off to Liverpool [laughs]. Got on the boat, mm. Yeah, that was it. They were requisitioned Liners.

Interviewer: Right.

Eileen: They called them the troop ships cos they were requisitioned, and they only carried troops. I think it was the end of – end of April we moved out of – and for the last thing I can't think of the name of the boat but it was a very nice boat. So we had stewards in the – in the cabins, stewards in the Dining Room.

Interviewer: Did they you where you were going to go?

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<sup>1</sup> 5 min

Eileen: They didn't say. They wouldn't tell us, naturally, the war was on, it's '43. War was on and we've got troops. Not only us girls, they've got troops, you see. So there's no way they were gonna say where we were going. And off we went and it was very nice. Others and all the frills, you see. It was like a cruise. I mean, we – there's us up in the dining room eating pork chops, well, I mean there was rationing in the UK, you hadn't seen – you hadn't seen a pork chop since, you know, the rationing started. So anyway, I was ok but some of the girls were sick across the Bay Biscay and I wasn't [laughs]. Anyway, we finally got to West Africa, just trying to think of the name of it. We broke down anyway for a – for a week. Just trying to think of the name of the place. Anyway, now that was the only time they allowed us to mix with the ranks because we were very precious cargo as you can imagine. And these lads had just left their homes so – [laughs]. Anyway, they gave us a quiz – it was a quiz. We were allowed to attend this quiz. That was the only time they were allowed to mix with the lads.

Then eventually we got to South Africa, we got to Cape Town. They allowed us off the boat, we were – what did we do? In Africa – South Africa there's a lot of English people and they were lining the streets to meet the troops that take the [unclear] [clears throat]. We – some of us girls we got on the metro and went up to Pietermaritzburg for a swim cos we'd been cooked up in the boat. Anyway, of course apartheid was on we weren't allowed – there's no coloured only white on the beach. So we got back and then we started, you know, washing our hair, washing our clothes and things like that. Next morning, 'Outside, twenty minutes!'. We'd only been on the boat one night. We thought we were going with the lads, where they were going which was the Far East. We got hot arms, wet clothes. So we had to wet – wet clothes around the arms and everything, pack up in this kitbag. Off we went, only one night in Cape Town. Put us on a train from Cape Town to Durban which took three days and two nights, that's a long time on a train. Well, they had these trains where they brought the [unclear] things down in the night and then put them back in the day, just. Then we had a little basin in the – in the – mm, what was it – carriage and then we went further along for the meals. We were three days and two nights in that train. Mm, till we got in Durban and then they – they took us off and alphabetically they put so many girls and a corporal in a hotel, so many girls and a corporal in another hotel and at the – my name was Weeks then so W, right, there were two little W's at the end of the alphabet with no one.

They put us two in the Cecil Hotel in Durban, all on our own and the headwaiter was an Indian married to an English girl and, of course, 'Come bring her out, bring her out.' 'Bring her out', you know, got to talk to her cos she comes from the UK. Anyway, cos with apartheid, we got in the taxi this side and had to swing right round for him to get in the taxi over there. See, we weren't allowed to mix and then coming back he got out there and we swung around go out there. That was apartheid. Sad, wasn't it? Anyway we had five weeks in Durban. They gave us two weeks holiday, they took us up to the Valley of the Thousand Hill, where all the sugarcane farms are and they're all English people so they wanted to know what was going on in – in the UK. Of course, spoilt as rotten as you can imagine but we went – very interesting to see a sugarcane factory, you know, where the sugarcane

goes in and all the juice comes out the side. Then they'd show you how the brown, the white<sup>2</sup> and all the different shades of sugar were made. That was very interesting so they gave us two weeks sort of leave as it were. Then they decided – the hostilities were over in the North Africa. That was all over, right, and the wounded lads were coming down to South Africa for recuperation and their mail was following them down and it was stacking up in the Post Office so they said, 'Right, we'll put the ATS girls to sort the mail'. But they forgot the two little W's in the Cecil Hotel [laughs]. We never did do anything [laughs]. Anyway we were there for five weeks and then they put us on another boat from Durban up to Port Taufiq which is this end of the Suez Canal, right, and then from Port Taufiq to Cairo on the train. Coming home, I came back to the Meds. I never – I never – I'll been all round Africa except the Suez Canal [laughs]. Yes, of course, when it was over, you see, '45 the Med was open then so we – I think it was Alexandria we came back from. But, yes, I was there for two and a half years as a switchboard operator. Yes, we used to have lots of lines, what they call, 'up-the-blue' [laughs], you know. Yes, very interesting. I went up to Palestine for holiday, to Haifa, went to Haifa cos they had a YWCA there so we stayed at Haifa. Went to all the usual tourist places, you know, Jerusalem and places like that for a fortnight. That was nice. Then, of course, the war was over as you know in May '45. This was the end of '45 and we were coming home, oh, incident [laughs]. In between I married a regular soldier in Kasr-El-Nil – in a, yeah, Roman Catholic Church in Kasr-El-Nil Barracks in Cairo where we were and the reception was in the YWCA. But the trouble was at the beginning of '44 he was going home and, naturally, he wanted me to go with him. But they said, 'If she's pregnant then she can go. If she's not she's gotta stay and do some work', and as I wasn't [laughs], I had to stay.

Interviewer: You had to stay.

Eileen: And that was the end of that. Never – no – eventually went up to Edinburg for divorce because that's where he was domiciling in the UK. Yes, so we came home and they eventually posted me to Wentworth Golf Course, I didn't play golf in those days but, of course, golf wasn't being played, naturally, in 1946. The club house was a signal unit and believe it or not, one day I shall the [laughs] the pro. His pro shot was our switch room, there's me plugging away [laughs] on the switch room. While I was there I volunteered for overseas again and, of course, the war was over everywhere but there was troops in Germany. So June '46 I was off to Germany again. I started – we went to Minden it was at King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry Barracks in Minden. But we didn't stay there, we – they moved us to Royal Army Head Quarters which was Badenhhausen. We used to do calls to home, the lads were allowed to ring home in the evening and we used to put them through. Mm, that was quite interesting and, yes, that's right. Yes.

Interviewer: And how did you find Germany after the war? Was it very badly damaged?

Eileen: Well, what they had done in Germany, all they had done was sweep up the roads and the pavements and pour all the rubbish in the – where it all been knocked down. Yes, that's all they'd

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<sup>2</sup> 10 min

done. They'd just cleaned it up. Mind you, in '49 – although American money was just beginning to come in to Germany, mm. That's all, they hadn't started to rebuild. They'd just cleaned it up as it were. Where did I go when I was in Germany? I went down to Dusseldorf, went down to Harz mountains to ski [laughs], only though [laughs] on the [laughs] only on the nursery slopes. But all we had to do was hand in your pay book, you see, into the ski – and they gave you boots, a suit and skis. I only went on the nursery slopes, no. But never mind. I was a start wasn't it. Yeah, that's right. What else did we do there? Dusseldorf. Oh, we went all over the place. Yes, that was nice. What are we on to? '49 now aren't we? That's the end, came back in '49.

And believe it or not, I said to myself, 'You've got to get yourself a job, my girl', right. Food rationing was still on [laughs], I came back to the Food Office [laughs]! How's that for jam [laughs]. Yeah<sup>3</sup>. Went back to the Food Office until, of course, rationing completely finished what was about '53/'54 and then '54 I got a job at Manston with the – with the yanks. The Americans were at Manston. They were there from '50 to '58. I just worked for them from '54 to '58 and, of course, they moved and I was made redundant because I was only a temporary civil servant. Then I worked at a place in Margate in Thanet Press in Margate but then managed to get back Manston when they re-activated. Got my job back and became established and that was – I stayed there until I retired in 1985, mm.

Interviewer: If I can just take you back to Cairo.

Eileen: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you find Cairo?

Eileen: Hot [laughs]! 120 degrees in the shade so you didn't go out in the afternoon, did you? No, we didn't. We just left one girl on the switchboard and we went – gone on the metro up to Heliopolis Swimming Pool, see. Then came back at five o'clock when it – the traffic picked up till eight o'clock, then the night shift came on eight o'clock to eight the next morning and then that's when you went – went to get something to eat. Either you went to the mess hall or somebody took you out even. Yes, we were rather in demand [laughs]. That was the truth. I rather cleverly made friends with an RAF officer who was the empty out MTO. So needless to say we didn't have any problems with transport out to the pyramids [laughs].

Interviewer: Oh, right.

Eileen: Rather clever, wasn't it [laughs]? Yes, yes and the NAAFI used to put on tea dances and I had a very good partner who used to dance at the Hammersmith Palais so he was a good dancer. We used to win all the competitions [laughs]. Got little prizes, yes, I still got them. Yeah. Oh, yes. Well, we had to do our jobs, you see, but that was – and when you do shifts you rotate, you see, whereby sometimes you're off mornings and afternoon, evening or sometimes your off the afternoon and sometimes you got the day off, you see. So when you've got the day off then you – you started to

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<sup>3</sup> 15 min

sightseeing. Well, you've got to go to the pyramids if you're going to Egypt, haven't you? Needless to say [laughs]. Yes, that was a very nice hotel out there too.

Interviewer: Working on the switchboards there must have been quite, well, wartime anyway, but a real element of secrecy?

Eileen: Had what?

Interviewer: Secrecy.

Eileen: Well, if you did you didn't, no. You didn't, you keep it – mind you, the war was over in North Africa. By virtue of that five weeks in Durban, we missed the Africa Star by twelve days. You had to be on Egyptian soil the 30<sup>th</sup> of June '43 by being down there you see for five weeks we didn't get there until the 12<sup>th</sup> of July so I can't show the Africa Star. Although the same as – when I went to Germany, you see, I went there for June '46 and it was over in '45 so I even – I haven't got anything to show for that either [laughs].

Interviewer: But with Germany, after the war, I mean, I know from somebody I used to know, he went out there just after the war because there was a programme that they operated with the civilians. What they called like a de-nazification programme, to try and –

Eileen: Yes, yes. I always wanted to ask – to ask a German what they thought of Hitler after all he'd boost about, you know, Berlin won't be bombed and all of that business and look at the state it was in, you know. I have never found a German I could ask yet. I'd like to – how they feel, mm.

Interviewer: How did you find the civilian population?

Eileen: Well, they didn't bother us. They didn't bother us, no. No, they didn't. We – the – our switch room in Germany was in a bank vault, yes. Yes. We had [laughs] – we had German cleaners but they were hiding away more than they did any work. We had just to go down – go and find them, 'Come and do work'. Wouldn't you, if you'd just been conquered? You wouldn't feel like. So, you know, we sympathised but they were paid to clean and that's what we had to do. By then I was a sergeant, you see, you got three stripes [laughs]. Yeah. Yes, I stayed there till, unfortunately, I wanted to go on, I'd done seven years, I wanted to go on for my pension but something happened at home. I had to come home. In the mean time, believe it or not<sup>4</sup> my Signals Officer said to me, how was I getting on with my divorce, I was in Germany by then, I said I'm not. She arranged it all and with a warrant, didn't cost me a penny. I went from Germany up to Edinburg and back again on a warrant.

Interviewer: Really?

Eileen: Didn't cost me a penny [laughs]. Judge said, well, it's the Scottish court, you see. 'You can't get blood out of a stone', he said, 'I won't award you any money' [laughs]. I didn't care. I wasn't after

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<sup>4</sup> 20 min

any money. Just get rid of him. No, he did visit my home but I don't think they were too impressed [laughs]. I didn't care [laughs]. No, well, there you are, you're thrown together like that aren't you.

Interviewer: And you got married in 19 –?

Eileen: In 1940 – yes, December '43. Yeah, I got there in July and we – fast – life was very fast, mm. Very fast. Yeah.

Interviewer: I mean, you hear this a lot. My grandmother she – my grandparents they got married in '43. He was in the Navy and she said, because you thought you, you know, life was –

Eileen: Short.

Interviewer: Short. You didn't really think about the future and she said when he came, she was in the army, but when he came back, she said, it was almost like having a stranger and she found it very, very difficult.

Eileen: Yes, yes, of course, he'd probably been away for a while.

Interviewer: Mm.

Eileen: Yeah, this is it you see, yes. You have to get to know each other again don't you? Yeah. Yes, a lot of people –

Interviewer: So he was Scottish?

Eileen: Hmm?

Interviewer: Was he Scottish your husband?

Eileen: Yes, yes. Yes, I – so I had to go up to Edinburg cos he was domiciling in Scotland. I didn't mind, it didn't cost me anything [laughs]. That's the things you get away with in the army isn't it [laughs]?

Interviewer: But, now, Durban sounds very interesting.

Eileen: Durban? Yes.

Interviewer: Yes.

Eileen: I went to – with the head waiter, being an Indian we went to an Indian wedding while we were there. This girl and I, yes, that was interesting.

Interviewer: But you know you said about apartheid?

Eileen: Apartheid, yes.

Interviewer: Did – I mean, presumably let's say you were walking along the road with a coloured man –

Eileen: Oh, you wouldn't.

Interviewer: Would the police sort of interfere?

Eileen: Well, you just didn't do that.

Interviewer: You just didn't?

Eileen: No. They didn't go together at all. No. More than likely they would have arrested you. Oh yes, more than likely, mm. No, it wasn't worth it. No. As I say, he got in this side and we got in that side and he was – he was, of course, very nice, very sympathetic to us, used to come home at night and a great big bowl of fresh pineapple, with the sugar red and green [laughs]. Just us two, yeah. Yeah, yes, I can – yes, that's lovely. Well, I mean, coming from England where you, you know, we hadn't had fresh fruit. It was marvellous, absolutely marvellous. Even though that's – in the train when we were going along in the train, you know, from Cape Town to Durban they were coming up trying to sell us fruit. But with rationing in the UK, you see, there was orange juice – there was concentrated orange juice for the children through the Food Office but that was all. Mind you, with some of these women, with all these women with all these kids, they had more orange juice than they wanted [laughs]. They would sell it.

Interviewer: Didn't they have malt?

Eileen: Hmm?

Interviewer: Didn't they have this malt as well for the children? Cos –

Eileen: It had to be bought?

Interviewer: Malt. The malt.

Eileen: Malt? I don't know. There was tablets for the expectant mothers, tablets for them and I don't think in liquid form. I think it was in tablets. Yes. Oh yes, it was very much in demand because no fruit, you see, other than what's in the UK, mm.

Interviewer: But when you were in the Food Office did you find that people tried to fiddle, you know, members of the public?

Eileen: [Laughs] No, I don't think they fiddled in that way. The only thing is, as far as I know, is that if they got too many rations books, you know, some of these women have got lots of kids, lots of ration books, you know. They would sell a ration book and then, yes. And that was one of the things that they would do. Well, they weren't any good to them, you know. They didn't have the money, got too many children. But I do remember once one of the inspectors took me out on the a test purchase to see if these grocers, you know, were tearing out the coupons when they sold the goods, you know,

rationed goods. And he sent me in this shop and I bought something and, 'No, I haven't any coupon but you'll let me have it?' went outside and, of course, there's the inspector isn't there. Takes me back in, how [laughs] how awful [laughs]! I didn't expect that<sup>5</sup>. I didn't mind taking the food out to him, you know, rationed food out to him. I never expected him to take me back in the shop. Oh, well [laughs].

Interviewer: Something – with the rationing, say the meat rationing, was it on weight so everybody had –

Eileen: No, no, you had – you , no, you were allowed like, say an ounce of tea or lard or butter or some – and he cut a coupon out according to how many you can have. We were allowed one egg a week so we used to have that on Sunday for [laughs] specials, Sunday specials, eggs. Yes. No, it was – it was on weight and then the coupons accordingly, you see.

Interviewer: And that was per week?

Eileen: Per week, yes. And then, of course, clothes went on ration but I didn't – I didn't – I didn't get involved in that. I'd gone before the ration came in with clothes but I – so I don't know how they got on. They gave me some clothes coupons when I came out.

Interviewer: But certain things weren't rationed? Were they?

Eileen: Pardon?

Interviewer: Was bread rationed?

Eileen: No, not for a long time or potatoes. This is why they were the two most fattening things and why I went into the forces twelve stone four [laughs], came back from the Middle East nine stone three [laughs]. Well, you didn't eat, you see, in the day. You only ate at night. Yes, I didn't mind losing all that weight. Yes. Well, diets was, you see, made up with bread and potatoes because they weren't rationed. I came to understand they were afterwards but I wasn't there, you see. I don't know. Yeah, the two of the most fattening things, aren't they? Bread and potatoes.

Interviewer: Yes.

Eileen: Mm. No, they weren't on ration and the sweeties for the kiddies, oh dear [laughs]. They didn't like that. No, they were glad when that came off the sweeties. I say to these kids today, you know, 'How would you like it with sweets of ration'. 'Oh, I wouldn't like that' [laughs].

Interviewer: Did they ration cigarettes?

Eileen: Oh. Oh, god. I can't remember. I didn't smoke.

Interviewer: Cos I think in the forces they – they allowed –?

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<sup>5</sup> 25 min

Eileen: I don't know if they rationed cigarettes. I wouldn't be surprised. My sister smoked but I didn't. No. I couldn't say, I don't know. I wasn't involved, no cigarettes.

Interviewer: But out of your whole wartime experience, does anything stand out in particular?

Eileen: Oh, yes. Comradeship, you get you see, which you don't get in civvy street. No. And then, of course, now there's the British Legion and all these – all the men's regiments and, of course, for the girls, for me it was the King gave all the three services Royal in their titles in 1948 for the work that they did in the forces and it was the Women's Royal Naval Service, the Women's Royal Air Force but we went from ATS, which was Auxiliary Territorial's, to Women's Royal Army Corps. In 1948 we became Women's Royal Army Corps so my service is ATSWRAC. I stayed until '49, you see, and he gave it to us in '48, I just managed to get it. Yes, it changed us completely, you see, how this – Auxiliary Territorial Service was the girls were joining the Territorials, you see.

Interviewer: Right.

Eileen: Before conscription came in. Conscription came in for females December '41 see, and then you could get called up. I remember, I went to Guildford for my six weeks training and, you know, there was girls there trying to get out, even then, even though got as far as Guildford, 'Oh, I've got a bad back' [laughs], and me dying to get in [laughs]. I was very pleased I managed to get away, yeah. That's it mate. That's it. So, of course, now as I say, there is the ATSWRAC, we meet at Canterbury once a month. And, of course, there's the Royal British Legion. So there's all those sort of things that you can join and, of course, British Army Association, like the Royal Naval Association and RAF Association but Army didn't have any – anything. But we had – in August 1988 was formed the British Army Association in Ramsgate. Yeah, they were the founder branch Ramsgate. Mm, mm. Yes, I was the treasurer for sixteen years. Then somebody else wanted the job so I let them have it [laughs]. After sixteen years so we – all services now have got an association, mm. Yeah, we meet in the British Legion once a month, second Tuesday in the month. Yes, so you see like with the men they can belong to their regiment, they can belong to the British Legion. They can belong to British Army Association, yes.

Interviewer: You<sup>6</sup> said about the comradeship was one of the most positive things. Was there anything – a negative memory from – was there a particular –?

Eileen: Negative?

Interviewer: Any particular –?

Eileen: Don't think so cos I enjoyed it, you see. I would have gone on if I hadn't have had to come out, I had done – I done seven years, see. Cracked it, I was a sergeant recommended for a [unclear] which was a very good rank but now but you make these decisions don't you. Mm.

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<sup>6</sup> 30 min

Interviewer: And how do you – when you – your parents you were saying you said goodbye to them what was the reaction when you saw them again?

Eileen: I don't know. I never found out. No, I never found out what their reaction was. I don't suppose it was good but I had to go, you know. It was no good hanging around. I had to go. No and that was the sad bit wasn't it. But – and then, of course, we were going on the water, they didn't get any information about me, you see and, of course, they started getting worried and anyway you had a very good Mayor in Ramsgate, A B C Kempe, used to wear a top hat [laughs]. He was called the Top Hat Mayor and my mum contacted him and to say, you know, 'She's got somewhere but we don't know where' and he had to try to find out but as soon as we got to, well, eventually, when we got to Cairo did we send a card – a post card to say, we're ok. But that was a good three months, you see. Yeah.

Interviewer: Because, you couldn't – when you wrote home letters were censored weren't they?

Eileen: Oh, yes. Very much so, mm. Mm.

Interviewer: So you couldn't say –

Eileen: Cut out.

Interviewer: Where you were.

Eileen: No.

Interviewer: Or what you were doing.

Eileen: No. I'm just starting to think. There was something on the water that was rather – I don't know. Anyway there was a certain bird that used to fly across the water, no, you daren't, cos it gives the game away, you see. No, if we did they cut it out, mm, mm. Yes, and it wasn't until we finally got to Cairo. You see as I say, we left Liverpool the end of late April and didn't get to Cairo till the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, you see. I was with –

Interviewer: It's a long time.

Eileen: Yeah, we had, you see, that five weeks to get us out there to Cape Town and then the five weeks in Durban and then we went up to Port Taufiq. And then coming back as I say, we came back through the Med cos the war was over, you see. So I haven't done [laughs] – I went in the Med, Suez [unclear], right came out that way. Came back through the Med cos the war was over in the Mediterranean, yes, yes, nothing -

Interviewer: And what was it like –?

Eileen: Two bob a day we were paid [laughs].

Interviewer: Two bob per day?

Eileen: Two bob per day [laughs].

Interviewer: But what was it like – I know, people that have had good, you know, good experience in the forces, I think in particular a friend of mine. He had a lovely war because he was some – he went to Australia and he was in the RAF, he was in intelligence, and then he went to New York and Washington.

Eileen: Oh, did he? That was a nice posting.

Interviewer: But I know that when he came back, he found it terribly depressing, he –

Eileen: Really?

Interviewer: Yes, he – he said to me –

Eileen: Was the war over then?

Interviewer: Yes, I think he came back in about '46 but he said that if he could have done he would have emigrated. He would have gone to Australia.

Eileen: Yeah, well, of course, don't forget wartime.

Interviewer: But were you glad to be back, did you use to when –?

Eileen: Well, no I didn't want to come out. No. I wanted go on. I thought, now where else can I go after here [laughs]? Well, actually there weren't a lot of places to go to after the war was over. I thought I'd like to go Far East but, of course, it was all over there. So I don't quite know, I can't think now where I could have gone. But I couldn't so there you are. Well, I would have done and I would have volunteered again, mm. Yes, why not, it's nice seeing the world is there, two bob a day [laughs]. And, of course, the forces have gone on, the girls have gone on, you see, mm.

Interviewer: Do you still keep in touch with people that you were –?

Eileen: Yes, I used to but, you know, we're an age now were we're knocking off [laughs] as it were. Yes, I have got a friend – who I was with when I was in<sup>7</sup> Guildford, she's still around. She's got children and they've got children and they've had their 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary, that's one. Another one that I was with in Germany, yes, Ivy, now, I kept in stay with Ivy and, of course, we was ATS sergeants mess and she met up with Jim who was in the Royal Corps Signal Sergeant mess, you see. In '49 – she came out in '49 because she married Jim and came out. Yes, and they're living down in Cardiff now and they've got – oh, she's got four children and they've got children. But I've kept in touch with her, with Ivy and I've been to all the children's christenings. I'm godmother to one of the girls, she had two girls and then a gap and then two more girls and I'm goddaughter – godmother

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<sup>7</sup> 35 min

to one of them, who lives in London. But I keep in touch with them, yes. Very good friends they are. Lovely couple they are. Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: It's been a real pleasure. I would just like to thank you.

Eileen: Oh, that's ok.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing those things.

Eileen: [Laughs]. Boring you?

Interviewer: And, no –

Eileen: [Laughs].

Interviewer: On the contrary, very, very interesting. Cos I think despite the horrors of war, I think that having the opportunity to travel like that must have been quite marvellous.

Eileen: Oh, yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: Cos you were what – how old were you when you joined up?

Eileen: I was called up twenty-one. I was twenty-one when I was called up. Yes, yes 1921, so I say free, white and twenty-one [laughs]. Yeah. Yes, twenty-one. Well, it was nobody at home, see, you know. If you went to a dance at – there'd only be the local soldiers, you know. It wouldn't be your friends they had all gone that's why I wanted to go cos all my friends had gone. Mm, never mind [laughs].

Interviewer: And you were one of four did you say?

Eileen: Yeah, I was the youngest of four but my, yeah, my brother was in the Navy, my elder brother was in the Army but my sister had children so she didn't go anywhere. She kept down the tunnel. We had tunnels all over Ramsgate where you could, if you caught out in an air raid you could go down here and come out the other end of the town.

Interviewer: Really?

Eileen: Mm, you could ride – walk underneath. Yes, yes. Even old Churchill came down and had a look at those [laughs]. There was a little boy down there selling newspapers – evening papers and it was tuppence. 'Oh, I'm not gonna spend that', he says, 'Oh, Churchill gave me that' [laughs]. Yeah. Yes, so it was very good.

Interviewer: Are they still there?

Eileen: Hmm?

Interviewer: Are those tunnels still there?

Eileen: I – we don't use them. No, no, we don't. If they're blocked up we don't use them. No. One of them, the train used to run down from the station down to the front. Yes. That's not – that's not going now. That was very useful, where I live right down to the beach. Mm.

Interviewer: Because you must have had a lot, being on the coast, you must have had quite a lot of bombardments?

Eileen: We had a very bad raid in August 1940. Oh, yes, we were the target, Ramsgate. Mm, we lost people. Yeah, we lost people. Yes, unfortunately. But as I say if you just rushed down in any entrance if you were out, see, but one bomb went – fell on a public house, you see. It's nothing you can do about that, is there? That's the sort of thing. No, that we were the target that particular day. Mm. Yeah, afraid so. I think that was the only one. Except if they're, like, they were going back and they still got some bombs aboard, they just drop them any old how. But other than that particular day, that was the only one that was meant for us. Yeah. Yes. But, of course, we've got the harbour which was a target. The Navy used the harbour and, of course, the RAF used the harbour when the pilots used to come down in the drink, they used to rush out in their boats and pick them up so they used Ramsgate harbour for – to anchor. Mm.

Interviewer: I suppose, you had all the Dunkirk?

Eileen: Dunkirk, oh, well, I remember Dunkirk. Yes, I remember the lads landing at Dunkirk with French soldiers, please, if we ran away so did they because I saw these French soldiers landing with ours. The blooming French said we ran away [laughs] at Dunkirk. My god, what did they do? Capitulate to the Germans, didn't they and they walked in<sup>8</sup> [laughs]. Amazing. No, no, they – I was working and just ran along Leopold Street looked over the edge and there was the boat and all the lads and the WRVS down there, you know, with cups of tea and sandwiches. But French sailors came abroad as well, you see. Mm.

Interviewer: Well, that's something I didn't know.

Eileen: Yes, and then, of course, we had the Battle of Britain after that. And that was ups the skies. All the vapour trails up there with our lads from Manston and Biggin Hill and all those places, losing our lovely boys at the age of nineteen. Yes. That was terrific up there. Yeah, of course, London was bombed a lot wasn't it then, in that year. Mm. Yes, the dear old boys nineteen years of age losing their lives, you know. I plugged these in to these kids, at the Hartsdown College at Margate, I would go and they have an Oral History Day and the men come over but I've only managed one naval man to come over. Of course, we can get Army but there's only us two girls, a WAAF and I. And they give us the library – for the older ones in the school, in the Hartsdown College, and they – we have the library and they have round tables and they come in and sit down, you know, where they like and the girls make straight for the men's table [laughs]. Fifteen years of age, yes. But they sit down and they've got a list of questions to ask you. But then, of course, then it get's round to, what did you do?

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<sup>8</sup> 40 min

But, yeah, we had two sessions before coffee, then we had a cup of coffee then we had two more sessions and it was only for the morning and then we had lunch and that was it. We were just there for the morning. But these kids were quite interesting but I plugged the Battle of Britain cos that was so important, you know, old Goering told Hitler we'll get master of the sky and you can walk into the UK. I mean, you don't mind he was only 22 miles over Calais, wasn't he? It didn't take much to get over but our lovely boys in blue they didn't allow it did they?

Interviewer: Well, what Churchill said was absolutely right, 'Never was so much owed by so many to so few'.

Eileen: To so few. It was so apt wasn't it? Absolutely apt. Yes, it was wonderful. Yes, our Battle of Britain, if we hadn't won that they would have over and I say to these kids, 'How do you like to be under the Germans?', 'Oh, I wouldn't like that' [laughs]. And I said, this is why it's important, the Battle of Britain. But we won it. Otherwise it would have been over. Yes, we didn't realise how important that was. Never mind, we won it and that's the main thing, isn't it? Mm.

Interviewer: And we – it's people like you we have to be thankful for.

Eileen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Now, we – our forty-five minutes is up but I just – I just like to say thank you very much for sparing your time.

Eileen: You're welcome, you're welcome. Nice of you to listen to me [laughs].

Interviewer: No, you're very, very interesting. Thank you.

**End of Interview.**