

Interviewee: Frances Sewell

Interviewer: June Balshaw

Date: 29 September 2012

Interviewer: Ok. So today is Saturday 29th September 2012 and I'm talking to, what's your name?

Frances: Frances Sewell, S-E-W-E-L-L.

Interviewer: Frances Sewell and could you tell me your date of birth please Frances?

Frances: June '20.

Interviewer: June 1920. Ok, that's fabulous. So this recording is going to form part of the Memories of War project and is supplementary to the DVD that you've already made with Vincent and Leslie. But what I'd like to do is just start off by asking you if you could just tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you were born.

Frances: I was born in Silvertown actually and we moved to Woolwich when I was eight.

Interviewer: So that was in 1928?

Frances: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. And why did you move to Woolwich from Silvertown? Do you know?

Frances: I don't know. I think my mother and father probably – my mother had friends in Woolwich so probably this was one of those reasons.

Interviewer: Ok. And how many were there in your family?

Frances: Just me, until my mother married again. My father died when I was eleven. I always wanted to be a schoolteacher but in those days you had to pay for college and mum couldn't afford it so I never did get there. And then she married again. A man with three daughters, all older than me and we didn't get on.

Interviewer: Oh dear. And was that before the Second World War?

Frances: Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: So how old were you when you got married, Frances?

Frances: I think I was nineteen.

Interviewer: What year did you get married?

Frances: 1940. Yes, I got married in the March as I would have been twenty in the June.

Interviewer: Right. Ok, if you could just tell me a little bit then about where you lived when you were first married and what you were doing and what your husband was doing.

Frances: Well, when I first got married, like it was during the war, so I lived with mum then when I had my eldest son we got a hut, they were called, they were wooden places built for the Arsenal workers in the First World War. Ivan was six months old when we moved there and we've been in Abbey Wood ever since.

Interviewer: So where was the hut? What was the address?

Frances: 18 Conference Road, Abbey Wood, which there're not there now.

Interviewer: No. Ok, so it's 1941, you've got a six months old son, Ivan, and what is your husband doing?

Frances: Well, he was wounded during the war so he was disabled.

Interviewer: Would you be able to tell me a little bit about – was he in the Army?

Frances: No. When they conscripted everybody he wanted to go in the Navy. No, they couldn't go in the Navy so he said, 'Well, I'll go in the Air Force'. So when he got his papers, Infantry [laughs]. But he was wounded in El Alamein and he was in hospital in Jerusalem and South Africa for nine months and he came home in the April. They discharged him up Wishaw, where they came off the boat presumably, and he said – they said, 'There's your papers'. He said, 'I don't want my discharge until I'm cured. It's not what you want, it's what you get. He came home. We met him at the station and I was ashamed to walk along with him. He had his khaki army trousers on that were all stained. No underclothes and an overcoat¹ that was ten times too big, and a few little belongings in a little cotton bag. My boss at the time said, 'You should have taken a photo and published it', but –

Interviewer: So why do you think he was in such a bad way?

Frances: Well, he had – he got shrapnel in the bottom of his spine and they had taken the coccyx away and they said they wouldn't take any more because he probably then would have been paralysed for life. He just had an open wound for, oh, must have been two years or more after that. And then gradually it did dry up and then cos eventually he had to have his leg off.

Interviewer: Oh dear. So you mentioned your boss saying that you should have taken a photo. What work were you doing at that point, Frances?

Frances: I was in an office in the City. Oh, gosh. I'm just losing my words now and again.

Interviewer: It's ok. Take your time.

Frances: It was a Bradford firm, with materials and I was the office girl.

¹ 5 min

Interviewer: And so who was looking after Ivan when you were at work?

Frances: No, I didn't – I left work when I was six months with Ivan and I didn't go back again.

Interviewer: You didn't go back. Ok. So you basically you were here with Ivan, your husband returned from the war, can you remember what year that was? If you were –

Frances: I think it was '44, I think.

Interviewer: That would probably make sense if he was injured at El Alamein. Ok.

Frances: I think he was wounded in '44, in the July. July, yeah, that would be that's nine months cos he came home in the April.

Interviewer: Alright. So he came home in April –

Frances: 1945.

Interviewer: 1945. So just before VE-Day, a month before. So tell me a little bit about what you were doing during the war. I've seen your card, with your Civil Defence duty.

Frances: Yeah, that's more or less [laughs].

Interviewer: But just tell me a little bit about what you – what that actually involved and any of things that happened.

Frances: Well, we had a routine. Certain days you went out in the evenings. You sort of walked round the street watching to see if there was anything. If you saw a fire you were supposed to put it out or help put it out. I never did get a fire. But we had a bomb on the house opposite my mother. When the Air Raid Warden was walking up the road with my stepsister and they caught the blast from the bomb. He only got a broken arm. She got shrapnel in here but she was a very shy girl and she wouldn't tell anyone. They took her round to –

Interviewer: So that was shrapnel in her side.

Frances: Yes. They took her round to what was the First Aid depot in Market Street. They transferred her to the War Memorial Hospital. This was in the evening. At half past six in the morning, when the all-clear went, [sighs] she relaxed and died. And I think it was – she was just tensed up and when she relaxed she –

Interviewer: And what was her name?

Frances: Grace Gillard. Her name is on the plaque in the Town Hall.

Interviewer: And the actual bomb happened –

Frances: In Rectory Place.

Interviewer: In Rectory Place.

Frances: At Woolwich.

Interviewer: At Woolwich. Ok. Alright. So your husband is overseas you've got Ivan and was it just the one child you had for the duration of the war?

Frances: No, I had Ivan in '44 and then in '47 I had James and in '54 I had Stephanie [laughs].

Interviewer: Oh, great. So, but you got married in 1940 so you had four years before you had your first child, is that right? If Ivan was born in '44.

Frances: Yeah, it must be [laughs]. I didn't realise it was that long².

Interviewer: So basically for most of the war you were working in London, in an office, as well as doing the fire watching duties. So what was it like your journey to work during the Blitz?

Frances: I had some hair-raising ones. More or less, it wasn't too bad cos I went up by train. But there were times when the trains weren't running and you had to find alternative ways. One particular time, no trains, but they said if you go over to North Woolwich you can get a boat up the river. So we all trooped over to North Woolwich got on the boat about nine o'clock, I eventually got to London at 12 o'clock cos you don't realise the river's this long. When I walked in the office, they said, 'Where have you been?!' So when I told them, they said, 'Well, you might as well go home now'. But the trains had been running by then so I got home on the train.

Interviewer: So in terms of the Blitz then. Could you tell me a little bit about what that was like? I mean, it must have been quite terrifying with the bombs going off all around you.

Frances: Well, yes. But mostly in the City they were at night more, you know. I mean, when I went up when they'd had the big blitz in the City there was firemen and pipes everywhere. That's when our office was bombed. But one particular time all the trains had stopped. I had to walk home. Four or five men I didn't know from Adam were all walking, we all walked along together. You couldn't do that these days. I mean, I didn't know who they were and also as we got to where they lived they dropped off. I got to Woolwich and there was one man left. He lived in Belvedere. We walked along and there was a raid while we were on so we just scoot under the shelter. Now, I mean, at the time cos when I walked in my mother said, 'Where have you been?!' So I said, 'Walking home' [laughs]. But, you know.

Interviewer: So you just really got on with it on a day to day basis.

Frances: Yeah, I don't think anything of it.

Interviewer: And what about here where you were living in the evenings then when the Blitz was on? What sort of shelter did you have? What did you do / where did you go?

² 10 min

Frances: Well, we had a shelter in the garden but I'm afraid we never went in it [laughs]. Stayed in the bedroom [laughs]. I said, 'I'm not going in that thing'.

Interviewer: Was it an Anderson shelter?

Frances: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you just took your chance and stayed in.

Frances: Yes. Well, they said what used to be will be.

Interviewer: Ok. And was there much damage to properties around where you were?

Frances: Not an awful lot. This house opposite, I suppose that was the nearest. There wasn't an awful lot apart from that. It was more out of Woolwich, you know. But, it's just one of those things. I'm a person that takes things as they come. It doesn't worry me.

Interviewer: Ok, alright. So is there any particular memory that stands out for you about the Second World War and about what you were doing or what was going on?

Frances: No, not about what I was doing [laughs]. It was that walking home, that's the one that sticks. But, some of the men in the office were called up and that so I just carried on. Then we have a couple of new men came in but we got on alright so.

Interviewer: Cos a lot of – obviously a lot of women were also conscripted during the Second World War.

Frances: Oh, they got me, what was the word?

Interviewer: Exempt?

Frances: Yeah. Cos I said, I always said I would have liked to have gone in the Land Army [laughs].

Interviewer: But there wasn't an opportunity for you?

Frances: No, they said, you know, they wanted me in the office to keep the business going so that was it. So I was exempted.

Interviewer: Ok.

Frances: Which I regretted at one time.

Interviewer: So with the fire watching then. Was it sort of everybody men and women that had to take their turn? And did you have to have any training?

Frances: No, they just showed you how to work a stirrup pump. You had a bucket and a pump like this and that was it. We were mainly women³ that were doing it. But the men were the Air Raid Wardens.

Interviewer: Ok. And everyone did it when they were supposed to? Were there any slackers?

Frances: No, we had – there were my two younger step sisters and me. We all did it. Well, two of us it did it one day and the other one, she was, the one that got killed was on a different shift.

Interviewer: But you just took it in your stride?

Frances: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok, well that's super. Thank you, Frances. Is there anything else you'd like to say? Any other memories before we conclude?

Frances: Not really.

Interviewer: No? I mean, do you feel that after the war was over, VE-day, your husband was home. But I'm guessing he was still in quite a bad way because he'd only been home for a month. So can you remember what you did on VE-day? Which was May 1945. Was there a party?

Frances: No, I don't think we did anything. VJ-day we were out at Grantham, up at my cousins [laughs].

Interviewer: That was in the August?

Frances: Yes. But VE-day it just came and went. He didn't feel like celebrating so that's it.

Interviewer: So, after the war then, you said he had to have his leg amputated. That was a result of the –

Frances: Well, all part and parcel. He did go back to work for a while.

Interviewer: And what was his job?

Frances: He was a progress chaser, yeah, that's the right word [laughs], at Elliot's at Lewisham. They're not there now I don't think.

Interviewer: No, I don't think they are. But his war resulted, obviously, in him getting injuries and affected the rest of his life.

Frances: The only thing, when he came out they gave him a silver badge to wear because he'd been wounded. He said 'I'm not wearing that Mickey Mouse badge'. Consequently, once or twice when we'd been on the bus with people who said, 'Huh, why is that man not in the Army?' Because to look at him he looked fine and that was a bit embarrassing cos in those days I wouldn't speak up for

³ 15 min

myself so I just ignored it. Whereas now I would probably have turned round and given them a mouthful [laughs]. So that's it.

Interviewer: Alright, good for you. Ok, well, Frances thank you so much for talking to me today. I'm going to switch the machine off now.

End of Interview