

Interviewer:

Okay, so this is Terry Ford on Saturday the 18th of November, 2023 and I'm interviewing Eleanor Miles, and she's going to talk about herself, evacuation and being in the Wrens and in Burma. Do you just want to tell us a little bit about being in the Wrens?

Eleanor:

Yes, well, I volunteered because I was going to be called up anyway, I was 17 and a half and I knew that I would be called up. So I thought, if you volunteer, you can go in, you can pick where you want to go. So I volunteered six months before my call up papers came in, and so I went into the Wrens and I started off in Scotland and then we came down to London and yes, came down to London and we were waiting to be given places where to go we were sort of hanging around.

So one of the petty officers, it was a university we were in, we were living there. The petty officer came and she said that Dame Vera Laughton Mathews, who was head of the Wrens, was having a cocktail party in London and she wanted some Wrens to go and help with the cocktail party. So she picked six, and I was among six. So we went along, she had this house in London, but we were given jobs to do and my job was to be in the hall greeting all the officers that were coming through, taking the hats and coats and hanging them up. The other girls were in the place where the party was going on and they were handing out drinks and eats and things like that. And so they were all coming in sub lieutenants, lieutenants. And then the petty officer came to me and she said, we've got the Admiral coming this afternoon. So she said, make sure that you look after him properly.

So, oh my God, the Admiral. After that, I was forgetting about the sub lieutenants, lieutenants and the captains. I was only looking for the admiral, and I was looking and looking. They were hanging their own hats and coats up. Eventually, I was so busy looking for this admiral and then the petty officer came and she said, everything all right? I said, yes, but the Admiral hasn't arrived yet. She said, oh, he's been here about a half an hour. And I thought, how on earth did I miss all that gold braid and all that gold braid around the hat? I couldn't imagine how I'd missed him. She says, come here and I'll show you to him. So she took me to the place where the party was going on. She said that's him sitting in the chair there. And when I looked, it was a little fat old man in a grey suit. He was a government a top government official that had a lot to do with the Navy and he was given the name of Admiral. I was so disappointed.

Interviewer:

Excellent, excellent.

Eleanor:

So that was the end of that story. I saw two German ships surrender. I was in Felixstowe, it was a motor torpedo base and there was a message came through from Norway to say that there was two German ships. This was at the end of the war, mind you, two German ships on the horizon and they sent a signal to see if they wanted to come in, surrender and they sent a signal back to say they wanted to surrender to the men that they had been in combat with, which was our base. So it was all arranged that our base would sort it out. So an admiral came from London and so the morning of the, the morning that they were going to surrender, how I got there I don't know, but I among with three other Wrens were standing on top of the Officer of the Watch's hut where the surrender papers were going to be signed. So we had a good view of everything and of course, we were right on top of where everything was

happening. So an Admiral came up from London and our boats, MTB boats, took him to Norway to where they had had the first messages. So it was decided that our ships or our MTB boats should go and bring them in. So they did, they went out with the Admiral and they brought in the two ships and brought them into the Felixstowe Harbour. They went onboard and brought all the officers out and they all went into the Officer of the Watch's hut and watched the surrender papers being signed and the Admiral was there to witness it all happening. Then all the officers off the ships were taken away somewhere. I think they'd taken over a hotel to put them overnight and then they brought all the men, the ratings and sub lieutenants and lieutenants, no, all the officers were off. It was all than men, the petty officers and the men were brought ashore and they were taken they put on a bus and they would be taken away to some camp. So it was really quite exciting.

Interviewer:

You don't know the names of the ships, the two German ships?

Eleanor:

No, the ships' names were never mentioned, never mentioned, right, so I really never heard, I just know that there were two German ships. So we were told then after that all happened, of course it was all over, but we were told that there was going to be a parade. We had to march past the Admiral and he was going to give a speech. So there was the Navy, the Wrens and the Marines and we all marched to where the Admiral was and about turned and stood and listened to his speech and at the end of the speech, he said: "never in my naval career have I met such a smart body of men and hmm, hmm, hmm, women." Course everybody roared with laughter. So that was it.

Interviewer:

Excellent, excellent. So you mentioned that someone was in Burma.

Eleanor:

My husband was in Burma for four years. He was fighting the Japanese. He never got, he was never home for four years, because I knew of him, but that was all I knew about him. And he had a terrible war, where they were stationed, they were stationed out in the plains and they had to build shacks and things to live in and of course the water, you can imagine dripping down off the plains. Anyway, they were stationed, yes, they're stationed and the Japanese were coming over. They were bombing them all the time. For the four years he was there, they were all on half ration because all the planes that were coming over the Japanese were bombing them. So letters, food and everything were, well he never had a letter for four years. The food, they had very little food. They were put on half rations and that happened for the four years that he was out there. And before they came home, he was seven stone in weight and before they came home, they took them to a camp to fit them, fatten them up before they came home. They were all in such a bad state.

Interviewer:

What was his name?

Eleanor:

Robert Miles.

Interviewer:

Was he from South Shields?

Eleanor:

Yes.

David Parker (Grandson):

Second stripe sergeant.

Eleanor:

Pardon?

David Parker (Grandson):

Second stripe sergeant.

Eleanor:

Yes, yes, he was in charge of the men, yes. And they could hear the Japs, they had been pushing them back, but they were so near that they could hear noises on each side of the camp. And on the Japanese side, they must've been picking up names, listening, picking up names from the British and they would shout over "How's Jack from South Shields" or whatever, a name and where they lived. And it frightened them to death to know that the Japanese knew of that person that was there and where he lived. Do you know? So they used to have guards out of course at night and he put one lad out. He surrounded their camp with guards at night in case the Japanese started. And this lad wouldn't go out he was frightened, he was terrified and Bob said right he said, I'll go; I'll take your place tonight and you will go out tomorrow and if you don't you'll be in dead trouble. So Bob took the watch and the next day, the lad went out and he did the watch and he said, I could report you on this, but I'm not going to.

Just before they captured, the Japanese were trying to get into Burma and the British were pushing them out and eventually they did push them out Burma. And the last fight was hundreds of bodies of both Japanese and British and the fight ended up in an officer's building where the officers were all stationed and when the battle was over and the British won it, the place was just filled with dead bodies. So someone contacted the British Legion. It was either the British Legion or what is, this another the Salvation Army? No, the British Legion. They asked them if they would help towards a fund for a monument with all the men's names on that had been killed and the British Legion refused. So the men gave three weeks pay up to pay for it to have this memorial with the men's names and to this day my husband would never give a penny to the British Legion.

So that was and of course, well before they came home, the war was over. It was called the Forgotten War. And they were fattening them up to bring them home and they kept saying, when are we going home? But everybody was going home and there wasn't enough ships and so they waited quite a long time before they eventually got a ship and were able to come home.

Interviewer:

Do you know when he came home? What year?

Eleanor:

It would be 1945 I think, 1945, when he came home, yes. And he was on the train, of course he couldn't let anybody know that he was coming home. So when he was on the Newcastle train at about three o'clock in the morning when he got into South Shields, he thought well I can't knock anybody up at this time of night. So there was a train in the sidings and he got into one of the carriages and he slept in the carriage until morning and then he went home, yes.

Interviewer:

So can you remember anything else about the Second World War? Anything else, you said did you say you were evacuated?

Eleanor:

Yes, we were evacuated to Arnside, yes and I was telling you about it. Tom said, we haven't to be separated. So I went, I've told you that haven't I?

Grandson:

No that was downstairs, this is all brand new.

Eleanor:

Oh, we went to Arnside and we were all put into a huge room and people were picking us where we were going and we were going to live with and Tommy and Freddy were going with one person and I was going with another and Tom started to cry. He was three years younger than me. He said, my mother said, we haven't got to be separated. So eventually I went with Tommy and Freddy. So the three of us went to live in the one house and the house was a lodging house you took in lodgers. It was quite a big house. And she had a maid who did all the dirty work, but I was stuck in the kitchen washing dishes all day. I mean, I had to go to school, but when I came in at night, all these dishes and I would have them all to wash and I just felt like I wasn't happy there.

So we were sleeping in the top floor and Freddy and Tommy were out playing and when they came in, I helped them to get into bed. We were in the one room, there was, I think, a double bed in the corner of that room, in the corner of the room. And then this corner was a single bed for me and we were all in bed and Freddy started to cry. And I said, what's the matter? He says, my legs hurting, I said, well, what have you done with this? He says, nothing. I said, have you fallen down? No and he just kept on crying. So I got up and I had a look at it, and I couldn't find anything wrong with it. And I sort of soothed him down and I got back into bed and started to get back to sleep again. And he started crying again about his leg was hurting.

So I brought him in with me and I cuddled him in and I got him settled and eventually he got some sleep. So the next morning when I got up, I said to Miss Cole, that was her name Miss Cole. I said Freddy's not going into school this morning. I said, he's been crying about his leg. I said, he'd been crying most of the night. His leg is hurting, so she said, well you'll have to stay off and look after him because I haven't got time. So she said, go and get the doctor. So she told me where the doctor would be. So I went and got the doctor and I have to say he was only five minutes later, the doctor was there and he had a look at his leg. And before I knew what was happening, there was an ambulance at the door and he was taken to hospital. They got in touch with my mother to tell her what was happening and they advised her to come through. So she arrived that day about tea time, well, no middle afternoon. And the pair of us

went up to the hospital and I was sitting beside Freddy. And the nurse got ahold of her mother and took her away and talked to her. And when she came back the doctor said to my mother, we're going to operate tonight. He says, I can't remember, it was like a poison, septicaemia.

Interviewer:

Septicaemia is very common.

Eleanor:

He said, we hope that we'll be able to catch it, but if not, his leg will have to come off. So they said they were going to operate that night. So he came home and we were having our tea and Miss. Cole didn't have the phone, but a relative of hers who lived higher up the street had a phone, had her phone number, were having our tea, and suddenly she was called Mrs. Cole, I saw Mrs. Cole standing in the kitchen doorway and I had a crust of bread in my mouth and when I saw her, I could hear the crust hitting the plate. And she looked, she just stood there and then she walked away and then she came back and she stood and she looked at us all and she said, Freddy's had his operation and I'm afraid he's not very well. And then she walked away and she came back and she said, I'm afraid he's died. He's gone. So we came home for the funeral and there was no way I was going back. So we didn't go back.

Interviewer:

That's pretty sad, tragic.

Eleanor:

Septicaemia

Interviewer:

Septicaemia

Eleanor:

So that was the end of my evacuation.

Interviewer:

So you then came back and then joined the Wrens?

Eleanor:

Well, I was only 14, of course, then I had just gone 14. And so we came back home and I used to work for the Co-op in the ladies dress department and I knew that I would be having to be called up, so that was when I decided we would go out and go into the Wrens.

Grandson:

You started courting granddad.

Eleanor:

Oh, yes. My mother, my mother's doctor was Dr. Lowe and he was moving into a new place for his surgery. And it was a house in Westoe Road. It was one of the big houses. And the two rooms

downstairs, the front and the back room were going to be the waiting room and the surgery and he wanted someone, he said to look after the surgery and the waiting room and the rest of the house, which we'd be hers to live in. So we moved in there. And of course, Dr. Lowe is then called up and Robert was called up. So we were there during the war until they came home. And Dr. Lowe came home and then Robert came home. And when he was on leave, he used to come and visit Dr. Lowe. Of course, Dr. Lowe wanted to know all about where he'd been and what he did and all the rest of it. My mother had to go into hospital and I had to come home on, compassionate leave to look after her. So when she came out of hospital, I still, I had a month's compassionate leave. So I was looking after the house and the surgery and then eventually I was think was home about a month and I was upstairs doing the bedrooms and my mother shouted, there's a cup of tea here for you downstairs. So I came downstairs, went into the kitchen and this bloke was standing there by the fire with a cup of tea. And I sort of recognised him because I had been to the doctors for my mother to get prescription and he was the dispenser for Dr. Lowe. Well we were having tea and then the mother had to go to the someone at the door. So for about 10 minutes the pair of us stood, I'm standing here, he's standing there and not a word, dead silence.

Oh God, I can't put up with this. I picked my tea up and I went to the scullery and well, I went to the backyard and I finished me tea in the backyard. And when the mother come back, I came in and I went straight upstairs. So on the Saturday, my brother Arthur was in the army and he was home on weekend leave. And my other brother Tom, he worked on the tugboats and he was off of course that day. And then Robert arrives and he's standing because Dr. Lowe just wants him to be there. He wants to hear all about it. He's standing there waiting for the surgery to finish. Of course, Tommy and Arthur all wanted to know exactly where Bob had been and what he'd been doing and all the rest of it. And he mentioned this, I've forgotten the name, but it was a name in India.

And when he mentioned it of I said, oh, I said, my petty officer's just come home from there. And then he started to describe exactly where it was in India. Well, I hadn't a clue what he was talking about. He was talking about this southeast something. Oh, he was going on and on and describing minutely where this place was. Anyway, off he went and this Tuesday morning, the next Tuesday morning, two or three days later, I was cleaning out the fire, taking all the ashes out and doing the grate and everything. And my mother handed me a letter. So I opened it up and I read it and it said he hoped, it was from Robert. He hoped I didn't mind writing, him writing to me. But when we were talking about this place in India where my petty officer had just come from, he said, he had described minutely where it was, he said, I'm afraid I got the directions wrong. He said, it wasn't that side of the area. And he started describe all the places. I was just lost, I thought. So I handed the letter to my mother and I said to her, read that. So when she finished, she started a laugh. She says, well, if ever I've seen an excuse to write to anybody, that's it. So that was the beginning. That was the beginning, yeah.

Eleanor:

Course and of course, when the war finished, all the MTB boats were ashore and there was parties in every one of them. And we were hopping from one boat to the next. And then we went into London on the night, on the very night that war was finished. And we had, oh, it was fantastic, I mean you just couldn't move. Everybody was singing, everybody was dancing, everybody was hugging and kissing everybody and it was just mad. And we went into London and we were just joining in with all the fun in the crowd and it was about three o'clock in the morning and we thought, where are we going to sleep? So we ended up sleeping in a ladies toilet until the first train back to where I was stationed.

Interviewer:

Where were you stationed?

Eleanor:

First, I went to Bridlington Sea. Then when the war was almost finished, I went to Chatham Barracks and we were travelling to Chatham and then we were in a big sort of, it was a motor and they dropped the two of us, so they dropped two of us off at Chatham Barracks. And of course there was soldiers on sentry duty on sentry duty and when we went up, we said we've been told we've got to come to Chatham Barracks. And they told us where we had no idea where we had to go. Well, they told us, and they said, just straight up there all the way and turned left or whatever. So we've got our cases and we were walking up the pavement and walking and walking and suddenly all hell broke loose. There was yelling and shouting, whistles blowing. And we're looking around, what on earth's happening. And suddenly two sailors on duty ran up to us and they yelled and shouted us and said: "Pavements For Officers Only!!!"

Interviewer:

Only officers on the pavements, Wow!

Eleanor:

"Pavements For Officers Only! Get On The Road!!" I mean, it was absolute mayhem. I thought World War II had broken out again. So we had to get off the pavement and walk up the road.

I was working in an office in Chatham Barracks, It was the offices, it was the office where officers were living and eating and we were doing all the accounts. There was an office upstairs, they did so much of it and then they sent it down to us and we had to do the rest and then it all had to be rechecked over again. So that was my job, what I was doing. And this Saturday, it was Sunday and of course there's not many people working on Sunday, but it was our turn, Ira and I, one of the Wrens in the office and we did what we had to do and then we had the News of the World and we were doing the crossword and we filled it all in and I said, I think we should send it in. So Ira said, yeah, yeah, we will. So Cookie, who I worked with, he was a sailor. He was an older man who was listening to what was happening. He was on duty this weekend and he said, he, if you do win, you won't get anything because you've got to be 21 to enter it. So he said, I'll put my name and address on. He said, and then that'll keep things right. So he put his name and address on this crossword and we sent it off to London.

But he was well known for his tricks and his jokes. I mean, there was one day I had been buying some underwear and when I came into work, I said to Ira, what I'd been buying and I'd put it underneath my desk. When I came home, I took my parcel with me and I said, to the girls I've been buying and when I opened it up, all the old dirty dusters are inside, the knickers that head away somewhere and that was the sort of thing they were up to.

Another time I was taking my shoes to the cobblers and I put them in a bag and I was going to take them after work. So I picked the bag up and got into the cobblers and I said, can I have these repaired? And then he took them out of the bag. There was a man's shoe and my shoe and we used to call him the old man. He was a lieutenant commander who worked in the office, it was his shoe and of course, when I got back to work the next day and said, you are in trouble. The old man couldn't find his shoe. So he went to go home.

So that was the sort of thing that was happening. So anyway, this crossword we sent off, but Ira says, knowing Cookie, there's going to be a joke in this somewhere. She says, I think we'll write him a letter next week and pretend it to be from the News of the World and tell him that he's won the crossword outright. So she typed the letter out and she had a wonderful scroll of a signature, and she put it in the envelope and addressed it to Cookie, and she put it in another envelope and she put her mother's name and address on it and posted it to her mother in London and told her mother to post it in the West End. So that was it. I was getting ready to go out this particular night. One of the girls ran upstairs and says, there's a man downstairs. She says, he wants to see you. She says, better hurry. He's terribly excited. She said, he's asked if are in. He says, will he come down straight away and see him? So I went and it was Cookie. He says, come on, get your coat on. We're going celebrating. I've got a taxi outside and sends us in the taxi. Oh my God, you believe it? So I said, Cookie. I said, oh, there's no time for jokes now. Come on, hurry up. I've got the taxi waiting. Come over, go and get Ira. And I said, Cookie, it's a joke, Ira sent it. She couldn't have done. It's got a London postmark on it. I said, she sent it to her mother and asked her mother to post it. Well, eventually I got him to realise, well, he just about broke down. He says she shouldn't have done that to me, she knows how much it would've meant to me. And I thought, yeah, I wonder how much we would've got.

So, the next day I went in early and it was a long corridor and then there was our door into the office, and I stood in the corridor waiting for Ira to come in. And when she came in, I said, was she said he couldn't have believed it. I said he did, I said there was a taxi outside. He had his son waiting. She says, oh my God. And just then Cookie came out and he says, oh, I'm glad I've caught you. And we started apologising. He says, oh, forget that. Forget about that. I know it was a joke. He says, but I want you to do one thing. He said, for God's sake don't let them in there know what's happened!

Interviewer:

Excellent

Eleanor:

They would've had his life.

Interviewer:

So thank you very much. That's lovely, really, really good.