

Interviewer:

This is Terry Ford, part of South Shield's Local History Group interviewing Jean Stokes on the 9th of February, 2024. And she's going to talk about her parents, the Lewthwaite family.

Jean:

Thank you very much. It's a very nice introduction. My mam, Doreen Lewthwaite, was of course born Doreen Robertson and she was born on the 29th of August, 1922. So when war broke out, she was 17. It seems she was got a calling up papers, not that this was ever, this is only bits I've gleaned from what she said. And she told me once that she wanted to join the Land Army, heaven knows why, but her mother wouldn't let her. So she finished up having to stay home and was in munitions. A cousin Lonnie became a Wren, which must have been fantastic and married a Canadian called Derek and their family grew up in Canada. I remember meeting my half cousins there. Her brother joined the RAF, but poor mam was left with munitions. And I don't know how much the story's told about women who were involved in munitions and I wish I'd asked her more. How many times did you say this?

All I know is she worked 12 hour shifts, so at seven in the morning till seven at night. And that another girl called Rachel was her counterpart. So she must have worked seven at night till seven in the morning. I don't know if they worked a whole seven days a week because surely if you did, you had no time to do anything. Did you have Sunday off? I don't know. Where mam was working was Reyrolles. So she was living at the town hall in South Shields Burleigh Street. So she'd have to get there for seven in the morning and get back at seven at night. Now we know that the men working in the dockyards may be had buses and things to collect them. I never heard mam talk about that. So I find that she was working on a machine, which she worked to the 16th of an inch making brass nuts. Yeah, just the nuts. She turned the nuts. So I don't know again what sort of machine that was and the only story I got from mam, so you've got this 17-year old 7 to 7, I mean she'd have been working since she was 14 because she left school at 14. But she was a shop girl, she was working in Crofton's. Munitions having to travel to Hebburn and because there were brass nuts and because they were turning these things, she would get brass splinters in her fingers. So she said regularly, twice a night maybe more she had to go to the medical room and get these brass splinters taken out. I can't imagine that. I can't imagine the repetitiveness of it, the tiredness of it, but having to have splinters taken out. And she remembered one girl whose mam would always say with an amazing statement, "She got scalped", so she had her hair caught in the machinery. So that was why they wore those turbans, and I was always reminded of that, so that must have stuck out in mam's mind. How many years she did that, I do not know, I don't know what the sequence of events was.

The only other thing I know about her wartime is that she, of course, she was 18, 19 years old, there was lots of young men in town. She had the story about kissing the wrong one in the doorway. She'd gone where he was meant to be, Harold was meant to be and she kissed this in the blackout and it wasn't Harold, so that was a standard story. And then the other story was that she'd met, she was meant to be going out with this other boy turned up at their lodgings. So they must have been lodged in South Shields, again, I don't understand that, I don't know how the army worked and where they put men, but the boy she was meant to be meeting wasn't well enough, and down the stairs came Harold and Harold said, I'll go. I think it was to walk the dog. It was that innocent, I don't mean it was some sort of horrendous tryst or something. It was to walk the dog. And she always said she'd gotten engaged to Harold, how I can't imagine. He's called Harold Evans and he was Welsh and mam always liked the Welsh accent thereafter. Now from what I know, he was a Royal Marine, again lodged in South Shields, but he was on the HMS Edinburgh, not as a naval person, but as the Royal Marine. And the little, I've read up about the HMS Edinburgh, I mean it was built on the Tyne. So it came back to the town a few

times, but it was here for a refit in January, 1942. Now I know he sailed on the Edinburgh and he was on the Edinburgh when it went down.

And mam had a story, again, one of her stories that my dad would always shut her up about. So we never heard the full story. Well she went on the ship, I don't know if it was the Edinburgh, I don't know if it was another ship and how it was horrendous having to climb up the wooden stepladder when you had your skirts on. The wind caught them and it was just standard mam stories. So she must have gone on some ship, whether that was the Edinburgh. The Edinburgh was on a refit January 42. So if Harold was on that, I mean it was scuppered in May 1942, so this can only have been a whirlwind romance if they somehow or other got engaged, which again would fit what we know of the wartime stories. So he sailed out on the Edinburgh after its refit, the ship was torpedoed and the ship was eventually scuppered. I think of the 590 men were lost in the torpedoing and he went on another ship and it seems the Royal Marines were there because it had gold bullion on. So they were to protect the gold bullion. And when the Edinburgh was sunk with its gold on board, deliberately scuppered, he went on another ship and then that ship got the hit and he died on that ship.

I don't know if it was after that. I don't know if she was still doing the munitions. If she was, how the hell did you have time to meet him? My goodness, you'd been working, I suppose she was only 18, 19 because if that was 1942 she would just be coming up 20. She wouldn't have been 20 till the August. So she'd be 19 when she met him. It seems a very whirlwind romance and she never forgot him. At the end she's talking a lot about Harold, more so than my dad to be honest.

But sometime during that war period, my mam had a nervous breakdown. Now I don't know if it was the relentlessness of that, I don't know if it was losing Harold, I don't know. But the story, I know it was true. She finished up in Stannington. She was taken away in a straitjacket and in a padded cell and she was in Stannington where she's given electroconvulsive treatment, unbelievable. And this is not someone who saw a gun who did anything. But it just makes me think of that relentlessness of home life and the harrowing grief that you must have faced.

Again, her mam's having to deal with her dad was, I think he'd, I'm not sure if they were separated at that point. I think they were. And he was working in stores because he'd been in the first World War of course. So I don't think it was anything to do with the father, but that was my mam's only stories about the Second World War. It was the brass having to get the brass taken out of her fingers. It was going on a ship up a rope ladder with the skirt blowing in the wind. It was Harold. And then it was a complete nervous breakdown. And the horror she had, the terror she had of hospitals and doctors, as you can imagine, that they can take you. If she went to the doctor, she was always well, we couldn't get her to explain to the doctor she was ill and she was terrified to go into a hospital. And I think that was all to do with the Stannington experience. And that's my mam's all I know about my mam. But I think it speaks about women and young women. I mean mental health and things.

I don't know when she met my dad, I think it would be after the war, I think it was after the war. And by then she was working back in, she was working in Wares. So in a shop the men would come to ask for what they wanted, so many screws and so many things like that. And she would be in the stores handing out that, how she recovered, I don't know.

Dad, Ernest Lewthwaite was born on the 7th of March, 1923. So he was six months younger than my mam. So he was 16 when war was declared. And he says he feels guilty because he was just a teenager and was just, you just took it in your stride. And when he thinks about his mam and what his mam must have been going through, because his brother would be 14, he was 16, yes, she was on her own running the house. Her parents had died by then. And what she must have gone through trying to feed them and standing in queues. And of course she'd lived through the first world war and her brother had been fighting and things like, anyway, so dad was 16,

He was working as an apprentice at Wares. He'd left school at 16, of course he was an electrical apprentice at Wares. He got his calling up papers and he went to the medical and failed it because of his eyesight. He was as blind as a bat like I am without his glasses, due to him his fault. So he joined the Home Guard and I gathered that the Home Guard was twice a night whatever group or troop, whatever it was that he was in. He was in the Royal Artillery and he was based at Frenchman's Fort. His home address was four Ferry Street. So he's in the market, right four Ferry Street. The house actually faced, not the Ferry Hotel, it faced the coal staithes. So it's actually where The Word is now. And it had a basement and everything. I remember the house, it wasn't pulled down until the 1960s, so I remember the house.

So he was living in four Ferry Street working as an apprentice at Wares. So he'd be all over the place doing electrical things. Two nights a week he was in the Home Guard, they were in charge of a rocket battery that I would imagine went from either Blackberry Hills area or something. He said there was a field, I'm not quite sure where. And he said they were instructed that any rockets must only be over launched over the sea because they could do worse damage if the rockets landed on the land than the planes could. So there were after the planes, he doesn't remember hitting any of them, just the set of this, he remembers the sergeants and things like that who were actual army blokes.

But the main stories he had to tell were about food because he was only young and it was good because he slept overnight. So what you must have done is turned up there, gone home after work, got yourself changed I suppose, ate at home, got yourself changed and then somehow or other got to Frenchman's Fort. I don't know what buses or how you would get there. It wouldn't be the coast road then maybe cycled and you would be on duty, but you would mostly be asleep mostly. And he said at bedtime, nighttime you were given a cocoa, because food must have been important with rationing. And he said it was in a huge vat and it was real cocoa, real chocolate melted. So there was this layer of fat on the top of it, this is what he remembers. And you had a metal cup, metal, whatever mug. And you had to have a quick action of splitting the fat and getting it out without a layer of fat on top of yours. So you can imagine, can't you, the 16, 17, 18-year-old boys sleeping overnight. It must've been worrying if there was a raid you wouldn't know what was happening at home. And you were out there putting these rockets up, but didn't get many stories about that from dad. And then of course you are woken up at the crack of dawn and you were given a full English breakfast, cooked breakfast. So again the food was important. And then you were sent off before seven o'clock to go home, get changed and get yourself dressed to go to work. So from what I gather during those five years, he was two nights a week in the Home guard. I don't know if it was more, I'm just sort of guessing that from what he said because two nights a week he was doing night classes at the Marine School in Ocean Road.

And his story about them was that you would pray that the air raids would go because the caretaker would be standing at the bottom of the stairs trying to get all the lads. And these are only young, aren't they all the lads into the air raid shutter. Well they would push past him and go off to the cinema. So that was good. And also as he progressed, he finished up going to Sunderland because he would do his OND and then his HND at Sunderland. I think that was during the war as well. And if an exam started, it only had to be if you were in the exam for half an hour and then the air raids went, the exam counted, if they went before the half hour, you would have resit the whole exam. So it's just like the kids with Covid isn't it, It's just the same. And as I say, he felt ashamed that these are the sort of things he remembered because he was young, it was just happened. I wouldn't say it was a jolly jape but it was just part of his life. He didn't know any other. The war came and his uncle and family had been through the war before. It was only a few years, 20 years before wasn't it?

And then the other nights he fire watched on the top of Wares in King Street because there would be all the incendiary bombs. And what he was taught to do was just kick them off because you just put them

in the street, you didn't want them on the roof. And it seems if you fire watched, you got paid as well. I don't know how much. But he got paid so he was quite happy to fire watch.

So there wouldn't be many nights when he would be home, his poor mam would be on her own really. And he was fire watching the night that the marketplace got bombed. So he was on the roof of Wares and he said he'd never tried to get into concrete before, but that night he tried to get inside of concrete. So he was on the rooftop of Wares he must have seen all the bombing. He must have seen every bomb. And he would know that his mam was in the marketplace. Now she could have been in the main shelter, which as we know got bombed. She wasn't luckily because she survived, she was in four Ferry Street and they would have, I don't know if she went in the basement, I don't know if they had a table as the shelter (Morrison), I don't think they didn't have any Anderson shelters as they didn't have a garden, they just had a backyard. And he asked permission when the bombing ceased, he asked permission from the man who must, there must have been an older person there on the roof. He asked permission, that's all I know. He would say, I asked permission, can I go along and see? And he came out of Wares and went down Union Alley. He didn't go down King Street, he went down Union Alley. And he must have been, I mean to see Crofton's gone to see the marketplace in the state it was in. And I've seen Miss Flagg's picture of Union Alley. He must have been clambering over bricks and rubble and everything and what state he must have been in. Now that's 1941, isn't it? So he's 19, his brother would be 17. So I don't know if his brother would be at home, maybe he was doing his Home Guard or whatever he was doing at that time. But his mam, whether his mam was alive and he had to cross the market to go down Dean Street to get to her, what he must have seen that night, I'm not saying he's seen dead bodies. I'm not saying he's like men on ships going down, but you just think, and I got nothing more than that from him. Nothing more I've got about cocoa and breakfast. But the night of the bombing, he knows, he went along there to see if his mam was alive. And I just think that we are going on about all the affect it has on children in Gaza and all the affect it has on, and we think so much about the men coming back and I mean shell shocked, post whatever shock syndrome, all of that. But you think these young kids at home, they saw a lot and lived through a lot as well. And that's really it I don't think I've got any more.