

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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So first of all could you just tell me your name and where and when you were born?

Yes. Well, my name is Margaret Seeley [spells it out] S-E-E-L-E-Y

And where and when were you born?

I was born in Chester the 13th of November 1924

Thank you. Now I understand you were a Wren....

Yes I was

....serving in Southampton. Could you describe to me your experiences on that day before D-Day?

I can. To begin with of course everything was very hush-hush. We weren't really meant to know that D-Day was imminent, but you couldn't help it when you saw all the...the landing crafts lining all the way down Southampton Water and they were all embark ... all the troops - I think they were mostly American ... they were all embarked in all the landing craft, and as the weather was so terrible the powers that be decided that they'd have to put D-Day off [pronounced orf] for 24 hours. And then they thought, "What can we do to keep up the spirits of the men who are on board?" and so they chose two Wrens, myself and another, whose name I don't remember, and we sailed all the way down Southampton Water in a naval ML, waving at the men. Really I suppose the idea was to

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keep their spirits up. But we...both the other girl and I, knew perfectly well what ...what it was all about - you couldn't hide it then from people then in Southampton that D-Day was very imminent. And at the end of all that they took us on board the Admiral's flagship – I don't remember the Admiral's name but it was HMS Bulolo and they gave us tea in the wardroom. And what I can remember is, we had white bread which I hadn't seen since beginning of the war. But that's the navy for you, they knew how to look after themselves [chuckles]. And I... I just felt very honoured to have been able to... to do my little way to help really. But that's all I can do, except that in after years I began to wonder, did I dream a ship called HMS Bulolo until I went to the D-Day exhibition in Southampton ... no, Southsea Castle, Portsmouth. And there was a whole plan of the D-Day ships, and there was my ship, HMS Bulolo who sailed across, so I don't know what happened to her after that. I hope she wasn't sunk. But it wasn't a dream it actually did happen

Yes, I found references to it on the Internet, so it certainly wasn't a dream [laughs]

[chuckles] Yes

So, the boat you were on, do you remember the name of it or any of the details?

Sorry you're rather distant now, can you....

Alright....the boat you were on, do you remember the name of it, the MV?

The motor launch?

Yes

No, no, you see they didn't have names, they were just numbers and I couldn't tell you which it was

And that left from Southampton did it?

From Southampton yes. We didn't land anywhere, we just went right down to Calshott and turned round and came back again.

What did Southampton Water look like? Were there a lot of ships?

Well at that time they were all landing craft. They were all on the New Forest side as far as I can remember. On the left hand side of course there was that large naval hospital wasn't there? Netley... Netley.

Yes, Victoria...yes

So there was nothing that side. And we must have gone through, oh ...Warsash ...what's its name...Hamble!...Hamble, the Hamble river. But I don't remember... I mean my eyes were glued on all the landing craft and all the men waving back at us

It must have been an emotional sight.

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Yes it was very, very moving. And of course many of them didn't come back unfortunately. We may have been the last women they ever saw. I think I was a very young 19 at the time. So...

Yes, so you had no official instructions about what was going on but you...

No, no it was very, very secret, I mean nobody was to know. And in Southampton at that time, that week of D-Day, every night there was a very thick smoke screen all over the town, almost choking one. But that's the only time I remember that they used a smoke screen in Southampton, so that the Germans couldn't possibly...because of course they all thought we were all going to go over from Dover. So how they kept it secret I don't know.

Yes it's amazing isn't it?

But I... I... it was really part of history and I was very pleased to have had a very, very small part in it.

00:05:13

And so, were there... you could see the sol...the sailors on each of the ships could you?

So...sorry, can....I couldn't hear.

You could see the sailors on the decks of the ships could you?

Oh yes...yes...yes...I mean they were large LSTs – landing.... I can't tell you now what it stood for. The landing crafts, the open ones that took the tanks, were smaller but these were LSTs and the men, well, they were just biding their time. They must have realised that they were about to sail, but they certainly waved back.

Yes, I think they were glad to see a...another face. So, were you and the other Wren in your uniforms just standing on the deck?

Oh yes...yes. A naval motor launch is very small, you know, more like a lifeboat really. It's similar to the one we used to go to the Isle of Wight with the mail, to the naval establishment over there. HMS Vectis that was. We used to have taken this to go down to Cowes, HMS Vectis, just to have an outing on a...on a boat and accompany the mail. But no one was allowed to land on the Isle of Wight because it was territory which was....you kept visitors off it.

Yes. And do I understand...did you land at Calshott?

No...no, never...didn't land. No. No. We used to send signals to Calshott. I worked at the signal office at Southampton and we used to send signals to Calshott and Exbury. I was trying to remember the name of the naval base at Exbury, you know the Rothchild's house.

HMS Mastodon

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I think it was....?

Mastodon

...Driad? HMS Driad? But I can't remember now.

HMS Mastodon

Sorry?

HMS Mastodon

Oh yes that's right! Yes, Mastodon. You know better than I do. That's right yes.

[laughs] You never went there you only sent them signals did you?

Yes, yes. I only went there after the war 'coz I, I got.....a friend of mine was stationed there. But...and that of course, in Bucklers Hard, is where they did, well you probably know, where they built parts of the Mulberry.

Yes. And so, when you landed on HMS Bulolo.....

Yes ...

... and you told me about ...

... went on board. I mean, she was in the water you know, she was anchored in Southampton Water

Yes. You told me about the white bread. Do you have any other memories of that?

No, none at all. We were only there for a short time. I suppose the officer of the watch entertained us. But being a non commissioned Wren it was very nice to be entertained in the wardroom.

You don't remember the name of the...the captain of the ship?

I don't. I think one could probably find out by going to the Southsea exhibition.....

Yes

...because he was the admiral. It was all Force J, which was Combined Operations where I worked. And I was stationed in a block of flats. I think it was in Milbrook Road, a short walk from the station at Southampton, which I think now has been pulled down to make room for a new road.

Yes, yes that's probably correct

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I always get lost [pronounced 'lorst'] when I drive to Southampton these days.

You were....Were you aware of the King coming to inspect the troops?

No, no, no. They wouldn't have told us if he had. I didn't know anything like that. I'm sure he did.

And were you out in Southampton Water immediately after D-Day?

After D-Day?

Did you notice the difference?

Oh it was absolutely empty, yes. I mean all these ships they were all along by Fawley, you know where the oil now is - the oil refinery. They were all along that coast right the way down to Calshott as far as I can remember. But...well the whole of Southampton was completely dead after they sailed. It was an eerie sort of feeling until the first casualties started coming back. Then we were aware...I can't remember seeing them but I know that they were very busy at the various stations and looking after the wounded.

Yes, but you say you were not involved with that at all

No, no, I wasn't, no.

You mentioned, I think, when we spoke previously you mentioned the Hythe Ferry being closed

I mentioned what?

The Hythe ferry? Am I correct? Did you mention the Hythe Ferry being closed?

Oh yes, yes the Hythe Ferry! Yes indeed. Not during D-Day, but it must have been closed the day that they actually sailed. But the year before D-Day they had these exercises for D-Day and everything was very hush-hush. And my mother had come down to stay in a lovely hotel at Hythe whose name I can't remember, it may have been the Hythe Hall Hotel? And all the rooms were fitted out with bits of furniture from ocean liners, bunks and chests of drawers and things, and going to visit her, I wasn't able to go over by the Hythe Ferry, I had to go round by bus all the way to Totton, around the top of Southampton Water. But when D-Day came, to our amazement they...they hadn't stopped that Hythe Ferry probably because, I suppose, they thought it would be suspicious if they did - I don't know

Yes that's true yes

Yes

00:11:14

But it was all so long ago now. But, you know, it's all part of history.

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That's right, but you do have some very vivid memories.

Well I've got a pretty good memory I must say [chuckles]

Do you have any other particular memories of...of the New Forest?

Well yes we used to go there on our days orf (sic). We used to work watches. If you were on at night you had the next morning orf and...and it was a three watch duty. So if we had a day orf we used to hitch-hike to the New Forest and I particular enjoyed Lyndhurst. We used to have a wonderful walks in the New Forest. It was so peaceful, you were so far away from the war really.

00:12:01

I remember once, a Wren and I were following a chap who was holding a large notice board, and he seemed to know where he was going so we wandered after him until he came to a standstill, turned round, put his notice board in the ground and said Keep Out, so we hastily got out of the way. Whether he was laying mines I really don't know. The New Forest was...I don't remember any ponies? There must have been some. But it was a wonderful haven from Southampton.

Yes. What do you remember about Lyndhurst? Anything in particular?

There was a little tea shop on the right as you went into Lyndhurst - I think it was thatched and we used to get cream teas there as far as I can remember. I don't know how they can produce the cream, but anyway. Lyndhurst was very, very different as far as I can remember. It wasn't one way like it is now and of course very little traffic 'cause everything was rationed in the way of petrol. It was a lovely centre for going for walks.

Were you aware of seeing troops camped in the Forest?

Not in the Forest, only in the lanes going into Southampton. The troops were in their lorries - they were all....I don't know where they'd come from, where they'd landed by air, but anyway they were all lined up in the lanes. We used to go on our bicycles if we wanted to get out of the town, and all these Americans would sort of ogle us and throw candy and presumably were - I think that must have been what, six months before - no I can't remember when now, but it...well pre D-Day anyway - they were all probably destined for landing craft.

So you were able to just cycle into the New Forest without having to pass any checkpoints or anything?

Oh yes, no checkpoints at all. I mean you'd just get a bus or you used to hitch a lift sometimes on a lorry or in a naval car if we knew anybody who was going that way. Give us a lift, but I don't remember any checkpoints at all.

Did you have any memories of the airfields in the New Forest?

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The what?

Did you see any of the airfields in the New Forest?

No, no I don't know where they would have been! They must have been some around.

Yes. I think Beaulieu would probably have been the one you might have seen.

Yes, well Beaulieu - I don't think we were able to go to Beaulieu - Bucklers Hard - I'm sure we weren't

Yes

Because the Admiralty took that over with Exbury I should think.

You never went out into the New Forest for dances?

No, no, no, never in the night, only in the day time.

Right ...

So really my knowledge of the New Forest..... Before I was stationed in Southampton I'd never been to the New Forest so it was all very new to me.

Yes it must have been quite a contrast from Southampton city

Oh it was. 'Cause of course Southampton had been very much bombed – not when I was there – but see, John Lewis was a sort of a one storey building and obviously they'd had a terrible time, and our signals office was in....I think it was Elmfield Flats it was sort of a Tudor block, susedo Tudor block of flats, and we were stationed in the Royal Hotel just opposite the Civic Centre.

Right yes, yes

So...

Yes, so the contrast, cycling out into the New Forest must have been very marked.

Oh yes! very, very marked, yes. And of course on going back to Southampton and all that area, you hardly recognise it now with all the new buildings and everything.

Yes, yes

But I'm sorry I can't give you more about the New Forest

No well, the..the most important thing for us at the moment was your description of ...of Southampton Water....

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Oh yes!

....the day before D Day because we spoken to several people who were involved in various ways

Yes, well...well I mean it was on the edge of the New Forest obviously. When we went over to Hythe on the ferry we would wander around Hythe. I can't remember going much into the New Forest from there, because of course transport was difficult

00:16:19

Yes

But the Hythe ferry we certainly remember

Was there ...was there much in Hythe at that time?

Yes, yes. [pause] I can't remember where it went from in Southampton. But one thing I do remember in Southampton was of course, was seeing over the....from our offices which were fairly high up – right on the railway embankment – and you could see right over the docks to the liners, and the original Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth took it in turns coming in as troop ships....

Oh I see, yes

.....all the way from America. And then I was in Southampton when D-Day was umVE Day was declared and I remember either the Mary or Elizabeth sounding out their horns and all the ships hooting for absolute joy that it was all over.

Yes, yes

Yes

You mentioned HMS Mastodon. I gather there were some Wrens based there but none...

There were, yes 'cause I know one. She is very elderly now. I don't think she would remember much about it if I gave.... if I gave her name. I would have to ask her first. But she was definitely stationed there.

00:17:32

[Then a conversation about meeting up in November and the possibility of an introduction to the friend who was at HMS Mastodon and then....]

00:18:17

And again, I understand that the day the King came down to inspect the troops about a week before D-Day you did actually go to HMS Mastodon?

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Oh did he? Very likely he did, I wouldn't be surprised

And obviously if she had any memories of that we would be very interested

I will ask her yes...I will see what I can do

That's lovely. We have a consent form for signing for you to give us permission to use the recording. So if I pop one of those in the post would that be alright?

Yes that's fine, yes. And if I find out about my Wren from Mastodon can I ring you, or...?

00:18:56

[some other formalities and then tape cuts out]

End 00:19:05

Key words: D-Day, Hythe Ferry, Fawley, Calshott, Southampton Water, Milbrook Road, Southsea Exhibition, HMS Bulolo, LST, HMS Mastodon, Exbury, embarkation

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