

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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00-00-00

First of all could you just tell me name, and where and when you were born?

Barbara Helen Smith, and I was born in Redlynch, which is 2 miles from the New Forest.

Right, and do you mind telling me your date of birth?

Five, twelve, twenty seven.

Thank you very much. Do tell me if you can't hear my voice. I've tried to keep my voice quieter than yours because it's you that we're interested in but it may mean that you can't hear me.

Right.

I'll just say. Erm, first of all could you tell me when you worked at the Millersford Range?

I think it was about 1944. I was 15. Just a minute, 27 and 15 – 42.

Right, thank you. How did you come to be working there?

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CHAIRMAN OLIVER CROSTHWAITE-EYRE CHIEF EXECUTIVE ALISON BARNES

Well, some of the scientists there were lodging with my family and I imagine somebody asked them if there was a job for me.

Right, OK. So erm, what were you doing there? D'you remember much about the job that you did?

Well, yes. (clears throat) We were measuring the blast from various bombs. We had to set up gauges which recorded the blast and then we had to read the recordings.

Right. Erm, d'you know what any of the explosives that you were testing? Were you involved with that?

No. No. I think we were all kept in very close proximity. We understood what we were doing but we knew nothing of the use, or the larger use of the work we were doing.

Yes, yes.

I think that's a matter of policy.

Yes. I've heard little bits from other people about the work that was involved but what was your day to day job have involved?

Well, (sigh) we, we went down to the various huts – there were about five or six huts on the site – and we had to set up the gauges and then make sure that the recording equipment was ready and then we had to wait for the call that the bomb would be going off to make sure that we didn't go wandering around the forest. Then we had to take the recordings, take them up to the main office area and measure them.

Yes.

And that was what we were doing.

Were you based in one specific building? I gather that they all had numbers.

Oh Lord, it's a long time ago.

That's fine. Erm, d'you remember any of the people that you were working with at all?

Oh yes. Catherine and Victoria James, a twin from Wales. Jean Crow, Betty – Betty, Betty, Betty – she's now Betty Higgs, Joyce McCartney, (long pause) Molly – it's a long time ago and I was only 15 or 16.

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Yes, yes, oh yes, well it's amazing that you've remembered any of the names. I'm sure I wouldn't have done.

(Laughter)

So apart from the huts, I gather there was a central administrative building was there?

Yes.

Were there any other buildings that you remember?

Well, the huts – about 5 or 6 huts on the site, which was away from the administrative building. Obviously if you're setting off bombs you didn't want them too near the administrative building.

00-04-34

Yes. And I gather there was a canteen?

Oh yes, there was a canteen alright. (chuckle)

D'you know roughly how many people were working there at the time you were there?

(pause) 50, 60.

Yes, it's quite a reasonable number isn't it.

Yes, there was the – there were the scientists who knew what they were doing, presumably, there were us who were the field workers and there were also local men who did sort of digging work. There were quite a few of them. I would think there were 10 or a dozen of them.

And presumably there was a large fence around the perimeter?

I suppose so, yes. It was too far away to know.

Yes, yes. How did you get to work each day?

Oh, there was truck – a truck took us to work. It came round the village and picked us all up and took us up to Millersford, and brought us home again.

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As you say, you were very young, erm, was it exciting or was it daunting at that age?

Oh yes, (laughter) it was very, very enjoyable. From my point of view it introduced me to people I would never have met. The university people who were there, the scientists. I think they were the brightest of the bunch. They were Oxford/Cambridge first class degrees, double firsts, and erm, it was an education for me.

Yes, yes. That was certainly what Vera Store said to me – very exciting experience for a young girl.

Oh definitely.

00-06-30

Did you have to sign any sort of secrecy agreement when you started working?

Yes, yes. We're covered by the secrecy act.

Yes, and presumably you were living at home with your parents still?

Yes. (Long pause)

00-06-50

One thing that erm, I know you mentioned that you have some memories about the crash of the Lancaster – bomber.

Yes.

What do you remember about that?

That was on - I think that was on Ashley Walk, which was adjoining Millersford, just the other side of the road. I suppose it was about 3 or 4 miles away.

And did you actually see the plane come down?

No.

I gather it was all cleared away very quickly.

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I knew nothing about that. I think it came down at night, so we wouldn't have been there.

Oh I see. Ah, right, yes. Did – were you aware of what was going on at Ashley Walk at all?

No.

It was even out of sight for you presumably most of the time?

Yes, yes.

Any other particular incidents that you remember from your time working there?

(Pause) No, not particularly. It was just routine. We did the same every day.

Yes, as you say, working with interesting people.

Oh, certainly yes.

00-08-12

Something worthwhile, yes. Do you have any particular memories of D-day, either when you were at work or at home? The build-up of troops -

Well I remember all the erm, the army trucks coming round for about – oh – 34 – 48 hours before D-day. They flooded through the villages on the way to the coast.

Yes, and then they were gone within a matter of days.

Yes.

00-08-48

Were there any accidents or particular incidents while you were at work at Millersford that you remember?

Yes, one of the scientists I think lost an eye because, as far as I remember, there was a decimal point in the wrong place, and something which should have been, erm, safe, certainly was not safe. That's the only serious accident I remember.

And there were no air-raids or any other incidents while you were there at work?

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Erm, there were plenty of air-raids going on because we were near the coast but mainly it was German planes going back at night and wanted to get rid of their bombs, so they dropped them in the Forest.

Yes, yes that's what I've heard from other people. (pause) So away from work, as a young girl, did you – what were your leisure activities? Did you go to any dances or anything?

Oh yes (chuckles) there were dances in the village hall. Erm, there were quiz nights – we used to walk up to Hayle which was about, erm, a mile and a half away. We either walk or cycle to the village hall there and there was a social club for the Millersford people, which was where we got the opportunity to interact with these scientists who we never would have met before, and they introduced us to, erm, youth hosteling and cycle rides, play reading – all this sort of activity.

When there were dances in the hall, presumably you had to, erm, you had problems getting material to make clothes because of rationing?

Yes, yes. But everybody was in the same boat so you just did your best.

Where did the scientists live? Were they billeted with families?

Yes, they were billeted with families all-round the village and in Downton and Redlynch of course, and Woodfalls and a few lived in Salisbury, but not many. They were usually the family people.

Yes, erm, were you aware of any troops based in your vicinity? Did they ever come to your dances and socialise at all?

No, no. There were troops in Salisbury and there were a lot of Americans in Salisbury, (pause) but there weren't any troops around the village.

00-12-11

Right, yes. D'you have any particular memories of Redlynch and Downton during the war?

I don't understand what you're getting at because it was just village life.

Yes, and did the war effect village life in any particular way?

Well, there was Home Guard, all the young men were gone. Actually we did pretty well I think.

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Yes. Presumably you were affected by rationing?

Oh yes, oh yes. But then living in the country, even that was made a little easier. It was not exceptional for you to get up in the morning and find a hare or a couple of rabbits left on the doorstep.

Oh I see (chuckles) –

That all helped.

Erm. (long pause) I think we've probably covered most of it. So the, erm, going back to your work at Millersford, erm, I gather they had straw boards that they put to measure the blast, is that correct, to collect the shrapnel?

Yes, but that was in Fragmentation. I was in – erm – bombs I suppose. I wasn't in Fragmentation.

Oh, alright. Yes I see. Erm, Mr Lovegrove, is it Blast and Fragmentation, were there two separate sections?

Geoff Lovegrove (long pause) – think he was in Fragmentation. I didn't come across him very much so I expect he was in Fragmentation.

Right. And you say you tended to do the same sort of work every day so they didn't move you around, you had one area that you specialised in?

Oh, no, no. We weren't moved around at all. No, I don't think they wanted us to know too much about what we were doing. So they just kept us in a tight group, but we didn't realise this at the time. It was only years later we realised how strict they were, how few people seemed to know exactly what we were doing. (background "Yes") Probably Mr Pilgrim and Mr Farrow who were the top people, they were about the only ones who knew everything.

Erm, what were you doing before – had you left school?

No, no. I left school and went straight to Millersford.

Yes, that must have been a huge change of life style for you. Big introduction to the wide world.

Yes it was. (chuckles)

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What did you do after the war? Did Millersford close immediately?

No, it was about a year or so – erm – I did a shorthand typing course. That was about the only thing that was available and I did work in Salisbury for a while, and then later I worked in my father's business. He was an engineer – agricultural engineer – and I worked in the office, and at the end of that I decided to see the bright lights of London when I was about 22 or 3. I moved to London.

Yes, I expect the work at Millersford gave you a lot more self-confidence and a vision of what else what out there in the world.

(Chuckles) Possibly.

Yes, yes. Right, well I think unless you've got any other specific memories, I think that's been most helpful.

Well I expect it's fitted in with what some other people have told you.

Well, yes, as I said to you the other day, I've spoken to Vera Store and Betty McCarthy ("Yes") and Geoff Lovegrove, and between you it gives a lovely picture of what was going on, and as you say, nobody else seemed to know much about what was happening there.

Well they weren't expected to.

That's right, and you were out, erm, in a remote part of the Forest.

Yes.

Yes, alright, well thank you very much for your time now.

You too.

Thank you, bye.

Thank you for ringing.

Bye.

End: 00-16-32

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