

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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Contributor's name	Mary Ellis	Name code	M-E
Interviewer's name	Sue Jackson	Code number	007
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00-00-00

Could you just tell me your name and where and when you were born?

My name now is Mary Ellis. It was Mary Wilkins before I was married, and my name Wilkins was all through the War. I was born in King James's Palace in Wychwood Forest in Oxfordshire.

Do you mind telling me when you were born?

(chuckles) The date? 2, 2, 19.

Could you just tell me briefly what you were doing in the War and where you were based?

Well, during the War they required people to deliver aeroplanes from the factories to the squadrons; to the RAF and to the Royal Navy and various stations. I was accepted into the Air Transport Auxiliary and joined in '41.

Where were you based?

I was based initially at Hatfield, that's where I joined, and then I went to various other places. And finally I came to No.15 Pool, Hamble, near Southampton.

So were you conscripted or were you already flying?

New Forest National Park Authority

Lymington Town Hall, Avenue Road, Lymington, Hampshire SO41 9ZG

Email archaeology@newforestnpa.gov.uk

www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/wwii

VAT Reg No. 871 9343 00

CHAIRMAN OLIVER CROSTHWAITE-EYRE CHIEF EXECUTIVE ALISON BARNES

Yes I learnt to fly before the War. That's how I managed to get into this excellent occupation during the War.

That's fantastic. If we can talk specifically about your memories of the New Forest first of all. Which of the airfields did you fly into in the New Forest?

00-01-58

In the New Forest there weren't too many airfields. There was Beaulieu and Stoney Cross and Ibsley. I think those were the only ones.

What do you remember about the Beaulieu airfield?

It was very small, very small indeed (chuckle).

So you brought the plane in, landed on – was there a tarmac runway there?

No, no there wasn't. It was a grass airfield.

Do you remember any of the buildings there?

No I don't, I'm sorry.

So you flew in the plane, landed it, and then how did you get back to Hamble?

Either a taxi would be sent for me or another aeroplane would fly in and pick me up and take me back to Hamble.

So would you be on your own in your plane or would there be several people delivering at the same time?

No, we always flew alone. We had no one with us and we had no aids. We had no radio, we had nothing, we were completely on our own.

So how did you navigate? What sort of navigation ...?

Oh, we navigated by maps and it became quite easy after a long time (chuckle).

Were these new aeroplanes or refurbished, reconditioned ones?

They were mostly new ones from factories which went to these various places. In all I flew 76 different types of aeroplanes which were fighters and bombers, and in the end jets.

So how easy was it to change from one plane to another? How did you know where the controls were?

(chuckle) It was not easy but the ATA gave me fantastic training and they managed to get a

year's lessons into three months, and so it was concentrated. But one flew in stages and progressed into something faster and bigger and faster and bigger as one flew all these different aeroplanes.

00-04-47

What about Stoney Cross airfield, do you have any memories of that?

Stoney Cross I think was a big airfield. It had runways. I think the Americans were there. In actual fact I flew a Wellington into there, which as you know, in those days it was a big aeroplane (chuckles) and they were astonished when I got out (laughter).

While we're talking about that, what was the attitude of the men, the soldiers, airmen, at these bases, to a woman?

Initially they couldn't believe that a small person like myself, fair and not very large, and they couldn't believe that we could fly these aeroplanes and that you don't need a lot of strength. You just need some brain power (chuckle).

Would you spend any time at the airfield or would you leave immediately?

Not usually because there was a fantastic taxi service. A plane would be coming in either shortly or was already there to pick one up and take me somewhere else. It was fantastic, it really was.

You enjoyed the experience, did you?

I did (chuckle), yes I did (laughter).

00-06-19

And finally, Ibsley airfield. Do you have any memories of that?

No, Ibsley was concrete runways. I flew Spitfires in and out of there.

Did these airfields have control towers with staff in them? You say you didn't have radar – radio, but was there a control tower? Did you have any contact with the airfield?

No, we had no contact with anybody on the ground, ever. We were alone, quite alone. No, it's a very interesting story which I think ... (Noise of emergency service siren)

End: 00-07-06

Keywords: Delivery of aeroplanes, Air Transport Auxiliary, ATA, Number 15 Pool, Hamble, Airfields, Beaulieu, Stoney Cross, Ibsley, flying aids, navigation, fighters, bombers, jets, Wellington, Spitfire, air taxi service.

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00-00-00

Are you happy to tell me in your own words exactly what happened during your forced landing?

I was flying over the New Forest. I was flying a taxi plane. I was going to pick someone up I think from Stoney Cross and suddenly the engine stopped as I was flying along. So it was quiet, and immediately I had to look around to find a place to land. I did find a place, and fortunately I landed in it, and it was a successful landing. And it happened to be just near the Balmer Lawn Hotel, just behind it. But as the story goes, after landing a lot of cows came around afterwards and so I had to be rescued. And fortunately the Balmer Lawn Hotel was occupied by the Royal Marines. So they rushed out and saved me from the cows (chuckles) which is all rather ridiculous, isn't it (laughter)?

So you survived the landing [yes] and were only trapped by the cows.

Yes, I had to crash land – sorry, I had to force land this aeroplane. Obviously I couldn't stay in the air and I did that without breaking the aeroplane or myself.

You just came across the cows (laughter).

And then they're curious aren't they, cows? Where they came from I don't know because they weren't there as I landed. They must have come out of the woods - out of the sticks as it were (chuckle).

I should think the Marines were rather amused by that, were they?

They were very astonished (chuckles). Very astonished.

Did they accommodate you? Did you go into the hotel at all?

I went in to make phone calls to tell my CO that I had landed, and that was it.

Do you remember much about the Marines, and did the hotel look any different from normal?

Well, I don't know. It wasn't a hotel as such because the Marines were there and it was just a base for them for the duration.

Were there any other incidents that you remember at all, in the New Forest particularly?

No, not really (laughter).

I don't think I asked you what was the plane that you were delivering when you came down?

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VAT Reg No. 871 9343 00

It was a Fairchild. A Fairchild Argus.

00-03-04

Thank you. Do you have any other particular memories of the New Forest during the War? Did you get any impressions from flying over the New Forest, of how the War was affecting it?

Well one didn't really have too much time to look around in those days because we had to find out where we were going and manipulate the aeroplanes successfully everywhere we went. I do remember though occasionally the weather was so bad that we were not flying, and so we would have a day off. And a few of us would go into the New Forest to some little place and have tea or lunch or something like that, which was rather fun.

How did you get there?

By car. I had a car. I was billeted in Bursledon, which was near Hamble, and that's where I kept my car.

Yes. So life went on in the New Forest. Was it open access? Did you have to get permission to go into the Forest at all?

No. No, no, it was quite open, you know, anyone could go in. There were troops everywhere, obviously. Sometimes they were in hiding because they had to go off the next day from Southampton in all these tanks and things. So it was different, not like it is today (chuckles).

Do you have any other specific memories of the Forest? Did you see any of the saw mills or the prisoner of war camps?

No. I didn't.

00-05-06

There were troops. Were they camping, the troops?

Yes, they seemed to be everywhere, and they were moving continuously you know, because the War was advancing, and so these troops would be there and then the next day they would be gone and then the next day another lot would be there.

00-05-36

What year did you move into Hamble? Was that towards the end of the War?

No, I was at Hamble from '42 to '46.

Right through then?

Yes.

So did you go into the New Forest after D-Day? Did you notice the difference?

No, because my home was in Oxfordshire then, and so I went home.

Yes. Were you involved in D-Day at all in any way?

Yes, on D-Day I flew two Spitfires. I can't remember where they were from or to, but I know there were two, which was very exciting at that time.

So that was part of the D-Day [yes] you were flying over to France?

No, I didn't go to France.

Within the UK.

Yes, keeping the Air Force supplied.

Yes, yes, a very important job. And were you aware of what was going on with D-Day, and why you were delivering the planes there?

Not really.

00-06-50

All I can remember is (clears throat) as I flew over Southampton Water, the Solent, one day it was absolutely full of, I don't know, all sorts of ships. And I couldn't imagine what was going on and then the next day I flew over and it was completely empty. So hundreds of thousands of ships were there and disappeared overnight. But in those days we couldn't talk about anything to anyone because it was all rather secret, and we were told that "Walls have ears", so (chuckle) we were not allowed to say very much.

So you only learned about it from the radio the next day, did you?

No, I saw it from the air when I was flying.

Yes. Did you know where they were going?

No, no. Had no clue.

Amazing. Did you fly particular aeroplanes into particular airfields? You said Spitfires were to Eastleigh.

No. I flew aeroplanes into different airfields where they were wanted. Each day at Hamble I

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was given a little sheet of paper which said, "You will fly so and so and so and so", whether it may be three or four different types of aircraft in the same day. And that was terrific. And we never knew when we went in the morning to work where we would be going or what we would be flying, so there was no pre-op.

It is amazing, isn't it?

It is amazing. I can't believe it now (laughter).

00-09-00

And then were you involved in flying the taxi services back or was that somebody else's duty?

No, it was the senior person always flew the taxi aeroplane because the taxi aeroplane had passengers, and I did quite a lot of that also.

Did you have a particular rank within the ATA?

Yes, I started off as a Cadet, I suppose, although we weren't called Cadets. After two years I was made First Officer and I remained First Officer for all the time, which was quite a high rank.

And was it all women in the ATA?

No, no. There were an awful lot of men. Many more men than there were girls. But it so happened at Hamble it was a pool of girls only, right from the CO down to the nurse who was on the medical section.

Approximately how many women were based at Hamble?

I think probably 25 and so we were kept very busy.

Yes, yes. And were the planes delivered to you in Hamble ready for you to take or did you – you collected them?

No, no. We went to the factories, wherever the factories were. There were an awful lot of Spitfires made at Eastleigh, which is Southampton now, so we had a supply of Spitfires from there. But no, we flew different aeroplanes from different places to other different places.

So you had to get used to not only the aeroplane but the airfield where you were landing as well.

00-11-04

Yes, it was sometimes very difficult because the airfields were all camouflaged and

sometimes there were two or three, especially on the east coast, two or three quite close together and one had to find out which was the right one to land at.

Yes, yes, very difficult. So you said Beaulieu had a grass runway and Stoney Cross was a proper concrete runway [yes], what was Ibsley?

Yes, that was.

That was concrete as well?

Mm.

So did you ever fly into any of the – I gather there were some temporary airfields down near Lymington, did you ever fly into any of those?

I flew into lots, but not in the New Forest. I flew into several just between Brighton and somewhere. I can remember flying into a temporary one where there was a squadron of Spitfires. I landed and I couldn't see any Spitfires, and I thought "Oh dear", and then I asked the chappie and he said "Ah, you've come to the right airfield, but the squadron left this morning". So I said "Where have they gone?", and he said "They've gone so and so". So I took off again and found where they'd gone to and then, blow me, they had just left when I went to the second place. So eventually I went to the third place and found them there.

00-12-58

Gosh, tenacious! You mentioned the camouflaging of the airfields. What would that consist of?

Well, they were camouflaged like everybody and everything else, just very, very difficult to find. Some of them looked like the New Forest and you knew they weren't (laughter).

I think we've probably covered all the specific memories that you have of the New Forest.

00-13-37

You're experience of D-Day is fascinating, just the impression of what you saw. So there were the ships all lined along the Solent.

Yes, they'd been building up for days, for weeks probably, and you wouldn't know, people didn't know. We knew because Hamble is quite close and Hamble we flew off every day so we could see all these things and you could honestly have walked across from the mainland to the Isle of Wight quite easily. It was so stuffed with the ships, and then overnight, one night, they all disappeared. D-Day.

00-14-20

You didn't have any experiences coming across enemy aircraft when you were flying at all,

did you?

I did once, yes. I was flying along in a Spitfire and another Spitfire came along beside me. I looked at it and I saw a swastika on the tail. I waved it away and he wouldn't go, and he waved back to me (laughter), and so I waved again like that and then he decided to beetle off, and so he went off.

Was that immediately after leaving Hamble?

No, it was just north of Hamble.

Gosh, what an experience.

And another time I was shot at because I was taking an aeroplane into Christchurch, which is part of the New Forest I think, and the weather was rather bad. It was very foggy and I was going out to sea, I think, and these chaps obviously thought I was an enemy aeroplane. And I looked out and there were puffs of smoke, and I thought "Oh crikey, someone's shooting at me, so I'd better do something about it", and I turned round and came back in land, so all was well.

00-15-57

Did you have a specific uniform to wear?

Yes we did.

What did that consist of?

It was navy blue. Blue shirt. Trousers of course. Our rank in gold braid and our Wings.

And you wore that to fly as well as on the base?

Yes, yes.

Very interesting.

But we were civilians. We weren't RAF. So many people think we were joined to the RAF, but no, we were civilians.

And you were paid, presumably, [yes], who paid you?

Well, initially – oh crumbs – BOAC I think, initially, and then when ATA joined and had us girls there as well they became completely devoid from all the others. And so they paid us, ATA paid us. Initially we were not paid as much as men, but that was rectified sometime after (chuckles). They realised that us girls could do it as well as the men. So we were paid the same.

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And did you always fly solo?

Yes. Yes we did.

Even on the big bombers?

Yes. Yes (chuckles). It was amazing, absolutely amazing. It could not possibly happen again.

00-17-57

You said you were flying before the War. In what capacity was that?

I was a school girl (laughter).

Purely for pleasure?

Well, I learned to fly, yes, that's right, 'cos I wanted to learn to fly and it was unusual I believe in those days for a girl to be doing. But I wasn't very good playing hockey at school so they said "Oh well in that case, you may as well go and learn to fly then". So I was allowed to go and have a flying lesson rather than play hockey (laughter).

And that led to amazing things.

It did indeed, yes.

So at the start of the War, what were you doing at that stage, when war broke out?

In '39? I wasn't doing very much I suppose (laughter).

But you'd left school.

When I left school I stayed at home.

Oh right, I see.

I lived in a big house with my Ma and Pa and my three brothers and a sister.

Right. And had you still been flying for pleasure at that stage?

Well, I suppose it was pleasure (chuckles).

At that stage, yes. That's amazing. It must have been - as you say, you were so busy actually flying and navigating yourself that you wouldn't really have time to look at what was going on around you, would you?

Normally, would there have been much going on in the Solent other than immediately

before D-Day? Were you aware of ships in the Solent normally?

Yeah, there were ships, you know, albeit American ships. American crews were around quite a lot, but they had to be, and ...it's a long time ago (chuckles).

00-20-09

So, when you landed at the various airfields, presumably sometimes they were RAF there but then sometimes would be American forces.

Yes.

Do you remember - did it strike you as – did anything particular strike you about the different forces?

No, but because we had no aids when we were flying, if the weather was bad we suddenly went into bad weather and couldn't carry on safely. 'Cause the whole object was to take these aeroplanes safely to the squadrons where they were needed. So we were allowed to land anywhere at any airfield in order to be safe. It was mostly a case - well I suppose it was mostly under those circumstances - you put down and you'd find it then would be Americans. They didn't seem to – I suppose they thought we were men, I don't know (chuckles).

It happened on several occasions did it, that you had forced landings?

Yes, yes. But forced landing and landing due to bad weather is quite different. Forced landing is when you simply have to because the engine has stopped or something has happened. But otherwise, landing during bad weather is a normal landing, only it is in bad weather.

Yes, and you had maps so that you would be able to work out which airfield you could land on in that situation, presumably?

No, (chuckle) it wasn't quite like that. If you were in difficulties because of the weather, any airfield you could find, you would put down, just land. But that was not a forced landing. It was a landing due to bad weather.

Yes/ So did you have many instances of forced landing other than the one at Balmer Lawn? Any other in the Forest particularly?

00-22-35

Yes, I had an engine failure and had to land at Reading airfield. I think it was called Woodley. And that was a – I made a successful landing after the engine blew up as I was flying along.

You took it all in your stride. You weren't aware of any major incidents or colleagues who

had problems with planes in the Forest particularly were you?

Well, yes, several of us, you know, didn't make it. There was one particular one. My friend was flying a Mosquito and she was trying to land and I don't know what happened, but something terrible happened and she crashed the aeroplane onto the runway and unfortunately it went in flames and she died. There were several instances of people, you know, just passing away.

Yes, yes, so it wasn't all fun then. How sad.

Which was your favourite aircraft if you had to name one?

Well, I don't know. Everybody loves the Spitfire. The Spitfire was so easy to fly. It responded to every little thing you wanted it to do and it was fantastic. I flew in a Spitfire a couple of years ago and it really was – I was in the seventh heaven, back again (laughter). It really was marvellous. But I enjoyed various types and I just enjoyed flying.

End: 00-24-51

Keywords: forced landing, Balmer Lawn Hotel, Marines, cows, Fairchild Argus, Spitfire, Mosquito, troops, D-day, Solent, ships, ATA, First Officer, airfields, camouflage, Hamble, Americans, crash landing.

File name	M-E	007	_0003M0.WAV	Interview date: 02-08-13
<p><i>Could we talk a bit about the barrage balloons? Where did you see them?</i></p> <p>There were barrage balloons at Eastleigh, where all these Spitfires were being made. Sometimes it was urgent for us to have to get the aeroplanes delivered and so there was a special line we could go out - and it was called Charlie I think, this special line. But it was very dangerous to fly anywhere near these barrage balloons. It wasn't the balloons themselves, it was the wires that they had and so it was very dangerous.</p> <p><i>Yes. Were there any others on the route into the Forest and Southampton, or was it really just round Eastleigh airfield?</i></p> <p>Just round Eastleigh, yes. But they could pop up anywhere, you know, they could suddenly pop up at Winchester or someplace like that, or some particular airfield which had to be guarded. They would pop up and we wouldn't know because no one could tell us.</p> <p><i>So you just relied on your ability being able to see them?</i></p> <p>Yes.</p> <p><i>Yes, thank you.</i></p>				

End: 00-01-21

Keywords: Barrage balloon, Eastleigh, Charlie line, Winchester.

File name	M-E	007	_0004M0.WAV	Interview date: 02-08-13
<p>I was asked to stay on by the RAF and I went back to White Waltham, which is headquarters of the ATA, and I flew with the RAF for another three months afterwards, delivery. I was one of the chosen few at that moment, 'cause there were only one or two girls that were chosen to go – carry on.</p> <p><i>Still doing the delivery?</i></p> <p>Yes.</p> <p><i>To provide replacements presumably.</i></p> <p>And then of course the end of the War came and so there was no urgency to move aeroplanes about and so unfortunately we had no work to do (chuckles).</p> <p>End: 00-00-49</p> <p>Keywords: White Waltham, ATA Headquarters, RAF</p>				

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