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Name: Harriet Wright

Regiment: Wren - WRNS(Women's Royal Naval Service)

Date of Transcript:

Transcribed By:

Time Code	What is Said
01:00:00	Start of Film 1
01:00:01	Harriet Edith Frosser - was, when I joined the wrens- that was my name.
01:00:05	Harriet where-where are you from and why did you decide you wanted to be a WREN?
01:00:10	oh, well I've had other people ask me that and i think myself because I was auburn haired, um, pale skinned and freckly faced, I didn't think that um the ATS would suit me- the uniform you know (laughs). And I though that the navy blue would. and I think that's the only reason.
01:00:34	Really?
01:00:35	Because we didn't live by the sea, we were- lived inland you know. Farming stock
01:00:43	And where are you from?
01:00:44	Aberdeenshire
01:00:46	So just tell me what, what impact did the war have on you as a young girl living in Aberdeenshire?
	Well, um, I was still at school of course. I went to (unclear) academy and I was still at the academy and I remember, um, they used to be a reconnaissance plane come over every night you could almost set your watch by it, 8 o'clock ish and you knew, I, I knew, we all knew that the engine had a different noise to it you know. So you could tell that it was a German plane. And then one night, it was much more noisy. And my father went outside, mother went outside and then I decided I would follow and i had my hand on the doorknob still, this hand. And all of a sudden, we heard this whistle. And it was a bomb that they'd dropped in a ploughed field only about quarter of a mile away so that made me think. That was, you know, at that stage, when your up there, you don't think of um, of, well conflict like that do you, especially in the country and yet this is what happened. And the lovely fireworks display all the parts coming out of- the greens and what not you know. But i think what happened was, an aircraft had come up from (unclear) they couldn't come up from (unclear) because (unclear end of sentence) you see (unclear). And um, he had dropped this bomb to get away quickly. But they had 2 bombs in um Aberdeen. They bombed the um ice rink and one of the -I can't remember what and then i went into Aberdeen one day um, for some shopping and believe it or not, i still can't understand why i did, i heard this plane and I'm looking up and it was just rooftop high and there were um, using the machine guns ratatatat, you know. And I'm standing there- I was waiting for the bus at the um, country bus station in (unclear) waiting to go home- what an idiot. Instead of running into a doorway or something like that, you know. So I go this sort of thing very early on, um we ourselves thought they were maybe after the um (unclear) bridges. see, they bombed those. They would have had an awful lot of trouble getting round, along way to go you know, for the trains and things to get say up- to get stuff over to the Orkneys and that
01:04:10	So you decided to do your bit- what do you remember of that enrolment process?
01.07.10	30 you accurate to ab your bit what ab you remember of that embinion process:

Time Code	What is Said
01:04:16	Um, well i had to go to see (unclear) time, um Edinburgh capital, Glasgow, Dundee was the third city, Aberdeen fourth. When the oil came around of course Aberdeen is third city now but at that time, I had to go to Dundee for my medical. Now the strange thing about that was when I got out of the station, I'd never been to (unclear) hall before and yet I know- I knew where I was going, I knew exactly what room I was going to head for and i could never understand that. That was the most strange. But obviously I was then to go in the WRNS- had to go there for my medical. And i um, passed it obviously and then got the call up and did my training at Balloch Loch Lomond which was rather nice except that before that- we go there before the WRNS took over- the Americans had been there and they left lock stock and barrel leaving dirty things here there and everywhere you know and when we got there, they were building new loos. But, until they were finished, we had these open loos, you know (laughs). I didn't like that at all in fact there were five of us that um, we got off after lunch every day and five of us used to head down to Balloch station to have a, you know, a comfortable (unclear) because it was awful to sit and then somebody else coming in and then of course, what they had to do was to empty those um, daily. But that didn't last for long because the others, the flush loos were ready within a few days. But until then (laughs, unclear) we head down to Balloch to get on these loos you know.
01:06:41	How did you- you know- you mentioned that you were a country girl but how did you find that sort of- I imagine a very relaxed, comfortable, you know, okay, tough, but care-free existence to military life. How did you find that change?
01:06:58	Um, I don't know. I'll tell you this- while um, this contingent was there, the WRNS could within the two weeks training, if they didn't like it, they could leave. I don't think this applied to the WAF or the ATS. But there were two girls um, i mean you were put to scrubbing floors and things like that, it's all part and parcel of your training and these two girls they just wouldn't do it you see. Um, off they went, they weren't going to- and yet one of the permanent staff there, a leading WREN, had said to them, it's not like this when you finish your training, it's only here you'll be doing this, you won't be doing that elsewhere you know. But they didn't listen so um, I don't know, i just scrubbed floors and did as I was told more or less. And um, i think if you set your mind to do something and you want to do it, you have to get over the initial training or whatever.
01:08:18	Was it military stuff- it sounds like it wasn't particularly military based it was-

Time Code	What is Said
01:08:24	Well, it- you've (unclear) talk about (unclear) of course you had the tallest on the right, shortest on the left, I always knew where I had to go because I'm so short- Left. But again, you didn't do much of that afterwards. You only did that you know, while you were there. But I was very glad I wasn't the shortest. About the third shortest while I was there so I was happy because when they do the um right wheel and left wheel etcetera, I'd be going the wrong way I'm sure but um I enjoyed it. We had um, a test, I don't know if everybody did but i certainly had um. This test was to do with say um, arithmetic and various things um in case your wanted to be supplies or whatever. But as I got um the whole of the paper right, they didn't know what to do with me so that's why I ended up as a messenger to start with. But having said that, we then went down to, from there, we went down to Earls court and (unclear) gardens which was a holding depot before you posted onto somewhere else you see. Now we were all Scots there, near, nearly all of us were Scots. Come Sunday, we had to go on divisions- you know what divisions are- you know, um so we marched to the church and as we got to the door of course, the normal squad halt, Catholics fall out. So, in we went and it was very very high church, they were swinging the incense and chanting and we had such a simple service you see in Scotland where I was, not so much Glasgow would have been different but the East of Scotland um, different, very simple and come the next Sunday, um those that, of us that were still there said um, 'shall we ask if we can fall out like the Catholics? So will you be spokeswoman?' So we all went there but I was spokeswoman and I said well we know we've got to go on divisions etcetera but really can we fall out and go to a church of our own, you know, Scotland, (unclear) something because it was far too high for us, we didn't know when to bob up and down, you know that kind of thing. And we were told by the regulating petty office on duty, you're her
	Start of Film 3

Time Code	What is Said
01:12:52	Now while I was- although I was a messenger, Renee, sally and myself who were the three there and we were um taking and logging signals um, mostly they were signals from say north African- a lot of, i learnt more about the human body I suppose then than i ever knew before you know, because they'd come through wounded in action and they'd maybe give you the details. Most of the time they would, sometimes they didn't. And then they would end up by saying, next of kin, informed or not informed. Well we didn't do that bit, we had to log these signals then get signatures front the officers in charge of um, wherever you know, whatever. So from that point of view, it could be very sad. But you just had to let it ride over you, you know. But I suppose if you were over sensitive, i don't know. But we, three of us coped alright. But we were next door, the SDO then, there was a switchboard in there and um, we were next door to the commanding officer who was um, I think he was a lieutenant colonel then or he may have been colonel. His name was (unclear) so everybody said he was very strict but quite fair. Well if we had a turn of the giggles for instance, we would knock, knock, knock on the wall and that made us laugh even more you know. But one of the marines made up a little ditty about him. And it went, I can still remember it: 'there lived a colonel long ago, rejoicing in the name of Poe, but disliking this utensil, he grabbed himself the nearest pencil. And with a noise resembling glee, he placed two dots above the e. In this manner somewhat showing, his staff now have to call him Poë'. So and that was just a normal marine that made this up. But-
01:15:39	Did you get a sense of how things were going on in North Africa-
01:15:45	Yes, yes you could get a sense of that. You could get a sense of that. With the number of casualties and so forth coming through.
01:15:55	Where there any that particularly stood out to you that you'd heard the name or you knew of or-?
01:16:04	Well um, the names I didn't recognise any, but one of um, the chief officer- WREN officer in charge, now what was her name. Something like Wainwright i think but her- one of her sons was killed and she was a lovely person really you know, you consider your, um persons in charge are always nasty but she certainly wasn't, she was lovely. But she did have a- a thing come through you know. To say that he'd died.
01:16:57	That must have been quite traumatic for her then.
01:17:00	Yes.
01:17:01	Is the messages coming through to you coded?
01:17:06	No, it came- they came through on a teleprinter in full- they weren't coded.
01:17:13	Can you just describe the set up?
01:17;16	Well the set up was a bigish thing you and then when you heard the thing um, the noise when it started up you knew there was something coming in you know and then you had to wait until that was finished and then put time of- TOR- time of receipt etcetera on there and um that was it. Then from that point, you had to log it in the book and then that book was circulated to the officer who was responsible for whatever section you know. Um, I can remember there was Calver was one that got an awful lot of calls so he must have been in that section. Lieutenant Calver, C-A-L-V-E-R but I can't remember all of them.
01:18:13	And were these, were these specific, you know, were they relative to regiments or were they just literally everybody injured out in North Africa-?

Time Code	What is Said
01:18:21	Well it didn't always say what it just gave a name and number, you know but it didn't always you couldn't really say that they were Seaforth Highlanders or Gordon Highlanders or whatever you know.
	Start of Film 4
01:18:39	When were you in Ilfracombe, what year was it?
01:18:42	It would have been, I joined up July 43 so I would have got there at- oh August probably 43, August 43 and then I was there for quite- several months anyway. Quite a while. From there i was posted to Barrow Gurney near Bristol and that was a hospital for more or less shell-shocked um, service-navy personnel really and marines and so forth. And I was mostly on night watch there. It was only just prior to going to Westfield College and every night, every hour there was a, I think he might have been either a PO or a CPO complete with gown used to do the rounds. Making sure that none of the um inmates had escaped for instance because they were all rather shell-shocked you know. But I had no- no bother. Well I wasn't there all that long it was only a matter of weeks before going off to Westfield College. Um, I suppose you see, when i was at Ilfracombe as well, there were three um elderly marines that manned the switchboard. Well, two were elderly, I suppose too old to go to the front for instance. But Bernard wasn't that old but he um, I think he might have been wounded and sometimes they were sent to (unclear) to- because it was easy work and not at the front you know. And there was one day when one of them was ill and um, they wanted a break so i said well i can work one of those. Because it was only a very small one and so i got on it and that was one of the reasons i think they sent me to Barrow Gurney before going to learn the whole um from the very smallest to the largest switchboard. And um at Hampstead after um we had the course, the last day we went to the admiralty. Well when I got in there, all these rows of things you know and i thought how on earth can I get up there. There was a kind of a footrest and you would- on a fairly high stall but i thought goodness. I had to aim the plugs up at the top you know and if you cut anybody off well, that would be the end of you, you know, but I managed but oh, that was massive and that was the sort of last little bit of our training- we went to the admiralty, just o
01:22:32	Just describe the SDO and the various ones you worked on.
01:22:38	Um, now in (unclear) when I got there, that was the first posting after I went to Westfield College and we had always two maybe three on duty there, you know, two or three (unclear) and when the light comes out you obviously plug in and if you're quick or if you're doing- your partner or the next person will pick that up and then you have to test, always test and you can tell by the crackle if you just test it, if there's crackling on the line you know it's engaged. So if you over-plugged some of them, some of them you can over-plug and they won't be cut off but others you, it depends on the machine. You know. I don't think they do these things nowadays anyway but um, I think I could still work them.
01:23:43	And you're basically- this is primitive telephone isn't it?
01:23:48	Oh well, yeah, it would be now, it would definitely.
01:23:53	And who were you patching through to who and where were you- where were you-

Time Code	What is Said
01:23:57	Well, you got everywhere you see, um for instance I'd been on watch when um there might be a call coming through that everything is pooled out because it's urgent. And they get special treatment right through. Very urgent things that are secret, they would just say 'scramble' and if you listened in, you wouldn't hear the men, you wouldn't understand because it had just scrambled you know. So you always knew there was something going on if there was anything like that happening. There would be something that wasn't supposed to be generally known.
01:24:42	How did they scramble- is that you-
01:24:46	Well, we didn't do that, they did it from their ends you see. And it would only be these sort of head persons in charge- the captain or whoever it was of the ship because they always called them ships anyway, though they were land based, they were all the ships- HMS this and HMS that you know.
	Start of Film 4
01:25:11	Okay so you've gone from admiralty to I think Hatston is that right?
01:25:16	Yeah- well at- stopped off at Dunfirmline first of all for about um, ten days. But that was-oh I- there I managed to get a trip onto the HMS Implacable. it was the indefatigable, the implacable and one other i can't remember what it is. But this was the implacable and it was just being commissioned and um, we WRNS that were in the holding depot were allowed on board if you wanted to go and have a look around. Very interesting, you know, to do that. So then um- from there I went to Twatt first of all in the middle of the mainland of the Orkneys. Then from Twatt to Hatston where- that's on the coast, it's only a few, about ten minutes from Kirkwall and i would have thought myself they would have kept that one as the main airport. They didn't- they were using Skeabrae which was the RAF slightly further in. But the main (unclear) really. But they used Skeabrae which was the RAF instead of keeping Hatston on.
01:26:47	What was- what was Hatston like as a WRENery and as a place to-
01:26:50	Um, well we had- it was all (unclear) camps and (unclear) huts that we had and um the old fire in the middle you know. Um it was very very blowy out there. Very very blowy. The weather could be simply horrible. And being little, both that way as well as this way um, I had difficulty getting the right size so my wellies were always rather big, you got issued with Wellington boots at (unclear) and um that sort of thing. And I remember I'd gone into Kirkwall for something and coming back it was raining and blowing and what not. I nearly took off because it- my thingymebob was so big, it was going underneath (unclear, laughs) so and i only took (unclear) and shoes and they didn't always have my size in shoes you know.
01:28:01	What about social life was it, was there much-
01:28:05	Oh, there, loads of it because there was everything there. There was the RAF and so forth and there were dances, various um RAF (unclear) and um drill hole and there were umpteen salvation army and um oh i can't remember what they were all called now but you could go in and have egg and chips, 2 eggs and chips- lovely. It was great. you wouldn't know there was a war on you know, when you were there. And they had um ENSA come you know the ENSA groups. there was plenty to do- plenty to do.
01:29:00	Any famous people come in ENSA?
01:29:02	Well i didn't- the most famous i suppose that i ever went to see was in Ilfracombe and that was-what's the one that was- he- I'm a yankee doodle dandy. Oh dear (laughs). Oh you would know him. He's not a very tall chap. He came to- because of course being loads of Americans there in Ilfracombe um, they had some of the American entertainers.
01:29:38	Irvin Berlin?

Time Code	What is Said
01:29:39	No no- oh dear dear dear. I can see him now. Can't think of his name. Not Mickey Rooney. Yeswas somebody like that anyway, might have been Mickey Rooney. So if you had an American boyfriend, he would take you to their dos. I went on leave from the Orkneys and in those days if there was a plane going from Hatston to the main land and there was any room, any WREN um, would be allowed to go. So I was fortunate on one occasion only to go. DC- what would it have been, very small plane because there were only two men they um- the pilot and the co pilot and then there were us two WRENs going. Well we go to Inverness that was where they were going. We got off at Inverness but my ears- the noise you don't have that now do you when you get off planes. But oh that was dreadful. I couldn't hear a thing for hours you know because this noise was still there. So i had my first flight way back then. That was nice wasn't it.
01:31:15	Did you feel like you was an important part of the war effort?
01:31:20	Oh, up there yes definitely. (unclear) the fleet- the whole fleet's there based at Scapa Flow and yes.
01:31:31	When you say you felt it was important I mean, you know how much communication are you having or hearing from the ships? what are you, what-
01:31:40	Well um, yeah. When um the ships were coming back say from the um convoys to Russia, you'd hear that they were coming in but you'd have to listen in. Oh well- April 6 squadron's back tonight that mean winds are short tonight you know that kind of thing yeah.
01:32:11	And what about when ships wouldn't come back?
01:32:20	Um, well I'd- I didn't know any- I've had um one chappy that i had a date with once on the Monday and he said see you Saturday but I didn't see him Saturday because they had in Norway, they went to bomb something in Norway and his name was Payne and all Payne's were known as Whackers, you know they were all like Dusty Miller and Bungy Williams and things like that and Whacker Payne and he didn't come back. He was taken prisoner apparently, did hear that afterwards. So, but i didn't know of any ships that had really been- anybody on a ship that had been sunk completely. Didn't know anybody. But the Trumpeter was also on the Atlantic convoys.
	Start of Film 6
01:33:20	Just explain your relationship with the Trumpeter.
01:33:24	Um well, I met this chappy which is my um, my husband eventually. Um, at one of the dances in the drill hole and every time he came in, I knew i had a date that night so. And then he went with a crowd of them so if he wasn't ashore, one of the other would come and take us girls out. The only time that um Gwen who's always clean shaven, but you know that the navy's not allowed to just grow a moustache, they must have a set. So the number of - didn't you know that? Oh yes, you can't have just a moustache, now the airforce you know, they could grow the big moustaches, but you've got to get permission to grow a set and of course when they went to artic convoys, of course it would have been the thing to do, you grow a set because otherwise you know, pretty cold shaving every day wouldn't it. And he only grew a set once. And then he, when he was (unclear), he shaved off the beard and kept the moustache and then - my mother said to him one day 'I don't like you with that' so he shaved it off (laughs). He didn't shave it off for me but he shaved it off for my mum. He also was - the trumpeter was also on um, a convoy to Malta. And i haven't got that photograph because again my um, great-niece has got it. As they were coming back from Malta, they called in at Gibraltar and their eating bananas, because of course there were no bananas here to be had, so they were showing off - I think four of them in the picture, all tucking in to these bananas. So they were not only on the Russian convoys, but um, they did the Malta one anyway and they were also on the Atlantic.

Time Code	What is Said
01:36:04	What was your feeling when he went off to see to do the convoys - do you remember?
01:36:10	I don't think that I ever thought anything could happen. That is the - I'm sure I didn't. well I know I didn't, you know 'I'll see you next time when you're back'. I never thought of it being that dangerous although obviously it was.
01:36:35	How close did you feel the war was sometimes?
01:36:38	Well, I - I think that the, one of the things that brought it home to me after D-day was because i'd got one of the Americans I used to write to him, that it wasn't that he was a boyfriend as such, you know what i mean, but a friend. And he was of German extraction and another one was of Italian extraction. Now, isn't this strange that they're fighting against the Italians and the Germans (laughs) it was funny, but Marvin, he was the one that was killed in Belgium. And I had one of my letters returned. And it wasn't until that point - because I hadn't known anybody else that had been killed. And it wasn't until that point that I realised just how bad it was. And then i had his - he must have told his mother that I was his girlfriend, well I suppose I was a girlfriend but I wouldn't say I was the girlfriend if you know what I mean. And she sent me, I've got it there actually - She sent me, (unclear) things as well. So poor old Marvin. But I was just reading this morning, he was born in 29 I think it was 29, I was born in 20, I didn't think he was that much younger but still.
01:38:33	And- you mention it then, D-day. Did your work increase up to d-day?
01:38:39	Oh there was - yes, yes, there was always a lot of um action going on, busy switchboard etcetera - on d-day. But at Hatston now, again we didn't do a lot of um parade work, but we did go on divisions one day. Um, you'd be nominated and very rarely we were on there. But the captain in charge at - the chap in charge believe it or not didn't like WRNS in the old Lisle stockings you know, the thick Lisle stockings. He only liked them in the silk stockings. So well - instead they'd be rayon really, I don't suppose they'd be pure silk, well they weren't pure silk I do know that. And so only WRNS that had silk stockings could go on parade.
	Start of Film 7
01:39:44	And what- where did you go after Hatston?
01:40:05	Well, the war finished and we came down lock stock and barrel from Hatston to halesworth because they closed Hatston then. And um, Halesworth had been an RAF station, so um we had to mess with the men, i don't mean - I mean , mess with the men, have your meals and things with the men. And the WRENs were very lucky really because we always had teapots - big teapots, the old enamel ones but always in there -teapot. Whereas when we got down there, i suppose they'd left a lot of the stuff there and they had um so you never know whether you were having tea coffee or coco, it all tasted the same. Instead of keeping one for tea only and one for coffee only and so forth, oh, no didn't like that at all.
01:41:09	Do you remember VE day?
01:41:11	Um, yes I do, I do indeed. But um, there wasn't that much - i think London was probably the place to be on VE day really. Because we still would have been um, on duty because being in communications, I wore the cross flags on my sleeve, rather than the W or whatever. And um, I think um you were always on duty, (unclear) watch keeping. So you had mornings, and you had afternoons, you had evening shifts and night shifts. And um, I, I preferred that actually than a nine to five job.
01:42:06	(unclear) made the return of their convoy to Lioness after their-

Time Code	What is Said
01:42:14	Oh well, no I was on loan to Lioness for three works, somebody - or two weeks or three weeks I can't remember but um, somebody was off sick, so I had to go to Lioness to cover. And during that time the Nabob came in, right, and um I could - there the, the switch ops and things were underground a bit. Not on the top, slightly underground. And, I remember my tea break went up to ground level and you could - watch the soldi-sailers come off the ship and they were all looking about 16 - 18, very young looking you know. And drunk as lords, really they were. But you can't blame them can you, because there they were, they could have been at the bottom of the ocean by then you know. And especially (unclear) to limp back to Lioness you know.
01:43:29	Well the funny thing is, years after when my, um, married Alfred, it wasn't until two years or so after I married him and i was talking about - we were talking about the WRNS or the Orkney's or something and I said something about the Nabob and he said - what did you say, the Nabob? I said yeah - and his brother-in-law was on that ship, so I must have seen him come off that day too. And all these years later, must be 60 years later or so, we find this out. Isn't it a small world?
01:44:02	How do you reflect on the war now, that the - the war itself and your work in the war?
01:44:08	Um, well i'm glad I joined up I must admit. I think um, I had a better time in the services than I would have had if I'd just been working and whatever. Um, in wartime - well I think um, my first, no wouldn't be my first job, my second job after was (unclear). I worked at Staines kitchen equipment in (unclear) street. And there was a woman there, she was older than I, and she had a son, Peter, who was in the - I think he was the army. And he was in Germany. She never had a good word to say, for instance, about Germans - ever, you know. Well, would you believe, Peter was stationed there for a while, and he married a German girl, so she had to eat her words didn't she (laughs). But I made good friends, I have no qualms about - there's good and bad in everybody. In every race and nation. So, but I can't- what I can't understand nowadays, is this conflict going on um, in Syria for instance. How can people kill their own? I just don't understand it. Well, I - I can see the point, because as I say, in - when we were in diplomatic services, one of our first postings was to um, Lagos in Nigeria. Well again, there are loads of tribes there, reminded me a little bit of the Scottish clans, frankly you know. And then of course, they - we had left just before the (unclear) and the, you know the East and the West, because of the oil again. Um, well a tribe is ok but I can't see this in Syria, I really can't. And I can't see why Scotland wants to separate either. Alex Hammond wants his head sorted (laughs).
01:46:55	And what about the WRENs, how do you feel about that?
01:46:59	Being a WREN? Proud of it, proud of it, very proud of it. Now I um, when I was - had the Globe Laurel, I bought another hat. When I was transferred back to the fleet air arm, of course I had to wear the HMS, so I kept my marine hat and every time I went on leave I would swap it over because nobody knew what I was then you see, I was so proud of my marine hat.
01:47:33	How did you get that?
01:47:35	Well because I was (unclear) marine. The home based (unclear) office in Ilfracombe but really I suppose, the pay office and that sort of thing - that's why everything had to go through there when people were injured, died and so forth. Um, yeah. So um, I do know I used to notice people looking at me you see, wandering what I was and I liked that.
01:48:09	End of Films