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Date of interview: October 2025

Location: Pencarreg, Ceredigion

Interviewer: Neil Davies

Photographer: Hugh Morgan

Elsie Spiller nee 'Robinson'

Women's Royal Navy

1962 to 1966

Pencarreg, Ceredigion



"It was the best thing I ever did."

Methodology

Elsie's story of service in the Royal Navy was gleaned from a conversation with her, which took place at her home. Elsie was 88 years of age at the time of the visit.

The conversation was recorded in audio format.

The majority of the content of this narrative relies heavily upon Elsie's memories. However, the author has cross-checked Elsie's recollections with additional sources of information and consulted with other resources, in order to create an enhanced picture of Elsie's journey in the Women's Royal Navy.

The Author has summarized some of the conversation from the interview, where Elsie is quoted in this narrative.

Background

Elsie was born in 1937 and grew up with her three sisters in the small town of Addlestone in Surrey. She attended the local primary school and also the church 'Sunday school'. World War two featured heavily in her early childhood and the conflict left her with vivid memories of Luftwaffe bombing raids. Elsie recalls that the 'Vickers' aircraft factory was located about three miles southeast of Addlestone at Brooklands and was targeted heavily by the German bombers.

"Vickers built planes and was only up the road from Addlestone. The German bombers tried to bomb it every night. We had to go down the air raid shelters which were horrible, like a concrete jungle. You had a bucket to go to the toilet in front of everybody, which was the most embarrassing thing. The noise of the planes was terrible."

Elsie's father was a Fireman and was exposed to the full horror of the bombing.

"My Dad was a Fireman, and he had to go to London to help with the bombing. Getting dead bodies out of buildings and horrible things. That wasn't a very nice time."

The family living next door to her gave lodgings to RAF airmen.

"We didn't have lodgers because Mum had 4 children, but the lady next door had RAF in. It was compulsory back then. They were smashing lads. You thought to yourself, if they are going off to war, are they coming back. It's a horrible thing, the war."

The end of the war in 1945 was an event to be celebrated. Elsie was 8 years of age.

"We celebrated. We got all the jam jars we could get and put red, white and blue stripes on them. We put a candle in them, and we marched through the streets singing."



In this photograph taken during the war, Elsie is stood at the back with her three sisters in front of her.

After leaving school Elsie began work at the ‘Research laboratory’ in nearby Weybridge. This establishment, its official title being the ‘Animal and Plant Health Agency’ research laboratory, celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2017. In recent years the laboratory has been heavily involved in testing bird samples for Avian flu.

“I worked at the research laboratories in Weybridge. It was the only job you could do. We cycled (to work) because we couldn’t afford a car. But it was a good life.”

Elsie fell in love and married a local man. It turned out to be a short marriage and the catalyst that ended up with Elsie joining the Navy. The Navy wasn’t something she had earlier considered, but when her marriage failed, it offered her the chance of a fresh start. She talks candidly about her life at the time and her decision to join the Navy.

“My first husband left me. I just lost a baby, and I thought I got to get away. I opened the paper and (an advert) said ‘Join the Wren’s’. I filled it in, sent it off and in 2 weeks I was in the Wren’s!**”*

*Women’s Royal Navy.

(Before 1993 the female branch was separate from the Royal Navy)

**Spoken as Wren or Wrens.

After responding to the advert, Elsie was quickly called in for an interview.

“They said I had to go to London. I can’t remember where it was now. There was a ship that you went on to have your medical and eye test, things like that. She said, ‘We’ll send you a letter’ and I thought I’m going to hear nothing. But 2 weeks later I was in the Wrens.”

Clearly this was a significant change of direction in Elsie’s life, and one of her parents in particular was both concerned and surprised.

“My dad wasn’t very pleased, but my Mum said, ‘You do what you want to do’. I had to get away, and it was the best thing I ever did. I met some lovely friends.”



Some early recruiting posters for the WRN.

Courtesy of Wrens museum Facebook.

Women’s Royal Navy

Elsie joined the Women’s Royal Navy and travelled to HMS Dauntless, Burghfield, near Reading in Berkshire to undertake basic training.

In 1962 the HMS Dauntless name was in its 5th period of service and was now a shore establishment. The WRN had moved into Dauntless in 1953.



A period photograph of the main entry gate to HMS Dauntless. Elsie walked through this very gate in 1962.

Image courtesy wrens.org.uk

The Women's Royal Naval Service was formed in 1917. It disbanded in 1919 but reformed in 1939. Wrens undertook domestic duties such as cleaning and cooking. However, as time moved on, the service was modernized. Trades opened up and Wrens began training for roles such as wireless telegraphists, electricians, meteorologists and Stewarding. Most Wrens were based in the United Kingdom.

Elsie isn't too sure about the length of the Wren's training course at Dauntless. Contemporary records indicate its duration was about 6 weeks.

"It was about 3 months I think."

The women's training in most part mirrored that of their male counterparts.

"We had to go to the gym, prove we could use gas masks and march properly. We had to learn all the rules of the Navy."

The trainee Wren's also had to undertake academic work. They learnt about the history and function of the Royal Navy, the different roles, vessels and rank structure. At the end of the course, there was an exam to complete and to some the degree, the results determined postings.

"I passed my exams and the next day I heard I was going to Collingwood."



Elsie pictured with friends who completed their initial Wren's training together at HMS Dauntless.

Elsie has kept this photograph to remind her of happy days.

HMS Collingwood

"The happiest 4 years of my life!"

HMS Collingwood, located at Fareham, Hampshire was built as a training establishment for the seaman branch on 197 acres of farming land. The area was compulsorily purchased at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. During the course of the war and beyond, it grew in size and morphed into a maintenance and training establishment for a variety of roles and equipment. Wrens were present from the outset, performing roles such as cooks, stewards, messengers and switchboard operator.

The Wrens quarters was on the east side of the southern end of Excellent Road. After the end of WW2, the vast medical complex located halfway along the same side of Excellent road was reduced in size. The Wren's moved into the redundant buildings left behind and was enclosed behind a security fence. This is something Elsie remembers well.

Collingwood became the centre for the Electronic Branch and in 1962 the training-structure was reformed. The new arrangement composed of central administration staff, 3 instructional groups responsible for electronics, electro technology and academics, and 6 equipment groups, surface weapons, underwater weapons, nuclear and general electrics, workshops, nuclear and communications.

So it was that Elsie packed a Navy issue kit bag and took a train to Fareham. She arrived at an enormous military base.

"I went to HMS Collingwood, which was a massive school. You had people from all over the world going there. To learn how to do Radar and things like that."

She was introduced to the Wren's accommodation and allocated a room. This was an exciting but nerve-wracking time for her.

"I felt a bit strange at first. You meet all the Wrens, and they get chatting to you."

However, she was made to feel welcome and soon settled in.

"It was just another way of life."

Before joining up Elsie had learnt waitressing. This skill was soon put to good use. Within a short space of time she took up duties in the Officers mess, known in the Navy as the 'Wardroom'.

"I learnt how to do 'Silver service' so I could wait on the tables."

Indeed, she became a 'Leading WRN Stewardess'.

"I was a Leading Wren. I waited on the tables and woke the Officers up in the morning with a cup of tea."

The Stewardesses worked hard, and Elsie adapted to the daily routine.

"You worked long hours, starting at 7 in the morning. You woke the Officers up with a cup of tea or coffee. Then you went back and had your breakfast. Then you went back and served the Officers breakfast. Then you had to do their rooms out. It was a busy life, you didn't get much money though! But it was part of life."

Being a Royal Naval shore establishment, with a lot of visiting Officers, there was much tradition to follow.

"It was long days. They did a lot of Mess dinners."

Mess dinners were formal events that were rooted in Naval history and tradition. These events were demanding for the Stewardesses, who had to be immaculately turned out. In addition, the Stewardesses had to display a high level of knowledge about the

function and format of these events. The Stewardesses were expected to perform to a high standard. There was the additional pressure of the evening's proceedings reflecting upon HMS Collingwood's Wardroom. Mistakes or sloppiness were not tolerated'

"You'd work until 1 in the morning and then had to get up for 7 in the morning to get the Officers a cup of tea or coffee."

There's no disputing the fact that throughout the 1960's, females were vastly outnumbered by their male colleagues. Social attitudes were very different. Nowadays the military has moved along with changing attitudes in society and females are on a more equal footing. However, back then, Elsie and her fellow Wrens regularly experienced poor attitudes from both Ratings* and Officers. Perhaps the fact that the Wrens quarters was encased inside a chain link fence demonstrates the issue well enough. Elsie shares some candid thoughts of life amongst the male population at HMS Collingwood in the early 1960's.

*Ratings is a term used to describe the wider non-commissioned naval workforce.

"Some alright, some not. Some thought you were easy game, shall I say. As long as you know what, was what. You didn't let the Ratings try to do anything to you. You met some smashing blokes and at an establishment like that Australian Officers, American officers, all sorts. You'd always put a dance on for them in the mess. So, we had a lot of good times."

Elsie reflects on the bonds established between the Wrens. They would 'look out' for each other.

"You made some smashing friends. Peggy, she was my best friend. I was Bridesmaid at her wedding. You used to leave your money around, nobody used to touch your money. It was a lovely, relaxed atmosphere."

The ladies had fun together.

"I got happy memories. One week you'd get paid and the next week was 'black week' we'd call it because you had no money. Every pay week you had a big band come to Collingwood, and we had a big dance. It was nice. We had a lot of famous names, but I can't think of any of them now."

Elsie then met someone who would change her life.

"We used to go down to the NAAFI every night for a drink. He was sitting on his own and I went to talk to him and we clicked, like that. He'd just come back and was waiting for a ship. He'd been all over the place."

That 'someone' was Alfred Spiller, later to be known affectionately as 'Alf'. He was a Leading rating awaiting a draft onto another ship. Elsie believes they first met in 1964. 'Alf' was drafted to HMS Vernon at the time, a nearby ashore base at Portsmouth. Alf's next draft came in March 1965. He joined the frigate HMS Penelope. The ship soon embarked on an extended voyage, accompanying the cruiser HMS Tiger to the South Americas. Over the course of the next year or so, Elsie and Alf would exchange many

letters. Writing was the main method of communication between families and partners serving overseas in the 1960s.



Leading Seaman Alf Spiller. Elsie has treasured this photograph of Alf's days at sea.

At some point Elsie was posted to another shore establishment not far from Collingwood.

"I went to where they trained the people to do the typing during the war. It was just up the road from Collingwood, but I didn't like it. You leave all your friends behind and it's horrible. But I met Alf, so I was lucky."

Alf's draft record shows that in early 1966 he disembarked HMS Penelope, which had just returned from the South American deployment. The ship was destined for a major refit and entered dry dock. Alf was assigned to the shore establishment HMS Pembroke at Chatham.

In July 1966, Alf's service drawing to an end, and he was drafted to HMS Victory and the historic naval dockyard, Portsmouth.

Given what Elsie remembers, it seems probable that she spent time together with Alf at the historic naval dockyard.

"I remember it being nice. You know in front of the ships they had a statue of a lady or something. All around the garden they had these lovely statues."

The couple decided that their future lay together and became engaged to be married. With Alf nearing discharge, they decided they'd both leave the Navy and begin a new life together in 'civvy street'. Alf was the first to leave. His certificate of service records that on the day before his 27th birthday, 12th August 1966 he was formally discharged from the Royal Navy on completion of service.

Elsie was discharged a little later in 1966. Once both their divorces were finalised, they married at the Guildford registry office.

“We got married in our dinner hour at Guildford Registry office. We got 2 people off the street to be our witnesses! Well, I though he’d been married before and I’d been married before. I didn’t want any fuss. I was very happy.”

The marriage was to be a long and happy one. The couple moved to Lincolnshire where they ran a country pub, The Royal Oak Inn, Swinderby. Ironically the pub was situated near to the RAF school of recruit training at RAF Swinderby. During their time at the Royal Oak, they welcomed many an airman through the doors.



Elsie and Alfred enjoyed many happy years managing the Royal Oak Inn, Swinderby. Elsie has this fine print of the pub at her Welsh home.

Eventually the couple retired to Ceredigion, Wales and spent their final years together running a small holding.

“We had sheep, we had cattle, goats, pigs. Oh, it was a hard but lovely life. Especially when you get baby lambs coming out and you bottle feed them. They run up to meet you, oh happy.”

Elsie and Alf would often sit and reminisce about their former lives back in the Royal Navy. Elsie survives Alfred and lives with her memories of a very happy life together.



Footnote

This narrative account preserves the memory of service to the nation.

This narrative account, accompanied by an audio recording of the interview and photographs, is located in the Elsie Spiller collection at the West Wales Veterans Archive, Peoples Collection Wales website.

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 - en.wikipedia.org
 - Women's Royal Navy Association
 - Hmscoa.org (HMS Collingwood history)
 - Wren's museum.



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