

**Rev. Kathleen Mary Davie; nee Owen**  
**Narrator**

**Wayne Clark**  
**Interviewer**

**Interviewed on March 11, 2009**  
**Saratoga Springs, New York**

**WC:** Today is the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, 2009. We are at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York. The interviewer is Wayne Clark. For the record, would you please state your full name, and your date and place of birth.

**KMD:** Kathleen Mary Owen Davie. I was born in London.

**WC:** And when were you born?

**KMD:** In 1927, in January.

**WC:** And did you attend school there?

**KMD:** I attended school in South London for a time, and then we moved when I was seven years old to Wembley, Middlesex. Wembley is known to most United States citizens as the football capital, where they have the football—it's a big celebration and a big game—cup final, they call it.

**WC:** You mentioned that when the war started, you were evacuated.

**KMD:** I wasn't evacuated, but when the war started—people weren't evacuated until probably 1940-'41. Then the bombs really got to be bad; we had a lot of high explosive bombs, and then quite a few incendiary bombs. The Jerries were really smart; they used to have a high explosive bomb that started things off, and then they put an incendiary bomb just as everybody was trying to rescue people.

**WC:** Do you remember much about that?

**KMD:** Yes, we saw a lot of the fires in London from our landing window on the stairs.

**WC:** How old were you at that point?

**KMD:** I was twelve when the war started, and probably thirteen or fourteen when most of the action happened.

**WC:** Do you remember the buzz bombs at all?

**KMD:** Oh yes, do I. But, you called them buzz bombs—we called them doodle bugs.

**WC:** Ok, yes, I've heard that term before.

**KMD:** They were terrifying because you'd hear them coming, and they had a very distinctive um, um, um, um [hums]. And then, as soon as it stopped, you knew it was coming down, and depending on how loud the humming was beforehand, you knew more or less whether it was going to hit you or not. We spent most of the years from the time I was twelve to the time I was fifteen spending the nights in the shelter, because you'd have to get up in the middle of the night and go to the shelter. So, we just bedded down at night. We had a twelve-inch board as a bed—one on each side for my sister and me.

**WC:** Now did you have your own shelter?

**KMD:** Yes, I helped my father build one, yes. I was my father's son, actually, because I was the oldest.

**WC:** Ok, so you had your own home?

**KMD:** Yes.

**WC:** And the shelter was in the basement?

**KMD:** It was in the backyard, way at the farthest end of the backyard. My father had built a rockery, a rock garden, with a channel down the middle of it, and the shelter was right behind it, so it sort of looked like it was part of the rock garden.

**WC:** Did your house receive any kind of damage?

**KMD:** Only an incendiary bomb that fortunately didn't go off, and the wardens came and disabled it.

**WC:** And I imagine you probably had friends and maybe family members who suffered from the bombing.

**KMD:** Yes, some of them, but not really. It didn't come too close to home for us in terms of family. In fact, we gained family members because we discovered long-lost cousins of my father that also went into the Wrens and lived with us for a while.

**WC:** You mentioned that they started evacuating children, and you were supposed to be evacuated but you opted not to.

**KMD:** We were given the option in Wembley, because it was north of London, and quite a few of my friends went away, but we stayed at home. My sister and I asked my Mom and Dad if we could stay. We spent every summer down at my mother's cousins' home in East Anglia, which was quite near one of the military bases that our fighter jets went up from. So, we knew where there was action very often before the siren went, when we were down there for the summer.

**WC:** During the year after they evacuated most of the children, did you attend school then? Schools were still open?

**KMD** Yes, because there were quite a lot of us left.

**WC:** Now was your father involved in the military at all?

**KMD:** Indirectly. He had had a medical for the first World War, and they had deemed him unfit for action because he had a heart murmur. They don't do that now, I gather. But he was working for the London transport train business, and he was an electrical engineer. He started as a linesman and ended up as assistant to the signal engineer. His role during the war was to be—he was seventy feet underground in a sort of staging area to repair any bomb damage on any of the railway area. It was quite a... He used to write letters to me when I was in Ireland, and most of the letter was cut out because...[Laughs] It was really stupid. I don't think anybody could have gotten anything from it.

**WC:** What about rationing and food shortages?

**KMD:** Oh, rationing was really quite terrible, but we never drank our tea very strong, so we always had tea left over. And we gave away a good deal of our sugar ration because we didn't use so much as other people did.

**WC:** Now, what about—was there any kind of shortages of meat or fish or vegetables?

**KMD:** I don't know whether my mother sort of shielded us from things like that, but I don't really remember that we were obviously short of anything.

**WC:** So you never had to go hungry or anything?

**KMD:** No, but we knew that certain things weren't easily obtainable. For instance, eggs—we used to go and get eggs from my cousin's farm, and then we would put them in thiosulfate to preserve them. Then we would cook them later when we needed them.

**WC:** What about clothing or shoes?

**KMD:** I don't ever remember running out of anything.

**WC:** And then eventually you joined the WRNS?

**KMD:** Yes.

**WC:** Tell us what that stands for.

**KMD:** The WRNS stands for Women's Royal Naval Service, but individual Wrens are spelled W-r-e-n-s.

**WC:** Now what year did you enter?

**KMD:** I entered a year after I left high school. I went to a secretarial school for a year and then in September I joined up.

**WC:** And what year was that?

**KMD:** That was in 1944. My mother had intended for me to do a secretarial course because she had been a secretary, and she thought that would be a reserved occupation and I wouldn't need to go into the war at all. But I volunteered, being a seventeen-year-old—you know what teenagers are like. [Laughs]

**WC:** Sure. What sort of training did you receive?

**KMD:** I don't remember very much in the way of training other than the fact that we would be working shifts. We worked when I eventually got to the place where I was supposed to be working—I was part of a pool of typists—we used to type the signals that the Coding Office had deciphered and send them to the Admiral and all the people that needed it. I was stationed in Belfast at this time.

**WC:** In Ireland?

**KMD:** Yes. In Northern Ireland.

**WC:** Outside the summers, was that your first time away from home?

**KMD:** I think so. Well no, I was away from home for a holiday with my aunt when I was six years old. I don't remember being terribly homesick or anything.

**WC:** What was your uniform like?

**KMD:** It was a dark navy-blue serge coat, skirt, and bellbottom trousers, and white blouses, and a sort of beret with WRNS written around the ribbon.

**WC:** Did you have any kind of rank designation?

**KMD:** When I went in, I didn't, and I think about six months before I left the Wrens, I became a Leading Wren. Then the next thing is a Petty Officer, and I don't know what goes after that.

**WC:** What was life like in Belfast?

**KMD:** It was really quite comfortable in that we were stationed in a requisitioned home, and we did have to stoke the boiler, which I learned to do, and we also had to deal with mice. We had bunk beds in the bedrooms, and I had a bunkmate from Geordie Land, which was Northumberland, in England. She was older than I. We used to have to walk from Somerton Road where we were billeted to the castle which is where we had our operations. It was at the top of a hill, called Cave Hill.

**WC:** Were there English soldiers there also?

**KMD:** No it was just mostly Wrens, and we had a naval chief petty officer who was over our office, and of course the admiral was a man. I wonder if they will ever have admiral women.

**WC:** Well they do in the States, I believe.

**KMD:** Well maybe they do in England, I don't know. [Laughs]

**WC:** What time did you start work in the morning?

**KMD:** Well, we did shifts. I was what was called a signals dispatch office watchkeeper. So, we did shifts, we did 6-11 watch of an evening. Then the next morning, we would be from 1-6, and the next day, we would be from 9-1 in the morning, and then all night—we would go on at 10 or 11. Then we would have a whole day off and the next day off, until 6PM. So, that was a good opportunity for going and seeing places. I traveled to the Giant's Causeway which is way up in the north of Ireland.

**WC:** How were you received by the Irish people?

**KMD:** That was very strange in Belfast because the Catholic population in Belfast were against the war, and were against the British—they have always been against the British, I guess. So, we were told never to go down certain streets, which was largely a Catholic area in Belfast, in our uniform. I had friends in the Catholic area and so I used to go in mufti over to visit them.

**WC:** So on your days off, you were allowed to wear civilian clothes.

**KMD:** Yes, we were allowed to wear civilian clothes. Actually, when we weren't on duty, we were allowed to wear civilian clothes.

**WC:** What did you do for your meals?

**KMD:** I don't remember very much about that. We had meals at the billet and I don't remember what we did, whether we took sandwiches or what. I just don't remember.

**WC:** Did you ever have any kind of entertainment?

**KMD:** No, we were pretty much on our own, just living in Belfast and doing our job and sightseeing. That was the entertainment—most of us went sightseeing on our time off.

**WC:** How did you stay in touch with your family?

**KMD:** Well, I had letters from my father, but they used to come in ribbons because a lot of the stuff was x-ed out, cut out in fact. There wasn't any phone. My parents didn't have a phone. It's interesting, there wasn't any television; there wasn't any phone service.

**WC:** Were you able to listen to the radio at night?

**KMD:** I don't ever remember anything like that.

**WC:** What was it like when you heard that the war ended?

**KMD:** Oh, we were on duty up in the castle. We said, "Well, we've got to do something,"—this was VE Day—"We've got to do something to celebrate," so,

some of us went down to the little store at the foot of the mountain, at the foot of Cave Hill, for ice cream, and we brought ice cream cones back to all the people at the office. That was our way of celebrating. But then, after I'd been demobbed...

**WC:** Now what does that mean?

**KMD:** That means...

**WC:** Like discharged?

**KMD:** Yes, discharged. We had a celebration after—I think it was in 1945, was May, in August was the, it seems to me...

**WC:** The victory over Japan was August.

**KMD:** It must have been in 1946. They had a celebration in the spring of 1946, and a great number of us met in London. Some Royal Naval Air Service men and Wrens and some of us just met in London near Buckingham Palace. I remember going up there and doing all that, but I don't remember any details of it.

**WC:** Did you ever encounter any members of the royal family?

**KMD:** No; well, not close. Princess Elizabeth came over when she was, I think, eighteen, which was evidently a year after I had been in Belfast for that time. She came over and launched an aircraft carrier, and I don't remember the name of it, but I was down at the docks and watched her throw the bottle at the hull. It was interesting.

**WC:** After the war, did you stay in contact with any of the people you served with?

**KMD:** I still am in contact with one of the Wrens that I was working with toward the end, and her husband, who was one of the Royal Naval Air Service people who was in the same place where I was.

**WC:** And you did attend that one reunion in 1946. Anything afterwards?

**KMD:** No. Not since. I've been to visit the couple that were married in Canada and they still live there.

**WC:** Is there any sort of a Wren organization?

**KMD:** I didn't realize there was, but when I was in Worthing last summer I discovered that there's an arrangement to look after Wrens that are in need.

**WC:** So, they do have veterans' status?

**KMD:** I guess so, yes. I just left the Wrens and went to nursing school, and I didn't think any more about it.

**WC:** How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

**KMD:** Well, I think it did a lot. I think the discipline was very good for me.

**WC:** Was it very strict?

**KMD:** No, it wasn't. It was very lax, really, but it was good, and I got much more exercise than I would have done, I think, otherwise. I wasn't a very mobile person, and I think it taught me quite a lot—working with other people, getting along with other people, being somewhat resourceful about a number of different things. I really think it was helpful to me.

**WC:** You mentioned that once you got out of the Wrens, you went to nursing school?

**KMD:** Yes.

**WC:** Now did the government help pay for that because of your service?

**KMD:** Yes. Well, nursing school in England was very different, in that you went to a hospital, you were trained by the hospital, and they provided all your needs. We didn't get any money that I remember, but we had everything that we needed. So, I was four years at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London.

**WC:** And once you completed that program, obviously you went into the nursing field?

**KMD:** Well, I then went into midwifery at Mothers' Hospital, the Salvation Army Hospital in the east end of London, which was quite an education for me, the east end being the most poverty-stricken part of London. Then when I finished that, I went to missionary training school for two years to become a missionary.

**WC:** Where was that?

**KMD:** That was in Ealing, which was only about five miles away from where I lived, from my home. But it was residential, so I only went home once in a while.

**WC:** Did you go into the missionary field?

**KMD:** I went to India for a couple of years, and I came back from India and did public health nursing training at Southampton University. Then I worked for three years in public health before some friends of mine that I had met in the course of my duties were coming over here for a three month—he was a congregational minister—and he was coming over for a three-month summer exchange pastorate, and I came over with him, and I never went back to live there.

**WC:** Did you get married to him?

**KMD:** Oh no, he already was married and he had twins. I came over and looked after the twins while they went to church things and so on.

**WC:** Now did you eventually marry?

**KMD:** I met my husband when I was at Albany Medical Center doing psychiatric nursing while I was finishing my degree. We were married in 1966. And he died in 2000. He was quite a little older than me.

**WC:** You mentioned he had a son.

**KMD:** He had two sons. One lives in Argyle, which isn't too far away. The other one lives in Maryland, not too far from Annapolis.

**WC:** And you mentioned you became a Baptist minister.

**KMD:** Yes, I was looking after my husband, who had Alzheimer's, at home, and two years after he had gone into a nursing home in North Creek, I was asked by one church up in St. Mary, or where the nursing home was, if I would preach occasionally because they were without a minister. Their pastor died while he was there. And then they called me as their pastor.

**WC:** So you've been doing that?

**KMD:** I was doing that until—in 2001 I became what is known as an area minister, sort of a little bit like a District Superintendent in the Methodist church. Some of the churches used to equate it with being a bishop in the Methodist church or some of the other churches, so some people used to call me Bish, just as a nickname. [Laughs] But it was interesting in that there were nineteen churches in the Adirondack Association, and my role really was to troubleshoot, but also to support pastors who didn't have a pastor, you see. I enjoyed that very much.

**WC:** Did you have to travel a lot?

**KMD:** Yes, from Plattsburgh to Greenwich—most of the churches were—and out to Syracuse where the head office was.

**WC:** You're still active today?

**KMD:** No, I retired December 31<sup>st</sup> more than a year ago—'07.

**WC:** What have you been doing with yourself since then?

**KMD:** Since then I have been doing spiritual direction, and I'm also moderator of the association of the nineteen churches, so I still see a lot of the same people, and I teach Sunday school and I do various things. I am going to do some courses at the college.

**WC:** Which college?

**KMD:** Adirondack. Where I did the veteran's course from October to December. That's where I met you, I guess.

**WC:** Yes. Is there anything else that you would like to touch on that maybe we forgot to mention?



**KMD:** I can't think of anything. It was interesting being "remustered" from being an SDO watchkeeper to being a vittling supply Wren because I was sent... When I think about it, there's an awful lot of waste in the military. Because I was sent from Belfast to southern England— Portsmouth. I was there for a week, I think, and then I was sent to Burfield, which was near Redding. I don't remember how long I was there, a week or a couple of weeks, and then I went to Wetherbee in Yorkshire, where I did the vittling supplies.

**WC:** Now vittling supplies...

**KMD:** Oh, that was interesting, in that the milk was always in a churn, and we kept it in a refrigerator in a churn, so we had to... The cook used to make a list of the things he wanted from supplies, and we would measure out cheese and milk and all those kinds of things, and one interesting thing that was part of that vittling thing was, here I was a Baptist, dishing out the rum. You remember that the British officers get a tot of rum every day, so that was one of my jobs, was to dish out that tot of rum, and I would put it into a big jug for the officer to take to give it out to the men. But I had to dilute the men's tot of rum, it had to be equally diluted with water, whereas the officers got it neat. I thought it was interesting, though, that here was a good Baptist, who didn't drink, having to do this job every day.

**WC:** What about smoking? I imagine that most people smoked back then.

**KMD:** I guess a lot of people did. My father gave me a package of Du Maurier cigarettes when he saw me off from London to go to Belfast. I think I smoked them or gave them away—I don't remember. I think I smoked some of them. And I never smoked again. I quite enjoyed them. I enjoyed them after a coffee at suppertime. But that was all I smoked. So, I guess I don't have any residual health effects from that.

**WC:** Well, thank you very much for your interview.

**KMD:** It's interesting to look back and think. I wish I could remember better.

**WC:** You did well. Thank you again.