Rev. Kathleen Mary Davie; nee Owen
Veteran

Megan Shuler
Interviewer

Interviewed on
January 5, 2006

MS: Where were you when the war started?
KMD: I was living in a place called Wembley, which is where the soccer cup finals are held, and one of the things that we did when the war broke out was to stand on the landing, halfway up our stairs, and look out over London. At the time that they were announcing the war had started, on September 3, 1939, there was an air raid siren that immediately went off, and, of course we were a little scared, and we looked out over London to see if we could see any action, but we couldn't, and it finished shortly after that.

MS: How exactly did you hear the war had started?
KMD: On the radio–we didn't have television then.

MS: Were you ever bombed in the area that you lived, or did you ever witness?
KMD: There were bombs around us and we used to hear them. The thing that was the most frightening really was not so much the bombs, because you usually would hear a plane come before you'd hear the bombs, but when they started these unmanned planes called doodle bugs. You'd just hear the engine suddenly start, shut off, and then you'd wait for the crash because there'd be a bomb at the end of that. So, that was a bit unnerving.

MS: Did you have any relatives or friends that went into the Army or Air Force?
KMD: My father's cousin went into the Women's Naval Service, and I think she went in after I did. I was in the Women's Naval Service. The war broke out when I had just finished the first year of high school, it was county school, and my father decided we had to have an air raid shelter. So, my doll carriage, which was quite a sizeable one–you could have put a small baby in it–became a wheelbarrow for carting rocks and so on for making the air raid shelter, which we did at the bottom of the garden. Most of my high school was during the war. So, we used to sleep in the air raid shelter on a plank about 10 inches wide–amazing, we slept pretty well. And most of our schooling was done either between the classroom or the air raid shelter. We used to take sandwiches to school with us so that if the air raid warnings stayed on too long, we would still have things to eat.

We always had all kinds of snacks. And we had most of our classes in the air raid shelter, a good deal of the time.

MS: How often would you say the air raid warning went on?
KMD: I don't know. But it just went off at different times, and we would all go to the shelters. We were so used to the routine by the time I got to leaving school, it was just one of the things we did. It was most of my high school.

MS: Did you ever work during the war period? Were you ever old enough?
KMD: No, I didn't until I went into the Wrens. And that was in, let's see, I left school in '43, it was in the fall of '44, after I had spent a year doing secretarial training. My mother thought I would be exempt from military service if I did that, so I volunteered for the Wrens, which did not please her at all. But I was seventeen-and-a-half, and I was eligible.

MS: What exactly did you do?
KMD: Mostly typing of signals. Many of them had been decoded by the coding group, and then we would type them and send them to the Admiral and various other people. It was quite an interesting job. We did shift work–working all night and then having the day off, and then working the following evening, and then the next morning and so on, and then it would be the same over again. So, we never knew, we had to get used to sleeping at all odd hours.

MS: What were your feelings among you or your family towards Americans before they entered the war?
KMD: I don't know that we really thought anything about it until we went to a cousin of my mother's in East Anglia, where part of his farm was annexed to make the [unclear]Aerodrome which was taken over by the American soldiers and fliers. So, I think my mother was a little anti-American, but I married an American so she had to get over that.

MS: What were the feelings after Pearl Harbor when the Americans joined you in war?
KMD: I don't remember any ill feelings or really any positive feelings. I think probably people were… I was only in my teens and I wasn't very politically astute. I don't think that many of my school friends were particularly up on what was happening in politics and national life–we were more concerned with what Germany was doing.

MS: How did you and your friends and family support your troops during the war?
KMD: I don't know, really. I don't recall anything other than the fact that they would send [unclear]. There was an arrangement whereby we could send packages to people, but I don't really remember any of that.

MS: What kind of information did you have about what was going on in battles and stuff during the war?
KMD: Oh, I think we had, of course we didn't have television, so–we had radio–and I remember different things being told us, that the Germans had bombed this town or that town, and what we had done in retaliation, but of course there were no pictures or anything, like now we have instant pictures of everything. I don't remember being told how many lives were being lost or anything like that. There was also a program that described how the British were putting misleading notices out by radio to Germany, so that they didn't know what damage they had done where. We had code names–I don't remember what they were, but there were code names for different places. I remember we learned a lot more about what had happened, what had been bombed, like months afterward, [unclear].

MS: Was there a lot of rationing going on?
KMD: Yes.

MS: How did that affect you?
KMD: Well, we were rationed for meat and eggs, and milk, and sugar and tea, and coffee–mostly the basics. Flour was rationed. We had ration books, and a number of coupons had to last for each month and so on, but we didn't have our tea, for instance, we didn't have our tea very strong. My father gave up sugar, and we were always having some things left over that we could hand on to other people who found it more difficult. To this day I only use about one bag of sugar a year, simply because we got used to doing that. And we had coupons for everything and it lasted for quite a while.

MS: Did you hear about the D-Day invasions from where you lived?
KMD: Yes, but not until quite a little while afterward, because it was a matter of security. I don't remember, but it seems to me that it must have been at least a week afterwards that we heard what had happened.

MS: And how did you feel then?
KMD: Well, everybody was rejoicing. Of course, the thing that had been badly fought at was the Dunkirk debacle, and we sort of… There were times when we felt threatened, and there were times when we were pleased. A lot of my friends were evacuated to country places, so that was another difficult thing for a lot of people–to have their kids go away. Some even sent them to the States. Every so often I'd meet someone who came over as an evacuee.

MS: Did they stay here for the most part when they evacuated?
KMD: Many of them did, I think. They married an American and stayed.

MS: How did you feel when you heard that the war was ending or over?
KMD: Oh we were… I was in Belfast at the time, on duty in the Castle of Belfast which had been taken over by the Navy, and we decided we had to celebrate somehow, so a group of us walked down the hill to the bottom where there was an ice cream shack, and we brought back ice creams to everybody to celebrate. That's the way we celebrated then. And then there was a big celebration in London. I think it wasn't until the next year, if I remember rightly, and there was a big celebration in London and we went. Some friends of mine that now live in Canada and I went into the city. We were young enough to not mind the crowds then, but it was a fun time. Everybody was just waving flags and just having a good time. It was bit like Times Square at New Year's. It was very busy. I don't know how we got there–probably by subway.

MS: What sorts of things did you do for fun during the war?
KMD: Oh, I don't really know. We walked quite a lot, went to a movie occasionally. I don't remember that we did anything very strange or startling. When I was in Ireland, we had a day and a half off, and we used to take a bus or a train up to different places near Belfast, so we got to know Northern Ireland. But mostly I think we walked and went to the movies and things like that.

MS: Was that any different than what you had done anyway or what you would have done?
KMD: We were located mostly in country areas, so yes. I mean we lived in London. We used to bike ride a lot when we were kids. Nowadays it seems strange that kids can't go out. We went miles, we were gone for a whole day and our parents never even thought anything of it. Now, you're sort of checking in with your parents all the time if you go out. Kids–we were very free and the war changed a lot of that. I'm sure it did here too. Our private lives are more restricted nowadays.

MS: Do you have any specific memories that you can think of about things that happened to you during the war?
KMD: One of the things that I volunteered to do was to go and do dishwashing up at the hospital. We didn't have dishwashers in those days, we didn't even have refrigerators. I was in the–well, you call it Girl Scouts–Girl Guides they call it. We used to go and work at the hospital and do all sorts of volunteer work during the war. Bicycles were very much used. You either walked or we rode places.

MS: Do you have any particularly happy memories from the time, even though it was war?
KMD: Yes. I enjoyed being in the Wrens. We used to have some good times[unclear]. But, I don't remember any specific things that we did really. It was a long time ago.

MS: When you were in Ireland–that was with the Wrens?
KMD: Yes, Northern Ireland. We weren't allowed to go over the border into southern Ireland because they were not involved in the war and, if we did, we were told we had to take off our uniforms and wear mufti. In Belfast, the problems that the Catholics and the Protestants had, even then, was quite strong. I remember I was very friendly with a Catholic girl who was my bunkmate[unclear], and I took her to the Baptist church with me, and the preacher inveighed against the Catholics in such a way that I said I would never go back to that church. So, although I'm now a Baptist minister, I would never have gone back to that church. And I went to her church with her most of the rest of the time I was in Belfast. The religion wars were still going on during the war which was really… It's never really been settled even though there's peace there now. But I loved Ireland; it was a beautiful place. If we were in the Castle, which was up on a hill, we used to be able, early in the morning if we'd been there all night, we'd look out toward the sun rising over the hills of Scotland across the Irish Sea, and we were able to see from there. That was a great memory of seeing the sun rise over Scotland from Ireland. The Irish Sea separated England from Northern Ireland, and when we first went over there, when I was first sent there, it was very, very rough. We were hanging on for dear life in order to stay on the boat, and it was a small boat, fairly, and the Irish Sea was pretty rough then. People talk about the Irish Sea being rough all the time.

MS: Why was it that you were sent to Ireland?
KMD: Because I was in the Wrens.

MS: What were they doing there exactly?
KMD: Well there had a base there. They were doing a lot of decoding of messages. Things were sent from ships in the Irish Sea, and around Britain and Northern Europe. Messages were sent and decoded, so that we knew what the Germans were doing. It was all very hush-hush, but when the things were decoded they had to go to the various people who could take any action, if there was action needed. It was very interesting. Of course, now it's all done with computers. We had teleprinters which were ways of sending messages that would be like the forerunner of the computer, I think. Sending messages from England to Northern Ireland, or from ships at sea–would come by teleprinter and telephone messages, too.

MS: When you heard about the bombing in Japan, what did you think about that?
KMD: I didn't hear about it until quite a long while afterwards. I was horrified that we would use a nuclear bomb. I think that was something that we never should have done, but, we did it. There's a lot of things we regret about the war. There's a lot of things that are still only now coming to light about that war. I saw a program on television just recently that showed some places that nobody knew

anything about at the time. I think there were ways in which the lack of communication, such as we know communication nowadays, was probably useful to the war effort, because the enemy couldn't find out an awful lot. Whereas now, I cringe sometimes when I see things on television that I think could help Al Qaeda or the insurgents in Iraq. I just wonder sometimes whether a lot of the things that we talk about, our security things and everything, whether we're being wise in publicizing as much as we do. But that's probably because I was so lacking in information during the war.

MS: After the war, what did you do?
KMD: I went into nursing after the war. The war was over in '45, in May, and then in August, and in '46, in September, I started nursing training.

MS: Why did you choose to do that?
KMD: Because I felt called to do missionary work. I applied to the hospital and was accepted, and did four years at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. Part of that time we were still evacuated. Some of the wards had been evacuated during the war and they hadn't moved back to London because there wasn't really any room. So, I got to know not only London but [unclear] which is where we evacuated to. Very interesting–looking at old cathedrals and things like that, and knowing some of the history of the Romans who had ruled England, which was early in A.D. Julius Caesar landed in England in 54 A.D. and, so, there's a rich history there. Exciting to learn about, I think.

MS: Ben has some questions. How did people keep their morale high even though there was bombing going on all the time?
KMD: I don't know, but I think the morale was exceptionally good. I really do. I can't remember any specific ways in which people did it, but of course Winston Churchill was the Prime Minister that really boosted people's morale, I think. We were so busy–involved in the war effort in different ways. People were air raid wardens, and, people were volunteering–everybody volunteered in some way to do something that would help the war effort. The threat of Germany invading Britain, I think, increased the amount of activity that people were involved with. We were at war now, but we're not at war on our own land, whereas the bombs were falling all the time. And after the doodle bugs, there were land mines that you wouldn't hear. You probably wouldn't even know that there was an air raid going on. You'd suddenly hear this big explosion. At that point was when I'd joined the Wrens and gone to Ireland, so I was out of that. But these land mines would land without anybody having any warning, and they caused a great deal of devastation. I can't begin to think what it was like for Japan to have a nuclear bomb. We just can't picture the devastation, even with the local things that are happening now, the tsunami and Katrina and Rita, and you realize that a nuclear bomb leaves so much radiation and other things that people have to contend

with, apart from the fact that so much is destroyed. Does Ben have any more questions?

MS: How do you feel about bombing against civilians in Germany by the British and Americans?
KMD: I just thought it was terrible that we were bombing and they were bombing us. But what can you do? I've never felt that we should ever retaliate against somebody, because usually what happens in war is you bomb each other to death, and then negotiate afterwards. Well, we could negotiate beforehand. I think we very often want to show our power or something and we are not so willing to go the whole mile with negotiation. I'm very anti-war. Mostly I think because I was in it. I don't know whether if I were seventeen-and-a-half now, whether I would volunteer to go to Iraq. I rather think I would not because I just don't feel that war is the answer. Maybe if I was younger I'd be… I'm more politically astute now than I was when I was seventeen. There's a lot of difficult questions that we all have to think about.

MS: How did you feel towards the Germans during the war?
KMD: I think, in general, most of us felt bad that civilians were being killed. Factories that were turning out good things for people were also being bombed because we had ideas that they were producing munitions. I think there were a lot of things happen that we think something is true, and then after we bombed it, we discover–like we did with weapons of mass destruction in Iraq–that it wasn't true. I don't really know anything about covert operations during the war, but I'm sure there were. We had a young man come from France who was British–he'd grown up in France–and his father was killed and he went underground with the French Marquis to fight against the Germans in a sort of underground way. He came and lived in Britain, lived next door to us for quite a while. He and his friends were all sort of underground. The Germans didn't even know about what was going on, and what they were doing–sabotaging a lot of Germans things. There's some wonderful stories about the Second World War that you ought to read, called <u>The Colditz Story</u>–have you heard of that? It's a paperback book. Colditz is a castle in Germany where people who were pilots who were downed in Germany during the war–people that had gone from Britain or America to bomb Germany and were downed and kept in this castle, and there were French and Poles and British people there. The way they dealt with being in prison was to try and plan escapes, and some of the escape plans are really interesting to read. It was Colditz Castle in Germany where they were housed. There were some exciting stories that were written. I think there is a video which you might be able to get.

MS: What would you do when you were in an air raid shelter if it wasn't during school, what would you do?

KMD: We used to eat and sleep, [laughs] and we used to play games, like board games–Sorry–and I don't remember many of the board games that we played there. Old Draughts we used to play, which is the same as your Checkers. We'd do that, but we read a lot my–sister and I were both readers– and we'd sit and read, talk. We had an incendiary bomb on our house, but the air raid warden saw it very quickly and put the fire out. We never even lost the house. We lost the front gate. The incendiary bomb destroyed the gate in the front yard. We were very blessed. My father was in Signal Engineer Office for London Transport, and was seventy feet below ground in an office for London Transport. If there was a bomb on the land destroying some tunnels or train tracks or anything like that, he would be the one that would have to stop and repair and make sure that the trains didn't go into the danger area. So, he had an interesting time, but it was mostly nighttime work for him. He used to write to me when I was in Ireland, and the letters used to come like a paper doily with chunks taken out of it, because of the way they used to censor everything. It was just from Britain over to Ireland, and I used to think it was crazy that they censored so much, but they did it so that the enemy would not find out what was happening. Nowadays, I don't know how they do the censoring at all because of the e-mails and everything else. It's just a mind-boggling task.

MS: How was life after the war different from life before the war?
KMD: Well, it seemed to me that even after I was doing nursing training, because we were evacuated, that in some ways things were not greatly changed even though the war was over. We were still rationed for a while. Being straightaway into the nursing training for four years–it didn't change my life a great deal.

MS: Could you just briefly describe your life after the war–when and why you moved to the United States?
KMD: I didn't move to the United States until 1960. That was partly because I had gone to India as a missionary, and was there for two years, and I went to India expecting the culture to be very different and the language to be different. When I came to the States in 1960, which was seven years after I had gone to India, I expected the language to be the same, and it isn't by a long way. It's even worse now, I don't understand half the language that you guys talk about[laughs]. And I really suffered a great deal more culture shock coming here than I did going to India, because I was prepared for it there. I had to learn to talk American, and now it's gotten to the point where I can't tell the difference–I don't know whether an expression is a British expression or whether it's an American expression. Sometimes I throw it out and let people tell me. There's a lot of expressions that are different. But even now, I go back to England to see my sister and I don't understand what she's saying. The language has changed. If you listen to Word for the Wise on National Public Radio, you begin to learn something about the different ways in which language changes. They're always

accepting different expressions as being part of our language now, that to me were just jargon. So, life has changed a great deal in fifty years. I think the world has changed a great deal. We didn't have television until 1952. My father built his own television set. I watched Wimbledon. That was the first thing I saw. I had just had an appendectomy, and I laid on the couch and watched the tennis and Wimbledon on this new TV that my father had built. That made a big difference to our lives. I still prefer the radio. I like to use my imagination when I hear stories and so on, instead of having it all presented to me in picture form.

MS: Is there anything else you can think of that you want to share?
KMD: Does Ben have any more questions?

MS: Then, I will conclude the interview. I'm Megan Shuler interviewing Rev. Kathleen Davie. It is January 5, 2006 and it is about 3:44.