

MRS. ELIZABETH FISHER

1921-1991

MEMORIES OF WWII

In the 1980's as part of a local project, a group of young people produced a weekly community news-sheet "The Pass Times" They interviewed local people about some aspect of their lives. In 1984 Francis Savage and Catherine Watters talked to Mrs Betty Fisher nee Kimmons about her early life and her time in the WRAF in WWII.

My father, Bob Kimmons, was born in Church Street in Poyntzpass. My mother whose maiden name was Anna Maria Whiteside, was born and reared in the townland of Ballinaleck.

My father was a regular soldier and had a very interesting and tough life. He served for many years in India, as did his two brothers. He served throughout the First World War and was involved in many of the great battles and events of the war. He was part of the retreat from Mons and had a very hard time in the trenches. The troops lay for days in trenches in mud and water, infested with lice and wringing wet. Unfortunately, when we were young we were not as interested as we should have been and didn't listen enough. He was lucky enough not to be seriously wounded but he was hit by

shrapnel on the ankle and this left him with a bit of a 'hop'. Despite his hardships he lived to be 79. His brother, Davy Kimmons, was wounded. Their names are in the Roll of Honour in the Church of Ireland, Poyntzpass.

I was born in Drumbanagher in one of the houses on Major Close's estate and the whole family grew up there very happily. There were no cars, no electricity, no television but we made our own fun. We played hide-and-seek in the woods, climbed trees and played tig. My father looked after the pleasure-grounds and tennis courts up at Drumbanagher Castle and he also ran the engine which made the electricity at the castle. We went to Drumbanagher School till we were 14. At that point we did the leaving certificate. The teachers were Mr and Mrs Griffith. Mr Griffith, the Principal, taught the senior school and his wife taught the juniors. There were more than 100 pupils on roll. The subjects I took in the leaving certificate were: English Grammar and Composition, geography, drawing, arithmetic, algebra and geometry.

Mr and Mrs Griffith were great teachers and very kind people and we all loved school. They gave Christmas parties, at their own expense, - parties were few and far between then. When my mother was ill -she was 44 - and we were all at Drumbanagher School, they were the most kind and concerned people you could meet. My mother wasn't expected to get better. Doctor McDermott was extremely good as was Canon Nelson, our minister. However, thankfully, she made a remarkable recovery and lived for another 25 years.

At the age of 14 I left Drumbanagher Primary School and went to Newry Technical College. It was where the Arts Centre is now, near the Town Hall. There I did a secretarial course for two years. My subjects were: book-keeping, shorthand, typing, English, geography, commerce, drawing, arithmetic and domestic economy. Job prospects at the time (1930's) were very poor and



Elizabeth (Betty) Kimmons

when I was 16 there was no job for me. So the Principal asked me if I would stay on into third year as I would have more prospects of getting a job if I stayed on, as firms who wanted a girl to do secretarial work sent to him if they wanted someone. So I went back to school. On my seventeenth birthday, the principal called me in and said to me, "You have to go over to Wray and Telford's Solicitors. They're looking for a clerk."

I had just fallen off my bike the day before and I had a limp. So I limped over to Wray and Telford's in Trevor Hill and had an interview with Mr James Telford. After the interview, as I was about to leave, Mr Telford asked me, "Is that a permanent limp you have?" I said, "No, it's only temporary. I fell off my bicycle yesterday." So he said, "Start in the morning."

So I started in Wray and Telford's the day after my seventeenth birthday and I stayed there for three years. I was an apprentice law-clerk and the pay was very poor. For the first year my pay was five shillings (25p) a week and my bus fare from Drumbanagher was three shillings and nine pence (19p) so I had to feed and clothe myself on the change! Well, the second year I didn't ask for a rise but my mother went in and asked and my pay was raised to ten shillings (50p) - a 100% rise! The third year she went in again and my pay was raised to 15 shillings (75p). The staff members in the office were all



Bob Kimmons 1881-1960

elderly with the exception of Mr William Telford who was recently qualified but he went off to join the navy. I had no young company and a solicitor's office with files and ledgers was a very unexciting place, so I decided to join one of the services myself.

The R.A.F. were known as 'The Brylcreem Boys' so I chose the R.A.F. as it seemed to me the most glamorous.

My father had a service background so there were no objections at home to me joining up.

One day I was going up Canal Street and I met a Recruiting Officer coming down the street. I said to him, "Could you give me an application form to join the Women's Royal Air Force?" and he said, "I can to be sure." So he gave me the form and I filled it in and sent it off. A couple of days later I got a notice to report for a medical in Belfast. I hadn't said anything about leaving to Wray and Telford's and I had to ask for a day off. I said a friend was getting married and I got a day off. The medical was alright and a week later I got word to report to the boat in Belfast on a certain date.

Well I really did have to tell the boss then. I was afraid to tell him, so I asked one of the older women to tell him for me, and she did. So he rang out and told me to go in. He said, "What's all this about you leaving?" I said, "Didn't your own son join the navy?" I needed him as a referee - I had to have three references. So fortunately, he was alright. I got my reference and away I went.

I cycled from Drumbanagher to Poyntzpass station and got on the train for Belfast. I spent the day with my aunt and she left me to the docks that evening. There was a crowd of others going to join-up as well. I palled-up with another girl. Her name was Iris Gordon but she was never called anything but 'Paddy'. We'd never been on a boat before so we sat up on deck all night watching the waves. In the morning we arrived in Heysham and were met there and taken to the Grand Hotel in Harrogate which had been requisitioned for the duration of the war. There we got kitted out and received some basic training and drilling.

The Grand Hotel Harrogate was a beautiful hotel with a bathroom to every bedroom. It overlooked beautiful gardens called The Valley Gardens. We spent three weeks there and then we were sent to a place called Pannal Ash College, Harrogate where we got inoculations and were given general background instruction and training. It was there we were told where we were to be posted to - where we were to serve. My friend Iris 'Paddy' Gordon and I asked if we could be posted together and we were delighted when we were told that we were both to go to Worcester to the Headquarters of 24 Group RAF.

So off we started the next day for Worcester. At every station there was a Rail Transport Officer (RTO) who kept us right. We were met at Worcester station and taken to 24 Group Headquarters, at Hindlip Hall, a large country mansion, the home of Lord and Lady Hindlip. I was there for three years and was billeted in

the house while the offices were in huts in the grounds. After three years, Lord Hindlip was invalided out of the army and needed his own home, so we were moved out. We were temporarily billeted at Credenhill a big RAF training base near Hereford.

After six months at Hereford we were posted to Halton in Buckinghamshire where we had good accommodation. Aircraft and engineering apprentices were trained there. There was also a large Queen Mary Hospital at Halton.

My work was basically secretarial and I worked for a Wing-Commander on the Air Staff. There was no flying from Headquarters. We were involved in Administration over twelve RAF stations. The Wing-Commander would go out to visit these stations and when he came back he would make reports which the secretary had to take down in shorthand and then type up. As a result, work for me came in rushes. Some days I had little to do but on other days, I was rushed off my feet.

'VE Day' happened when I was at Worcester and on that day you could do anything within reason. The officers mixed with the other ranks and it was a really memorable day. Not being an operational base we didn't have first-hand contact with the '*Brylcreem Boys*' who did the flying but some of the girls working with me had been posted to Headquarters from operational stations where they had met pilots. Some of them had pilot boyfriends who would come to visit when on leave. We knew everything that was happening but we wouldn't know about a particular operation until it had happened

On 'VJ Day' we went up to London from Halton. London was mad, really. You'd have been better out of it, the crush and the rush and the shouting and the bustle! You could have been drowned in the fountain in Trafalgar Square if you weren't careful. It was far removed from Wray and Telford's I can tell you.

At Halton we had a number of Italian prisoners-of-war in our camp. They were guarded night and day. Some of them were very artistic and they were sent to make flower-beds round our offices. We had to pass in and out through them as we were going to our officers with our typed reports. We felt very sorry for them. We thought that if these were our boys, we'd like them to be well-treated so when we were over at the NAFFI for our 10 o'clock tea or 3 o'clock tea, we'd bring them back buns or cigarettes. We weren't allowed to speak to them at all but the guards turned a blind-eye to this for they were sorry for them too.

One of them could speak a little English and one day when I gave him a bun, he said to me, "I can't give you

anything, but I could write your name for your desk." So I wrote my name on a piece of paper and gave it to him and next day he gave me the little sign. I still have it. I never knew who he was. It would have been interesting if I had known his name but unfortunately at the time everything was difficult. Had it been peace-time it would have been different. We were always busy at Halton. We worked seven days a week. I got home on leave every three months for two weeks.

I never got back to Drumbanagher for, while I was away, my father retired and the family moved to my grandfather's house in Ballinaleck. When the war ended we had to stay on to "clear up". Members of the clerical staff were very busy then.

I came home in January 1946 and registered as 'unemployed'. I could have stayed on but I thought I would come home for a while. I applied at Newry Labour Exchange for a job and was called to three interviews – one for the Income Tax Office, one for Newry Post Office and one for the Assistance Board. This Board was dealing with Old Age Pensions and Supplementary Benefits and I fancied it because I felt I would enjoy working with old people. So I went back to work in Newry again in Trevor Hill. Wray and Telford's was number 6 and the Assistance Board was number 10!

I was in the Assistance Board for three years. I had to interview all those who came in about Pensions and Supplementary Benefits. I enjoyed the interviewing best. Often I would be interviewing someone I knew and sometimes they would say, "Could I not see someone else?" but I was only assessing them. I didn't make decisions whether they got the pension or benefit.

There were 'visiting officers' who went round the country interviewing people in their own homes and making out reports about their eligibility for a particular benefit. There were a couple of cases in the Poyntzpass area which had been lying for a long time and I was asked to call with them and report. One of them was John Faloon or McAloon, an old man who lived in Ballinaleck. John had come from Donegal many years before and had no Birth Certificate. I was asked if he was over 70, I said he was over 80 never mind 70 and that he should get his pension. As a result John got the pension and to celebrate he invited my sisters Sylvia, Edie and me, to a party in his house. The party consisted of goat's milk, a loaf and butter and it was pretty rough. Then he produced a bottle of whiskey and, although we didn't really drink, sure we had to pass ourselves. It was John's way of saying, "Thank you!"