

<b>Surname:</b> Armitage	<b>First Name(s):</b> Nell	<b>Army Number:</b> W/144735	
<b>Maiden name (if applicable):</b> Smith	<b>Name used during service:</b> Smith	<b>Rank:</b> Pte	
<b>Main base:</b> London	<b>Training base:</b> Kimnel Park	<b>Enrolled at:</b> Lancaster	
<b>Platoon/Section:</b> A Troop	<b>Company/Battery:</b> 495 Battery	<b>Group/Regiment:</b> 93 <sup>rd</sup> Searchlight Regiment	<b>Command:</b> Ack Ack Command
<b>Year(s) of service:</b> 24/4/1942 to 13/4/1946	<b>Reason for discharge:</b> Services no longer required on termination of WW2	<b>Trade:</b> Driver / mechanic	
<b>Uniform Issued:</b> Dress uniform Full Battle dress Boots Gaiters Leather jerkin Fur type jacket Woollen mittens Tin hat Arm type gasmask	<b>Photo:</b> 		
<b>Description of daily tasks:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaged in the defence of London on an all female searchlight site we name the Dawn Patrol as we rarely got to bed before dawn.</li> <li>• My responsibility was maintenance of the Thornycroft. All equipment had to be ready for action at stand to. After the while, the Thornycroft was changed for a</li> </ul>		

	<p>Lister diesel generator. It was extremely difficult to start as there was no starter motor. The Lister had to be started with the starting handle. This was the procedure: I would attach a rope to the starting handle, and all the girls would hang on to it, like a tug of war. I would turn the handle as fast as possible, and, at the right moment, knock in the clutch and the girls would heave on the rope. This would happen several times until the engine roared into life. The engine had to be kept warm and so we would do this manoeuvre several times a day to ensure the Lister would start at stand to. This generator also had a nasty habit of setting on fire. A long streak of flame would shoot out from the exhaust, quite noticeable to the planes above us. I was not allowed to turn the engine off until the all clear was given.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apart from the maintenance of equipment, we were rostered to stand guard, empty and clean the latrine pans, the grease trap outside the kitchen, general cleaning of the huts, the r.t. set had to be manned 24 hours a day. The whole site had to be in 1<sup>st</sup> class order, and we would practice constantly to improve our efficiency. We became experts at using spades and picks, having a stand up wash in the pail in the ablution area. We worked together very well.</li> <li>• Our free time was a couple of hours in the afternoon.</li> <li>• A typical day: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The most important item was the maintenance of the equipment. The Thornycroft, radar and searchlight had to be in working order when stand to came at night.</li> <li>○ Rosters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 girls to empty the latrine pans. We would carry the pans to a far corner of the site, where we would dig a hole, empty the pans, wash them (pew) and return them to their resting place.</li> <li>2 girls to empty the grease trap</li> <li>1 girl always on the R.T. set</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>The huts had to be cleaned, and the whole site in general to be in good condition.  Rostered at night when no raids. 2 hours guard duty to protect the radar armed only with a police baton and whistle.</p>
<p><b>Pay book:</b></p>	<p>Not available</p>
<p><b>Memorable moments:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My life in the ATS was a series of firsts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of the first female conscripts in Britain</li> <li>One of 100 girls chosen for a secret experiment</li> <li>One of the first all female crews to man and maintain a searchlight site.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• I reported to Lancaster, where I was kitted out with dress uniform etc, had a medical, plus a series of aptitude tests/exams. To my great amazement, I was chosen, along with 99 other girls to take part in an experiment. This really shook me, as I was only just recovering from receiving the letter from the Government re conscription, something I had never envisaged.</li> <li>• 100 girls ... part of the first batch of women conscripts in Britain were chosen to be part of the experiment to operate a Searchlight site manned by women only.</li> <li>• Transferred to Kimnel Army Camp and commenced training for the experiment to operate all female searchlight sites. The secret being radar for enemy plan recognition.</li> </ul>

- Training at Kimnel Park (Wales) by male Staff Sergeants. Trained by men, treated like men from the word go. A twelve hour day, starting with PT, drill and route marches. Learning our respective jobs, plus one hour each day cleaning up the rubbish from a fire which destroyed a number of huts on the first night of our arrival..
- I was selected to be a driver mechanic, and taught how to drive and maintain an enormous WW1 three ton, Thornycroft Searchlight Truck. The engine in the cab. Generator in the front, room for a platoon of soldiers and equipment in the back and a towbar to pull the searchlight. Quite daunting.
- The days seemed never ending, but as time went by, we grew stronger and became more confident in ourselves. We were different girls from the apprehensive ones who had first arrived at Kimnel Park. For we were combat soldiers, were we not?
- After training completed we transferred to 10 sites, situated north, south, and west of London. We were engaged in the defence of London and we worked with the RAF and not the guns. At this time, we became part of 495 Battery, 93<sup>rd</sup> Searchlight Regiment.
- I was stationed at Farnham Common, and was responsible for the maintenance of the Thornycroft, which provided the power for both the radar and the searchlight. During the time I was there, a newsreel was taken of the girls at Farnham Common and shown at all cinemas in Britain for a week. There were also pictures and articles in all the papers and magazines.
- We had to do night guard duty, with only a police baton and a whistle with which to protect the radar, searchlight etc. Girls were not armed in those days.
- I also recall, quite vividly, our accommodation which was very basic. The ablutions consisted of a shallow, metal sink 5 ins deep, with 2 cold water taps and a couple of hooks on the wall. Plus one pail, which presumably was to be used for washing ourselves. Next door, the latrine was something from the dark ages. Two pans with a board with two holes suspended above. Heating was provide by an ancient black cooker in the kitchen, plus a pot belly stove in the living area, which consisted of several chairs. The R.T. set was on a small table in the corner. No sewerage or drainage. A large grease trap outside the kitchen. The sarge fell into it one night, but that is another story.
- A change came for me when the Thorneycroft was changed for a Lister diesel generator. This was completely different than the truck. Starting the truck was easy. Just press the starter button and that was it. A slight problem with the Lister, there was no starter button. It did not have sparkplugs or carburettor. I had to use a starting handle and it would only start when the engine was warm. This is what we had to do. The girls had to help me. We had a long rope attached to the starting handle, and they lined up like a tug or war. I would turn the starting handle as fast as possible, knocked the clutch in place, and the girls would pull as hard as they could. Finally it would start, and we had to do this every hour, every day, until we had several batteries fitted. The Lister also had the nasty habit of the exhaust setting on fire when we were in action. A huge tongue of flame would soot out lighting up the whole area. I was not allowed to switch off until the all clear sounded.
- I also recall; that, whatever we had to do, we gave it our best shot. We were a closely knit group and proud to have been chosen to defend our country in this way.
- I was very happy there, but unfortunately, a driver for the ration truck was needed, and I was transferred to Troop HQ, and then later to Battery HQ. I was sent to London to take a full driver mechanics course at a civilian garage. Once again, I was the only female. My co-driver was Micky Comont ... Mary Peacock, Louise and Vera Ayto were the Q girls ... Marjory Smith and Joan, a Scottish lass were drivers also ... Gerry was our very glamorous Don.R.
- This was a completely different life to being on site. Early rising, we would go to Battery HQ to pick up supplies. A large ration tin for each site. Huge bags of bed

linen and laundry. Sacks of vegetables, parcels from home. Pick up girls for sick bay or ones that were being transferred. We were the link to the world for the girls on site. We had to load the truck ourselves. Micky and I would pick up each item, swing from side to side and heave on to the truck.

- We had to do the rounds of the sites, whatever the weather. We drove through fog, one of us sitting in the mudguard and shouting instructions to the driver, even walking in front with a small torch to guide us. Arriving back at HQ we always had to unload the truck, wash out the back etc and be ready for the next day. This was also the time for the V2 and V1 rockets. Driving along we would see convoys of tanks, trucks, soldiers, as preparation for D Day was growing. The whole South of England was like an armed camp, but no one ever talked. We would wave to them as they passed by and wished them well.
- In the meantime, due to the success of the first experiment, other girls had been trained to man all female searchlights. The first all female regiment in Great Britain was formed and became the 93<sup>rd</sup> Regiment. This is listed in the Imperial War Museum.
- After VE Day I was seconded to the RASC and sent to a place called Thetford, close to Norfolk. There was a group of 8 girls and 1 sergeant. We drove 3 tonners. Ambulances, anything on wheels. We moved troops, PoWs, ration runs, picked up goods from railway yards, anything that was needed. We never knew what the next day would bring. The good thing about this move was, that for the first time ever, I drove modern 3 tonners. They were Canadian Chevys and they were beautiful to drive.
- I was demobbed from Thetford. My time in the army had been fruitful. I was confident in myself and felt I could overcome the shyness and hesitancy of the young girl who had approached my conscription with such fear.

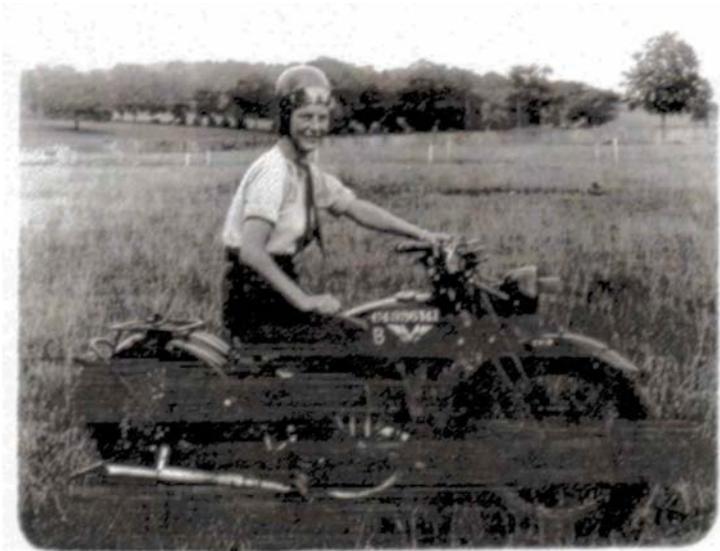
**Photos:**



Farnham Common – A Troop  
Nell Smith, standing, far right



Ready for Action – The Dawn Patrol  
Farnham Common



Gerry – September 1943



BHQ Drivers and Q girls



BHQ – Gerry and Nell, with Emily and Smoky



Joan (radar) Alice (cook) Nell (driver mechanic)

The following was information given to American Forces  
when they joined the war and travelled to Britain.

r duty under fi e.

knitting more socks than anyone  
else in Ipswich.