

Surname: Coleman	First Name(s): Ruby Ethel	Army Number: W/71145	
Maiden name (if applicable): Ireland	Name used during service: Ireland	Rank: Cpl	
Main base: Finchley, London Offley, Herts	Training base: Neville's Cross, County Durham Hatfield, Herts	Enrolled at: Beverley, East Yorkshire	
Platoon/Section: A Troop	Company/Battery: 902 Coy H.Q.	Group/Regiment: Royal Army Service Corps 93 rd Searchlight Regt	Command: Ack Ack Command
Year(s) of service: 1940 to 1945	Reason for discharge: End of hostilities	Trade: Cook Searchlight Operator	
Uniform Issued: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 greatcoat 1 Battledress (on duty only) 1 jacket/1 skirt (off duty wear) Combat pullover or jerkin 1 steel helmet 1 rubber cape 1 cap + badge 1 respirator 1 webbing haversack 1 pair boots (on duty) 1 pair shoes (off duty) 3 pairs khaki stockings 3 vests 3 white cotton briefs 3 silk khaki knickers (passion killers!) 2 pairs winceyette blue-striped pyjamas 3 shirts 2 ties 1 housewife 1 pack shoe cleaning brushes 1 brass placket button cleaner 1 set cutler 1 enamel mug 1 pack field dressings 1 A.B.64 1 black kit-bag(for stage and travelling) <p>Side caps were sold, generally in the NAAFI, but were not encouraged to be worn in most units</p>		Photo: 	

Description of daily tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We did a rota duty of guard duty throughout the night “armed” with a pickaxe handle with which to defend ourselves. We were not allowed firearms. Although at Offley one of the Pub owners very kindly lent us his Alsatian dog to walk around the site with.
Pay book:	<p>Not available</p>
Memorable moments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was 20 years old when the War first began, born and bred in North-East Yorkshire. I, along with everyone else had to register for ‘War work’ the following year when I was 21. • Drafted into the A.T.S. I was sent in due course to Neville’s Cross, County Durham. This was a huge Girls College that the Government had requisitioned just outside of Durham City. I did my initial Army training there, drill (square bashing) P.T., route marching etc for 6 weeks. I was then assessed and asked (but not really given any option) as to what or where I was to be applied. I wanted to be a driver, but alas, as I had been employed as a housekeeper to the Chief Constable of Police and his wife at his home in Beverley East Yorkshire in civilian life, that sealed my fate. I was given a further 6 weeks instruction course in cookery and butchering and food store management. I passed the course and came out as a full Corporal! • I was duly given a Train Travelling Warrant to take me to Kings Cross Station, London and from there by underground to East Finchley, N. London. Much to my consternation, being country bred and never having left home before that! However, I eventually found my ultimate destination, which was 444 The High Road, Finchley. A T.A. Barracks of 902 Coy, Royal Army Service Corps. I was given sole charge of the Cookhouse which catered for about 150 personnel each day. • After about 9 months there, they were all sent abroad and it became a ‘Transit’ or ‘Holding’ Barracks. I didn’t like the new set-up as I was constantly moved from Officers’ Mess to Sgts’ Mess or vice versa, so I applied for and was granted permission to transfer to the Royal Artillery. This was the 93rd Searchlight Rgt about which very little was known! • The 93rd Searchlight Regiment, R.A. was formed in the latter half of 1942. Until then there had been a lot of talk and controversy among the hierarchy at the War Office about the suitability of women (alone) taking on the job of operating a Searchlight Site. Which until then had always been handled by men, but due to the manpower situation at that time, and the Ack Ack Commander Sir Frederick Pile’s faith in women, they in their wisdom and with ‘backing’ from Winston Churchill decided to give it a go! So, the 93rd Regiment was created. That “monstrous” regiment of women, as we were always known. • I was sent to Roe Hill House, Hatfield, Herts., the B.H.G. of 301 Battery. So began further training. I was eventually sent out on site to the village of Offley, Herts to A Troop H.Q. Each Battery had 4 troops and each troop had 5 sites, plus an H.Q. site which was also operational and completely self-contained. Operated by a full Sergeant, 2 Cpls, operational staff, medical orderly, cookhouse, Office, our Despatch Rider, R.T. Operator etc. Each site had a static 150 cm Searchlight Projector – H.Q. had a 90 cm as well. Spotter, tracker, projector for homing beacon to aid damaged planes back to their base. • We learnt to keep the site neat and tidy, keep the equipment clean and serviceable and in good working order. We worked and played together and laughed and cried together and got on with the job as well as the men had ever done.

- Two male staff from the R.E.M.E. came once weekly to 'service' all the equipment.
- Where we had a 90 cm projector situated also on site, it was sometimes used to illuminate bomb damage. When necessary a wagon driver from H.Q. at Hatfield generally a Cpl and driver would haul the light up on to the lorry. Especially when the V2 Rockets and 'doodle bugs' were making direct hits on blocks of flats etc. It would be used for lighting up the terrible scenes to assist the civilian rescue squad to find the injured and dead.
- All our sites were situated around the Greater London outer area and our main function was to light up the enemy aircraft to help the gunners in adjacent sites to shoot them down before they penetrated into the heart of the City. Unfortunately, 'Jerry' would sometimes aim and shoot down the Searchlight Beam to put it out of action. In which case you were very unfortunate if caught in the "flack"!!
- We girls always made the sites "home from home" as far as possible; (other than putting curtains up in the huts!!) We tended every empty piece of soil round the huts with pansies, forget-me-knots etc. It was a picture in the Spring and Summer. Two of us started a herb and salad garden and everybody pitched in with plants from home. My Dad made me a lovely wooden sign painted in Gold "Shangri-La".
- When Princess Mary (Princess Royal) paid us a visit she remarked at our enterprise.
- We also had cats. One girl brought two kittens back off leave, because she was scared of the field mice that invaded the huts. Very soon we had four full grown cats, as we fed them outside the cookhouse every day I noticed we had a tabby feral cat looking on, all skin and bone. He wouldn't let you near him, but I eventually tamed him and called him J. Wellington Wimpy after the Daily Mirror Cartoon Character who scrounged food. He was a real character and slept on my bed eventually, and would actually walk round the village with me. I still wonder what happened to the cats when we eventually left the site. Did the villagers feed them? I can't remember what provision was made for them.
- We always found the Offley villagers very kindly disposed to us and very welcoming into their homes. We made good friends and also sadly 'lost' good friends.
- Another abiding memory – every time now whenever I hear Glen Millar's Moonlight Serenade playing on the Radio or Discs I am transported back to Offley Village Hall and the Village Dances there. They were good king people there, they cared for us and looked after us.
- Also, the Salvation Army, they had a Hostel outside Kings Cross Station – whilst I was waiting for my train, I could go in there and have a mug of tea and a slice of dripping toast late at night. Two or three hours sleep if I needed it they would then wake me – one of the staff would see me safely on to the train, which was the Night Mail Train leaving at 11 pm. They also brought their Red Shield Vans right on to our site once a week, with hair nets, combs, talc etc. Things we wouldn't get otherwise. They were marvellous and could always get through to us in bad weather and fog even when our own ration wagon couldn't (or wouldn't)!!
- It was an interesting time for all of us. We learnt how to use radio intercoms, morse code, phonetic alphabet, aircraft recognition; both sight and sound. The radar (SLC) came along – very top secret – in its infancy and we had to understand that as well. The Germans tried to "jam" this with yards of "black tape winda" strewn all over the fields. Sometimes it shut us down for the night until we called the R.E.M.E. boys in.
- As you can imagine we were always more than ready when our turn for seven days leave came up for going home. This was very often a very hazardous journey for me on the train from London to Hull. We were often taken off the train at Doncaster because the lines were being torn up with planes "straffing" the train.

I would eventually arrive in Hull City Station to find it under heavy bombardment and rather than wait for a local train to take me the last 28 miles in land to home I would start off to walk (hitch hiking) and it was surprising how many people would go out of their way to give you a lift, especially as you were a girl in uniform. There was a real sense of decency and comradeship amongst all people then.

- There are so many good memories locked away, especially the kindness of the East End people whilst I was in Chase Farm Hospital with an abscess in my ear. When they visited their own bomb accident family victims they would shower me with fruit and biscuits etc. Goodness only knows how and where they got it from and never accepted any money from me, they virtually adopted me. But above all the one remaining memory for me was the noise, bombs dropping, guns always hammering away – planes throbbing through the skies. Noise and confusion – also the dogs – for miles around barking all night long – horses stampeding round the fields. Even the birds would rise up from the hedgerows twittering and crashing about from the noise and glaring flashes of light. I suppose they wondered where the night had suddenly disappeared to.
- I often feel now; that we shouldn't have cheered then – when the guns brought a plane down in flames. They were somebody else's next of kin. Boys in the planes who would never go home. We didn't think of that then but I do now. I am sure that God did not put us on this earth to kill each other! War is not glorious. Whoever wins there are no real victors, only victims.
- It was a good life in one way, we were disciplined but we all worked as a team and looked out for each other. After the War, General Sir Frederick Pile's book about the Ack Ack in Wartime gave quite a piece about the Searchlight girls. To my knowledge that is about the only proof that the 93rd Regt ever existed. No-one knew about us then and generally speaking as well as being the forgotten army, we were the "Didn't know you existed female army".

Photos:



Battery H.Q., Roehill House, Hatfield, Herts

When first we came to searchlights
We thought, oh! What a curse
But then we'd joined the army
For better or for worse
We slowly got accustomed
To Listers, and the men –
Some even got a liking
For turning in at ten!
We started understanding
To think of others too
And pulled our weight together
Not me, but me and you.

	<p>We had our fun and laughter We also had our tears But it is something to remember Just now, in later years The regiment is broken The time has come to part And yet, in one small corner Of everybody's heart We are saying it together It surely must be heard We are, what we were Members of the monstrous 93rd.</p>
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