

CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

ERIC BRUNT ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW CONTROL NUMBER: 20230415-108

INTERVIEWEE: Jessica “Jessie” Swail

INTERVIEWER: Eric Brunt

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 7 October 2022

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: West Vancouver, BC

PLATFORM OF INTERVIEW: Video camera

REVEIWED BY: A. Cuthbert

Transcription of Interview Number 20230415-108

West Vancouver, BC

Interviewed 7 October 2022

Eric Brunt (00:02):

So the first thing I always ask is, what's your full name?

Jessie Swail (00:07):

My full name is Jesse Rankin with an E on the end. Miller, M-A-L-L-A-R. Swail is my married name. S-W-A-I-L. And

Eric Brunt (00:19):

What was your maiden name?

Jessie Swail (00:20):

Miller. M-I-L-L-A-R.

Eric Brunt (00:23):

Got it.

Jessie Swail (00:24):

I see.

Eric Brunt (00:24):

And what day were you born?

Jessie Swail (00:26):

I was born 1924, which makes me 98 almost.

Eric Brunt (00:33):

When is your birthday?

Jessie Swail (00:36):

My birthday will be on October the 19th.

Eric Brunt (00:39):

Wow. So it's pretty close.

Jessie Swail (00:41):

It is, yes.

Eric Brunt (00:42):

Yeah. Do you have anything planned for your birthday?

Jessie Swail (00:45):

Beg pardon?

Eric Brunt (00:46):

Do you have anything planned for your birthday?

Jessie Swail (00:48):

Yes. Oh yes. Big plans.

Eric Brunt (00:50):

Really.

Jessie Swail (00:55):

We'll have a party.

Eric Brunt (00:56):

Is that right? Yeah. That's awesome. And you're almost 98 years old, do you feel 98?

Jessie Swail (01:03):

I am. I will be on the 19th, yes.

Eric Brunt (01:07):

And do you feel 98 or do you

Jessie Swail (01:09):

Feel Oh, good heavens. No, I don't feel anything like 98. No. Age is only a number.

Eric Brunt (01:15):

Yeah, for sure.

Jessie Swail (01:16):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:17):

And where were you born, Jesse?

Jessie Swail (01:19):

I was born in Bannockburn, Scotland.

Eric Brunt (01:23):

Wow. And when did you come to Canada?

Jessie Swail (01:24):

I came to Canada when I was three years old with my family. Yeah. So I'm an immigrant.

Eric Brunt (01:33):

Right, exactly. And where did your family settle?

Jessie Swail (01:37):

They've settled in a town named Shaw, Alberta, 25 miles east of Banff. Wow.

Eric Brunt (01:43):

Far from

Jessie Swail (01:44):

Chicago, cement plant town.

Eric Brunt (01:48):

And what was it like growing up there?

Jessie Swail (01:50):

It was cozy. I always called it cozy because there were only 450 people in the town knew. Everybody felt entirely safe and everybody looked after everybody. It was very cozy and safe.

Eric Brunt (02:07):

What did your dad do for work?

Jessie Swail (02:10):

What

Eric Brunt (02:11):

Did your father do for work?

Jessie Swail (02:12):

He worked in that cement plant. Everybody did, worked in that town.

Eric Brunt (02:19):

I looked up Shaw on Google and the cement plant's still there.

Jessie Swail (02:23):

It's still there. Oh, yes, it is.

Eric Brunt (02:25):

I was kind of surprised.

Jessie Swail (02:27):

Still there.

Eric Brunt (02:29):

It's huge. It's like you see the mountains and then there's that massive cement plant.

Jessie Swail (02:32):

It grew so large that it overtook the village. It bulldozes the village. I was showing my daughter a beautiful picture of the hotel that used to be there. It was all bulldozed down.

Eric Brunt (02:46):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (02:46):

By the growth of the Canada Cement Company.

Eric Brunt (02:50):

Yeah,

Jessie Swail (02:50):

Yeah. Too bad.

Eric Brunt (02:52):

Crazy in that town. What was the background of most people? Were they mostly Germans? Mostly Anglo-Saxon.

Jessie Swail (03:04):

Great number of Ukrainians. Yeah. I would say apart from the Britts, the majority of people were Ukrainian. That was true of Alberta. Northern Alberta was full of Ukrainian people. That's where Christopher Freeland comes from. Just north of Edmonton. All Ukrainian. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (03:29):

My grandmother was Ukrainian.

Jessie Swail (03:31):

Was she?

Eric Brunt (03:31):

Yeah. The one that married my grandpa who was in the Air Force.

Jessie Swail (03:34):

Is that right?

Eric Brunt (03:35):

Yeah. But she was from Saskatchewan.

Jessie Swail (03:38):

From Saskatchewan.

Eric Brunt (03:39):

Lots of Ukrainians there.

Jessie Swail (03:41):

Well, the whole northern part of the province is a lot of Ukrainian people.

Eric Brunt (03:46):

Yeah. Was there just one school that everyone went to?

Jessie Swail (03:51):

Oh yes. Just one school and it only, we had two teachers who were man and wife. He was the principal, of course. And then it only went to grade nine. And then after that I had to go to high school. I did go to high school in Banff. I didn't have to. I was very lucky to be able to do that. Really?

Eric Brunt (04:20):

How far of a trip was it to Banff?

Jessie Swail (04:22):

25 miles. But I went and boarded with friends of my family.

Eric Brunt (04:29):

Yeah, it's unique because most of the veterans I talked to, they stopped after grade eight.

Jessie Swail (04:34):

They did eight.

Eric Brunt (04:35):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (04:36):

Yeah. My siblings all had grade nine, but I was lucky. Along came the time that the company was forced into allowing, paying our tuition at another place so we could go on with our education. Yeah,

Eric Brunt (04:55):

Amazing.

Jessie Swail (04:55):

So I was lucky.

Eric Brunt (04:57):

And what was Banff like at the time?

Jessie Swail (04:59):

Banff?

Eric Brunt (04:59):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (04:59):

2,500 people. It was cozy as well. Oh. It was a wonderful place for me. I thought I hadn't gone to heaven, really. I had a great time in high school there, and then I joined the WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service) from high school.

Eric Brunt (05:16):

Wow. Was Banff the tourist destination that it is today? Or had that not quite been established yet?

Jessie Swail (05:24):

What's that?

Eric Brunt (05:25):

Was Banff, the tourist destination that it is today, or was it not quite so touristy at that time?

Jessie Swail (05:33):

Well, Banff was a pretty small town. Had one school, half of lower grades and half of the higher grades. That was it. Tourists? Yeah. It was a very small town.

Eric Brunt (05:52):

Were there tourists that would come to Banff at that time? Like tourists taking photos and

Jessie Swail (06:00):

Yes. And then most of them were from Hollywood.

Eric Brunt (06:03):

Really?

Jessie Swail (06:04):

Seriously, in the summer, Banff was full of people like Bing Crosby and all those women. I can't even remember the names now.

Eric Brunt (06:16):

Bette Davis,

Jessie Swail (06:18):

They all came to Banff. Nobody paid any attention to them because there were so many of them. And it didn't mean anything to us that they were Hollywood stars, but they all came there and to Jasper.

Eric Brunt (06:35):

Right?

Jessie Swail (06:36):

Yep.

Eric Brunt (06:37):

So you stayed with some friends while you were going to school?

Jessie Swail (06:40):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (06:41):

Okay. Interesting.

Jessie Swail (06:42):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (06:43):

And did you enjoy school? Did you enjoy school?

Jessie Swail (06:50):

Did I enjoy school? I loved school. I just loved school. Yeah. I still do. I'd still go to school if I could. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (07:03):

I think it's great to always try and be learning something.

Jessie Swail (07:06):

Yeah. I love school, loved university. Love everything about education. The more the better.

Eric Brunt (07:13):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (07:14):

It's the answer to our problems is education.

Eric Brunt (07:17):

I completely agree.

Jessie Swail (07:18):

Yeah. The

Eric Brunt (07:19):

More education, the less there are other issues.

Jessie Swail (07:22):

Right?

Eric Brunt (07:23):

Totally. Do you remember when you started hearing about the war? Would that have been in high school?

Jessie Swail (07:23):

It was. The boys all started leaving. That would be 19. What would it be? 44, 39

(07:43):

Started, let's see, 1939, the wars started, and I had just started high school in September of 39. And I remember my oldest sister coming with her boyfriend at the time to say that he was joining the Air Force. The war had started, and he was joining the Air Force, and I remember that. And I

was just starting high school. And while I was in grade 12, a woman in a WRNS uniform looking very beautiful. She is from Calgary, you may have interviewed, her name is Betty, it was Betty McIntosh, and that was her married name. But anyhow, she came to our school when I was in grade 12 in her uniform. And I decided that's for me. And I went down to Calgary and joined the WRNS.

Eric Brunt (08:47):

By yourself?

Jessie Swail (08:48):

No, three of my school friends went with me, and two of them got in. So three of us went.

Eric Brunt (08:56):

What happened to the other one?

Jessie Swail (08:57):

Well, one was too young, and the other one had a heart condition from a rheumatic fever bowed in her childhood.

Eric Brunt (09:08):

And this was in 1944 that you joined?

Jessie Swail (09:14):

Yes, it was. I joined in April of 44.

Eric Brunt (09:17):

Incredible.

Jessie Swail (09:18):

So I must have finished high school in 43. Yeah, I did. And I was waiting to get in, and while I was waiting to get in, I was working in the lab at that cement plant waiting to get into the rents. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (09:36):

You worked in the cement plant?

Jessie Swail (09:38):

Yes, in the lab. Taking samples of the product as it went through all the different processes.

Eric Brunt (09:45):

Wow. Interesting.

Jessie Swail (09:46):

So I know all about making cement. If you want to interview me about that,

Eric Brunt (09:51):

That'll be, the next project will be about cement, maybe not as interesting.

Jessie Swail (09:56):

Right.

Eric Brunt (09:58):

Did your sister join before?

Jessie Swail (10:00):

Hmm?

Eric Brunt (10:01):

Did your sister Helen join before you?

Jessie Swail (10:03):

No, she joined after she joined after I did. She thought, oh, that's a good idea. She was at the present at that time working in a Safeway store in Calgary.

Eric Brunt (10:17):

Wow. They had Safeway back then.

Jessie Swail (10:20):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (10:20):

I didn't realize it was that old of a company.

Jessie Swail (10:23):

Yeah. So she decided to join as well.

Eric Brunt (10:26):

So you went to Calgary, you joined, and then did you have to wait a bit before you were sent for training?

Jessie Swail (10:32):

Yes, I did. Because when we enlisted, they asked us, what do you want to do? And they had a list of things you could do. You could be a cook, you could be a sick bay attendant, you could be this, this, this. And then they said, A writer. And I thought, well, that's me. Even in high school, I was writing articles, and I figured, well, that's for me. I'm a writer. I figured I'd be a foreign correspondent. I got into the S and discovered a writer is a clerk. They have three classes of writers, and one is a ship's writer, captain's writer, and a general duties writer. And we were called goddamn writers because we were GD writers. So I was a goddamn writer. It's what I was. And that was fine. I worked in the records office, I knew where every seaman was. I had his records, and my colleagues would come in and mention a name, and they would say, steer Clearing or Steer Clear. And that meant, is he married or is he single?

Eric Brunt (11:50):

You had a very valuable

Jessie Swail (11:52):

Position and had the record. So I knew yes,

Eric Brunt (11:56):

Because I'm sure

Jessie Swail (11:56):

I say Steer clear dear. Yes. Stay clear.

Eric Brunt (12:00):

I'm sure they'd say one thing, but the record says something else.

Jessie Swail (12:03):

Otherwise it was clear sailing. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (12:06):

Wow. That's so funny. And so where did you do your basic training?

Jessie Swail (12:11):

I did my basic training in Galt, Ontario. And we had this, what was she? She was a captain, actually. Isabelle McNeil was her name, and she was a tough one. And she used to get us all out on the Parade Square and say, pick it up. Matilda Clap, clap, clap. Yes. She became very well known. And the place where we did our basic training had been a woman's prison. It was quite large. Lovely big brick buildings. I didn't know that many female fi salons in Canada

Eric Brunt (12:59):

At that time. Right?

Jessie Swail (13:00):

Yeah. Anyhow, that's where we did our basic training Galt, Ontario.

Eric Brunt (13:07):

I think that's where all the Wrens went was, wasn't it? I think that all the Wrens went to Galt to start off

Jessie Swail (13:14):

All of them.

Eric Brunt (13:14):

And then they were sent far and away.

Jessie Swail (13:16):

That's right. Yeah. From Galt. And that's an interesting story because in the WRNS in the Navy, a communication is called a signal. A telegram is called a signal. And this signal came from HMCS Protector on Cape Breton Island saying they needed 13 writers. So 13 of us were shipped down there. We get there, and the petty officer in charge of the quarter deck said, "I asked for one writer, I get 13. What am I going to do with all you dames?" He said. So we were all lined up on the quarter deck, and he was trying to find jobs for us to do. It was ridiculous.

Eric Brunt (14:10):

What was the job that he gave you?

Jessie Swail (14:12):

Well, I was at the very end of the line, and I stood there deliberately. And as he went along, my friend Charlotte Bambi, we called her. She was first, and he said, what do you do? What do you do? And she said, I'm a typist. How many words can you type 90 Good. And he gave her this rotten job where she said, I typewriter all day long, and I could see what was happening going along. So I was the last one. And he said, and what do you do? And I said, nothing really. And he said, he looked at me and I looked at him, knew he was a wag. I've got a picture of him in there. I saw today when Megan was bringing him out, he said, take this folder, put it under your arm, and go down to the dockyards and skull around. You know what skull means in the Navy? Waste time to skull me. You could get run for sculling. When I say run, it means you're charged. And you could get charged for sculling being idle and sculling around. He said, take this folder, put it on your arm. Go down the dockyard and scull around. So do you know what I did that? And many, many, many years later, when they tested my ears, they said, what big noises did you listen to? And I got a pension because of that, from sculling around in the Dockyards.

Eric Brunt (15:54):

Wow. That's hilarious.

Jessie Swail (15:57):

My hearing was affected.

Eric Brunt (15:59):

Yeah. That's not funny. But the fact that they made you just walk around and do nothing.

Jessie Swail (16:02):

That's right.

Eric Brunt (16:04):

How long were you doing that for? Until they finally came to a job.

Jessie Swail (16:06):

Oh, a very, very short time. And then I got what I consider the best job in the whole outfit. I was put into the, what was it called? I can't remember what it was called, but I was in charge of all the supplies, paper, pens, ink, erasers, all those things that had to do with writing. I was in charge of handing them out to people as they needed them. I'd forgotten what that job was called, but I loved it. And I wasn't there very long before I was put into the records office. And that's where I kept track of every seaman who went out of any ship that came into Sydney. And more ships came into Sydney than even into Halifax. That's a fact. 150 Corvettes were manufactured in Sainte-Hyacinthe, Quebec. And they all sealed in and out of Sydney, 150 of them. And they were all decommissioned in that harbor at the end of the war and sent back up to St. Lawrence. To Sainte-Hyacinthe.

Eric Brunt (17:25):

Scuttled.

Jessie Swail (17:26) :

Yep. Yep. 150 Corvettes.

Eric Brunt (17:29):

Crazy. It's amazing.

Jessie Swail (17:31):

I have a picture somewhere of them all in Sydney Harbor with all their decommissioning flags on.

Eric Brunt (17:38):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (17:39):

Yeah. 150 of them.

Eric Brunt (17:42):

It's incredible how big Canada's navy got. Canada's Navy started so small, and by the end of the war, I think it was like the third or the

Jessie Swail (17:51):

Fourth

Eric Brunt (17:51):

Largest

Jessie Swail (17:52):

World. That's right. Oh, yeah. We had Corvettes, frigates, and destroyers, and now they're all called frigates. And I was on HMCS Calgary, which is in my terminology, is a destroyer. It's a battleship, and it's called a frigate. And I said to the captain, this is not a frigate, this is a battleship, it's a cruiser. And he said, all ships in the Canadian Navy are now called frigates. And I said, why? And he said, because it's not an aggressive name. And destroyer and battleship are very aggressive names, so they're all called frigates.

Eric Brunt (18:40):

Yeah. If you say, oh, here's the destroyer in the harbor, it might get people worried, but

Jessie Swail (18:45):

Right.

Eric Brunt (18:46):

Forget. Yeah, you're right. More neutral sounding.

Jessie Swail (18:49):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (18:50):

So your brother was in the Navy?

Jessie Swail (18:52):

My brother was in the Navy.

Eric Brunt (18:54):

Did you ever get to see him during the war?

Jessie Swail (18:56):

Yes, I did. My brother had a terrible career in the Navy. He was torpedoed off three ships, the ROIs, the San Quois and the Ottawa. The first one was the Ottawa, and he ended up with what they called in those days, shell shock. So he was in what they call the hospital in the Navy,

Eric Brunt (19:29):

The rehabilitation.

Jessie Swail (19:30):

They had a name for it. He was at the hospital in Halifax. And when they discharged him from hospital, he came up to Sydney to see me. And I had a boyfriend who happened to be in charge of the supply department down on the dockyard. So he gave him a room and lots of food, and he stayed and visited with me in Sydney.

Eric Brunt (19:56):

And how was he when he came to visit you? Was he okay?

Jessie Swail (19:59):

He was fine by then, I would say. Yeah. But he'd had a bad, bad experience. The Navy hated every, he hated the Navy. He had had such a bad experience three times in boiling oil in the water, waiting to be rescued. You had a terrible time in the Navy. Lots of people did.

Eric Brunt (20:28):

I don't know anybody who has survived three. I don't know anybody that survived three sinkings like your brother,

Jessie Swail (20:35):

A friend of mine, a friend of mine who stayed in the permanent Navy and was an officer. He said no captain would ever have him on board his ship.

Eric Brunt (20:47):

Bad luck.

Jessie Swail (20:47):

Bad luck.

Eric Brunt (20:49):

What was his name? Your brother?

Jessie Swail (20:51):

Jim James.

Eric Brunt (20:54):

Interesting. Wow.

Jessie Swail (20:57):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (20:57):

Well, at least he survived.

Jessie Swail (21:00):

Yes, he survived. He didn't survive very long, though. He was killed in a freak automobile accident when he was 29 years old. And my friend in the Navy said he was dark crossed. He was dark crossed.

Eric Brunt (21:18):

Too many bad incidents.

Jessie Swail (21:19):

Didn't survive. No.

Eric Brunt (21:21):

Yeah. So you're back. Let's go back to your job. So you're in the records department and you're keeping track of all the men coming in and going out.

Jessie Swail (21:35):

Right.

Eric Brunt (21:37):

And what happens? What happens when a ship sinks?

Jessie Swail (21:41):

When a ship sinks?

Eric Brunt (21:42):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (21:44):

Well, nothing really. I remember the story of the She Winni again, that I wrote about. We'd had a dance that night, the rents had, and the soldiers would come off whatever ship was in the harbor and dance with us. And the men from the Sherwin, again, came up and danced in our rec hall with us. And then we had this big thing all over the place called loose lips sink ships. So they weren't to say a word about the fact that they were shipping out at midnight, but we all knew all they were shipping out at midnight. And what was the question? I got off on this tangent.

Eric Brunt (22:30):

Okay. Keep telling this story. Tell me about the story about the shenanigan sinking.

Jessie Swail (22:34):

Well, you see, we were dancing with those guys, and they were both not to tell us that they were shipping out, but we all knew, and they did apparently ship out that night. And when they would ship out, their records would go with them on board, and I would have written them up to date, and they would go on board. And of course, the ship never came back. They were escorting the ferry from North Sydney to Porta Basque. They got to porta Basque that was known, but they never got back. It wasn't known until a U-boat was captured and hauled into Sydney Harbor. And the captain's log in the captain's log, he had written that they had destroyed the H-M-C-S-C Winni again, and all hands had gone down. And so until then, we didn't know what had happened to the sch shenanigan. It was a terrible time around the base. You couldn't talk about it. You weren't allowed to. We had blackouts at night because there were U-boats in the Cabot Strait and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and we had blackouts and everything. Those U-boats were lurking around all the time.

Eric Brunt (24:01):

That must've been quite the site. When the came into Sydney,

Jessie Swail (24:06):

That one was pulled in, we weren't allowed to keep a diary or anything of the sort. We could not write down the name of a ship or a sailor or anything. We weren't allowed to a loose lips sink ship. So

Eric Brunt (24:23):

That was the motto. Yeah.

Jessie Swail (24:25):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (24:26):

So once the Shawinigan went out, you didn't have the records anymore?

Jessie Swail (24:32):

No, they go on board.

Eric Brunt (24:34):

So the records are in the bottom of the ocean right now.

Jessie Swail (24:37):

That's where they are,

Eric Brunt (24:39):

Yeah,

Jessie Swail (24:41):

Yeah, yeah. The records. I would bring them up to date and they'd go out. They always stayed where the sailor was.

Eric Brunt (24:49):

Got it.

Jessie Swail (24:50):

If they were on shore, they were in my vials.

Eric Brunt (24:53):

I understand.

Jessie Swail (24:54):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (24:56):

I was curious because I interviewed a WD and she worked in a records department

Jessie Swail (25:02):

Where?

Eric Brunt (25:03):

In London.

Jessie Swail (25:04):

Oh, really?

Eric Brunt (25:05):

And what her job was, was every time an airman died, she had to pull his record and get it ready for somebody to write the family a letter. But her job was pulling those records, and she said it was very emotionally taxing because all day you're pulling files of people who are no longer there.

Jessie Swail (25:28):

Yeah. I was never a part of that process.

Eric Brunt (25:33):

No,

Jessie Swail (25:34):

That's a different one. No, I wasn't. No.

Eric Brunt (25:36):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (25:37):

Interesting. I know it had to be done. But at the end of the war, those 150 Corvettes were decommissioned in Sydney Harbor, and that's 150 men on 150 ships. How many men is that?

Eric Brunt (25:52):

A lot.

Jessie Swail (25:54):

I had to bring all those records up to date and send them out to wherever those sailors were discharged all across Canada. So every day I would have piles of records as hired that I had brought up to date and waiting to be shipped out. And somebody says you need an assistant. So guess who my assistant was, was the woman who had appeared in BFF high school in this nty uniform and recruiting. The reason why I joined the Rand in the first place, she ended up as my assistant in Sydney, and we were bringing all these records up to date and sending them out across the country. And as a result, I didn't get out of the vans until the middle of 19. When did the 46? Wow. June, 1946, because then I had to go up to Ottawa and do the same thing there.

Eric Brunt (27:03):

Oh, really?

Jessie Swail (27:04):

Yeah. So I wrote up a lot of service certificates during that time.

Eric Brunt (27:11):

Oh my gosh. Was it typing or was it

Jessie Swail (27:15):

Actually writing?

Eric Brunt (27:15):

No,

Jessie Swail (27:15):

All handwritten.

Eric Brunt (27:17):

All my gosh. Your poor hand.

Jessie Swail (27:18):

Yeah, all handwritten. Yep. Everything was handwritten.

Eric Brunt (27:23):

There was no typing involved with that.

Jessie Swail (27:25):

Well, I'm trying to remember what the typist typed, because we wrote everything on the service certificates, and everything was all written by hand.

Eric Brunt (27:33):

Yeah. So why were you sent to Ottawa eventually? Like why?

Jessie Swail (27:39):

To do the same thing, To write up the service certificates, as they call, of the people who were working in Ottawa. So I figure I was about the last person out of the Navy.

Eric Brunt (27:57):

You might've been.

Jessie Swail (27:59):

I think so.

Eric Brunt (28:01):

That's such a full circle moment. That woman who came into the high school, being the woman that was your assistant,

Jessie Swail (28:07):

Isn't that amazing?

Eric Brunt (28:08):

What a crazy coincidence.

Jessie Swail (28:09):

Isn't that amazing?

Eric Brunt (28:11):

Amazing.

Jessie Swail (28:12):

I thought so too.

Eric Brunt (28:13):

What was her name? Do you

Jessie Swail (28:14):

Remember Betty Macintosh?

Eric Brunt (28:15):

Did you tell her, Hey, you're the woman I remember. Did you tell her that you remembered her from Banff?

Jessie Swail (28:21):

Of course I did. Yes. And she remembered being there and everything. Yes.

Eric Brunt (28:25):

Crazy.

Jessie Swail (28:26):

Yeah. She was from Calgary originally.

Eric Brunt (28:29):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (28:29):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (28:30):

Interesting.

Jessie Swail (28:30):

And Betty Macintosh, that was her married name. So her name

Eric Brunt (28:36):

Was already

Jessie Swail (28:37):

Then never changed. I'm sure she's not alive any longer. She was older than I by quite a bit.

Eric Brunt (28:43):

Probably not. Yeah.

Jessie Swail (28:44):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (28:45):

So did you also have to do the papers for the rents, or did you just did the men

Jessie Swail (28:53):

Am trying to remember who did the papers for the WRNS.

Eric Brunt (28:59):

Not you.

Jessie Swail (29:01):

We didn't.

Eric Brunt (29:02):

No,

Jessie Swail (29:03):

We didn't. Who did them? You know, I can't remember who did them.

Eric Brunt (29:09):

That's okay. No worries.

Jessie Swail (29:12):

Because we were on what was called the Quarter Deck, and all around the quarter deck were offices, and our office was here, and then there was the captain's office, and then there were the writers, ships, ships, writers were accountants all in the middle. Where were our records kept. See, I never saw my own record until I was discharged.

Eric Brunt (29:41):

Somebody else.

Jessie Swail (29:42):

They must I know where they were. They were kept in the office of the captain's secretary. And he happened to be a little man from Calgary whom it turned out I had connections to. He was the nephew of somebody from Shaw, actually. And he was the captain's secretary, and our records were in his office. Yes, the captain, that's where they were.

Eric Brunt (30:16):

The captain of HMS Protector. The

Jessie Swail (30:20):

Captain was Captain Ord with the one eye that he lost one eye in the Halifax explosion of 1917. And he had a glass eye and he had a variety of them, and he changed them all. He was a character, and his secretary was this man who looked after our records.

Eric Brunt (30:45):

I understand.

Jessie Swail (30:46):

And

Eric Brunt (30:46):

So was your base called HMCS Protector?

Jessie Swail (30:51):

Yes.

Eric Brunt (30:51):

Got it. And where did you sleep?

Jessie Swail (30:55):

I slept in what they called a cubicle, and our cubicle was very famous. It was called Dirty 30, and it was numbered 32, 36. I think there were six of us in there. Three and three, or it was a two and two four of us. Anyhow, we were called Dirty 30 because every Sunday we were all mustard on the Parade square and Captain McNeil and everybody was there, and we would be inspected to make sure that our uniform was proper, that everything about it was proper, that our hair was properly cut, that everything about us was proper. And we'd stand there, and they go around and inspecting us, and then they'd say, fall out. The Roman Catholics. And the Roman Catholics would get to go to their church service, and they'd have a church service on the parade square every Sunday. So we'd fall out with the Roman Catholics and go and SCU around somewhere. But anyhow, we had to be inspected every Sunday on the parade square. And while that was going on, captain Ord and his retinue inspected our cubicles, and at one point he found dust. He wore white glove, he found dust in our cubicle. We were punished for it, and so we were known as Dirty 30.

Eric Brunt (32:44):

What was the punishment? What was the punishment?

Jessie Swail (32:49):

Two weeks extra work and drill. That was always the punishment I had when I went first to golf as a recruit, I was five, seven and a half, and I weighed 113 pounds. They couldn't find a skirt that would fit me. That was long enough. It was too wide. If it was not too wide, it was too short.

So this went on for some time, and then this supply officer said to the tiffy, the tiffy was called the person who handed out. She said, I order you to issue the skirt to this rim. And then she said to me, I order you to fill it out. So I'm stuck with this skirt. So I put a pin in it, and she knew that the next day she would always inspect us as we left our barracks to go to our jobs in the morning. She said, Ren Miller, open your jacket. And I got two weeks extra work in drill for being out of uniform because I had a pin in my skirt. So I did that, and I put a belt around, and she said she went through the same routine when Miller opened your jacket, another two weeks to work in drill for being out of uniform. That happened three times. Finally, I took the skirt over to Sydney. The summer uniforms came out, and I took the skirt over to Sydney and had it alter, altered.

(34:40):

So that's how arbitrary they were.

Eric Brunt (34:43):

It's crazy hearing about that.

Jessie Swail (34:45):

Absolutely crazy.

Eric Brunt (34:47):

Absolutely. For what benefit? There's no benefit of them being like that.

Jessie Swail (34:52):

No. But that's the Navy.

Eric Brunt (34:55):

That's the Navy for you?

Jessie Swail (34:56):

Oh, yes. If you got a sunburn in the Navy, you were charged with, what was it called? Malingering. Malingering.

Eric Brunt (35:09):

Crazy. And I know you had to be very timely if you went on leave, you had to make sure you were back at a certain time.

Jessie Swail (35:17):

Oh, yes. My brother, my poor brother, who been through all those three shipwrecks and being in the hospital, was given medical leave to go home for a couple of weeks, coming back on the train. The train derailed. I mean, he really was starstruck, wasn't he? The train derailed, and he was adrift, as they called it. If you were late, they called you adrift, and he was punished for being adrift. That's the way the Navy was. He hated it.

Eric Brunt (35:53):

Yeah. Did you ever go on leave?

Jessie Swail (35:57):

Oh, yes.

Eric Brunt (35:58):

Where would you go?

Jessie Swail (35:59):

I went home, and then I went to Banff. I have pictures of myself walking with my friends, and they were so proud of me.

Eric Brunt (36:08):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (36:08):

I had my uniform.

Eric Brunt (36:10):

Yeah. Did you ever go explore Nova Scotia at all?

Jessie Swail (36:14):

Oh, yes. We once, a gang of us, rented a bus and went around the Cabot Trail, which wasn't developed at that time. It was nothing but a dirt road and not even a road, a trail. And we went all around and went up to bed deck. And I didn't do the east side, which is all French. It's Cape Breton Island. Then I would go down to Halifax, and I didn't see a heck of a lot of Nova Scotia, but I saw a lot of Cape Breton Island.

Eric Brunt (36:49):

Nice.

Jessie Swail (36:50):

Yeah. Which is beautiful.

Eric Brunt (36:52):

I've heard that in the fall. Cape Breton is incredible.

Jessie Swail (36:55):

Nova Scotia in the fall is so beautiful.

Eric Brunt (36:58):

I'd love to go in the fall.

Jessie Swail (37:00):

Oh, God. It's lovely. Really.

Eric Brunt (37:03):

I'm going there in January.

Jessie Swail (37:05):

Are you to Nova Scotia? Where?

Eric Brunt (37:07):

To Sydney.

Jessie Swail (37:09):

Why?

Eric Brunt (37:10):

Because there's four veterans there that I want to interview.

Jessie Swail (37:15):

Who are they?

Eric Brunt (37:17):

One of them is an amputee. His name's Ernie. His last name is B-U-I-S-T. And he lost a leg during the war.

Jessie Swail (37:25):

Oh,

Eric Brunt (37:26):

Another guy is called, I forgot his name, but he's a black Canadian who was in the war. His name's, I think it's Lem Skeet is his name. He was a driver during the war over in Europe. And there's two others. I forget their names. But yeah, there's four veterans in Sydney, so I'm going in January.

Jessie Swail (37:47):

Really?

Eric Brunt (37:48):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (37:49):

So if

Eric Brunt (37:49):

You want any pictures; I'll send them to you.

Jessie Swail (37:51):

Yeah, that'll be darn.

Eric Brunt (37:53):

Yeah. Is your base still there, or it's all gone now?

Jessie Swail (37:59):

No, it's all gone. I did go there again with my husband. It was called Point Edwards where we were.

(38:06):

It was sort of the north end of Sydney, and the harbor was called Point Edwards. And the last time I was in Nova Scotia and went there, it was all gone. All the barracks, buildings that we used to have to parade from our barracks, or we them, what did we call 'em? We didn't call 'em barracks, something else. We had to parade from them in an actual parade to our offices in the morning, back at noon for lunch and back again to the office and back again. We were always parading. Anyhow, that's how things were done. And I can't remember what we called those buildings, but they were all gone.

Eric Brunt (39:06):

All gone.

Jessie Swail (39:07):

Yep. There was nothing there. It was flattened out and nothing was there. It was very disappointing. There was a huge administration building. We called the admin building. It was enormous. And there was a hospital, a sick bay, as we call it, all gone.

Eric Brunt (39:29):

And your room was, you were in dirty 30, right?

Jessie Swail (39:32):

Dirty 30.

Eric Brunt (39:33):

Did you have the same girls with you the whole time, or did the girls change?

Jessie Swail (39:37):

No, we were the same the time.

Eric Brunt (39:39):

Were they your friends or?

Jessie Swail (39:40):

Yeah, we were all good friends. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (39:43):

Yeah. Do you remember any?

Jessie Swail (39:44):

They were from all over. Two of them were from here. And I went to a WRNS reunion one year, several years after. And it was at some hotel downtown. It was coming down in the elevator with a woman, and we both had our little WRNS insignia. We knew we were both at the reunion, so we had name tags on. And they weren't smart enough to say well put your original name on. And we all had these married names on, and we were chatting away and chatting away. And she said, I think I recognize you. Are you Gully? Everybody called me Gully. They called me Gulliver because I was five feet, seven and a half, which was tall for a woman in those days. And I was taller than all of my friends. And she said, are you Gully? And she had a name on it, said Eleanor somebody. And I said, and are you what? The devil was her nickname. But anyhow, there we were after all those years.

Eric Brunt (41:08):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (41:09):

Yeah. I forgot what her nickname was.

Eric Brunt (41:12):

That's okay.

Jessie Swail (41:14):

But that's who it was in the elevator with me. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (41:18):

Yeah. I understand that. With the Wrens it was kind of hard to keep track of each other after the war, because everyone got married and changed their name, and you couldn't just look them up in the phone book anymore.

Jessie Swail (41:29):

Right. Well, that's exactly what happened. Yes. Yeah. But anyhow,

Eric Brunt (41:38):

I guess, were the Wrens there in Sydney from all over the place, or were they mostly from

Jessie Swail (41:43):

Oh, yeah. They were from all over the place. I was just because you were coming. Megan got out some old photographs, and I was looking at them, several from Northern Ontario. One girl, a very good friend of mine from Walkerton, Ontario, several from Toronto and others from out here. Yeah. We knew a lot of people from all over Canada. Same with the sailors going in and out on the ships. And those who were based on the, we called it a ship. We had to call our base a ship. It was HMCS Protector. Conestoga is in Calgary. That's where I joined up. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (42:36):

Were there any French girls?

Jessie Swail (42:38):

Any what?

Eric Brunt (42:39):

French like ones that were from Quebec?

Jessie Swail (42:41):

Yes. One of them we called Frenchy. Yep. Yep. Wow. Not as many from Quebec, I think, but they were from all over Canada. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (42:55):

It must've been so interesting

Jessie Swail (42:56):

Meeting

Eric Brunt (42:56):

All these different,

Jessie Swail (42:57):

Yeah, it was interesting to meet people from all over Canada.

Eric Brunt (43:02):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (43:02):

And as you say, from Newfoundland as well.

Eric Brunt (43:05):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (43:06):

Yeah. A couple of the people in our office were from Newfoundland. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (43:13):

When I went there, I found them very friendly, the Newfoundlanders.

Jessie Swail (43:16):

Oh, they're wonderful people.

Eric Brunt (43:18):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (43:18):

They really are wonderful people.

Eric Brunt (43:21):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (43:21):

They're friendly. They're humorous. Yeah, they're different. I think they're wonderful people.

Eric Brunt (43:29):

And I guess during the war, they weren't part of Canada. They were still a British colony.

Jessie Swail (43:35):

Yeah. They were not part of Canada.

Eric Brunt (43:37):

Yeah,

Jessie Swail (43:37):

That's right. They weren't, no.

Eric Brunt (43:40):

Yeah. I did a few interviews in Newfoundland, and they all served with the British, which was interesting.

Jessie Swail (43:45):

Yeah. They had a premier called Joey Smallwood, and he was the one who brought them into Canada

Eric Brunt (43:51):

Together.

Jessie Swail (43:52):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (43:55):

What was Sydney like? The town?

Jessie Swail (43:57):

Well, it was small. I can't remember how many people, and it was absolutely dominated by the steel mill. And that red hot, what would it be? Or whatever it was, it came out in a big stream down into the gray pits, and it dominated the city. And it was very small. There were no high buildings. There was one hotel called the, I think it was called the Grand Isle or something like that. And that was about it. There were a few interesting little restaurants. There was a bit of a French influence from the other side of the island, but it was a pretty poor community.

Eric Brunt (44:59):

It still, there

Jessie Swail (45:00):

Were no great signs of wealth or anything in Sydney.

Eric Brunt (45:03):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (45:04):

It's still like that. I gather. It's still like that.

Eric Brunt (45:05):

Yeah. How were the people towards the Navy personnel? Were they friendly or were they kind of kept to themselves? The civilians? How did they treat the Navy?

Jessie Swail (45:18):

Oh, they, they're very hospitable people. In any case, they really are. They're so Scottish in Cape Breton Island and Nova Scotia, that's New Scotland. It's very Scottish. So they're very hospitable and warm kind of people. And so yeah, they were very glad to have us there. I would think they would be. I think it was probably good for their economy for one thing.

Eric Brunt (45:52):

Exactly. Yeah. Lots of people in the restaurants, and that's right.

Jessie Swail (45:55):

Then we'd go over and the weekend and maybe stay at a hotel or something like that for a weekend and just to do something different. Or we'd go over and go to, like you say to a restaurant and have a party or something. Wow. So yeah, we brought some wealth to the community.

Eric Brunt (46:21):

That's great. Because I understand that in Halifax, they were a bit annoyed by the Navy.

Jessie Swail (46:28):

A what?

Eric Brunt (46:29):

They were a bit annoyed by the Navy people in Halifax.

Jessie Swail (46:31):

Well, the Navy was disruptive in Halifax because they were men, so many men coming and going, and so many of them based there. And they were bored and all one thing and another. So we didn't have any of that in Sydney. And at the end of the war, when they declared VDI there, whatever it was, we were at lunch when we heard the news on the radio. We had a radio up on the shelf in the lunchroom, whatever we called it. I can't remember what we called it.

Eric Brunt (47:13):

Not the cafeteria, the mess.

Jessie Swail (47:16):

I can't remember. We called it

Eric Brunt (47:19):

The Mess hall. The Mess Hall.

Jessie Swail (47:22):

The Mess Hall. Thank you. And up there was the radio and overcame the word that the war was over. Well, everybody left. Well, no. We all got, believe it or not, that was a mess hall full of

Wrens. I don't know how many long tables Wrens on both sides on, I just remember this now, when the word came over the radio, the war has ended. One ran got up and started to sing Land of Hope and Glory, and I'm going to cry now. We all got up and sang Land of Hope and Glory, that whole mess hall full of women, all with the tears running down. I'll never forget that, as long as I lived Land of Hope and Glory. And we all sang it, and then we all rushed out of the mess hall, and the fire engines had come out of the fire hall, and we all climbed on the fire engines, and we tootled around the base with the horns going. And that was VE Day, wasn't it? And the next one was V Day,

Eric Brunt (48:42):

I think it was, or

Jessie Swail (48:43):

Was it the other way around

Eric Brunt (48:45):

V Day and then VJ Day.

Jessie Swail (48:47):

VJ Day. Thank you.

Eric Brunt (48:48):

This was VE Day.

Jessie Swail (48:49):

That was Japan. VE Day was Europe. And so that's what we did. We ran around on the fire engines, and then they opened up the canteen and everybody could have a drink. And rum, of course, always rum in the Navy.

Eric Brunt (49:10):

What was the song? What was the song that they sang?

Jessie Swail (49:17):

Land of Hope and Glory.

Eric Brunt (49:18):

I don't know it.

Jessie Swail (49:19):

Don't you?

Eric Brunt (49:20):

Can you sing it at all?

Jessie Swail (49:21):

I can't sing anymore. Land of Hope and Glory, mother of the free, how can we are born of the, it's good. Wider. Wider and wider. Shall I Bounds Be said, God, who may the mighty Make the mighty, or yeah. Then it goes on and on and on. Land of Hope and Glory. It's very British.

Eric Brunt (49:55):

And one Wren just stood up and says,

Jessie Swail (49:56):

That's what we sang. I can't sing anymore, but you can.

Eric Brunt (49:59):

That was great.

Jessie Swail (50:00):

That's what we used to sing.

Eric Brunt (50:02):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (50:03):

Well, that's what we did sing that day. It was quite something. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (50:10):

It gives me chills just hearing the story.

Jessie Swail (50:12):

It gives me goosebumps to think about it. Yeah, it does. Really. Because, and then the war was over, and we were all going home, and that was sad. That was really sad. We were leaving all these wonderful friendships that we made and going home to our little towns. Yeah, that was the sad part of it.

Eric Brunt (50:42):

It must've been a lot of goodbyes.

Jessie Swail (50:43):

Yes. All those goodbyes. All those goodbyes. What's that song? I remember we saw more people off on the train, honest to God, you can't believe it. And then I did the same thing up in Ottawa. Was very sad. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (51:11):

There is some song about goodbyes. It was famous. Oh my gosh. It's on the tip of my tongue. Because this veteran told me that he was in the train station in Winnipeg, and it was all the guys were getting onto the train, and they started singing the song and oh, I can't remember it, but it was something about goodbyes.

Jessie Swail (51:39):

About what?

Eric Brunt (51:40):

About goodbyes? Like kiss, kiss,

Jessie Swail (51:46):

Kiss me luck as you wave me. Goodbye. Cheerio. Here I go. On my way. Yeah. Vera. Vera. Who?

Eric Brunt (51:58):

Vera Lynn.

Jessie Swail (51 :59) :

Yeah. Oh my God. She was marvelous, wasn't she? When the lights go on again.

Eric Brunt (52:05):

That was pretty amazing. I sang a little tiny bit and you knew what song it was.

Jessie Swail (52:08):

Yeah,

Eric Brunt (52:09):

Yeah,

Jessie Swail (52:10):

Yeah. She was wonderful. She used to get all the soldiers singing with her. It was wonderful. Yeah, it was. Yeah. There were a lot of good things about the war. Such camaraderie you'll never, ever experience anywhere again. No, it won't.

Eric Brunt (52:31):

Everyone came together.

Jessie Swail (52:33):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (52:34):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (52:36):

Lifelong friendships.

Eric Brunt (52:38):

Lifelong friendships. I don't know. Maybe you never experienced this. You might not have experienced this, but there were some women in the Navy, and I think maybe the army that told me that sometimes the older generation looks a bit down on the woman in uniform. Did you ever encounter that?

Jessie Swail (53:02):

Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. When I first joined up, we were very much looked down on, because we were in uniform. And my brother, my brother said, oh, no, you're not going to do that. You're not going to do that. I mean, he considered That was a what? I don't know what, that we were becoming common or something of the sort. And what did they call us? They had a terrible name for us. I don't know if you want to hear it on a

Eric Brunt (53:42):

Tell me

Jessie Swail (53:42):

The museum or not

Eric Brunt (53:45):

Hit me with it.

Jessie Swail (53:46):

Do you know what they called us?

Eric Brunt (53:48):

No.

Jessie Swail (53:49):

Do you know we had two uniforms. One was called a Tiddly, and one was called a puer. And the puer was an everyday coser uniform. The tiddly was very nice material and everything better tailored and everything else, they used to call us. Don't get this on there.

Eric Brunt (54:10):

I'll cut it out.

Jessie Swail (54:11):

Pusser pigs. That's what they used to call us, and they looked down at us. They did, because we were women in uniform. Well, that was terrible, wasn't it?

Eric Brunt (54:25):

That must've been hard for you and you other

Jessie Swail (54:28):

We didn't pay any attention. We thought it was just ignorance, which it was, of course. And it soon lost its effect.

Eric Brunt (54:38):

I imagine for the older generation, it must've been difficult for them to see all these women taking on these new roles as well, because you women had so much new responsibility and new positions. And I can see

Jessie Swail (54:55):

The world.

Eric Brunt (54:55):

Maybe the older generation was a bit upset about that too.

Jessie Swail (54:58):

I think so. And then the world was never the same again after the war. There was a saying that was very popular, was Rosie Goho. Rosie was the Riveter. Did you know about that? Rosie the Riveter were the women who worked building ships. And after the war, the popular saying was, Rosie, go home, Rosie back to the kitchen. That's what they used to say. And women said, no thanks. They let us out of the kitchen and we're not going back. And nothing has been the same since, has it? No, it hasn't.

Eric Brunt (55:40):

It's great. It opened the door for a lot of women.

Jessie Swail (55:45):

That's right. It absolutely did. Yep. It was amazing. And they all flooded out of the kitchen.

Eric Brunt (55:55):

And what did you do after the war?

Jessie Swail (55:58):

Oh, when Betty McIntosh, as I told you, came to my school in Banff, in her uniform, she said, for every month that you serve, you will get one month of university education paid for. And that's why I decided to join up. I immediately decided for me; I'm joining. I wanted to go to university. I had no way to get there. My family was very poor. Everybody was in those days. And so as soon as I got out, I went to the University of Toronto, which was just a stroke of really good luck for me. Yep.

Eric Brunt (56:44):

What did you study there? What did you study?

Jessie Swail (56:48):

Well, I just took an arts degree there. Then I came out here and did a social work degree at UBC. So I ended up as a social worker for a while. I did a lot of different things over the years.

Eric Brunt (57:05):

And you eventually found your way to CBC, or you eventually started, how did that happen?

Jessie Swail (57:09):

Oh, I don't know, because, well, we were living in Ancaster, Ontario and had, Murray was born there, remember Megan? So then I had four kids,

(57:26):

And I was dirt crazy. So I started writing articles and trying to sell them. And the first articles I ever wrote as sold to the Gulf Digest. And yeah, I started selling my writing. And then we moved to Toronto at some point, and I wrote features for the Toronto Star, and I guess my name became known. And when we were moved to Winnipeg, a friend of mine told one of the producers at CBC that I could write, and I got a job at the CBC. That's where I got the job at the CBC. And from there on, that's how that happened.

Eric Brunt (58:25):

That's interesting. I interviewed a WD in the Air Force, and she used the Air Force to, when she was a little girl, she always loved photography. That was her passion.

Jessie Swail (58:44):

She did what?

Eric Brunt (58:45):

She loved photography. She loved cameras and taking photos,

(58:50):

She had no training. So she went to the recruiting office, and she said, I don't have any training, and I'm only going to join if you make me a photographer. And they said, okay, we'll do it. You

can join and we'll make sure you become a photographer. And after the war, she was a single woman and she was living in Belleville, and she became the Belleville newspapers first female photographer. And she took photos for that newspaper for years.

Jessie Swail (59:25):

And who is that?

Eric Brunt (59:28):

Her name was Alicia Chambers,

Jessie Swail (59:30):

I'll be darn,

Eric Brunt (59:30):

Was her last name.

Jessie Swail (59:31):

Is that right?

Eric Brunt (59:32):

So her role in the war helped her have a huge career afterwards?

Jessie Swail (59:37):

I guess so, wouldn't it?

Eric Brunt (59:40):

Yeah. So she was very thankful for the Air Force for that opportunity?

Jessie Swail (59:46):

Yeah, I guess so.

Eric Brunt (59:48):

Yeah. Because I think before then, it would've been very challenging for a woman to be a photographer. It was usually, I guess, a man's job in the thirties and the twenties, right?

Jessie Swail (59:58):

On television last night, this woman had all these photographs of associations, organizations, businesses, goodness know what, of rooms full of men all sitting to have their photographs taken. And in every one of them, there was one woman, the token, and she had several of them on television last night, of all these situations where all these men were photographed, and they had one woman. One woman in this whole thing.

Eric Brunt (01:00:46):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:00:47):

Yeah. Times have changed.

Eric Brunt (01:00:50):

Times have changed.

Jessie Swail (01:00:51):

Yeah. It used to be a man's world. Yeah,

Eric Brunt (01:00:55):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:00:57):

Yeah. Very much so. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:01:01):

You must've seen a lot of change in terms of women's roles and

Jessie Swail (01:01:06):

Oh, yes.

Eric Brunt (01:01:07):

Opportunity. Women could have.

Jessie Swail (01:01:08):

Oh my goodness, yes. Because my older sisters never worked. I worked all the time. My kids were growing up because I had something I could do, and they didn't. I was lucky in that way that Betty McIntosh, coming to my high school, changed my whole life, coming in her uniform and looking and telling me I could go to university. She changed my whole life. Yeah,

Eric Brunt (01:01:44):

Because you probably wouldn't have gone to university otherwise. Would you have gone to university otherwise, do you think?

Jessie Swail (01:01:50):

Well, I wanted to, and I had no idea how I was ever going to get there. I really didn't. And actually, that absolutely is why I joined the Navy, because I wanted to gain those credits to go to

university. I don't know whether I would've joined otherwise, probably. But that was the main reason.

Eric Brunt (01:02:19):

It was a nice benefit of being in the military to get those that education paid for.

Jessie Swail (01:02:25):

I did. Yes.

Eric Brunt (01:02:25):

It's a nice perk that they have.

Jessie Swail (01:02:27):

I got my education paid for by DVA and I, believe me, ask Megan, DVA is still so good to me. I'm so lucky. I really am.

Eric Brunt (01:02:39):

That's amazing.

Jessie Swail (01:02:40):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:02:42):

And after the war, you said that you, did you join a WRNS association? Did you join a WRNS association after the war?

Jessie Swail (01:02:49):

Yes. Yeah. They had them all over Canada and with a very large one in Toronto with all my friends there. And then we had quite a large one here as well. Yeah. So yeah, it was a great organization to belong to. Really was. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:03:10):

And you joined the leg.

Jessie Swail (01:03:10):

It was great to see all those people again.

Eric Brunt (01:03:18):

Do you remember, were there any other ships that went down in between Sydney and Newfoundland, or was that the main one that she went again?

Jessie Swail (01:03:25):

Well, that's the only one that went down between Sydney and Newfoundland, but lots of them went down. There was the valley view [HMCS Valleyfield] went down just off of Sydney, not very far off of Sydney. I think it was the valley view [HMCS Valleyfield].

Eric Brunt (01:03:40):

The Valleyfield

Jessie Swail (01:03:42):

Yeah, the Valleyfield.

Eric Brunt (01:03:44):

Go ahead.

Jessie Swail (01:03:44):

Oh, thanks, Megan. I have to take that. I can tell. Thanks. A lot of ships went down. How many Corvettes were sunk? 150, something like that. They were escort ships,

Eric Brunt (01:04:10):

And on each ship, there were 150 men.

Jessie Swail (01:04:13):

That's at least on every Corvette. And on the destroyers, there were a lot more.

Eric Brunt (01:04:23):

And it was before you were there, but the caribou went down. Do you remember hearing about that? The Caribou, the passenger ferry?

Jessie Swail (01:04:30):

Oh, yes, of course I do. It went out Sydney. And that's why the Gan [HMCS Gananoque] would later, well, whatever ship was in was given the task of escorting the ferry over to port-a-bass. That's where the caribou went to. And that's when the U-boats were right there, right in that Cabot Strait and sunk the Gan [HMCS Gananoque]. And the Valleyfield was sunk just off of there. And I'm trying to think what other ones. Oh, so many went down. It was sad, wasn't it? The Ottawa, the ROIs, the St. Croix. Well, they used to do a dinner at the Naval Officers Association Discovery here, and they would ring a bell for each ship that went down, and a voice from the deep would say, here, here, sir. And we'd all have tears in our eyes sitting around the wardroom table at HMCS Discovery down here.

Eric Brunt (01:05:51):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (01:05:52):

Yeah. That's when all the naval vets were still alive. None of them are. I'm the only one. I'm the only one. And now they're all reservists. Now.

Eric Brunt (01:06:05):

How does that feel?

Jessie Swail (01:06:06):

Quite a different, well, they don't know the old traditions. It's quite different. Yeah. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:06:15):

You really are one of the last Wrens in Canada.

Jessie Swail (01:06:19):

I know. I am. Yeah. I don't know how many left, but I'm the only one around here. Megan often goes to dinner with me. That was the naval officers caught me in. Well, that's what we're talking about. Yeah. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:06:37):

Well, you're number 11. I've only found 11. I think Canadian Wrens across the country

Jessie Swail (01:06:44):

Are only 11 left.

Eric Brunt (01:06:46):

That's all I found.

Jessie Swail (01:06:47):

And one of them is 101.

Eric Brunt (01:06:48):

One is 101. Yeah. There might be more out there, but I haven't found,

Jessie Swail (01:06:53):

I doubt that there's more.

Eric Brunt (01:06:55):

There's one I want to interview. One in Edmonton. There's one there, and there's one in Pictou, Nova Scotia.

Jessie Swail (01:07:04):

Is that right?

Eric Brunt (01:07:05):

And she's 101 as well.

Jessie Swail (01:07:07):

Well, I can't imagine there's very many, because I was one of the youngest,

(01:07:14):

As I say, my number was 5003, and there were only 5,000-some-odd Wrens. And some of those were discharged or left to the Wrens for various reasons. So there were probably only about 500, just over 5,000 Wrens at any given time. And that's my number 5003, so I was one of the youngest. Yeah,

Eric Brunt (01:07:44):

Definitely.

Jessie Swail (01:07:45):

Yeah. So there can't be very many of us left, for sure.

Eric Brunt (01:07:50):

I bet you some got homesick. I bet you that some got homesick. Did you ever encounter that Wrens that were homesick?

Jessie Swail (01:08:02):

Homesick,

Eric Brunt (01:08:03):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:08:03):

Oh, yes. Lots of them were. I wasn't. Lots of them were. No. I found it exciting to be exploring new parts of the world and meeting all these new people and everything coming from such a small town. But lots of friends were homesick, and I didn't particularly enjoy their time in the service, and I did. I think lots of people didn't, probably for various reasons, then we're glad when the war was over, and they could go home.

Eric Brunt (01:08:44):

Just because it's such a good story. Could you tell me just one more time about the day the war was over on VE Day? What happened?

Jessie Swail (01:08:54):

Well, we heard it on the radio.

Eric Brunt (01:08:58):

Where was the radio? Where was the radio?

Jessie Swail (01:09:01):

We were in the mess hall, and they had long tables like this. We were on each, and the radio was on shelf up high right there, over there. And we'd had the radio put there because we knew things were happening. And we were at lunch, and we were all sitting around the table when the news came over, the war over the radio. And I remember, I think I wrote an article about this, and at the time, I remembered what it said, but I don't remember now. But this one, Wren stood up and very quietly started to sing Land of Hope and Glory. And then one by one, we all got up and joined in, and pretty soon, that whole Mess Hall, I wonder how many tables full of Wrens there were in there, and we were all singing Land of Hope and Glory. It was very, very moving. Really? All with tears streaming down our faces. Yeah, it was very moving. Even now it moves me to tell you about it. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:10:21):

It's a beautiful image, walking over, and everyone's standing together.

Jessie Swail (01:10:27):

Yes. What a beautiful image, isn't it really? Yeah. That's singing Land of hope and glory, not Oh, Canada. Interesting.

Eric Brunt (01:10:39):

That was the song.

Jessie Swail (01:10:40):

Yeah. Wow.

Eric Brunt (01:10:42):

So interesting.

Jessie Swail (01:10:43):

Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:10:47):

Amazing. Do you think now that you're one of the last World War II veterans left in Canada, do you think it's important to document the stories of the veterans?

Jessie Swail (01:11:03):

Can I get them to document the story?

Eric Brunt (01:11:06):

No, sorry. Now that you're one of the last World War II veterans in Canada, do you think it's important to document the stories of the war?

Jessie Swail (01:11:17):

Oh, I do. Yes, I do. Absolutely.

Eric Brunt (01:11:21):

Why?

Jessie Swail (01:11:21):

Oh, yes. Well, I think that all historical events need to be chronicled and probably archived and whatever. I think that's very important. Absolutely. We need to know our history and the more firsthand history we can get our hands on the better, and document it and make sure it's authentic, et cetera. Don't you agree? I know you agree, or you wouldn't be here. And so I think that's really important. What you're doing is important, and all that material in the archives is very important. Really. It's amazing how many people make use of the archives for various purposes, and it's a good thing that they're there. And now everything is digitized and put on all kinds of different ways of storing it.

Eric Brunt (01:12:34):

And now that we have the internet, we make it available to the whole world or the whole country, right?

Jessie Swail (01:12:40):

That's right. And it's there. So you can go back and say, no, that's not the way it happened. This is the way it happened. When people try to distort history and things of that nature, you can go back and make sure that we are getting the goods.

Eric Brunt (01:13:00):

And I think it's important to know where we came from. I think as a Canadian, it's sometimes important to know where we came from, the history of our own country.

Jessie Swail (01:13:10):

Oh, yes, of course it is. We're all immigrants. Well, I'm an immigrant. You're not. But so many of us, my generation are immigrants to Canada, very young country. We're a very young country and a very small population considering the amount of territory we cover, although it's all pretty much along the US border. Yeah. We've got to start moving north.

Eric Brunt (13:42):

Yes. It's funny seeing an image of earth from a satellite. You can see all the lights right along the border.

Jessie Swail (01:13:51):

Yes. You can, can't you?

Eric Brunt (01:13:54):

It's funny. Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:13:55):

Isn't that wonderful? You can see that now.

Eric Brunt (01:13:57):

It's like all across the border. And then there's Edmonton up here. I don't know why it's so north, but

Jessie Swail (01:14:05):

Yeah, we always considered it the old country, a way up there.

Eric Brunt (01:14:08):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:14:09):

It is quite north of Calgary. 250 miles.

Eric Brunt (01:14:13):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:14:15):

Wow. Incredible.

Eric Brunt (01:14:21):

How old was your sister when she passed? Did she have a nice long life?

Jessie Swail (01:14:25):

She died of lung cancer at 75 because she wouldn't quit smoking. My older sister lived to be, what was Margaret, 97.

Eric Brunt (01:14:37):

Wow.

Jessie Swail (01:14:37):

Yeah. My uncle was a hundred. My aunt is 101. My cousin was 101 sister. We are long, long, long-lived. Family Scots. Yep. The gene.

Eric Brunt (01:14:56):

Except your one brother.

Jessie Swail (01:14:58):

Except my, well, of course, he died in an accident. Yep.

Eric Brunt (01:15:04):

Not natural causes.

Jessie Swail (01:15:05):

No, that's right.

Eric Brunt (01:15:06):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:15:07):

Yeah. It was a very freakish accident too. But anyhow, as they say, he was dark crossed. Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:15:18):

Well, I think that it's all my questions.

Jessie Swail (01:15:21):

Well, there we go. You certainly have asked lots of them.

Eric Brunt (01:15:24):

Yeah. But you have such a great memory. I couldn't help keep asking. Yeah. Do you have any photographs?

Jessie Swail (01:15:32):

Yes.

Eric Brunt (01:15:33):

Oh yeah. You got them here.

Jessie Swail (01:15:35):

Megan had some over there.

Eric Brunt (01:15:37):

Oh, great. I'd love to take a few photos. Photos? Photos of the photos. Yes.

Jessie Swail (01:15:44):

Have you got them there, Megan? Those photos that we picked out?

Eric Brunt (01:15:49):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:15:50):

I have a million of them.

Megan Swail (01:15:53):

This is the crew from the records office. Here's mom. Second from the right. So this is the gang who?

Jessie Swail (01:16:02):

The records office at Sydney.

Megan Swail (01:16:06):

And here's the guy with the Captain Ord, who they called Teddy

Jessie Swail (01:16:11):

With a glass eye.

Megan Swail (01:16:13):

Each eye's not quite right.

Eric Brunt (01:16:15):

I'm not sure,

Megan Swail (01:16:18):

Mom. This one. This woman. It says Bradley.

Jessie Swail (01:16:21):

Oh, you know who she was? Did I say Bradley?

Megan Swail (01:16:24):

Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:16:25):

This was the woman who kept telling me to open my jacket and giving me two weeks extra work in grill.

Megan Swail (01:16:31):

She looks so nice.

Jessie Swail (01:16:32):

She was what? You know what we call her?

Megan Swail (01:16:34):

How pleasant she looks?

Eric Brunt (01:16:35):

Yeah. She does, what did you call her?

Jessie Swail (01:16:38):

What do you call the enforcer? The

Eric Brunt (01:16:41):

Boss?

Jessie Swail (01:16:41):

Huh?

Eric Brunt (01:16:42):

The boss or the,

Jessie Swail (01:16:43):

No, no. We had a name for her. Oh God. It was like the enforcer, but that's not what it was.

Eric Brunt (01:16:52):

The dictator.

Megan Swail (01:16:55):

Something not nice.

Eric Brunt (01:16:56):

Yeah.

Megan Swail (01:16:57):

This is a bunch of friends, and I guess one of their group is getting married here, which is kind of,

Eric Brunt (01:17:04):

Oh wow.

Jessie Swail (01:17:05):

What is that?

Eric Brunt (01:17:06):

There was a wedding are getting married.

Jessie Swail (01:17:07):

Oh yeah. One of the Wrenss got married, and that's all the gang there in the Wrens. Wow.

Megan Swail (01:17:20):

And then this says, this is the folk soul for Kai.

Jessie Swail (01:17:25):

Oh, what

Megan Swail (01:17:27):

Is that say in the back?

Jessie Swail (01:17:31):

Oh, in the folk for Kai. Now, see, that reminds me. The folk soul was the recreation room where we would go and recreate, and Kai is what they call in the Navy. It's what they call a cup of hot chocolate or cocoa or something in the evening. It's called Kai, KAI.

Eric Brunt (01:17:59):

I've never heard that before.

Jessie Swail (01:17:59):

And there we are in our night close. Yeah. Ready to go back to our bunks. Go to bed.

Eric Brunt (01:18:07):

I don't think she's in this.

Megan Swail (01:18:08):

There's someone who looks like you, but it's not you.

Jessie Swail (01:18:13):

What's that?

Megan Swail (01:18:14):

That isn't you, is it?

Jessie Swail (01:18:17):

No, that's not.

Megan Swail (01:18:18):

I've seen her in a couple photos. She looks a bit like you, but I don't think you're in that one.

Jessie Swail (01:18:23):

I don't think I'm in this one, but here's Betty Macintosh, the one

Megan Swail (01:18:28):

Who's

Jessie Swail (01:18:29):

Recruited me and bounced. Oh,

Megan Swail (01:18:31):

Really? That's cool.

Jessie Swail (01:18:32):

That's Betty Macintosh.

Megan Swail (01:18:34):

Let's see,

Jessie Swail (01:18:35):

Betty.

Megan Swail (01:18:36):

So she ended up in the same place. Oh, yeah. She does look a little more mature than the rest of these guys. This is one, it says Corvettes await decommissioned 1945.

Jessie Swail (01:18:48):

Yeah. They've been decommissioned in the harbor. Pictures

Megan Swail (01:18:52):

Of some ships here

Eric Brunt (01:18:52):

Too. Cool.

Megan Swail (01:18:54):

Isn't that neat?

Eric Brunt (01:18:55):

That is neat. Did you ever get the chance to go on a ship or,

Jessie Swail (01:18:59):

Yeah, I did, but not very far. We went to Newfoundland on the HMCS, I think it was called the Uganda. Oh, really? Yeah.

Eric Brunt (01:19:12):

During the war?

Jessie Swail (01:19:14):

Yes.

Megan Swail (01:19:14):

Wow. This was the new US Mint. They

Jessie Swail (01:19:16):

Took us as a special trip, and it was very, very low. It had to be kept quiet and we couldn't tell anybody or talk about it. Or

Megan Swail (01:19:27):

There's a British ship, the HMS London Derry.

Eric Brunt (01:19:31):

Why was it secret?

Jessie Swail (01:19:33):

Everything was,

Eric Brunt (01:19:34):

Yeah, I guess so.

Jessie Swail (01:19:35):

All the movements of any ships or anything like that was loose lips, sink ships. It was,

Megan Swail (01:19:43):

These are just random. That's mom in her, she calls it work gear.

Eric Brunt (01:19:48):

Oh, I'll take a photo of that one. Sure. Because that's her,

Megan Swail (01:19:50):

And let's see, she's in, I don't know, maybe you met some of these women,

Eric Brunt (01:20:03):

Maybe. Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:20:04):

They're what?

Megan Swail (01:20:05):

Helen Russell?

Jessie Swail (01:20:07):

Yeah, Helen Russell.

Eric Brunt (01:20:08):

Okay, great.

Megan Swail (01:20:10):

And Helen Russell.

Jessie Swail (01:20:12):

Helen Russell and I were

Megan Swail (01:20:14):

Frida Berry

Jessie Swail (01:20:16):

Discharged that age of the discovery here, and we hitchhiked down in San Francisco, and all the people in the United States were so taken with our uniform. They treated us so well.

Eric Brunt (01:20:34):

When you went on the Uganda, how long did you stay in Finland for?

Jessie Swail (01:20:39):

Oh, we didn't. We just went over there and came back. You know why we went there?

Eric Brunt (01:20:42):

Why?

Jessie Swail (01:20:44):

To dump ammunition at the end of the war. You're kidding. I shouldn't say that. But we did. We dumped it in, it's

Megan Swail (01:20:55):

The bottom of the sea

Jessie Swail (01:20:57):

It was dumped in the ocean, and that's what we did that afternoon.

Megan Swail (01:21:03):

A dumping party.

Jessie Swail (01:21:05):

Yeah,

Eric Brunt (01:21:06):

I've heard that happen. Yeah.

Jessie Swail (01:21:07):

Wow. Yeah, we did crazy. We weren't supposed to talk about it, but

Eric Brunt (01:21:14):

Was this someone she knew?

Megan Swail (01:21:15):

Well, I thought this was interesting. It's the page from the Ex Shop book.

Eric Brunt (01:21:21):

Oh, nice.

Megan Swail (01:21:22):

It's got all the veterans, so it's got Helen and her brother, James and Jesse in the list there. That's

Eric Brunt (01:21:29):

Great.

Megan Swail (01:21:31):

And then there's a picture of her sisters there. They are as adults. Oh, cool. So this is, oh, that's Margaret. That's Helen.

Eric Brunt (01:21:45):

Nice. All tall. Hey.

Megan Swail (01:21:47):

Yeah. Yeah. Helen's tall.

Eric Brunt (01:21:49):

Helen was tall. Yeah,

Megan Swail (01:21:50):

She was,

Jessie Swail (01:21:50):

No, Helen and I were the same height.

Megan Swail (01:21:52):

Maybe she's wearing heels

Jessie Swail (01:21:54):

Yeah, we were both five, seven and a half,

Eric Brunt (01:21:57):

Which was unusual back then,

Jessie Swail (01:21:58):

But we were tall for our generation.

Megan Swail (01:22:01):

Oh, I know. Yeah. There was a sharper picture of that. Oh, nice.

Jessie Swail (01:22:07):

We were a tall for our generation.

Eric Brunt (01:22:09):

Yes.

Jessie Swail (01:22:10):

Yeah.

Megan Swail (01:22:13):

You could take a picture sheet.

Eric Brunt (01:22:17):

Yeah, that'd be great. You were great. You gave a great interview.

Jessie Swail (01:22:25):

Talk to me.

Eric Brunt (01:22:27):

No, you're great.

Jessie Swail (01:22:28):

Well, you can edit it to your heart's content. Of course.

Eric Brunt (01:22:31):

Yeah. It was a great, yeah, I loved hearing all your stories. You're a very good storyteller too, so it makes it great.

Jessie Swail (01:22:43):

Dang it. Well, my God, there were lots of stories to tell.

Eric Brunt (01:22:47):

Oh, I bet.

Jessie Swail (01:22:48):

Oh, so many. Yeah. I got to find it some sad and I'm glad.

Eric Brunt (01:22:56):

Yeah, for sure.

TRANSCRIPTION ENDS