

Women's Overseas Service League

Los Angeles Unit

FLORENCE FAILING KENNY

Interviewed May 28, 1983 by Genevieve Hill Cadmus and Thelma Norris

Q We are interviewing Florence Failing Kenny of World War I who served in London to furnish VAB from June 1918 to 1919.

Q Florence, what is the full name of the branch of the service?

A VAB was Volunteer Army Division, British.

Q And you served in London, correct?

A Yes

Q What influenced you to join?

A There was some publicity in the newspapers in Syracuse, New York where I lived and where I went to Syracuse University /Reingold/ and it there was that Mrs. Hazard, a very wealthy woman in the Arm & Hammer business, that was on everybody's shelf, had received a request from a great surgeon in London that they were having difficulty and there was a shortage of nurse's aides. They didn't need to be trained nurses, but they needed them to be with an aide and a help to the real nurses, registered. So I thought it would be nice; I thought I would like to go and I was taking lessons. The hospitals in Syracuse contacted the University and said they would be delighted to give us any little training as to what a nurse's aide was expected to do or would be asked to do, which we did--and many thought that Mrs. Hazard financed it, the trip. Each girl paid her own way to New York City where we . . . from where we were to London.

Q Where you took the train?

A Yes

Q You weren't flying in those days, were you?

A No

Q You didn't take a train to London?

A No

Q But to New York?

A Yes

Q You took a train to New York?

A Oh, yes, I guess so, I don't know; it doesn't matter, because--a great deal--

Q Only, you didn't fly?

A No

Q I don't think, back in those days! ha ha

A No

Q So you were joined by other women?

A Yes, and we took the--

Q Steamship

A We took the steamship, and we were together for the first time, three or four from the President's office, plus us. When we left England.

Q How many days did it take you to go over, do you recall?

A I don't remember

Q Okay

A And when we got there there was a big ballyhoo, what-do-you-call it.

Q Reception

A A big--

Q Parade, or

A A big wagon and, with somebody up, you know, making a big noise. And we were taken right to the hospital first, and they said, "This is where we are going to be, but stay on; we are going to drive around town. And we had all sorts of applause and "Hi", "Hello" and "God Bless You" and all that sort of thing. It was the most inspiring thing that could happen to anybody. It was beautiful, so--and in our whole stay there we were being spoiled, as they said, simply spoiled rotten! And the American Women's Club in London gave us cards to come at any time without any appointments, and we could come there and we could entertain there if we chose to. And so many things were done for us.

Q Yes

A And everybody got a little tired out, because whenever we were supposed to rest we would get out on the street and go some place and see something and say to each other, "Did you see so and so; did you go to so and so?" And we wore ourselves out, and when it came time there was the Armistice, about six or seven of the girls were not fit to travel home, they were so exhausted and they couldn't get a passport to come home; they weren't fit to travel. And I was one of those that went to / / to rest. On the night of--when the war was over and there was a big celebration all over London--and all over the world, I guess-- in where I was, the British--it was just for officers, this , it was a rest home for them-- They all went to the living room and they played hymns and they sang and played hymns, and more and more and more. When this was over, one of them said, "Thank God, there are no Americans here. If they had been here they would have made ballyhoo." You see, I wasn't talking much, having trouble with my throat; if I had talked a little bit, of course, they would have known, of course, that I was American, we talked so differently. But I wasn't saying a word; I just smiled; and he said . . . "Thank God we had no Americans here."

Q To back up a little bit, what was the name of the hospital where you worked?

A Oh, Street Military Hospital

Q I believe it is on that thing that I gave you.

A Yes it is. Street Military Hospital

Q And you said--

A It was right down town across from the British Museum; and it was a temptation every minute we had, to run around and see everything. We

made a good job of that, but we--

Q Did you live at the hospital?

A Yes, we lived at the hospital. We had very nice accomodations, very nice. We all had separate beds and dresser and what-have-you, and everything was very nice--and good meals.

Q Did you wear a uniform?

A When we were an duty as nurse's aides, yes, but we had uniforms made to measure. And I have a picture here; what did you do with that? This is the uniform. Now, the British VAD's mostly were society girls. It was a rather snooty exclusive group of people. To get into the VAD, it was, kind of something. And we thought, you know us, one was size 12, 14 and 16 like we would have done here in America in anything of a military nature. No, no, we had to go to so and so, one of the finest places there. And these costumes, this-outfit, were all made to your own particular measure; they were made, and custom made.

Q What color were they?

A A light brown with a dark brown trim.

Q Would you say you wore them when you went out on the street?

A Oh yes, we had to wear the, none of our own clothes. We were told not even take them, except underwear and stuff like that.

Q You didn't recall getting any salary or anything while you were there?

A No. We got our living, and were shown a lot of entertainment; so many organizations there in London. And once a month the Hospital would send-- they were invited to go--to Windsor Castle. And they would send six or seven or eight, and send two girls to escort them, to get them there. And so often, they would come to count them when they were going to Windsor Castle, and they would find that they were short a man or two, a couple--they had wanted to go in a bar or someplace like that, and they just kind of lost them, so-- So we did a lot of talking; we had been warned in leaving the hospital that we must be very careful and keep counting them all the time to be sure that we kept the full number there. Because it was something to go there to tea; it wasn't just, go in and go along the line and shake hands and be out the door and gone. It was more than that; it was much more intimate and much more personal. And we had hot tea and sandwiches and goodies, and so forth, and almost a little luncheon. And at the table where I was sitting with my group, it was Princes Alice--there was a hostess at each table, somebody connected with the King--that was King George, wasn't it, and Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth?

Q No, Mary.

A Mary? So, I kept my mouth shut. Elizabeth took in everything, and after a bit, she said, "How are you Americans enjoying your stay here?"

Q Was that King George himself?

A No, no. It was Princes Alice. She was the hostess around which we were sitting . . . And I said, "How did you know I was an American?" "Oh," she said, "your boots, all I have to do is look down at your feet," she said, " you Americans have such lovely feet and shoes."

So, when we left the Hospital to go, instead of two girls being up ahead and counting them back now and then, I suggested one would be at the head and one would at the rear and keep counting them that way. And after

that we didn't lose anybody. We all stayed together and our count was right, and at the hospital they set up that idea, that whenever any men were taken they would always have somebody in the rear.

Q Were you discharged over in England?

A Yes

Q And how long did you stay, and what did you do?

A We were sent--those that were up and going on their feet, I don't know what they did, they were able to come home. But they were asked if they would go on to France; a couple of them went on to France, doing the same sort of work. But those of us that were in the were told when we were fit to travel we could just go home; we attended to our on transportation, as a round trip.

This physician-- I wasn't eating well and I had lost a lot of weight-- and he said, " I am going to come in and watch you eat your meals, and you will never get out of this place until you clean your trays every night." He said, "You are going to stay here just as long as you don't eat. If you feel like staying a year, don't eat; we will have you a long time." Then he said, " I am coming and I am not going to depend on any nurse saying you finished your tray," he said. He came in for two or three nights, and I had it all. "Well," he said, "Now, stay with it. You can eat your way home." Eat your way home, and I sure did, and I haven't stopped eating since.

Q Did you enjoy the British food?

A No

Q Did you go to many restaurants?

A Yes. We entertained. So many of the girls that were doing the kind of work we did, VAD's, they were British, and I took a couple of the girls-- I forgot that big hotel, a very nice one right in the heart of everything, to have cocktails, and she wrote home to her people who lived on the outskirts, that I had done this. So when I went to her parent's home-- they had a big estate--her mother took me aside and said, "Please don't take any of our British girls to any kind of bar; we don't do it." That was interesting. She said, "It was appreciated. You wanted to do something nice, but" (no go).

We were spoiled, really; everybody did so much, and on the streets, of course, there were other VAD's dressed up, but whenever we got to sitting down and talking and they knew that were the ones--and they were played up--we had some very nice--I have some pictures at home that were taken there by the newspapers of these Americans that had come to . . .

Q When you returned, what--did you go to work or back to school, or--

A No, I got nice and rested, and then I got married.

Q The easiest way out! Now you joined the--did you work before you came to California?

A No, I never had

Q Never. And you came to California?

- A I have since, since I got a divorce.
- Q Oh, yes. Did you live in New York City?
- A No. I had stayed there with relatives. I had relatives there, but they are all dead and gone a long time ago.
- Q That is where you became acquainted with the Women's Overseas Service League, wasn't it, New York?
- A I read in the newspapers in New York City about something that was going on in some hotel, a benefit, and it was for people of the Women's Overseas Service League, and could be reached by
And I called them up; and this Mrs. Duncan called me up and she said, "I want you to come to my apartment and we will have a little cup of tea or a drink or something, and tell me about your experience." And I went to her, and that was the beginning of my getting into the Women's Overseas Service League.
- Q You joined the Los Angeles Unit in 1942?
- A Did I?
- Q Did you join immediately after you got here, or when did you come to California?
- A Well, I joined the New York Unit first. Of course I knew I wasn't going to be there and going to meetings, but it was an expression of gratitude; I have kept it up now--special occasions, holiday gifts--
- Q And you came to Los Angeles. When did you come to Los Angeles, the same year you joined? Or had you been to--
- A I came right home, really, just stopped a little bit in New York City, maybe two or three weeks, and then came home to--
- Q Syracuse
- A To Syracuse
- Q Yes, but you got to California, and I am trying to establish when you moved to California.
- A Oh. I can't remember the year.
- Q Before the Depression?
- A Which depression?
- Q 1929, the Big Depression.
- A I don't remember.
- Q You were married, then, when you came to California, right?
- A No, I was married from California. I was married in an Episcopal Church near downtown, Wilshire Boulevard.
- Q Do you remember what year that was?
- A No, I don't
- Q Do you remember what year you got rid of him! -- So, you lived alone a long time?
- A I liked it

Q After you came to California

A Mrs. Duncan, whose name was in the newspaper. I called on the phone about going to the affair that the Women's Overseas Service League were having. I was living in New York City. But she said, "I think it would be nice first, why don't you come here and see me, and we will have a chat." And I did. When I stayed there, maybe a week or so, and then she said she would give me a name of somebody to call here in Los Angeles about joining the Los Angeles Unit, and she gave me the name of Florence Crozier, and I got in contact with Florence Crozier. And I was delighted, and she has been a very intimate close friend ever since. And when Florence was--Florence and I, when she was president of the Los Angeles Unit, she and I would get together and we would work up the newsletter. Later on it developed we had somebody who just did newsletters and things, but she and I did this at the time she was president. That was a long time ago. And I have always kept up contact with New York.

Q What kind of work did you do when you started to work in Los Angeles? You worked as a secretary, didn't you?

A Yes. I had to take a course, though; I didn't know anything about it; I had never--didn't have a typewriter and didn't know where the keys were, didn't know anything about anything. And I took a course, amen. And then the teacher said, "I think you are able now to take Civil Service." And she said "The County and the State and Federal, and so and so are all coming up in the city. And you take them all; and if you fail any, don't tell anybody, and if you pass, then tell everybody." And so, I passed them all, and the mail came. I heard from the federal, they said, come there now at phone such and such number, and come in. Each of them said that, phone such and such number and come in for a personal interview. So I checked out the City. I thought that would be nice, you know, right here in the city. So I went down to the City Hall and I had an interview and got a job. I just had my purse and things like that, and gloves or something. And I was there, and they had an interview with three or four people, and they said if I wanted to I could just go upstairs to where I was going to be, which I did. So, I put my stuff in the desk. "Don't do anything," she said, "We won't get into any work today, just get yourself settled in." And so I thought I would go to the restroom, and I did. I went out in the hall and went to such and such floor, and as I was walking in the hall, along came somebody connected with the League, and she said, "Florence Kenny, what are you doing here?" She could tell by the way I was dressed that I . . . I said, "I got a job here." She said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Yes, I got a job here." She said, "There are no good jobs in the City Civil Service, no good jobs," she said, "I am the only that has a good job." Rounds, do we have a girl by that name?

Q Edna Rounds?

A Yes

Q But I don't know--Edna was a telephone--

A But at any rate, she said, "You get out of here. You ought to contact the federal Civil Service," she said, "that is the best thing going." I said, " Oh, I have taken it and passed it." "What," she said, "Wait, and you will hear from them." And I had in my purse the letter that very day from the federal, and I thought when I get relaxed and ready, I will sit down and tear this open and I will maybe have to wait. She said, "What do you mean," I said, "Look here, open this," and I opened it. She said, "You go right there, go fast, go right there, and take anything they will give you. The opportunities are tops in any Civil Service jobs that are going." She said, "I know a lot about it." So I said, "When I go up there, my supervisor will be there; I will take my things and go out." She said, "Before you get up there in the elevator, I will have talked to her, and I will tell her" She said, "You don't have to worry about anything. You don't have to say anything. I will explain to anybody. Just get the heck out of here, and you go right now." This was late morning. "You go right now to this--some place, a tall storied building on Beverly Boulevard." I did, and I got the job.

Q In what department?

A Legal.

Q Legal?

A Yes. And the lawyer was the head of everybody in the department, and four or five girls, most of whom did typing. And I told him I wasn't much at typing, I was new at it and that sort of thing, but I could. And so the end of that tale is, I ended up being supervisor to the group. I got a good job, and God bless the federal government that feeds me!

Q Now, to backtrack. Background, your family. When you were a kid, this sort of thing. You were born where?

A Syracuse, New York.

Q You were born in Syracuse, November 15--

A October 14, 1891.

Q That was a good year.

A I think it is. When I subtract it out, how old am I going to be? I am not that old yet. I am only . . .

Q You are going to be 92.

A I thought it was 93.

Q Yes. 92. This is still 1983. What type of work did your father do?

A My father was in the printing and advertising business. He had quite a plant, and he was a very well educated man and clever at writing.

Q Were you an only child?

A I was the only child.

Q Anything in particular about your mother you wanted to say?

A My mother was always sick. Always sick. I can't remember her any other way. And after she passed on, Dad and I thought we would come to California, and that is how it is we came to California. And at a resort outside of Syracuse, up in the Adirondacks--you may have heard of it--at the country club that my family had belonged to, I met

George Kenny, and when he heard that we were leaving, and so forth, he said, "I have always wanted to go there. Can I come along; we will have a chaperone if your dad is there." And George came, with us, and then we hunted up a friend whom we had know in Syracuse, a couple. And they said, "What in the heck are you wasting time? Why don't you get married?" So, we got married in our friend's home.

When I think back on the war and everything connected with it, it seems as if all the people in our Unit . . . Unit, we were kind of /slummy/ spoiled rotten. They did so many nice things for us, and so many people made sacrifices. And when you think of war service, think of it that way, and although some of them paid a price in health, it was their own fault--it wasn't the work they did, it was their play.

Q Sure. Now, since you worked in a hospital in London, was that mainly for the wounded sent back to England?

A No

Q Is there anything you would like to say about the condition of the fighting men?

A Their attitude was very generous, no criticism, none of them complained. They laughed a lot and some of them laughed at things we did, you know --but they were very nice. But they were all serious, because one of the outstanding surgeons in all of England was in this hospital, so all these extreme cases of putting people together--limbs, legs, and what-have-you, was right there in our hospital. And one thing that we didn't like much the looks of, on each floor there would be a little balcony . . . with a railing. And the nurses--the nurses, in-house--would come out and lean on them and smoke, blow smoke up. They couldn't smoke, of course, in the wards anywhere around the hospital. They would come out there, and you would look up the side of the building, and from each floor, here, they would be leaning out, smoking--and we just thought that was just awful; I still do.

Q Well, that is the difference in what a lady is.

A Yes.

Q The mother said you couldn't . . . cocktails; and you did not approve of cigarettes, so . . . which is the worst?

A When we were going over, there were always two girls that smoked; I am speaking of going over. And the Captain of the ship, up there on the top of the--talked down with--another officer told me this; he said, "We were looking at your girls and thinking what things would be like when you returned, and we all agreed on one thing, that you would all be smoking."

Q Oh?

A We only have a couple of girls that do and they are really nice girls. I associated with girls that were kind of slack--

Q Did you date any British men?

A Yes.

Q Did you enjoy the British company?

A I did

Q Did you do any traveling while you were there, outside of London, other than to Windsor Castle?

A Well, we were invited by people who had estates. They were girls that were girls that were doing the work we were, nurse's aides that were British. I went to families that had very nice lovely estates, and were invited to them, so we got outside of London for those kinds of things. But, such hospitality was absolutely lovely, wonderful . . . exciting part of it. They were important people, with social prestige.

Q Did you make any friendships, with correspondence after the war?

A We wrote thank you notes, and lots of things like that, for a period.