

Surname: Coleman	First Name(s): Freda	Army Number: W/269053	
Maiden name (if applicable): Dickinson	Name used during service: Dickinson	Rank: Lance Corporal	
Main base: Oswestry Surrey Wednesfield Lancashire	Training base: Newcastle-on-Tyne Camberley	Enrolled at: V. Coy Preston Group A.T.S. 29/07/1943 (volunteered)	
Platoon/Section:	Company/Battery: 11 th A.A. Workshops	Group/Regiment: 39 th Searchlight Regiment R.E.M.E. R.A.O.C.	Command: Ack Ack Command Northern Command
Year(s) of service: 13/8/1943 to December 1946	Reason for discharge: Demob	Trade: Driver	
Uniform Issued: S.D. Jacket Skirt Tie Shirts Shoes Boots Battledress Trousers Cap Gloves Leather jerkin Gabardine raincoat (only to drivers) Gas mask	Photo:  1943		
Description of daily tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We worked long hours driving all types of vehicles, many of which were open sided with only a tarpaulin fabric which could be closed or rolled back so we were very much exposed to the elements. • In Lancashire we had a variety of work, much of it driving heavily laden vehicles to railway sidings discharging our loads for who knows where. • Eventually I became Staff driver to the C.O.O. (Chief Ordnance Officer) which earned me a stripe – Lance Corporal – a rank given to drivers of Commanding Officers. 		

Pay book:

Not available

My last driving licence prior to demob in December 1946

Memorable moments:

- At the age of 18 years women had to register for war service, be it in factories, the land army or the women's services. The only exemptions to direction of labour or service in a forces was, if I remember correctly, teachers, nurses, doctors etc. I chose the A.T.S. and come Friday, August 13th 1943 at the age of 19 off I went.
- My first destination was to Fenham Barracks in Newcastle-on-Tyne – 3 weeks basic training: army discipline, spit and polish, health checks, injections, parade ground drill – no! you don't move if the girl next to you passes out in a dead faint, you learn to pump the blood into your leg muscles so that you too don't pass out. The issue of kit – store staff took one look at you and decided you were size this, or size that and hoped it would all fit – very often it didn't and had to be changed. So much clothing to walk away with and sort out according to rules and regulations and yes, we were issued with khaki bloomers!! The hats were horrendous and it took ages to bring them to any semblance of smartness. One of the first things drummed into us was that we had "no rights – only privileges".
- Of course, one soon began to make friends and settle down to army routine. We were of course, totally exhausted from P.T. – so much running on the spot, parade ground drill – how could there be so many people with two left feet and arms that never seemed to swing properly, but time sorted that out and how quickly we learnt that everything was by numbers. Those first three weeks we were confined to Barracks our sight of Newcastle-on-Tyne was limited to a day at the end of our time there.
- During those three weeks we were given our trade and then moved out to "win the war". There followed three weeks in a holding unit, Nutfield Priory, near Redhill in Surrey. Awaiting the start of our course which was to be trained as a Driver I.C., the I.C. standing for Internal Combustion – which was laughingly called "Infernal Combustion". This time was filled with more lectures, more P.T. and much scrubbing of floors – totally unnecessary and I have often wondered how much damage was done to the floor boards of a beautiful house with endless soap and water. At the end of our time at the holding unit I went on to No. 1 M.T.T.C. (Motor Transport Training Corps) at Camberley in Surrey. The famous picture of the then Princess Elizabeth, now H.M. Queen Elizabeth brings back so many memories as the officers instructing the Princess also put me, with others, through rigorous training – driving, maintenance, first aid, map reading, convoy drill etc. The discipline was strict but I must say, the staff certainly knew their stuff and in no time at all we became more knowledgeable about what went on under the bonnet and what there was underneath. For most of the time we were exhausted from a full days work and many of us found it hard work to keep awake especially when we were lying underneath a vehicle being taught what a drop arm, drag link, track rod, gear box, prop shaft, differential was, how to grease nipples, what sort of oil

went in where and what for – quite a battle to stay out of the arms of Morpheus when we were so tired.

- Our driving tuition began using vehicles that were raised on blocks, usually 30 cwt trucks. This meant that we could start the vehicle and actually drive without the vehicle moving and, yes, in those days we did have starting handles, synchromesh gearboxes weren't in existence – only crash gearboxes which meant learning the art of double-de-clutching and hoping to time the rev's so that we could change gear smoothly but, in the early days it hardly ever did and the crashing and grating of a protesting gear box had to be heard to be believed. When eventually we were allowed out on the road sure as could be if we crashed the gears some comedian would shout "Sort 'em out". However, time and dedicated staff soon improved our performance and we became more and more proficient.
- Periodically we would be accompanied on our route by one of the officers and, we knew that this was decision time – some of us passed muster, others were failed and R.T.U'd (returned to unit) for re-training in some other capacity.
- We, as drivers, were allowed a little bit of snobbery in that, on entry to the M.T.T.C. the leather straps on our hats were worn over the top of our hats. We also had bright yellow gauntlet gloves considered necessary as only hand signals were used in those days.
- Our first "night driving" was quite a milestone – no street lights (black-out regulations) and vehicle lights were of little or no use – side lights showing a light the size of a sixpence and headlights only a slit of about 3 inches with a cover so that the lights, hopefully, wouldn't be visible to enemy aircraft. We were, however, young and coped with most hazards and were full of the confidence of youth. Discipline was very strict at No 1 M.T.T.C. but enforced in a kindly way except to be awakened each day at 6.30 am, if I remember correctly.
- Our camp was virtually next door to Sandhurst Military College and nearby was a Free French Camp whose residents seemed to play "The Marseillaise" – their National Anthem, all day long on their bugles.
- At the end of that ten weeks we emerged fit as fleas which must have been the end result of so many cross-country runs and Physical Training. Oh! That I could feel like that today!
- From Camberley, I was posted to 39th Searchlight Regiment an attachment in Oswestry, but after a few months we moved back to Surrey being marched through the town in the dead of night and pouring rain, on to a troop train, ending our journey at Pendell Camp, Bletchingley to find no beds and only bread, jam and tea to sustain us till everything was properly organised.
- Eventually, I moved to 11th A.A. Workshops R.E.M.E. Wednesfield, Staffs where we worked long hours driving all types of vehicles, many of which were open sided with only a tarpaulin fabric which could be closed or rolled back so we were very much exposed to the elements, rain, snow, wind, despite leather jerkins, boots, gloves etc. On occasions we were so cold we couldn't feel our feet despite thick socks and boots and it wasn't unknown not to be able to feel the accelerator pedal. I remember one girl driving her vehicle behind a funeral, her feet so numb from cold she pressed the accelerator too hard and almost ended up in the hearse! A sort of black comedy! Lots of similar events happened providing much laughter to a lot of exhausted women.
- At this time, the roads and fields were as one large car park, filled with vehicles awaiting different battle fronts. Such orderly parking for mile after mile. I must say that this period of my life was one of the happiest so many lovely people – men and women, always at leisure to be helpful. I could never have wished for better friends.
- In time the workshops moved overseas to Germany as part of the B.O.F. (British

Occupation Force). I went North again to the R.A.O.C. (Royal Army Ordnance Corps) Burscough, Lancashire to a variety of work, much of it driving heavily laden vehicles to railway sidings discharging our loads for who knows where. That was a time which I knew what it was to sweat profusely – such hard work, but eventually I became Staff driver to the C.O.O. (Chief Ordnance Officer) which earned me a stripe – the dizzy heights of Lance Corporal – and rank given to drivers of Commanding Officers. It also gave me a few extra pence pay per day. My car – a beautiful Wolesley despite its camouflage, which was, alas, on the condemned list and often in need of first aid. I lost count of the times I had to push it, then, when moving, jump in, slip it into gear and move, thankful to get it moving again, especially if it was during the night!! However, we made it and travelled so many miles from one end of the country to the other.

- Ironically, despite those years of driving all types of vehicles, wagons, cars, vans, you name it I, along with others had to take a written exam and a road test (a Canadian Fordson with the pedals the wrong way round) before obtaining a Certificate of Competence to allow me to apply for a civilian licence from the County Council. It makes one think. All this for my pay of 6/8d per week, but having said that, I am grateful for all the A.T.S. did for me. It taught me about life – its many ups and downs.
- As for that 6/8d per week which we received at Pay Parade, all lined up to attention, awaiting our name and number to be called, we then marched forward, came to attention, saluted the officer, held out our right hand for the money which we then transferred to our left hand, took one step back and saluted the officer, turned and returned to our rank. The good fortune of being a driver was that, more often than not, we were out on the road so missed pay parade and eventually collected our pay from the office in an informal manner.
- One very special memory I have, is of a day I drove my Commanding Officer to Chester. Much top brass in evidence. We drivers were told to assemble at a given point where we stood informally in a part circle - why was that? What was going on? Then he appeared – a slight figure of a man, “Monty” – General Montgomery (later Field Marshall Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, C.B.E.) walking along chatting to many of us. He brought a breath of fresh air to the army by his relationship with his troops and changed the course of the war with his defeat of Rommel. A man more than worthy of remembrance.
- I am grateful to the many men and women with whom I worked, they enriched my life in no small way.

Photos:



No 1 M.T.T.C. Camberley, Surrey 1943