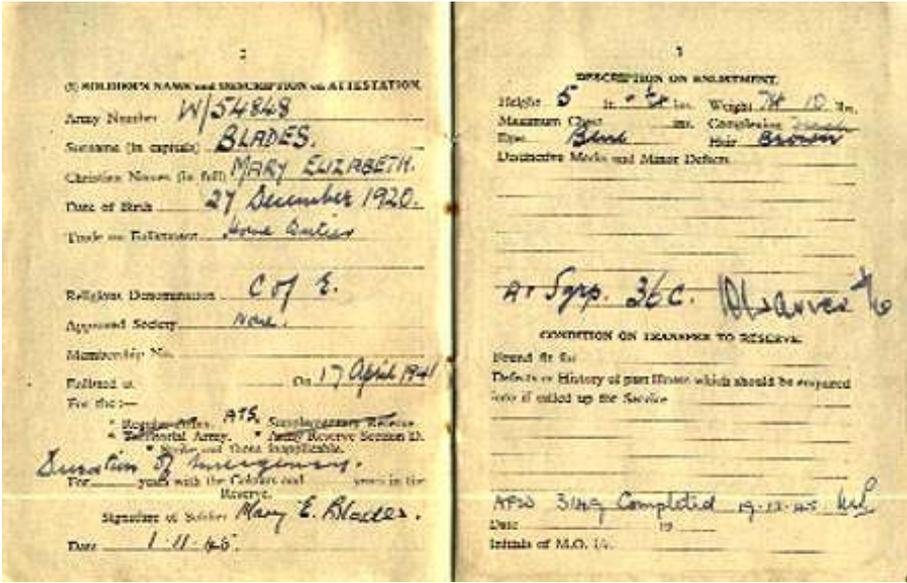


Surname: Aplin	First Name(s): Mary E.	Army Number: W/54848	
Maiden name (if applicable): Blades	Name used during service: Blades	Rank: Cpl	
Main base: Brancepeth Castle (Co Durham) Warrington Chester Hull Sheffield Rotherham Lowestoft Blyth Middlesborough		Training base: Nevilles Cross	Enrolled at: Durham
Platoon/Section:	Company/Battery: 516 (M) H.A.A. Battery	Group/Regiment: Royal Artillery	Command: A.A. Command
Year(s) of service: 1941 to January 1946	Reason for discharge: End of War	Trade: Cook	
Uniform Issued: 1 cap & badge 1 tunic 2 skirts 2 shirts 1 tie 1 tin hat 2 pairs pyjamas 2 pairs woollen under knickers 2 pairs silk khaki knickers (with elastic bottoms) 2 bras 2 hooked sided suspender belts 2 vests 2 pairs khaki lisle stockings 2 pairs brown lace-up shoes 2 white overalls 2 white kerchiefs (to tie up hair) – cooks only, orderlies wore khaki		Photo: 	
		Pte Blades with Durham Light Infantry 1941	

<p>Kit: 1 gas mask 1 knife, 1 fork, 1 spoon, 1 enamel mug 1 housewife (small canvas pocket which rolled up to hold mending and sewing kit) 1 greatcoat button stick shoe cleaning brushes brass cleaning brush (polish and dusters you had to buy) kitbag</p>	
<p>Description of daily tasks:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When with the Durham Light Infantry there were thousands of men to be fed and we worked in shifts 6 am until 2 pm and 2 pm until 10 pm. There were about 6 men and 8 girl cooks on each shift. • With the mixed battery, we mostly all worked 24 hours on duty and 24 hours off with the change over at 2 pm but our off duty was not entirely free as the fatigues had to be done. During our 24 hours 'on duty' we could get to our sleeping hut after the teatime meal and the kitchen was made ready for next morning. But if the guns were 'in action' for any length of time the 'on duty' cooks had to go in and make drinks to be taken to the men and girls in the gun pits.
<p>Pay book:</p>	
<p>Memorable moments:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I volunteered to go into the ATS early in 1941 and was called to report to Durham and was given the number W/54848. We did our basic training at Nevilles Cross in what we were told had been a Teacher Training College. • The basic training consisted of learning how to march and doing Physical Training every day. We received our uniform and were shown how to wear it and look after it. Also we were instructed in Army traditions and how and who to salute. It was a laugh when learning how to salute if you happened to be riding a bicycle. Also we were taught and tested on the ranks and seniority of NCO and Officers of all the armed forces. Church Parade on Sunday morning was enjoyable as we marched down through some playing fields and over a bridge to Durham Cathedral. • Our pay was approximately one shilling (5p) a day at the start but went up gradually as we got promotion or passed exams after courses. Considering our clothes, food and accommodation were all in, it was adequate at the time. • I took an extra few weeks in Cookery Training. I was then sent to Brancepeth Castle (Co Durham) where the Durham Light Infantry had their Headquarters.

There were thousands of men to be fed and we worked in shifts 6 am until 2 pm and 2 pm until 10 pm. There were about 6 men and 8 girl cooks on each shift. We girls had to march in a body from our camp down the road to the big camp and were always escorted by a male guard carrying a lantern during darkness.

- After about six months a call went out for Volunteers for a 'new' unit. Always ready for a challenge off I went to Oswestry (Shropshire) with a few more girl volunteers where we discovered we were to be part of a 'mixed' (male and female) Heavy Artillery Battery. These units were to replace the 'all male' units for duty nearer the front. The girls learned to use Predictor Equipment – Height Finders – Telephones and to do Visual Plane Spotting and of course the cooking (one of these was me). The men were to man the guns and do other trades like carpentry and engineering. Most of the men were older or had been wounded in previous campaigns.
- After various training we were assembled as 516 (M) H.A.A. Battery. Approximately 1,000 of us (600 girls and 400 men) were posted on to two gunsites on the outskirts of Manchester. We had four 4.7 Heavy A.A. Guns on each site plus a few Bofors guns which we girls were all trained to operate. I cannot remember much about our training on Bofors guns, but I remember that when the shell was dropped into the breach, we had to 'duck down' quickly and cover our ears. I suppose we were trained as a last resort if the big guns and crew were knocked out. Different sections of girls were trained in different emergency measures, ie fire fighting, plane spotting, first aid and other 'last ditch stands'. We always occupied two sites. Our address was often quite a long way from where we were actually stationed and I know that some wives at home questioned what the (M) stood for in the address. The older married men used to tell their wives it stood for 'Mobile' as they knew the wives would be jealous to know their men were serving along side us young girls. It did in fact stand for 'Mixed'.
- The ration truck arrived each day with our supplies for 24 hours. The Sergeant or Corporal in charge decided what the menu should be from the food available and we shared the jobs out between us. We were often very hot as we had to wear our khaki shirts and ties and skirt under our white overall. Wearing our brown lace-up shoes on hot concrete floors soon ruined them, also if grease got spilled the leather soon caused us to slip so we were later issued with proper clogs with wooden soles and metal plates and wool socks. They were very comfortable but the noise of clogs on concrete was deafening.
- As the bombing raids on the cities developed we were moved to other places namely Warrington, Chester, Hull, Sheffield, Rotherham, Lowestoft. When we moved we had an idea how far we were going by the means of transport. If we were marched to the railway station we knew it was a long trip. If it was Army lorries we knew it would be a short journey. The 'off duty cooks' went first to take over the new cook house and have a meal ready and the duty cooks handed over the old cook house to the 'in coming Battery'. The same happened with the gun crews, so that the guns were never 'out of action'.
- Every so often we had to 'practice evacuate'. When we had to don boiler suits and go outside and build field kitchens and cook the meal. This was sprung on us, as was fire drill, when we least expected it.
- We were mostly housed in Barrack Huts made of wood but sometimes in corrugated metal Nissen huts. There were about 16 of us to one hut all of one 'trade' in the same hut. Our beds were ply-wood bases, we had three square straw filled mattresses called 'biscuits' when placed side by side made a six foot mattress and four grey blankets, two sheets and a pillow. We got a clean sheet and pillow slip every week, and our white overalls were laundered for us. Also our khaki shirts could be laundered but most of us preferred to wash our lisle stockings and underwear ourselves, but we had very little facilities for doing this.

Our beds had to be folded up and the blankets staked in a special way before 'room inspection' at 9 am. Even if you were 'off duty'. Once a week was 'kit inspection' when all kit had to be folded and placed in a special way. You were in trouble if you were one item short.

- During the war all village and town name plates and sign posts were removed so when we got to a new place it was always a bit mysterious where we were and if we asked a local inhabitant they were reluctant to tell us. But amongst about 500 troops there was always someone who recognised a local landmark.
- When we got to Lowestoft we found ourselves 'under canvas'. We were four to each tent. We still had our plywood beds and the blankets had to be folded and stacked. We had the luxury of a duck board to stand on when we got out of bed. This was quite an experience but as it was now Spring 1944 we made the best of it. Our cookhouse at Lowestoft was a flagstone floor with the ovens etc. bolted down, corrugated iron walls fastened to a wood frame which only came down to within about eighteen inches of the ground and a gap between the top of the wall and the roof. Plenty of draught, no fridges in those days. The dining room was a marquee. We were told we were the nearest serving girls to Germany. We had a lot of activity down at Lowestoft. Doodle bugs were coming over every day and our guns were firing to bring them down. There was also a lot of troop movement in the area which turned out to be preparations for D Day. The weather worsened about this time June, and we soon became bogged down so we were moved up to Blyth (Northumberland) and then to Middlesbrough.
- At some of the gunsites which were in isolated spots our toilets were buckets under a wooden seat. All the girls (and men) had to take turns to scrub out the toilets and wash rooms. It was often quite a long walk from the sleeping hut to the toilets and wash rooms. If we needed 'to go' in the night we had to waken a friend to accompany us. Remember a blackout was in operation so we dare not even carry a torch, even if we had acquired one.
- We mostly all worked 24 hours on duty and 24 hours off with the change over at 2 pm but our off duty was not entirely free as the fatigues had to be done. The cleaning that I have described, cleaning the dining room, guard duty, vegetable preparation and washing up in the cookhouse as well as practicing any new drills that came in, Fire watching, guard duties all had to be done. All the operational girls had to share these duties. Cooks had to keep the kitchen clean. All was inspected every day by the orderly Officer. During our 24 hours 'on duty' we could go to our sleeping hut after the teatime meal and the kitchen was made ready for next morning. But if the guns were 'in action' for any length of time the 'on duty' cooks had to go in to the cookhouse and make drinks to be taken to the men and girls in the gun pits.
- Punishment for wrong doing or kit loss was to receive extra fatigue duties.
- Every evening music was played in the NAFFI hut and those of us 'off duty' danced and chatted and drank tea. When the ration and money allowed we could get a drink of beer or buy our ration of cigarettes. Sometimes an ENSA concert party came and put on a show or a film was shown. When off duty we could have a pass to go out of camp from 5 pm until 10.30 (or 11 pm in summer) this allowed us to go into the nearest town or village where we often found a dance in progress. So then we flirted with the local boys or other troops from nearby camps. If we were in the country the lads were often farm lads but if we were near an industrial town the civilian lads were in reserved occupations and not eligible for conscription. Lots of friendships were made and some marriages. I met my sailor boy, a Devon lad, when stationed on a gunsite on the banks of the Tees outside Middlesbrough. We married in 1947 and after 55 years of happy marriage I am now a widow.
- I am still in contact with my wartime ATS pal. We visit each other when possible

and ring each other about once a month. Other pals are on Christmas card lists. During the wartime we were granted 'leave' about every four months for 10 days. For this we were given a railway warrant to take us to the nearest railway station to our home. We took our 'leave' on a rota system, no two of the same trade were away together. During our time at home we were expected to wear our uniform with pride at all times. Not that we had much choice as our sisters and cousins at home had raided and borrowed our clothes left at home.

- Our guns were in action at Christmas 1944, but after then Hitler was too busy elsewhere but we had to still be ready. After peace came in August 1945 all the married girls were discharged immediately also the older men were discharged. We all were given a discharge code depending on our age and length of service. Our numbers dropped every week and I was discharged in January 1946 to return to my home village where I still live.

Photos:



L/Cpl Blades on the right - 1942



Lowestoft – June 1944
B Section 516 (M) H.A.A. Battery

Back row

Harry Hammond, L/Bdr Ted Hunt, L/Bdr Frank Dumbleton, Jack Blessett, L/B George --, Ernest Coult (Farmer), (Chesney) Allan, Bill Andrews, L/Bdr Wright, George Darby, George Butler, Paddy Allan, Fred --, Johnny Hatton, Micky Jenson, Albert Taylor, Jim Potts.

Second row

Cpl Blades, Clara Girdlestone, Margaret O'Hara, Betty Reeves, Ruby Armstrong, Phyllis Atkinson, Hilda Ching, Flo Burrell, Lena Bannister, Mary Drinkall, Lily Howe, Norma Stewart,. Margaret Smith, Peggy Curry, Sid Fowler

Sitting

L/Cpl Ada Hunt, Lucy Edwards, Cpt Pentney (Skitty) May Mears, Sgt Nesbit (Chris), Sgt Barclay, Miss Hayes, Cpt Hatch (Site Commander) Mr Weaver, Sgt Boden, Bdr Sam Bamford, Vera Campbell, Bessie Breeze, L/Cpl Ruffles, - Johns,

Kneeling

L/Cpl Marion Anderson (Andy) Betty Weightman, Dot Young, Martha Guilty, Binky Potts, Mary Wakeman, Beryl Collie, Kath Pratt, L/Cpl Edna Alderson, Babs Rowe, Lou Wright

*nicknames in brackets.