

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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Transcription file name	AEG-Arthur Green		- OH Transcription.doc

Web Pages:

Oral History article:

<https://nfknowledge.org/contributions/memories-of-a-brockenhurst-evacuee/#map=10/-1.58/50.82/0/22:0:0.6|36:1:1|37:1:1>

Project information:

<https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/discover/history-culture/new-forest-remembers/>

File name	AEG	015	_0001M0.WAV	Interview date: 13/12/13
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00-00-00

So Arthur, if you just give your name and age at the start of the war, and where you lived?

My name is Arthur Green, I'm 86 and I reside in Portsmouth at the present time and I was here when war started – Oh, that's a lie – I was evacuated wasn't I?

OK Arthur, if you'd just like to give me name and age at the start of the war and where you lived?

My name is Arthur Green. I was 12 years old when war broke out and I was evacuated to Brockenhurst and was billeted there for several years.

What was life like in Portsmouth just before the evacuation?

Life here before the war was quite good for most of us, although some people were still of course, getting over the 1930s, which were very difficult for some people. In fact, my father came out of the service and was out of work for 6 months and eventually managed to get a job on Whale Island as a steward, which he kept until of course he was recalled. Went back into the Marines and he went through the second world war. An interesting time for him. He was sent up to Fair Isle, where they shot down one of the first German planes, taking the pilot captive, and the silk parachute captive. And he had a third of that silk parachute, and my mother had silk underwear thanks to Mr Hitler.

And what led to the decision to evacuate you?

If you wished to continue your education, you had to be evacuated because the school had

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gone, and there were schools in Portsmouth, but they weren't of the same standard or the same quality and so my people said "You're education comes first, you must be evacuated". And of course, I had to go.

00-02-10

And tell me about the journey to (from?) Portsmouth when you were evacuated?

When we left, we were met at the school by a coach and taken to the station and then we went by train to Salisbury, and we sat on Salisbury station I suppose for hours on end, and the headmaster went to find out what was happening and it turned out that we shouldn't have been in Salisbury at all, we had to go to Brockenhurst. So he had to arrange for transport, and you can imagine, we were sitting there, and we'd all been instructed not to have anything to drink, for obvious reasons. Eventually we were taken by coach down to Brockenhurst and there we met the billeting lady who eventually found us a billet rather late in the day. I imagine we were quite exhausted by that time, but at least we were there. And the next thing we had to find paper and pen to write home to say we'd safely arrived and where we were.

OK, and I understand there was a school operetta written about your journey?

In consequence of this going to Salisbury instead of Brockenhurst triggered one of our masters who was quite good at that sort of thing – Mr Hitchins – to write an operetta. And in the operetta he has to bring in the fact that "here we sit on Salisbury station, like birds in the wilderness". And it was produced, and there was a song and we all had to join in. It was produced and put on in the large school hall later in the year. I suppose most of us were taking part in one way or another. I was one of the people who was in the orchestra, a very poor player of the violin, but nonetheless I was incorporated into the orchestra for that occasion.

00-04-20

What were the billets like that you stayed in, in Brockenhurst?

Billets! Billets there varied an awful lot. One billet I was in for quite a time was owned by a doctor's widow, and obviously pre-war they were quite wealthy. There was a car laid up in the garage, there was a live-in maid who gave her breakfast in bed, had to change her uniform during the course of the day and yours truly had to live in the kitchen with the maid, which was probably a lot better than being in the main room where I would have had to mind my P's & Q's a lot more. We were allowed, once in the day, 9 o'clock, to listen to the news to find out how the war was progressing and then it was off to bed. That was one billet.

Another billet, which was in many ways a lot better, had a chap who was a watch maker who worked all day not with watches but instruments. That particular billet had no electricity and he refused to buy any more batteries for the radio, so when it came to the news, he

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used to come up to the bedroom where I'd made a crystal set, and he'd sit with one part of the headphones and I'd sit with the other to hear the 6 o'clock news. I don't think we ever paid anything for a licence but they never caught up with us, obviously.

00-06-00

What do you remember about the day war broke out?

As I said, we were in Brockenhurst at that time. The church was up on the hill, and I remember I was in the church and suddenly the side door opened and the gentleman handed in a note for the Rector who then announced that war had been declared. I don't think there was any sort of gasps or anything; we probably expected something that would happen. But nonetheless it was a turning point for several years to come; five years to be exact, wasn't it. I suppose it justified the fact that we were evacuated.

00-06-50

So what was school life like at this time?

The school at that period, where we were, we were fortunate. The county school will have been rebuilt. They were moved to the county school, and we took over the old premises except for things like physics, chemistry and gym, and never permitted to use the new premises, which were very good actually. So we probably had the best of both worlds. Looking back, there were air raids, least the siren would sound and I can remember on one occasion, 'cos at that stage we had no air raid shelters, they'd put up planking across the ditch between two hedges. And I can remember being there and looking up and seeing the German planes going across in formation with nothing to stop them.

00-07-55

What did you do to earn money at that time?

Where I was in one of the billets, they had contact with a chap who had a cow. Obviously milked the cow, used the cream to make butter but then gave away the skimmed milk. And someone had to collect it and take it around, and I was asked if I would do it. Also pick up the newspapers because they'd stopped delivering them. So I used to collect them, take the milk to the hotel and to one or two other places and the papers and was paid the princely sum of one shilling or one and six, which was well worth having in those days.

00-08-40

And tell me about your cycle trips into Lymington.

Of course, we didn't spend all our time doing homework. We were able to go out and enjoy ourselves in the Forest. And one of the things was we would cycle, which was about three and a half miles, to Lymington where there was a large open air swimming pool. We'd enjoy

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ourselves there. I'm not sure, but I think there was a fish and chip shop on the way back probably and no doubt we indulged in the chips if we couldn't afford the fish.

And what did you see on the way to Lymington?

The road actually went right past a prisoner of war camp – Italian prisoners of war – who had very large coloured circles on their back to identify them. There were quite a lot of them there; I'm not sure how many, but quite a lot.

00-09-34

And what do you remember about the bombs falling in Brockenhurst?

The first year, the river 'rose and flooded and a lot of people said the Germans mistook it for Southampton Water and decided they would give it a pasting and they dropped an awful lot of incendiary bombs. 'Course us boys were interested 'cos they didn't do much damage, they just burnt out on the side and we would dig up the fins for our collection and mementos.

Talking about bombs, one lad was very fortunate. He lived at Purkiss's, which was in the middle of the village. We were allowed home one weekend in six. I think the headmaster decided if you said you can't go home at all, we would have gone and never come back. So one weekend in six you could go home. So, obviously only a few of us were away. And that particular weekend this chap had gone home, and that bomb dropped on that village shop where he was billeted and destroyed the room he would have been in. So it was luck of the draw for him. He survived although the premises didn't.

00-10-52

And tell me about going to Lyndhurst Fire Station.

Didn't always cycle towards Lymington, sometimes we'd go to Lyndhurst. It was interesting because at Lyndhurst the Fire Station there, they'd had a bomb on it which had come through the roof, gone into the floor, hadn't exploded but had a round hole of about 10 inches or more. You could go in and you could inspect it and of course there was a bucket there you had to put your penny in, for the privilege, which went towards their amenities. I'll always remember that particular one.

00-11-32

And tell me about collecting shrapnel.

Of course it wasn't only bombs dropping on the area, there was awful lot of anti-aircraft guns in the area and they would be firing half the night. What we used to do was to go out onto the road between Brockenhurst and Lyndhurst and pick up the shrapnel. So it then ended up with all the other mementos of the war.

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But talking about the bombing, from where we were we could look over towards Southampton and we could see the glow in the sky because Southampton had really caught a pasting and was going up in flames. They said that the butter was running out of the warehouses and down the gutters, but I don't know if that's true, but it's a good story.

00-12-24

And I understand you had tea with the sister of the Bishop of Peterborough.

Yes. I'd been confirmed before the war and my mother said "You should go to Communion". So being an obedient child I used to go to 8 o'clock Communion. Mind, before I went, the couple where I lived benefited because they used to make him a cup of tea and take it up to them in bed. On my way to church, there was a lady, and I met her lots of times and it turned out that she was a Miss Blagden and her brother was the Bishop of Peterborough. She very kindly asked me round to afternoon tea on a Sunday, more than once, and she said bring a friend. And then of all things in those days, we played cards, which was not the done thing on a Sunday.

00-13-20

So where was your mother whilst you were in Brockenhurst?

My people? My mother, my grandmother and my aunt, all lived in Portsmouth. My mother realised that it was getting very difficult, I mean with the bombing, and she was able to get lodgings out a few doors from where I lived in Brockenhurst. So she brought her mother and my aunt down to stay. They were very fortunate because they had a friend who ran a car and he was able to bring them down all the way. I had to stand by the side of the road to signal where they had to go and they stayed there 'til about 1942. The advantage was I think that I could pop in and see my mother and my gran very easily.

Thinking about that particular place, I'll always remember - I don't know if you know or don't know – the best thing to catch mice or to bait the traps is not cheese but chocolate. We happened to have a bar of chocolate and my people put it in a bag and hung it up in the cupboard under the stairs. To their horror the next day, the mouse had found it (chuckling) and nibbled it, so we never had that chocolate. But never mind, we did have other things and I suppose we were more fortunate than a good many.

When my father came to stay over the Christmas, he said "What have you got? Have you got .." No, no chicken for Christmas lunch. So I knew where all the farms were, some five farms, and we spent the whole afternoon traipsing round one farm after another and they all said "No, no chicken, no chicken" and we got back into the centre of the village and there was one farm there and the farmer said "Yes, you can have that chicken", and it was one legged one. He said "Come back tomorrow". So we went back the next day. I suppose because my father was in uniform they took pity on us and we had a chicken and it cost my father ten shillings, which doesn't seem a lot today but then was quite a lot, but nonetheless

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we were well blessed. We had a decent Christmas lunch.

00-15-50

So, did you do any sports while you were in Brockenhurst?

Sport of course was part of school life. Everyone was expected to play and yours truly had to join in. We had good playing fields, which were very fortunate really, and you could do running, football and cricket. I was quite good at cross-country running. I could run the mile when a lot of people couldn't, which (chuckle) I was quite pleased and proud about.

But one of the things that I'll always remember. We had a master there, Alfie Stockwood, and he'd played cricket for Yorkshire in his day, and we always had a masters versus pupils match during the course of the year. And of all things, he was out first ball. I mean, there'd be a great shout of hurray from the boys but not from the masters. We did cross-country running splashing through all the streams, which we didn't worry about, and quite frankly that was one of the best things I think of being in that part of the world, that we could indulge in all these sort of sports.

For gym we used to have to go to the county school. They had a lovely new gym but a lot of our time was taken up not doing sport but we were enlisted in growing vegetables for the canteen. I can remember pulling up the carrots which should have ended in the pot but I'm afraid they ended up in me. (laughter) And I imagine a good many other boys did the same.

00-17-43

So when did you return to Portsmouth and why then?

The school prepared boys for the naval entrance exam for artificers or for apprenticeships in the dockyard. In due course I took the exam, passed high enough to become an artificer, but then unfortunately failed a medical. Looking back of course it may have saved my life. If I'd a gone in the navy I could have been killed. I didn't. I was then fortunate enough – became an engine fitter apprentice, which was a five year apprenticeship and in due course had to come back to Portsmouth in 1942. The war was still on, but the worst of the bombing was over fortunately. I became a runner. In other words, whenever there was an air raid all the people on fire watch had to report to a particular point, and as the runner I had to take a message to say how many were on duty round to a central point, which was interesting, because I can remember going up the road and hearing the shrapnel wiz past me. I thought "my goodness, I wonder why I've escaped?" But I did. (chuckles)

00-19-06

So tell me about the placards on the dock gates.

When we used to go to work and if you went through the main gate, there was a large placard there, and it said "This is the year". It was obviously referring to the fact that D-day

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was going to come, and then on the particular day when it started, there was a sticker right across it which said "This is the day". I'll always remember because my father got me up early and all the shipping had disappeared from the Solent and there were nonstop planes going over with gliders for part of the invasion.

One of the things which - they'd emptied a lot of the storerooms and that in the yard in anticipation of bringing in all the wounded or the departed, but fortunately they weren't needed anything like as much as they'd anticipated, although a lot of people did lose their lives on that particular day. So we were lucky. We knew what was going on and thank the Lord, the invasion was successful.

00-20-15

Did you see much of the build up to D-day in the countryside around Brockenhurst?

If you'd have been like I was, cycling with my friends all round the area, you would have found that under almost every tree there were lorries and army personnel awaiting. We weren't stopped, but of course a lot of people couldn't come into the area because it was restricted, you see. But of course, on the day it had all disappeared. They'd all gone.

00-20-50

And what did you see of German planes around this time?

By this time the German planes were few and far between. Unfortunately, a little bit later in the war, we did start to get the – what d'you call them? – the flying bombs, and they came over but they had an awful job to hit Portsmouth, which is an island, and so they tended to miss. And we didn't get the V2's either. Very late in the war there was a single German plane came over and the ack-ack guns which were placed on the common here ceased firing, but the marines at Eastleigh kept on. They're just one gun there. And I'll always remember because we would see this plane, it was just a speck in the distance and all of a sudden they caught it and it was finished. I'm not sure we cheered, but we were very glad anyway.

End: 00-22-04

Keywords: Portsmouth, Brockenhurst, Southampton, Fair Isle, German plane, silk parachute, silk underwear, education, evacuated, Salisbury station, billeting, radio, news, school, sports, local deliveries, trips to Lymington, Italian POW camp, collecting shrapnel, Lyndhurst Fire Station, bomb damage, bombing, mice & chocolate, Christmas chicken, cross-country running, growing vegetables, apprenticeship, engine fitter, air raid, runner, D-day, shipping in Solent, lorries, army personnel, flying bombs (V1), ack-ack guns.

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