

## New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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*Could you start by telling me your name, where you were born and in which year please?*

Yes, my name's Betty Hockey, I was born in Bournemouth, born and bred, and that was in 1916.

*I understand you ran concert parties – the Non-stops, and you entertained troops all around the New Forest during the Second World War*

Yes, that's right. It was a very large concert party; I think we had every artiste possible. I chose all people that wanted to go into the forces but they weren't allowed to leave their jobs. So that was the nearest they could get. And we stayed together right through, until 1948. I think we were the only concert party doing that. We were always welcome wherever we went. And then television was coming in, making its mark, so theatre was dying and we went out on a high note.

**[00:01:09]** *Which artists did you have in your concert party? (repeated)*

Singers, four girl dancers, I was the principal dancer doing Can-Can and of course that was frowned on then and it wasn't allowed in England and anyway. If you had to see the Can-Can you literally had to go to France. The boys loved it. And frankly I liked doing it, it was

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quite nice! And one day the General from Southern Command rang me and he said "I've had a complaint" I said "Oh! What's the complaint?" He said "The Can-Can" Oh, I said "Who on earths complained?" He said "one of our, OUR silly entertainment officers". He said "He's complained, but he said it's formal so I must go through with it" So about three days later he rang me he said its ok, carry on, I've posted him abroad! (laughs)

**[00:02:24]** *So you had men in your concert party too? (repeated)*

Oh, yes, yes, we had quite a lot of men. There was an old Fisherman and he would do sleight of hand. There was a fellow that had a café at Wimborne. There was a builder fellow, he was a singer, and so it went on.

**[00:02:59]** *And you did a concert at Hurst Castle, can you tell me about that concert?*

Yes, very difficult place to get to of course, you have to go over by boat. It was full of weeds and brambles and lord knows what. And we were in the Officers Mess after the show and there's one of the soldiers came in and said "would the concert party please hurry and get down to the boat as quickly as possible the tides coming out and it's going to be difficult all round". So we went down and we had the two children with us at that time. My daughter and her friend. And I think the soldiers were carrying those two down and we were struggling with all the brambles (laughs) getting stuck. However, we got down to the boat which was some way off shore where the deep water was, so we had to take our socks and shoes off all of us and paddle out until the deeper water. Then they thought well how are they going to get us onto the boat? However they did, they got us all on. They picked us up bodily and lifted us onto the boat, threw us on the boat! (laughs)

**[00:04:23]** *So who had you been entertaining that evening? The people stationed there?*

Yes, yes, yes. I can't remember what Regiment it was now, but I think it was Royal Engineers, if I remember rightly.

*I think that's the only surviving garrison theatre now from the war, what was it like inside?*

(Sighs) a bit stark and a lot of underground dungeons and what not. Not an ideal place to be posted, but they seemed to like it there those that were. It's mainly gunnery.

*Was it just one concert you did there? Or did you keep going back to that place? ...*

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Sorry?

*Did you keep returning to Hurst Castle or was it a one-off concert there?*

Oh no, we went there many times. We repeated a lot of shows; we were very popular (laughs) terribly spoilt (laughs).

**[00:05:34]** *Can you tell me about some of the airfields you visited around the forest?*

Yes, I think we went as far as Portsmouth, but the forest yes, we gave a lot of shows there. And just prior to D-Day of course, the forest was full up, under canvas, and well we concentrated on them, because of course we knew something was afoot but of course, we didn't know what. And of course we didn't realise they were all going off from there. The army were very very good. They'd arrange Marquees to do the shows in and the soldiers would even build stages and things, it was surprising what they did do. But they were always happy shows and we had a lot of forces for entertainment and we drew them into it. It would be very corny now of course looking back on it, but we would have four seats on the stage and four men sitting on the seats and four girls sitting on the men's laps. Then another one would come in with four bottles, baby's bottles, full of milk you see and they'd take one each and the first one to finish was the winner and he would get an enamel babies potty with all the artist's names on (laughs). I don't know if any are still about (laughs) I'm sure there were hundreds of them!

**[00:07:23]** *Which was your favourite airfield to perform at? (repeated)*

Famous...

*Your favourite place to perform?*

I don't know I think possibly the ships that used to come into Bournemouth Bay for shelter and it was funny to do that one because the only contact you had was ship to shore so I had to go down to Bournemouth Pier and there would be a sailor there with all his equipment and he would relay my, what I wanted to tell them, over to the ship. Which was no easy job. However, when the day came we were going, a truck would take us and all our scenery down to Bournemouth Pier where it was transported then over to the ship which was possibly roughly half a mile away. We would do the show, have a do at the Officer's Mess and come back. *Well now, our pianist, he was Gay. Very nice fellow, but Gay.* We got him tight one night. I don't know how he got off the ship I'm sure (laughs) but he was wandering up the pier between two soldiers and apparently he got home and they wouldn't

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let him in so he stayed out all night (laughs) he didn't get drunk again (laughs).

**[00:09:15]** *I understand you did some concert parties at Hurn airfield and you were there... your hundredth party was the same night as their hundredth mission?*

Yes, that's right. That was, strangely enough I was looking at it a few minutes ago. That was 397<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group that was stationed here. Well ever since I've been over to America and done most of their reunions, I can't do them now unfortunately. I'm still in touch with them but there aren't that many left now, but it's nice to hear from them still. And there's a picture here of me meeting one of them when he came over last year.

*What do you remember of that evening?(repeated)*

*The hundredth evening?*

Well, we waited for them to come back. Because they had been on a bombing mission that night and it was the very first mission they had with no upsets at all, they all came back. Every one of them. So it was lovely to see them.

*And did you perform at other airfields in the New Forest?*

Yes, Yes. At Beaulieu, Holmsley, Stoney Cross, all of them actually, yes.

*Do you have any memories particularly from any of them?*

No, mostly they were ok. Stoney Cross they were very good. They used to pile us into their trucks and the airmen would take off and we would try and beat them before they could take off! (laughs) crazy, absolutely. Only the Yanks could do that (laughs). I mean, In England you'd have to have a piece of paper first! (laughs).

**[00:11:11]** *Did you come across lots of different nationalities?*

Yes, yes, quite a lot Russians... and even Germans we gave a show to. We went down near Weymouth and we got ready for the show, we'd been there many many times, but there was barbed wire all around this time. We thought that was a bit strange, but I mean we were so used to seeing things, it didn't matter. We unloaded all our stuff from the truck and the CO came up and he was British. He said "you do know this is a German Prisoner of War camp do you?" and I said "No, everything back on the truck". So he said "now look".

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He said "I've purposely let you unload". "Oh, Why?" He said "they're a grand bunch of fellows and I'd do everything possible I can for them. If you won't give the show to them, give it to me will you?" (laughs). What could we do? So we made him promise that he would never record it anywhere and we had a lovely show. Most of the Germans spoke British anyway and they seemed to appreciate all the jokes and everything. We said "well that's nice, we're glad we've done it now". But that was the only one we... mainly we did. But recently, I say recently it must have been about 15 years ago now, a German rang me. High up in the Air force. And he said "I understand that you entertained some of our boys when they were guests in your country". I said "that is correct, but where did that come from?" because I said, "that's supposed to be deleted". "Yes" he said. "I believe so" he said "but would you like to come over and be hosted by the German Air force?" and I said "I'd love to" arrangements were made, I flew over and had a whale of a time for four days, driving their tanks, firing their guns, having a lovely time (laughs) it's never dull! (laughs)

**[00:13:51]** *What do you remember about Stoney Cross Airfield?*

Stoney Cross, not an awful lot happened out there, I don't know why. Except chasing the planes at take-off but I don't think there was an awful lot did happen.

*What about Ibsley? Do you remember Ibsley?*

Yes. Ibsley was a very popular place to go to. Never anything terribly difficult there but always a good show. Really nice. And I belong to the Association there, still now.

*So how did you move about to get to these concert parties? Did you have a car?*

Yes we had a fleet of 4 volunteer drivers which would take 4 in each car – 16 of us. With a trailer on behind I used to have a Canadian, big Canadian **staff car** and I used to draw the trailer with all the scenery and props. Or we could hire a coach and the Army would pay. Or, this ten-tonne truck (laughs), which I didn't think was a very good idea (laughs) nevertheless we had to use it sometimes, but never with armchairs on castors anymore (laughs)

*Could you just tell me that story again? We talked about that briefly before... with the armchairs in the back of the truck?*

The CO responsible for that was very thoughtful in making us comfortable but I'm afraid we weren't, we were black and blue! (laughs). Of course, we couldn't stop the truck because

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there was a space between the whole of the truck and the engine, so we couldn't contact the driver to stop him (laughs).

**[00:16:04]** *Did you have any trouble getting petrol?*

Yes, a great deal. An awful lot. The army gave us about two gallons each a week which didn't go anywhere. Because I mean we had to go as far as Weymouth one side and Portsmouth the other. But we managed. The one place we couldn't get it was the bug army depot in Bournemouth, and we couldn't even get a pint out of them! (laughs). When the Americans came there was plenty. We used to just draw in and they would fill us up and they would be good.

*Tell me your story again about taking the distilled water tank and filling it up with petrol?*

That one that was at.....*Beaulieu?* Beaulieu (laughs)

Yes, I was driving a small van to pick up old tyres for recycling and I would carry a carboy extra of water and they would lift it off, come back and bring a carboy of petrol. I went to come out of Beaulieu one day – there would be! And of course Aviation petrol really used to stink to high heaven. So I thought do I have the windows open and get some air, or close it up and probably pass out or something (laughs). However, I chose to have the window open and off I went with the Police Car following, so I did everything I should do correctly and then getting nearer New Milton there was a farm I knew I could pass the petrol on which I did, I put my foot down and I said “close the gate quickly, a police car's on me” and the police car went by and I did change the petrol for 3 chickens and they were very welcome (laughs).

**[00:18:26]** *Did you have much shortage with rationing?*

Well rationing in general yes, it was pretty tough at times, but we always did very well because the camps would send us, especially the American ones, would send us back with piles of stuff really. Chicken again, sugar, tea, all sorts of things and we never went without.

**[00:19:02]** *So did the troops request you to come and you went by their program? Or was someone else directing where you would do the parties?*

I had to apply for Southern Command. There were a lot of concert parties but we were pretty regular and being a big party of course I mean we were always out five nights a week. Weekends we had free, but of course most of the camps were all on leave anyway,

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so... but we all had daytime jobs as well. It took a bit of keeping up for five nights because we'd be in the Officer's Mess until perhaps 2 o'clock in the morning, drive back to Bournemouth by that time, drop everybody off and up at work at 8 o'clock.

*Wow!*

And we never failed *(laughs)*

**[00:20:02]** *What was your work during the day?*

I was driving a van picking up old tyres for recycling. I didn't have to do anything manual I'd just drive it to the units and then I'd find the nearest café and get a cup of coffee *(laughs)*, and drive it back again. So I was more or less my own boss as long as I kept the area clear, which made it easy for picking up things for the camp, I mean I just went in the camp and said "would you like the concert party?" "Ooh yes please!" *(laughs)*

*What area did you cover when you were driving around...Collecting tyres...What areas did you go to?*

Roughly Weymouth to Portsmouth and probably North and even out to sea of course, on the ships.

*What did you see, what wartime activity did you see in the forest?*

Everything there was to see. I suppose we were very very well-known and you couldn't help seeing things. And also seeing things the average person didn't of course and looking back on it we could have done an enormous amount of damage. We really could have done, but of course we didn't.

*What do you think you saw that perhaps you shouldn't have done?*

*(laughs)* well we saw all the bombs to start with! The gunneries, the strength of the units there of course. We knew how many were there and what they were there for. Yes we were quite knowledgeable actually. *(laughs)*

*So was travel for the general public quite restricted?*

Yes, very restricted. Nobody really was allowed into the camps but of course we did. We were in and out and that was that! *(laughs)*

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*I read that you did a camp at Holmsley on the eve of D-Day – can you tell me about that one?*

There were the 397<sup>th</sup> Bomb group there from America and we entertained them. There was about half Brits and half English there we waited for them to come back from a bombing raid and to everybody's surprise they came back absolutely untouched. And they were so excited about it that they flew round and round overhead to celebrate...and that was it (laughs). But it amazed us, because to do things like that we always had to get bits of paper signed and what not but the Yanks didn't. They'd just jump in the plane and go (laughs).

**[00:23:23]** *What did you see of the build-up to D-Day in the forest?*

All the convoys and where they were, stationed under the trees and all the side roads and small roads. It was just amazing, they were everywhere. And of course, just prior to D-Day, it had to be put off a day because of the weather. And there was everybody just there, and I remember it so vividly, because the next day there wasn't anything to be seen, there was no soldiers, sailors, air force. No vehicles, nothing. Just absolutely nothing. As if they'd all vanished into thin air.

What did local people think was happening? They obviously saw this increased build-up?

I think everybody was quite aware that there was an invasion of some sort planned but nobody really knew or on what scale of course. In my case, the General from Southern Command called me in and he said "I'm going to put you in a uniform". I said "Oh" He said "Yes", he said "you will not be able to walk in and out of the camps as you have been doing". And it was quite a hotchpotch it was more like a Police uniform than anything. In fact it was a basic of a Police uniform with the black tunic and trousers and what not, and I had a helmet and a side cap, I was fully kitted out. But he did say that if you're caught, he said "you're on your own". And I was dying to be caught (laughs) but nobody caught me, they just let me go in and out as if I was anything. And it wasn't until about ten years ago, I went to a big do in London and people used ... I wore this uniform because I've still got it, and they said "what on earth is that uniform?" And I said well it's a hotchpotch made up specially to get me in and out of camps. And I think I'm the only person alive that had something like that (laughs)

*Was that to get in and out to do the concert parties?*

Yes, that's right, to book us up (laughs)

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*Did you do a concert on the eve before D-day – in the evening before?*

Yes, I didn't have any trouble, I just used to go in and out of camps ok, with the uniform on (laughs)

**[00:26:30]** *What do you remember of Air raids and blackouts?*

Well we didn't have much here. We were rather lucky. There was a nasty one at the Metropol Hotel. Whether they were just jettisoning the bombs I don't know. But they killed about 40 of the Canadian Air Force there and I was in uniform that day because I had just been down into Bournemouth Gardens for a meeting of some sort. And being in uniform of course I was called in...regardless of what my uniform was (laughs). And they put me on the cars which took the dead to the ... what do you call it?

*The mortuary?*

Yes, the mortuaries. It was pretty nasty actually.

*Yeah!*

But apart from that there was no big things in Bournemouth at all, and not even Weymouth. But of course you went the other side to Southampton, Portsmouth and of course there was a lot.

*Did you see any enemy planes over the forest while you were collecting tyres?*

Yes, yes we did and you'd take shelter a bit quick if you did. But basically we didn't take much notice of it. We just went on and got to where we were going and that's it.

**[00:28:14]** *Was your daughter at school during this time?*

Yes my daughter was two and a half at the early days, and her little friend who made it to Superintendent of Dorset Police and she's still involved with that now. My daughter of course is retired now, I can't believe it! (laughs) but I'm very involved with the forces right now.

**[00:28:56]** *So your typical day, you used to wake up, collect the tyres and then off to your*

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*concert parties, how did you ever catch up on your sleep?*

Well we didn't really! (laughs) it was ever such a different day and age you see because you used to work, you see, and long hours. It's not like it is now. And you younger people you of course, you can't appreciate what we did go through

*No, I really can't.*

I mean looking back on it, I often wonder how we did it (laughs) but I suppose you're used to that sort of thing and we got on with it (laughs).

**[00-29-47]** I've read somewhere that you went back to Ibsley one day and there was a big chest of the costumes left behind?

That's right. The hut I believe is still there, I'm not sure now, but there it was in all its glory. And it was a Nissen hut that used to do us for the theatres and there was this trunk, basket, wicker basket, full of costumes, I couldn't believe it! Because I mean most things after the war just went. But I enquired around and they didn't seem to belong to anybody, so of course, I had them (laughs).

*Was that after the war?*

Yes, it was.

That was ... about 30 years after.

*Do you still have the costumes?*

No, I haven't got those. I've still got my uniform you know, but I haven't got anything else (laughs).

And of course making the costumes for the show, that was almost impossible. I mean we used to have sheets and we'd dye them and cut them up and make various costumes and things. And people with granny's attics used to give us all sorts of things. It was amazing really everybody sort of rallied round and did everything, you know.

**[00-31-28]** *Do you remember any of the names of the songs you used to sing?*

Oh goodness me, no. I wouldn't sing anyway! (laughs) Glen Miller stuff, that was nice ...

*Was it the latest music around that you were singing?*

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Yes.

**[00-31-57]** *So when the war finished how did things sort of... slowly get back to normality?*

With difficulty, because suddenly everything was swept away and you had to really re-adjust and get on with it. But as we carried on until 1948 which was quite a long while after the war, we gradually weaned off you know. It wasn't too bad. But jobs and things, well with the forces coming back in, they were getting lesser and lesser. And I suppose, well you had to, you had to adjust and that's it. But of course the forces and all the camps were still there, so I don't know.

*When did they all disappear? (repeated)*

Well they've gradually gone, bit by bit. And they're going fast now aren't they? Too fast. All the ships are disappearing and ....I don't know.

**[00-33-20]** *I read that you gave a concert party and it was right on the eve of D-Day and you had American and British soldiers and the atmosphere you said was very different. Do you remember that one?*

Sorry I didn't hear that?

The concert on the eve of D-Day, the soldiers knew they were going the next day how was that concert different?

That went very well it was half Americans and half Brits and they used to get on pretty well together you know...The Brits really they were jealous of the Yanks of course because they were well dressed, well paid and over here! (laughs) and the shows, well, yes, they did very well too. I think all round everyone did agree with each other as much as it was possible to do.

*Do you have any other memories – anything we haven't already touched on you could share? (repeated)*

I suppose that a lot of the memories ... I think basically that was it. People used to say well why do you do it? And I said well, we're all doing a war job of some sort and this one is as good as any. And I think we did a good job actually, because what was ahead of those poor lads was no odds to anybody. We'd do our best to keep them entertained for a couple of

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hours, take their minds off things. And I think they appreciated it.

*Yes, I'm sure you did. I think you probably did a very good job, and you kept a lot of people very happy.*

(laughs) Yes, we loved doing it of course, and it was one of those things and I think although we were the largest concert party, we honestly all stayed together for the whole time. There was only one missing and that was our pianist and unfortunately she died. But the other one came in and stayed with us. Apart from that we didn't change artists at all (laughs)

**[00-36-18]** *What had you been doing before the war?*

Aw, got to think about that one (laughs). Not a lot. I had my daughter to bring up of course. In the end I managed to get a little shop which was I suppose the start of the cut-price ones and well that was it, that kept me going.

*What did you do after the war, when the concert parties were disbanded?*

I think everybody missed that. You know, it was like a big void. From a very busy life to "oh what shall we do next" So really nothing much, only get a job here and there and do things generally. But it was about 1955 when I suddenly thought it would be nice to get back and have contact again with the forces, so I wrote to one unit, I think I was at Weymouth and "oh yes, do come back" and they gave me a whale of a time and since then it's escalated quite a lot. So much so that I'm always visiting one or the other somewhere. It's getting a bit more difficult to do but even so I'm still doing it (laughs). And the Navy were very good. They gave me six ships which I call "my ships" and they used to take me on and off them and go to sea on them and do all sorts of things. But of course they're getting less now. I'm now down to "Illustrious", I've got that one, but of course she's going to be got rid of in two years' time. I've got my "Protector" which is the red one over there (points to photo on the wall) that goes out to the Arctic and what not. And I've got a new one, "Dauntless". I'm not too keen about having new ships. People say "why?" and I said "well to me a ship has Portholes and the new ones don't have portholes, they're impersonal". But I like "Dauntless" anyway (laughs).

**[00-39-30]** *Are you still in contact with the American Air Force?*

Yes, I'm part of ... always welcome over there. I go over every year for a reunion. Which is very nice. And also the Germans invite me over too – through doing this show for them and it's lovely. It really is. And people say to me, "oh fancy going to Germany" and I say "Yes, but they were fighting like us. They didn't want to fight". And the Germans in general have

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been very good.

*Lots of fascinating stories, thank you very much.*

I'm sure there's a lot more but they're buried deep in the memory (laughs)

*Thank you.*

*End of Interview*

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