

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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[00-00-00]

Could you first of all just tell me your name and where and when you were born?

Oh, my name's Ian Gordon and I was born in Chorlton-cum-Hardy, a suburb of Manchester, in 24th June 1925.

Thank you. What were you doing when war first broke out?

When war first broke out I was at school. I was at the local grammar school and I was swatting for my school certificate which I - and we were evacuated from Manchester to Lytham St Annes on the Fylde coast and when we - after we spent about six months in billets in Lytham, realised that there wasn't going to be the expected Blitzkrieg of all the cities at that time, so gradually the schools went back to where they'd come from. And so we continued to study for our school certificates and then the air raid started in the evening. I eventually left school at 16 and went to work as a copy boy in the Daily Telegraph, Manchester office. I was interested in becoming a journalist at that time and I realised after a time there that in order to learn your job as a journalist you had to start on a local paper. And so I was recommended to find a job on a local paper, which I did in the Manchester area and while I was there they were asking for volunteers for the Home Guard. So I volunteered at 16 to the Home Guard and spent a couple of years as a volunteer Home Guard while working. Worked for a time at the Telegraph and then I sort of got this job with the local weekly paper in Manchester and was called up at the age of 18 about a week after my 18th birthday, because I was - I opted for the Navy, from choice, and I was told at the medical that I was colour blind. I had no inkling of that before, so because I was colour blind, I couldn't be in the Seamen Branch and I couldn't be in the

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Visual Signals Branch but I could be a stoker, a Royal Marine, a telegraphist and then he said, 'Oh, I'll tell yer what, why not be a coder? You don't need the eyesight for that.' So I said, 'Alright, I'll be a coder.' (chuckles) And so from there, this was for the medical initially and then called up shortly afterwards about a week after my 18th birthday, we went to Royal Arthur, which is the Butlins Holiday Camp at Skegness, which the Navy used as its main recruiting base and spent a week there. Then I was sent off to a training camp at Loaten St Marys near Wallington, to train as a coder. And that lasted three months and then I was drafted down to the Isle of Wight, where I found myself as part of a combined operations unit, called Group G... no, sorry. Group One, Force J. What I didn't know at that time what we learnt later was Force J stood for Juno, which subsequently meant Juno Beach, but we didn't know that at the time.

While I was on the Isle of Wight we carried on our training as best we could and I contracted a mild form of hepatitis, which meant that I had to go into Haslar Hospital for a month. By the time I came out, my group had moved across to Exbury, which was then known as HMS Mastodon having been commandeered by the Royal Navy at the outbreak of war. Now then ...

[00-05-00]

Shall we talk about the Junkers incident while you were at Exbury?

Fine, yep, yeah.

Thank you.

Right.

Just tell me in your own words what you remember about it.

Yes, right. Well, we - (pause) while I was at Exbury the weather sort of improved as it was - we did enjoy the sort of rhododendrons and azaleas for which Exbury is famous and round about the April of 1944 we were on the - drawn up on parade. I think it was Sunday morning divisions at the area in front of the hall - Exbury Hall - and we heard this loud noise of aircraft. And suddenly from behind the hall building this German aircraft, German bomber, appeared being pursued by two Typhoon RAF fighters. Very low down, and she passed over just in front of where we were and eventually crashed in the field in the Exbury estate. We all ran over to it, but by that time she was - I think there was about seven crew members altogether - they were all killed. The engine parts were sort of strewn all over quite a wide area. There was one of the German crew was still alive and they sent the ambulance over there and they picked him up and apparently he was still alive when they took him in the ambulance but he'd died by the time they'd got him to the sick bay. And so obviously there was nothing, all the others were killed presumably outright. Following that incident I subsequently read a book by Neville Shute. [Well, I can tell you about that can't I, I think we know about that.] Some years later, I read a book by the author Neville Shute, who was in the area at the time - I think he was an RNBR lieutenant at the time - and he used this particular incident to form the basis of his book called A Requiem for a Wren. The story itself was complete fiction but at least he took the crashing of the Junkers as his theme and apparently somebody subsequently researched a book to find out what had happened to this aircraft, because it was a bit of a mystery.

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Apparently this lone aircraft had come over, and it had passed over the Isle of Wight and it had been changing direction and people couldn't understand what it was doing. But the suspicion was that they were photographing installations ashore and all parts of the New Forest and that to see where all the build up to D-Day was taking place. In point of fact as a result of the researching for the book the author found that what had really happened was that this aircraft had been on its way from an airfield somewhere in the south of France to an airfield in the north of France in order to take some equipment and some mechanics on board to service aircraft presumably. There was a thick mist at the time and the aircraft had actually lost its way without them realising it they'd crossed over the Channel. And they were looking for somewhere, this airfield in the North of France when actually they were over the Isle of Wight and the New Forest! (laughs)

One thing that was a mystery was the fact that there were about seven, there were seven aircrew who were killed in the Junkers and the normal aircraft compliment was less than that. I think it was probably five. And they couldn't understand why the extra people on board and this partly inspired Neville Shute's story that they were Czech people trying to escape from the Nazi - had stolen the aircraft to escape from the Nazis and fight on the allied side. But that was not true, because the chap who wrote the book interviewed the families, some of the families, of the German aircrew, and found that it was in fact had been a mistake really it had intended to fly to an airfield in northern France. And another - one of them had an Iron Cross apparently and they couldn't discover what had happened to the Iron Cross. I could ensure them that I hadn't had it anyway. (laughs)

[00-11-06]

What do you remember about Mastodon and the buildings at Exbury?

Well in - the officers were housed in the house. The other ranks, like myself, ratings, were housed in Nissen huts in the grounds. The place when I subsequently visited Exbury, I was looking for the dining hall and I think this was then being and may still be being used as a café for visitors. There's a place, a house on the outskirts of - down by the river from Exbury which was called Gilbury House and that was also taken over by the Navy and that was used as a signal school for the communications people like myself. And then when the time came, it would be just the end of May, we were moved down to the river Beaulieu, where we went aboard a large motorised cutter manned by two Wrens and set off to join our headquarters ship HMS Lawford, a Captain Class Frigate, which was then lying in Cowes Roads with a lot of other shipping and landing craft of all kinds. And on the - we were kept - we weren't allowed to go off the ship and that subsequently proved to be the - left on the nine o'clock on the evening of May 5th to go across the channel to Juno Beach where we had to land the Canadians as she was the command ship for the assault group, Assault Group Number One on Juno Beach. And then afterwards, after we'd been sunk, two days later we returned to Exbury, and we were told that we were allowed four days home leave and to come back after four days because we were urgently required and our senior officer, Captain Pugsley had been ordered by Admiral Bryant to find another ship and go back to the French coast to continue the patrols of the anchorage. And so the ship was HMS Waveney, which we boarded at Lepe Hard, because the two - the senior officers of the group were housed at Lepe House while the rest of us were at Exbury. And there were a number of units housed at Exbury, or HMS Mastodon as it then was, but not just ours.

Do you remember what they were?

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Well, one group was the Forward Observation Bombardment Unit and they were naval communications signallers who would land with a Royal Artillery captain to spot for the gunfire from the ships lying off the shore and sort of signal where to the shells should land and picking out targets. And I remember, it was rather interesting because one of the chaps who had the next bunk to me, he was in FOBS, he was a telegraphist and he said he'd been on one of these exercises with this officer and the officer said to him 'Right,' he said, 'down!' and he said, 'Well' he said, 'there's a puddle underneath there,' he said, 'and I didn't want to get wet, you know' so I said, 'well, I'll get down, you know' he said, 'he said, d'you know, if we'd been on operation and I'd have ordered you to get down and you hadn't had done, you know what I would have done? I would have drawn my revolver and shot you. What would you do about that?' he said, 'well, I would have made sure I shot first, sir.' And so they got on very well after that! (laughs)

So the other groups who were based at Exbury were they in tents or other Nissen huts?

Umm, yes. I only remember - I don't remember any tents at that particular time. People, different groups were there at different times, you see. I can only remember the two Nissen huts that we used and we used to parade in front of the house for the morning divisions and things like that.

[00-16-48]

Was anybody using the house itself?

The officers were housed in the... put in the house, that's right, yes. And were allowed, from time to time, we would be allowed 24 hour passes. But we'd only go within a radius of 20 miles of Exbury and the - Bournemouth was out of bounds, was beyond the 20 mile radius but we could go to Winchester. It made a change of scene. We'd probably spend the night in the YMCA and then come back but then after we'd been back in the Waveney for a fortnight off the French coast, we came back to Exbury and at that time one thing that does stick in my mind, we used to have to go up onto the roof for, not fire watching but doodlebug watching because the Germans had started launching the doodlebugs during the time we were - during the invasion operation. I don't remember seeing any doodlebugs while we were there but it was a bit of a diversion. (laughs)

You mentioned that you went off on schemes before D-Day.

Oh yes, that's right.

Were some of those in the New Forest?

Well, we'd go on board the ship. We'd go on board the ship, the Lawford, which is the headquarters ship to carry out - to take part in practice landings. Some of the - quite a popular spot was Studland Bay, Dorset. And these were exercises to try and get everybody up to scratch for when the big thing happened. We knew it was going to happen sometime. We didn't know where, we didn't know when. We didn't know what part of France we'd be going over to, or anywhere really. And the only time it was really officially - we were officially told was once we'd got underway from Cowes Roads on the eve of D-Day. When the group's signals officer unfurled this chart and the wireless officer, office rather, explained where the landings would take place and that we would be landing the

Canadians at Juno Beach and the times and everything. So.

You mentioned that that was called an operation rather than ...

Oh yes. Well when the - hitherto when we'd been on the schemes the drill was we'd be briefed by the officer who would say, 'Well, the object of this exercise,' which would be known as Operation Whatever, but on this particular occasion we'd have no official information that this was the real thing. And on this particular occasion I remember very clearly he unfurled this chart of the French coast and he said 'The object of this operation,' which would be known as Operation Neptune, which was of course the naval code words for the naval part of the operation, seaborne part. '...is to endeavour to establish a footing on the French coast. Here, here.' and pointing out the various beaches and what times the landings were scheduled for.

Can I just stop for a...

End: [00-20-24]

Key words

Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester, Lytham St Annes, Blitzkrieg, Daily Telegraph, Home Guard, Royal Arthur, Butlins, Loaten St Marys, Wallington, Juno Beach, Haslar Hospital, Royal Navy, Exbury Hall, Neville Shute, A Requiem For a Wren, Junkers, Isle of Wight, Mastodon, Exbury, Nissen huts, Billbury House, Beaulieu River, HMS Lawford, Cowes Roads, Juno Beach, Canadians, Captain Pugsley, Admiral Bryant, HMS Waveney, Lepe Hard, Lepe House, HMS Mastodon, Forward Observation Bombardment Unit, Bournemouth, Winchester, YMCA, French coast, doodlebugs, HMS Lawford, Studland Bay, Dorset, France, D-Day, Operation Neptune.

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<p>[00-00-00]</p> <p>(laughs) <i>Could you just describe on the day of D-Day, when you got up and you were already on the Lawford, were you?</i></p> <p>On the Lawford, yes that's right.</p> <p><i>What did you see in the Solent as you set out?</i></p> <p>I didn't see - we were in the - ah, I know. When we set off from the Isle of Wight, in the Solent, it was a night of course. It was nine o'clock in the evening although it was June it was still light. And after we'd been called into the wireless office to be briefed about the operation, I remember going out onto the quarter deck and seeing the white ensign on the stern and it seemed very big for some reason and I couldn't quite make it out. Realised later, of course she was flying the battle ensign, as you do, you know, going into battle really, hmm.</p> <p><i>Were you nervous at that stage? Do you remember your feelings?</i></p> <p>I think the feelings were, yes, yes you were nervous. You knew you were going into action for the</p>				

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first time. Your big fear was that you'd let the side down. You didn't know how you'd react personally because it never happened before. You just hoped you'd play your part right as you should do, you know.

And you did. One incident that I understand happened before D-Day at Mastodon, I gather the King came and inspected the troops and visited Mastodon. Were you there at that time?

Not at that time, no. We'd have known if he had been. (laughs)

Yes. (laughs)

Were there any women based at Mastodon, were there any Wrens there?

Yeah, the Wrens. Oh yes, there were Wrens. When, in fact they formed the sort of regular establishment. And in fact when I was in the Exbury Veterans Association, they were talking to people and one of the ladies there had been a Wren and she received the first news that the landings had taken place, you know. And quite an honour in a way, I suppose. She was a wireless operator. Oh yes, quite a few Wrens.

[00-02-29]

Do you remember in those weeks before D-Day, were you aware of what was going on in the Beaulieu River, I gather there were Mulberry Harbour's built and ships being there?

They didn't leave the Beaulieu River, I think the Beaulieu River's too small really. They came from - they were being built in other places. In fact a friend of mine who was the Royal Engineers Assaults Squadron he was ashore at the time at HR, when I was on the H cruise ship, he was ashore but on the Royal Engineers trying to move these limpet mines from these shore obstacles. And of course they went it was very, very quiet because the Germans didn't know we'd - it was completely by surprise, you see. And then all of a sudden they said all hell let loose as all the ships started opening the big barrage. But I... again, we set off across the Solent and we took in, we were followed by our - the first assault group of landing craft and remember there was the ship behind us was the free French destroyer, La Combatant. I think she was a Hunt class destroyer. And so I say - I think, I'm not quite sure how many landing craft would constitute the first assault group, but that was our job to take them, of course. When we got over there, we sort of stood off the shore and let the landing craft come in (laughs). So as far as we were concerned, it was - when you were off watch you sort of went onto the upper deck and all I remember really, was all these waves of gliders going over. It seemed to be aircraft and guns were firing of course, the bombardment was taking place.

You could hear the guns,

Oh yes. Oh yes, that was, yeah. Still a big concentration of shipping off the coast and all blazing away. And then of course, when we were sunk the second time, sorry, when I was sunk two days later on the - we were bombed and sunk on June the 8th in the early morning. When we were transferred from the Scyllar (HMS Scyllar), the cruiser Scyllar, having been picked up by the minesweeper, we were transferred from the Scyllar to the Frobisher, she was still bombarding the

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coast before going back to Portsmouth some more ammunition. (chuckles) That was remember. The umm... of course, most people on the ship you don't see what's going on at all, because you were inside the ship. So the captain was doing a sort of running commentary, you see. He was saying 'Oh, we've just been given a new target, we've got a couple of German tanks there,' he said, 'Oh,' you know, 'Good shooting A Turret.' and that sort of thing 'We've got those. And there's a pillbox somewhere else so we're getting these targets.' And then all of a sudden there's one almighty crash and the whole ship shook and I remember I said to somebody, another of the survivors 'it was surprising these six-inch guns with these pillars, they make a big noise don't they.' you know, and then the captain's voice came over and he said, '(imitates bang sound) that rather loud bang you heard,' he said, 'was caused by an enemy aircraft just straddled us with bombs. The nearest one was about 20 yards on starboard side.' he said, 'We seemed to have got out of the shelter... the protection of the 'Ack Ack' ship, I think perhaps we better get back there.' you know. (laughs) Of course we'd just been bombed inside it was!

[00-06-30]

Yes. So then after D-Day you came back to Lepe.

Well, we came back to Exbury, after we'd been sunk, of course. After D-Day we carried on in the patrolling the anchorage, you see. And we were sunk two days after, on June the 8th, the early hours of June the 8th. And then we went back to Portsmouth first of all and were kitted up and then went to Exbury and from there we were sent on home leave. I know there was this coach with all - we all went on this coach and she was going to take us down to the station to go on - no I'm sorry I think it was - did we go back to Exbury at that time? I think we might have gone straight from Portsmouth Naval Barracks. I'm a bit vague on that point quite honestly, but anyway, we were sent on home leave, and then we had this strange four days leave at home and then we went back to Exbury. We went on board the Waveney, river class frigate, at Lepe Hard and went across to spend another fortnight patrolling the anchorage off the Normandy Beaches.

Do you remember anything about Lepe Hard at that stage? Was there much there?

I don't remember it at all hardly. We were taken by transport down to the Hard and I remember we went on board by this landing - gangway, rather - walked up this gangway onto the ship. And there was like - (chuckles) my instinct was to run in the opposite direction! (laughs)

Yes, I can imagine after your experiences. Yes, and was Exbury any different after D-Day? Were there as many people there?

No, no. From what I remember it was, there weren't as many people at all it was quite quiet really. I think we must have been there maybe a fortnight, maybe a month after D-Day and before we went back to our base, which in my case was Devonport. Some of them were from Portsmouth some of them were Chatham. Everybody had a port division in the Navy, you see. But mine was Devonport. And, then ...

You were telling me about the floating mines that were ...

Oh yes, well that was when we were off - when we went back in the Waveney, and were patrolling

the - of course, we'd go inside the Mulberry from time to time. The Mulberry Harbour off Arromanches, was of course fully erected then. And so we spent quite a bit of time off there at night and the German aircraft would come over and drop mines in the sea with the hope that with the tide moving that they got a fairly good chance of hitting something. There was such a large concentration. It was surprising there weren't more ships mined, there were at a - but no, I don't think there were any other warships that were sunk at that time.

[00-10-13]

Going back to Exbury, and when you were there, do you remember the names of any of the people who were there?

The captain who was in charge of the base at Exbury, there was one there Captain Ringrose-Morton RN. I remember that, that's surprising the things you remember isn't it. (chuckles) The - I don't remember anybody else by name. We knew our own officers, of course.

And who was in your group?

In our group we - well, there was Captain Pugsley but he was based at Lepe Hard, and of course so was the group's signal officer who was called, he was Lieutenant Culme-Seymour RN and he would also be at Lepe. Our chief one at Exbury for our group was a chief petty officer telegraphist, was a chap called Aldridge. And various others, petty officer telegraphist there was a Welsh chap called Parker and there was somebody called - oh what was his name - oh dear me - there's Parker and umm... let's think. (long pause) I think there was a yeoman Roache we had and one or two petty officers, and I'm trying to think. I can see them but I can't just remember the names. It's difficult really, hmm.

It's amazing how many you do remember.

That's right. I had two particular pals there who were both coders and one of them was Eric Skilton, he came from Surrey, and another chap came from the midlands, he was called Shorthouse but we all called him Rosy because he had very rosy cheeks! (laughs) But the three of us used to knock about together. And funnily enough I never made any contact them since. I met up with some of the Lawford ship's company people who I did know at the time and met up with the later, you know. And we used to have the Captain Class Frigate Reunions. But I looked from time to time to see if any of them were in these sort of websites and things and then they may not have survived the war. Because I didn't, I was sunk again six months later, you see, in the Arctic. So (chuckles) So you don't know really. But it nice to have been met up with them again, you know, but never did.

Do you know why the senior officers were based at Lepe? Was there a particular reason? Rather than being with you at Exbury?

I don't know really. I think it was just a matter of accommodation, probably. Maybe, I just don't know. I remember on (chuckling) one occasion we - it was a fair walk down the road, it was a couple of miles I think, wasn't it, something like that - and I remember, of course the POs used to sort of like to take the mickey if they could and I remember one of them saying, he'd talk to one chap and he said, 'can you swim?' he said, 'Yes chief!' he said 'Right,' he said, 'you can walk down

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to Lepe and collect a blackboard and bring it back.' (laughs) But little things like that stick in your mind, you know.

Did you go out exploring other parts of the Forest at all?

No, we didn't really get the chance, you see there were no transport or anything like that. No cars or anything and the only time we got out... oh we used to umm... I remember going on a cross country run on one occasion and it might have done it more than once for all I know but I remember trotting around the lanes round Exbury and also we used to go to a place outside in the village at Exbury where they had these, they had sort of dances and concerts and there was a - I know one of our chaps, Johnny Ball he - ahh, that's right it comes back to me now - he could play the piano and we used to have a bit of a sing song and things like that, you know.

But there weren't regular social events laid on at all then?

No, not really. No.

And you were not aware of the SOE buildings?

Not at all. No, not at all. Didn't know, that was completely hidden from us. (laughs)

Yes. Were there any air raids at all while you were at Exbury?

No, no. Apart from the Junkers that was sort of crashed we didn't have any air raids at all.

What was in your Nissen huts?

We had bunks, I think they were two-tier bunks. And we would have a little sort of stove of some kind to give heating out. Say for the most part winter turned into spring and the weather was rather nice actually and I really took to the New Forest after that. I thought it was a really lovely place, you know. Never having been down there before.

[00-16-03]

And did all the groups eat together in the canteen that you described?

Oh yes. Yeah. People - yes, we were - we weren't working on watches then we'd sort of day hours, you know. And you'd sort of work so far part of it study part doing all the various chores that you have to do. You never kept - you're never idle, you know. If you'd time off duty you'd simply walk round the grounds and enjoy the scenes, you know.

Was there much going on on the Beaulieu River at that time?

Not from what I remember. All I remember of the Beaulieu River particularly was going on board this cutter to take us out to the Lawford. I remember thinking it is a very nice spot, but it is of course.

Yes. And what were you doing at the house on the shore, Gilbert House, were you having lessons

there?

Yes, yeah. There was, you'd be sort of practising coding and decoding and that sort of thing, and of course you would have to take these portable wireless sets to be recharged. And I remember batteries and things and having to lug these, you know like they have in garden centres where they have these trolleys with a handle at both ends, that you could - and I think from what I remember something like one of those. You have to walk all the way up this hill with these things, batteries to be recharged and take them back again.

And did it involve any other equipment or was it pen and paper job?

Oh, just pen and paper job. In those days, because they hadn't introduced - the Germans had the Enigma code but we didn't get a similar thing until I was on the North Atlantic run. After that for a time, before I went to the Arctic, and I remember going over - we used to escort the convoys over the North Atlantic and the escorts were put into St Johns, Newfoundland. While the merchant ships would go to places like Halifax or New York. Being picked up by a local escort and then we'd sort of wait in St Johns for the return one, go and pick them up and bring them back, you see. And one of the occasions when we went to - we were in Newfoundland where the coders all had to go to the sort of signal school place in Newfoundland and they showed us this what they call the Type X machine, which was the British equivalent then of the Enigma machine. And I remember having it explained with the various cog wheels and things, but very few of our ships we equipped with those. Otherwise it was pencil and paper really. Hmm.

Yes. Gosh, very clever work.

Hmm.

Have we covered all your experiences in the New Forest, there were no other incidents that stick in your mind?

Can't think of any, no. I can't think of any really, no. (chuckles)

Thank you. It's been very interesting.

End: [00-19-14]

Key words

D-Day, HMS Lawford, HMS Waveney, HMS Mastodon, Solent, Wrens, Isle of Wight, Lepe hard, Exbury Veterans Association, Mulberry Harbour, Royal Engineers Assaults Squadron, limpet mines, Germans, La Combatant, free French Hunt class destroyer, HMS Scyllar, HMS Frobisher, Beaulieu River, New Forest, Portsmouth, Portsmouth Naval Barracks, Normandy Beaches, Devonport, Chatham, Mulberry Harbour, Arromanches, Exbury, Surrey, Captain Ringrose-Morton, Lieutenant Culme-Seymour, Eric Skilton, Captain Class Frigate Reunion, Arctic, Johnny Ball, Gilbert House, Nissen huts, Junkers, German aircraft, North Atlantic, St Johns Newfoundland, Halifax, merchant ships, Typex, Enigma.

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