

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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00-00-00

My name is Ronald Mintram. I was born on the 30th of November 1934 and as a child, obviously I endured the problems of the sec – the first world war, second, sorry, second world war. (nervous chuckle) Having had my fifth birthday on – in November 1939, I started at Fawley Infant School and in the following January – sorry, on the following, following January and I had to be put in a Mrs Nicholas class. She was a kindly soul whose heart must have been in England's imperial past and these being dangerous times, and the country being in mortal danger from the Nazis, patriotic fever was understandably high. But the only clear memory have of my time spent in her class was the occasion when we small children were instructed to march up to the Union flag draped across the chalkboard and easel which bore a map of the empire with all its pink markings representing the countries of the empire and to salute the flag whilst coming to attention.

Of course it was a very serious time for people of Britain, particularly England, which was under constant attack from the bombers of Nazi Germany. Erm, the United Kingdom was under prolonged attack from the Nazis and in a very perilous and dangerous state being almost the only bulwark against the rising tide of fascism that had swept and conquered or was about to conquer most of Europe. The United States didn't enter the war, and then very reluctantly, until nearly two years later. So we were alone with only our empire nations to support us.

British and more often the English families were often subject to nightly bombing raids by the German air force. Dashing to the air raid shelters night after night and bemused by all that was going on around us and scared witless by the sound of the wailing sirens warning of impending raids, the population was under tremendous pressure. We children had to go to school after spending half the night cowering cold and damp in some smelly reinforced

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shelter, trying to keep warm with blankets and sometimes hot water bottles. The dads would sometimes brave the raids and try to provide hot water if there was a lull in hostilities, but they were so often occupied by the duties of being the village's air raid and fire wardens.

At times the "all clear" would sound so that we could return home only to be alerted again an hour or so later to begin the whole weary process all over again. They were the worst of nights for us children, and we would catch the bus to school in the morning, often worn out and virtually exhausted. School was still carried on and woe betide anyone skipping lessons or falling asleep because of a disrupted night.

00-03-12

The most important item that we carried to school was the obligatory gasmask, which in case of gas attack from the sky; it was drummed into us to never go far without it. The school kept a few spares in case of emergency, but most children remembered to carry them to and fro. (intake of breath)

Everything was rationed, including most food, clothing and fuel, together with sweets and chocolate. Only in exceptional circumstances were there, very few people who owned a vehicle, given petrol coupons to allow them to use their vehicles and then only if it contributed towards the war effort. However, most families had neither any form of mechanical transport or telephone. Our family was lucky in that our neighbours next door was Mr Bert Morgan, the local gas fitter, who was provided with a telephone to enable him to receive instructions from the Southampton office regarding his job. So there was some access to a telephone for the neighbours in an emergency.

Rationing was a huge problem with few people getting enough to eat and the government setting out how much each person was allowed to – each week. This was controlled by giving each person a ration book filled with printed coupons to be cut out by the relevant shopkeepers to correspond with that week's rations. How our mothers kept us going on such meagre fare was a miracle. I clearly remembered being given a leaflet at school - in school at the end of the war to tell us what a banana was. Most children of our age didn't know what they were, and having never seen one, or had forgotten all about them, because the UK had been blockaded by the German navy and the import of such items was not considered necessary for the war effort.

00-05-15

Ron, what was it like to be in an air raid shelter overnight as a young child? What was your experience of that?

Well, we were lucky in as much that the local authority had built an air raid shelter not more than 25 yards from our house, and it was a brick construction with a concrete roof and it had two compartments in the shelter, obviously to accommodate several families that used it. Erm, and apart from that, it was bare inside with wooden benches and I assume that

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when they were built they were thought of as being used briefly, but occasionally some of the raids would go on for a long time during the night and the “all clear” hadn’t sounded so we would cower in there. They were cold, damp, erm, there was obviously no lighting or heating and people survived (chuckle) in there. Some had oil lamps, some had candles, and if we had time our parents would take hot water bottles there to keep us warm because they were very very cold and miserable really if I think of it. And there were occasions of course when at some time during the night the “all clear” signal would be heard and we would then troop out of the shelter and go back to our beds. But then again, shortly after that, they would be another raid come over. The air raid warning would go again and we would be back into the air raid shelter. (deep intake of breath) So much so, that on occasions my parents built erm, a reinforced shelter under our stairs. I don’t think it was so – it would have been so efficient as the one built by the council, but it was one that both my mother and I could hide in if we were taken by surprise with a raid. Erm, (pause)

I think you were tired when you went to school weren't you?

We were extremely tired going to school because er, school carried on, we had to catch the bus to school in the morning to take us to Fawley School where I was a pupil and erm, we (expels breath) caught the ordinary service bus, went to school and woe betide anyone that fell asleep or didn’t pay attention during their lessons. (pause) I think I already mentioned Miss, Miss, Miss, Mrs Nicholas.

00-08-12

OK, let's move on to the subject of rationing. I think you were able to supplement your diet a bit by keeping erm, animals?

Well, yes they were – everyone I recall, well sorry, most people kept both chickens for both eggs and to eat the chickens on occasion, and rabbits. And I can recall in my own garden my father had up to twenty rabbits and they were used not as pets but to be killed and to eat at some stage and supplement our diet. And my big pleasure was to be given the brains and the tongue of the rabbits after I’d helped my father skin the rabbits in the back scullery and I rather liked the brains and tongue of rabbits. They cooked of course and that was the treat I had to supplement my fairly meagre diet on rations at the time.

00-09-18

OK, erm, tell me more about the actual bombing raids, 'cos you must have suffered erm, raids on the area here.

Well, of course erm, Holbury where I lived was in between a number of strategic points I suppose for the Nazis to bomb. There was the old refinery which was then known as the Anglo Gulf West Indies Oil Company prior to it being taken over by Esso, which is – that was down at the Ashlett end of Fawley, erm, there was Gunsight Farm which was an ack-ack battery at the other side of Holbury which was er, obviously a target for the Nazi bombers. We were then - in Hythe itself there was the Power Boat, which was a company

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that specialised in providing power boats for the air force to go out to rescue downed pilots in the sea, and of course, Holbury if you think about it, is not terribly far the crow flies from Southampton docks. So I'm sure that er, some of the bombers mis-directed their bombs intended for the docks or the unloaded bombs that were intended for the docks on the local villages, and I think most of the waterside was hit by bombs, and certainly Holbury was hit by bombs.

And on one particular occasion, in the house next door but one to where I lived, which is now the Co-op car park in Holbury, a bomb fell during the night and (chuckles) luckily or unluckily, it fell on – it was a direct hit on the cesspit because we – in those days there was no drain – main drainage, we were all on sewers – and this blew a tremendous hole in the back garden of the property and the shrapnel from the bomb flew all around and hit the window – the side of the window in the bedroom where I normally slept and the scar is still on the wall today. I can see it when I go to the Co-op car park. And of course a piece of shrapnel from the bomb flew along the length of the garden in the house where it fell and penetrated the back kitchen window, went in to the living room, hit the sideboard, did a 90 degree turn and went up and lodged in the ceiling. Luckily it didn't enter the bedroom above where there presumably could have been people sleeping. But, next morning, because children used – all these sort of things that's part of play – the camp - family that lived there by the name of Hayworth had three children, two girls and a boy, and we all played together, and they invited the children from the village to go and see their - where the bomb had fallen in their back garden and it 'ad landed as I said earlier, on the cesspit, and blown a tremendous hole in the ground and nearby, not too far away, was a wonderful Victorian plum tree, and that was decorated (chuckling) in a manner which was unbelievable, with the contents of the cesspit etcetera, and I think to this day it's rather put me off the taste of Victoria plums. (laughter)

00-12-57

Er, that's a wonderful story, but I understand that erm, during those raids, erm, the animals were still outside, and erm ..

Yes of course, everyone, as I say my father had – I counted one time 21 rabbits, but I don't recall that we actually kept chickens but both people that lived either side of us kept chickens and of course there was swapsies going on between families and one did all these sort of things to supplement one's diet. But er, on the occasion the bomb fell in the garden two doors away, people had lots of chicken houses - or there were chicken houses, and of course the blast from the bomb (gasp) completely (gasp of breath) allowed the, sorry, made the chicken houses collapse, and they collapsed on top of the chickens that were inside. And I was in the air raid shelter on that occasion with my mother and she was convinced that the horrible noises that were emanating from the back gardens to these houses were people that were trapped and killed or injured in the debris, but on seeing daylight next morning looking round, we realised it was Mr Morgan's chickens that were making this horrendous noise and not people, luckily.

00-14-25

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I understand the er, the door of your privy had an interesting night ...

Yes, well we lived in No.155, Long Lane, Holbury and it had an outside privy and beyond the back garden of our house which is now Ivor Close, was a corn field in those times, and the blast somehow managed to remove the privy door from its hinges, and it completely disappeared. And my father looked for it and we couldn't find it immediately, so we were then (expels breath) had to put, put – use the privy with a curtain pulled across to give us some degree of modesty. But after several days my father was able to retrieve the privy door which had been blown at least 100 yards away into what is now Ivor Close, but in those days was a corn field.

00-15-27

I think later on in the war erm, there were buzz bombs over this area.

Well, erm, during the first part of the war, one of the things that scared us enormously was the Germans used a psychological tactic by dropping screaming bombs. Ordinary bombs, but they made a terrific screaming noise as they were falling through the air and of course this used to frighten the population as well as the impending explosions that would come. But latterly of course, people will know that the Germans developed the buzz bomb, and the buzz bomb was a rather menacing er, weapon in as much that it flew – it was directed towards targets in England and it flew for several hundred miles until it cut - the engine cut out and then the bomb plunged to earth and exploded. Presumably it was a bit of a hit and miss affaire because they could fall anywhere, but they absolutely terrified me and other people that I know of because you listened for them coming over and you waited with baited breath to see whether the (chuckle) engine would cut out because you knew that the bomb was gonna fall somewhere, somewhere near you. But er, as I recall, none fell in the immediate vicinity of Holbury.

00-16-58

I believe erm, you had some quite unusual toys during this time ...

Yes, well of course toys weren't a big priority to be er, produced in the war effort, because all the efforts were on producing er, materials and weapons and such like for war, but for – so most parents, including my father, were reduced to making toys for their children, so I had numerous wooden toys made for me in his shed, and as I recall, the girls also, that the mothers produced clothes or dolls or whatever a girl wanted because they just weren't obtainable, they just were not obtainable, so we all managed to - with toys made by our parents, either y'know, for the girls or for the boys. And I recall that the only – I of course was at Fawley School, and latterly, they were the only organisation that I knew of that had proper footballs, because nobody in the village owned a football because footballs, once they were past their sell by date, they were totally of – unattainable. So those of us that played football played with a tennis ball because there was no footballs available. And then erm, I recall the first boy that ever had a football, and his father brought it home from

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somewhere, he'd been in the Far East, and he brought this football made somewhere in the Far East, and he was the most popular boy in the village and everybody wanted to be his friend and play with him because he was the only one with the football, a proper football that is.

00-18-51

I understand also you used to collect the shrapnel that these

Yes, yes, that was part of the play because children (expels breath) – there's war going on but chil – it doesn't affect children apart from the terror of the shelters. Outside that, children go on and play as they normally would I suppose. We played, I mean we built shelters, we had camps, we played cowboys and Indians or soldiers or whatever, because that was part of play. But erm, one of the aspects of play was that er, erm, often there would be dog fights above us by aircraft in the air and they would obviously – all the ordnance that they used firing machine guns or canons or whatever, their spent shells or whatever fell to the ground and would be picked up by the boys and of course became a sort of a – boys collected shrapnel because this was er, a collectable item and there were swapsies and such going on with shrapnel and I do recall on one occasion when I was at Fawley School, (deep intake of breath!) we were all – the air raid siren went and we all rushed across to the air raid shelters and they were purpose built air raid shelters on the opposite side of the road to Fawley School which is now Esso property, where all the children ran to hide in the air raid shelters, and on our exit from the school to the air raid shelter, shrapnel actually fell in the school playing field. And there was one boy that stopped to pick it all up and it was still warm I recall. But er, but that was great excitement for children in a sense, although we were in mortal danger, it was all incorporated into the play of the time, because being children, we weren't really I suppose fully aware of the danger that we were in.

00-20-58

I understand on one occasion during a raid you were taken ill and had to go to Southampton Hospital

Yes, I well (clears throat) – I had a – earlier I was at school and I was feeling very ill one day and I came home from school and my mother called the doctor. Now in those days there was no such thing as the National Health Service, so we had a chap that lived in Fawley called Doctor Jones-Evans and he came to visit me and diagnosed the fact that I had a perforated appendix, which was quite serious, and I had to be rushed into South Hants Hospital in Southampton. And I do recall that my parents had to give him five shillings for this visit and subsequently five shillings every time he came to visit me. And I do say that I don't know what it means to this day that we were on "the panel" whatever that was. I presume my parents paid a small sum of money each year to be one of his patients and with – consequently we didn't have to pay as much as normally if we called him out.

But I went into erm, Royal South Hants Hospital and I was really, really ill, and it was just before my sixth birthday and if I recall correctly, on the night of my sixth birthday which was

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the 30th of November 1940, Southampton received a tremendous raid when many many people were killed and injured and there was much damage done to property whilst I was in the Royal South Hants Hospital. And the only vague recollection I've got of that was that when they opened the curtains in the morning, 'cos you'll appreciate that all the houses, our houses, everything had to be the blackout, so that every window and every house and every building in the land was blacked out so no light was shown to attract any potential German bombers. Well, when they – getting back to the ward, hospital ward – when they (garbled words) the staff opened the curtains, I seem to recall that where there'd been a line of roofs and chimneys (slight chuckle) on previous occasions, they disappeared overnight because of this horrendous bombing raid.

So my parents - in those days you could go to what was known as the Fred Woolley House, which was the home of recovery from people (draws breath) recovering from (clears throat) serious operations which was located on the outskirts of Southampton, on the way to Winchester. In sort of northern Bassett as it were. But er, when the authorities suggested to my mother that they were gonna transfer me to the Fred Woolley House, she was vehement in saying that she wouldn't allow me to go there 'cos I would be in the danger zone although of course we were in the danger zone in Holbury, but she wanted me – to bring me home and nurse me herself. Because I was really really unwell, and unwell for many many months afterwards I have to say, erm, I was allowed to have my bed moved to the downstairs front room where I was tended to and where Dr Jones-Evans used to come and see me etc, etc.

00-24-41

OK. I understand there was a German speaking lady lived in the village. What was the people's attitude towards her?

Well, on recollection, in Holbury Drove, which is just around the corner from where we are today, there was a German speaking lady – whether she was German or not I don't know, but she was German speaking – and such was the er, (intake of breath) panic of people in those days that this woman was accused of (chuckles) being a German spy and supposedly signalling with a torch to the German aircraft when they came over. Now I find that incredibly unbelievable because obviously she wouldn't signal to someone that was gonna bomb her. But er, such was the – the attitude of people – such was the panic of people that this poor woman was accused of being a German spy. Now, I was only a little lad of six or whatever, seven at the time, so really what happened I don't know but er, it was just a measure of peoples' attitude at that time. They felt they were under so much pressure.

00-25-56

Er, I understand there was some German flying boats that came into Southampton water (intake of breath) on one occasion.

Yes, well I didn't witness this but I had a friend, sadly no longer with us, who worked as a

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young lad as an apprentice at erm, (pause thinking about it!) in Hythe at er, Powerboat as it was then. A famous resident of Hythe started the business, a chap called Scott-Paine, and he features in Hythe historians' talks etc, but anyway, on this occasion that my friend George told me that some Norwegian pilots had managed to steal two flying boats from a fjord in Norway and managed to get aboard them, start them up and fly them away from Norway, and that initially they landed in Scotland and handed themselves over to the authorities. Because there was no flying boat facilities in Scotland they were then redirected down to the Solent where er, – Southampton water – where there was a flying boat business run by British Overseas Airways Corporation. Subsequently - initially it was Imperial Airways, then it became BOAC, and now it flies under the flag of BA – but, nobody had informed the local authorities that these Norwegians were going to continue flying these boats – flying boats – down to Southampton, to Hythe in fact, and nobody (chuckles), the communications were so poor that the er, (intake of breath) the local ack-ack batteries opened fire on the Germans when they open – sorry, when the German boats – flying boats arrived with the Norwegian pilots in, and luckily they weren't very accurate, and they managed to land (chuckling words) and contact the authorities in Hythe. So that was quite amusing story but not one that I witnessed but one that my friend George – obviously was a young apprentice in the factory at the time – he actually saw this and told me the story and I thought it was a wonderful story.

00-28-07

And er, living where you lived, you must have seen a lot of the build-up of the troops, erm, for D-day. Tell us a little bit about that.

Yes, well erm, we were – obviously we were involved heavily in the D-day landings in as much that the whole of the south coast was the build-up area for troops about to disembark to Normandy and in what's now Esso – and in those days it was the original Cadland Estate – erm, right opposite the - what is now the Co-op in Holbury, was one of the gateways to the estate with one of the cottages there – a Mr Bordman lived in – he worked for the estate and he lived in the cottage, but immediately behind and around him, one of the erm, (intake of breath) embarkation camps had been built which was populated by practically all GIs. And er, the whole of the roads along through Holbury and down to Lepe, and you can still see some evidence if you go on the Lepe road now, of the concrete hard standings that were built to accommodate tanks etcetera along that road, just beyond where the village ends. But we had numerous vehicles parked all along the main road, which is now the service road, but in those days it was the main road through the village in Holbury, of jeeps, tanks, armoured vehicles of various sorts, Bren gun carriers and all this sort of thing, all this – and the troops were required to camp out with their vehicles during the build-up to D-day. And erm, (expels breath) I remember my mother took pity on them and did some washing for them and they didn't want to live – particularly live in their tank whatever, so one group of GIs actually pitched a tent in our front garden and used that for a few er, nights. Erm, and in the field which was our football come cricket field, which was just a waste piece of ground in those days which is now where the Co-op is, they – a huge marquee was erected there – used I know not what of course because it was under the control of the Americans – but it had I know – remember going in there and it had a stage so presumably I don't know

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what they used it for but p'raps to entertain the troops, p'raps to give them pep talks, I don't know. And also in the grounds of that er, they built themselves three er, kitchens made of tin cans and turf. They were – so they – they obviously had some sort of food there. I don't recall us ever being invited going eat with them although we did the usual thing – the kids did in those days, and scrounged sweets and gum off, y'know, "got any gum chum" was the – was the er, the saying of the day. And when the D-day troops actually left, the day - the morning they left to go to, to embark for France, we children stood alongside the road and sort of waved them off as it were, and they just threw all their English cash out of the vehicles and landed in the road and threw it to us and picked it up and to us in those days 2s-6d was a fortune. And all this money came out because obviously they decided they didn't want English money anymore, so they just threw it all out of their vehicles as they drove past us. So we made quite a killing in terms of cash on (chuckle) that particular occasion.

00-32-16

I understand they baked you a cake as well.

Yes, well my mother er, - for my mother's kindness, the troops in the erm, in the – actually in the camp opposite, they made this wonderful cake for my – for our family, which contained cream, chocolate, as I recall went er, pineapple, and that was a delicacy, a luxury really, that we'd never ever have thought we'd have in the UK. So erm, we had this wonderful er, cake given to my mother as a present. And of course, one of the strange things for we children, bearing in mind that Holbury in those days and most of this area was very very rural, given its build-up over the last er, 70 years erm, we'd never seen any black people before. These – all the black soldiers – there were many black soldiers on the – although they were in separate units as I understand it, they worked in the camp and they were in some of the convoys that were going to go to Normandy, and it was an amazing for us er, (sighs) young children to see white – sorry, black people. We'd never seen black people before. We'd only even known white people, and that was my first experience of seeing somebody whose skin colour was black.

00-33-53

What was it like when all the troops had gone? It must have been very quiet.

Well, er, it was good fun for us kids because they just upped and left the camp over the road from where I lived and left everything behind, and erm, we were allowed free rein to go round all the nissen huts and that to find things and they left a lot of things behind. And I don't know whether I should say this or not, but (intake of breath) my friends and I went into the guard room – what had been the guard room – and we found all these strange packages (clearly smiling) which we didn't know what they were, and we blew them up thinking that they were balloons, but we subsequently learned that of course they were contraceptives. (laughing)

00-34-42

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Ron, I understand you had an interesting er, close encounter with a German bomber when you were out clothes shopping with your mother one day.

Yes, yes, well obviously clothes like other items were severely restricted in the war and you had to have coupons, and there weren't many drapers shops in this area, one in Hythe and one in Fawley, and we went to the Fawley one one afternoon, my mother and I, to get whatever clothes we went there for - I don't know, probably something for her – and whilst we were there the air raid warning went off and we all had to run to the shop's shelter because obviously if you ran a business you had to provide shelter for your potential customers. And as we ran down the back garden of this shop to go to the air raid shelter, I was amazed to see a German bomber fly over not much higher than 500 feet, and it flew straight over the Agway refinery. But as far as I know, it never actually dropped any bombs, it just was flying round there. So that was my closest ever view of a flying bomber, but I subsequently did see one that 'ad been shot down and it landed in a field between Exbury and Lepe, and it had an whole number of crew on board, but extra people on board so I'm told, erm, and they were carrying things like pyjamas and toothpaste and toothbrushes, and what they were (cough) – it's said they were trying to do was they'd erm, got hold of this German bomber and were flying back, erm, were gonna surrender in the UK because they'd, they had enough of the war and they wanted to, to get out of it and come back to UK. But of course, they were unable to communicate with the British authorities and so the local ack-ack, er, (pause) batteries, and presumably er, fighter aircraft, shot them down. And the bomber landed in several pieces on both sides of the road – on that road from Exbury to Lepe. Erm, and I think it's featured about it in a book written by – because Exbury in those days was HMS – I've forgotten the name – Heron or something, I can't recall the name - but it's featured in a book, this story about erm, this particular bomber being shot down and all these German er, people on – aircrew on it being lost.

So that was part of our play really. We encompassed this all in our, in our everyday life and though as I said earlier, (jumble of words) the war was, was about us, around us and we suffered during the night and disrupted sleep and – (deep intake of breath) I suppose we were frightened, but we (chuckles) obviously weren't as frightened as the adults because we had no conception of, y'know, the danger that we were in that sense. So erm, we all encompassed this erm, this – the war in our everyday play.

End: 00-38-05

Keywords:

Fawley, Holbury, Southampton, Germany, school, air raid, shelters, bombing, siren, gasmask, rationing, coupons, petrol, food, clothing, banana, blockade, chickens, rabbits, bomb, ack-ack, gun battery, Hythe, docks, shrapnel, cesspit, chicken house, privy, screaming bombs, buzz bombs, toys, football, dog fights, Royal South Hants Hospital, blackout, German spy, flying boats, Norwegian pilots, D-day, troops, GIs, jeeps, tanks, Bren gun carriers, camp, sweets, gum, Americans, black soldiers, nissen huts, contraceptives, shops, German bomber, Exbury, Lepe.

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