New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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00-00-00

Maybe you could start by telling my your name and …

My name is Hugo Du Plessis. The day I was 16 when the war started. (chuckle) The war started for us actually two days' earlier on September the 1st with the evacuation of children from all over the country. Our lot came from Portsmouth and one of the many things as a councillor, my father, had to organize. He took over Beaulieu Road station, and the trains came loaded with children, all with labels on them, and they were bussed (cough) into various halls around the Forest for distribution to families. The first lot – the first day was alright, they were all children. The second day, were the mothers and children. They were far more trouble. Anyway, we got back from doing that – got home and discovered that three little girls had taken over what had been our nursery and those little girls, like most of the others, they stayed with us right until the war ended. The eldest was I think 12 and the youngest then 5. When I've finished this, if I can find it, I have two photographs. One of them of three little girls in their Sunday best going off to church and staying with us and the other of rather good looking grey haired ladies, which is what they are now. They've kept in touch ever since, but my mother always adopted them. After she died, my sister took over the contact and when she died at Plessis, then we sort of exchange Christmas cards.

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00-02-56

So day 3. The day actually started – my hobby was radios or the wireless it used to be called it in those days – and I happened to be listening on that Sunday morning and Chamberlin came on and made the announcement that the war had started. So had to go down and break the news to the family. The local councillor for Baddesley – my father was – and surprising how many duties were given to him to do. Started with ARP – took over all sorts of things. My mother ran a First Aid post in Boldre, and as I say, they had to do with the evacuees and food rationing, issuing ration books, oh I don't know, all sorts of things. Salvage drives – all this business about recycling is nothing new. And the Home Guard which was organized on the basis of local government areas. Rather a ridiculous situation in Boldre, and particularly Walhampton because we were one side of the river – Boldre - and Lymington was the other side and so little contact between the two. It was rather ridiculous.

Right, now how far have we got?

You're doing extremely well actually. (laughter) Tell me about the start of the war and how things were and what was happening and what you were doing.

00-04-57

First of all of course was the anti-climax, 'cos nothing happened. We had food rationing. The blackout was the main thing. The moderate sized house had a lot of windows to be blacked out every night and you weren't even allowed just a little chink at all. We were told the slightest chink of light and immediately a bomb would come crashing down. Of course ridiculous, as there were no bombers going around to drop them. So everything was very quiet until April the next year. Then Germany invaded Norway.

As you know, things still didn't affect us until, what would it be, May/June. I missed the earlier part. I was away at boarding school. When I came back for summer holidays, my father as local councillor had to raise the Boldre platoon of the Home Guard. Also ridiculous. He'd been in the First War. He joined up right at the beginning, one of the territorials, and he spent the whole war in India or essentially Mesopotamia and that particular battalion, the Second Seventh Hants Regiment had never been – I think they had almost no casualties – they'd never been actively fighting. And he was put in charge of the Home Guard – to raise the Home Guard, and under him, he had I think at least four colonels, a brigadier, a couple of majors as well, all of whom had much more experience than he was. But that's how the Home Guard was organized. All a question of who you knew rather than what you knew. The first thing he did was go round all the poachers. As I say, we just had to pick up the people needed. (laughter) Daddy knew the country like day

and night.

Well then, that summer holiday I became the platoon clerk and I learnt to type after a fashion – I still only use two fingers several million words later. Brockenhurst was the main depot, again because it was in the New Forest Council area, and we'd go to and fro to collect stores, anything in boxes, ammunition, greatcoats – because to start with they had no uniforms, they just had an old badge with LDV – they weren't even Home Guard to start with – LDV, Local Defence Volunteers. The things we came back with, and usually all done in a baby Austin and often as not, you'd find a Cocker Spaniel from under a load of greatcoats or something – the spaniels came with us.

The more active side; we used to do patrols. I was on patrol one night on Portmore crossroads – oh, this is by June, which time things were falling (clears throat) and a plane flying round at night, going round and round in circles. I don't think - he was dropping bombs occasionally – I don't know if he was trying to hit anything but what they really did was aid the war effort - the German side, they did anyway – was to keep the Wellworthys night shift in the air raid shelters for one night. They were making piston rings and pistons and other things for aircraft, particularly for the merlin engines and the Spitfires.

00-10-10

Oh, there was one night there was an incident. My sister and I were coming back from the cinema one night – one of the nights we managed to get in. There's usually a queue – it was in what is now Marks & Spencers – and there was always a long queue 'cos there were the forces in the neighbourhood. Anyway, we're coming back and got to the bottom of Walhampton Hill and found an old man in the ditch, who as the saying goes, had to drink taken. He'd fallen off his tricycle. Now it's pitch dark, how d'you sort out an old man and a tricycle in a ditch? It took a little while. Any case, we got him out and put him on his tricycle and pushed him up the hill. Now, he had one of these old fashioned acetylene bicycle lamps. You've probably never heard of them and you certainly I'm sure have never seen one. Incidentally I've got one here that I bought, I'll show you. And it set fire to his coat tails. So there we were pushing this old man up the hill with a miniature bonfire going on, and as we could hear there was a bomber coming towards us. It was very high up. We'd had this warning, even a lighted cigarette would bring a bomb down on you. Eventually we decided we were a couple of teenagers and an old man and a tricycle weren't really worth a bomb. Nearly down at the bottom we were going to tell the sentry bird that.

Now, how are we going. You wanted to know about the machine gun I'm sure.

You told me a small story when I came round. (laughter)

00-12-25

One night, I can't tell exactly when it was, while I was away at school I know that, a bomber was shot down, night fighter, they had night fighters going by then. Must have been in about 1941. It fell at Slades Farm in Pilley. The crew bailed out and much to their humiliation I'm sure – as they were Germans – they were rounded up by the girls from the searchlight station at Crockford. The tail fell off separately - and incidentally so did the rear gunner who was found later in a hay field by which time he was described as being a bit off – and then the plane itself was found by some children playing in a wood nearby. It still had this machinegun in it. Of course, when the salvage crew picked up the plane, they only picked up the main part and couldn't be bothered to find the tail. Anyway, the Home Guard took possession of this machinegun, literally a gift from heaven, having come down from above. We dismantled it, because we got it off the tail. While doing so, lucky we disconnected the belt containing the ammunition, because there was a sort of click and the works, whatever they were, shot forward. The gun happened to be pointing at the school playground – the village playground, so if the ammunition box had still been attached it might have been rather interesting.

00-14-51

Well now, we had one of these colonels in the platoon, he was an armourer and he'd been in charge of whatever the experimental armoury section is in the British Army and he was also a quite a skilled engineer, and he got this gun off and got a mounting for it and they still had the box of ammunition. And now we had a machinegun and that was something. We had by then been issued with rifles, old American ones which they no longer wanted and the shotguns had been returned to the owners. I managed to get a very nice one too out of them. Everybody got interested in our machinegun, saying we shouldn't have it. And we said "Oh, we've got it. We're going to keep it". The only platoon in the Company – South Hants Company – in the whole of Hampshire – who had a machinegun.

Well the first person to come round was the local policeman – PC Mears I think his name was – and he was arguing this was a police matter. Had they got a licence for it? In who's name and where was it being kept? And so on. And all of this time he was in the sitting room sitting on the sofa under which was hidden the machinegun, under where he was sitting.

Then the ARP came along and said "Well, this has fallen from above. That was an ARP matter". That was quite wrong 'cos if the invasion had come, they would have been rounded up and the idea of a civilian having a machinegun, they'd all be shot. This body would have been anyway but that was our look out.

Then the army said they should have it. I think the local troops quartered in the area, which was the Northampton Fusiliers – they drank well too! – we used to exercise with them. I

think they were concerned for their own safety rather than what it might do to anybody else, including the Germans, because they didn't want to get shot by a lot of something amateurs armed with a machinegun on a Sunday morning exercise.

So, I think this went on for about three or four weeks I think, and eventually army decided that the right move was to exchange it for an anti-lewis gun off a First War aircraft. So we still had a bit of a machinegun.

And while all this was going on, of course, we had the machinegun well hidden. And where was it hidden? Under my bed, for the whole time.

00-18-52

Could you just tell me, you mentioned the Home Guard scheme and you talked about all the poachers being retained that your father invited to join, how many people were there in the Home Guard platoon you were in?

Good question. Been trying to work it out for some time too. It was divided into four sections – Boldre Parish, Sandy Down, Pilley, Walhampton, Portmore area and Norley. Each one was I suppose no more than about 20. So you might say the whole platoon was say 50 strong (clears throat) but it varied quite a bit, people came and went.

One of the troubles was that a lot of the people in Boldre and Pilley worked at Wellworthy's and John Howlett raised his own platoon, with himself in charge, as a complement to the others. Well, he was used go stealing people from Boldre and Lymington to make his separate platoon and he started making himself a sub-machinegun or two as well.

D'you know what sort of equipment they had?

(chuckles) Good question. What equipment did they have! To face the German army – the victorious German army - expected any time, and we were a south coast parish, you might say right in the front line or would have been. We had quite a lot of shotguns. The farmers themselves always used a 12-bore, as did the poachers, a couple of rifles from the First War and one was more likely to come from the Boar War or even earlier, or some other war fought in the outpost of the empire, revolvers and things. We were never issued with pikes, but I think that is more threat or propaganda so that we were prepared to defend our parish against anything and everything that came to hand with anything we could use. I know my sister and I were making up homemade weapons, like a bicycle tube packed with sand as a nice way to knock out somebody. Sharpening up kitchen knives and things like that. We really had nothing and the defence posts were mostly sandbags and ditches in strategic places like Portmore but if the Germans really did come the Home Guard would be just wiped out. But I think all the time the idea really was to look out for parachutists and fifth

columnists and spies being dropped at night, and rounding them up, which if they ever did, would have been comparatively simple.

Another thing is uniforms. Just an armband that said LDV, which was only a token thing, otherwise they would have been shot as – what's the word? – factorea I think it is, which is a civilian found with a gun, or even worse, using a gun in a military area. After a while the armband was changed to Home Guard. That was Churchill's idea for it. 'Dad's Army' came sometime after the war ended. Quite a long time as purely television show. Incidentally it was my view the Home Guard was pretty crazy, but it wasn't nearly as crazy as the real thing.

We gradually got uniforms, what they called denims at first, which were rather thin shapeless things and a forage cap with a badge on it. Boots I think and as winter came on I think they issued us with greatcoats and slowly they were gradually better equipped. Just remember that in 1940 when it was formed, all the attention was on re-equipping the British Army after Dunkirk. Really the army – those that did come back – left behind pretty well everything, even their rifles and that, a lot of them.

How often did you patrol, and what was involved with patrol, the Home Guard?

00-25-30

As far as we were concerned it had been done on Portmore crossroads, two of us. Yes the two of us, we just took it in turns wandering around in the dark. There was no traffic and not much else. That would have been rather frightening when an owl hooted rather close, all of a sudden. It was a bit more exciting by then, by 1940, and there was one night when there was a plane wandering around dropping bombs, or trying to drop bombs on Wellworthy's. One of them came – fell somewhat, I don't know, it was pretty close anyway to where we were at Portmore. Retired hastily for shelter beneath a hedge. We had a beach hut there for shelter if it rained because they cleared Milford – very quickly cleared all the beach huts – we had one down there which we brought back and so used one of these ones as Home Guard shelters. But that bomb which fell that night rather close was somewhat of delayed action - but that one was so delayed it never went off at all.

A year or two later Jess Sibley who was a farmer at Portmore was going round one of the fields and he noticed what he thought was rather a large rabbit hole. He put a stick down and it went down rather a long way and had the sense to report it to the police - PC Mears again – who came along from a safe distance and decided that it was a bomb hole and with the bomb disposal people, kind of come along and do something about it. Which they did. They started digging, but it's on clay, so it kept going down deep and deeper, so they decided to blow it up. Which they did successfully. The crater was there years afterwards. My house was very near it. But they hadn't told my mother. They had told her they were

going to blow it up. She heard the bang and came dashing out with her first aid kit expecting to find bodies all over the field and found they were all very active and invited them back for a cup of tea.

Well that's only one unexploded bomb but there was another one somewhere and nobody has yet found it and it's still there. That fell in January – I suppose it was January '41. Again a German bomber who probably preferred dropping a bomb on a bit of countryside rather than a city surrounded by guns and searchlights. And he did, he dropped two bombs. The one fell somewhere near Baddesley church. The plane - remember it very well - was coming from the south-easterly direction and the next bomb – another bomb fell but didn't explode and no one as yet found that bomb. I've a fair idea where it might be but I think I'm the only person now who even knows of its existence. The countryside must be full of bombs. A lot of them were dropped out in the Forest, but they never noticed too.

Did you see the odd lone bomber? Were there any other things going on in the air, or the other end of the war?

00-30-23

You didn't see them at the night because they flew high trying to keep out of range of the aircraft guns. Southampton of course was pretty heavily defended, even before it was completely wiped out almost. But in 19 – summer of 94, as well as helping the Home Guard that summer, I was helping with the harvest with Eddie Perkins at Norley farm. He was going round with one of these old fashioned binders with the big – called the sails I think – going round and round, pulled by an old – it wasn't, it was probably quite new - Fordson tractor. And somebody had to sit on the binder and pull the lever to release the sheaves and even more important, to shout to Eddie to stop because the string had broken or something.

Well, after a while the Battle of Britain started, and if you're sitting on a binder in the middle of a corn field, it looks quite a long way to the nearest ditch and it certainly felt a good deal further. Those planes were flying fairly low and you could see them - you could see the courses (insignia?) on them as they came in to bomb Southampton, and dog fights were going on. Planes being occasionally being shot down. Occasionally you'd see a plane coming down and one landed of ours or theirs sort of thing. But somehow as a teenager, these sort of things, it was just all rather exciting. Nowadays be scared stiff. Sure (chuckle) would be too.

Just as a teenager, I had to wait two weeks I think 'til I was seventeen. I think I joined a week early in the end. That was when our school platoon, because I was away at boarding school near Windsor – not Eton I might mention, a place called Beaumont – and we formed our own section. Well, in fact all public schools were a great asset to the local Home Guard

because they all had to belong to the OTC – Officer's Training Corps – and we'd had had a perfect good deal of military training, which is more than you can say for the usual people in the Home Guard except for one or two that fought in the First War. Also we had rifles most of which would still fire. Others were dummies or for training.

Also, being young and active, we'd go out on exercises with the old men, and we could run circles round them. This was at the local Home Guard. You'd get something back for that. Our Sunday morning exercises were held usually in the grounds of Walhampton House, and as I said, we were young and active and we would laugh at these old men – they were in their 60's or so anyway – they were digging for victory and suffering from lumbago and so on, and trying to get themselves down in the prone position and couldn't get up again, which was amusing to us. Of course, nowadays you see why. It's not quite so amusing.

00-35-35

Well, my experience of what went on in Boldre was rather limited because in January 1942 I left to join the Navy. (Unintelligible) to what went on. They were just starting to build the aerodromes then. It was a big one at Beaulieu; it was a major one. That was built up on the Heath. It didn't really affect us anyway, but Newtown Park, which is the family estate. Then later on built a whole series of smaller airfields - air strips really – along the south coast in preparation for D-Day. One of them called Lymington which was actually mostly on Pylewell Estate, also extended onto some of our land. They cleared trees – bit of the wood was taken (clears throat) – but also two cottages – semi-detached cottages – which they said were going to be at the end of the runway and would have to go. So they went. Along came the bulldozer. Next day they came along and said "Oh those cottages, no we don't need them anymore" by which time the only things left standing were the privies at the end of the garden. They gave us £200 for the pair of them. Wasn't exactly very generous. They did spare what we called the icehouse which was a mound which belonged to Newtown Park – the house. Inside there's a sort of built cavity. It's now been opened up again so that people can see it. That just had a machinegun on top. But that air strip I never saw it in operation. It was only used for about three months until they had conquered enough of France to make space for air fields there. They were only fighter stations.

Beaulieu was Coastal Command. (no idea) One or two crashes there, at Beaulieu. There was one which was trying to make the airfield and no one seems able to say whether it was – it had just taken off and ran into trouble or was coming back having been shot up a bit. Anyway it was trying to make the runway but didn't quite make it and crashed with a very loud bang near Friaries Wood, bottom of Pilley Hill. The (unintelligible) claimed that it had just taken off, but I think it far more likely that it had been (clears throat) it had been damaged 'cos about that time (no idea) was arming the U-boats. Before that they'd always – they'd see the plane coming in – chance to dive – do a crash dive and keep out of the way. But then he decided they could fight the aircraft on the surface because they'd be very

low flying and that's what he did. He was bringing down the returning aircraft.

Which also had the new tactic. The microwave radar was only just coming in. They were fitting bombers with that, and the Germans didn't know about it, and they could pick it up on their radios. Sorry, the older aircraft radar they could detect on their radios but they couldn't detect the microwave radar on their radios. So they were taken by surprise, which helped them shoot up an aircraft.

Did you see the plane that came down on the Forest?

No. (clears throat again)

You're doing very well. You've been talking for 40 minutes. (laughter)

Tell me, I think you were on the Forest at the beginning of the war and then you were called up weren't you, so when did you leave the Forest first?

January 28th 1942.

What was it like leaving?

Not so bad for me because I'd been a boarding school for ten years but the first night – I went to the recruiting office in Southampton and then shipped off up to Skegness. Butlins Holiday Camp in mid-winter. It was a little bit cool. But I was sharing a cabin with a lad who'd never been away from home and I think he felt it badly. Felt sorry for him. But having been at a public school, it was no worse. (chuckles) Actually it was somehow much better than school.

Did you keep in touch with the Forest during the war? Did you manage with your parents and what was going on there or were you completely cut off?

You know what you say?

D'you manage to keep in touch with what was going on in the Forest during the war or were you away?

00-42-41

Oh yes. I was never out of the country, except, well, Scotland anyway. But my naval career was peculiar. I spent four years in the Navy and never went to sea. Somehow I found myself - for want of a better expression - in the Fleet Air Arm and again found myself working for Testwood Training Squadron on night fighters. They were shore stations, but

there was an old saying at one time “Only God and the Admiralty knew how the Navy worked and now only God knows”. I think that sums up my naval career. (chuckles)

Did you get to pop back to home during the war and the Forest?

I came back on leave. I was lucky in that respect, I was always within range. I wasn’t overseas when I wouldn’t have got home at all. In fact, during my time in the Navy there was only one when I wasn’t home for Christmas.

What was it like coming home for Christmas?

00-44-15

Booze was tight of course. I know one year we – we always had Christmas Dinners anyway with my uncle – he’s the one who owned and lived at Newtown Park – lived in one of the cottages - but for Christmas Dinner he wanted a turkey. If you bought a turkey you had to get your meat ration about a month ahead, sort of thing. But a goose - well you could buy a live turkey or in our case a live goose. There was somebody in Norley - that’s one of our tenant farmers was rearing geese – I think he paid for his rent on that goose – but it arrived. It was driven up across the fields and walked straight into the kitchen. What happened after that was um – well it found out. (laughter)

00-45-41

Yes, food was rationed right from the start. Sometimes quite adequate but sometimes it was a little bit short of things. But Lord Walton who was head of that, needed to keep people fed – the whole country fed. The black market – for it existed of course – but probably to a far less extent than in other countries. In France they had food rationing but nobody bothered about that and they just had the black market.

I can’t remember what the rations were. I think you were allowed one egg a week, or maybe one egg a month even. Bread, strange to say, wasn’t rationed until after the war when rationing was even tighter because while the war was on a lot of food came under ‘lease-lend’ from America. After the war ended the Americans said well if you want it now, you’ve got to pay for it. We’ve taken all your trade and all your industries – well, they were saying, you haven’t got any money ‘cos you can’t use your trade to make some. But that’s what it was. America sent the bills in and refused to supply any more under ‘lease-lend’, saying you’ve got to pay. Britain had to – there was great demand then and concentration on exports.

Can you just tell me then, because we’re at a point where we’ll have to stop because the memory’s almost gone. D’you remember coming back to the Forest at the end of the war?

00-47-48

Yes.

What was it like at the end of the war on the Forest?

The airfields were still there and operational. Beaulieu remained operational until 10 years after the war. (clears throat) Eventually they had a big auction sale, buildings and things. Every farmer saw businesses up there buying these prefab buildings. I think we bought the detail RAF headquarters – WRAF quarters – quite big huts and things. Nissan huts you still find dotted around, to be re-erected. Gradually returned to normal. The airfields were fenced, so of course from a Forest point of view, ponies were restricted to a much smaller area. On the other hand, the grids weren't in, so the ponies did very nicely on a diet of roses in Lymington gardens. Yes, things returned to normal. No traffic of course, or very little.

I've almost run out of memory on this thing. (laughter) You've interviewed extremely clearly. Thank you very much.

End: 00-49-14

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00-00-00

My name is Hugo Du Plessis. My qualifications for this are that I've lived in the Forest most of my life. I'm not from an old Forest family. The family has only been here for 175 years, and I'm only a third generation but perhaps I know a bit more about the Forest than the more newly arrived settlers. My family was based in the south of the Forest. At one time we owned the Newtown Park Estate, a small estate east of Lymington. It had what I consider one of the most imposing small houses in Hampshire, but that's now got out of the family.

I was born – I'll ask you to guess my age – I'll just say that I was old enough to have served in the Navy during the war, which these days, saying you've been in the Navy during the war rather assumes you're getting very ancient. I've always been extremely interested in the Forest, and well, south Hampshire in general I suppose you might say.

Now I said we owned Newtown Park. That was typical I suppose of the big houses in the neighbourhood. Well, the south of the Forest area is peculiar because it has always been a desirable residential area and at one time there became a lot of mansions built on comparatively small estates. The whole socialist idea that the country is owned by aristocrats with their enormous land holdings is not true at all. Newtown was – well most of the estates maybe about under 1000 acres, and Newtown was 400, but it had our big house. Of the local houses - the army occupying – handed over to the army almost at once, with the exception of Walhampton which was reserved for the Australian High Commission I think, so I'm told.

At the beginning of the war, nobody considered that Hampshire would be a danger area. I think it was rather a surprise when France fell and we found the enemy under a hundred miles away. Pylewell, our neighbouring estate was a bit bigger, but they had army right from the start, eventually taken over by the commandos who did a bit of damage. They also taught the commandos a great deal about poaching. Unfortunately what they didn't teach them was the boundaries of estates. They used to come over and poach our pheasants too.

Of the big houses, Walhampton was never occupied. Beaulieu of course was taken over for secret service training, all very glamorous now. As I say, Walhampton was not occupied by the army until quite late when it became a rest house for the American Airforce.

One of the troubles was that the army left behind when they ceased to occupy the houses, the owners were left with a large claim for damages, which in some cases meant pulling down the house and building another. Newtown, they were lucky because it was still in our possession and owned by my Uncle Gaston who was still living there and because he was still living there, the army spared him.

00-05-30

Then came the blitz on Southampton during which one of the warehouses there which had the furniture from the liner Queen Elizabeth, which at the beginning of the war was uncompleted. In fact its maiden voyage was planned for May 1940. Not a particularly lucky time, and the maiden voyage in the end was as a troop ship. There was a dash to New York to be converted into a troop ship. But then came the bombing of Southampton and the warehouse was damaged and one had to look for somewhere to store the furniture. Newtown being not yet taken over by the army provided a good area where they could put

the furniture. Uncle Gaston retired into one or two of his rooms, each of which incidentally was about as big as my entire bungalow (cough) including the television aerial on the roof. There he lived for the remainder of the war sharing the house with these luxurious armchairs and deep carpets and I think the whole of the shopping centre, while the Queen Elizabeth went backwards and forwards bringing the American army over to Europe and then taking the American brides as a result back to America.

00-07-15

First of all the Northampton Fusiliers who were the regiment - or army unit whatever they are, battalion I think – which was stationed (mumbled words) out of this area but from I suppose all the south coast along as far as Barton, that area, which was as far as we were concerned, right in the front line. Very good crowd though. (chuckle/cough) All Geordies from Newcastle area, a lot of ex-miners, and they got on very well with the girls. A lot of the girls ended up by going back north, with their babies.

Oh I know, the local people, we suddenly got up a cricket team against them. I remember I was put on to bowl and I got the Colonel (chuckle) out first ball. Most unusual! Happened the ball was aimed at his head and he was out of the game.

Now there's one thing which – well, I was talking to my son only yesterday – getting people to understand what - it's really a very serious disease, probably the most serious disease you can have in wartime, which is war fever. The entire country, everybody gets caught up in it and everything, and I mean absolutely everything, is devoted to the war. And of course, they yearn a victory. And all sorts of things, victory parades, dig for victory and things like that. Personal dedication of everybody, whether they be in the services or not. Chiefly because they're working in the factories and so on. The thing is, if you've never been through it, it is extremely hard to understand and anybody I've spoken to about it agrees they know nothing about it. It was one of a saying among my generation, a few years after the First War ended and I was brought up in the shadow of the Western Front and the trench warfare and allegedly it dominated my childhood. The firm determination and no way was I ever (cough) going to join the army. One reason why I joined the Navy instead. That was almost as bad!

Particularly I think of the wartime feeling that came in 1940 and we – particularly the south coast – were faced with a threat of invasion. Something which had been quite unimaginable. Nobody ever thought it possible. That's why we were a safe area for evacuees. But there again, even more, controlled everything we did because we really did think that invasion was coming, quite literally any day, particularly by about September. There were one or two scares when the Home Guard was stood to and ready to do whatever was necessary.

00-11-47

Can you remember any of those scares?

Yes. (chuckle) My sister and I were coming back from the cinema one night. We were stopped at the toll bridge by the Pennington Home Guard and warned we'd better get home quick. But part of understanding, nobody really knew what was happening, whether it was going to come or what it was or why there was a scare. I think some of them were just rehearsals or somebody had said thought they'd seen – thought there were reports of the barge movements on the French coast. We certainly were expecting it and rarely what you do when you think, surrounded with pictures of – particularly the First War devastation – pictures of the whole countryside being sort of laid waste, the stunted trees, that sort of thing. Very hard to imagine.

But the preparations for it had begun as I came back from boarding school in July that year and found at very short notice – or they did, because the beach was lined by steel stakes all the way to stop landings there, and pill boxes along the cliff had suddenly appeared. Of course, with the Home Guard, we had all our preparations. They were pretty feeble, just sandbag trenches most of them. I know that's all they had at Portmore. By the genius - the Home Guard section commander had contact in Southampton with shipping agents, or some shipping company, and he got hold of a very large buoy, one of these channel buoys, which he cut in half, put some slots in it, turned it upside down (chuckle) and he had a pillbox. They could sit in there with their guns, (laughter) shot guns.

00-14-23

Now, going back to the effect on Newtown – on some small estate – one of the major things was the great sacrifice of the woods. We lost a lot of timber, being cut down. It went off to make paper for government forms I think, letters essential to the war effort. Then they came along and wanted to build an air strip on the land. It was only a landing strip but they did make the huge runways on the big airfields. Beaulieu was just outside, almost entirely on Forest land, but eventually (muddled words) include was the series of lights to mark where the airfield was. They were called the Drem lights I discovered. I was wandering round one day and I found a little string of posts and lamps on them. I was rather amused they were called the Drem System because at that time I was still stationed up in Scotland (chuckling) on Drem airfield. That was all … designed. By that time, they had them all over the place.

00-16-18

We suffered on the estate a certain amount of bomb damage. I think about twelve bombs altogether dropped. One of them killed a cow. It wasn't ours, it was a farmer's, but otherwise there were no casualties anyway. They did cause a bit of damage. Newtown

Park was a big house, not a huge stately home but all the same, it was a sort of mansion size, built in about 1700-1800, and every time a bomb came anywhere near – there wasn't one nearer than about 400 yards I think – it shook the house so much that the windows just fell out. Old tinted Georgian glass. The frames were rather slim and rather rotten, so it didn't take very much to shake them out. And they had one bomb on one side, all the windows fell out on that side and later there was another bomb on the other side, again in my opinion distant, and all the windows were shaken out that side too.

But also they had cellars, quite deep underground, and we found after the war sometime – the house had been cleared a bit - a pile of crockery down there from the days of the old big country house dinners, about six feet high I think. One of the bombs evidently had produced a shock through the ground. It lifted up (chuckle) the entire pile of plates and put them down again, every one of them broken. So that was all the real damage done I think, other than the windows.

00-18-40

I think I said last time, there's still one unexploded bomb there. It still hasn't been found. I'm the only person knows any whereabouts it might be. The owner of the house now is a very wealthy American who loves planning war games and collects military vehicles and tanks and things and he goes round firing guns. Having war games with dummy bombs blowing up. I think one of these days may find he's exploded a real one, which I think is probably rather nearer his house than any of the others ones had been.

00-19-27

Many or most organisations houses lost staff who had to go off to the war. I don't remember that Newtown really lost any staff. We had for various reasons - particularly there'd been a financial crisis before the war - and I think a lot of the staff, the number of staff had been reduced. We never had – without being one of the great big estates – we never had all that many. By that time those we did have were getting pretty old and I think they were too old to be called up. Did have some younger ones came along later, because as a refugee family from Southampton, and at that time we had a flat empty and they were given that and there they stayed for the rest of the war. I think frankly, only rent paid I think was that the lady helped with the housework on the big house. This all paid for the rent.

Now later on uncle got extremely decrepit. The husband had come back and he had to help uncle with his bath, which he did very nobly. At that time the old man got so weak he was living downstairs and in even fewer rooms. All the baths were still the old fashioned hip baths. It's amazing how that sort of thing went on in that house.

00-21-30

The Home Guard – have to mention this – we had peculiar ranks. As I say, my father who raised it was only a colonel and nothing very remarkable, because he was still rated as a colonel of the Territorial Army, and under him there were half-a-dozen full blown retired colonels. The other ranks came from anywhere, but the head gardener at Walhampton happened to be called Sargent. So he was given one of these stripes and promoted to corporal. He'd never done any fighting; he'd never been in the army. (chuckle) But just because of his name.

There was one colonel who was a most interesting man. He had button head guard. Actually he used to be in charge of the ARP, but discovered years later – his son actually was a great friend of mine – that he had (chuckle) in the First War, he gained three DSO's, which is really quite something. Nobody quite knows how or why, but he had. But then again, when he died it came out that he'd been a something called the – in the Second War – something called the Special Services.

00-23-03

Well, he lived over in the house quite close to the main Brockenhurst to Lymington road and it transpired that he'd been given a secret radio that was hidden in the henhouse and usually ready to report on enemy troop movements in the case of invasion, because his house was in quite a good position for spotting those. It was a very secret organisation called I think Special Services, and so secret that they reported by radio directly to General – forget his name - in any case he's the General in command of the entire southern section of the army. More or less the whole of the south of England.

(Laughing) I had this sort of body of guard colonels who, imagine, who would be able to give accurate reports of any troop movements. But they were never actually called into service, but apparently used to have secret regular meetings or exercises. His son told me that they'd sort of wake up in the night and hear father talking on the radio.

00-24-44

One of the prominent features was the blackout. You weren't allowed to show a glimmer of light. Well now, how d'you black out – block up all the windows in the house? At Newtown I don't know how many windows there were. It was probably a hundred, but part of the fact that half the house was half used, or more than half the house solved that problem. And we also had the old Georgian idea of shutters, big wooden shutters, which were closed every night, rather to keep out the burglars but more to the point, to keep out the draughts. As most of these old houses were, they were extremely draughty and extremely cold and not really all that luxurious to live in. Down at Newtown Cottage where we lived, which was the dower house which was rather smaller – well, a lot smaller – we still had 20 windows to

black out. Eventually not every night, but all the same, quite enough to do every night. We had time to make curtains for all of them, but (clears throat) done in a hurry too because these blackout rules only came in a few days before the war was declared. Whether anything fighting happening going on was another matter, but you sort of blackened every night. And when we went round we made up wooden shutters out of roofing felt and a light wooden frame. So this had to go up and down every day. (chuckle) It was quite a routine job, you know. Finally we didn't always manage to create a great deal of light because at the beginning of the war we still had our own Ocala electric light plant, which came on only when you switched on a light and stayed on as long as the light was running and (cough) well betide you if you were reading in bed, 'cos father could hear the engine running. In 1939 it was on its last legs and it was great a difficulty keeping it going. A lot of rather cold and frosty evenings we had in this little engine house, pouring petrol into a thing called the autoback trying to keep it going while an evacuee held the torch. Fortunately we were I think in the 1940's, one of the very last houses to be connected to the mains, so that meant we had to be rather more serious about the blackout.

00-28-03

One of the interesting things locally was the employment. Wellworthy's at Lymington - where they made piston rings for Spitfires and the pistons too for Spitfires - started just before the war. An expansion of the Wellworthy piston ring factory which had been running for some years. They were made for car engines. But all this employment was very helpful for the neighbourhood. We had a field up near Bull Hill which was being sold off for building plots – actual small holdings - and a lot of the local men were working in Wellworthy's making good money. They could now come along – they could afford to buy these building plots, which about I think were going off for about £100 a piece, which before the war was way out of their range. They couldn't think about it. This gave them the idea they could buy the whole little plot, which was I think an acre each, were intended as smallholdings for the commoners and so on. So this sort of injection of money into the neighbourhood really made quite a difference.

00-30-00

(Long pause) Southampton got real and truly plastered, so what do you do with literally street loads of rubble? All of it had to be cleared somehow. They came out with the idea – well, it wasn't an idea actually - of building airfields. The place was quite transformed by building three major airfields. The runways and so on were virtually made with the rubble from Southampton, and tarmac as well. As I say, Beaulieu was the one which I knew most about. Three very large runways and a major taxi strip all round it, but then it spread out. It took the whole of Beaulieu Heath – biggish area – but it also spread out into the woods, into the inclosures where they had bomb stores and other things, and in the other direction I think into all the various quarters, huts and so on, administrative areas, workshops,

hangars. Then in 1948 I suppose – no '58 - Beaulieu was the last one to be handed back and had a great big auction sale. All these buildings, and all the people and the farmers and the small businesses in the neighbourhood descended on the auction (clears throat) and in buying these prefab buildings. I know we bought what was the entire WRAF quarters – women's air force quarters, and they made very good buildings too because we had lots of them. But a few years later I still had one of the Nissan huts. But that was at ??? … the house we built on the edge of the Forest. That was after the war. There again, they had to make a road over the Forest to give it access and we used the rubble from Southampton which by then had been used to make the airstrip on our land, which my father was very busy digging up to restore to agriculture. So nothing from Southampton got wasted. All sorts of funny bits came up too. Sort of coloured tiles, which was rather interesting. Wondered where they'd come from. Anyway, my wife and I laid the bricks by hand and some of it is still being used but not by us anymore.

You've covered a lot of ground actually.

Have a lot more here too.

00-33-47

Oh yes, the D-Day preparations. Well, I missed it all because I was away in Scotland most of the time and only saw these things afterwards – what was left. And what was left was pretty extensive, because as well as these airfields – Beaulieu was one of the major bomber stations - but then this huge assembly on the coast in preparation for D-Day and that required all sorts of alterations and things too. Roads had to be widened. One of the major problems was that Lymington Pier offered major loading place for things like tank landing craft and also for supplying the – one of the old ferries was used to supply these ships that I'm told were so thick on the Solent (chuckle) that you could almost walk to the Isle of Wight without getting your feet wet. They doubled the size of the slipway at the pier, but how d'you get there? Because at Baddesley is a low railway bridge, which still occasionally takes the roof off a heavy lorry. So what did – you couldn't get a Sherman tank on its transporter under the bridge and like a lorry, if they hit the bridge they take it away. So they had to divert them, which meant from Baddesley crossroads down through Rope Hill and over Boldre bridge, then down numerous lanes like Hundred Lane to get to Portmore crossroads where they could divert onto the main road there which would take them down to the pier. But even doing that the roads were only country lanes and the damage. A Sherman tank was wider than a country lane, so they all had to be widened, which meant concrete over the ditches, filling the ditches in, and for years afterwards in the days I was on the parish council, a good thirty years later, had endless trouble with the drainage because it had all been filled in and it used to cause floods. And also at Portmore crossroads they had to do a rather sharp turn, so even they had to widen all the crossroads there. I think a house had to be – no, only the garden wall had to be pulled down.

00-37-26

Then also the airfields - imagine the major construction work like that requires a great deal of material. Where the cement came from I don't know, but there seemed plenty of supply of that all through the war, but gravel was another matter. So they started up in Beaulieu alone, there were I think three major gravel pits. There was one at Bull Hill near Portmore which ended up – that's an ancient one, been there for hundreds of years – but that was more than doubled in size. Same at Setley Pond was also formed from one of the gravel pits and the road suffered because of the lorries going to and fro. The gravel pits are still there. Some are used for recreation now, but there are a lot of small ones as well.

And then get a problem after the army's gone over to France. They'd left a lot of stuff behind. Enormous quantities of stuff. Well, the gravel pits they only used them for dumps later. But a lot of the small pits – and we had quite a few on our land which were old gravel but also marl, which is a form of fertilizer – very ancient – so a lot of those were used. And we had the airstrip that had to be cleared and the material from that left and they used some of our pits for that.

00-39-41

Of course, they left a lot of stuff behind which was very useful including emergency rations and things like that. Everybody from the local villages was helping themselves, 'cos in about five minutes a family could pick up enough food to more than double there official rations, which was by then getting pretty tight.

There were all sorts of other things too. Bits of aircraft, radio sets ..

Did you get your hands of any of that stuff?

Yes! (laughter)

What did you get?

I forget now – I got a radio. I tell you what it was because we had them on our own aircraft, Squadron Fleet Air Arm. Yes, great big – cow bells … oil drums. You could do all sorts of things with an oil drum. And again, rubble, which we used then to make up our own road, or filled in the potholes with it anyway. Oh yes, and on Beaulieu – not on Beaulieu, on our own Newtown airstrip, sometime afterwards it would be used for – take over by the Navy as an open dump, using the runways, even more the perimeter track, for storing naval equipment. All sorts of things, I don't know what it was. Tanks - not army tanks - just big fuel tanks or something. They used to go bang in the night. Make you wake up and wonder what it was.

But also engines there. I don't know, had several hundred Rolls Royce merlin engines – 1500 horsepower – they were used actually in all sorts, MTB's and so on. Not to worry, you could almost walk in and help yourself to one, or two or three if you wanted them.

They stayed for a while then we got the go ahead farmer and he wanted his land and the thing was cleared as quickly as possible. There was a lot of steel mesh – I don't know what you call it – well, to make the roads and military runways. 'Course it's only grass otherwise. And also enables more extensive use of road vehicles and things. That was quite useful too. I don't think we bothered with any of that. That was scrap and nothing else. They also had the big pegs which held it down and they were very handy for fences and so on.

We did in the end do something about it, but they never replaced our two cottages though.

That was the two you mentioned on the first track – knocked down weren't they?

Yes, they knocked them down. They came along and said "Very sorry, we don't want them after all". Pylewell really suffered more than we did, because really took probably the edge of one our more extreme fields and thus the fair bit of clearance. Trees were cut down – on the flight path, sort of thing. They didn't really sack any of our woods but those had suffered quite enough anyway. They'd come along and just order you to cut them and the timber merchant came along and that was that.

00-44-38

There was quite a change too in farming. Before the war, farming had been depressed industry. We only had one farm – one big farm at least – and for years - well my father had just after the First War my father took it on, and in the '20s he got out of it just in time. It was then let to a farmer who went bankrupt, then let to another one who never paid his rent. So that was the state of farming before the war. And then suddenly this demand came for food. Everything was brought in to get farming back on its feet. And we got in a new and a very good farmer. Again, he brought land into use that had been neglected. Brought in equipment and a tractor which worked, which the biggest one never did. We had a big garden at Newtown Park, they conquered growing vegetables and so on. My 90 year old uncle got a special – used to work in the garden – they got a special agricultural labourer's food rations, about an extra slice of bread a day. But it was completely different as part of the war effort. They'd urged "Grow Food" – any means, as fast as possible. Allotments started up in towns, and in Boldre we – there were some parish allotments always intended for the labouring poor, basically cottages without gardens. They were all brought back into use. Just after the war you couldn't let them to anybody in the parish council.

Alright, I'm running out …

(comment by interviewer)

Thank you very much.

End: 00-47-48

Keywords: Newtown Park Estate, Walhampton, Australian High Commission, Pylewell, commandos, Beaulieu, Secret Service training, storage of Queen Elizabeth furniture, Northampton Fusiliers, Home Guard, preparations for possible invasion, Drem lighting system, bomb damage, Special Services, blackout, local prosperity, rubble from Southampton, auction of war surplus, D-Day preparations, Sherman tanks, gravel pits, abandoned food and equipment, Navy dump, fuel tanks, merlin engines, demand for food production, change to farming practices.