

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

Contributor's name	Alan Edward Oakenfull	Name code	AEO
Interviewer's name	Helen Wallbridge	Code number	018
Audio Typist name	Helen Wallbridge	Transcription Date	28/02/2014
Transcription file name	AEO - Alan Oakenfull		- OH Transcription.doc

Web Pages:

Oral History article:

<http://www.newforestheritage.org/memories-of-an-unhappy-evacuee/>

Project information:

www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/wwii

File name	AEO	018	0001M0.WAV	Interview date: 28/02/2014
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[00:00:00] Are you ready to start?*Yes, can you tell me your name please?*

Yes my name is Alan Edward Oakenfull.

Where were you born?

I was born in a place called London, quite big, you may have heard of it (laughs)

Yes I may have heard of it (laughs)

The West end of London, not the West End, near, what's it near? Kew Gardens, that end of London. That's where we used to play as kids, before the war. You don't want me to go before the war do you?

No if we can stick to wartime and in the New Forest

And the forest yes, because that's too far.

What year were you born?

I was born in 1932. Which makes me ... what year are we now? what year?

2014

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CHAIRMAN OLIVER CROSTHWAITE-EYRE CHIEF EXECUTIVE ALISON BARNES

So I'm aged 82, oh strewth, dreadful (laughs) 82 now, hoping to make 102, but doubtful! (laughs)

Any more questions specifically?

No

Ok, well shall I just go on perusing this? (his printed story)

Yes, can you start with when you went to Southampton Central station to be evacuated?

Oh at the beginning yes, I'll put it on (papers shuffle)

In 1939 I was living in Southampton, Dimond Road, 153 Dimond Road and it's in Bitterne Park. My father was a gardener but he was about to be drafted into the Army because the war was upcoming. My mother had died in childbirth when I was about 4 and a bit. As a seven-year-old in 1939, I had a vague idea that war was coming and that I was to be evacuated. but I knew very little. I didn't even know what evacuated meant. Something to do with the bowels it is these days? (Laughs).

Three days before war was declared my sister who was ten, myself, my brother who was just six were assembled at our local school. My father told my sister that she should make sure we all stayed together and she should look after us. We were given white labels with our names on which were tied to our coats. We had our gas masks over our shoulders which of course we didn't understand or know about and some luggage in rather a small suitcase and a shirt or so. We were taken by bus to the Central Station in Southampton, along with about 40 other children from the school.

The train took us to Lymington - a place we had never heard of- but it was supposed to be safe from the expected bombing. There we were all taken to a hall where the ladies of the locality chose which children should go to their own homes. Gradually the numbers diminished until we were the only ones left. Nobody wanted three children as a group. So my sister went to one council house to be looked after and my brother and I went to the house next door and put in the care of an oldish couple. A Mr and Mrs Knight.

My sister incidentally said that she went to sleep on her own and she noticed a strange smell about the place and next morning she was told by a neighbouring child that the mother of the lady who owned the house had been buried that day and had been laid out in the adjoining bedroom. War was declared three days later and we heard about it when we came out of Sunday School. We were not happy there. We wet the bed a good deal.

(Noise – what was that?)

My brother and I were pretty wild and misbehaved quite a lot. We enjoyed going out and scrumping apples and once I recall we were in a phone booth giving the operator a bit of lip using some language we'd only just learned. And anyway she contacted the local bobby who cycled up,

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dragged us out, boxed us round the ears and told us not to do it again. We did not dream of vandalising the phone. These days it would be a different story.

At the local church school they tried to force me to write right-handed and being left-handed I did not enjoy this very much. Evidence of war at this time was limited to wondering what a huge circular water tank with SWS written on it was. Was it for swimming in? We didn't know, do you know?

No, what was it?

Static Water Tank for putting in hoses and ...static water tank yeah. Well I just didn't know what it was. We weren't told anything. And these people we were living with were well...

(paper shuffles)

I won't say it.

After three months our foster parents had had enough, so had we! So my brother and I were moved to Bournemouth to some other foster parents who still didn't really want us. It was not very pleasant. At school there I can remember being accused of stealing a farthing from a girl in the class. Being innocent I learned that life is rather unfair at times. (laughs) Nice girls he was but she said I'd stolen a farthing! Um, I'll tell you what.... (Takes coins from his pocket) what's that coin?

5p

See, I looked at it and for years I was thinking that's a sixpence. It looks like a sixpence.

Laughs, same size

You're quite right, I was just checking!

[00-07-29]

There was a story going about that a German pilot had bailed out of his aircraft and had come down on some telegraph wires and had been sliced up. Of course this would appeal to boys like us. At one time my brother and I set fire to the heath at Wallisdown. Later we learned that it was thought to have been caused by enemy action. I suppose we got our own back on the Germans on that occasion. We stayed there quite a while. And then I'd better mention, Lyndhurst School. Which was in the same old Church of England School is in the middle of Lyndhurst still, I guess it hasn't changed very much. It was opposite the church which had a very slim spire and looked very impressive.

After about a year, when I was 9, we were moved to a home in Lyndhurst called Wilverley House. What did he call it? (referring to an earlier conversation with Barry Halford)

Wilverley Park House?

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Yes, subsequently I've learned it was called Wilverley Park House, but now it's been demolished anyway. I can't remember the name of the road it was in, but I could take you up there.

I suppose there were about 35 boys there - all from problem backgrounds because of the war. And we slept in dormitories with about 6 to a room. A Mr Dimmock who I remember as being a very fair man and ran the home with his wife. The setting in the Forest was lovely and access across to the farmland existed and we had a jolly good view of it as well. One could see another large house called Foxlease which became or was a centre for the Girl Guide movement. Did you know that?

Yes, it still is.

You did know that. Well we could see it but we never went there because it was a couple of miles across.

We attended the Lyndhurst elementary church school. I remember going to church parades at the church opposite the school and also being prepared for confirmation by the vicar. However, I decided I was not convinced by his beliefs and declined to go through with the process. I waited until he got me up...

Up the road from Wilverley was a bomb disposal unit, housed mostly in tents as I recall. I remember going to the small cinema in Lyndhurst - I think it was called the Lyric - it was. And seeing a film called "Sailors Three" starring Tommy Trinder. You wouldn't remember him would you?

No

A favourite that Tommy Trinder! It involved a merchant ship carrying a cargo of bananas. As we had not seen a banana since the beginning of the war our tongues were hanging out at the sight of thousands of them (laughs) oh dear that's true! Near the home there was a farm and I recall the farmer plastering his hay crop with molasses in a large tank. To mix with the straw to feed his animals with. We enjoyed eating the black treacle when we managed to get hold of a drum of it.

While at Lyndhurst I became aware that something had happened at Dunkirk. This was because many of the French survivors being billeted nearby. They were probably my first sight of a foreigner.

During our time there we were bullied quite a lot. Can't remember by whom (laughs) So one day I persuaded my brother and another boy, Barry (Halford), that we should run away heading back to our homes in Southampton. We decided to leave after lunch on a Saturday, so that would give us the maximum time to get clear. We rendezvoused in a rhododendron bush before we left at about 1-30. We walked to Lyndhurst and then set out on the road to Southampton. I knew which way it was as the Hants & Dorset buses went and came that way. In order not to be seen by Mr Dimmock in his Ford 8 - DHO 158, I remembered that?! I have never forgotten the number (laughs). We walked, where possible, parallel to the road some forty yards in the Forest. When we got to Hounslowdown I was dismayed to see how much further we had to go. Because I was working backwards and the buses were coming from Southampton every half an hour we saw a bus come. When we got to Millbrook I made the mistake of going to the centre of town instead of going towards Winchester Road, well you know where that is. We reached the Bargate and I felt we should turn left into

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Hanover Buildings but we could not since the road was closed because of an unexploded bomb. It was a notice in the middle of the road, "Danger, keep out!" Unexploded Bomb. We made our way through St Marys. Yes we were going to turn right, left at the Bargate and down that road, what's that road? Hanover Road? Hanover Buildings I think, but we went on down a bit further and then made our way across to St Mary's and sighted a tram going to Bitterne Park Triangle which I knew. So I was back on route again so I was happy. And I dragged these two Herbert's along with me. (laughs) Oh dear. We eventually got there and my brother and I separated from Barry who lived in Woodmill Lane, which he mentioned in his letter. And I found our house, number 153 Dimond Rd at about 7-30.pm. It would have been about that. Because we left at ...a lot of hours

7 hours,

Yes a long time. We had nothing to eat really. Thought I understand my brother had hidden a crust in his pocket and hadn't told us! You can't trust them! (laughs) Our current stepmother was there, yes because we had several step mothers, and we were delighted to be given a boiled egg each. I can't remember the others having one! I had one certainly. About three days later we were shipped back to the home and I do not recall any bullying after that. So that was a successful exercise.

[00-15-05]

After a couple of years I won a scholarship. That's right; I've got it in the right order, because I was quite young then to go to Itchen Grammar School which is in Southampton. I did not know I was sitting for it. Scholarship. One day a teacher said to me, at Lyndhurst school, "Alan go into that other room and do that paper that is on the desk" This Southampton School had, itself, been evacuated to Andover so my brother and I were shifted to Andover and lodged with a fresh set of foster parents who were not very keen on us at all (laughs). Nobody wanted us! (laughs) The school was divided into three houses, Exeter, Ajax and Achilles; named after the three Royal Navy destroyers that caused the German battleship Graf Spey to scuttle itself. That was a big thing in the war which I obviously remembered. You probably didn't know that? Graf Spey, ever heard of that?

Yes

Oh you have, well fair enough! You must be quite bright! (laughs)

There's a film, a very good film! (laughs)

You saw the film? Oh well, I didn't see the film! But I heard about the Graf Spey.

And of course very time there was a success for allies, I was quite chuffed, nobody told me this, but I was quite convinced that we would win this war that was going on. My dad was in the Army, part of the time. He was in tents up here, Bassett. Funny times they were, never knew where anybody was. Anyway it was quite funny. So that was the first bit of good news for the navy since the war started (a bit of confusion about where the last sentence came from in the print out). It's true.

I used to look to look with interest at the maps in the newspapers showing Monty's advance in North Africa. This thing on Radio Solent this morning was about the Ordnance Survey making maps for the army to use during the war. They had several million of course they didn't use them all, but they

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had them all stacked and they would use them wherever they needed to go. And they didn't know where they needed to go, they'd be in North Africa one minute Sicily the next and coming up the Italian Peninsula another one, so it was a lot of work to do which I as a lad got involved in (Alan worked for the Ordnance Survey after the War and until he retired)

[00-17-55]

(Mutters while catching up his place in the print out)

Hitler only had one...yeah.

I used to look with interest at the maps in the newspapers showing Monty's advance in North Africa and I felt certain that we would win...yeah! Anyway, Hitler only had one ball – 'cause that was a song they used to sing (laughs). I felt sorry for him!

One day my friend, Brian Best and I got into a small church north of Andover and rang the bells (laughs). Later we learned this was a signal that the invasion had begun! (laughs) It was a little tiny church not that much bigger than our front garden. North side of Andover I could take you there now. And when I was evacuated up there, we use to get up to all sorts of games! Ooh. The foster father had a job painting camouflage on top of aircraft hangers at nearby Weyhill aerodrome. Again we were not really wanted in the home - naturally their own son was treated much better than we were. A rotten memory was of the two of us being caged in under a Morrison shelter while the foster parents went out to the pub for the evening. You know what it was, caged? You know what I mean? A metal table quite big, hard to get it in this room. And it had a cage round the side that they used to lock on used to have something to sleep on underneath it, but if they went out we'd be locked in there. So you couldn't get out. Pretty nasty. Although I don't suppose it was that bad. We used to sneak out some ways, sometimes. (Laughs).

At this time I saw the local Home Guard training with pitchforks in the local gravel pits. My Dad was invalided out of the army so we paid occasional visits home travelling on the Spratt and Winkle railway line from Andover to Southampton. Have you heard of the Spratt and Winkle?

No

Well, they were fish obviously. A Spratt is a fish and a winkle you eat I can't honestly remember. The railway line that came down from Andover was the Spratt and Winkle. Either it was bringing fish down to Southampton or it was taking them the other way, I can't remember which. I would have thought it could have been going up. But I enjoyed winkles. Phew Lord, Spratt and Winkle. I'm glad you came for this! This is good!

I recall watching aerial dogfights over the town. We'd cheer madly when we saw a Hurricane or a Spitfire do the victory roll, yes we would. This would indicate that the pilot had made a kill. One night during a raid we saw a parachute coming down in our back garden. We feared it was a land mine as some had hit nearby Woodmill Lane, which was where Barry (Halford) lived, the night before and done much damage. It turned out to be a flare, which had not ignited. We took the parachute indoors and subsequently all the females around enjoyed silk underwear.

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One morning I was walking with my Dad down Ashtree Rd – I don't remember, I must have written this. ...this takes me back, because when these houses were blown up in Ashtree Road, if you go walk down there now you can see about 6 houses that are new, quite different to the ones on the other side. I've got a mind to go down there and have a look at that, take Nancy down. An unexploded bomb went off in Ash tree Rd and destroyed three houses and we saw the wreckage when we walked back from breakfast. Cause we used to go down and have breakfast in the school. Things that people got up to!

[00-22-20] As well as serving in the Home Guard at this time my Dad was an ambulance driver. His worst experience was when the Art Gallery at the Civic Centre was bombe. You don't remember that Art Gallery do you?

No, but I've heard about it.

Civic centre, you heard about it? killing dozens of, I don't know if this is true? Killing dozens of school children that were sheltering in the cellars. I don't know how true that is? Or dozens? I don't know but from what people have told me it was a lot.

Yes, I think they were on a school trip.

Were they?

Well, then we come to Pennington, which I've not covered in the war story.

[00-22-56]

We stayed in Andover for approximately four months and then we were re-united with our Dad (Jan 43) who had funnily enough settled at Lower Pennington near Lymington where we had started. After a spell working for Wellworthys (piston ring makers) they were quite well known for that. He got a job as gardener for Sir Cyril Deverell, a retired Field Marshall who, I think, headed up the National Savings Movement. Well he did, I've seen that proven. The gardening job £3 per week (Laughs) came with accommodation over a large garage where we lived. He had another step wife at this time, she was quite decent. £3 a week (laughs).

(paper shuffling)

Moving school was interesting. At Itchen Grammar School the first year was called... oh yes this is where all the years got mixed up, I won the scholarship at 10 so I was already ahead of my years - should be 11. When I moved up here they misunderstood what had happened or didn't talk to each other or whatever and I was moved up another year! And of course I didn't know what at these, teaching all these kids...I didn't know French! I was supposed to be talking "en francais" by this time! But I just didn't appreciate what was happening, but I let it happen I think. I must have done, I thought well I don't mind going up another year. They had this numbering system – 2C they called it. Which was Followed by a 3rd, 4th 5th and a shell year. I must have written this – it's exactly what happened. And finally a 6th form, But shell year...

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When I transferred to Brockenhurst County High School they asked me what year I was ...oh year, it all happened again! I said I was in 2c and they put me in their 2c so after one term I was now in the second year. I can only put this down to lack of liaison between county and the town educational authorities. Because of this I found learning French ...very tough, but the other subjects were not so bad.

School life was quite decent at this stage. The teachers were mostly quite old as the younger men had been called up for military service. The school ran an Army Cadet Force and an Air Training Corps for the older pupils. Sometimes I would cycle to School after my paper round and sometimes I used the bus. On the bus ride one could check ones homework with fellow pupils (Laughs) Oh yeah I got that wrong! (Laughs).

On day in 1943 I came across a 14 foot sailing dinghy- I didn't know I'd written this? It was an open boat and had weeds growing through the bottom. Up to that point I had enjoyed sailing around the marshes on a crude raft constructed with oil drums and some old timber. I persuaded my Dad to buy the dinghy for me and he did for £25. Where he got that money from God only knows! It was good of him though. I was attracted to sailing having read Arthur Ransom's books. Have you ever read them? Any of them?

Yes, Swallows and Amazons.

Good. I wanted to sail it in Oxey Creek and in the Solent. In order to do this the craft had to be registered as a fishing boat. This was done and the large identifying letters "SU 48" or some other number it was painted on the bows. This officially allowed me to sail between Needs Oar Point which is up near Beaulieu, and Hurst Castle down the other end. On my first trip out I took my trusting Dad out for a sail and capsized. We crawled ashore on to the marsh, bailed out and then headed home. At this point he decided that the boat should half-decked in. Timber was very scarce. That's right; he got these clothes posts he wanted. He wanted some wood so he got these clothes posts and sawed them all into planks. Fancy doing that! And he laid these flat planks on the decking supports – blimey. The wood was then covered with canvas from part of a bell tent.

I joined Lymington Town Sailing Club as a cadet and raced regularly. I had a mooring just off the end of the slipway. Well Lymington Town Sailing club is still going I guess but you mean Lymington Yacht club is different – higher class. The Yacht club has got its big Yacht House – club house down near the water. Which you've probably seen. You go out under cover but I joined Lymington Town Sailing Club, let me think, he cut up those planks, that's right, and the two clubs – they were different and we used to race against them and we beat them sometimes, not always because of course they had good yachts, I used to love that. One bloke died, I can't remember his name. He had quite a big sailing dinghy. Oh – can't remember his name – it was a long time ago wasn't it, it was in the war. Anyway, I can't remember his name. He was quite decent. He was older than me, about 22 and I remember he was a ...he didn't go in the army, he was in the fire brigade, and the fire brigade were billeted in Lymington Yacht Club, Lymington Yacht club must have been accommodated or taken by the military for the duration of the war which eventually the yachtsmen all came back when the war was over. And he had been in the ...Army, no Fire Brigade sorry because he wasn't in the Army. And he had a yacht and I used to sail against him and with him, he was about 21 or 22 I guess he was older than me but always very kind to me and let me go on his

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boat, sail it. But he went down the river one day, fell overboard and drowned. I wish I could remember his name, I bet in the Lymington times for that summer and I guess you'd have to work it out from here (his notes) he would be mentioned, because he was known as a firefighter and not a soldier and he was based in that club house I think he lived in there almost and as I say he died. There should be a record in the Lymington Times.

[00-31-17] Prior to the invasion in 1944 two things stand out. Cycling to school ... oh yeah all the tanks- the American and Canadian and I used to see them on the boats – the black men – I'd never seen a black man. It's not surprising. They were all doing dirty work out on these ships parked in the Solent. Cleaning up, scrubbing. Then they'd chuck their brooms away because they didn't want to do it again. (Laughs) they all seemed to anyway. We used to take their brooms home sometimes. My dad was always glad of a broom to clean up the place.

But they did, they were always very generous with their candy and gum and crystallised fruit which they gave us when we gave them eggs, the Americans.

Did you talk to them?

Oh yeah, they loved talking because they'd just be sat there, sleeping in their tents. And we'd be outside. I'd stop my bike, I was on my way to Brockenhurst to go to school and "what's new now?" "What have you dug up" and this and that. "What have you got for us today?" "Well We've got a few eggs, maybe we can squeeze one out for you" "what have you got for us then?" and they used to give us all sorts of things.

Were the same ones there for several days?

Oh yeah, they were there for ...I would say about three weeks, maybe more, maybe four. Because obviously they were coming down county and all parking on the byways and sideways of the forest in particular all those bits of grass along the edge they were all there with all the tents up, all linked up. I think I said in the paper, when they went it was gone; they were all gone, all gone. And it was the same with the sailing, all the ships had gone. Did I say that somewhere?

I'm not sure, but I've heard other people say that.

I mentioned the Bryl Cream. That bloke who had that Bryl cream was God what was his name – Bryl Cream, I'll think of it in a minute. He was very proud of his hair. But Bryl cream was very hard to come by, you can imagine it, it's like ladies not having their stuff. However I had a source — a member of the Sailing club was a barber and he received a ration. He got a ration of Bryl cream from somewhere – I don't know how he got that. I used to buy stuff and I bought stuff for this teacher and he was so pleased. All my pals used to accuse me of trying to get top marks for history! Which I did because I'm pretty good at History.

Then I mention the Cordite – did you read about that?

Yes, but I can't remember...

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It was explosive and you get a bit about as big as your little fingernail with a cylinder and if you lit it Boof! It would go up. So if you put it on the ground and out a few bits together and then you put something over the top it made a bit of a noise, a bit of an explosion. The boys were very pleased with this idea and I sued to sell them this Cordite at a farthing for each piece. And in my diaries which I've still got for some of those years I've got a record of how much I made moneywise. Made one and tuppence three farthings today on cordite. The sales of it. (Laughs).

[00-35-44] *Alan's wife Nancy comes into the room and they chat – recording paused.*

Interview restarts with Alan eating biscuits while talking!

As the Solent filled up with ships, the Invasion fleet I used to sail amongst them, it was an incredible sight.

I remember seeing about the Invasion fleet, it must have been huge...

Oh yes, it was 1945 it filled up you could almost walk across the Solent on ships, I mean that's a lie, but looked as though you could. I mean it's never ever looked like that before or since.

Do you remember seeing anything of the Mulberry Harbours being built?

Yeah. Blimming great Mulberry Harbour being towed out somewhere I can't remember where it was. What I didn't know was, it came back. There were two, huge things – massive, massive, I don't know how big they were and I tell you where they built them, dome of them, I better be careful here...they came back. I tell you where they did build some invasion fleet I'd better not exaggerate here – some pretty big landing craft, dozens of them they built them in the dry docks, you know King George V graving dock down in Millbrook, they were full of these things. And where they were protected, They were all let out and all taken away on invasion day, but it was a hell of a sight. And up at Eling Quay, you know Eling Quay,

Yes,

A pal of mine used to sail up there, I sailed with him, as well...

(Alan loses his train of thought as Nancy enters with Coffee and we have a short break) recording paused.

[00-37-45]

Most interesting for me were the boxes of cordite that they jettisoned. They took the shape of little cylinders about a centimetre in length. I would collect hundreds of them and take them to school and sell them for a farthing each. The boys used them to create key bangers. At one time with friends we wheeled old pram chassis over to Walhampton, that's the other side of the Lymington

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river. And there used to be an airstrip down there, they were everywhere in the forest, the New Forest was full of airstrips. You never knew you'd cycle along the road one day then the next day you go along and there's an airstrip there and another one and another one.

Nancy: They laid concrete at a rate of knots

And sometimes they weren't even concrete, but as long as they could get a plane up off the ground they'd be flying them out there to bomb fighters in particular. To do all the pre-bombing that was necessary to damage as much as they could of the Germans set-up.

We went over to Walhampton where we collected discarded fuel tanks and wheeled them home. There were made of compressed paper. We cut out a hole in the top and used them as canoes. It's a good thing we were not smokers for they reeked of high-octane fuel. (laughs)

Nancy: Gordon talks about those

That's my brother. He was around (laughs). During 1945 I started keeping a diary in which I recorded mostly boyish things but had an eye on the war.

An entry for April 1st, Easter Sunday and All Fool's Day, reads "Brit forces 200 miles beyond the Rhine". In the afternoon of the same day I record, "Mr Churchill at Quebec Conference" He went over there for a chinwag with Roosevelt and stuff.

On the afternoon of the 7th of April I listened to a programme on the Home Service – here you are - A Harbour called Mulberry, that's it. On 2nd May I note "Hitler is DEAD, Donitz takes his place". On the 4th, "Jerries surrender in N Italy and Austria" and on the 5th "Jerries' surrender in NW Germany, Holland and Denmark".

On VE Day, the 8th, I say "got up rather early and went down town. This was Lymington. The place was covered in flags. A banner across the street said, 'Victory 1945'. I mention drunken soldiers and airmen, thunder flashes, blank cartridges, flaming sacks and water bombs. Bed was at 1150 (laughs).

On VE+1 an effigy of Hitler was burned on a pyre of orange boxes. Orange boxes? Where did those Orange boxes come from? Someone had some oranges.

Nancy re-enters the room – has not been able to find the diary.

Nancy – Did you tell Helen about all the stuff that used to be dumped overboard from the ships?

No not really,

Brooms,

Nancy: And flour. You said they used to throw over bags of flour. And of course it would cake round the outside, but inside was perfectly alright. And of course Gordon said about all those oranges you

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couldn't remember that could you?

No,

Nancy: There was a ship wrecked on the IOW, the shore was covered with oranges. And of course they floated in the water and they were quite edible and he said he'd never seen oranges before. Nobody knew, and I remember you were on about the bananas

Yep

Nancy: You didn't know what bananas were did you?

And so the war was over. Back at school next day saw us kids letting off even more fireworks. My final memory of the war is of our teacher giving us kid's ordinary razor blades and telling us to stand up on the chairs and scrape off the anti-blast tape that had been stuck on the windows for five years. Then I say Health & Safety! Hmph! They wouldn't do that would they? You imagine the flimsy razor blade.

Nancy: Not even the ones with the solid side to it; they were ordinary double edged double sided blades.

Wow I didn't remember that! (reading) During this operation I record that I caught a glimpse of Pat Smith's knickers. One of the girls I fancied.....(laughs)

Nancy They were quite funny stories, very interesting.

(laughs)

She lived at New Milton, next door to the cinema.

Nancy: Have you got there right at the beginning of the war when they closed the ice-cream factory?

Yes I've got that. That's mentioned in there. There's quite a lot in there.

Nancy: There is a lot in there – I must read that again, that would be lovely.

[00-43-24] End of Interview.

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