

## New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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**00-00-00**

*OK Brian, if **for the purposes of** the tape, just say your name and where you lived and your age at the start of the war, please.*

My name is Brian Brown, I lived in Porchester Road, Woolston. That OK?

*Erm, I believe Brian, your father worked for Supermarine before and during the war. Can you tell me a bit about er,*

Yes, before – before the second world war he worked for Supermarine Aviation works at Woolston. He actually took part in the Schneider Cup Trophy team which won the Schneider Cup Trophy outright and then subsequently he was a colleague of R J Mitchell, the designer of the Spitfire, and subsequently worked on the very first Spitfires as well. And I don't believe he was present at the first flight of it, but er, the pilot's name was "Mutt" Summers who flew it in 1936 I think it was, yeah.

*Did he tell you anything about working on the Spitfire. Any of his experiences working with Mitchell?*

Erm, (long pause)

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*No, sorry, no problems.*

Yeah. I, no, – no I don't remember any great deal what he said about that apart from the fact that I think he did the engine installation because as a younger man he had erm, Brown Engineer's A & C licences, so erm, he was always able to er, work on, y'know, installing engines and running the engines if you like as well, although in those days, I think because of it's a Rolls-Royce engine, there was always a Rolls-Royce em, erm, senior man to look after their own products (chuckle) sort of thing, yes. Yeah.

**00-01-57**

*So Brian, tell me about going to the Empire Air Day.*

Yes, we – the Empire Air Day was at Hamble just near Southampton and up until then, all we had seen were biplanes, but on this particular day – who had arranged it I don't know, but – there were two Spitfires actually did a flight over the assembled crowd, and one was flown by Geoffrey Quill, the Chief Test Pilot, and the other one by Bill Pickering, who was another test pilot for Supermarine at the time. And I remember saying to my father at the time, "Gosh, look at the speed of those, nothing will ever catch them". Erm, well, 'cos we were only used to seeing biplanes (chuckles) at that time.

*OK Brian, tell me about life in Porchester Road at the start of the war.*

Yeah, well, initially in the first weeks of the war nothing much had changed apart from the fact that we went onto rationing, er, which was somewhat different to what we had been used to prior (chuckles) to rationing. Food was short, however there was enough. Erm, the first thing that came home to use as children was the fact that er, the evacuation from Dunkirk brought a lot of French soldiers into erm, into our area and a lot of them were lodged in Porchester Road school and in fact we also, in our house, had two French officers erm, put upon us sort of thing, whom were very very nice men and could speak perfect English. Which they did, (chuckles) they really did. Erm, and they were there for a couple of days before they were moved on. We never knew where they went but erm, anyway that was our first sort of er, baptism if you like in a wartime situation.

**00-04-11**

*And do you remember the bombing starting?*

Well subsequently to that, yes, with the German bombers then being based in northern France, we used to have regular sort of visits from them. Not many at a time but nevertheless erm, they always made an appearance almost on a regular basis. A lot of

them, they probably came for reconnaissance to see what there was and in fact in retrospect of course, erm, they came to look for the Supermarine works as well, which in fact subsequently they did bomb. The first effort was on a Sunday teatime of all times, erm, but they actually missed the works as well. They did not miss one of my favourite shops in Bridge Road, which was called Lamertons, which was a model shop which I used to visit regularly to make aeroplanes and whatever. But er, I said I only realised that because when we went out on our bicycles I found lots of Lamerton notepaper all about, which had obviously been blown up and just got in the air and y'know, well, we found it all. They then came back again on the following Tuesday and Thursday, and that time they did bomb the Supermarine works. And in fact, had my father then gone to his right shelter, he would have been killed, but he went to the first one that he came to and he was OK. (nervous chuckle) But many people were killed of course, and the works was, well er, destroyed, literally. And subsequently believe it or not, within a very few weeks they commandeered various large garages, i.e. Hants & Dorset garage in Winchester Road, Seward's garage in Winchester Road, Henley's garage in Southampton and moved all the jigs and – that they could muster, put them in those localities, and production of the Spitfire was carried on within weeks of their original er, factory being bombed.

**00-06-40**

*So Brian, tell me about what you remember about the blitz on Southampton.*

Well, initially, er, when – obviously there were lots of aeroplanes that used to fly over and you never knew exactly where they were going because it seemed to me wherever there was going to be a raid in the country, they always seemed to cross over Southampton. It was just where it was positioned in relationship to a) the bases in northern France for the Germans and wherever they were going in the UK. The nights that they were going to bomb or blitz Southampton, you knew that it was going to be there because the first ones always dropped their phosphorus flares and the whole sky was totally lit and so was the ground as well. And erm, well, under those circumstances you just went underground (chuckles) as we always did, and you just stayed there. In fact, erm, my father extended our air raid shelter and we – I don't remember sleeping in my own bed in the bedroom for many many weeks. We all slept in our air raid shelters. Erm, my mother, father and myself for weeks and weeks on end, erm, it was just the safe way of doing things (chuckle) really because even if the – even if you weren't er, the subject of the blitz that night, it was quite incredible how when the German bombers returned, if in fact they had say and bomb or two left, invariably they dropped it on Southampton before they went across the Channel back. I think that happened, I would say, at least 50% of the times when they returned. Yeah.

**00-08-47**

*So tell me about the sort of bombs that were dropped.*

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Yes, well, apart, as I say, apart from the high explosive ones and many of those did not explode - I remember on one occasion we had one in Porchester Road halfway down and believe it or not, it was outside of our little general store, and that general store was called Targets. (chuckles) I'm not suggesting that they knew that, but it was right outside of Targets. The unfortunate thing is, it hit the water main and nobody in the road had any water at all for at least 36 hours until the bomb disposal squad dealt with it, took it away, and that was it. And they repaired it.

Having said that, we then had this other sort of ammunition which the Germans used and it was a landmine, which they dropped on parachutes. The idea of that was that it didn't sink into the ground, it just stayed on the ground and as it exploded it had the big blast affect. Erm, not all of them did hit the ground at all. A lot of them in fact in The Avenue, the upper Avenue in Southampton, just hung in the trees, and they were disposed of by, well, the bomb disposal squad, which was quite fortunate.

Erm, the other aspect after these raids as far as we children were concerned, we would go out on our bicycles picking up the shrapnel everywhere and who would get the biggest and the most best collection of shrapnel. Not only from bomb shrapnel but anti-aircraft gun shrapnel and erm, some of the best shrapnel that came from, would you believe, erm - there was a gun emplacement at Grange Lane, just back from Netley and there was an erm, there was an anti-aircraft battery there with 4.7 inch guns and they were really big, (chuckles) and they made a lot of noise. And of course, they made a lot of shrapnel (chuckles) as well. Yes, really very interesting. However.

**00-11-09**

*Did you see any of the German aircraft?*

Yes, er, on occasions, yes we did see them. I remember one day seeing a Junkers 88 dodging in and out of the clouds. All black it was painted. That really indelible on my mind, I must say. The other ones of course were the ones that were caught in searchlights as well, which erm, - I mean you may ask well how, why was I out sort of watching this at night, but erm, well, (chuckles) it was all part of the adventure (laughing) if you like, which one loved to see, and also the shells bursting around these things. I don't ever remember one of them being shot down but erm, certainly erm, certainly the shells were bursting around these aeroplanes.

**00-12-08**

*I understand there were a few erm, barrage balloons in the area ..*

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Well, yeah, they were only there in the early days. They did not – I get the impression that they gave up on these. They really did not seem to erm, have the effect that they – I mean, on, as I say, on the basis that these Me 109s just came along, you know, and took pot shots at them, shot – got rid of them. So obviously the attrition rate was going to be quite considerable. So just a waste of time I felt, oh yes.

*I understand one of the barrage balloons erm, had a er, an unfortunate effect on an English aircraft.*

Yes, on the Fleet Air Arm Walrus with a crew of three, it actually flew into the barrage balloon that was actually stationed on the St Mary's College football green, which was my school in those days. And in fact, after, well, after they had moved – when they moved all the barrage balloons away, we actually went down with our gym master onto the football pitch and pulled the concrete blocks away so we could use the football pitch again. (laughter)

### **00-13-33**

*So Brian, tell me about the adventures you had out on your bicycles with your friends.*

Yes, well, we used to – the nearest place we found was at Hamble airfield. There was a small hangar away from the normal sort of hangars on the airfield. It was just in one corner, and damaged aircraft like Spitfires and Hurricanes were actually brought in there by the ATA pilots for repair. And erm, I guess they were there sort of 3 or 4 days just being patched up with, if you like, plates and a few more rivets and they'd be flown out again. We subsequently extended our range on our bicycles because with the onset of the probability of D-day coming along, there was much local activity around Southampton and in the New Forest generally. And erm, we used to come down to places like Stoney Cross, Holmsley airfield, Christchurch airfield, which had a wonderful array of – oh, and Ibsley as well – had a wonderful array of all sorts of American bombers and American fighter aircraft. There were Flying Fortresses, there were Bostons, Liberators, Mustangs, Thunderbolts, which to me as an aircraft enthusiast in those days anyway, this was just wonderful to see. Erm, and this is why we regularly came to see them.

Having said that as well, there wasn't only the aircraft. There were lots of tanks and Bren gun carriers which also were in the Forest. I remember particularly the road that used to run alongside Wilverley Enclosure. There is no road now apart from just a path, they've actually closed it, but on that particular road there were many many tanks under the trees along there, and Bren gun carriers, in fact a lot of them were Canadian tanks as well, and erm, obviously they were there and erm, there was the cookhouse and whatever (chuckle) because every now and again you'd see a wisp of smoke coming up and obviously they were cooking for whatever facility they had. And erm, also they used to do exercises on the

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erm, on the heath between Wilverley and Brockenhurst as well. In fact, in subsequent years, walking my dog, I have picked up many pieces of shrapnel, bullets, empty cartridge cases. That is in my, y'know, much later life (chuckling) sort of thing, but it proved to me what was going on - and was still going on.

#### 00-16-45

*Brian, tell me about your memories of VE day.*

Well, VE day, really, OK. We realised it was going to come but er, I can't actually remember the date that it was - actually happened. I think it was in May or something like that. However, on our bicycles again and we went into Southampton. Suddenly all the street lights were back on again, the church bells were ringing and erm, well I don't know where all the beer came from but everywhere you went there seemed to be plenty of beer and even at the 14 years old, I remember having my first pint of beer to celebrate. I wasn't too steady on my bicycle going home but nevertheless, you know, it was great fun. (laughter)

#### 00-17-36

*So I understand you saw some American troops coming through Southampton.*

Yes, the American troops in the latter part of the D-day invasions, came by, came down Winchester Road past the Sunlight Laundry where I had started my apprenticeship for Supermarine, and at lunchtimes we used to stand at the front gate and these American troops would throw us bars of chocolate and also packets of cigarettes. I remember particularly er, things like Camels, but I'd never seen these before and I used to think "What are Camels cigarettes?" sort of thing, which in fact I took home for my father. But nevertheless, I mean, it was the first chocolate we had seen for quite a long while. So we were most grateful for it.

#### End: 00-18-28

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