

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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<p><i>Could you just tell me your name and where and when you were born?</i></p> <p>My name is Major William Spiller. I was born at Heathrook Rectory in 1924, the last days of 1924.</p> <p><i>You said that you were in the Home Guard when you were fourteen?</i></p> <p>Fifteen actually, yes</p> <p><i>What memories do you have of that?</i></p> <p>Well, that was not strictly speaking here, but it relates to here. I was a member of the J.T.C. (that's the Junior Training Corp) at Canford and was, therefore, to some extent trained in military things. I was able to fire a service rifle and at fifteen, along with my father, I joined the local Home Guard - it was then called the L.D.V. We were given a suit of denim overalls in khaki and we wore an armband on the left with "L.D.V." (I think somewhere I've still got it) and we paraded at a local headquarters at a derelict house which was made our armoury and so on. I think the most important occasion I can remember is: I was at home at night time and they rang the church bells, which really was the sign of an impending invasion, and together with my father ... in those days we turned out with shot guns because at that stage we had not yet got these American rifles with which we were later equipped. And we</p>				

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went up and we lay, fairly uncomfortably, along in a ditch awaiting the never-to-arrive German parachutists. And mercifully, I think the next day, they said it was a false alarm or something like that and we all went back peacefully. It was an extraordinary experience really because though I was only, well then, fifteen I was one of the very few people who knew a little bit about service rifles and shot them. Later, we occasionally went to weekend training camps and learnt more sophisticated things, including one terrifying thing called the 'Blacker Bombard' which was a left-over weapon from the First World War. It had a spigot and it fired - it was like a mortar and you put in a ginger beer bottle filled with phosphorous and a wick and the idea was to discharge it at an oncoming tank and set fire to it [laughs]. I don't know how many of these things were ever used, I don't think they ever were, but we trained with them nevertheless. Well there we are.

Where did you - did you meet each week, did you meet each week for practice?

Yes indeed [coughs] Sunday mornings was our sort of major parade of the week when people could get together in daylight hours.

And where was that?

That was actually not at this location, but it was the sort of training we did in those days. My early days of the War really go back to May 1940. I was then a boy at Canford School, Dorset, and one of the early memories was ... in those days, the Imperial Airways (before British Airways were invented) had some very large bi-plane airliners and I think they had wicker chairs inside which people sat in and one of these, there weren't many of them, flew over Canford and back again. And I'm told, whether it's accurate or not I couldn't really say, that it was bringing back the French Cabinet - it bought them back from France pending the invasion really. The other memory I have of there was a thunder-black sky. It was basically a nice May day and this terrible black cloud came over the Channel and that, I understand, was caused by setting the oil vats alight at Dunkirk and a huge, massive cloud practically blackened us out, yep.

You mentioned that you were a Commando.

0:05:22

That came later, of course. Yes, in 1943 I was old enough to join the Army and having done my Officer Cadet Training things in the Royal Artillery, which was the regiment of my choice, I found that I was not going to go on D-Day. And they were volunteering - they asked for volunteers for the Commandos and I put my name down. Now in those days these Commandos were originally Army people, Army Commandos, and it was only later that the Royal Marine Division was broken up and the fit and young Royal Marines were turned into, from the Royal Marine Light Infantry, became 40, 41, 42 Royal Marine Commandos. So we always felt we had a one up on them because we were volunteers and

they were told what to do and join [laughs]. I was on a course prior to being posted to the Far East, a jungle warfare training course, and I was stationed very comfortably for a week's course at the [chuckles] Rose and Crown in the New Forest. And it wasn't so built-up as it is today and we used to go out on exercises on the New Forest and they set a sort of course - they had dummy bodies tied up in trees, and this that and the other, and as we walked through suddenly they were firing blank, a (quote) 'Japanese' would come out of the tree and we raised our rifle and, with any luck, shot him. So I have to be careful when I see the Japanese now that [laughs] I'm not sort of rather like my sheepdog, trained to shoot the Japanese [laughs]. It's a long time ago, much has changed. But in those days, of course, the New Forest was packed with military memorabilia, they call it now. They had forward dumps of ammunition and I suppose rations and other goods, spread out in dumps at intervals along the approach roads and as the troops came forward for D-Day, it was on a 'move forward' programme and if the thing had - if they hadn't gone when they did - they would have (quote) 'run out of supplies', if you understand what I mean. But it was very much alive with things. Now, also I remember I actually went onto Salisbury Plain because I had a reason to go there and the ranges up there were simply packed with camping Americans, British tanks, wheel to wheel, track to track, it was like a car park on Grand National Day. It really was hugely occupied there.

0:08:23

Another interesting more local – which is not actually a memory of mine but I read of and think it's interesting - is in the early days of the airborne troops they were training glider pilots from Hurn Airport in the New Forest and they wanted to see how many people they could pack into a glider successfully. And they stuffed Commandos as payload into this glider and it took off but unfortunately, when it was near Ringwood, it parted its cable and came down on its own and bounced onto the ground and penetrated the wall of the cemetery of the place whereupon, an irate vicar came out. He was much more interested in the broken down wall and possibly a cracked gravestone or two than he was on the welfare of the poor blighters who were stuck in the glider [laughs]. But there we are. There was a lot of airborne activity round here in those days. They did parachute descents somewhere, I suppose locally. And these Whitley Bombers used to fly over and you knew they had dropped parachutists because they had a trailing cord. In those days the Whitley Bomber was – you could call an obsolescent bomber which they used because that was the only aircraft they could spare - and the poor chaps had to jump through a hole in the fuselage in the bottom. And quite often they hit their heads on the edge of the thing and it was known as 'ringing the bell' [laughs] but you used to see these aircraft, one after the other, come over with these trailing things and this was a sign that they'd dropped the. In the woods opposite my school there was a medium regiment of the ... or a battery certainly, of the Royal Artillery and they had a very obsolete gun, a six inch Howitzer. It fired a hundred pound brick but only a relatively short distance and it was a massively clumsy-looking thing. But they were all tucked away in the New Forest, as indeed many units were, to be hidden

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from enemy observation and this, that and the other, and in an area from which they could assemble to fight off any intended invasion.

0:11:02

On Sundays, we used to go on our bicycles to Poole as boys and we manned the air raid sirens. It was rather fun really, switching them off at intervals and thinking of all the people running to their shelters [laughs], there we are. We suffered also with quite a lot of night activity from the Germans. They had a Dornier Bomber which had in those days a diesel engine and it made a particular droning noise which you could identify, sort of 'oom oom oom' a regular beat, and you knew what it was. Then shortly afterwards there'd be a 'crump' [laughs] and we took cover.

So this was when you were at Canford School?

Yes, yes

Where did you go during an air raid? Did you have shelters?

We did have shelters but at night time we didn't bother. We did shut the shutters in order to stop the flying glass. We didn't really suffer any damage at all. I have one memory, well two memories, of that: a Liberator which was, I think probably a coastal command patrol aircraft caught fire flying over the top of Canford and a huge flame developed from this big thing, sort of twice the length of the aircraft as it flew over, and the crew jumped by parachute from it and the brave pilot steered it clear of the town and perished with it. Shortly afterwards the thing disintegrated and went into a dive, with a big 'crump'. On another occasion I recall there was a German Junkers 88, which was a sort of medium bomber I suppose you would call it, it was one of the 'sneak raiders' and two Spitfires were after it and it was really rather like a sort of pheasant shoot. We came out and watched this thing in the distance and the Spitfire, one roared down and fired and went up, away and the second one caught him and of course, the inevitable flames from the back and he disappeared. And the next day like ghoulish children we bicycled out to see what remained of this German bomber [laughs].

0:13:43

All quite vivid memories actually, yes.

Several people say that as a child during the War it was actually quite exciting, did you feel...?

Oh yes, yes, yes, slightly. It was frightening at times, yep

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Did the War affect your daily school life at all? You had rationing presumably?

Oh heavens yes. Food was not very good. I even thought that the Army food of the day was rather better than the food at Canford [laughs]. Yes, we used to have our own little pots of sugar so that the big boys didn't squander it all, I suppose. We carried this thing in to two meals in the day, it had a label on and so on. The food wasn't very good I have to say, but there you are.

And so your parents were living near Reading at the time, so was that where you went home in the holidays?

Yes, yes, yes, yes but many - because we were in the defence zone there - many of the parents took wind and took their children away. But we were very happy to be there. The driveway leading from Canford to Wimborne was occupied by a company of R.A.S.C. (Royal Army Service Corps) lorries parked nose to tail. It was like an avenue and lorries were parked on both sides of the road, again hidden from the air, which was the object of the exercise.

So, you mentioned that you were at the Rose and Crown?

Yes, that was later, of course,

Was that your next memory of the New Forest? Did you move away from the New Forest?

I was only there on a course, I was not resident there. I was at school down in this area and of course joined the Army all over the place and came back on a course shortly after D-Day, actually. And that's where the memories of the Rose and Crown were, yes.

Did you stay in the pub?

Yes, yes! Very comfortable [giggles].

Was there any evidence of D-Day having happened? Did you go around the Forest at that time to see any other...?

Well, as I say there was all these ammunition dumps at intervals, parked and hidden in the undergrowth by the side of the road and so on. And of course the area was what you call 'alive with troops'.

Even after D-Day?

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Oh yes, yes, still people coming through.

Oh right, because most people talk about the New Forest being full of soldiers one moment and then suddenly empty in a way.

Oh yes, in a way but there were still a hell of a lot of them around, yes.

What did the dumps look like?

Well, they were really just literally like a pile that might have been sand but a bit higher than that and some of them had a corrugated sheet covering of sorts, if I remember, yes, that's right, yep, yep.

With a guard or were they just dumped?

No, no, just dumped, yep. So that people could refresh their supplies as they went through, I think that was the idea, yep, yep.

0:17:15

Do you remember anything else about the course, apart from the dummies in the trees?

All I can say really is it was pretty unrealistic when one saw the real thing [laughs] afterwards. But the New Forest could never really look like the Japanese jungle. I suppose they made an honest attempt to do it. Mind you there were parts of the Burma jungle that were open, yes, there were. And we did what's known as 'live firing' you know, we discharged lethal bullets and things, yep, yep.

Which Commando division were you with when you did it?

Number 5 Army Commandos, yes. It was part of ... that was an experience because we embarked on ... you could almost call it the D-Day of the Far East. We left Mumbai as it now is, Bombay, in a convoy of ninety ships, the slowest of which was the Llanstefan Castle, which was an old coal burning Union Castle Boat. And we chugged along, really supposed to invade the coast of Malaya near Port Dixon. And we were supposed to have landed there and then the 23rd Indian Division were supposed to have passed through us and then we were going to withdraw down towards Singapore in 'hops', as it were, down the coast. Of course, it never happened that way. They dropped the Atom Bomb when we were at sea, thank goodness perhaps, and we sat in Trincomalee Harbour for about three days. Then the force was split up and part of it went to Java and Sumatra where interestingly enough the Japanese, who we'd come to disarm, kill and this, that and the other, were left with their weapons to help fight off the Dacoits who were, you could call it,

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a terrorist organisation about to invade the Dutch East Indies. So the Japanese joined forces, changed sides [laughs] if you like, that happened there. We bypassed Singapore, dropped off some of the people there, and we were the first army into Hong Kong and we landed there. Some of the US Navy were there with us and I was only, what, only nineteen, twenty, and we landed there and did a flag march round the town to tell the Japanese that we were there, kind of thing. And the next morning we set foot in the train, which was wood burning, fuelled with wood. And it was like those things you see in cowboy films, wooden carriages with a sort of railing round - observation railing - at the end. And we chugged out to the New Territories where we disembarked and the Japanese surrendered to us. The officers presented, saluted with their swords and handed them over with a bow and the men went by and threw their rifles in a pile, which soon looked like a pyramid. And they were marched off to a camp and held there, until the Americans took them to fight... to return the prisoners to Japan I think, ultimately, and, yes, await the Chinese occupation, as it were.

Talking of transport, when you came to Brockenhurst to do the course how did you travel here?

Train.

So did you come to Brockenhurst Station? Do you remember anything about that?

Yes, I used to go to ... Brockenhurst Station used to be the last chance of having a cigarette before [laughs] going to school. I used to come from Reading on a local train and change at Basingstoke and then I bought a last cigarette and a bar of chocolate or something in Basingstoke, if you could, then caught the Express which came down, we called it the 'School Train', and that had come from Waterloo and it stopped at Brockenhurst where I got out of the local train and got in for the last part of the journey [laughs].

0:21:43

And what about when you came as a Commando? Did you come by road or by train?

No, train, train, yes.

Do you remember Brockenhurst Station then?

Oh yes, yes. I think there is now a restaurant in what used to be the engine shed and of course it was all steam in those days. There wasn't anything particularly to remember at Brockenhurst Station but there were many stations down the line which have disappeared now, yeah, Fordingbridge I think was on the line if I remember. Of course, there's a line which runs from Salisbury to Fordingbridge, cross-country, that's all disappeared now and

then Ferndown. And these little stations at night time were quite funny because they were lit by an oil lamp, a little oil lamp, and the windows in the carriages had anti-blast netting on them and there was just a little space through which you could look out to identify where you were. But it was all very dark and dreary in those days, yes.

Presumably you had a black out when you were at school as well did you?

Oh yes, yes, yes. That again was a bore because it all had to be put up every evening. We had frames with black cloth tacked onto it, pretty effective I may say. And the carpenters did a wonderful job in the holidays with the impending War, as it were, and knocked up these things very quickly and they did a good job.

I didn't realise you had to put them up each night.

Yes, you had to sort of lift them ... or, I mean there might have been shutters in some of the windows but, depending what there was, but an awful lot of them had to be raised every night, yes.

Do you have any memories at all of the New Forest Airfields? Did you ever see or hear about those?

Not really, I mean, there was a fighter place just outside Ringwood, I'm trying to think of the name of it now. Ibsley, Ibsley yes, there were fighter planes from there, yep. Stoney Cross, of course was very much ... it had a variety of aeroplanes visiting Stoney Cross. And locally, here in our church, we had a parachute company of the Royal Army Service ... (corrects to) Airborne Parachute Company. They gave us a very nice memorial collection plate which is part of the treasures of our local church in Minstead, yep.

So they were based in Minstead?

Well, they were based in the Forest around here, very much part ... integrated with Minstead. I think they frequented the local pub here quite a lot, yep. And every year since they still come back, survivors of that lot, yes, yes. But I think they were ... I think they went to Arnhem, I'm not sure if it was Arnhem or the earlier part, but anyhow, they dropped by parachute and I think they lost quite a few people, yes, yes.

0:25:11

So you were not in this area during D-Day?

No, no, no. (You just came for the training course) I was a commissioned officer in the Army elsewhere, yes. I joined ... when I was commissioned I went to a unit which had just

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reinforced D-Day. Certain units were like hotels for oncoming troops and they harboured troops going to D-Day. And if those ones going to D-Day were in any way short of vehicles, men, anything, they just pinched them from our regiment and took them ... to reinforce them, make good their losses or deficiencies, no questions asked. And round this camp which I was in (that was actually in Suffolk) there was trenches there, filled with battle dresses because everybody going over was equipped with a new battle dress because it had anti-lice powder in it so that it, you know, you wouldn't suffer when you got bitten to death when you landed. And the old battle dresses were just thrown away. The other interesting memory, of course, I have of there is looking over the estuary towards Felixstowe [coughs]. There moored in the estuary were dummy landing craft, hundreds of them, lots of them, and this was part of the 'phantom army'. To fool the Germans and keep them deployed round the coast in numbers they had this phantom army in East Anglia and all these units were chattering to each other, platoons pretending to be battalions, battalions pretending to be brigades, sort of one upmanship, passing signal traffic as if it was a live army there. And the Germans thought "Christ, you know, this is another lot coming, isn't it" and kept the reserve forces over there, which stopped them reinforcing the landings in Normandy, in a big way, very successful. I don't think you could get away with it these days. Such was the technology in those days, it wasn't that developed and you couldn't do that now.

Yes, with satellites, everybody knows what's going on.

Yes, it's the end of those days [laughs].

0:27:42

Do you have any other memories of the New Forest during the War? I know you were not based there at all... [silence] you never flew or ...

No, no, no. An awful lot of aeroplanes were of course flying over the whole time, yeah. They had these 'sneak raiders' that came in during the War, from Germany. A single aircraft would just tip and run and push off, so they always had to be on the alert for these 'sneak raiders', yes.

When you said a Junkers 88 came down and you and your friends rushed, presumably you weren't allowed anywhere near...?

Oh yes, it crashed through the roof of a conservatory, poor chap, yes. The parachutist, one of the parachutists, he was killed, he went through the roof of the conservatory, landed, poor chap. And I remember coming back from a rugby match in a bus and there was a Messerschmitt 110, which was a twin engine fighter plane, almost intact, which landed very near Bradbury Rings and we got out of the bus and we were allowed to have a look at it, it

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was very interesting, yep.

So you were still allowed to travel around during the War, by bus and by bicycle presumably?

Oh yes, well this was actually, well, yes, yes oh yes, there were no restrictions as such, no, no. Of course petrol was scarce, very, very hard to get. I'm trying to think of any other memories really.

I know you were not, obviously you were not living here in Minstead when you mentioned about the parachutes. Have you heard any other stories about the Minstead area specifically during the War?

Not really, no, no. Interestingly enough, there is a Commando buried in the churchyard at Emery Down. I was there yesterday and somebody took me aside and "Oh", he said, "there's a Commando buried there." I looked - it was somebody from number 4 Army Commando, buried in the churchyard there. Whether he was buried, he must have been buried, come back dead from one of their raids I think, probably and was buried there during the War. They mistook him, they said it was a Royal Marine buried there. I assured them that number 4 Commando was an Army Commando [laughs]. I feel rather proud of that fact.

I presume they had people evacuated to Minstead...?

Mm, yeh, yes, I don't know too much about Minstead in the War really. There was an interesting book I had of the airfields of the New Forest, have you seen that? Yes, yes. I don't think there's much really that I can add ...

Home Guard
Canford School
Rose & Crown, Brockenhurst
forward dumps
Hurn Airport
Whitley bombers
Dornier bomber
Liberators
Junkers 88 crashed
Commando course in Brockenhurst
Brockenhurst Station
Minstead
Sneak raiders
Junkers 88 crash

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