

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

Contributor's name	Mr Dennis Cavell	Name code	D-C
Interviewer's name	Dave Larder	Code number	015
Audio Typist name	John Martin	Transcription Date	21-09-13
Transcription file name	D-C - Denis Cavell		- OH Transcription.doc

Web Pages:

Oral History article:

<http://www.newforestww2.org/memories-of-a-young-boy-and-his-father-in-the-home-guard-and-employed-at-redbridge-railway-works/>

Project information:

www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/wwii

File name	D-C	015	_0001M0.WAV	Interview date: 23-03-13
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My name, Dennis Cavell. I was born and brought up in Old Redbridge just outside of Southampton. My memories of the war years are not that great as regards my personal involvement, just the memories as regards of a child. My father was in the Home Guard at Redbridge. He was employed at the Redbridge Railway Works. Because he had bad feet, he didn't join up in, we say like, the main forces sort of thing like, he was put into a reserve occupation on the railway, but the Home Guard unit was based there and he joined that. I have had people say later on in my life that in actual fact he was more of a liability than anything else as regards of protection us villagers and local sort of people. He managed to put a live round through the (chuckle) ceiling of the station master's house during his period in the Home Guard, so that would give you some idea perhaps of the sort of man he was.

How did that happen Dennis?

Well, apparently they used to meet in the station master's house and be detailed for say whatever duties for that period of time they were on duty, sort of thing, in like most military things, y'know, there is a weapon inspection sort of thing like, before they go out on patrol and all this sort of thing like. And by all accounts, father when going through the procedure presenting his rifle for inspection and one thing and another, managed to pull the trigger sort of thing like, and sent (chuckle) this .303 round up through the station master's (chuckles) ceiling, sort of thing like, and it caused quite a stir all the way round. And the

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poor man sort of lived with that for the rest of his life. My father being the sort of man he was, it used to quite easily wind him up, I mean to say, the poor man couldn't read or write, sort of name like, and not being we'll say being medically fit for the army or that during the war, only secondary Home Guard shall we say, I don't mean that as a view, but by way of explanation, when any of the men in the village, we'll say in the local pub years later, be reminiscing about the war years, it was almost a certainty that (chuckle) this incident of father putting a .303 round through the station master's ceiling (chuckles) would be aired sort of thing like. And father was always shall be say, a wee bit touchy about it sort of thing like and it was a big thing with father, he had a bit of an internal conflict going on in many respects because he didn't feel he was suitable for military service, sort of thing, he was less of a man, sort of thing like, but he was quite capable of doing Home Guard service sort of thing, and he wasn't going to have it decried by anybody, sort of thing, even if he had (chuckles) nearly shot a civilian (laughter) in the process, sort of thing.

00-04-14

And another sort of instance where father was concerned, he was a hell of a sort of hard man physically. Shall we say if he got involved in a squabble he had two arms, two legs and one on here, father would be quite prepared to fight it. When it come to officialdom or something like that, he was basically a coward. He was terrified of officialdom. Right, so we've got a man that's we're say in that position, if you can imagine him one night on patrol when he's in the Home Guard, him and another fella by the name of Bob Newton used to work with him on the railway, they're patrolling a length of railway line between Redbridge and Millbrook, sort of thing like, pitch black, no lights allowed to be seen during blackout, all this sort of thing like, halfway along the track this particular night, sort of thing, they starts hearing rustling and that on the track quite near 'em, sort of thing. Sounded for all the world like somebody creeping along the rail track. So, father and Bob, they hunkers down on the side of the tracks sort of thing like, all prepared to repel (chuckle) the enemy. Because the great thing along that time although it might seem ridiculous now, it was sort of believed it was they er, the Germans could, was they er, either drop a sabotage unit off or something, somewhere say Southampton Water, and they could come up the river at Redbridge there and destroy the railway bridge, the main route between Southampton and Bournemouth or say the Redbridge/Totton causeway, the road link between the two. So father and Bob are quite prepared (chuckles) to repel (another chuckle) any sort of sabotage unit that was coming up that night. But at the same time he admitted years later (chuckles) he didn't know who was the most terrified, him or Bob, sort of thing like, and it was something else he was never allowed to live down because when daylight sort of broke, they found that they'd have been terrified by hedgehogs (laughter) crawling along the fence between the rail tracks, sort of thing like. (laughter) Something else he wasn't too pleased about (words lost in laughter) later on (words lost in laughter). But there again, that was father for you.

00-07-24

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Another instance I can sort of remember with father, the air raid shelter we had down the bottom of the garden at the family home, it wasn't one of your Anderson shelters that was supplied by the authorities at that time, father in his wisdom decided he would build his own railway shelter. Basically it was corrugated tin shed sort of thing erected between the bridge wall – this is the Redbridge/Totton causeway wall – and the brick wall of the Anchor Hotel that was next door to us at Red – (break in conversation)

But then I understand your father built his own bomb shelter.

(chuckle) Yeah, an interesting one in some respects. I say we didn't have the Anderson shelter that was supplied by the authorities in them days, father in his wisdom thought he'd build his own. Now he had – at the bottom of the garden he built this air raid shelter between the Redbridge/Totton causeway bridge wall and the brick wall of the Anchor Hotel that was next door to us. Basically with corrugated iron, sort of thing like, and loads and loads of soil placed over the top of it. How effective it would have been I honestly don't know, I have me doubts really. The most memorable thing about it for me as a child, I can vividly remember a few nights, the air raid siren would go and we would be rushed off down the shelter, sort of thing, but father would never go in the damn thing. He would stand outside and he'd give a running commentary on the dog-fights and so on and so forth that would be going on overhead, sort of thing, and we picked up bits of shrapnel and one thing and another in the garden a couple of times, y'know, so I mean to say, the man was in some sort of danger stood out there, sort of thing like, but he had to give this running commentary, sort of thing. He was out there one night when one bomb fell in the river between the old Roman bridge at Redbridge and the causeway, sort of thing, and there's a crack in the front of the house at Redbridge at Bridge Cottage, er, it was caused when this bomb went off sort of thing, so that was fairly close sort of thing. I mean to say, there was only I suppose about ten yards away from hitting the Southampton/Salisbury railway line and about as many yards hitting the causeway, y'know, so that was near enough for us.

00-10-50

One big consolation where air raids around that area was concerned and our air raid shelter, it used to drive my mother up the wall a bit, my eldest brother – step-brother really – Bill, he would never go into the air raid shelter, and that all transpired because as a lad he had a bakery delivery boys job and he used to deliver up around Cannon Street in Shirley. By all accounts, he was delivering up there one afternoon when an air raid took place. One of the houses got hit and the blast picked Bill up and deposited him about two gardens down, sort of thing like. Everybody, y'know, was expecting him to be a gonner, sort of thing, but no, Bill picks his self up, sort of thing like, couldn't hear a damn thing for days. It transpired (chuckle) he'd got perforated eardrums out of that little episode. But his attitude after that was always, well, sorry but I'm gonna a little swear word, but I got to record it as it

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is “the buggers couldn’t get me in Cannon Street”, sort of thing, “they ain’t gonna get me here either”, and there was no way that nipper would ever get out of bed, sort of thing. He stayed in bed through every air raid (chuckles) that I can remember during the second war, purely because they didn’t get him in Cannon Street, sort of thing. (laughter)

I understand, I think when you were, erm, been to the greengrocers for your mother one day you had an experience of an air raid as well.

Yeah, that was another little one, God, I’m going back really early now ‘cos - I’m blessed with the fact that I can remember back to being, say, pushed around in a pushchair, so I couldn’t have been much more than about four I would have thought at the most, but we’d just been to the greengrocer’s shop in Oakley Road, near Shirley – greengrocer by the name of George Coombes – mother been dealing with him for quite some time, they were on first name basis – but we were coming away from the greengrocer’s, sort of thing like, when the air raid siren went and I don’t know whether this George Coombes sees something approaching in the air or something, I don’t know, but all of a sudden he starts hollering and shouting “Nell, Nell,” which was my mother’s first name, “get back in here”. And I can remember my mother running like heck with me in this pushchair going back to this lockup (chuckle) in Oakley Road.

00-14-08

That was the first sort of instance I can remember, well say like, enemy aircraft. The only other experience I can bring to mind is erm – it would have been, I dunno, perhaps a year later, more towards the end of the war. We were out in the back garden this particular day down Old Redbridge and there’d been no air raid warning, sort of thing, so whether this aircraft had crept through unobserved or not I honestly don’t know, but all of a sudden father starts shouting out “Oh my God, oh my God” and looks up, and I can vividly remember seeing this German plane go over with the black & white cross thing on the side, sort of thing like, and father shouting out “a bomber, a bomber”, sort of thing like, of course it goes out of sight, sort of thing like, and we heard later on that day that he’d unloaded having a go at the viaduct – railway viaduct – and Burt Bolton’s Works by the side of the viaduct, but apparently all his bombs went into the mudflats in the river there. In actual fact it was often said that if there was any major dredging went on in the river there at Redbridge, sort of thing like, they would uncover tons of bombs and that in the mudflats there because a hell of a lot of it ended up in the mud there. I often wonder, I mean to say, you hear of things now about they’re gonna extend the docks at Southampton across to Dibden Bay and one thing and another, and all this dredging that’s supposed to be gonna go on, whether they’ll start dragging some up then or not, ‘cos apparently there was a hell of a lot went in the mud there, y’know, and didn’t go off being as it went in the mud. But there you go.

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00-16-29

So how did rationing affect you as a child?

(deep inhale of breath) Oh, where rationing is concerned, my recollection of that is erm, was they – concerns about clothing was the only one. There was clothing coupons, this sort of thing, that I can remember being talked about and the arguments between mother and father as regards, you know, sort of making the clothes last more and that were us nippers were concerned, sort of this er, what was termed as hand-me-down sort of situation like y'know, it became quite a usual thing to be wearing my brother Bill's cast offs or something like that. I think that was the only concern as regards of rationing as such. I never experienced any difficulty where food was concerned because my father – yeah, we heard the term a lot during the war years "Dig for Britain". Well I sometimes wonder if my father was an instigator of that because he had plots of ground here and there and everywhere (chuckle) around Redbridge and that sort of thing like, to grow vegetables, so we never went short of food during the war years. In actual fact I can remember mother not only – 'cos we had chickens as well at one time – I can not only remember mother giving fresh laid eggs away to people in the village, but I can remember her giving vegetables as well. Now this might sound silly after I said about the George Coombes episode, father digging for Britain, plots of ground everywhere growing vegetables, and yet mother used to go up to Oakley Road and buy vegetables, and it used to cause no end of rows between the two of 'em, sort of thing like, and to this day I still can't get my head around it as to why that took place, and that's ridiculous, doesn't make any sense whatsoever. So basically, you know, that's about all I can remember as regards of rationing.

00-19-15

So Den, did you see anything of any of the troops or perhaps prisoners of war during your time in the - sort of during the war?

As regards of the troops shall we say, my sort of recollection of troops as such was because our house was only about ten or twenty yards away from the main Southampton/Salisbury railway line, there were quite a few occasions when the troop trains used to go by out the front of the house absolutely chock-a-block with servicemen, sort of thing like, obviously on the way to Southampton docks for embarkation or whatever, sort of thing like. As regards of the American troops, (chuckle) there was a unit based just up the end of the village road at Redbridge Triangle, sort of thing like, and then another unit was billeted down on Green Park rec, just a bit further down from the village, between Redbridge and Millbrook. The ones that was at Redbridge Triangle, sort of thing like, I believe were a bit of cause of consternation to some of the men in the village and I know of one family where the daughter ended up going back to America as a GI bride, sort of thing like, but shall we say, that was the legal side (chuckle) of the billeting down there, sort of

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thing like. The way some of the men used to talk back in them days (chuckles) I think there were other women (laughter) involved with these Yanks, sort of thing like, and they weren't made to feel very welcome at times I think by some of the local blokes, sort of thing like, but that's my main recollection of where say troops and that during the war.

00-21-22

One other little thing might be of interest, I don't know, but as regards prisoners of war. Now, I've learnt later in life that there were a few German prisoners were used by the farms and that, around say the Nursling area and that, while there was a little billet – I don't know where they were prisoners, interns or what, but Bryce White's the timber people that used to be in Old Redbridge, had a sawmill a little way up Test Lane where the Daily Echo offices now have a site, sort of thing like, and a little industrial park – that was where Bryce White's had their sawmill and by the side of that was Kingslands Nursery, sort of thing like, and there was a group of these interns or prisoners whatever, was made to work there and billeted there. And these chaps – my earliest recollection of them - they were obviously were, say, trustees of some sort – used to come down into the old village, sort of thing like, in their work clothes was always made out of what I associated later in life of mailbags, because it was a very coarse sort of canvass material, a purple sort of colour with a big diamond sown into the back of the jacket to make 'em, y'know, recognisable or something like that I suppose. So that would be my recollection of say like troops and prisoners as such during the war.

00-23-24

So Den, tell me about the ack-ack guns which were close to your home.

Yeah, that was something that will always stick in my mind. When I was in the air raid shelter some of these nights, and father was outside giving his running commentary on what was going on overhead, sort of thing, the one thing you could hear was the ack-ack guns just up the road. There was a field about 200 yards up the road from the house, there was an anti-aircraft battery station there and you could hear that one going, no problem. I think they were something like 25 pounders, something like that, and they can make a fair old bang when them damn things go off, sort of thing like, so I've got a quite vivid memories of hearing them go, plus the fact that another little thing where father was concerned over the railway. The office block over there, they had a couple of like anti-aircraft guns situated on the office roof over there, a long flat roof, surrounded by sandbags and all this sort of thing like, and course, father working over there being in the Home Guard and this sort of thing like, he could differentiate between the different noises of these guns, sort of thing like y'know, and part of his commentary was "God, there goes the 25 pounders up the road" sort of thing "ah, there goes the machine guns on the office roof over work" sort of thing like y'know (chuckles), so he had that off quite pat, sort of thing like. But these anti-aircraft

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guns, they did used to make, y'know, quite a loud noise when they went and not only that I'm saying, when those things do discharge they do light the sky up a little bit, y'know, when you're sort of in pitch black other than what's going on the conflict around, sort of thing like that. They make quite bright flashes in the night sky. But yeah, there was always that.

End: 00-25-45

Keywords: Redbridge, Southampton, Totton, Millbrook, Shirley, Nursling, Home Guard, railway, station master, weapons inspection, patrol, rifle, trigger, 303, shot, blackout, sabotage unit, bridge, causeway, hedgehogs, air raid, shelter, Anchor Hotel, corrugated iron, commentary, dog-fights, shrapnel, bomb, Cannon Street, bomb blast, greengrocer, Oakley Road, George Coombes, siren, enemy aircraft, railway viaduct, rationing, clothing coupons, hand-me-down, cast offs, Dig for Britain, food, vegetables, eggs, troops, prisoners, interns, troop trains, servicemen, embarkation, American, GI brides, Yanks, coarse canvas, purple colour, ack-ack, anti-aircraft, guns, sandbags, noise, light up the sky.

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