

BAMPTON TAPES

Stan Smith

World War 2

Conversation between Jo Lewington and Stan Smith: 19th May 2004

JL It's May 19th 2004, and I'm talking to Stan Smith; and we're going to talk about Stan's experiences in World War Two, which were extraordinary.

When did you first enlist? Or were you called up?

SS In 1942

JL Yes; and where did you go for your training?

SS Colchester

JL Do you remember lots about that? Was it lots of square bashing?

SS I did my basic training at Colchester, and then I went to the Second Battalion, the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry at a place called Woodhouse Barn in Lincolnshire and from there, that's when I was drafted from there, to go abroad. We went toabroad; we landed in a place called Oran, Algeria, and we travelled from there to North Africa. I never saw a great lot of action in North Africa, but we went on to landing craft to cross to Italy; and I believe it was at a place called Salerno where we landed, in Italy; because I can always remember in the distance of seeing Mount Vesuvius, and we travelled up through Italy and never saw much action 'til we got to the River Grigliano. And the time that we got there the river was in flood there, and it was about a mile wide, so we had to wait for the river to go down before we did the crossing of it.

JL How long did you have to wait?

SS Well, somewhere about two, three months I should say; and I always remember zero hour on that night of the crossing was nine o'clock and there was a Beaufort shot a star shell across and all the artillery opened up and well, we crossed the River Grigliano in what were called collapsible boats; and on landing the other side we never got very far from the landing, where we landed, but we was caught in mortar fire, German mortar fire, and that's where I was wounded - I got caught by a piece of shrapnel; that was in my hand, you see, well the next thing I knew, see, I had to come back across the River, and they said 'Go to the First Aid'. I got to the First Aid and they said "We cannot do nothing whatsoever for you. You go up the road, and there's ambulances waiting; and you'll go to M.D.S.

I always remember arriving at the M.D.S., it was six o'clock in the morning and that artillery barrage was still on. That started at nine o'clock, and that was on until six o'clock in the morning. Well, going and getting into the M.D.S. I happened to look down, and there was my great coat slit from top to bottom; so very carefully, very carefully I opened my greatcoat and I found my blouse; and my blouse was all split; now I opened it again, and my pullover was all split down like that; and the whole of my vest had never been touched. Well, one of the a medic come along, looked at me hand, cut my old glove off, and it was all blood and dirt and everything there like that; and next thing I knew I was transferred to Number One, British Hospital; that was near Naples.

JL Just go back to your coat being split down; it was...

SS It was shrapnel.

JL So it was shrapnel, torn down..

SS So what hit my hand, how it never hit my face I shall never know; but..

JL Amazing. So it hit your hand and somehow it tore your clothes down to your vest, and not you?

SS Yes, it never touched me, never touched me; though it slit me down as if it had been cut with a knife.

Well, I was transferred to Number One, British General Hospital near Naples, then; I had it dressed there and that was the time when a convoy of a hundred ambulances came in with casualties

JL From that particular crossing?

SS From that crossing. And all this going on all night, as I say, people laying on the floors, everywhere....

Well, then, I had a dressing on me hand and that, and then we were put on a Red Cross train to transfer to Number Two British General Hospital, but where that was I cannot tell you. Well, from there I had, oh, at least two, three months there; and then I was sent to a convalescent. I was in the convalescent, and the story came round that the 56th London Division was drawing out of Italy and coming home for the Second Front. That was before D-Day was ever thought of, we always thought we would be coming back to England.

Well, next we knew, we got this troop ship and the next thing we knew we were at Port Said; and we found out then afterwards that we were going to be reinforced with five hundred men of the R.A.E. Regiment who were actually on the Suez Canal Defence zone. Well, we had to train them for infantry.

I don't know just how many months we were actually in Egypt then, because I had my second time going back to what they called North Africa....

JL Stop there a minute, because this is very interesting. You've come from England; I don't suppose you ever travelled,

SS No, no...

JL So you went from Bampton to Colchester, and then you were whisked off to North Africa.... And you wouldn't have had television, you wouldn't have seen pictures of it..

SS No, no

JL So what did you think?

SS Well, it was a marvelous experience, and that's all there was to it. We were actually in Egypt when the news came through that they'd landed in France. Well, after taking a long time in training and one thing and another, we loaded back up on a troop ship again; not knowing where we was going, whether we was going back to Italy or whether we was to come back to England nor nowhere.

Well, next thing we knew, it was after about three days' sailing, we actually landed back in Italy and that. Well, we was supposed to have been all made up into the full strength of the Regiment and that, at the time and that; and then we unloaded there; but actually just where we went to from there I don't know. I know that at one stage I know we went to the Anzio landing place there, to load some ammunition there, and that; and then I know then we thought... we was moved... we moved, because that's when they told us to take off our divisional signs, come off our epaulets and that...

JL Oh, did you?

SS We were moved to another sector of the front; and that was the time when we was all going across this open country, and I happened to glance out of the side of me eye and I seen a steel helmet come up out of the ground

JL In front of you?

SS No, actually it was about fifty yards away, at the side of me, you see. Well, I think that at the time that I thought that I was gone bomb-happy or something like that; and they said "Where? Where?" and I said "Across there, across there", so I know a Sergeant went across with me, and I'd got a Bren gun, and we got so far..... And he said to me, he said "Put a burst of fire over the top of that," because we could see the camouflage netting; and he said "Put a burst over them", so I put that burst from out of my Bren gun across like that, and nothing happened, and he said "Put another one, down lower," so I put another one, and eventually there was a white glove come up out of the... see, like that; and I know the Sergeant went down a bit closer, and I know he turned round and said to me "You keep me covered," he said, see. Well, then see he thought I'd heard an automatic over the

top; and there were two of them white gloves came out like that; so eventually this German came out of this trench, and the first words he said was "No! no! no!" and he drew his finger across his throat; he thought we were going to cut his throat, or something like that.

And there was all the other companies, 'cause we were the last company; there was A Company, B Company, C Company...

JL Are you still with the Ox and Bucks by this time?

SS Yes, I survived through with the Ox and Bucks, well, so far. Well, at last we got to what they called the Coriano Ridge or whatever it was called, because I recall when we got there, up on the side there, we looked down towards the sea, you know it might have been a hundred miles away or something like that, we could see that they was attacking the town of Rimini, like that.

Well, we had several places there... well, we got into one village there what had had pretty stiff opposition there, and eventually we cleared, well, we partly cleared this village of it; that's when the Sergeant and me got pinned behind a big heap of soil; that's when the Sergeant said to me, he said "Look, at this," he said, "You watch;" and he put his steel helmet on the end of his rifle, and put up, and "Ting!" that was it, just like that; so...

JL So you knew you couldn't come out from behind the heap..

SS That's right. So I thought of the idea, I said to him, I said, "Look, I'm going to roll away from this, this hedge, to the next boulder," I said, "I'm going to roll away from this building the best I can," and I said, "As soon as I get down into that ditch there, you just put your helmet up again so I can see where they are firing from."

So I got right down into it as best I could, you know, and saw like the Bren gun all set up and all that, and I said to him, I says, "Right!" and he puts up, and "Ting!" just like that; and I spotted where they were firing from so I put, well, the magazine, bullets, into it and that, and we never had no more trouble; whether they moved out, or what happened, I shall never know, like that.

JL One minute; go back to the man who had the..... who showed one white glove and another white glove; was it just one man there?

SS It was just only one man there; only the one, it was the one.

JL And is it very strange that he had gloves on?

SS Ah, well, we've come to the conclusion he was on what you might call observation. He was on the side of that hill for observation for the German artillery. See? And instead of doing wireless, see, he done semaphore.

JL With his white gloves?

SS With his white gloves. Because we said straight away, what we don't often see Germans with white gloves on. That's how it come about, and that.

Well, during the course of this visit, as we were clearing and that, because looking right down onto the roads we could see the German transport and that, pulling out of this village and that; and that's when the Sergeant said to me, he says ... there was a house, - oh, it was a hundred yards away, could have been farther, that they wanted to clear, see, so we got up into an old attic place and there was part of the roof knocked off, he said to me, he says, "Put a covering fire down" he says; so I set my Bren gun up like that, and as I was firing I could see the slates moving on top of the house, see like that.

Then there was another instance, I think it was in the same village, where we had to clear another house like that, that's when I went up the stairs with a Bren gun firing; a corporal followed me behind me kicking the doors in and throwing hand grenades in the room. Well, while we've done that it was getting dusk, we were all stood there unconcerned as you like, about, oh, six of us...

JL In a room, in the house?

SS No, outside the house, unconcerned like, and we see two persons coming up alongside the house like, we were quite under the impression it was two of our fellas. Well they got within about 20 yards or so of it, like that, they just give one blast on a machine gun, an automatic. That's when the sergeant got hit directly into the stomach. And they just disappeared; you know we never fired a shot and that. And er ...

JL Was he killed?

SS Oh yes, yes, instantly ... and er ... then there was another instance, I don't know just what was the happening of this instance, we got all split up, different lots and that, with, I know Germans put counter attack and that, we got all split up and that, and, there was about, oh, six of us, we didn't actually know where we were. Well, that was when the rain started and everything was all of awash and mud and that and that there, so we did no more, we thought well, we don't know actually where we are, where we're not and that; and we got in this old house where been 'id and there were a beam burning. We got round this fire at night there, like that, and the next thing we knew, the Gurkhas came up through us and that and we had some tins of stew. We got a big box of these ... it was only a patrol, no more than about six of them, we started giving these Gurkhas one tin each and all as they would say was "Sleep night Jonny, sleep night Jonny". Well their officer happened to come in, and he 'appened to see we were giving them one tin each. "Oh no, no, no, no, no, no!" he said "Seven men to a tin!"

JL Oh my goodness! Was the officer also a Gurkha?

SS He was a Gurkha, oh yes but he could speak you know plain, well, not plain English but good English then. And er ... "No, no, no; seven men to a tin!"

like that. And we was there about two days and eventually there was some of the others of our lot caught up and we all had to reform once again then to one another and that.

JL When you say you were clearing a village, the Italians have all left?

SS Germans, it's the Germans.

JL So it's the Germans that have moved in and occupying it and you're clearing them out?

SS Yea, yea, and er ... let me see, where did we go to from there? Oh, there was the other instance, we moved up during the night because the idea was, we used to move up during the night, and what they call dig in, and no movement after daylight. Well this was in a vinery, all the rows of vines and that, and we moved right up on to this hillside and that and we started to dig slip fences and that .. and a thunderstorm, you've never experienced anything like it! There was lightning running along the wires what the grapes were on; and rain, it was filling the trenches up as fast as we was digging them. Well, in the end they decided to pull us out. We were all pulled out and was took back to a barn. And within about half an hour, you've seen cattle steaming; well, that's how all of us was, steaming. Completely steaming like that and you've never smelt such a stench in all your life.

JL There was one incident you talked about, a grenade being thrown into a room, now where was that, was that at Germani?

SS No, this wasn't at Germani, but I'll go to my story now at Germani because as I say, that was the worst experience I ever encountered.

JL Yes. You haven't said very much so far but when you were wounded were you frightened or ...

SS No, no, no. I don't know, what can we say, I don't know, you don't worry about nothing. You just keep going, day to day, day to day, day to day. Yea. Well, that's how I was but I can't say Oh, then there was another instance where we took an 'ill, we took this 'illtop during the daytime, we took this like that, and we dug in to defend this 'illside and we were supported by tanks then, we had tanks come up with us. Well, matter of fact we travelled with tanks so far, before we got on to this 'illside. And, at dawn the following morning when the Germans they put a counter attack in, they come in 'ollerin' and yelling and that, tracer bullets were flying everywhere and that, and, it was a good job that we had the tanks support that morning or as I say, well we should have got completely over-run, completely. Then as I say, they got beaten back, well they got beaten back, and, that was the only time that I really ever 'ave sympathy for a soldier. There was a poor old chap there, I know he came to me, this was before this instance happened, only about a week or so before. He came to me, and he said to me, he said "How long 'ave you been out here?" Oh I said, must be best part of twelve month must be. "Oh," he said, "I was home at Christmas," he said and this was

happening, oh, could've been January, February. "You were lucky then," see, like that. And that's the only real person that, you know, I ever felt sorry for because, after this attack with the Germans, when they put this attack in and that, after everything sort of settled down and that there was this poor old chap, there 'e was dead ... he got killed.

JL I wonder if it was because you talked to him a little bit about his home and it made him into a person, not just a soldier?

SS Well I don't know, because he was a man, oh, he was a bloomin' lot older than me by a long, long, long way; I think 'e was a man, well, well - in his 30s and that.

JL And you were how old then?

SS Oh I was only in my twenties then, see, I was only in my twenties. No, as I say he came up to me and said, you know, er, "How long, you how long?" "Oh," I say, "I don't know, to be honest," I says, and he says, "Well I was 'ome at Christmas," he said; and, er, really, that's the only person as you know I've ever felt sorry for, for some unknown reason

JL Yes, it's a funny thing.

SS And, as I say, the company sergeant major got killed there as well; there was a fair few got killed there. And then we all got split up again and 'ad to be reformed and that, after a time, got re-formed and that, and now I think I've got really as far as I can with this Coriano with, as I say, that's one of the worst experiences of my life that was. Well, the whole battalion, the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry we were stuck in this village of Coriano from dawn to dusk. There was first one company got in, went to get in and got beat back, then another company and that, then it was our chance of getting in and that and we by luck had got right into the village itself and that and, you know, the one or two little skirmishes and one thing and another; and that's when the bloke, this German come round the corner with an automatic and shot the whole lot of us down, and I was the only one that never got hit. Well, after it sort of died down a little bit, I looked down and there was my officer there, all hit in the hip and that and all bleeding, and I sort of crawled up the side of him and went to put my hand in 'is field dressing pocket, and he got no field dressing. So I took mine out and very, very carefully, undone the wrapping and that because I could 'ear Germans up above me and Germans down the side of me.

JL And he was lying out in the street, trying to do this?

SS Yea, but as luck should have it on this little road there was sort of like a lay-by that I could lay in there, and they couldn't see me down the road. Well I very very gently undone the field dressing and that, put it on there the best I could, so I said to 'im, I says, "I'll get you out now Sir." I went to move 'im out into the road, like that, and a sniper hit the road about two foot away from me. So I pushed 'im back and I pushed myself back in, and I thought, wait and wait

and listen, like that; and I thought, "Well, I'll 'ave another attempt," and the same 'appened again, didn't he; so I said to him, I said, "Sorry sir," I said, and it was getting dark then, he said to me, 'e said, um, "You can get on now." So I crawled over this road, you know, very very steady an' that, 'til I eventually got to a bamboo fence ... I can always remember it ... I laid there, then broke this bamboo fence so that I could get through then,

JL That's not easy, is it? Bamboo's very tough.

SS Ah, but they're very small ones, they broke very easy see and that. Well then I plucked up courage and stood up.

JL Right, you're just through the fence ...

SS I got through the fence and plucked up courage, and I started walking; and I really had no idea at the time what direction I was travelling in. And all at once the German artillery started opening up, and the British army artillery started opening up, like that, and the shells were going right over me, and I was right in the middle.

Well, I travelled for I don't know how long; and in our field pockets we carried what they called emergency rations; what it consisted of was concentrated chocolate. On there, you're not supposed to open it without the permission of an officer; but I was that hungry that I just sit down and got it right out of my pocket and undid the top, and ate it.

JL You must have been at least a day without food, and working hard under stress..

SS Yes, and I eventually thought, well, I've got to start heading away a bit now, because this was.. I've got an idea this was in September, and the night wasn't very long then; so I was going along and that; and all at once I found myself sliding. I've no idea... how far I slid down the side of this rock face I don't know. I landed on a road and there was somebody stood there; whether it was dead, whether it was German, whether it was British I don't know; but I tell you what, Bannister wouldn't have caught me!

So I got well away from that, and eventually I got to a river. It was, you know, quite dawn by then, it was light, you see; and I happened to look on my left, and I could see there were mills in the distance; and I thought, "I don't know, I'd better not chance it," because, you know, to be honest about it, by that time I didn't know whether I was in German territory or British territory.

So I went straight into this river and out the other side, and I got out the other side...

JL Swimming or wading?

SS I had to swim. Oh, yeah, I was in it up to here, and I could find I was still, you know, going down. And I'm a big swimmer, see. Well, I gets out the other side, I got into a field, and I thought; "I can hear somebody talking;" and these people, you know, you can't recognize people when they are whispering, whether they are German, whether they are English, whether they are good people, that's as far as I can say; I eventually got across to the other side of this field..

JL You didn't try to hear what they were?

SS No, I got across and I suddenly recognized that they were British helmets; I got through, and they happened to be a carrier section. Well, I just said, "Where's Company Headquarters?" "Well," they said, "down the road there." So I headed off down there, like that; because Company Headquarters was in a farm yard and buildings and that.

So I went to meet the RSM – Regimental Sergeant Major, see. The words he said to me, "My god," he said, "where the Hell have you come from?" "Oh," I said, "I've just got out of Marni," I said, "There's ten soldiers up there," I said, "and they're severely wounded," I said, "and I've been trying to get them out, but," I said, "I can't." He said, "You've just about had enough of it," he said. "Your best thing is go on down to the cookhouse," he said, "get some food, get a blanket," he said, "and get down to it." You know, he meant sleep.

So I had a good feed and that, and I got a blanket, and I got in an old shed, like that; well, you would not believe it, how tired I must have been. I slept all that day and all the next night. Then I went up to the cookhouse, and one of the cooks said to me, "You come in here," he said. "It wasn't last night, was it?" I said. "Well, didn't you..?" "Well" he said, "where were you, then?" he said; "a shell cut the corner of that shed off!" "Well," I said, "I never heard anything."

JL Because you were so deeply asleep?

SS Well, the lot could have fell on top of me and I wouldn't have never known. And so after the episode of that, because we lost – I don't know how many hundred men we lost there..

JL Did you hear what happened to your officer?

SS Well, all the news that I could get of it, he was took to hospital, and he died in hospital; that's all that I could find of it and that.

JL Tell me about him; because you thought a lot of him, didn't you?

SS Well, he was a real, true gentleman. We'll put it this way, because I know when we used to have rifle inspections, well, I always carried a Bren gun, see, and he used to come to me, and "That's all right," he used to say, "I've no need to look at yours," he said, "I knows how you keeps your gun", he said, "no need to look at that." He was a real, real gentleman.

JL He was very trusting of you.

SS Yeah, yeah, and as I say – I don't know whether it helped me in my army career or not, but it happened to be, we had this new company commander come; well, it was like, when somebody comes like that, new, they has a personal interview with everybody there, in the company. Well, it come to my turn, and I had to go in there, see, like that, and he looked at me, and he said, "Bampton, Oxfordshire?" and I said "Yes, sir," "Oh," he said, "Do you know Mrs Nettlefold, at Bampton Manor?" I said, "Well, not personally, sir, I know her by sight and that," and "Oh," he said, "That's my wife's aunt." And he said, "Do you know Mrs Loveday at Manor Cottage?" and I said, you know, "not personally, I know her by sight and that." And he said, "Do you know, before the war," he said, "we used to visit Bampton very often," he said. Well, actually, he was the officer that wrote that letter to me.

JL We've got it in the Museum, yes.

SS And so as I say, well, I got on very well, the best I could with the Army life and that, and then as I go back to the story about this place, Germani, see; well, there wasn't enough left to make a company up.

JL There wasn't enough of the Ox and Bucks?

SS .. of the Ox and Bucks yes. So I actually got transferred, temporarily, to what they called the two-six Queen's Regiment. Well, we put this attack into this village, like that; well, really there was no opposition whatsoever, it was taken; well, that's when I got hit with a bullet that night, and that, and now I was with Company H Q, Headquarters; and I know we got into this village, and, what I call the Officer in charge, he said, "We'll make the Company Headquarters, this place", like that; and we were just sitting in this room and the next we knew, a hand grenade come through the window; and as luck would have it, not one of us got scratched.

JL I find that amazing. It must have been where you were sitting in the room, or something.

SS I was in the room, and he threw this hand grenade; I must admit it was a biggish room; well, we said, "They knows we're here, we shall have to get out of here." So we got out of there, down the road a bit further; we got into an old cottage standing on its own. Well, it come daylight then, and this Major was going to look out, and there was eight to ten British troops there, with a German escort back and front. So what does he do? Just went and fired with his automatic; I don't know what he thought he was going to do, but we said then, at the time, we said, "Well, we've had it."

JL Because everybody would know. I mean, the Germans would know you were there then.

SS Ah, they knew, you see; and we said to him, well, next thing we knew they started dropping these mortar bombs, like that, and I know I happened to say at the time, I said, "Get out of here," I said, "because next time we've only got to get one coming through the roof and that'll be it."

Well, we eventually got out of this place through a hole in the wall at the back of this old building. This crazy Major said – because we had got in contact with HQ, we were only six and a half miles forward: we were six and a half miles inside German territory – "Oh," he says, "if we goes out of here, and straight across," he says, "we can get back into our own lines." Broad daylight! Well, we was going up under this hedgerow, and I happened to look down into what they called a wadi, that was a dried river, and there was Germans walking about down in there. That's when I took a grenade out, m16 36; I took the pin out; and something said to me "Put the pin back," and a good job I did.

We hadn't gone far; there was a machine gun out behind us and there was one to the left and one to the right, we were under fire from three machine guns; and this crazy Major stood on his knees and started firing at these machine guns. I tried.. well, – a worm wouldn't have got under my belly then. Next I knew there was what I call a big German paratrooper stood over me. "Come! Come! Come!" I thought then at the time, I thought, well, I expect there's no good you playing heroes now, you've had it." Well, that's my thoughts of it!

So as I say, he took us before an intelligence officer, and one thing and another, and next thing I knew we was took up to the Brenner Pass there, and put into cattle trucks, and I went to somewhere in Germany, I don't know where it was, and then that finished up in a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland.

JL Up to then you've had an extraordinarily eventful war, haven't you? You've had a lot of near misses!

SS All near misses; yes, I calls it, that's what I calls it; as I say, I finished up in a prisoner-of-war camp in a place called Lamsdorf, in Poland. We were in this prisoner-of-war camp until the Germans started, well, their Russian offensive that they took us out. Well, that was when we was on the road, then, but whether it was the last week in December or the first week in January, I don't know what the actual week it was..

JL What date is it? Which year?

SS We're in '45 now. Well, we were driven from place to place, place to place, walking,

JL Always on foot, or were you sometimes..?

SS Oh, always on foot; we were driven like cattle and that; and that's when we.. Well, we were only too pleased to eat anything we found.

JL How many of you were there at the beginning?

SS Oh, there was no... well, as a matter of fact there must have been hundreds, must have been hundreds in the first place..

JL And not all English, or all English?

SS Well, all nationalities, all nationalities was there and that, and some days.. a lot of us remember as the first night out we was put into a yard, and we had to sleep out in the open; and when we woke up in the morning we were covered in snow. To tell how low the temperature was, we put scarves round our mouths and the vapour on the outside was freezing.

Well, as I say, we was took from place to place to place and that; and then they must have split us up into small groups afterwards, because... I shouldn't think there was more than about forty to fifty in our lot, and we were eating anything we could find; because some days we might get a tin of boiled-up cabbage, or some days we'd get a slice of bread. And that's all as you had.

JL And this is the middle of winter.

SS Yes.

JL So you can't find much in the fields, or anything?

SS No; as I say, we used to find, when we was going in to these farmyards and that we might find raw potatoes and that, mangles; and we tried sugar-beet, but sugar-beet's no good. And so as I say, month after month....; and we were eventually released, on the 12th of April 1945.

JL That's somewhere like four or five months, isn't it?

SS Yes and it was...

JL Without food? Marching?

SS No, no - well, regular food, put it like that; because I'll always remember on that day we'd got just outside of this little village, about a mile, two mile away; there was a road running parallel with us, and all of us ... someone said, "Look, there's some tanks going along that road." See? And all we could see was these tanks going along, and the dust blowing up and that, so there was a sergeant major with us, and I don't know what regiment he was in, and he said, "Is there anybody here can semaphore?" - signal - and I said "Yeah, I can." "Well," he said "Look," he said, "we'll put it this way," he said, "We don't want to go out into that field," he said, "because if it do turn out to be German tanks," he said, "they'll have an excuse to shoot us for trying to escape. But," he said, "we'll just chance it." All they had got some way out into this field, and that; and this bloke - I can't remember just what he was having for signaling and that ..

JL So that's done with flags, isn't it? So you need a stick with something on the end.

SS We hadn't got no flags; well, with bits of paper or what, I could not say that. Well eventually he come back; and "Ah," he said, "they're Americans," he said; "they're American tanks," he said. And next we knew, we heard a bit of gunfire in this village, an automatic; next we knew there was this great big American come through, with this big automatic; and he turned round, he turned round and said to us, he said, "We've come sixty miles," he said, "today, to overtake you fellers;" he said, "We've got no rations for you, nothing; we can't supply you with nothing," he said, "we haven't got it ourselves. But," he said, "you get out of the village there," he said, "and get on to that main road," he said, "and follow the arrows backwards," – apparently they were putting arrows for directions, see, for 'em, then.

And, I know, that night, as it was getting dark and that, you know, we was all split up into little gangs; I suppose there might have been about ten of us in our lot, we all just split up; I know there was one there, we got outside this little village and there was this big, posh house, well, he goes there, knocks on the door, and this old German comes to the door; he says, this bloke says, "Come on," he said, "your turn's in the stable tonight," he said; he said "We're going in your bed, it's your turn in the stables." And I don't know what position they were in, because we searched this house through, right through, and we couldn't find nothing, nothing whatsoever.

Well, in the guard's beer hall where we was sitting and deciding that, there was two Russians come in; well they'd been somewhere, and apparently 'd had a lot to drink, they was drunk as drunk, and they'd got blooming big automatic pistols and that, and they ...

JL Not good to be near...

SS So we said, as far as we'd got now we don't want to upset them, because they'd just as likely turn their gun round on us as not. So we said – we planned it, we said "We'll send them upstairs to bed, and we'll stop down here; and first thing in the morning, " we said, "we'll be gone, leaving 'em."

Well, one of the blokes come in, he'd been out, and he said, "Ah!" he said, "any of you chaps know how to harness a horse?" So one bloke says "Yeah, I can do it." He said, "There's two good horses in the stable there," he said, "and a cart." He said, "What we'll do, just as dawn's breaking, we'll harness the horses up, harness them... you know, in the cart," he said, "and we'll be away before they wakes up." So that's what we did.

Well, we got up on to this, well, highway, like that, and a good job we did have this cart, otherwise, as I said, I'd no effort.

JL You must have been quite weak by that time. And did any of the other marchers die?

SS Oh, hundreds, hundreds! Hundreds! Because I'll always remember one big Australian bloke, oh, he was taller than me, and about twice as big as me, I was sort of laid aside of him in his set, and that, and all night long he was just on the wriggle and back like that, and there was a bloke the other side of there, and I know he said, "Oh," he said, "be quiet," he said, "and let's get some sleep." And then later, in the morning, that was it; he was gone, and that. See, where it was, the International Red Cross wanted to survey that route through, see, because wherever they – chaps died, they were buried in the earth, you know, where the graveyards are.

JL Did you...?

SS The locals.

JL The locals buried them?

SS Yeah, yeah;

JL In the local graveyards? And did they mark the graves?

SS I've no idea, you know, you don't know really nothing of it, and that; well, the International Red Cross wanted to survey the route right back through and find out, you know, where everybody was buried, then. Because there was talk of excavating some of them and putting them in a cemetery in Berlin, see, sort of put them all together, like that, see; well apparently they got so far on their survey and that, and the Russians wouldn't let them go no farther, but whether they was ever opened up again afterwards I don't know, I never heard no more about it, and that. We only could go back so far and that.

JL So: you're on your horse and cart..

SS Oh, I've got to the horse and cart now, haven't I? Well, I don't know how many mile we travelled, travelled, travelled, like that; but eventually we came to the big town of Hertzels: well, I think that's how it was pronounced, that's how we was told it was. Well, there was bulldozers there still pushing the rubble either side so the transport could get through; and I think every house, if it hadn't been hit it was burned out, just walls standing. Well, I looked at it; we happened to come up to a crossroads in this town, and there was an American policeman stood there, so; that's how it was. There was a German stood there, like that, at the side of the road, and one of our chaps took these horses across, and he said, "Can you hold them?" – hold these horses, see; so there he was stood there holding these two horses; and we said to this American policeman, we said, "Could there possibly be a convoy coming through?" "Yes," he said, "you're lucky," he said, "There should be one approaching any time now, going back; you'll be lucky." Well, we hadn't been there about half an hour when there was an American half-track vehicle come around, come tearing round the corner, see, with a big machine gun and all that on there; so I held them up and told them to

just move on 'til they got to a lorry, see, like that; and we had.. we couldn't get up into the lorry.

JL You were too weak?

SS Too weak; so they loaded us up and I know they stopped in this village; there was this village they stopped in, and I know, and this American, he says, "Ah," he says, "you guys," he says, "you've got to go over there," he says; "Look, there's the notice," he said; and there was a big notice, 'All ex-prisoners of war report here.' Huh! We goes across there; and there was only just ordinary soldiers sitting there, see; so we said – because, oh, we had to report to Major Somebody, I don't know what the name was now, "Oh!" he said, "you chaps are too late," he said, "he moved out of here yesterday. " So we thought, oh, that wasn't a very good start. So we done no more, the time of day was getting on and that, so we thought, well, we've got to get on and do something.

JL But there was no one looking after you yet?

SS No, no, no; we were quite... completely.. well, no. Well, I thought, officially nobody knew that we had been released, see?

JL Are you getting anything to eat from anybody?

SS Well, we, what I call, we all decided we could take up lodgings with Germans, people, see; it was a matter of getting somewhere, you know, to sleep, or whatever, like that. And eventually, as I say, they'd got nothing...

JL They'd got nothing either?

SS And I know we had a night there, with these.. some went to one house, one went to another, two went to another, and all round, so; and we decided we'd meet up on the main road again the following morning; so that's what we did.

Well, luck was really with us again. We was all stood there discussing, you know, which way to go, where to go, what to do; and there was an American lorry came along, so we held him up, like that, and we was asking him where he was going, and he says he's "going to the Depot": he says "going to the Depot," like that; so we'd got so we'd take a chance where we was going; so we all got in there, with helping one another up, and that, and we pulled one another in. And I fancy we was finished up in a German airfield; and transport was coming in from England, with supplies, and going back; and so we went to the American medical centre, and that, and he said, straight away he said, "Oh," he said, "sorry, you guys," he said, "I must not give you nothing." He says, "I'm sorry," he says, "you'll soon be back in England," he says, "and you'll see your medical staff," he says. And he explained then, he said, "Your condition you're in," he said, "your stomachs have all shrunk, and that," and he said, "If you go and have a lot of solid food," he said, "it's just burst stomachs."

So he said, "You'll be lucky," he said, "You should be back in England by tonight."

JL How did you feel when he said that? Or were you too weary to feel anything?

SS Well, you were, you know, you really were; margotten.

JL So how long did you have to wait for your plane, to get back?

SS Well, the Americans, they come and said that there was some planes coming over the Channel, and they should be within, I don't know, so long; and they put us into groups of – I'm not too sure how many now; it was sixteen, I think . It was Dakotas that was coming; and more or less these planes were coming in, they were unloading them, servicing them, and I know there was.. they called out; because they put us into groups with a number, see? So they start calling these numbers, and I don't know whether they were there or not, and that; 'we ain't going to get away tonight,' and that, 'we ain't going to get away;' and then there was another.. I think about four more Dakotas came in, see, I don't know whether they didn't know that they was coming in or what; they come in, and unloaded and within, well, two hours our group was called out to load up.

We came over London when London was what they call 'dim lit', for the first time, when we come over London.

JL So what was that date? Do you remember?

SS Somewhere in April....

JL April '45, are you?

SS Something like that. And then, as I say, that's how it was with these Americans, they said, "You guys, you can either go to a place called Wing, or you could go to a place called Bradwell Grove," see? And I didn't know that there was an airfield that had been built at Bradwell Grove, see.

JL It's just up the road, isn't it?

SS Yes; so I chose to come to Wings, see; you know, out by Slough, like that. Yes, I'll give them their due, that was well, well organized; so, because no sooner we came off the plane that we had to go to a decontamination unit, X-ray..

JL So what's decontamination, is that to get rid of fleas and lice, and other...

SS No, typhoid.

JL Oh, typhoid; oh, I see.

SS They were frightened of typhoid, see. And then you went in one lot, and stripped there, and everything; you had to leave everything that you had, even me boots; well, me boots, they wasn't boots really.

JL You had this special ring that you carried, didn't you?

SS ... and everything; you completely left everything there, and there was showers, like that, and then eventually you went and got your clothes in from one place or another, so you finished off..

JL What, everything new?

SS You got everything new, completely, everything new; when you walked out the other end you had nothing whatsoever what you walked in with; because, as I say, they was frightened of the typhoid, see, and that.

Then we were picked up, and taken to a camp – I don't know where it was – when we got there, there was each of your beds, all made up ready for you; there was a telegram on there; all as you've got to do is just sign him and he was gone, to your relations, see? Your next of kin, and that...

JL Because your Dad had already had a telegram, hadn't he?

SS Oh, yes, you gets one from the War Office.

JL Tell me about the letter that your father got.

SS I've no idea, no idea.

JL Did he not get a letter saying that you were missing?

SS Oh, yes; oh, yes, and that; and I've no idea about that one, see; that one, I never see it, so I don't know, see.

JL But he must have been overjoyed when he got the telegram from Wing?

SS Yeah, yeah.

Then as I say, we slept there that night. The following morning you had breakfast, there was your travel warrant all ready made out, so much money for you, like that; and, well, the best of it was I was up at Wing, and – well, the station isn't actually in Wing, is it? It's Slough isn't it? Like that.

Well, it's during the coming back to Oxford, well, as I say, I'd never been to that part of the country before, I finished up at Paddington Station – to get back to Oxford! (*laughing*)

JL How long were you in hospital, before they let you go? Because ... How much did you weigh when you came back?

SS Seven stone. I always remember me on seven stone; see, we went back home, they sort of let us home for a few days, see, you know; then we had to go back on this concentrated chocolate for, oh, I should think about a month. You started off on one square, and you come to two squares..

JL Is that all you had? Or did they give you milk, or..

SS Well, all day, you had drink, you had drink, you know, you had milk or tea or whatever, like that.

JL But the only solid food was....

SS No solids, see; no solids whatsoever, like that; and..

JL For how long?

SS I don't know just how long it was; about a month; I don't know for sure how long that was; it could have been a month, two months; I ain't for sure of it, and that.

And then – that's right – then – I ain't for sure; because I know I was on sick leave from April through to December of that year, I was on sick leave. And I know I had to go for a medical – that's it, a medical in December; I had a medical in December, and that was when I failed my medical; and ..

JL You did a medical to go back in the Army, didn't you?

SS Yes, that's right, to go back in, see? What was it? "According to your condition," yeh, "there is no suitable employment in the Army" – or something like that. And that's all there is: discharged. Discharged. On a big pension of nine shillings a week. *(laughs)*

JL Yes; and you were very disappointed, weren't you? Because you wanted to be in the Army.

SS Yes; I wanted to; oh, yes, definitely, oh, yes;

JL I see your face light up when you say that; you..

SS Yes, as I say, I don't know; because, like the old saying is, with the Army, you either like it or dislike it.

JL And you loved it.

SS I did, you know, and as I say I should have loved to, you know, kep' in it, and that, and that.

JL You loved what about it? What did you say you loved about it?

SS Well, I don't know, the atmosphere, the action, and everything, you know; I really sort of took to it, somehow or another, and that; and as I say, you know, that was it; I could not carry on, and that was it. That's all there was to it, and that.

JL Tell me a little bit about when you came back into Bampton; you'd been away for four years, hadn't you; and you came home weighing seven stone, and an exhausted-looking man; so did they cheer? Did they put out the banners? Or did they just say, "Hello, Stan!"

SS No, no, no; because just at that stage, as I say, actually the war was not finished, and people were coming home in dribs and drabs and that; and, you know....

JL No big celebration?

SS No, nothing; nothing whatsoever, no, no.

And, as I say, I had then from December through to the following April, I think, see, I don't know what sort of leave it was, I was given this leave, and that, and just through the monotony of one day and another it's – because I used to get these papers come every month, "Your leave has been extended for another four weeks," and that; "Should you require further advance of pay," you just filled a slip up, sent it off to the Paymaster General, and you had it come back, you see, like that.

And I lost, just through the monotony of it, and that, and that, I don't know, I think I spent a large sum of money.

JL Oh, dear; yes.

SS And I know I took to drinking, terrible, terrible.

JL Yes. And you don't think that was to forget? Because there were some terrible things you saw.

SS Oh, yeh, and that; but, as I say, I took to drinking, oh, terrible, and that. Because, as I say, believe it or not, I stopped it – like that (*snapping his fingers*).

JL Did you? How did you manage that?

SS Well, I know as how you'll hardly believe this story. I don't know for why; I used to go down to – well, that was many years, to the Jubilee; I used to go down there; and I don't know, for some unknown reason one night I went to go to the town, to go down, like that, and I got to the door, and I thought, "I don't know, I ain't going to bother to go in." And I never wen' again. I just chucked it off, easy as that.

JL Lucky; you were lucky again, weren't you?

SS Well, you can tell what my drinking habit was like; I always remember going down there on a Sunday lunchtime, and there was someone on the dart board, and there was only him in there, Bill, throwing at the dart board and that; and at that time I always used to drink this bottled brown; so, "You going to pay for a bottle of brown?" I said "Yeh." Well normally I was never much of a dart player, I don't mind admitting. Well, I hit a hundred-and-one, straight in and straight out, see, like that; so I said to him, I said, "Come on, get your own back," I says, "Play another one," like that; so he said, "Isn't that right? Call it." So I said "Come on," and so he said "I'm not." Well, he took on like that; so I took on like that; I was back down there at seven o'clock in the evening, and the landlord said to me, he says, "I bet you don't know how many bottles of brown you had dinner time." I said, "I don't know, I've no idea." He said, "You just had a crateful, twelve."

JL And you were back at seven?

SS I was back down there. Oh, I was cut back... I knew it was time to pack it in.

JL That's brilliant. Do you think that happened to a lot of young men who came back from the war?

SS Oh, quite..... there's every possibility, yes, yes. Oh, no, as I say, I got.... I couldn't have done that, at one time.

But then, as I say, well more or less I was just drove to it..

JL Yes; yes. Because there was nothing to do.

SS Nothing to do, nothing to do, nowhere to go, as the saying is.

Then, as I say, just after that, when I was.... I happened to pick my wife up, and got married, and as I say, we had fifty years of happy marriage. Well, if she'd have lived to the December - she died in October - if she'd have lived 'til December that'd have been fifty-one years.

JL Yes; that's a good long marriage.
That was all the time in Bampton? So were you born in Bampton?

SS I was born in Bampton.

JL Where were you born?

SS Do you know where Mill Green is?

JL I know where Mill Green is.

SS Well, if you go down the path, beside the brook, you've got one little house stands across in front of you there, and then you goes on down farther – there used to be three, but I think there's only two now, isn't it? Stands right beside the road.

JL Well, it's near where Francis Shergold lives then?

SS Oh, no, no, no; nowhere near there. You go down the path; there's a little house stands across there, and you goes round the corner, and there's two houses right on the side of the path; and you go on a bit farther, two more houses stands back, don't they? I think they're doing a lot of this trenching down there now, aren't they?

JL There's so much being extended down there, so it's hard to tell what there used to be.

SS I'll tell you... did you ever know where George Blackwell lived? Well, there's a house this side.. George used to live in that house, that's where I was born, there. (*He's talking about Walnut Cottage*)

JL So that's number 2 Mill Green; or it could be number 3?

SS I don't know, I've no idea; because it's on that letter, that's got Mill Green on it, and that's..

JL That's right, yes.

What did your father do? What was his work?

SS What I call.. engineering.

JL Oh, he was an engineer.

SS Yeah. Or I think at one time - he was a big property dealer at one time. And, but, no, see where it is, huh, for some unknown reason I shall never know, and one never will now, see, there was only me and my sister, see, in the family, and that, and for some unknown reason my father and mother split up; and, as I say, I wasn't really all that old at the time, and that, and what went wrong I never shall know now. And as I say, I was brought up at the time that you did not ask questions and you'd hear no lies; something like that.

So, as I say, no; because after I came out of the Army, I know I missed what led to all this, I said I worked for the Thames Conservancy; but I did not. I worked for Arthur Gerring there for a few years, on the farm there and that, before I went over to the Thames Conservancy, and that; and no, as I say, I had the chance to finish at sixty with the Thames Conservancy, and I've never done nothing since.

JL Shall we finish there? Because it's an amazing story. Your Army story is amazing, because you had so many near misses; and an extraordinary survival really.

SS Well, my friend as come here, you know, comes to sit with me here, and that, and have a talk and that; and she always claims that I've got a guardian angel.

JL I think so, too. I think so. And on that note, I think I shall just say Thank you very much, and we'll stop there; because I think there is a guardian angel there.