

BAMPTON ARCHIVE

Memories of the Second World War

Bill Drinkwater talking to Jo Lewington about WWII

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JL I'm talking to Bill Drinkwater, and we're going to talk about your wartime experiences. I expect you think there's nothing to tell!

How old were you when you were called up?

BD Well, I was about the end of eighteen. I'll tell you: it was after D-day; I suppose it would be about six or seven weeks after D-day, something like that; and I went to Budbrooke Barracks, in Warwickshire, and done my six weeks' Army training.

JL How did you find that?

BD It wasn't too bad, take the good with the bad, you know.

JL Was that your first time out of Bampton, or had you done a bit of..?

BD Oh, no, that was the first time out. That was from an argument with the employment officer, he told me to go to Rutland, I said I wouldn't go, he said "We'll have you in the Army," and I was in the Army in about three weeks.

JL That's terrible! So you didn't go as a Volunteer, you went because you didn't want to go somewhere else.

BD But I wasn't worried; I think he done the best thing. 'Cause I had to go, so I might as well go then as... I went to Budbrooke Barracks, in Warwickshire, done the six weeks' training with the Leicesters and Warwickshires, and then we got sorted out, and I put in for the R A S C, Royal Army Service Corps; and we had to have - what shall I call it? - a thing to say, and anyway they sent me to Chesterfield, in the Royal Engineers; and that's what I finished up as.

I had eight weeks there; I was a lorry driver, quite good wagons; and we had to do an eight weeks' course. When we finished that, they sent me from there to Halifax, which was a holding unit, and we got sorted out, we went across in American with them TLCs, I think, which was a Diesel Tank Landing Craft. And we landed in Ostend.

JL Now were you supposed to know the mechanics of these things as well?

BD Oh, yes; we'd learned all that; well, I knew that before I went in the Army, you see, because I was driving. Anyway, we got to Ostend; we had good weather,

a holding unit, for a fortnight, and they sent us on to our different groups, you know, different... I was along of... went with the 69 field company, with eight... When I got to there they'd just finished doing the Cook's Bridge over the Waas in Holland. We finished that and we went on up to the Rhine, and we - the Sappers - bridged the Rhine, it was the Westminster; we took up there to Kaliwaal; well, we were drawing the old pontoon and that, you know, just navvies, let's put it that way. And we done that one; I think there was ...the other side of the Rhine there was, I don't know whether it was a town or a city or something, but it was right flat to the ground; Rees I think it was called, of course it was a long time ago, mind.

JL It has been flattened in the War, you mean?

Did you meet with resistance, or were you just marching?

BD They were following the Infantry.

JL Yes; so the Infantry had done all the doing battle?

BD Yeah, they fought up the Rhine, and then we followed up and put this bridge over. We put the Westminster, the Americans were a bit farther down, they put the General Dauntsey, and then we finished that, and then we went up to the Elbe, the River Elbe. We put a bridge across there, but I can't remember the name of the bridge because we got sent back, 'cause when the Germans packed in. And we went back, come back to this country, we went to Inverary and trained as assault troops bridge, for the Far East.

JL Inverary, that's a ...

BD 'Not forgotten', yes, Richard Todd. And we went there, Lock Fyne; we built it at the side of the Duke of Argyll's castle, in them old Nissen hut things. We was there, and then all of a sudden we heard all of this noise, and it was in - can't think of the name of the village now - anyway we went there and we said 'What was up?' and they said "The war's over!" That's when they dropped the bomb up there, Japanese, you see. So we got transferred from there back to Halifax, and we went to Gibraltar; and that was it, finish.

JL So it was a short war, for you, wasn't it?

BD It was; yes.

JL What was the date you went out?

BD Oh, don't ask. I couldn't tell you.

JL Which year was it you went out to start with? When you were called up? When the ....?

BD It was about 1943, I think.

JL And you came back in '45?

BD Yeah; and we went to Gibraltar; and that's where I finished my days, there. It along of the tunnellers, they used to do the tunnelling in the Rock, you know.

JL Those tunnels are still there, aren't they?

BD Oh, yeah; I had about – well, I can't remember when we got there; but I come back about 1949, 1950, or something. And that was it.

Just that ride, well, as I was coming back, they found that cave, Saint Michael's cave, in the middle of the Rock. We had a... well, they only sent us out to see our days out, more or less, you know. 'Cause my demob number was 50, 51 - something like that; and we had to wait before we could come home, because all the boats was packed with the blokes coming home from the Far East and that.

JL So they were just giving you something to do, really, weren't they?

BD Well, that's right, yeah. So I was driving there, in Gibraltar, and what-have-you; and about – oh – six months before I come home they put me up in the Rock in the big garage they've got up there, the workshops;

JL Just being a mechanic, were you, up there?

BD Yeah; well, helping them, a kind of, I don't think really a mechanic, but helping. And then that was it, we come home on the boat.

JL Were you glad to be home?

BD Oh, yeah! Yeah. I mean, the Army was all right, I didn't mind the Army. You couldn't... well, they aren't like they are in a regiment, they're not all guards and all this spit and polish and everything; you just went about like in ordinary ...doing your job.

JL And you didn't see – I mean, you would have seen the results of the War, but you didn't see much action?

BD No, no. Well, action; we seed it when we bridged the Rhine, and the Elbe. Well, we'd taken the pontoons and that up, you see, what's a .. But the Sappers were doing the work over the... the thing, we was only just the lackeys then, you know.

JL Yes; you were the minions. And no fighting?

BD No, no. Sometimes we used to go into 'No man's land' and see what we could find, you know; but that was it; nothing at all like that.

JL And when you came home, was England as though it had been at war? There was rationing, wasn't there?

BD Oh, yeah. That was for a long time after the War. It was still in the fifties, wasn't it?

JL Yes, that's right, it did go on for a long time. I mean, I remember that very well. But for a child it's normal; it's the mothers, I think, that have a hard time, making things meet.

BD But they reckoned that in them days the people were more fitter than they are today; because of the rationing; that's right.

JL Well, we've got the problem of eating too much now, haven't we? And not enough exercise.

BD Well, years ago it was just one staple thing, you know; potatoes, greens, everything. Now, it's anything now, isn't it?

JL A huge choice now, isn't there?

BD And that was the end of my war days.

JL Well, it was very short and very sweet, then.

BD Well, it was, yeah. I mean there was nothing special about it, we were just the lackeys, that was all. We were doing our bit, that's right.

JL Well, we'll switch it off, then, shall we?

BD Well, yeah; there's nothing else, anyway.

JL Thank you very much.

*There is a pause in the tape there; and then the interview resumes, with B D talking about Gibraltar.*

BD It's a bit dull thing, see, but it was, the side of the...that faces Spain, it all slid down.

JL I never heard of that.

BD Well, when I first went there – it was done before we went there – we was - the Royal Engineers – was digging it out.

JL Digging out the Rock of Gibraltar?

BD No, the landslide; and then tipping it in the sea for that airfield; that's where the airfield was going. That's between the English and Spanish border isn't it, the airfield?

JL Do you remember the landslide happening, or had it happened?

BD No, it happened before we got there; but we was there taking the stuff away, you know. Tipping, yeah; being the navvies. Not only that, it's where they were digging the tunnels, that's where we were taking all the stuff and putting it in the sea for this ...

JL Just moving the land around, isn't it?

BD We used to have some fun stuff there, it was – you aren't recording, are you?

JL Well, I can switch it off if you like, if we're going to get personal. What about the Australian brides? We haven't heard about them.

BD ...because, well, they.... we was waiting to catch a boat, and they said, "There's a boat coming, but it's full of Australian brides, for Australia; because in this country, well, I suppose they married English ones.

JL Well, the Army wasn't out in Australia.

BD Well, they said it was the Australian brides. Well, they weren't the only ones, there was a lot on there, but there was a fair few of these what they call occupational brides.

JL I never heard of that.

BD 'Cause they called in at Gibraltar, and that's how we came to get on the boat.

JL There were G.I brides, that's where a lot of our lasses went over to the States.

BD Yeah. There was G.I.s on there, but they was in the Hospital, the big General Hospital there.

JL What, were they dressing the wounded there, or what?

BD No, no. You'd better switch it all off!

JL Oh, come on, we don't mind.

BD Well, it was the dam' beat women, got all these diseases.

JL Oh, I see, yes; they got the clap

BD Yeah; there was one bloke, and he was just rotting away.

JL I thought they just handed out condoms to all the service men?

BD Well, I don't think there was any there when we was there. No.

JL You just had to be careful.

BD But if you went into Spain, at La Linea, and that, and you went to a brothel, and you got this girl, or whatever – I don't know, I never went in them – you got a photograph of the girl, and on the back was when they had been inspected. Every few months – well, every so often, anyway; and if you caught anything, you'd put that card in, and she'd be banned forever.

JL So they did do some effort at looking after you.

BD Oh God, yeah. Yeah, 'cause some of our blokes went to Madrid, to the British Embassy, but I never got that far. I wasn't lucky enough.

JL They just got invited, did they, or...?

BD To do – like a guard, I suppose; but I wasn't that lucky..

JL Now that would have been interesting, wouldn't it?

BD It would have been, yes.

It wasn't far to travel on the road, I could walk it in an hour. Because one of our blokes, he used to play the electric organ, at the Rock Hotel; and that was three parts up it – I don't know if you've ever been up it?

JL You weren't allowed up there? You weren't posh enough?

BD No! That's why this bloke got up there, he was invited because he played the electric organ, for dancing and that. It was for all the officers and everything, wasn't it?

JL I suppose it would have been. Interesting times, though.

BD It was interesting, yes.

JL But you didn't get to see the rest of Spain? You didn't get to see North Africa?

BD No. We could have went, if I'd have wanted to, but I didn't bother, you know, I wasn't worried much, you know. The Royal Navy used to take us across, because they'd got the big naval yard, if we wanted to go; but I wasn't bothered, I stopped in Gibraltar. 'Cause they reckoned there was a lot of trouble out there

when we were there; I don't know where it was, in North Africa; Moors, what was they called? Was it the Moors or something?

JL Well, there was a lot of trouble in Algeria after the War, when they were trying to get independence, but it was the French involved in that.

BD Yeah; but I come back, well, that was about – I don't know, it's so long ago; in the '50s I reckon; no, end of '49 I got back in this country.

I heard on the Tannoy that people with guns, or something, you know, they, what they... souvenirs, then, you know, would, well, what-have-you, go to prison or what..

JL Be arrested..

BD Yes. And you could hear Ploy! Plop! Plop! all the way across, you know, over the side. I never brought anything, I wasn't bothered about things like that, you know.

JL Where did the guns come from? Did they just come from prisoners of war, or something like that?

BD No, it was just what they got when they was advancing, see, took off the dead, or revolvers or what-have-you. Well, I wasn't bothered, but one kiddy, in our lot; he was a driver, and he found a Luger; and we was in the barrack room, end of..

JL But which town was this that you were in?

BD Oh, I don't know; it was a German barracks, because it all had old glazing in them days, their barracks did. And this kiddy got this Luger; and he was sat on the side of his bed, and he said to his mate, "Look what I've got here," he said, "It's a Luger!" and he pulled the trigger; and it went off Bang! It went through a bloke's..... bloke's legs first, that's right, then a bloke's arm, and through a bloke's small parts; and I tell you what, his feet never touched the ground, going out.

JL Terrible.

BD Yeah. They wouldn't bother, years ago; they'd pick up a hand grenade, and pull the pin out and what have you. Them Sappers, they'd do anything. It wasn't mad, it was boredom; they wanted action, you know.

JL Yes, they didn't want to just sit around.

BD I was in their billet one day, and the group, they'd got a hand grenade, and they was unscrewing it, you know the primer then, you screw it up to the primer; they were screwing it down to about a thread-and-a-half; and then they'd pull the pin and chuck it on the ground, and the blokes that did it, they'd pull it out and see how far – you know.

JL This is seriously risky, isn't it?

BD It could kill the lot of them, you see. But I tell you what, I wasn't in there when they done it, I was gone, when they said they was going to screw it. And that was boredom, that was all...

JL And this is why I think in the Army they give the chaps such silly jobs to do; I mean shoe polishing, that's just to keep them busy, isn't it?

BD Yeah, I mean, you did; you get bored; not when you was in Germany, and that, because I mean you was on the go all the time.

JL You never were afraid?

BD I was, oh yeah; too right I was, yeah; specially when we done the River Rhine, or them what-do-you call them, can't remember now, them – like a bomb thing; it wasn't a mine, it was what they used to shoot out of a gun like a bomb thing; I can't remember what they were now. Well, Hades was exploding all round you, but you didn't keep above it.

JL It was all part of the job. Was it because you were so busy that you weren't..?

BD I think that's what it was; you wouldn't have had time to be frightened. You just done what you were told, and that was it. And one old fellow, he used to drive a lorry, and when they used to shell us he'd sit in the lorry; and we used to say, "Come on and get underneath that thing!" "No," he says – I can't think what his name was - he said "That's it!" and he kept there all the time. He never got hit at all. He was the sanest bloke of the outfit, he did clean the ...he hadn't got no nerve at all.

JL He just thought it was fate if they got him.

BD He said, "If my name ain't on it," he said, "I'm all right."

JL Did you lose any friends?

BD It was on the River Elbe, and I wasn't up there at the time, but the other bloke was up there, and then our M.T. Sergeant, Sergeant Proctor, they were shelling this side, where we was; but instead of him staying with the blokes, he went the opposite side of the thing, and that was where the shell exploded, blew him to bits. That's the only bloke I knew that we lost, anyway.

JL Did you see that happen?

BD No; no. I was out – I was back a bit further than that. I don't know; it's... you didn't bother. This is what .. I mean, I never worried. They used to say "Heads down!" because they wanted, you know, and that was it. And that's the



joke. That's right. When we used to go in, before you went up there, "Pig! Pig!" they give you half a cup full of rum, or something, you know. And you never worried about a thing.

JL So the war was fought on half a cupful of rum!

BD Yeah, well, he always used to say, "Have a bit of this to warm you up." And it did relieve you. Quite right.

JL Well, that's interesting.

BD Never mind, the war's over now.

JL Well, there's a war going on somewhere, isn't there?

BD Everywhere there's a war, now.

JL When you see that, when you see it on television, what do you feel?

BD Well, I feels frustrated; because I mean they should know better; I mean, look at this Iraqi war: I mean they're always on about all these, what do you – what's 'is name have got, these Iraqis have got; they ain't got nothing. And they reckon – I blame what's-'is-name, the Prime Minister, I do honestly; I think they'd have been better off underneath that Saddam, or whatever his name is, than what they are now. 'Cause look how many's being killed all the time. Still, I suppose they knows best, and that's it.

JL Do you think they know best? Do you really think they know best?

BD They don't know best; no. They're sick, aren't they, really?

JL Seems like it, doesn't it?

BD Yeah.

JL Or there's something else behind it; you just don't know.

BD Well, you don't know. But I think Bush is doing it because didn't that old – his Dad, was in that other war? It was Iraq.

JL He was in the Gulf War.

BD Yeah; and they told him to stop, didn't they, the United Nations? And he stopped. Well, he's – I reckon he done that so that he could finish it off.

JL A little bit of family pride? Just that.

BD That's right.

JL It's a terrible thing, isn't it?

BD Yeah, and it backfired.

JL Well, you wouldn't want to be out there.

BD No. No way.

JL And you feel sorry for the soldiers, because you've got this bit of experience behind you, and when you look at the young soldiers now ...

BD Oh, you do feel sorry for 'em, yeah. Well, they've got to fight somebody else's war. But what we had to do was the same, I suppose. It was just too bad. I mean, when we had World War One, that was supposed to be the war to finish all wars; and we've had more wars since then. I don't know.

JL Yes, it's about time it stopped, isn't it?

BD I don't think it'll ever stop; it'll get worse and worse. You see, the Yanks, they're trying to be the big "I ams," they're trying to be the masters, but I think they'll come unstuck one of these days, and that'll be it. They nearly come unstuck with that other war, wasn't it? With Russia. Taking them things to Cuba.

JL Yes; that was very nearly the end of the world, that was serious stuff, wasn't it?

BD That was; if it hadn't been for the Russians turning back I reckon it would have been the finish.

JL A very near thing.

Right, let's finish there, then.

BD You haven't got that thing switched on still, have you?

JL Yes, well, I think all of it's interesting.

BD Do you?

JL Well, I'll listen to it later, but I think it is, yes.