

Interviewee: Bernard Skinner

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 01.10.2010

Interviewer: This is Malin Lundin interviewing Bernard Skinner on the 1st of October 2010. Would you be able to give me your date of birth please?

Bernard: May 1921.

Interviewer: Ok, so can I just ask you, how old were you when the war started?

Bernard: Eighteen.

Interviewer: And where were you living?

Bernard: In Woolacombe Road in Kidbrooke.

Interviewer: Ok. Who were you living with?

Bernard: I was one of six children living with my parents.

Interviewer: Ok. So can – can you remember that first day when the war started on the 3rd of September?

Bernard: Clearly, yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about it?

Bernard: Well, it started as far as I was concerned on the 1st of September when we were embodied, I being a Territorial Army soldier. I had joined in the early part of thirty-nine, volunteered. And I still have the letter commanding me to attend the Drill Hall at Lee Green and from there I took my civilian gasmask and haversack ration which I had been provided by my mother in accordance with the instructions. We were taken to Woolwich barracks on commandeered flat lorries, I can recall clearly our legs hanging over the side. No seats or anything and we were decanted on the famous barracks square and immediately we were supplied with some of our uniform, not all. We didn't get full uniform for some weeks later. So that was on the Friday the 1st of September thirty-nine. I can, of course, remember the day war broke out, the alarm – what do they call it? The air raid alarm sounded at eleven o'clock on the Sunday morning but it was apparently a false alarm. But it reminded us that the war had started. I remember the broadcast by Chamberlain I think we all did. So, briefly, that's how I recall the outbreak of war.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt when – when you realised that war was declared?

Bernard: I was too immature to worry about what was in front of us. Had we had the foresight knowing what the war was going to be like probably no one would have volunteered for anything. On the other

hand, that's being unfair to so many people. I suppose I was one of them who did volunteer. We could foresee the risks from the Nazis, often described as the black clouds of war, threatening us and we thought we'd do something about this and we did.

Interviewer: So when did you volunteer to join the army?

Bernard: Well, I joined the territorials in, as I said, early in 1939. I don't know the precise date it was probably about April thirty-nine.

Interviewer: So how – how come you decided to join the territorials at that stage?

Bernard: A friend of mine, a neighbour, felt that we would do what so many people were doing and I think my brother had joined the RAF balloon barrage which was quartered at Kidbrooke and subsequently he went on as a bomber navigator after training in North America. We were concerned about the country. When people ask me this today, 'Why did you volunteer?', I feel like throwing something at them sometimes because they haven't had the proper teaching in the history of¹ that period. A lot of youngsters have grown up, now mature and some of them retired, gives my age away, and haven't really a full idea of what it was like in pre-war days in this country. We have been reminded in recent times almost every night on TV of the Battle of Britain and that must be doing some good.

Interviewer: So can you tell me what happened when war broke out then? Did you receive training or had you received training before?

Bernard: We had – we had had a little bit of training between early 1939 and the outbreak of war. We were given more intensive training at Woolwich Barracks for two or three months and then I was transferred in November, it was September – two months. From Woolwich to Dover as an immature, I was eighteen and most of the unit were going to France. As far as I know, they did go to France, I was lucky. We were anti-aircraft gunners for the whole of the Battle of Britain so we had a front row view of what was going on and that was in Dover where we were stationed was quite hot place to be and exciting. I could tell you a lot more about that but that's another story.

Interviewer: Ok, did you feel like that the training that you were given that that prepared you for what you later experienced?

Bernard: I think so. We had very intense training when we arrived at Dover. They too were a territorial unit. I transferred from field guns to anti-aircraft guns after I arrived there. We were right on the front to protect Dover harbour that was a target for not daily but regular visits by the Luftwaffe and as the Battle of Britain commenced it wasn't a place I would invite my family to come and see me. In fact, that part of southeast England was out of bounds for everyone. Sadly my mother died in June of that year and I had a dickens of a job to get permission to go home for the funeral and come back at 23:59

¹ 5 min

(which I managed to get). So that's the beginning of the war and we intentionally trained on anti-aircraft guns and I think it stood us in good stead. Those photographs give you an idea, we were well established on the cliffs there and the other parts of the unit were sited around Dover.

Interviewer: Do you remember what this stage when you moved to Dover and you weren't actually allowed to – to go to France, were you – were you disappointed or do you remember how you felt cos you were quite young at that point. Did you want to –?

Bernard: I didn't know we were going to France. It was subsequently I've learnt, obviously that my unit, as far as I could find out and research only would tell me for sure that they went over there probably came back at Dunkirk but I'm not sure about that. That would have to be looked into. Then that unit went out to the Far East which I wasn't in then and many of them captured by the Japanese when the guns were pointing the wrong way in Singapore. You would know that history better than anyone. So I was lucky in the sense that I stayed in this country and then I went abroad in forty-two. We were well-trained.

Interviewer: So – so where did you go in forty-two then?

Bernard: We went by boat, everything was by boat in those days, to Durban, round the Cape, we stopped there. I remember we had to search before we went on leave in Durban for a day or two. Italian prisoners who'd been taken in the fighting in North Africa and they'd been sent down to Durban. It was a sad introduction to the war² for us because most of the Italian prisoners had musical instruments on their backs, unbelievable sight, and we were instructed to take all their instruments away and all their wristwatches. I don't know what happened to them all. Then we went on leave. By good fortune, my cousin Rex was the Mayor of Durban or had been, he said, 'If you'd come down last week you could have had a car but now we have petrol rationing'. So he invited us out with a few friends, to his lovely house in Durban which made a break and then we went on via boat to the Red Sea to Persia and Iraq, Paiforce, as it was called in those days, P-A-I-F-O-R-C-E, and we were there for a couple of years defending the refinery at Abadan. So does that answer your question?

Interviewer: Yes, yeah. So how were the conditions in the army? How was the access to food and did you –?

Bernard: What were the conditions?

Interviewer: Yeah, when you were fighting. Did you have good access to food and did you find the heat –?

Bernard: We saw no action in Persia as it was then called. We were simply there to let the Germans know we were there if they did venture over. They didn't come. Then we went back to the Middle East, to Egypt, which was a vast transit camp. We could have gone to North Africa turning left. We

² 10 min

didn't, we were sent to Italy across the end of the Med. and there had been some very savage fighting before we got there. We were transferred our unit, the 132 Field Regiment on the Adriatic side and we – I wouldn't say fought our way it was a relatively quiet war as far as I was concerned in – in the Gunners in Italy. Up until northeast Italy and then the ceasefire was sounded so, yeah, we didn't have a lot of action in the sense that people visualise but we were prepared for it did. Most of the action we saw was at home before we left England, protecting the old country, full stop.

Interviewer: Ok. You were telling me before that you were – that you were posted in Austria as well?

Bernard: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a bit about that?

Bernard: Well, Austria was a time as I will relate in my story, of relaxation. We didn't have any more work to do as gunners we were probably taking advantage of the fact that it was a beautiful place to relax in. We had a lot of facilities available, For example we were sent down to Rome, those who wanted to and we had a – what's the word when you see the pope? He invited us, as soldiers in uniform, probably several hundred of us, to see him in the Vatican. He welcomed us and it was breaking the routine. We attended the opera in Milan and others in northern Italy. Most of us hadn't been to an opera before. Many of the - I've forgotten what they call them now. The entertainers used to come out. But there is a word for them – abbreviation but what, no, NAFTA or something. Anyhow³, they used to come out and we had a relaxing time.

Interviewer: So what – just to clarify was this when the war had ended?

Bernard: Oh, yes, No more fighting. The idea, I recall, was that the military government had taken over. The Allies, [clears throat] excuse me, shared the responsibility for sorting out the tremendous mess of Europe. Thousands of people in the wrong place, including prisoners of war and others and they all had to be sent to their proper places in – in different parts of, well, of the world – not only in Europe. Our job was sometimes to help with doing the sorting out but it was a relaxing duty and as I can recall in another story we had long leave home, travelling by road and back, detail of which I still have in my possession. So it was an easy holiday like situation until we were demobilised.

Interviewer: So were you well received by the Italians and the population?

Bernard: They had got used to us. I can say this in retrospect having thought about it many times. Since welcoming the Germans and then welcoming the British and other Allied troops of which there were numbers of Poles – Poles were in quite large numbers in Italy. I think they were used to the war they gone though the mill and when we arrived they had to suffer our taking over their country. But generally they were kindly, friendly, didn't say too much. If we wanted any laundry done they were the first people who would do it and made a first class job at it. No, it was – the relationship between the

³ 15 min

troops and the civilian population was good when – when we had opportunity to talk to them but which wasn't very often.

Interviewer: Ok. So at what point was it that – that you were – that you were skiing in Austria then? That you were being taught how to –?

Bernard: Well, it was something to amuse us if you like. The authorities wouldn't use that word, they generally had to train some troops to protect the border between the Yugoslavia and Austria, I assume there were large numbers of people wanting to cross that border and their intention, and I'm guessing here, was probably to ensure that they didn't move too much until the authorities could sort them all out and send them to wherever the authorities thought they should go. I believe there is a lot of history to be told about how certain, probably civilians were claimed by, for example, the Russians who wanted possibly to get them under their control for reasons which are not clear to me. But it may, here I'm conjecturing, be that they had a – something to pay – they wanted a payback these people for whatever happened during the fighting. It's not a subject I know too much about and I'm sure it's been researched in detail ever since then. But, no, the relationship between the British, we were able to get on very easily with people. We had to and it made the war – it did make the war [post war period] that much easier, I suppose, for us.

Interviewer: Ok. So h-how did you experience de-demobilisation when you –?

Bernard: How did I experience –?

Interviewer: Demobilisation. So when you returned to –?

Bernard: I couldn't wait for it. It was what we were aiming at technically as a territorial⁴ soldier I wasn't intending to be – they – the authorities didn't intend that we should be demobilised. We would carry on as part-time soldiers. Often unkindly, the phrase was 'Saturday afternoon soldiers', but for reasons, which I won't go into detail now but I was unfit at that time and I was discharged as being medically unfit. So I was no longer a territorial and being demobbed was, in a way, a surprise to me. I felt fit but I wasn't, it was hypotension which is now known as blood pressure, high blood pressure, which I got over and have not been troubled in most of my life. But I was discharged on medical grounds.

Interviewer: So how was it returning to – to England? Had it changed?

Bernard: I – I think so. My siblings had all got three or four years older. My two younger brothers had joined different units. Peter, my younger brother, joined the RAF so I had two brothers in the RAF and another brother was in a specialist type of work which didn't permit him to join the services. He was in employed in a firm named Elliott Brothers in Lewisham. Until recently he was still there but now gone. So I did notice the change, we – we didn't have a home to go to because as I explained earlier my

⁴ 20 min

father had moved to the north, Cheshire. It was a difficult time but we would spend – spending that time settling down. I got a job in Woolwich as a trainee chartered surveyor which I subsequently became in 1950 when I qualified, 1951 I qualified, 1951. And we all married, which was the practise in those days all five children – six children – all five married during the war or after the war and my sister, the elder, married in early 1930s. So it wasn't a great change as far as I can recall, things had altered we'd all got jobs again and we all married and I being in the property market was very lucky working for a firm of estate agents, as I said, I was training to become a chartered surveyor. We couldn't and didn't go to university in those days as regularly as they do today. I trained by what they call evening classes in those days combined with courses and some day release. So it was a combination, thousands of people were wanting to be trained, pouring out of the services and I was one of them and my brother was, as far as I recall, did much the same. So, yes, it was different but we all got on very well together and we all stayed in southeast London other than my sister who lived in northeast or northwest of the country.

Interviewer: So you were just a young man when you – when you joined the army –

Bernard: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you feel that the war changed you or affected you as a person?

Bernard: Well, I'm not sure if I thought about it at the time but looking back I suppose it made an overgrown schoolboy into a grown man. We learnt hard, we had to look after ourselves. We would train to be soldiers. I think we grew up very quickly and the discipline of army service didn't do it any harm. Dare⁵ I mention it on the record; I wouldn't think it would do anyone any harm today if they were trained as we were. But that's another story outside my purview.

Interviewer: Ok. Just one more question how did you feel that the – serving on the home front compared with – with serving overseas?

Bernard: How did I compare serving on the –?

Interviewer: The home front. So serving in Britain and then going abroad and serving overseas. How would you compare that experience?

Bernard: I think it was easier going overseas. We were certainly busier in the days in Dover and we were moved up in different parts of the country as the enigma people decoding the German messages were able to anticipate where the next air raid was going to be and I think we were busier in this country. One example was Sheffield, we were sent up there as anti-aircraft gunners, very, very urgently. We were told that the first plane would come over at ten to seven in the evening. The first plane did come over at ten to seven in the evening. We'd been piling up ammunition which was delivered in huge numbers to our gun site and probably the other gun sites around Sheffield and we

⁵ 25 min

needed all that ammunition. Suffice to say that many people suffered in Sheffield, there was a lot of damage inevitably but I can recall the groups of people coming up the hill to our gun site on the outskirts of Sheffield with plates of cakes and biscuits, which was a touching scene which almost brought tears to gunners' eyes. They had gone through it, we hadn't. We were too busy to worry. Whether we prevented further damage to the dear old Sheffield, I don't know now. I think undoubtedly we did because I know that the other – there were four gun sites of our unit and probably a lot more had been brought in and I don't know the details of that and I think between us the services did defend Sheffield to a degree but it was almost impossible to stop large number of bombers dropping their bombs. So to compare home action with activities in foreign countries, I think, personally speaking, that I had an easier war abroad.

Interviewer: How – how would you summarise your war if you had a few words to summarise your experience of the war?

Bernard: That's a complex question. I feel I did my share. I worried my dear mother, after all, 1939 was only twenty years after the First World War and she like many people had a vivid memory of what was happening on the Western Front. I think – I realise it was job done well. I was asked about it when I got a job in Woolwich as a – with an Estate Agent, they asked – often asked me about it and where I'd been. I felt that I could settle down after the war without too much of a problem. I don't think we changed too much. Some people may but I think we were sufficiently able to⁶ get on with our lives, which we did and I had a happy life with three children. All of whom have grown up and I've just enjoyed sixty years of marriage. The Queen sent us a card. I've got no grumbles so I look back on the war as a job to be done.

Interviewer: Ok. Is there anything you feel like you would want to add to the interview? Anything that you feel that you haven't had a chance to tell me?

Bernard: I don't think so. It's only recent times that I have thought a lot about the war. Every time with modern technology and television and other means of transmitting information and I must be one of the few people living in Eltham now who's not online. I had my thoughts about the pros and cons of modern technology, the world had changed too rapidly for a lot of people in recent years and it makes it difficult I imagine for young families to bring up their children when all the children want to watch something on TV or on a computer screen or play these games which I know very little about but I've heard about. I'm an old folkie, we lived in a different world. I liked the way we lived in those days and I carry on living very much in the way that I like. I have my hobbies, one hobby is painting. I won't waste your time on that and another hobby is making furniture.

Interviewer: Ok.

⁶ 30 min

Bernard: Examples of which you can see over your right hand shoulder. I got no time for modern so called entertainment, simply because I got old. I'm now in my ninetieth year. I can't say very much more than that.

Interviewer: Have you been to any reunions after –?

Bernard: No. I never bothered.

Interviewer: No?

Bernard: I did meet a senior officer who's a good friend and neighbour of mine now, some fifteen/twenty years ago. Actually through Rotary, of which I was an active member, and he wanted to join Rotary after retiring from the army as a brigadier and his influence still being active in the Woolwich garrison after he'd retired brought home to me the fact that, yes, there was a war sixty-five years ago and I did take part. Other than that I hadn't really thought too much about it because it did not affect me too much. But he introduced me to the garrison and we used to have meals in the famous mess down there either as Rotarians or as civilians invited by present and past officers. I enjoyed the reunion with service personnel and it caused me to – prompted me to think about those days firstly when my friend Brigadier Ken Timbers, who's such a good friend now, used to introduce me to his active officer friends down there in the garrison as having served at home and also in Italy. It emphasises the fact that I had been active during the war. But other than that, no, I didn't think too much about it.

Interviewer: Has the war been something that you been talking to your family about?

Bernard: Only in recent times. I'm not one who doesn't say anything about the war. I know a lot of people⁷ have kept their wartime thoughts to themselves and probably justifiably. My brother, Frank, who was in the barrage balloons in Kidbrooke and then went into flying on heavy bombers, was a navigator after training I think in America. He did, I think, sixty operations which was double the usual number. He didn't talk about that very much at all. He just told me what he'd done and that was it cos I was abroad when he was flying from East Anglian Air – what did they call them? Where the planes take off from? Airfields. So, no I didn't talk too much about it until quite recently.

Interviewer: Ok. Well, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me.

Bernard: Not at all, my pleasure.

Interviewer: And I'm going to turn this –

End of Interview.

⁷ 35 min