Interviewee: Charles Constable

Interviewer: June Balshaw

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Location: University of Greenwich

JB: Yeah, ok. So I’m just going to hold this in front of you, this is Charles Constable and today is Saturday 24th July 2010 and my name is Dr June Balshaw from the University of Greenwich and I’m interviewing Mr Charles Constable about his Second World War experience. Ok. So the first question I’d like to ask you Charles is what were you doing and where were you living when war broke out?

CC: I’d just been married about twelve months and we had an idea that the war wasn’t very far away from the news we kept getting about Germany so I had a little temporary job filling the time until they decided that when the war was likely to start and soon after, beginning of ’39 we were – we were married in ’38 and the war started in ’39 so we had about a year together before we got called up.

JB: Ok, and so you were called up were you?

CC: Yes.

JB: Or did you volunteer?

CC: No, I was called up very, very early I suppose it’s because I was on the younger side and 4.4.40 I went into the army which the war had just started. We only had one war zone and that was in France and it was the BEF, British Expeditionary Force. Naturally I was put into the expeditionary force, I was sent away training down at Herne Bay. Very, very cold and that was my next stop and when I finished training I’d be going to France. By the time I got there they were coming away so we had to alter the plans and we had to go around the neighbourhood finding extra empty property to make room for all those coming back from France and Dunkirk. I was lucky enough to be able to have left earlier and then they came back I got a job as a staff driver in the Army, driving an officer all through the Blitz in London. After the bombs had fell I used to take the officer around to see what sort of damage there was done and he would organise help to come and help them to get straight and get the people out, you see. But after a while they decided women could do my job so I got the sack and they got all the ATS to take our jobs over and I was then transported abroad to go out to the Middle East as a soldier.

JB: And what was your wife doing?

CC: My wife, wasn’t working until the war started and she had to join something so she joined the milk round. Now she was delivering milk in Kennington in the middle of London all through the blitz and when the raids were bad she used to have to tie the horse up to a lamppost until it eased up, and people used to ask but she got so used to stopping so she never bothered to stop, she just carried on. She was very well liked and she liked the job. I had the shock of my life because she used to be
frightened of a moth and here she was driving a horse all through the blitz. She was a good old soul and she was there right until after the war.

JB: Ok, so you were sent then abroad.

CC: I was sent abroad and it was rather hard. I had to go to Scotland to get the – to the ships to take me abroad and there was hundreds and hundreds, thousands of men even at the time to go abroad for their war that was in Libya, just about. I must have been at the end of the queue because so many ships left and I was like – about 120 left and we were put on this last ship. It was a very old ship, it had been sunk during the war and they dug it up put a coat of paint on it and put us on it. Now, something I shall never forget and people find it hard to believe that I was 11 weeks and 3 days on that boat, 11 weeks and 3 days, before I got to my destination, South Africa. The average man in the navy never goes to sea for more than a few months and I was 11 weeks and 3 days. And the convoy, we never saw another convoy as soon as we left England (Five minutes) we were on our own. We were so slow. We were doing six knots, we had to look over the side to see if that wheel was still going around and we had been reported during that time that we were expected missing and my wife had a cable that they thought that we’d gone missing. We travelled alone calling at St. Helena, Ascension Island, one or two other places until we got to Cape Town then we went round to Durban and then Durban we managed to find room. Everybody was coming in loaded and there was just about 120 of us needs to go abroad and asked if they had room for us. We got on to a ship called the Mauritania they said, ‘Oh yes, two there, two there, two there’ and that’s how I was shipped up to North Africa from Durban down through the Red Sea, right the way up. Then joined the army in a holding battalion and got attached to my units which was the Eighth Army attached to the Seventh Army to operate in Libya.

JB: And what was the job you were doing then?

CC: I was driving.

JB: You were still driving.

CC: We were taking hundreds and hundreds of lorries were going because today's war anywhere is all transport, the wars wouldn’t last without the transport. They must have supplies, without the supplies, and they were trying to build a railway from Cairo to Libya and to get to help their lorries and when we used to go off to take the stuff up to the desert there would, oh, two or three hundred lorries all in order two hundred yards apart in front behind so you all travelled doing. We were attacked many times by the German Air Force and they used to come down and take their pick but as I say without that transport the war wouldn’t be able to carry on

JB: No, ok if we could move on now to talk about your experience of being taken prisoner of war?

CC: Yes.

JB: Could you tell me the circumstances that led up to that?
CC: Yes, well as I said I was in the – what they call the Eighth Army attached to the Seventh Armoured Div. and our job was to go up and they were fighting there. Rommel had arrived now, firstly it was only Italians under General Wavell but they were getting nowhere so the Germans sent their forces over, Africa Corps. That was their General Rommel and he was a different kettle of fish and he started to put up a bit of a resistance and he would drive us back then we would drive him forward and backwards and forwards that went. They had to go past Tobruk which was a dock to the Mediterranean which was supplying us with supplies and this time we hadn’t stopped so all those that was in Tobruk was shut in. It was called the siege of Tobruk and after we’d gone a few yards, a few miles down the road we stopped and turned and come back and they released the men that was in Tobruk. That was the siege of Tobruk, they were there for quite a few months and off we go again up and down. The next time it happened the Germans didn’t want to leave us, follow us into Tobruk, and so they carried on because they thought it was their birthday. The army hadn’t stopped running and they thought now we’ve got the British on the run we’ll go straight to the end of it you see and Rommel overlooked that he’d got no supplies keeping up with him and before he got to a place called Alamein he’d run out of petrol and he found he’d caught a cold so he had to start easing up it slowed the war up a bit. We had a new general named general Macarthur – Ma – McCarthy I think his name was and the previous generals I’m afraid got the sack and this one took over. He said, ‘I’m staying here until I have the same as what they’ve got on the other side’. We were going to have more army, bigger tanks because we were always that much worse off than the Germans. Anyhow, we had seven pound guns they had something else bigger. They were always that much in advance so this general only a little fellow, I’m getting his name mixed up now.

JB: So was he responsible for you becoming a prisoner of war?

CC: So anyway, yes, because we had to go back and on another visit past Tobruk I got caught in Tobruk and we was transported there. The men had already carried on to Alamein and I got taken from there to Benghazi and then from Benghazi across to Sicily (Ten minutes) and Sicily across to Italy, in enemy ships. I was – went through the usual examination camp you got deloused and they took your uniform away from you and I was given another uniform that used to belong to an Italian that used to be a bloomer type of uniform. So we was all walking around like Italian soldiers little knickerbockers and that sort of thing and then they released us and took us up to northern Italy, right far north. We were put in a camp, a prisoner of war camp, there was about over two thousand of us and I was in this camp for a long, long while.

JB: And what were the conditions like?

CC: Pardon?

JB: What were the conditions like?

CC: The conditions were quite well in as much that you didn’t have to go out to work. They did abide by the rules and regulations as regards for prisoners of war. It was very disheartening because not having to go out we were all slinging these big hangers, we had three tier bunks very, very close...
together and it was over two thousand of us there. To pass time they used to break up stuff in the tin cans you got your food in and make cups out of them so we could drink out of these tins. We made it – there was a clever chap there, he made a clock, and he had a perfect clock. It was ticking away, gave you perfect time, all made our tin cans filled with sand. We would get visitors from the Italian prisoner camp to take photos with this clock. Of course we were never – used to be counted several times a day and Italians could never do it. We had to do it ourselves to make it easy we used to count ourselves in fives, tens, hundreds. They could still never count and so I think they gave up in the finish.

Then towards ’43 we got up the normal way stretch our legs and I looked outside and all our guards had gone, all the machineguns they’d got around the camp had been taken away and we couldn’t understand it, no guards. It soon came about that Italians had now capitulated they’d gone, left us to it so we were free if we wanted to go outside and mix or try and get away or do whatever you wanted to. We were advised by a senior member of the camp, it was a wrong move because the Germans were coming up fast and furious to try and stop all this sort of thing and there was every chance you’d be shot out of hand if they saw you wandering around and so a lot of the men thought they would stay where they were. But I thought I’d take a chance, a couple of friends and myself, we walked out the camp, making our way down, southern Italy where we were hoping, by the time we got down there, we might meet our advancing forces that were fighting in Italy. We got quite a distance, we travelled many miles and we used to travel at night and rest during the day. We had little parcel we’d saved for the occasion in the prisoner of war camp that we’d used a tea bag so many times, wait till you couldn’t get any colour out of them, so we were discussing it in a wood area, there was four of us –

JB: Presumably you were on foot?

CC: Pardon?

JB: You were on foot. You were making the journey by foot.

CC: On foot, yes. or getting a lift any way around that, you see, and somebody must have known we were there and reported us and the Germans appeared in a jeep with a couple of soldiers and he spoke perfect English quite a nice man as far as German prison catchers went. They took us to the railway head where the trains were and they was all lined up with cattle trucks, now these cattle trucks had been used all through the war shipping the Germans – the Jews where you’ve seen such a lot of atrocities, where they’ve been shut and killed. Now they’d handed them over to get all these prisoners of war, thousands and thousands of us in Italy, back to Germany away from Italy because Italy’s capitulated. After, I should say, three or four days we’d been shut in this cattle trucks not allowed out all that time and we were overloaded nearly a hundred, I think, shut in there like pigs. We looked terrible, we had growth of beard, we were hungry and starving all covered in lice. We weren’t nice to know at all and we travelled through northern Italy to Austria, Austria in to Germany near Munich because I noticed the signs and we come to this space – place where they were going to take us in Germany. Middle of the night freezing cold, we looked a sight but before they let us go and mix
(Fifteen minutes) with any decent people the camp we were going to is up the road but we had to go through all the de-cleansing and all the lice cleaning and just outside they had a big wheel which they use now I think for cutting hair off of horses, whatever they call them, you see. Each one of us was gonna have our hair shaved off because it wasn’t clean, now most of us carried a little pair of scissors in our little kit. In the armed forces they’re given to you, what they call a housewife, and you carry that with you the whole time you’re in the Army, Navy or Air Force and that goes with you so you’re always able to sew buttons and that was called a housewife. We all nearly had these little scissors and we got so fed up with waiting for this blooming mechanical thing that we all cut the hair off so we looked a sight, little scissors to make time. We’re still freezing cold and then we went further along there was a German – a big German prisoner of war and he had a big bucket of, looked like creosote, it was disinfectant and we had to strip and each turned, marched past him and he had this terrific big brush, distemper brush, and as you went past he put it in and then smacked it on your chest, wallop, wallop, or anywhere you’ve got hair. Next one thousands of all had the treatment to de-cleanse us then from there we went into a shower. Hot water nothing to dry – you had a machine to dry off and the other end you got another uniform. But now we’re respectable and clean, we were given a British uniform as with a prisoner of war markings on it, the big diamond on your chest and a big diamond on your back and that stayed with you the whole time you were a prisoner of war, before they let us into this camp.

Now this was a respectable camp that got respectable beds and we are now respectable English or German prisoners of war. But I’m afraid in Germany they don’t like to do anything for nothing and, of course, they don’t want to employ prisoners of war so you are employed by people who are responsible for you and they, they come out and call your name out and you had to go to anywhere you was wanted. And my name was called out with fifty others, there was fifty of us and we had to form up, and they took us from there to over Leipzig way, east Germany. At first they had a little place called Locknitz and it was near Tannheim. A little place called Tannheim you won’t know, it was near Leipzig, I could say, one of the big towns. And so because as they weren’t prepared to put us up on this stone quarry they put us behind a public house where they had beds put up quick, tiered, very small about this size for thirty of us, for fifty of us. They used to keep us there at night, give us a cup of coffee in the morning, they’d call it – coffee it was ersatz. I used to paint my bed with it so it was a good stain you see. In the morning we used to have to walk from there to the stone quarry, freezing cold and I made an old pair of gloves out of bits of material I could, and when you get there you’re in a stone quarry. Then at night time you march back again. I suppose it might have been about five or six miles away and because during this time they were building this hut for us in the quarry so it would save us that walk so after a while –

JB: Can you remember exactly what – what month and year this was by now Charles?

CC: It was winter time.

JB: Right.
CC: It was winter time and the guards used to come with us and they used to stand around the top of the stone quarry while we did our work. I remember the first day, we’d never seen a stone that size, they give you a hammer I couldn’t even lift it off the ground, heavens, twenty-two pound and you’re expected to break this up and load it up in to a wagon which carried a ton of stone. And you pushed it on the lines to the base of this cliff and they were taken to the top, tipped into machines where they were even smaller because Germany was hard up for stone and concrete all their defences all over the world and so and that was there. So because it was taking too long they had to send somebody round to us and show us how to do it, and they showed us how the different seams they do and after a while we managed to start breaking it. When the stone got short in quantity they used to hold up and drill the face of the quarry with long, long drills and at night time they used to blow it up, you thought the end of the world was coming. Terrific explosions, nobody there, so in the morning you got a fresh load of stone and its quite simple to pick up and load (Twenty minutes) your doing, and we used to start off – we used to have to do six wagons a day. Then after it took quite a long while to get the hang of it, when they saw we were doing it they put it up to seven then afterwards they put it up to eight then they put it up to nine and in the mean time I’ve had several arguments with the German authorities there and then they put it up to ten.

JB: And what – what sort of food rations were you getting?

CC: The food, we used to get fed by the company that owned the stone quarry and it was potatoes mainly and very little but I think sufficient and now and again we were getting parcels that were coming through but nothing like we should do. I think you had a gentleman just before me who used to get one parcel a week but he never had to go out work or anything like that. But we were getting the parcels, at times they were pilfered and one thing or another. We were lucky to have one between six or seven.

JB: And these were Red Cross parcels?

CC: Red Cross parcels from Canada but it was so useless your six or seven portion of that doing, we used to put them on the ground and put cards on top and you used to take a card and what card you had you had the doing. You might have a packet of tea; you might have a small tin of jam or something like that. So what we’d do as soon as we got our parcels we used to go on the top of the camp there and hold, ‘Who wants a packet of tea?’ and barter our goods out of the parcel to make it worth doings sort of thing you see. Anyway, getting back to the stone quarry that didn’t happen because we were getting fed from the firm that were doing it and they were guards we got into our own camp now so we used to come out the camp and start work straight away. It was freezing cold and after you’d been at work about a quarter of an hour you stripped to the waist because you were so hot, the hard work they made you doing. It carried on, we had reasonable, naturally as prisoner of war, the guards were from the German Army, called Wehrmacht, they’re the ordinary German soldiers. They weren’t SS or anything like that and there was a mixture there was Austrians amongst them. They was all German, naturally. They was very, very good to us, you could see that, we didn’t
escape that was the main thing and I caused quite an argument by refusing to do one or two things and they tried to get the guard –

JB: What did you refuse to do Charles?

CC: Well, if it was pouring with rain I objected to work in rain and because we had German civilians working in the stone quarry although they were older, too old for their forties and they used to work in the stone quarry. If it was pouring with rain they just carried on and I said, ‘No, we’re not going to do it’, so the foreman there, he was a Nazi, there were two Nazis in charge, he was jumping up and down frothing at the mouth and he tried to get the guards to make us work and the guards said ‘No, we’re only here to make sure they don’t escape. It’s your job to make them do it.’ So anyway they sent a higher ranking officer come down next door in the German Army to see what it’s all about and I explained to him I said I’m objecting to having to carry on working [unclear]. He saw my point and he said that what we’ll do is if the German civilians carry on working in the rain I’m afraid you’ll have to carry on working so I said fair enough. Ok, next day I went and told all the German civilians I said, ‘fur regnen nicht arbeit’, that means if it rains no work, all very friendly, yes ok. As soon as it rains they stop work, we stop work. There was palaver about it but that’s what they agreed and that’s how we managed to get away. That’s one of the things we used to do to try and break up the time whilst in the stone quarry.

JB: So how long were you actually in that camp for Charles?

CC: I think I was in the stone quarry about two years.

JB: Two years, ok.

CC: And also we used to get metal tickets so that when you’d done your wagon you pushed it up there and they give you a metal ticket and so you had a doing. So some of the lot weren’t all that bright and this one down below would give us a ticket and the man up the top would take it so when he’d know you got ten tickets. So I got a friend of mine to talk to him, keep talking about the weather and I went and helped myself to two or three handfuls of the doings and shared them about and instead of carrying on to do ten we might only done seven or eight of it and they were scratching their heads because we were all packing up work. The man up the top was having an argument with the man down below (Twenty-five minutes) nearly had a war on I think so they must have realised that it was something else but the next day we carried on.

JB: Ok, what I’d like you to do now Charles is tell me about what happened towards the end of the war which led to you eventually escaping?

CC: Well, as I say we done this job on and on and one day it’s in May, must have been about a week or fortnight before the war finished. The guys come in and say, ‘Ok, get you’re things together we’re all going to move, we got the Americans a couple of miles down the road coming up’, where unbeknownst to me they’d arranged to meet the Russians which was further east, a place called Riesa. So we had to down tools, get our few belongings and that’s like everybody you’d had about
this camp, you’d see millions and millions of people. Everybody, you could see, was on the move marching east because the Americans were advancing and they had to clear the deck. The only thing was they were getting nearer to the Russians just by a place called Riesa which is east of Germany. Now no Germans like the Russians especially the women they’ve got a terrible reputation and they were dragging their feet this march everybody all – I helped somebody one or two elderly people and their dog carts and belongings to get along the road. I think I was on the march for about four days wherever you happened to be if it rained you had to stay. Our guards went around the field and we just had to lay down in the field. If it had been raining it would be wet so if you saw a dry spot you stayed on it because once you got up you got wet. So anyway as we were getting nearer the noise was getting more dangerous, there were shells and doings so it must have been a headache for the German General, whoever he was, fighting the war against the Russians so he ordered all the people in Germany back to where we started from so he could carry on having the war with the Russians.

Now, you couldn’t stop them they wanted to go back towards the west they’d sooner be captured by the Americans than the Russians. But anyway, it took us about three or four days to get back to where we started and you gradually lost the groups of people that was on the march so when we got back it was getting dusk. We still had our guards, they didn’t know what to do with themselves and I was a little bit concerned because they will be prisoners if they carry on to the Americans. What are they going to do? Are they going to try and dump us, take us somewhere else, will they line us up and shoot us because they didn’t want to have the responsibility. So they came to this churchyard in the area where we stopped it was about a wall, a concrete wall, about six foot, ideal for enclosure to put fifty prisoners of war. They made us stay there and everybody had to come, they could keep their eye on us. They weren’t all that keen whether we, I don’t think, so perhaps I shouldn’t say, and it wasn’t much of – later on when it got dark a few of my pals and me we jumped over the wall and no gunfire followed us so we knew we were alright and we made our way towards a place called Tannheim, which was near the quarry. I couldn’t tell you what was outside the quarry because all my actual time was spent inside the quarry but my friend, whose address I had, lived in Tannheim so I thought, wouldn’t it be nice if I could make my way towards Tannheim. As far as all the Germans were concerned they thought the prisoners had been moved and didn’t know that we’d had to come back, you see.

JB: And can I just ask you talk about friend who lives in Tannheim?

CC: Yes.

JB: So what nationality was your friend?

CC: He was a German. He was a German soldier, he had gone on the eastern front and he injured his leg, he had part of his leg so he had a job offered to him in the quarry sitting down chopping up the stone into little cubicles for the make cobble stones. So he had a job in the quarry and I got very friendly with him and we exchanged – we talked about family and that and we changed addresses so that after the war perhaps we could – he couldn’t speak English properly and I couldn’t speak German
so we managed it and discuss and have a little laugh. He used to bring [unclear] and cos now we’ve had to leave I don’t know what’s happened. So I’m looking for his address, I don’t know where it is, I couldn’t go around knocking on doors and see if the right bloke. We were hiding in this woods just to make sure so we don’t get picked up by any stranger and I see this cycle coming along, bike, now this friend of mine he only had the one leg and he actually had to peddle a bike (Thirty minutes) and had a fixed wheel and you see his leg going up, fine from a distance one leg going up and down up and down coming towards me in a country lane. Now this is something nobody I think would ever believe I’m one of millions and I’m looking for that particular man and he’s coming up and down riding, his old leg, so when he got near me I stood in front of him. He fell off his bike, tears coming out of his eyes, put his arms around me and said how pleased he was to see me and he will come back about half past eight when it’s dark and take me back to his house, which he did do.

JB: Was it just you or was it you and the other people that you were with?

CC: The other two, well, as I say, they were there with me and he took us back to his house. Managed to get upstairs and – where he put us and we stayed there. But the Russians were advancing and it was getting a bit noisy and one or two other things and I thought it was only safe to get out of his house because if he had been found looking after prisoners of war he would have been shot. So I shook hands with him and said bye-bye, he had a little girl and she was ten years of age, and I left. Made my way back and walked and made my way towards the Americans. About two miles along the road the Americans were all lined up on the river Elbe, the river Elbe, and they were waiting for the Russians to join up where they signed the peace treaty at the end of the war. So there were several Germans and that trying to get across and the Americans refused them to cross but, of course, they didn’t stop us, we were prisoners of war, and naturally they let us through. So we had to get back over the river Elbe, a lot of the bridge had been blown up and so we made it and we got across. I’ve forgotten now about the other people I still had these other two chaps with me. We come to several German houses, this house had a big Nazi flag outside and it was empty so we thought, oh, we’ll have a look see what’s in here, went in there and there’s wardrobes of clothes, people dressing for breakfast just left it and run. They knew the enemy was advancing, they called it a day. We looked in the garage there was a car in the garage no petrol in it so now we’re in Americans occupying this area so we waved down an American got a can of petrol off him, put petrol in the car. We had hopes of driving all the way back to England which was ridiculous but we’d been warned that we had to be extra careful because they’d only been here a couple of weeks and the enemy was very, very sharp with the rifle they were picking us, anybody, off. So you see I think it best if you make your way back to one of our forward bases and in time we’ll give you a hand to get further back towards our main forces, you see [unclear].

So that’s what we did and we made our way back with a group of Americans and they had a [unclear] an empty coach, an eight seater they used to carry, and they put us on there and they moved us back to France, a place called Reims. Now in Reims, oh not a soul, deadly, but it’s a big headquarters of the American Armed Forces. They’ve all got their best uniforms on marching up and down. They’ve had no fighting now for ages I’m still working hard bringing up stone and everybody’s finished see so I
was annoyed. But anyway, they said that – they fed us, they all gave us a uniform so we had brand new uniform, all dressed up as Americans. They said you’re free to do what you like, nothing to do, and later on we’ll get you back. We made our way to a local air drome and they had a big Lancaster bomber, we watched it coming in and out. The pilot saw us watching and he got down from the plane and he come and said, ‘How would you blokes like to go to Blighty?’; he said. I said, ‘Fancy asking a question like that’, he said, ‘Well, I can give you a lift back to England’, he said. He said, ‘But I’ve got no room’, I said ‘Well that's nice’, ‘but I could squeeze you in the bomb rack’. I said, ‘I don’t care if I sit on a propeller’, I said, ‘we’ll sit in a bomb rack’. So we squeezed in and sat on this bomb rack. I’ll never forget it because over the bomb rack you’ve got these two big steel shutters when they drop their bombs they shut, they don’t shut tight they’ve still got a few inches and I’m looking through here watching the ground graze below, I hope they don’t open anymore and he flew us back from there to England.

JB: So when did you actually arrive back in England, can you remember the date?

CC: Yes, it was about – the war finished on the 8th it must have been about the 12th – 12th or 14th.

JB: Of May.

CC: And the war was finishing then you see (Thirty-five Minutes), just the end of it

JB: The war in Europe, and so tell me what it was like when you met up with your wife again.

CC: Yes, of course, my wife was still doing the milk round and when I got to England we had the usual interrogations and everything. They had beds there and sheets. I hadn’t seen a bed for six year. I’ve been away six years, they went – so of course they all questioned us where we was captured and all the usual things. They said right now there are ticke ts for travelling. Oh, the first thing we did was to send a cable home to your wife to say you’re now back in England, which we did do. There’s a railway station not very far, they give us a ticket to travel on the railway and there was NAFFI where you could get something to eat in a proper army camp in there. When they finished with us they said you are free to do what you like, you can stay here. I said, ‘I’m not going to wait here. I’ll make my way down to the station see what time the trains are going to be here tomorrow’. So I made my way down to the railway station I saw the guard, I said, ‘You got any more trains going to London?’ He said, ‘Yes, one mate’ so I said, ‘Alright I’ll have that’. So I waited for the train and I jumped on the train, took me all the way to Marylebone, when I got to Marylebone, cos I had a train pass there was a taxi and he was just going to pick up a lady customer but he saw me, he must have been experiencing it along the line so he said ‘I’m sorry love’ he said ‘I’ve got a customer here’. She said ‘That’s alright’ and he said to me ‘Where to do you want to go?’ I said, ‘Camberwell’ so I jumped in. He took me all the way home, didn’t charge from Marylebone and of course they’ve been expecting me from dinner time and now it’s night time. I knocked on the door, my wife opened the door, she ran a mile, rushed upstairs, because we lived upstairs in a little maisonette and that went on and I was doing jobs in the army for another twelve months before they released me.
JB: So why did she run a mile?

CC: She was nervous to meet me, excited, her sister lived downstairs, they'd been waiting for me and she was afraid and I'd been away, oh, I suppose about four – four/ five years.

JB: And had your appearance changed?

CC: I don’t think so actually better looking I think.

JB: I mean a lot of prisoners of war lost lots of weight didn’t they.

CC: No, I was – everybody said that they thought I was a bit thin but naturally we all – they ignored it. But yes, you weren’t eating as you doing but I soon settled down and cos the Army weren’t in a hurry to call us up so I went up the road and got a little part-time job driving a big American – a big milk thing delivering the milk to the milk depots all around London. Then so I get my call up papers to report back to doing, you see, my son was born on my demob day, 26th March. I had an order so I report to Guildford where my demob was waiting and my wife was expecting a baby, so we walked down to the hospital I made her take her time, no hurry with those things, we went in she had a baby boy. I said cheerio, jumped on a train and went to Guildford and got my demob. When I got to Guildford hundreds of men all down there they want to show them how to live in civvy street because they’ve been in the armed forces and they showing them films and things like that, I said, ‘Well excuse me’ I said ‘I've been living in civvy street now for twelve months and also my wife’s just had a baby’. Right here’s your hat coat bang I’m out in ten minutes. All the others got to go through the rigmarole and –

JB: Ok, what I’m going to do now Charles is I’m going to ask you the last question of the interview for today, ok, and that question is: if you had to sum up Charles’ war in a couple of sentences what would you say?

CC: A couple sentences on what?

JB: On your war, your experience of the Second World War.

CC: Yes, it was very, very hard work. I was lucky, fit and able to do it. A lot of them were weak, fell by the road side and I took it as it come and naturally every opportunity I had of trying to make it easier to get away, but because it was hopeless until the time until the war was closing. I don’t think we would have got away if we’d have been passed on somewhere else and had the war doing they would have doing. Wasn’t far from Colditz, you’ve heard of Colditz?

JB: Yes.

CC: We went out to see them afterwards cos I’ve been back since, you know, and I used to say to my family, I said, ‘Oh, I think I’d like to pop back to Germany’. My son said, ‘What do you want to go back there for?’ I said ‘I don’t know’. (Forty minutes) I had written to Ehrhardt since I’d been home and he sent me some little photos and I sent him some photos. So he said I tell you what I’ll do, I’ll treat you
to your fare up, I was ninety at the time and we go down and see them so he came with his son there 
was three generations and we got a train from up the road and took us to Germany and then we got a 
– we hired a car, took us down to where I’m looking for. It’s getting dark but we had a job to find it but 
we managed to get accommodation and the lady in that house with accommodation she could speak 
English, nobody else could speak English. ‘Speak English?’ ‘No, no, no’, could not find one person 
but luckily the lady that had it she said, ‘Well I’m going into to Tannheim’ and she said, ‘I’ve got two 
children there at school there’. She said ‘I’ll put a feel out if they know that person’. I got down Vesser 
– Vesser, V-E-S-S-E-R, his name was Vetter, V-E-T-T-E-R. So she come back she said, ‘Luckily’, she 
said, ‘we’ve found the person but you had Vesser down and it was Vetter’. So they were very sorry to 
say the man and his wife had since died, they died a few years ago, nearly ninety, but the daughter 
was still alive. She was ten, she’s now seventy, so she arranged for us to go and see her. So the next 
morning we went there, and it’s the same house where she hid us. She was over the moon and very 
upset, put an arm around, mind you I didn’t know the person and her sister had moved on, she’d gone 
back to Berlin. She showed us where we were staying when we were prisoners of war and she got 
talking to this person and got the story in the local press and so, of course, they put it all over the 
German press, ‘Englander returns to Deutschland’. They made quite a fuss of it and her family 
wanted to come and see us and got very, very friendly they were coming up and so we went back 
again and they made us welcome.

End of Interview