

**Interviewee: Eric Bullen**

**Interviewer: Linda Taylor**

**Date: 17.11.2010**

Interviewer: Ok. This is Linda Taylor, 17<sup>th</sup> November, interviewing Eric Bullen.

Eric: Well, in – when the war started I was –

Interviewer: Can you mention your date of birth?

Eric: I was in reserved occupation and as a carpenter and joiner but eventually I was called up and I was stationed at Dover, Dover Castle, and with the Queens Royal Regiment and from there I was sent abroad. We went through the Mediterranean and I was stationed in Iraq on police duty and from there we went further round the coast and joined the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in North Africa. There I was wounded and my right hand was severed and I had shrapnel in my shoulders and I was taken back to a dressing station and from there I was operated on and sent to various hospitals.

Interviewer: Whereabouts was this?

Eric: In North Africa.

Interviewer: Whereabouts in North Africa?

Eric: Enfidaville. A place called Enfidaville.

Interviewer: Is that in Egypt?

Eric: Tunisia. From there I was sent home and the convoy in front of us was decimated by submarines, u-boats, and the one behind us was also covered so I was very lucky. I got home.

Interviewer: What did it feel like to be involved in that at the time?

Eric: Well, very nerve-racking, really. When you're on the sea and you know that you're likely to be sunk any moment it's very agonising. But I got home and at the time, of course, I was living in Kingston and as I could no longer handle the tools, carpenters tools, I had to change my occupation and I became an insurance man.

Interviewer: Was your family with you in Kingston?

Eric: My family – I was married to my first wife of course and I had a son. One of the things I do remember about him was that when I was abroad my first wife took him to post a letter to me and he put it in the letter box and when she put him down he knelt down to the bottom of the letter box and said, 'Have you caught it daddy?' [laughs].

Interviewer: So sweet.

Eric: I always remember that.

Interviewer: How old was he?

Eric: He would have been about four then I suppose. But –

Interviewer: Did your wife live – you lived in Kingston?

Eric: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Whereabouts?

Eric: Well, it was really Norbiton, near Kingston Hospital.

Interviewer: Did you experience any –

Eric: And I had to change my occupation as I say because of my hand being smashed up and so I became an insurance man.

Interviewer: Did you experience any air raids?

Eric: Pardon?

Interviewer: Did you experience any air raids?

Eric: Yes, yes. There were air raids.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Eric: I think they were trying to get the hospital, actually, which was quite close to us but several houses round were damaged but we managed to keep ours.

Interviewer: What did it feel like being involved in an air raid?

Eric: Well, it's very nerve-racking because you can hear the planes and you can hear the bombs dropping and you just wonder when the next one is coming near you<sup>1</sup>. But thank heavens and we survived and I lost my first wife on our fiftieth anniversary. She died in hospital and I'm happily married now to my second wife.

Mrs Bullen: He's my first husband. I got married late in life you see, yes. I had several boyfriends earlier on but nothing very important, you know, I just used to – used to go – cos we – I – I'm a dancer you see and I used to go dancing with them but apart from that that was all [laughs].

Eric: So there we are. That's the war years.

Interviewer: Right. I mean, what – can we go back to North Africa?

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<sup>1</sup> 5 min

Eric: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you – you say you were in Tunisia, I mean, did you experience combat?

Eric: Yes. We – the Germans were gradually retreating but we –

Interviewer: Is this – when is this in the war? Which year?

Eric: It's 1943 [Interviewer: 43] 1943 and we were, of course, facing the Germans and I was sheltering behind a Jeep which had been left there and the shells from the German army were falling all around us and one of them hit the tank and we – shrapnel caught me and –

Mrs Bullen: And you lost a finger.

Eric: Damaged my hand and I had shrapnel in the shoulder and I passed out and the next thing I knew they ordered a Jeep to take me back to the dressing station and as the Jeep swirled away so a shell would land where we were. So the Germans had obviously spotted the movement and were trying to stop the Jeep. Luckily, I escaped that and they got me back to a dressing station where I saw an officer and I naturally addressed him as Sir and he said, 'No need to call me sir, my name is Tom'. I said, 'I think I've got shrapnel on my back', and he said – looked at it and he said, 'No, it's second degree burns and it smells very much of petrol'. So we realised then that the petrol can on the Jeep that I was sheltering behind had been riddled and the petrol had showered over my back. But, of course, I lay unconscious for quite a while and was unaware of this. So there I was with petrol ridden back and shrapnel had taken one finger off and the other two were ripped open on my – my right hand and I was invalided out of the army.

Interviewer: Did you – did you see any fighting yourself? Was it infantry you were in?

Eric: Not exactly hand to hand fighting, no, because the shell that had landed put me out of the – out of action and so there was no – I didn't actually see a German. I was just put out of action and taken back.

Interviewer: What was life like on the camp?

Eric: Yes.

Interviewer: No, on the camp.

Mrs Bullen: What was it like on the camp?

Interviewer: What was it like?

Eric: In the camp. What? During the action?

Interviewer: Well, while you were there? While you were stationed there?

Eric: Yes. Well, it was normal army routine<sup>2</sup>. I, you know, I was in charge of the section and because my captain had gone back for further instructions and I was in charge of the section. My great pal, I lost track of, I don't know where he went. Whether he was killed or not but I know at one time we – they started running back and I thought to myself, 'Well, this is wrong, running away from the enemy', and so I managed to stop them and we – we stopped – we managed to face the enemy and it was then that I got hit with shrapnel. So I took no further part in the action.

Interviewer: Did you fight – have other nations involved around you?

Eric: Any others – sorry?

Interviewer: Was – was it just British, um, the British army? Where there other – other nationalities involved?

Eric: No, no, no. It was the British Army, Queen's Royal Regiment. From there as I say I was taken from one hospital to another and eventually taken back home.

Interviewer: Where the rations like North Africa?

Eric: Well, I – we didn't actually meet them because –

Interviewer: No, the rations. What sort things did you eat?

Eric: Oh, rations.

Mrs Bullen: Rations, yes.

Eric: I thought you said Russians.

Interviewer: Sorry.

Mrs Bullen: I did too.

Interviewer: Sorry.

Mrs Bullen: [Laughs]

Eric: Rations. To be honest I can't remember because we weren't there long enough to sort of have any real big meals. It was straight into the action.

Interviewer: What was everyday life like back in Kingston then?

Eric: Well, air raids were the problem. Every so often we had the air raid signals – signals – and we just had to take cover in a Morrison shelter. The Morrison shelter was a table like metal table that you

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<sup>2</sup> 10 min

got underneath. We had several houses quite near us damaged with shrapnel and bombs. But fortunately we staked them.

Interviewer: What about for your family? How did you son react to what was happening?

Eric: Well, very good. They were terrified when the bombers came over, naturally. Natural reaction. But we survived.

Interviewer: What did you do for entertainment?

Eric: Well, we had no entertainment because at night you were glad to try to get some sleep. We didn't think of going to the theatre or pictures or anything. You just hoped and prayed that you'd come out of it alive. But [pause] I think – I did write a book when I came home which I can let you have one of.

Interviewer: Oh, right. Thank you. This is called 'Reminiscences of an Old Soldier – North Africa 1943'. I'll [unclear].

Eric: Yes. So now I'm unable to use the hand much, as you can see what the trouble is. They took the shrapnel<sup>3</sup> from my shoulder which I've got here somewhere. Piece of shrapnel in the shoulder, not very big but it does a lot of damage going in.

Interviewer: It's a small – just a small piece of metal. And you got some medals, I see.

Eric: Yes, the North African Star and the 1945 Medal. Yes.

Interviewer: What's the difference? What does the eight mean?

Eric: The 8<sup>th</sup> Army.

Interviewer: So that's two African Stars.

Eric: Yes. One was without the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the other was with and those are Africa's – Defence Medal and the 1939/45 Medal.

Interviewer: So the Defence Medal is for the home front, isn't it?

Eric: Yes, yes. Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: I'm just going to stop for a moment.

[Recorder paused].

Interviewer: Ok. So if you would like to tell me about an incident that happened in Tunisia?

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<sup>3</sup> 15 min

Eric: Yes. I only detected one case of bad nerves as a young lad of twenty years by the name of Murray and it was our practice, of course, to have one man on each section on the Bren gun as air and ground sentry, and we were then free to roam a little, within reason, from our trenches. We soon learnt to judge, from the scream of a shell, just about where it would land and would drop flat accordingly. But this young lad, Murray, he would jump in his slit-trench at the first sign of shelling and he remained there all night if necessary. I naturally sympathised with him and tried to reassure him but he had me worried. I was afraid of the effect it may have on the rest of the section. On the third day, however, sustaining only one casualty in the whole battalion, we received orders to move up to new positions, recently occupied by New Zealanders. Before moving I was instructed to choose one of my section as a 'left out of battle'. This, of course, placed me in something of a quandary I had six men to choose from and of these there were only two that I could reasonably suggest. One, of course, was the lad with nerves, the other was my own pal whose age was 37, and to my mind a little beyond the age for fighting. I realised, however, that as an NCO, I could not allow personal feelings to interfere with my decision, and of the two I knew that my pal would be the most useful in action. So it was Murray learned, with obvious relief, that when we moved up he would be moving back.

[Recorder paused]

Interviewer: Ok, continuing with the North Africa.

Eric: Because of the fact that I was made unconscious and I layed under the North African sun for a long time before they picked me up and that caused damage to my forehead which strangely enough only came out about a year ago because I suddenly started having all sores on my forehead and I was – the doctor sent me to hospital, Kingston Hospital, where they operated and removed all the wounds which were caused by the sun<sup>4</sup>. They cleared the forehead and about a year later which is, what, six months ago, I suppose, I found there was some more places appearing higher above the forehead and the doctor sent me again to Kingston Hospital to have those removed. So I'm still getting trouble from the war wounds. But –

Mrs Bullen: But it's alright now though, isn't it?

Eric: Fortunately I think they got rid of it all now.

Interviewer: Good.

Mrs Bullen: Yes, you're lucky to have a lot of hair left. Most men of your age are –

**End of Interview.**

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<sup>4</sup> 20 min