

Interviewee: Granville Bantock

Interviewer: Linda Taylor

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Interviewer: Ok, this is Linda Taylor on 17th of November interviewing Granville Bantock.

Granville: Hello. My name is Granville Bantock and I was born in Richmond in Surrey in 1926. My father was an actor and he died when I was just two years old so I didn't know him at all obviously and he didn't leave very much money being an actor of course and my mother was really wondering what to do with myself at two and a half and my brother who was five years old. So she was advised to send us both to an orphanage, the Actors' Orphanage, a charity run entirely by the theatrical profession and so in 1930 when I was just four and a half, I and my brother were taken to the Actors' Orphanage which was situated then at Langley, Langley Hall at Buckinghamshire and I have to say it was a little bit grim at first. It was – there were about thirty boys and thirty girls and we were totally segregated and conditions were indeed a little bit grim. Not exactly Dickensian but it was a little bit difficult for very young children to get accustomed to. Then very good event took place in 1934, Noel Coward took over the presidency at the orphanage and with all his contacts he was able to generate a lot more income to run the establishment and things did improve enormously so I have to say that from then on I did completely enjoy, if that's the word, the facilities of the Actors' Orphanage. We were – we were well looked after, we had very good food, the accommodation was good. We were always being visited by the leading theatrical people and we had annual events like a cricket match where we played the actors in tennis matches and we put on a pantomime every year which was also performed in the Garrick (??) Theatre in London.

In 1938 the [unclear] decided to move the school from Langley to Chertsey in Surrey. A wonderful old house, mansion, in twenty-six acres of grounds and we children, I think we were about sixty of us, boys and girls, were moved to Silverlands and this was 1938. So we were there at the start of the – of the war and I think the older children and I was one of the older children realised that this was going to be a major event when I think we did hear the Chamberlain's radio broadcast announcing that we were now at war with Germany. I think for the older children it was a little bit more frightening or concerning than for the youngsters. Anyway, we stayed on at the school and as we know the – the war in France didn't go particularly well when the Germans invaded the Low Countries and France in 1940. In May 1940 it was obvious that there was going to be capitulation and we, Great Britain, was going to be left alone. I remember very well the – the bombing of London hadn't really started until – until I think it was June – June or July of 1940 and we'd been, well, west of London didn't receive very much attention from the German bombers in 1940 except I do remember very clearly the – the raid, the German raid, on the Vickers factory at Weybridge which I think on their third attempt they did bomb and destroyed and killed about seventy or eighty people. They also – bomb did fall on Chertsey station and do a lot of damage, Chertsey Railway Station. Anyway, in August of 1940 the committee¹

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of the Actors' Orphanage, which included Noel Coward of course as president, decided to – to evacuate the orphans from Chertsey to America, Hollywood, and leading American and British actors and actresses had agreed to sponsor the children. So arrangements were made for us to travel across to – to America. Anyway, interestingly and luckily for us the ship that we were due to sail on was the City of Benares from Liverpool and at the very, very last moment, we were even on the coaches, we were called off and taken off and it was decided that we would have to wait for another available ship. Then I think it was on the 20 – on the 15th of September which was the last day of the Battle of Britain, daylight bombing that is, the daylight raids, when we finally left Silverlands and processed to Euston station to catch a train to go to Scotland, to Gretna to board a liner named the Emperor of Australia.

I remember very clearly the coach ride from Chertsey up to Euston station, which where the – the aero combat and the bombs coming down and I remember particularly we were mustered and we got on a train which pulled out of – out of the station and stopped and we children just let the blinds up cos all the blinds were pulled down in the carriage windows but we let them up so we could see the aerial combat going on and indeed the train was rocking as the bombs were falling were over and we saw our chances of getting to Scotland were not particularly good but anyway we did. We duly arrived up in Scotland and very, very late at night and boarded the liner and collapsed into a – into bed and that really was the – the end of my experiences and the children of the Actors' Orphanage of the early stages of the war because we – whilst onboard we heard that the liner City of Benares had been torpedoed and sunk with the loss of a lot of children's lives. Hundreds of children I think as well as other passengers that drowned. As a result of that Churchill, the Prime Minister, decided that the evacuation of children overseas must be stopped. But as we were onboard and we were a private evacuation, being paid for by the theatrical profession, that we should sail and we duly sailed and had a un – uneventful trip across the Atlantic arriving in – in Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, on October the 4th 1940. We got on the train and went off to Montreal, which was quite a long trip. I do remember that very clearly, the – the wonderful colours of the trees in the autumn foliage.

Anyway, at Montreal we were mustered into a hostel and the secretary of the Actors' Orphanage, who were travelling with us, the very first morning informed us that we were not going off to Hollywood to live with the film stars. We were going to go down to New York into an institution, into a home for children, and that was a big disappointment cos we'd all been looking forward to the long train ride across America to Hollywood but, anyway, that wasn't to be. So we then ended up in New York and – and found a very, very comfortable accommodation. The Americans were very kind and generous and the girls had on section of the – of the property – of the buildings and the older boys had another section and the younger children had yet another section. Still, so, that was our accommodation for the – as it turned out for the – until the end of the – the war. The younger children stayed on right until the end of the war but I came back in 1942. But I must say a little bit about the education in America because America wasn't at war². We older children, I think there were twenty of us, went to a nearby were taken to a nearby American High School, Christopher Columbus High School, which was new,

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and – and it was a huge establishment and I think there were over six thousand students so being thrown into this factory like educational system was really, really quite a – quite an experience. But I have to say they – they – they did very well, the Americans, in trying to accommodate us and they let it be known, the Principal let it be known that there were twenty English students had arrived from war torn Britain and were now in – as residents – as students at the school and if anyone – any of the existing students met them they were to do their best to be as friendly as possible and so on and so on. In actual fact that did – that was the case. I think occasionally when one thinks of the terrific ethnic mix of people living in New York, you name it, it really was quite incredible, the first generation or the second generation Ameri – Italians and Germans, you name it. I think one or two were – were a little bit hostile towards us. I remember clearly one particular class, I think the history class I think it was, every morning there was ‘Go home Limey!’ written on the blackboard and that sort of thing. But otherwise no complaints it was really, really quite – quite excellent they were. They were fine. But as far as the education went I have to say that I didn’t – didn’t really learn very much because the American curriculum was totally different from – from ours back home at the orphanage at Chertsey and – and –. But anyway, for two years I – I underwent this from, that was October 1940 until October 1942. Is it alright if I have a quick break?

[Recorded paused]

Granville: I must say just a little bit about the education in – in this High School with six thousand, I think there was six thousand four hundred students. It was a huge building, up staircases, down staircases and all the students changed classes. You didn’t stay put in your – your one classroom and teachers come to you. You went to teachers in their own classrooms and, of course, you must always, we were advised, we the – the English people – the English students, were always advised to refer to them as teachers, ‘Don’t under any circumstances refer to them – to masters and mistresses’, as we had always referred to the teachers in our school, the Actors’ Orphanage, at home. Anyway, they were teachers. They were fine and I did make friends, I made friends with – had a little – little bit of a set too. I remember going in to the first history class, lesson, the teacher was an Irish lady and she knew that one of the English students had come into her class and she let – let off a terrific tirade about the British and the way they treated the Irish and bla-bla-bla and the girl sitting next to me at the – on her desk at – in the class immediately got up and told the teacher to be quiet or to shut up in very polite language and don’t be abusive. But I came quite friendly with this – this girl whose father worked at the Carnegie Hall in New York, which was very nice from my point of view cos she asked me if I liked to go to concerts at Carnegie Hall. I think my first introduction to classical music in a big way was – was going with her dad and – and – and her and another couple of other friends of hers to afternoon concerts which was very good, wonderful. But then he moved away, the father got another job up in Boston and – Boston and she left and that was the end of that. But I did make friends, very close friends, with a Japanese boy. His father – he was about my age and his father was – he worked at the Japanese Embassy in New York and his mother was half American so he – he lived in New

York and³ was brought up as an American but more or less dual citizenship, I guess. He did speak perfect English and we became very friendly and over a period of, well, the next year more or less and we had complete freedom. We older children had complete freedom in – from our accommodation in the Bronx at the Theatrical Foundation to go out at weekends or evenings or whatever and New York was safe by lights and big bands to go and listen to Glen Miller and Tommy Doss and all that lot and – and, anyway, we became very, very, very close friends and he would help me with my homework at the school. Then mysteriously, I think it was in November of 1941, about a year later, he suddenly didn't turn up for school and the teacher, well, didn't know why he hadn't heard from the parents and he didn't turn up and – and then a couple of weeks later the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. So we had assumed or the teacher had assumed that somehow or other he had managed to get back home to Japan when it was known that the embassy that something was going to happen in the Pacific and, of course, there it happened. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and the Germans declared war on America and we were great allies at last so we were all friends and buddies and from then on for the next year we had a wonderful relationship with – with the American people and we, as the children, at the school, well, really, very, very well treated and it was a marvellous experience.

Then my brother who was that much older than me had joined the Air Force and he joined S.O.E, Special Operation Executive, over here and was flying Lancaster airplanes and there was an accident and he was killed in 19 – March 1942 and as a result of that my mother wanted me back home from America and she – it was [unclear] possible including writing to Noel Coward and the committee of the Actors' Orphanage saying that she wanted me back home. But, anyway, it took another six months for – actually to arrange for me to come back on a very, very small Norwegian steamer from New York in October 1942. Very, very bad timing the Atlantic was – all convoys were being absolutely devastated by the u-boats. Anyway, it was a terrible trip across, I remember being terrible sick and – and unwell but we did arrive back eventually back to Liverpool and managed to find my luggage got on the train and came back to Twickenham where we lived, where my mother lived in a Bungalow and – and that was October 1942. Well, she insisted – she had heard about an examination called Matric and she thought that if I was to make it anywhere in the world – get anywhere. I would have to take Matric examination and she fixed up for me through the auspices of the neighbour next door who was a teacher or rather a master at Thames Valley Grammar School. So I went off to Thames Valley Grammar School and was given a test as to see how much knowledge I had and how far I was behind the English students of my age which was then sixteen and it was obvious that I was nowhere near the standard they had reached and the headmaster suggested I went to evening classes as well. Took an evening course but he couldn't possibly accommodate me at Thames Valley Grammar School. So I did, I started evening classes but I really was just miles behind, oh, this is no good. So I managed to get a job as a – a lab boy in a factory in Hounslow and for the next year I – I spent at this

³ 15 min

factory in – in Hounslow⁴ making war materials. Making filters, army trucks with water purification plants and, anyway, I was very lucky and it was my education and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I spent time in the lab, in the drawing office, in the works so from a technical point of view it really did – did do me a lot of good. Then towards the end of December 1941 – 1943 this was I was nearly eighteen and at that time, I think it was Bevin who was the Minister for Labour who decided that there was such a shortage of coal in the country that conscripts, young boys being called up, one in ten of them would have to go down the mine – mines and dig coal rather than go in the forces. This was a real worry for me, I thought, 'No way can I go down the mine and dig coal'. But we did have a friend, a relative, who wrote to the – who had a very good appointment in the Air Ministry in London. He'd been a pilot in the First World War and he was now Wing Commander or Group Captain. Anyway, he did pull some strings for me and I duly was conscripted into the Army in January, I think it was, 1944, and started an Army career or an Army experience which was to last for four years.

Yes, I passed the medical, A1, no problems there and incredibly the first when – when new recruits went into the Army they went through an induction course or first course of primary training which lasted for about six weeks. During which time you – you learnt all the rudiments of Army life and they ascertained how bright or how un-bright you were. We had all sorts of physical tests and also incredibly I remember the aptitude test we all had was a written test and also they gave us a box of bits of metal in them and said, 'Do you know what this is? If you do, put it together'. Well, I recognised it immediately as a mortise lock and put it all together and assembled it and – and no problem at all and then when I went for my interview with the – the – the director of the – of the course, I – I can hear him now. He's saying 'Come on in soldier, sit down', he said, 'I'm looking through your test results. They are very, very good'. He said - he said 'and incredibly', he said, 'you were the only person who recognised the parts in the – in the box as being a mortise lock and put it together'. I thought, 'Well, that's amazing surely', there were about forty of us sitting, forty young lads sitting on doing the – doing the test and I thought, 'My world, if I'm the only one who knew what mortise lock is there must be an opening for me', and incredibly I can see him now sitting behind the desk. He had this mortise lock in his hand turning the key and it worked and it was set absolutely fantastic. He said, 'This is brilliant, soldier', he said, 'Have you ever thought about a commission?', so I said, 'Absolutely not, sir'. He said, 'Well', he said, 'you're other results are very good', he said, 'I'm gonna put you down as being in – in a class as suitable for promotion and it will mean going on a special course'. So my next part of Army training was to go to what was called, The Young Soldier's Training Battalion, where from all over the country – where conscripts had been selected as being most probably above average and me with my mortise lock made me above average. So we attended this course, which was very tough at the end of which we – we all had to go to something called a [unclear] Army, I don't know, War Office Selection Board where you did more tests and physical and written and this stage decided you were possibly bright enough to receive a commission. You were then sent off to [unclear]. But if you were not considered totally adequate enough for a commission they had another wonderful course up in the Cairngorms Mountains of Scotland called the Highland Field Craft Training

⁴ 20 min

Centre where they sent all possible officer cadets for⁵ a ten week really tough commando course to see if they could survive. So off I went to that which was very, very tough indeed, climbing all the Cairngorms peaks over four thousand feet with an army bag and a rifle in terrible equipment and terrible boots and all that.

Anyway, I did pass and then went on to [unclear] and then went – decided that I could go for [unclear] training. Went to the Isle of Man for four months training and duly passed out as a Second Lieutenant in February 1945 so the war in Europe was still on but it was rapidly coming to a close – close. So I passed out and joined holding battalion of the Queen's Royal Regiment in Folkestone I think it was. It seemed unlikely that I would end of fighting in Europe but more likely in the Far East and sure enough I remember a signal come through from the 1st Battalion of the Queen's Royal Regiment which was in Burma saying that the Pioneer Officer had been killed and they wanted a replacement urgently. Now, I mention that the Pioneer Officer was the – the – the officer who was responsible for the usual explosives and sort of general DIY and mechanical – supervising mechanical operations of a battalion. So, anyway, it was decided that I should go off on a course to Royal Engineers unit up in Yorkshire which I did and – for six or seven weeks at the end of which was the war off Europe came to the end. This would be May 1940 – May 1945 and I remember I came straight home on leave from this course in – in – home to Twickenham and we had a – a wonderful – there was a big street party at a local pub called the Turk's Head and – in St. Margaret's and I remember being invited along and, well, going along with all the other ex-servicemen and – and hundreds of people. It was a great time.

Then after that I joined – went back to my battalion where more training and training now the war in Europe being over now it was a training to fight the Japanese. There was a whole system and a whole exercise of training really sort of turned and developed into jungle warfare and how one would operate in the jungle and all that sort of thing which was not particularly pleasant. But anyway, I completed my six months as a Second Lieutenant and became a full Lieutenant and then I was posted to – to the 1st Battalion in Burma but then I can remember now sitting in the mess just waiting for details of transportation to the Far East by troopship when the 1 o'clock news came on and the announcer said that atomic bomb has been dropped in Hiroshima and that the Japanese have been called upon to surrender and then two or three days later they hadn't surrendered so another bomb was dropped on Nagasaki and the Japanese surrendered so that was the end of the – of the World War. So things were delayed a little bit and troopships were then needed to bring back all the prisoners of war and – and – and people from the various warzones and so my delay – I was delayed I think until September 1940 before I boarded a troopship and eventually arrived in – in India and then train across to Calcutta and then ship from Calcutta to Rangoon and where I learnt that the battalion had been flown into – into Thailand, into Siam, as the sole British Army unit in Siam from the 17th Indian Army Division and therefore I would have to get to them somehow and the only way in was flying by Dakota airplane⁶ so I duly went to a transit camp in Rangoon for a short while and then I was

⁵ 25 min

⁶ 30 min

flown by transport plane into Thailand, into Bangkok, where the battalion was stationed and this I think was the end of November 1940 so the war was over and our sole job then was to – was to search and screen all surrendered Japanese troops in Thailand.

There were about a hundred and fifty thousand of them before they were sent home to – and the real job we had was to try and identify war criminals because the Japanese had committed atrocious war crimes against prisoners of war and I must mention the fact that I think on the one – one big exercise of building the railway line from Siam into Burma cost at least fifteen thousand allied lives. Fifteen – fifteen thousand allied soldiers and many more civilian operatives as well. So they really were a beastly lot war criminals had to be found and identified. So my job over the next year in Thailand was just that, searching and screening all the Japanese troops in the country. It did take a year to do and it was a very – it was a very interesting exercise. We didn't have any trouble once the Japanese surrendered they surrendered. They'd lay down their arms and that was that. Once the emperor had said no more fighting that was that.

So we then had the job of searching them out, finding all the [unclear] which were dotted all over Thailand, Siam, and I was sent with my platoon – we were very short of officers and I had about sixty men. I was in charge of, responsible for, so I was the platoon commander and I was sent up country in a couple of trucks to a big Japanese headquarter unit which was mainly vehicle maintenance and hospitals and that sort of thing and I remember arriving at the camp. The guardroom and – there were all these – the senior officers knew we were coming and they were all lined up and I went over got of the truck and went over on my own, as a matter of fact, and to this line of Jap officers. They all bowed and saluted and one chap came forward and said, he was the interpreter, and he said, 'What are your orders, sir' and I said, 'Well, we'll see first and perhaps you can tell me – show me the layouts of the camp and where everybody is and all the rest of it'. But anyway he's English was very, very poor and I said to him, I said, 'Look, there must be someone in this camp of – ', we knew there were about ten – fifteen thousand troops in the camp, 'who speaks better English than you?', and he said yes and off he went and a few minutes later he came back with this tall Japanese officer who bowed and we stared at each other and he was Mick, my friend from New York, high school, which was absolutely incredible. He had been – sure enough so, of course, I made him, I didn't [unclear] to let on that we knew each other, that we had in actual fact been together in New York five years earlier and he suddenly didn't want it to be known. So anyway I had him as my interpreter for – for a week or so or ten days and he told me that, indeed, they had information – his father had information in New York about the proposed attack on Pearl Harbour and that they were to get home as best they can which he duly did. So he left school and ended up back home in Tokyo or wherever it was. But it really was an incredible shock and – but I kept him and we – I decided that he was my friends and he wasn't a defeated enemy. He was very useful for the next six months – six weeks for me and for the other British troops that were involved in screening this particular Japanese unit.

Anyway, I supplied him with aspirin and soap and all the things that the Japanese didn't – troops didn't have and gave him my address but I didn't hear from him and well he survived the journey back

home to Japan because we did put them – we crammed them⁷ like sardines into converted American troop ships, American Liberty ships. We had to get them back home as soon as possible and – but it did take a - the best part of a year and – and there we are. But it was – it was a very interesting and very enjoyable time and then Queen's we moved in the end of 1946 we were moved down to Changi barracks in Singapore where we to – to guard all the Japanese suspected war criminals who were awaiting trial and I think there were most probably several thousands who had been identified by the – the prisoners of war and by the civilians of course. So we were stationed there and other guard duties in Singapore for several months and then the – the Japanese – the trials started and I think all together two hundred and twenty were found guilty and were – were hanged by Mr Pierpont out from England to do the job and a lot received prison sentences and our guard duties were becoming more or less finished and I had the opportunity to move into GHQ, headquarters in Singapore, which was headquarters of the British forces in the Far East where I was. Six months, it was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot about admin work and it was an office job but it really was – and I was promoted to Captain and – and that was really how I ended my army experience and my wartime experiences. Troopship back home in October 1947 and demob.

Then in the, I think in the – incredibly I gone right through my two and a half years in the Far East without any – any serious illness or dicky tummy or anything like that or Malaria and then [unclear] after being home two or three weeks I went down with a terrible bout of Malaria. But, anyway, recovered from that and I heard a about a reunion at the Actors' Orphanage back at Chertsey. Not having been there, of course, since 1940 and I went to the union – reunion and there were several of the young girls and boys from the orphanage including Brenda, who, Brenda Lowden, who, of course, was one of the evacuees and had come back and we decided we would like to see each other after this little reunion which we did and got married a few years later. And there we are [laughs]. That's about the end of it so –

Interviewer: Ok, thank you.

End of Interview.

⁷ 35 min