

Interviewees: Jack and Spencer Netherstreet

Interviewer: Stephen Kinsella

Location: University of Greenwich

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Interviewer: Well, thank you very much for joining us today gentlemen. It's very kind to give us your time. So very informal, so if you want to stop anytime you just say the word and we turn the camera off if – if you prefer. Like I say we're just gonna have a nice hopefully hour or forty-five minutes for you to tell us about your – your memories of war. Ok? So would you like to start by introducing yourselves and if you could give us your date of birth please?

Spencer: You start.

Jack: Being the oldest one, I will say yes. We were born in February 1923. Do you agree with that?

Spencer: Yes, yes.

Jack: I was ten minutes older than him or something. Twenty minutes or something like that, yes.

Interviewer: Alright, wow. So I understand that one of you was in the RAF, I believe that was you Spencer?

Spencer: That was me, yes.

Interviewer: And you, Jack, was in the Navy.

Jack: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: Ok, so can you remember how old you were when war started or when war was declared?

Spencer: We were sixteen years old and in the garden on September the 3rd, my father took us out as he was very shattered because he'd been through the horrors of the First World War and really badly scarred by it. He said, 'I want you boys never to volunteer for anything', so we did.

Jack: Did.

Spencer: He volunteered for the Navy and I volunteered for the Air Force [laughs].

Interviewer: So you were sixteen at the – at the –

Spencer: Yeah.

Interviewer: At the start of the war so was that right at the beginning, in 1939? Did you sign up immediately or –?

Jack: No, no.

Spencer: No, no, not until we went to Reading but that's another story because that was the Blitz of the war had started then and being in Romford which was one of the beelines in for the Luftwaffe we saw the first of daylight raid coming up the Thames. The thousands – what appeared to be thousands of little pinpoints of silver lights up in the air and these were the Germans in arrogant formations of nine aircraft in beautiful arrowheads coming up steadily towards us. We were made to go in the shelter so we missed the fun of seeing the Spitfires and Hurricanes weaving round the outside of them. So we didn't see much of them being shot down, did we? There weren't many shot down actually on the first raid.

Jack: Well, the – Romford is close to Hornchurch and Hornchurch was one of the main defence areas.

Spencer: Airfields.

Jack: And they had Gloucester Gladiators to start with at the beginning of the war [laughs]. We were ever so pleased they changed. Was it –?

Spencer: No, no, no. It was in 1938 the Gloucester and Gladiators went and the Spitfires came in. So we had Spitfires in Hornchurch.

Jack: At the beginning.

Spencer: Yes, at the beginning of the war, yes, cos they were revving up at the – in the early morning. The dawn chorus and – yeah. So then after that first month the Royal Air Force did their job properly and it turned in to sporadic night raids which turned eventually in to major night raids where we eventually on September the 23rd 1940 were hit by a parachute mine and our house was a bit – bit – bit damaged wasn't it, really?

Jack: Yeah [laughs].

Spencer: Two big chunks of holes out of the roof and the French doors hanging at an angle and all the windows broken but nobody hurt, apart from one person was killed but there weren't many casualties.

Jack: The lady next door, she kept calling out her husband's name whom I don't –

Spencer: 'Jeffrey! Jeffery! Jeffery!'

Jack: Jeffery!

Spencer: 'Jeffery! They've killed Jeffery!' 'They've killed Jeffery they have!'

Jack: My father who was in the medical corps in the First World War, he said, 'Is anybody hurt? Is anybody hurt?'. He was running into the area cos he was associated with providing people with air

raid shelters at the time and sure enough Jeffery had gone to make a cup of tea. He'd gone it to the kitchen and he'd got a kettle of boiling water in his hand and the backdoor blew [laughs] the door on top of him with the kettle still boiling and landed up by the side of him [laughs].

Spencer: Oh, down by the front door.

Jack: Oh, it was the front door.

Spencer: Yeah, right down with the front door.

Jack: Yes, he as blown right the way through.

Spencer: And meanwhile his wife was having hysterics. 'Oh, Jeffery, they've killed him – they've killed him!'. My mother went over and gave her a bit of solace and¹ so that was that. Well, that was – that was the Blitz but there was a lot of damage in Romford. There were two hundred and twenty-three people killed and the course of the V1 and V2 and, of course, the Blitz and I think about three thousand – two thousand three hundred or something injured in Romford. But our office decided that it was too much of a hassle to keep moving the books down to the safe, never mind the staff, but they had to go down to the safe in – in the lift. Every time there was an air raid which happened very frequently so poor old George Lowe (??) would wheel out the trolley pull out the books [Jack laughs] went into the lift and down the lift and about when the all-clear went up they all came again. We all started work and the [makes sound of an air raid siren] all the air raid siren then came George Lowe (??) again and the books so it was impossible to work and we were evacuated to Reading which hadn't seen anything at all. They were amazed when – when we arrived, you know, they thought it was a peculiar intrusion first of all. Do you remember Mrs –

Jack: Where did that one bomb fell?

Spencer: Oh, that – one bomb fell out at Shinfield.

Jack: You'd have thought they'd been blitzed [laughs]. The performance they carried on! Oh dear me. Yeah, anyway, you were going to say?

Spencer: Oh, Mrs Cawston, the –

Jack: Oh, the – oh dear.

Spencer: Our first – our first billet was –

Jack: Be careful you might libelling somebody [all laughs].

Spencer: Sorry, cut that out please [all laughs].

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Spencer: She says, 'Where you from?', so we told her, 'Oh', she said, 'I want your ration books'. So the first thing we had to hand over were our ration books. That was the first we saw – the only time we saw our rations, wasn't it, when we [laughs] we lost our rations.

Jack: Yeah, we were severely rationed. We didn't see them. We had bread and brawn and –

Spencer: Salad.

Jack: Salad.

Spencer: A bit of salad. Lettuce from the garden.

Jack: Yes.

Spencer: Yeah.

Jack: 'You've not eaten all that bread, have you Trevor?'. That was the our pal, he was evacuated with us.

Spencer: The office boy.

Jack: The office boy.

Spencer: By then we were junior clerks. Oh, dear, oh dear.

Jack: Yeah, yeah.

Spencer: We were hard up because then men had been called up in the – in the Territorial Army.

Jack: Mm, and the Cawstons were both builders. They were – they used to have Annie in the attic, didn't they? [Laughs].

Spencer: Oh, yeah.

Jack: Annie's attic.

Spencer: Ally – Ally.

Jack: Ally.

Spencer: Allllly! [All laughs]. Ally was the maid of all work. Fortunately we were only there for a very short time and then we went to a wonderful, wonderful lady, Mrs Baker of No. 3, Norfolk Road, Reading, who looked after us like a mother. She was a wonderful person.

Jack: And we had Reading's football ground just down the road.

Spencer: Yeah.

Jack: So it was a home from home. It really was lovely.

Spencer: Fell on our feet didn't we there?

Jack: Yes, we did.

Spencer: Mm.

Jack: Yes, wonderful times.

Spencer: Mm.

Jack: And –

Spencer: He joined the Red Cross cos he's that way inclined and I joined the Home Guard, there, that was where I learnt to really be a soldier. God, dear, oh, dear. They – we were very well equipped cos the Royal Berkshire Regiment's rump was still left at the Brock Barracks at Reading and they managed to get all sorts of equipment that the Home Guard elsewhere rarely saw. I don't know why but we had the first delivery of Tommy guns so by the time I was eighteen or just reached my eighteenth birthday I could fire a Browning machinegun and could strip it and knock it down. A Tommy gun which always fired up left, they were no good at all really and a Ross rifle, a wonderful Canadian thing with a round circular sight which you couldn't miss with, magnificent thing. The only trouble was it had three hundred – 300 calibre whereas all our rifles were 303s [laughs] so it meant you had to carry an extra bandoleer if you were going to be issued with these Ross rifles. And the joy, of course, the Vickers water-cooled machinegun which there was only one. I'm not sure whether anybody else in the country had one of these. But I learned to fire that on the Aberfield Range and I thought, you know, you ripped the thing, you see, aimed up on the target and rounded across like that but you don't with a machinegun, apparently, this one you had to attack with the heel of your hand. So, of course, my shots were going all over the place. But Trevor Blake, he was pretty good with it, he – yeah.

Jack: Well, at the same time, I was learning how to set broken bones and how to deal with wounded casualties but, of course, there weren't any² in Reading [all laughs].

Spencer: Don't sound disappointed! [Laughs].

Jack: The Home Guard – the Home Guard decided to have an exercise and boss man said to me, 'Well', he says, 'We're supposed to be supporting the Home Guard in this exercise'. He said, 'I've got the Red Cross ban and', he said, 'I like you to join me on this', because there was nobody else. So we both set out to find – we had a distinct area where they were likely to be and when we got there they weren't. It started to rain so we came home [all laughs].

Spencer: At that particular time we were at the hideout at the Shinfield where it was actually. We had in the farm complex an old barn and in it, one of the sergeants had built us an armoured car. A real

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armoured car. It was a bull-nosed Morris [laughs] and he fixed it up with armoured plates and, of course, the ground was wet so it had to be wheeled out first of all, started up the engine and, of course, it just churned up the mud. It was so heavy it couldn't move. So he called that one off but the next time we did that was when you went out, we were all lined up by the sides. 'I want you to give me firing and give me – I want you to give me support, boys!'. So we all lined up on with our Lee Enfield rifle on the – being all [unclear] for now. Our enemy were the C-Company of the Home Guard and they were about two or three miles away. Well, we could easily make that up that – up that ground [laughs] but the poor little armoured car trundled out until it reached the spot where the cows had been and it was all muddy and there it waltzed its way, sideways, down. 'I'm going to open fire from here!', when we were about two miles from the enemy still [laughs]. It didn't make any difference. Just – just then that rainstorm opened and Captain Smart came down, 'You've done jolly well, boys! It's been an absolute success. Well done! We're calling it off now' [laughs]. So that was the Home Guard but it –

Jack: We had in – in our office, we had the doubles. Very definite lay of Captain Mannering [Spencer laughs] and we had dear old, what was his name, Arthur –?

Spencer: Arthur Low?

Jack: No, not Arthur Low. The dear old dodderer. The First Aid man, can't think of his name.

Spencer: Oh, yes, yes.

Spencer: Godfrey.

Jack: Godfrey. And we had a Mr Tart, who was the – what was he? He was the assistant cashier or deputy cashier or something. A Mr Moore, Captain Mannering, was – was the cashier and then we had Crab, who was the office boy, he was just off his man or rather. He wouldn't like me to have said that.

Spencer: He was a trader, dupe trader.

Jack: Dupe trader, yes, and he would have made very nicely the position of the chap that died and I can't remember his name either.

Mrs Netherstreet: John Le Mesurier?

Jack: No, not John Le Mesurier. The spiv. If you wanted anything he would find it. Yes. But then we went to Reading and we left Reading. I went in to the Navy much earlier than Spence went it to the Air Force.

Interviewer: Why was that?

Jack: I don't know. I'd got my call-up papers from the Army, this provoked a lot of trouble. I got my call-up papers for the Army, I went down to the recruiting office and I said, 'Look', I said, 'I volunteered

for the Navy, why have you accepted me for the Army?'. 'Oh', he said, 'Just a minute, sir', and out came this very fine chap dressed on all gold braid and god knows what and he said to me – he was what they call a Chief Petty Officer and he was responsible for recruiting and he grabbed these papers and he came back and he said, 'Sick berth branch, wasn't it?'. I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'We're very short of sick berth branch men'. 'Anyway', he said, 'I've just been in and the army doesn't want you anymore' [all laughs] tore the papers up. So a couple of months later I found myself at HMS Glendower which is near Pwllheli and that's where we did our six weeks basic training. Basic training included learning how to shoot, learning all the things about the navy³ for which we were very grateful. It was wonderful, wonderful course, very concentrated. We had a terrible man who was supposed to be our trainer and when he got us through, although we were battered to pieces by him, we all bought him a beer because we thought he was so wonderful [laughs]. Yes, so that was me then you followed into the Air Force.

Spencer: Yes, in the April of '42 so quite a long period in fact. But I was on deferred service due to the fact I think that the signal schools were full up. They badly wanted signallers and they'd taken in quite a lot so you just had to wait your turn before you went in. Mind you, we were still examined to take – given a little examination to see if we were bright enough [laughs] and they accepted me. My god, you know, if they only knew [laughs]. And just to – I went in to No. 3 signal school at Compton Bassett in Worcester. Well, all I knew about Calne was it produced pork. Actually, the signal school was as a superb organisation and I can't speak more highly of the tuition we had. We were crammed but, you know, going from Blackpool where the speed there up, we started at Blackpool and then came down to no. 3 signal school. You start off with your, di-do-di-do-do-di-di-do-do-di-di-do-do-do, if you didn't recognise that it's the first words of the alphabet, you know [all laughs]. But you never forget it, you see. Morse code is now no longer acceptable but I went through the sickbay in Compton Bassett which was run by very lovely Queen Alexandra nurses.

Jack: Marvellous.

Spencer: Because I had impetigo and that was marvellous cos I spent Christmas there. That was the best Christmas in the forces that I ever remember but [laughs] and they taught me how to embroider, you know. So I'm very good at the lacy-daisy switch – stitch rather [all laughs]. I missed a posting for the invasion of Sicily cos I had volunteered by that time for combined operations services which meant cooperation with the Army and Navy. Oh, dear, never mind, Jack, you got over it [laughs]. And that lot – that particular class landed in Sicily where there was no protection and they all got captured including my pal, Christiansen. I often wonder what happened to him. He was a Danish fellow, volunteered, he came from Copenhagen. Lovely character. Anyhow, back to the next posting was with the third division of the Army in Kent and there was just two of us, Corporal Reiss and myself. Corporal Reiss was an extremely nice fellow, he was extremely able and very gifted volubly, you see, and he could put our case very well and he was acting corporal cos you only got elected acting

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corporal actually in the training school. He wasn't supposed to carry his stripes out to the army, 'Well, I think, Neddy, it would be jolly useful if I became a corporal, don't you think so?'. I could see there was a big advantage in this and it worked very well cos he had access to Captain Smart of the three divisional signals, so they had to work all sorts of things. But including not doing an awful lot of duties and not being on guard duty and just watching the army and applauding them for the way they looked after their arms and at the same time did a little bit of signals training. We had deep contempt for them cos their speed was only 11 words a minute where our speed was twenty-two words a minute, no, sorry, eighteen words a minute. The navy was twenty-two, they were fast. Twenty-five was the usual operational.

Jack: I didn't join [laughs].

Spencer: And so we went on an exercise with them. Well, I actually took nearly three hours to pass a sixty word minute – a sixty word message and, you know, sixty words in three hours is not really acceptable [laughs]. I found I couldn't hear a darn thing and everybody else was getting on very well. 'How did you get on, Neddy?', said Albert. 'Oh, dreadful', 'Oh, I counted it a piece of cake, got lots of messages'. So I thought I was going to be sacked but no. Then went on to be posted to Fire Grenade G Mobile Signals unit which⁴ was a unit of eighteen men and we remained together for two and a half years and went on to the Normandy beaches eventually. Golly, I'm taking up a lot of time.

Jack: Well, you jumped a bit. At the same time I received my training at the wonderful hosp – Haslar Hospital which had the provision of fifteen hundred beds and I did my nursing training there and passed out as a nurse within, I think it was six months. I think eventually this qualification enabled us to call ourselves a service trained nurse. This meant that we weren't quite as high as a state registered nurse but we were capable. The training was terrific and once again we had the Alexandra nursing service, a naval nursing service and their – their staff where from the London Hospital of Millwall – at Mile End Road and they had a very high standard of efficiency. We had every reason to thank them. From there we went – having finished our training we then spent some time on the wards cos they wouldn't let us loose on any patient until we had six months looking after the patients in the ward. From there we went to the Victory ship.

Now, service on HMS Victory was really something unique, it was wooden walls sunk – sunk in concrete and it was fully rigged virtually but without any sails up and it was not bombed in the war. It was one bomb that fell down in the bows but when you consider the destruction in Portsmouth and this wonderful ship remained untouched. It's quite amazing but I ran a First Aid station with a fellow called Bill Broady, who came from Sunderland and he was a miner and he was a First Aid expert and we were very busy. We had a surgery with no doctor and we ran first thing in the morning to six o'clock at night so I was busy. And we had some nasty accidents while I was there, including the Adrias which had a terrible explosion onboard and we had a hundred casualties. We also had gale that blew five men off the boiler house and unfortunately I think they all died. But we had to pick up

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the pieces as it were, dreadful. But that wasn't – strange enough, of course, there was no bombing going on at that time. It was just a gale, shocking. Anyhow, from there we then catch up nearly with Spence, I was then posted back to Hasler Hospital in time for D-Day, incidentally, I've forgotten Dieppe.

Spencer: Dieppe, yeah.

Jack: When I was in training I'd just got to the stage of passing out when we had the terrible tragedy of Dieppe. I think we stop there for a minute.

Spencer: Yes, you have to take your breathe for that one.

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: Would you like some water?

Spencer: Mm.

Jack: Yes, please.

Spencer: I went to the 518G mobile signals unit which was as I say eighteen blokes and five vehicles, a transmitter, receiver and general purpose three-tonner which I tried to drive at one time but it did a kangaroo hop. It's very unfortunate, you see, so I wasn't allowed loose on it anymore. Maryanne will know that experience, won't you love? [all laughs]. And, oh, bless you. Thank you, thanks very much. And we toured the south of England, oh, I didn't finish with Albert Rose, did I? For goodness sake. He – we were making – when we were touring with the Army on the third – with the third division. The third division moved up on a big scheme which was called Punch and Judy, which was notorious I think for the Army cos everything went wrong there. We were – we were cruising up and we were captured at York by a group of officers wearing white armbands, 'You're captured, you're going back!'. So we said, 'Oh, we can't be captured because we're air control unit', cos⁵ we were going to be supervising the mustangs landing at an airfield. We didn't know, I mean, nobody knew anything what we were going to do but that's what our ultimate aim was and the landing strip was to be laid out somewhere near, oh, I don't know, up near Selby or somewhere in the Yorkshire Wolds. Anyhow, when we got to – what was the name of the bridge, for goodness sake, marvellous bridge. Beautiful looking bridge in Yorkshire.

Jack: Surtees Bridge?

Spencer: No, no. Never mind, doesn't matter very much. We were captured on this bridge and they sent us all the way back to Doncaster where we were going to go in to the racecourse there and we were going to be billeted there. So Mac [unclear] it, 'We're not bloody spending the night here', he

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came from Hull. 'I know, this place well, I used to come here without – without –'. Oh, it's your bloomin' watch.

Jack: Sorry [all laughs].

Spencer: 'So I'm not spending the night here'. So he went to the CO and said that he – he'd gone to the races at Doncaster quite regularly and never paid to get in cos he knew all way round at the back [laughs]. So he wiped all the chalk marks of our – of our vehicles that our army had put on to show that we'd been captured and just drove off. We expected any moment to be chased by a motorcyclist bringing us back. But, no, we went on our way and finished up in – at the most beautiful part of the country, really, at Castle Howard I think it was, possibly, I don't know. But it was a gorgeous part of the country and set our wagons up.

In those days the airports had an eighty foot mast and you had to drive five foot pins in round it. Four five foot pins and then hoist the mast up and attach it to these pinions that were stuck in the ground and they were – they were heavy things to knock in. He had an eleven pound sledge hammer and that's why I've got some muscles on my shoulders cos I could be able to knock those in. Mind you, I used to skip that if I could because we had one chap, called Gillypotty (??), he was from the north too. He was from Stockton-on-tees and he always used to speak through his teeth, like that, and he was very good at knocking these pins in. Anyhow, on one occasion when we were going somewhere else in Yorkshire we were told by some chap, 'I wouldn't drive your poles in there, you know'. 'You'll never get it in there, you know. There's solid rock under there. You should go further down the hill'. And he was quite right, we had to go down further down the hill, we didn't like that.

Still, anyhow, we escaped from Doncaster and we saw the Mustangs land. That was a marvellous sight, it was early in the morning and these kites came in and landed on the field. We felt a little bit of pride about that cos we had something to do with it. Not that we knew that we had something to do with it but the signal traffic was pretty heavy. We always worked hard, there's never any dull minute when you're on duty. The hours were quite extensive, we did a twelve hour stint at night and most of the time we were working towards the end of course, we – we didn't –. Anyhow, we were being prepared, of course, for Normandy and we had to go Fareham which is not far from your place [laughs]. At Fareham we were first of all put into – we were impounded in a lager at Old Sarum, where you were incommunicado, no letters, no – no radio, no newspaper. You didn't know what was going on for a whole ten days I think we were there. And our vehicles were undersealed with this black tar like substance and then we drove on to these great – we were in the hands of the Navy. The Navy did us well by god, you know.

Jack: Yes.

Spencer: 'Oh, this is an unlucky boat, this is. We were hit by a couple of mines, we were bombed by five stokers, we got [laughs] torpedoed'. They had every story under the book to make us feel unhappy [laughs]. But the food was marvellous and the cooking was excellent. And by the time – it was a nasty storm that night but I didn't know anything about it cause I had a lovely little cubicle up

above the engine room all to me-self and I didn't know that lorries had broken loose on the top and our blokes had to go and put it right. 'I want all⁶ the Air Force fellows down below to come up here and secure these bloody lorries that are floating about up here' [laughs]. The commander was like that, you see [laughs] and I didn't know anything about it until the following morning. Anyhow, I ate a jolly good breakfast, my other fellows didn't and when we drove off our dispatch rider drove off on his brand new Harley Davis which had been issued only a month earlier. He decided to drive off, though he was told off not to drive down the ramp he would insist on doing it and, of course, the bike went over the side, he went underneath and broke his leg [laughs] so he didn't –

Jack May I come in there?

Spencer: Yeah.

Jack: Just very quickly. At this time the Navy, I was on a medical ward and we were dealing with tuberculosis and we used to have something like twenty or thirty customers every fortnight to examine to find out if they really were TB positive. As D-Day approached there was a change, we changed from medical, general medical, to acute surgical, officers surgical because we were next door to the officers block. And our first casualty was a Royal Marines officer who had decided that he could beat the rest on to the landing craft, on to not off [Spencer laughs] on to a landing craft and he came off and he was badly injured and he was about the most awful patient you could ever come across. He was a typical marine, hardy as you like, and every time sister went by she used to deliberately knock his pulley that was holding his legs dispensed in the air [all laughs] just so he knew about it [laughs]. He was absolutely furious because, of course, he'd missed D-Day.

So that was our first casualty after that the organisation at Hasler Hospital was so different to Dieppe to give you an example we carried out – I was in the operating theatre reception which meant that we prepared the customers for operations. Now for Dieppe this was an appalling job and we lost thirty-five men on the operating table. They were literally dying before our very eyes, go and have a cup of tea and when you came back two or three missing. It was shocking, the appalling statistic associated with the deaths. We had nine theatres going in the cellars and we had officers that didn't even know they were supposed to be on duty and one appeared in his pyjamas said, 'What's happening?'. Dieppe. And when we came to D-Day we lost one person in the first twenty-four hours, the organisation and the way they ran it was simply marvellous. Every casualty was looked after by two ex-pharmacists because they called up all the pharmacists who took care to see that their blood and medication was coming out accurately and they looked after the patient entirely. This made our work absolutely – well, the reception of them was good too. They – nearly all of them that we received had had First Aid, makes a tremendous difference. The earlier you can catch casualty the better it is. So that was that one. Back to Spence again [all laughs].

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Spencer: Well, when – you didn't know what you were going to expect when you landed in Normandy but this was in July, I mean, long past D-Day itself and it was as peaceful as a picnic, really. It was amazing, the sand had been dressed with a very large mesh, wire-mesh curtain over the surface so that it would take vehicles, beautifully thought out. When we got up to the top of the landing ramp we were somewhere near Aubin-sur-Mer or some little village and when you consider the amount of damage that the bombardment had done. It didn't look as though it had received all that amount of trouble. We were on Juno beachhead, which I'm happy to say it was behind the Second Canadian Division [laughs] I wouldn't have liked to be in front of them. When we got up the top believe it or not⁷, there was the army catering corps there handing into our mug – into our – our vehicles mugs of tea to welcome us. Well, I'm blessed, you know, this is amazing.

We had a long drive then to a place called Douvres-la-Delivrande, where we were in a farm yard complex, I suppose, five miles from Douvres. This was a huge area surrounded by a large Normandy brick wall with a lovely little Normandy cottage in the corner which was the farm house and it looked as though it had come straight from the Cotswolds, really. It was a pretty little place but the window frames were hanging out of the windows, the door had been blown in and it suffered a lot of damage. There'd obviously been a tank battle just outside because there was two Sherman tanks burnt out by the side and there were the graves of four German soldiers on the side. One of them was a Feldwebel, a Sergeant Major and we looked at those and thought 'allo'allo. You could – all the time you could hear this rumble of the guns, not so far away, and occasionally there was the plop of mortar shells landing somewhere near and then we were unfortunate enough to hear a bit of machinegun fire too. So we weren't all together happy with the place they'd put us, considering we were with a hospital unit [laughs].

Anyhow, the hospital unit was – then eventually arrived two days later on a field next to us by that time the machinegun fire had subsided and the gunfire was obviously ours and it was doing a big job keeping the Germans at bay, I suppose. The guns that had – the German guns that had been aimed at the beachhead at Juno had been silenced by our own commandos and some of them were very famous men. One was a great friend of mine, he was on Pegasus Bridge operation having all ready destroyed one of the big German guns. He was only a little fellow but he didn't think anything of it so 'I just put me fingers in me ears, sat down underneath the gun port just lobbed a hand grenade in to the gun port and that was that'. There about five of them, apparently, with hand grenades and they'd all sat underneath this gun port waiting for the order to just lob their [laughs] their mills grenades into the gun ports. That wasn't my story though, it was his story. But he got the distinguished conduct medal for that. Anyhow, he was badly wounded at Pegasus Bridge, which we passed and made our way up towards Aubert (??) where we were greeted by the French, 'La Liberate!' with flowers and fruit and they'd been doing this for about a three or four weeks I think. No, two – two weeks, I think they were. So we were well and truly on our way.

⁷ 35 min

Jack: Now, at this time our casualties were moved from the hospital, we were the first base and as soon as they were in any fit state, they were removed to convalescent homes around the country and hospitals around the country so we found ourselves getting less and less in use for the emergency cases. So the ward once again closed and I received a little chit which told me that I was going abroad so I took the little chit along to the office and I said to the ward master, 'Now, look I'm supposed to be key personnel in this hospital and I received this. He said, 'Well', he said, 'If I was you I'd take it to the Board of the Admiralty and ask them [all laughs]. You're going' [laughs]. And then I found myself on the train up to port Glasgow where we joined a twenty-five thousand ton liner to take me out east so there we left these shores. Unlike Spence my journey took at least a month to get to Bombay and it was quite an eventful trip because we were the first convoy to go through the Mediterranean. So we were escorted by loads of destroyers because although it had been cleared it wasn't safe and they expected a submarine attack and, of course, after the second day, past Gibraltar, we got the alarm and, of course⁸, we all knew what to do. There were four thousand men aboard the ship and they got a few life boats knocking around. We were all allocated to a life boat but it was unnecessary and the alarm passed and we went on to a dock in Port Said and then down to Port Taufiq and across to Bombay. And that's about the story. Where were you?

Spencer: Ah, well, [all laughs] I had arrived in a little place called Londinières in France and this was a very nice little village but it had obviously been badly damaged. There were lots of houses missing and my pal and I were sitting in by the river looking at it wondering whether we could swim in it or not. We did swim in it actually, it was a lovely stream but it was jolly cold. And as we were sitting there some chap who looked very French cycled up the path opposite, came through the trees to us, parked his bike down by the tree and looked at us and said, 'Vous etes de la Royal Air Force?', I said, 'Oui, Monsieur', 'Ah, [grunt] la Royal Air Force vous porqui vous avez bombe notre ville?'. Why have we – have you bombed our town? We killed two hundred and twenty-three people and I said, 'Well, sorry, sir, but I didn't do it'. He said, 'Et la vous avez tué mon fils'. We killed his son. What can you say? What can you say to anybody like that and my pal who spoke sufficient French to understand what was going on said, 'Oh, monsieur, ces't la guerre', 'Oui, ces't la guerre'. He got on his bike and peddled off and we reckoned he'd been waiting over two years to get that off his chest. It was 1942 the village was bombed. We can only think that there was, you know, they were cap – they probably captured a French agent and made him give false information to the British to make sure that they got a line to us. They did that, they were good at that sort of thing. Anyhow, so we bombed the village for nothing and got rid of a lot of Frenchman – French people.

Then we went up to a place called Laarne (??). Laarne (??) in Belgium, on the Belgian frontier and we, oh, we actually bypassed Paris. That was a bit of a disappointment. I felt sure we were going to Paris but we were on the road to Paris but we went by it. Dear, oh, dear. At Laarne (??) the population had not seen any forces at all, in fact, we were the first British forces there. We're all Air Force Signal Unit as we went in one end of the – our end of the village the Germans were going out

⁸ 40 min

the other. We could see their green wagons going off in the distance. We thought, 'That's a bit of a close call'. Anyhow, we captured a German code and cipher unit that had been packed well with explosives to but they hadn't gone off and so we had to send for the bomb disposal unit and our old band was pleased as punch about this. There was an encoding/decipher unit intact or a German signals unit, he got promoted for that.

Jack: I can come in there.

Spencer: Mm.

Jack: We, at the same time, we spent little time in Bombay, there was a lovely story associated there but I have written a book so the stories associated with that are in the book. Went to Calcutta and I had a – the good fortune to arrive in Calcutta on a landing craft, took a month from Bombay to get around to Calcutta.

Spencer: In a landing craft?

Jack: In a landing craft.

Spencer: [Laughs]

Jack: And it was a big landing craft, it – we had space for sixty sleeping soldiers and two hundred and fifty standing soldiers. My sickbay was below the Oerlikon gun [laughs], which protected the bridge. We had three oerlikons and a twenty-five crew and each crew member had five jobs. Mine was rat catcher [Spencer laughs] victualing officer, paymaster, third officer on watch but never ever used it and I used to be⁹ responsible for all sorts of odds and things as well as the medical side of it. So I took this place, well, it was very, very pleasant I must say. When the sea was nice and we were just cruising it was beautiful. When there was or the weather was bad it was awful because being a flat-bottom boat it used to lift up at the front and come crashing down on the wave so you knew all about it. Now my bunks traversed the ship rather than going from bow to stern. Now, if you bow to stern you were going up like this but if you happened to be on a bunk traverse then you got shot off [all laughs]. If you're on the top bunk I was always being shot off [all laughs] cos my patients, if I had any patients, they were always on the bottom bunk. Fortunately we had no real trouble but we did have some nasty cases of malaria, bronchopneumonia and various injuries but all minor. But the bronchopneumonia case, of course, he had to go ashore and he had to wait for days until we came to a place, Chittagong I think it was, where we landed him. He went off to hospital from there whilst we went on to join the Arakan landing force. And the Arakan is in Burma and the landings took place from a little place called Akyab, Ramree Island and Cheduba. All those three landing areas we actually made a landing and fortunately we were lucky because the Japanese fled before we got there on each occasion. But we did see a Japanese soldier. We got lost in – going down south and he was looking after a jetty and he was standing guard there with his rifle and they had huge bayonets these – Japanese were

⁹ 45 min

immensely proud of their bayonets and they used to like to use them on the poor Chinese. Chinese were always a master to the Japanese, terrible really. Anyhow, this man he saw us coming and he ran that way and we turned round and ran that way because we weren't supposed to go anywhere near Japanese territory. This landing was supposed to be a surprise [laughs]. It was to him [laughs]. Then we – we – this really quite interesting story, the landing in – to catch Rangoon took place in southern Burma. They had to go across the Arakan mountain range to get into Rangoon and this was supposed to beat the Indian Army who were running down from north to south and it was very good. They – they did it alright but it took much longer than they thought. We by this time had turned round and gone back to Calcutta where I had leave and went up into the Himalayas which was very pleasant and was well needed and came back again to find an empty ship. Most of the crew apart from about the signals officer, signals rating rather, signals rating, the first lieutenant, myself, the chef and a couple of other boys were the only remnants of the twenty-five crew. The rest had all got their draft tickets while I was up in Himalaya and all been posted back home and I was left with a new crew which was quite a different thing entirely. This time we moved south but on this occasion we went to Cochin and we crossed from Cochin into Malaya and there we took our landings at Port Swettenham and Port Dickson which again were unopposed. We then went from there down to Singapore and that is the end of the saga as far as that part is concerned. So your war ended?

Spencer: Oh, yeah. Well, we went to – from Laarne (??) to Brussels¹⁰ where again we had, although they – Brussels had been taken about a month before we arrived, we were still given a hero's welcome in Brussels. We had the trams going by and the chaps saying [unclear]. We travelled free, I was able to go to the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels for only sixty Belgium francs which is about, oh, 2/6d, I think, and had the best seats in the house. It was wonderful. Saw all the operas that I love and sometimes three times over, La Boheme, La fille du regiment and Traviata. They had a very fat tenor there at that time, D'Arkor, very tubby, not a bit like, you know, a real hero tenor but never mind, it was wonderful to be able to enjoy such lovely music. But that didn't last all that long cos we were then up to Holland where we found that the Dutch had suffered dreadfully because they – we hadn't reached Holland and they had to go over the winter of '44 in subjugation to the Germans and with very little rations. Nothing coming into them at all except from what they could provide themselves and they were really close to starvation. We were stationed in a monastery there, up at – near 's-Hertogenbosch and the Germans decided that they didn't like us being there so they lobbed a couple of shells over. They didn't last long because the Town Major told us that the first battery had been captured the following night and the other one had done a [unclear].

But from then on we went into Germany itself, lovely, lovely countryside. A bit like Kent, really, with all the apple trees around that area and fruit trees. And then my pal decided we shall have a look at Belsen, he pinched the company – the unit's motorcycle on pretext of having a little spin round and took me into – took me to – took us to Belsen and I rather wished I hadn't. That was the most awful experience. First of all the building of it, the buildings that were left, were surrounded by an eighteen

¹⁰ 50 min

foot high barbed wire fence with the control towers on either side of the entrance, you know, and 'Arbeiten –' what is it? 'Macht Frei' – or something like that. 'Work means freedom' and we drove in and it was deserted. Nobody questioned our right to be there and we could see the places where all these sheds had been which had housed the poor inmates and they'd all been burnt. Derris dust was fresh in the air, derris dust incidentally is highly carcinogenous as Jack will tell us, but they – you could smell it. As we went down we passed kasten, a big red built – redbrick German built block, and women were – there were lot of women inside there and they were surrounded by this barbed wire fence and they were yelling at us all sorts of obscenities in German, French and any other language I think cos they thought we were Germans cos we were in blue uniform with the white eagle on our shoulders and forage caps. We must have looked a little bit like Germans, of course we were not armed and when we went through little bit further on we saw the ovens. That was a dreadful experience, the ashes and that. Ovens [pause] and beyond that there was a big notice with lumps in the fields beyond saying, 'Twenty-three thousand unburied dead were found here'. Our blokes had had to bury them, with bulldozers cos there was no other way of doing it. So – and we got back to the unit and were promptly told off so my mate who drove the motorcycle said, 'Oh, gosh, you can't tell us off. We got lost' [laughs]. It was a lost that I rather not have had. And then we finished up in Braunschweig in the – the airport there and played with the German airfield where a lot of German aircraft were wrecked, German aircraft¹¹ around and played bridge for about three months until I was demobbed.

Jack: At that time I was, we can equally say the Japanese were a dreadful enemy and the Chinese were their main target. The Indians had tried to cooperate with them but that too didn't work. They were regarded as secondary – second class citizens and the Malayans didn't like very much the Chinese because the Chinese are an industrial people – industrious people where the Malays are positively not. The cruelty put on to the Chinese could only be compared with what they did with our soldiers that had been captured. In Swettenham and Dickson we saw some of our soldiers and they were as white as white could be. They hadn't seen the sun and they were in dreadful state which was a bit of a reminder of the Arakan too because we saw them there and carried them onboard ship. They were in a terrible state, you know, and they were expected to turn up trumps. They did but it was pretty terrible for them and I felt very, very sorry for our boys. They had a shocking time out there and we were fortunate because we could always get away and they couldn't. They were stuck there.

Singapore we had reasonably time, having been to Malays we then had spent Christmas near Sumatra and we went round and round an island which contained forty thousand Japanese prisoners and they had what was known as the American K-ration which was built up on the jetty, hundreds and hundreds of boxes of K-rations and that was their food. Onboard ship, I'm not being – we got a new skipper and he had not looked after our water or our provisions so we were only expecting a short voyage for one day instead of that we were a week and a week onboard a landing craft meant you ran out of water, you also ran out of food and we had the most miserable Christmas ever. And there was

¹¹ 55 min

all this food [laughs] just across the water and we couldn't touch it [laughs]. But anyhow we got back to Singapore, there's other stories associated with that but they were not very important and we took the Prince Leopold, which was the Belgian ferry, home to England and what a lovely voyage that was. Oh, it was so different to a landing craft [laughs] we – I had a berth in the sickbay which had a luxury operating theatre, luxury bunks [laughs] and these swing-cots. You had a swing-cot and which you could put your patient and they went virtually with the motion of the ship, either backwards or forwards or so and so. They were always remaining fairly stable and our patients onboard, there was one boy who was helping in the kitchen. Now, I was on night duty and he – he cut his hand pretty badly and he – it was a split that wanted a lot of stitches so I got – I got the tray ready and I went to get the doctor. Of course I couldn't rouse the doctor because when I turned around my patient had fainted. So there he was on the floor and there I was with a tray full and I thought pity to waste it so I sat there and stitched him up and he didn't know a damn thing about it [laughs]. But the same thing then, we went back to a little island called Hoy, in Scotland, part of Scapa Flow and that's where I got my demob papers, went back to London from there. It was an interesting and certainly hard run part of my life cos we did work very, very hard the whole time unlike many service personnel who could take a nap or a break.

Spencer: Don't look at me [all laughs].

Jack: Well, you know, the [unclear] [laughs], I told you we'd fight [all laughs]. And that was the end of my story¹² really but I – it's a two hundred and fifty page book so it's a rather a lot. Spence's would be even longer I think.

Spencer: Mm.

Jack: And that's it as far as I'm concerned.

Spencer: Thank you.

Jack: Thank you.

Interviewer: That's been absolutely fantastic, thank you for that. I've got a couple of questions if I – I may?

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: So first of all, obviously, I think you're actually the only set of twins we have taking part in this – this project. What was the reason for you joining separate services? Was it by choice or –?

Jack: Oh, I had an inclination.

¹² 60 min

Spencer: Well, we knew that to join up to the same regiment or the same organisation was caught in disaster. If one of us would go there's just a chance that the other one might survive. Even if it was under the German peel [laughs].

Jack: Well, yes, but I always had – my father was in the Royal Army Medical Corps for the First World War and I definitely had an urge not to be a combatant. This didn't mean to say that I wasn't number three on the Oerlikon feeding the ammunition when we got in to any action [laughs].

Spencer: I – mm.

Jack: Sorry?

Spencer: [speaks under breath - unclear].

Interviewer: Ok, and did you keep in contact with each other during the – the time you was away?

Jack: No.

Spencer: No possibility.

Interviewer: Not at all?

Spencer: No.

Jack: No.

Spencer: He never got any mail virtually but I used to get mail from home and would ask in my letters home – they would take a long time – they'd take about eight days for a letter to arrive from home and similarly from mine out but mine out had to be, you know, censored and make sure I wasn't saying anything. There – there was never anything as far as I know, I don't think they ever cut anything up. They always cut them up with scissors if they thought there was something wrong.

Jack: My father had a little code.

Spencer: Did he?

Jack: Yes, for me.

Spencer: I had to code – I de-coded by dose.

Jack: He – he had certain words that I was to include in my letters home which would indicate to them that I was well, that I was on the move or that I'd seen actions. Simple thing but I hardly ever got any mail when we were at sea because it was just not possible. Service is very difficult for communication. Well, I hardly ever wrote home.

Spencer: The Army Post Office on the other hand was superb as far as I was concerned.

Jack: Well, naval, of course, wasn't [laughs].

Spencer: Mm.

Interviewer: Ok. And then – do you think your wartime experiences had any real impact on your relationship with your brother? Or was it always pretty strong to begin with? I imagine it would be as twins but did it change after you came back?

Spencer: Ah, well, he was very seriously ill when he was at the Hasler Hospital, he had Cerebral –

Jack: Cerebral Meningitis.

Spencer: Cerebral Meningitis and I was not well at the same time but not seriously. Not bad enough to go to the MO but I wasn't feeling very well for four or five days and that so happened when my mother wrote to me, she said that he'd been ill. I thought, my gosh, you know, what a silly darn thing to happen. I mean, nobody would believe that [laughs].

Jack: Yes, and we had screens round the bed for me and you were ill [laughs].

Spencer: Yes, yes.

Jack: Yeah.

Spencer: Yes, he didn't look too good afterwards. I think you had a leave, didn't you or something?

Jack: Oh, yes.

Spencer: We – we did spend one or two leaves. Quite by accident, I think there were only two leaves.

Jack: Possibly.

Spencer: Only a few hours on one occasion and two days on the other.

Jack: My parents entertained Spence's platoon. I remember that.

Spencer: A platoon [all laughs].

Jack: Your unit – your unit.

Spencer: Oh yes, yes, we had all – all eighteen of my — my fellows but that's not quite true because we had to leave some for duty. But we had them all come home and it was a meal that how mother managed the rations, I don't know. We had a friendly butcher who gave us some little bit of extras. That was a wonderful party. Yes, that's when we were at Northolt, that was the Head Quarters of the 11 Group and the Poles, the Polish Air Force.

Interviewer: Fantastic. And the my final question was, right at the beginning of this you mentioned that your father told you not to volunteer for anything, would you give the same advice to lads these days?

Jack: No.

Spencer: No, no.

Interviewer: Why not?

Jack: I think choice is up to the individual and you shouldn't restrict choice¹³. You can advise people but you don't say whatever you do don't do something because that would immediately say to them do do something.

Spencer: I think there's a difference in education too in these days because in those days we finished school fairly early, I mean, we left school about fifteen or later.

Jack: Fifteen, mm.

Spencer: And our education was of the classical, you know, reading, writing, rhythematics and some classics. Quite straightforward but these days there's so much piled into children from all directions, websites and all those sorts of – I was going to say rubbish, I'm sorry [laughs]. But they can pick up information from all sorts of areas so I think it would be unwise to try and guide them. They can pick up their own information.

Interviewer: Great, well, that's been fantastic. So shall we leave it there?

Spencer: Mm.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Spencer: Thank you very much.

Jack: Thank you Neil.

Interviewer: Thanks for coming in that was fantastic, really good.

Spencer: Pleasure.

End of Interview.

¹³ 65 min