

Interviewee: Keith Manns

Interviewer: Bill Fairclough

Location: University of Greenwich

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Interviewer: ¹This is an interview it Keith Manns. Date of birth April '22. My name is Bill Fairclough and it is the 6th of August. This is a 45 min interview.

Keith: Yes, prior to the war I was a founder member of a cycling club. It sounds very mundane I know but by the time the war started, believe it or not, it had got up to a hundred members. We used to meet upon Charlton Road at the Catholic Church for our Thursday meetings and we used to go out on weekends, a touring club. And when – the day that war broke out a number of people had already gone to war. It is surprising, they were well prepared. I mean my brother for instance in the naval reserve he was already out in New York by the time war was declared. He'd been called up and so many of the others had too. The remaining members, they – we did a run down to Shoreham on that Sunday 3rd of September 1939 and we were in a cafe in Swanley when the war was declared and we carried on down to our venue at² Bainsford in the Mill Cafe down there. That photograph was taken at 1 o'clock on that 3rd of September and that's 'muggins' sitting in the middle there. Shortly after that of course we heard on the radio in the cafe because what people don't realise is there was no communication in those days. There were no mobile phones and even telephones were limited with everybody. I mean people just didn't have contact. You went out and that was it. And so they heard on the radio, you know, that there had been sirens down in London. They went off shortly after the war was declared whether it was a trial or whether if someone got itchy fingers I don't know but the sirens went. And when we heard this on the radio the girls thought well their parents would be worried so I immediately got them together after they had their lunch and brought them back and dropped them at Charlton House in Hornfair Road as a group as they all lived in that area and I brought all the girls out of the group and that was my first wartime duty.

Interviewer: Your first wartime duty.

Keith: So that was quite interesting. I mean I got – strangely enough it carried on after the war and there is a letter there about – that I got from one of the secretaries after the war. And that was them in 1992.

Interviewer: 1992 so there was a few years past between them.

Keith: It stopped during the war of course because – we still went out cycling but not as a club group.

¹ 43:30 min

² 45 min

Interviewer: Was this a mixed group? So there were both men and women in the club. So it wasn't listed as a man only club.

Keith: Yes, in those days it was almost equal. We used to go in groups of 16 down on the road and the chap on the side of the front did all the signals and the chap on the back repeated it. It was all very well controlled by the cyclist touring club. You went along like a coach. [laughs]

Interviewer: So, there was something about this time. Your brother was in the States already and the preparations that were going on behind the scenes for war but you were still doing the cycling that you had always been doing.

Keith: This is what I am trying to say. We tried to keep a social life going. We still went and met our girlfriends. We still went to the pictures even with the Blitz going. We still went to the pictures unless we were on duty. During the time when any sirens were going as I say one night I was a warden in the area in around – our warden's post was under the Conservative Club in Charlton Church Lane and my mother funny enough was the head warden. And she'd been trained previously and she ran the warden's post and we all worked out from there. And of course what a lot of people don't know is that [pause] the wardens had to do all sorts of duties, it wasn't just the case of going seeing the black out and everything else. I mean before the Blitz actually started we used to have what we called nuisance raids. They used to send over just two or three bombers over night roaming around to get the sirens going and get everybody on edge. To disturb the people from the point of view of going to work. They were psychological if you like. And they were alright, they didn't worry us to a great degree until they got caught in the search lights and then they used to drop their bombs to get their height and get away. And we had an instance³ like that and the – a couple bombs fell across the area and one fell in Wellington Gardens and it was a big house and I was first on the scene and went around there. I could hear this chap calling out I finally located him and he had been coming up from the basement and the house was semi-destroyed and it was falling and he was trapped – trapped on the stairway practically up to his chest with bricks. Falling bricks all over him, you know, the building falling down around him. I managed to chock it up a bit with some timber that was lying around. And I stayed with him for a number of hours and tried to get as much away as I could. I managed to free him down to about his thighs but I couldn't get down any further, you know. And then a doctor – about after 3 hours a doctor came and I had to come out of the hole you know while the doctor went in and when he came out he said it won't be long and I went back and stayed with him until he died. Which at 17 odd was a little bit of shake to say the least. A few nights after that the – again in these nuisance raids clipper bombs was dropped on top of Charlton Lane there used to be a big church, I think it was St John's Church, and we couldn't get contact with our wardens post and the warden's post was in Charlton Lane just behind the main nave of the church. It was sort of under a slope and there was – I was sent off on my bike to try to find out what was wrong so I went up Church Lane, through Charlton Village and round and then I found that I was –. You can image there is no light at all, it was

³ 50 min

completely dark, so you were feeling your way. Although I knew the area well I suddenly thought this is strange I'm going up a hill. It wasn't a hill at all it was the top part of the church lining had all come over, it was lying at an angle at brickwork. I was going up the lining of the church! Oh, anyhow I managed to come down and find a way around all the rubble that was there. The bomb had gone right in the church and blown it apart. The back part of the church had come down over our warden's post. It wasn't a worry in one sense it was one of these concrete bunkers, you know. But cos it had busted their telephone line and cos we had to start digging them out. You know they were two early incidents we had before the Blitz ever started.

Interviewer: So when you were digging them out. How did you – was that by hand or?

Keith: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: No machines to dig out with?

Keith: Yeah, we didn't have any machines.

Interviewer: All by hand then. So it's a long job then.

Keith: Oh, yeah. I managed to get somebody else to go down and tell the other wardens to come up and the others came up as well and we all got cracking. It took about two or three hours to finally get them out. But we got them out anyway.

Interviewer: How were they when you got them out?

Keith: Alright. Alright. No trouble. I mean it was just that they were stuck in this concrete bunker like, quite solid. These were the sort of daft incidents you know.

Interviewer: Before it really started you got quite – quite a lot –

Keith: Then as I say the neighbourhood at night when I was home. I was a warden then. I used to go around on a bike with a big W on my front lamp, you know. Of course you couldn't shine a great light but a sort of dull W. And I used to wander around and see to this, that and the other. And then another night I was going around check one of the main public shelters in the area and there was a girl there who was obviously in some medical trouble so I had to go and get the doctor for her and she got taken away with appendicitis. All these sorts of incidents go on all the time you now. But as I said then alternately I was also a fireman over in the docks⁴. I was trained by the NFS over there and had a tractor and quite a big powerful pump which could also suck out the dock which was handy too so if you had water problems you could suck it up from the docks and we used to fight the fires around the docks as well. So –

Interviewer: How long was that for? How long did you do duty over there for then?

⁴ 55 min

Keith: Right until the blitz finished. When the blitz had finished there weren't a lot of ships getting in for repair as it were up the Thames, you know, because of the bombing and the shipping superintendent came over, I think that must have been about July '41 I suppose and he wanted people to go away to sea. Because they were losing so many engineers at sea, he wanted engineers to go to sea. I was serving my time as an engineer, you see. A couple of them volunteered but 'muggins' said well it's no good looking at me I haven't got enough time in to sit for my Board of Trade tickets cos you had to have 5 years apprenticeship in to sit through the certificate you see. 'Oh, what's your name?' so he dotted my name down and when he came back a couple of days later and I got called up to the office and he said 'I've been checking on you' he said. He said you did an engineering course at Woolwich Polytechnic for 3 years. I said 'that's right' and he said 'well that counts for so much'. He said 'you've been doing the night school for national certificate', he said 'that counts so much'. He said 'you've done 3 years of your apprenticeship'. He said 'you've got about 6 and a half year in what should be going on'. I virtually then got – went away to sea.

But we were all edgy at the time and realised the situation because we had recently fitted out as a merchant crew with the Royal [unclear]. I'm not sure if you remember in the circumstances the Royal [unclear] did battle with the Graf Spee and lost. I mean she only had six inch guns and the Graf Spee 11 inch I think. And the engineers that were onboard her were all our engineers because life was totally different those in a working point of view, to be a permanent employee of [unclear] were in those days you had to have your Board of Trade sea going tickets. If you didn't you were only a temporary employee. We went week to week but you could be taken off in a week. There was no permanence. And so all our senior people where I was serving my apprenticeship were all sea going engineers. And a whole lot of them had gone as engineers on the Royal [unclear] so we lost a lot. So we were all quite edgy about what the war was all about. It came down to earth and so off I went to sea. But strangely enough he purely gave me a list of lines that I would like to go on and I just said that would like to go on that one and it happened to be the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company who carries all the petroleum for Shell.

And it's strange when I first started my apprenticeship my grandfather arranged it for me cos he was the only one in the family who was mechanically minded if you like. And I went to a company up in West India Dock Road but after I had been there a short while it was revealed that they don't actually give you indentures they only give you a paper to say what you have done which wasn't any good for the Board of Trade you see. And I was desperate to get another apprenticeship cos after 16 and a half it gets difficult. Everywhere I wrote to it was a 2 year waiting list and on an odd occasion an uncle of mine came to see my mother about some business⁵ with my grandparents and I only saw him three times in my life on odd occasions. I must have told him about this story when my mum was getting tea like. Three weeks later I got a letter and I was taken in to [unclear] and all my previous apprenticeships time was counted in so my apprenticeship continued beautifully. And it was a lovely place to go to because you really got thorough training. You know it was sectioned out that you did

⁵ 60 min

this, that and another right through the five years. So I was lucky. But it was peculiar too because I choose that company to go to and in 1942 we had a bit of a tough crossing on the Atlantic and we went in to Glasgow for repairs. And who should come onboard as the engineering superintendent of Shell Company but my uncle.

Interviewer: So a lot of coincidences there?

Keith: Yeah. Very strange isn't it. I purely did that on the list of lines.

Interviewer: Sounds one in a million doesn't it. When you think about it –

Keith: I know. Well, I found that in life quite often. Strangely enough. It's strange how things work out of pattern. I went away to sea. Well, I could talk all night about things that happened at sea. And that is interesting that's my wages book and that's my discharge certificates. Here's all me medals.

Interviewer: So there is something about all this happening in your life and then you reach a point not so long ago really when you begin to think about it.

Keith: Well, it was only when this chap called me up from, who works for the merchant mariners and asked me about the veterans badge there they recently issued. But then funnily enough from that merchant mariners I joined that association, it's only a few pounds a year, you know, and I joined as a matter of interest and they sent me their periodical on occasion and one I got recently I suddenly noticed my ship was mentioned in it. So I thought this is strange and this character was referring to an incidents when the ship got torpedoed and they'd taken the ship in for repairs and all the rest of it and taken to the boats. But he got all these dates around. I got in touch with the merchant mariners and I said very nice to see all this in your business. But – and I wrote them a letter you see and from that and also to prove that I was on the ship and what date I'd been on. I sent them a letter I received from my company previously when we had a bad incident – I sent them a copy of that letter.

[Pause]

Keith: Note down how much we got per month.

Interviewer: So that's commendation from the company and the reward for your –

Keith: That's right. Anyway following that when the next periodical comes out shortly from the merchant mariners that will be in it apparently. Cos they asked for my confirmation that it was alright for them to publish it. So that's going in.

Interviewer: So this was your first ship was it?

Keith: Yeah. Yeah. Yes, we had a rough time really. We used to go to Curacao in the Caribbean. We used to sail on our own quite a lot, you know. Believe it or not. It was not always in convoy⁶. That was me, 'muggins' when he was at sea.

Interviewer: So you were leaving from ports in the UK and going out to Curacao. But sometimes on your own.

Keith: We always went out on our own and we always went up to Halifax Novo Scotia on our own. Afterwards and then come across in convoy. We didn't like being in convoy.

Interviewer: You preferred to be on your own?

Keith: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: You carried oil and things like that?

Keith: Mm.

Interviewer: So where would you leave England? Where was your port? Where did you go from?

Keith: Well, a lot of the time we came in to the Manchester ship canal to stand low. There was a big refinery there. A sugar refinery. We brought it in there. But the occasion when this main incident happened where I nearly lost it, we'd gone to Curacao and then we were coming up the Yankee coast we were attacked by a submarine. We were fortunate in managed to either disable or sink the submarine. We never had it confirmed but it was told to us by the Navy people when we got to Halifax that there was wreckage found by the RAF flying out from Bermuda which indicated that something had been sunk. We opened fire and sunk the damn thing. I've put that on tape – a tape if you'd like to listen to. It's quite a paste from the start. That wasn't – fortunately that wasn't petrol as such. This was a special consignment of fully-refined lubricating oil and there were about 20 different grades of lubricating oils and we brought that across. And that was 1942, that we brought that across and then over the top of Scotland down the East coast and into the Thames and we dropped it at Ford's in Dagenham. And that was 1942 which was a bit airy. That was lubricating oil.

Do you know it's strange even then the – they still held the regime of people having to do the right thing. The Board of Trade doesn't sway from war or anything, you know. I was manoeuvring up the Thames for a path and then somebody took over from me. But the pilot he was driving me mad. I mean he was trying to give different motions every few minutes. And on a diesel engines you only have so many starts on your air tanks to change direction cos the diesel engine starts with compressed air you see and you have to pump up the tanks. And he was changing his mind every few minutes slow head, slow stern over. In the end I had to phone the bridge and say 'you've got so many left and then you've had it and you'll have to drop the anchor'. You know, we were of Gravesend then. Anyway, the next engineer came down cos it was the watch change and when he

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started up the pilot got him confused and he gave the wrong direction on the engine on one occasion. He was dropped back on his rank for doing that. And when we were unloading the lubricating oil in Dagenham the second mate on watch on that night who had to control all the valves unloading the damn thing. Some horrible mix up you know with all the valves and I mean you got about thirty tanks in a tanker and it's easy to get mixed up. He mixed up about 50 ton of two grades of lubricating oil which in effect from a cost or use point of view didn't make any difference cos they mix quite well and they were able to use it. But he also got admonished for mixing the oil⁷. The standards were kept by the Board of Trade. You had to do all your repairs on an engine to a set fixed service line with everything else. The pattern of Board of Trade, it was good really cos it kept all the standards up. Nothing changed.

It was quite an interesting experience. We went on – we were on Caribbean runs for the first part on that ship then we went up on the Russian trip. We were supposed to be on a bunker ship up in North Russia for a while.

Interviewer: A bunker ship? What's that?

Keith: Well, just standing by in port. Instead of them having tanks on shore they got them on the ships and used them as they wanted. We were supposed to be up there for 9 months. So we were kitted out for 9 months in north Russia but within two days of getting there having gone all through the business of convoys and all the [unclear] and the lot. We were ordered back to Britain suddenly and came away from the convoy on our own and back to Britain, in Liverpool, and changed cargos from what we had onboard. Straight out to mid-Atlantic and there we circled in circles at half speed for about two weeks until we got an encoded message to go through the straits of Gibraltar, a whole loads of ships combined and that's when they did the North Africa invasion. We were the first ship in to Iran and the other ships went to Algiers. We should have been the second ship in all round but the commandor ship who was riding just beyond us, I don't know if he hit a mine or was torpedoed but he suddenly went bang. And I think the – they got off of that in about 90 seconds I think, that was an ammunition ship. It really went. And so we were first ship in and what we had to do was get tied up in the port. And there was a pumping station partly in the port which fed the - it up to the air field and they couldn't land any airplanes for air cover until they knew they got petrol up there. We were loaded with the aviation fuel and we had to get connected up to this pump house and the airport was about two miles in land apparently so we had to pump it up to the air port so we could get air cover. And that was our job. And of course it was a bit hairy because people didn't want you to be there you know.

Interviewer: So that sort of Russia and mid-Atlantic and then in to North Africa landing.

Keith: Then we came home from there and unfortunately cos I then learnt on my first leave from the sea that my brother who was in the invasion of Algiers. His ship had been blown up and he'd gone. So

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I was waiting for that telegram to come all time I was on leave. I didn't come until two days before I went back to sea. So it wasn't a very happy leave that one.

Interviewer: No, your brother had been in New York before?

Keith: Yeah.

Interviewer: You lost him then.

Keith: Yeah. At that time he was on a small aircraft carrier and it was only twelve people going off it. It went bang.

Interviewer: So there was a lot of death and destruction there.

Keith: Oh, yeah. You got used to it.

Interviewer: Ships blowing up.

Keith: When you're in convoy what you don't realise is that you hear that the, you know, that there's been an attack on the convoy. You've seen the ships going up during the night, being torpedoed. So the next morning you're going along and you see all the bodies floating by in their life jackets. That's when it all comes home to you that the bodies are all there. War is no heroics. It's no place to be at all. The thing – the most thing – strangely I regret⁸ is that I lost all my young teen life and my education. You see even night school that I used to go to had to be down weekends but it only went to a point and finished. There was no education after that because you couldn't educate at sea.

Interviewer: You felt you had more in you but you didn't have the chance to work on it really.

Keith: I was twenty-three before I started to live. So, you know, it was all that youth that you missed. You didn't have your teenage life which to let's be honest is an interesting time of your life.

Interviewer: You had your duties didn't you? You had different sorts of duties?

Keith: You were always occupied. You couldn't do what you wanted to.

Interviewer: What was needed to be done. Not what you choose to do.

Keith: That's right.

Interviewer: And often to be with others and to help others. Things like that.

Interviewer: I got that feeling when you were talking about how you know you had the qualifications and you couldn't – you didn't think you were quite you know qualified to go to sea. But you felt that they were losing people so they needed people to go to sea. So you come in the waiting room for the convoy and – cos people were dying so.

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Keith: 1942 they were losing so many ships. There weren't the engineers to replace any new ships they were building.

Interviewer: So you had that feeling as a young man that there was a lot of – there was something going on that was very nasty somewhere and that you were going to be part of it.

Keith: Well, you're seeing that in the Blitz. I mean when you're working I mean somebody doesn't turn up in the morning and then you find that you know they've been hit during the night and lost their homes and everything else.

Interviewer: And that fellow when you were seventeen and you sat with him and the doctor said more or less he's going to die quite soon and you went and you were with him in his last few hours really.

Keith: That's right.

Interviewer: At seventeen that's quite a lot isn't it to feel that.

Keith: There's no heroics in war. I don't find any pride in you know talking about this. Only to let people know that it something that shouldn't happen. War doesn't get anybody anywhere.

Interviewer: And the size of it as well. That's something isn't it? I hear you saying that that you were part of something big.

Keith: It's the noise of it too.

Interviewer: The noise of it.

Keith: The noise. You know, when you're under heavy gunfire and that's where the – I mean my tin hat was well dented with shrapnel that's another thing you see. When you're running around at night with – it's alright to say the guns are firing but that other stuff comes down. Some of these lumps of shrapnel were about this long you know. Quite thick, weighed about 4 or 5 ounces. Bang. On your head.

Interviewer: It's the physics of it isn't it. The gravity.

Keith: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: It's always there.

Keith: Oh, yeah. The gravity is there.

Interviewer: What goes up must come down.

Keith: 32 feet a second.

Interviewer: On to your head.

Keith: I remember that one. 32.2 wasn't it?

Keith: Yes, no it is interesting. Then I got ordered to go out with five others. There were three engineers and three allocating people sent out to pick up a ship in Galveston in Texas and it was being repaired it had been badly burnt out actually. And they had to practically take the top off and put a new top bit on it. We'd been out in Galveston and we were out there for a few months actually while it was finally being repaired and there was another strange incident. We - cos we had Chinese crews, you know, on our Anglo-Sax – the Shell company had Chinese crews on nearly all their ships prior to the, you know, pre-war and they were still there during the war. And we'd only been out of Galveston for about two days and the Chinese crew mutinied. It was all to do with this business what was going on back in China and they got their orders over the phone. It happened through loads and loads of ships. You know it was the sort of red army back in China had ordered, you know, that's it. So it wasn't against us⁹ they were annoyed but they had been told to mutiny. They were going to wear that gold braiden that was it, you know. So as you can image the skipper said to the – said to some of the naval gunners we're onboard get the Lewis guns trained and all the rest of it because the Chinese had been one step ahead of them. They had thrown all the ammo overboard the night before.

Interviewer: So you could turn the guns on them but [laughs] –

Keith: They got a bit desperate then and we sort of backed ourselves in the mid-ships and let the ships sail on sort of thing you know. And we sent for the US coast guard but then half a day later this blooming big coast guard cutter turned up with a squad of US marines onboard armed to the teeth, you know. And the Chinese gave up and they were all interned like. But then we had to sail the ship on our own just ten of us, blooming tanker full of fuel up to North of Virginia. On our own. And there we picked up a British crew. That wasn't good though because we then got a Liverpool-Irish crew and they're the very devils, honestly. The difference in the engine rooms changed overnight. Whereas everything had – I mean the Chinese are marvellous people. The engine room used to be spotless and shining, you know. And you could sort of slide down the staircases no trouble at all. But a week after the English crew had been onboard they let us down horribly. The last thing the mate ever did when you leave port with a crew like that is to go to the local police station and bail them all out. [laughs]

Then we went from there down the Medi. We did trips to Malta and that sort of thing. That was interesting and the aircraft carrier Eagle was taking aircrafts into Malta so we placed those that were shot down and we had to go with her and be the bunker ship for the Navy for the aircrafts. We were sent to do that for a while and then we got involved in the various other problems in the Medi. We were the first ship into Greece when that was relieved. And that particular ship was useful for it was a ship that could be a tanker or it could be a ordinary ship with holes so we used to carry sometimes in one section of the ship we'd carry you know food what not and another time we'd have petrol or something like that. Or you could carry whole full of already prepared jerry tanks of petrol ready for use you see. So we then got involved in all sorts of operations, they used to use us for all sort of ways

⁹ 80 min

cos we had a shallow draft too we'd got close to shore. Next we knew we were in the Salerno invasion in Italy and that was in September '42 or '43 I think something like that. When was that? Yes, September 43. We were involved in the Salerno operation and that was quite interesting. Cos we'd went in there and we'd use to go close in shore and these Army Ducks come out to us.

Interviewer: Amphibious things.

Keith: Amphibious things. They'd use to come out to drop a load of – we'd use to have great big nets with these jerry cans in and we used to drop those straight into these Ducks. And they went to the front line you see. So we'd been doing that for a little while and then a Tiger tank suddenly turn up on the sand dunes on the beach and started firing but it wasn't long before the Navy Destroyers¹⁰ sorted that. To see naval gunnery when it's like that is out of this world. You see a destroyer coming in at full speed, it almost turns on a pivot, goes along the beach, turned on a pivot and goes out all at full speed and that short period of time it let about six salvos go and you could see things on the shore just disappearing. Naval gunnery is absolutely out of this world. And we were doing that for a while then, blow me tight, one of the ducks as he started pulling out of the ship he backfired and of course there was a load of spillage from the jerry cans down in his builders and the whole blooming lock went on fire. And he was alongside us and we got the blooming - all the holes open so we just quickly had to chop through the ropes and let the cobber come down. Otherwise we would have gone bang to. [laughs]

Interviewer: We are getting towards the end of time. I suppose and can stop the tape.¹¹

End Interview

¹⁰ 85 min

¹¹ 86:22 min