

**Interviewee: Raymond Gallagher**

**Interviewer: Malin Lundin**

**Location: University of Greenwich**

**Date: 25.10.2010**

**Also present: Marina Gallagher**

Interviewer: This is an interview with Raymond Gallagher, is that how you pronounce your name?  
Yeah. The date is the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 2010 and the interviewer is Malin Lundin.

Interviewer: Would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

Raymond: June 1935.

Interviewer: So you were —. How old were you when the war broke out?

Raymond: I was five, just over five, so six years, six, when the Blitz started to come.

Interviewer: Do you remember the first day of the war?

Raymond: I don't remember the first day. No, no.

Interviewer: When does your memory start?

Raymond: I think my memories starts being in the corrugated dug-out in 11 Christchurch Way, Greenwich and I can still hear the bombs and the guns from this Big Bertha, you know, the ship that was laying off there and see the search lights in the sky picking up the aircraft and I can still see my father and my grandfather sitting on the garden fence with their tin helmets on and my mum and my Gran say, 'Come in the dug-out' but they couldn't because there wasn't enough room [laughs]. I had no brothers or sisters but there was just me mother and fath — and me grandmother in the dug-out and the other two were outside.

Interviewer: So you lived in Greenwich at this point?

Raymond: I lived in Greenwich.

Interviewer: Did you live with your parents and your grandparents?

Raymond: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Ok.

Raymond: My father worked for a grocery shop that was in Trafalgar Road, Francis and Champion, but that's another story [laughs].

Interviewer: So were you ever evacuated during the war?

Raymond: Yes, but I can't remember when it was staged. I remember going up — but I think my father had been called up by then and because of his catering skills, see they were attached to the Royal Artillery, some way or another he became attached to the Catering Corps within the Royal — or whatever it was and so we followed him down to Cornwall. I remember going down on the first night, presumably he had got us some billet down there, and looking out on the train on the right hand side across the — I think it must have been Bristol Channel. I think it's Bristol Channel it's called and seeing this great big glow in the distance and it was, obviously, the Germans bombing Bristol and you could just see this tremendous glow. So that was that so I was evacuated and went down there in a sort of semi-evacuation because my mother went with me and then we went to Wiltshire when my father got transferred. He was in the Royal Artillery, a big camp there, in Larkhill, in Salisbury, Wiltshire, I think it was and that's where we remained until it was time to get back to London.

Interviewer: So when did you return to London?

Raymond: I think I must have returned to London round about 1943-44 because the dangers had really passed by then in terms of the Blitz and all sort of that activity and so, yeah, that's when I returned. Yeah.

Interviewer: So when was it — which year was it — was it thirty-nine or forty that you were evacuated? Had they started the bombings in London?

Raymond: They'd started the bombing, in forty-one something like that, yeah, so that's really about the time when London was a target. Cos, of course, that was when Hitler was preparing to invade England and again, I'm again rambling on a bit, I remember my Gran. She had a very, very worried face and I didn't know what it was but, all of a sudden, I can see her now coming in to Christchurch Way to home, so pleased because the papers and perhaps the radio had announced that Hitler had decided to invade Russia instead of Britain. So she said, 'Oh, we're saved' [laughs]. I remember her saying that. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember the air raids, what you felt when the —?

Raymond: I think I'd — I think I was too young. It was — it was exciting. Looking back I was too young to be nervous. I suppose I was more excited cos things were going — this was something that was unreal sort of thing and the following day when you'd hear the siren going say, you know, go down the dug-outs and you'd hear the all clear. And then the following day I'd go out probably and meet my mates in the — in school and there was no traffic as there was today so you'd<sup>1</sup> play in the streets and you'd play in the roads, you know. There was — I don't know if it was propaganda — I never found one or whether it was actual but there was stories about children shouldn't pick up anything like, anything that looked like a butterfly or something like that from the pavement sort of thing because it could explode and it was where the Luftwaffe had dropped all these things down, you know, to terrorise the neighbourhood and you'd find but you would find little things perhaps hanging on, as I

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recall, on the clothes line where they dropped things down. I can't remember what they were but they were something within their war effort so, you know, to terrorise the civilian population so I can remember that. But it was — not for the people who was fighting but for a kid of five or six it was quite an exciting period, really. You know, seeing the soldiers in Greenwich Park, they may have been Home Guard, they may have been real soldiers but you know like years ago in football matches they used to have these wooden things. They used to make this noise like, diidiidiidii, like that, were the soldiers — soldiers or Home Guard they would have this wooden Tommy guns that used to do the same thing. So they'd be hiding behind the trees in Greenwich Park on the [unclear] and doing that sort of things [laughs]. Yeah, quite interesting.

Interviewer: So were you still going to school?

Raymond: Oh, yeah. I was going to the primary school it was then in — it's still there, the primary school in Christchurch Way. There at the top near Greenwich Church, not Greenwich Church, Church Alfeges. No, is it Greenwich Church Christchurch Way? St. Alfege Church is over the College, isn't it? That's it, yeah. Yeah, I was still going to school, yeah. I can't remember much about the evacuation because that was — that was another — another exciting period, really, because you were mixed up with all the troops. Where they was training, you know, for the invasion. Well, not so much for the invasion but for going — rambling on perhaps to 1944 and I was speaking to my cousin this morning on the telephone to jock memories because she was evacuated with me for a few, few months, in Wiltshire and so we used to go to Salisbury plain quite a lot and there was a huge encampment, as far as I recall, full of Italian prisoners of war because Italy had capitulated and they weren't seen as a threat so the Italian prisoners of war were allowed out in pairs to casually walk the streets and do whatever they did and they used to have these brownish denim overalls and jackets on and they'd had big white circle on the back of their coats so you'd know who they were. But the local — I do recall the local girls saying they loved them dearly [laughs] with their Italian accents. They used to make these lovely little ornaments with the Perspex from the — you know, there might be a German plane crash or something like that so they'd grab so they'd grab the Perspex from the cockpit and they'd made all these little lovely ornaments from them and give them to the girls [laughs]. Yeah, yeah, that's quite interesting. And I do recall being on Salisbury plain on many occasion round about, I suppose, '44 — 1944 and seeing parachute drops and we didn't know it then but they were clearly training for D-Day. I can see these aircrafts coming over and dozens and perhaps hundreds of parachutes opening up because Salisbury plain is quite vast and these guys jumping out the aircrafts and the parachutes opening. Sometimes you would occasionally, see the parachute open up like, you know, like a tube, but not fully extend so, obviously, the parachute failed. And they would — the nickname they would call those were 'Roman Candles'. 'There is a guy with a roman candle' and, of course, he would just go down and that was the end of it.

Interviewer: Did you know what they were training for?

Raymond: No, this was — this was top secret. Nobody knew<sup>2</sup> anything really, I don't suppose they knew quite honestly but that was what they were obviously training for. But at that time Wiltshire was full of American troops. Full of American troops, Canadian troops, New Zealand troops. The Canadians were pretty rough dudes. They was always — they liked their drink and me and mum would lay in bed sometimes, we'd hear fights outside. There'd be knife fights and all sorts of things. Well, you know, they really were rough guys the Canadians but the Americans was great. They loved the kids and I think, myself and my cousin, we had chewing gum from them, 'You have any gum, chum?', of flavours you would never even experience today. They was wonderful. Great.

Interviewer: So you liked the Americans but not so much the Canadians then?

Raymond: They were great, yeah. They was approachable and they must have — they must have got really fed up with us kids saying, 'Got any gum, chum?', 'Got any gum, chum?' but, no, they all took it in good part and they gave us the chewing gum and, of course, going back to the girls again, from what I remember, being an inquisitive 8 or 9 year old, I suppose then they loved them because the American soldiers when they was out of belt dress they were very, very smart compared to our soldiers. They was always dressed in their rough khaki and their boots and things like that, whereas the American soldiers were allowed out with a nice uniform and shoes and things like that so the girls went for those guys. They really did, yeah [laughs].

Interviewer: So did you go to school while you were evacuated?

Raymond: Yes, yes, I – I had a wartime education sort of thing, you know, but I can't remember much about the school. I remember one school we lived for a period in Oxford and I remember going to school there, near the Radcliffe Hospital, I think it was in Oxford. We were pretty bullied — we was pretty bullied. We were cockney kids, you know, and we was — we were bullied by the locals there and I remember in this school in – in Oxford, I think, near the playing ground there was a patch full of stinging nettles and a group of kids got a hold of this stinging nettles and we used to wear short trousers in those days, and they whipped my round the legs with these stinging nettles and I was in a pretty bad state then, I really was. So that was the [unclear] of bullying I think we – we used to get from the locals which, I suppose, you can understand. We was a different sort of people wasn't we because they say from London to Oxford, considering the transportation in the forties it was like going from here to Spain, wasn't it really though, yeah.

Interviewer: Was it just the children who treated you that way or?

Raymond: It was the children. It was the children.

Interviewer: Did the adults —?

Raymond: Yeah, but the adults — the adults didn't like the — the parents. They was very much a closed society. I had an aunt that lived in Canterbury and sometimes we would go down to

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Canterbury and the locals, you know, 'Here comes some more Londoners' and so there was some hostilities there you know and lets be fair as I said, you didn't travel that much in those days. For a start, just before the war people didn't have the money and there wasn't the transportation facilities. These were merely villages, you know, that had overgrown with evacuees and things like that and suppose they didn't like the kids going down there to scourge. We brought our London ways with us and that's how we got a little bit bullied [laughs], yeah.

Interviewer: So were you back in London by the time that — of the V1's and the V2's?

Raymond: I was back — I was back in London then, yeah, because the Blitz had finished and so we were then experiencing the V1's and the V2's, the doodlebugs which you could hear coming and you dreaded when the engine cut out and you just waited. But the V2's were silent until you heard a bang. If you didn't hear the bang you was in it. That's it. And that's when I mentioned about Maze Hill and things like that where it —. I don't suppose — they are in the archives as<sup>3</sup> I said to you in the email, the *Mercury*, I think it was called — because it is called the *Mercury* now but in those days I think it was called the *Kentish Mercury* and they — they have a wonderful archive [unclear]. You carry on talking while — cos I just got a piece of paper here.

Interviewer: Yeah.

[Pause while Raymond looks for paper]

Raymond: No, I'll find it in a minute. Ok.

Interviewer: We can have a look at it after if you like.

Raymond: Yeah, go on then.

Interviewer: So was you granddad, was he in the ARP?

Raymond: My granddad was in the ARP, yes. And, yeah, he was — he'd been a soldier in the Boer War so was of advance age at that particular time, so, yeah. And an uncle, I'm just trying to find his thing, he was in the — in the merchant navy and another uncle who was in the Royal Lancashire Regiment and got captured in Singapore. Yeah.

Interviewer: So what do you remember — what are your main memories of the war? Is it of the air raids or —?

Raymond: — I think my memories have now got confused quite honestly with all that's taken place since apart from what I've told you, I mean, we know at the end. I think one of the things that I do remember was when the war finished. On victory night, was it VE night or something I think it was called — I remember Greenwich simply seething with people and these things that they had in football matches if I turn back I can still see people walking around Greenwich Trafalgar Road hundreds and

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hundreds of people. All linking arms and singing and it was a magic night. That's what I can remember and, of course, the other thing that I can remember as well was that Greenwich and London — you'd see it more in London and places like Greenwich or Catford or something like that because that was where the congregation was. You wouldn't see this in the sticks where — like Salisbury where they were training for actual contact — combat abroad in France but certainly, while it was all being prepared Greenwich was full of soldiers from New Zealand, India, you know, countries that were our allies. They were over here getting prepared to, presumably, D-Day. You saw these lovely Indian soldiers, you know, with their long socks and their short trousers and their turbans on. You would also see, in Greenwich, quite a lot of soldiers, I think it was mostly — they could have been airmen, I don't know, but they would be in a blue uniform which was a hospital uniform I think it was a hospital and they were recovering from war wounds so you'd see those walking around Greenwich as well. But as I say VE night, victory night, Greenwich was just simply heaving with people. You had — you had a real community, I mean, I was just going forward forty or fifty years now, I was down Greenwich, you know, on the day your exhibition was closing and I walked down around Greenwich and came back, as Marina will tell you, totally depressed because Greenwich, to me, has lost its soul. There is nothing in Greenwich now, there's no neighbourhood, where all the property was probably owned by Merton College Estate which was a very, very big estate and they've probably been bought up privately is a popular place because the Dome, the Blackwall tunnel is still a mess and I used to travel through the Blackwall tunnel everyday to work and I get so mad when I think about all the work that could be done by building a tunnel over that area, you know, instead of let you find the Blackwall tunnel, is still the same as it was during the war, something is broken down you can't get through. A mess, a total mess. But Greenwich at that time, certainly Charlton, was full of big industry. Very, very big industry employing thousands and thousands of people, you know. A lot of them were uncles and aunts and I think, slightly distracting from the war<sup>4</sup>, but it was a part of that, I suppose, because it was a community and you had lots of aunts and uncles if you — if you got a little bit too cocky there was always an aunt or an uncle to say to your father, 'Keep an eye on Ray'. It's — you haven't got that today and that was perhaps another breakdown of society that we've got today. It was a — it was a friend... — you didn't lock the doors. You never locked doors in those days and as I say, everybody knew each other but Greenwich, unfortunately, the soul has gone. To my mind, anyway.

Interviewer: So how would you summarise your experience of the war?

Raymond: Unique. I can't. I mean, I'm not the only one, kids in France had a difference — my age now with the German occupation but it was unique. One other thing on my little notes here was — as I — as I became a teenager and then got my job. I got a job working with British Railways in New Cross and they taught me how to become a plumber and a gasfitter and things but the guys that I was working with were demobbed soldiers, who had the trade, the plumbing trade, before they were called up and they were wonderful guys. They really were. You learnt the trade. But a lot of things — there were casualties of the war obviously because some of the soldiers that came back found that they weren't coming back to a family because the families were killed in the Blitz and things like that. Like

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we generally do in this country, it's not just this government but, you know, governments prior, one day you're fighting, the war's over, the next day you're in civvy street, 'Good bye soldier'. That's it so there's no aftercare or anything like that and lots of those soldiers finished up simply as tramps. And because it took many, many years after the war for London to be demo — this part of London to be demolished and then rebuilt again with these horrible high-rise blocks of flats but that's another story. So you had lots of warehouses that was still shells and so these guys — that would be there home. You'd just see them in the daytime, you know, come round and somebody would slip them a couple of bob or something like that but they were ex-soldiers and they just could not get back to civvy street. And you have got, going on a little bit to my interest in — my obsession with war, I suppose is that the same has happened with the guys who fought in the Falklands War. The majority of them now, I've got a vast collection of medals of the Falklands War and they are fetching an extremely good price, not if you're paying for them but you know. I think a guy who served as a member of the SAS in the Falklands War, who's got the Falklands War medal, £18,000 you're talking about and it wasn't all that long ago but the majority of soldiers who fought in the Falkland war that survived and came out, they were regular soldiers are now dead. They committed suicide. It is a well-known fact that they committed suicide and I have no doubt that these guys who are out in Iraq and Afghanistan are going to do the same thing unless the government gets to grip and gives them some sort of help to settle down in civvy street again but of the track record of what I have told you and what has happened to the guys in the Falklands War they will commit suicide. They can't settle down in civvy street, you know, that's the sad part of it.

Interviewer: Do you have anything else that you would want to mention about the war that I haven't asked about?

Raymond: No, I don't think so. I mean to say, I have great experience of the artefacts of the war but from a municipal point with my career in the Greenwich local council what a mess it was in trying to re-build London and it's still a mess, you know, with 20 floors. They should only have gone up to 5. And — and it was through my efforts as a Works Manager for the GLC that I managed to get two high-rise blocks in Hackney demolished and blown up<sup>5</sup> because they were not suitable to be maintained. But that's another story, not connected with this.

Interviewer: But you have felt the effects of war throughout your working career?

Raymond: Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely, yeah. I mean as I said to you when I was — before I went in to Senior Management in the GLC, I became a plumber on the GLC, on the Bellingham Estate, and repairing the gutters there I would often find shrapnel in the old cast iron guttering and you — because the — because the houses — and most of them still are, they have what are called double Roman tiles on the roofs of these high-rise houses. You'd find the shrapnel probably goes through the tiles, they're ridged these double Romans, the go through the tiles, the shrapnel was still in the loft

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<sup>5</sup> 25 min

space but no water ever got through because of the shape of the tiles and they were still there, what forty years after, shrapnel you know! Yeah, God. Yeah, little things like that.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me.

Raymond: Thank you for listening.

Interviewer: I'm going to turn this —

**End of Interview.**