

Interviewee: Raymond Weeks

Interviewer: Vivien Hamley

Location: University of Greenwich

Date: 24.07.2010

Interviewer: My name is Vivien Hamley and it is the 24th of July 2010 and I am interviewing you, Raymond Weeks.

Raymond: Thank you.

Interviewer: And you — when were you born?

Raymond: July 1931.

Interviewer: So you were quite young when the war broke out. You were? Eight?

Raymond: Yeah. Right [laughs].

Raymond: September first — first September when we were all taken out in to the sticks, as you know, got rid of all the children in case we were bombed out and I was eight then. Do you want me to carry on about where I went when I was evacuated or? You ask the questions and I'll —

Interviewer: Tell me where you were living at that time.

Raymond: I was living at — what before the house was bombed, of course? My original —

Interviewer: When the war broke out, yeah.

Raymond: At Barnefield Road, in Plumstead, 57 Barnefield Road in Plumstead. Yeah, and I am the youngest of 10 children, four boys, no six boys and four girls and I lived there until we went on the first evacuation, which was to a place called Hawkhurst, in Kent. All the kids from London were thrown out to the sticks and it was a good thing for us. I mean, we all thought that apples grew in boxes and things, we were ignorant [laughs]. But nothing happened and this of course was termed the phoney war.

Interviewer: What date was that when?

Raymond: We actually went on the 1st of September 1939.

Interviewer: What was the actual day?

Raymond: The actual day was a Friday and war was declared on the third which was a Sunday, 3rd of September 1939. We were all — all the evacuees that had gone from London on block we were in church at Hawkhurst when war was actually declared, the moments declared. That church is long since gone, by the way. It's not there, it's something that — Well, it's in your memory but it's not there

anymore. My bit of notoriety, for going with one of my younger brothers, who I'll come to later — not my younger, I was the youngest but the next boy up. We were pinching a few apples, actually [laughs]. I broke my arm, in three places and I ended up in the local cottage hospital in Hawkhurst. It is still there, it is still performing and I was in there for a fortnight with a broken arm. It's about two and a half minutes now, isn't it, so long as it takes to plaster it. Mums, all mums not just my mum, they came down and took us home because nothing was happening.

Interviewer: After how long were you evacuated for then that first time?

Raymond: That time? — Next to nothing, probably two or three months and I wasn't the only child that came home. I mean, all the mums came down in herds, didn't they? They put their little children out to grass. It wasn't strictly like that, obviously, we were a great family as far as it went and in spite the fact of what happened when it happened. I do remember quite a lot about it and I am pleased to say that at the moment if my body is falling apart, my mind's still quite good [laughs].

Interviewer: So the first time you went, on the first of September, and you went for sort of two or three months to Hawkhurst. You went by train presumably?

Raymond: We did indeed. We were delivered to the various stations, Waterloo in this instance, and we were farmed out. Even the parents didn't know where we were going until we got there and notices were sent home. We had our little labels and gasmasks boxes and what have you and it was typical — sorry?

Interviewer: What did — I was going to say, what did it feel like doing that? Was it —?

Raymond: In a way it was like going on holiday to be quite honest because nothing had happened and God forbid —. And as I said to you, I wasn't joking when I said we thought that apples grew in boxes. Then we found out that they were there for, what we used to call, nicking, scrumping, was the word we used for that. Hold the old jumper out and get them in there and if a copper comes along put the jumper down, drop the apples and run. But it was like a holiday and again there I stayed with a family, Mr and Mrs Field, and they had two children of their own who were the same age as myself and my daughter — my sister rather and the brother, again, Ronny, who we will come to a bit later, Ronny and I was staying with them and my sister was in a little bungalow next to — next door and they were lovely people. They really were. I mean, a lot of people who were evacuees didn't get the worth that they should have had and that's like life today. You get a few rotten apples in the barrel out there and we all get clogged by that little layer that you get. But they were lovely people, they were really lovely and in latter time, latter years, when I had my own daughter we used to go down and see them. We were very welcome and it was very nice to see them and it was lovely¹. And also we didn't sort of intermix with the children down there, with other schools, we were taken on mass to a specific building which had been allocated with our London teachers and things like that so that —

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Interviewer: So you had the same teachers from the local area that went down there or did —?

Raymond: From the area but not necessary the teachers that you had from the school because lots of schools were taken in bulk. I mean, instead of taking 50 children from one school, which was called Plum Lane up in Plumstead actually. Instead of taking 50 children from one school and going to Waterloo and going down to Hawkhurst, they took about 50 to 250 children from schools all around the area and there was herds of us at Waterloo piling on to these trains and we went down there and we arrived, in Hawkhurst in particular, in a Village Hall and we were sort of fostered out from there. Mums came in, and what to say, they sort of, 'Hmm, we'll have that one' [laughs]. Or two. Generally, particularly mine, she was with my sister who came with me and the first time, Ronny, he was the next boy to me. Although there was 10 of us, we were, boy – girl, boy – girl, more or less right up the scale.

Interviewer: Were they?

Raymond: Yes, and there was always —

Interviewer: So who did you — who did you have — you had one of your other siblings and your sister stayed all quite close together is that right?

Raymond: Oh, yes. The whole family of us were close. Very close family.

Interviewer: No, I mean, when you moved to — when you went to — when you were evacuated, the three of you were quite close?

Raymond: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Where were the other children at that time?

Raymond: Oh, sorry. You're referring to my family — yeah, right. When we first went, put it in perspective, when we went I was the youngest child of the lot. My sister was the next youngest, the Ronny, that was the brother that was with me in the house. Ronny, unfortunately was one of those who were killed later on, and he was just coming up to school leaving age. So there were three of us evacuated, then I had, there was a sister going up again, going up the list, a sister of seventeen who was killed. There was my brother, who is still alive in Canada, he was very badly injured in the house and it was like that. Because of their age, you see, they were — some were out at work and I had a brother in the Navy at the time, a brother in army at the time but again this will all come together if you want to know this sort of thing, I'm sure you'll ask me. That was the thing, the children who were old enough, young enough shall we say, to be evacuated were evacuated but it wasn't compulsory. Almost, you know, you got the foot on mum's toes, sort of thing, so you dare not send them but it was actually.

Interviewer: Your mother was quite willing, was she, to have you evacuated? Do you think?

Raymond: Yes, absolutely. If your mum loved you, put it like that, they didn't want you to get hurt and I looked at it like that, you know, we were sent there and we did enjoy it. I mean, the short period we

were there we had a wonderful time and as far as we were concerned, as it was at that time, mum was at home, dad was at home and brothers and sisters and things like that. If they wanted us they'd come and get us sort of thing. Otherwise we'd be up there nicking the apples still while we get them for free. Because we lived right opposite, it's still — it used to be, in latter years, one of the first Chinese restaurant owners lived in this place. It was quite a mansion and three old ladies lived there and the first place we were evacuated to in Hawkhurst. Mr Fields, the father sort of thing, he was a general factotum to the ladies across the road that's where the apples trees were [laughs].

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Raymond: But, you know, it was great.

Interviewer: So you were back home again after a couple of months?

Raymond: I was talking to my wife about that this morning and I'm not honestly truthful about — not because I don't know — I think we went home just before Christmas that year. Mums came down, nothing was happening. I'd broke my arm, she was a bit sorry for that [laughs]. It's still not straight. We went home and —

Interviewer: You went home and — so you had Christmas at home? In Plumstead?

Raymond: Yes, I am assert of that but I can't tell you the exact date that I went back home, no, but within that group. So we'll say December 1939.

Interviewer: Do you remember whether that Christmas was different in any way because it was war time? Or was it just Christmas?

Raymond: No, because the shortages and the things that we should and shouldn't do were a bit out of my domain. I was the youngest of the group and, you know, I was only eight then and so the things that were going on weren't actually my worry. My worry was playing out in the street because that's what we kids did in London, playing out in the street in the old buildings and God knows what not and having little fights and things like that. My brother, the one that died, Ronny, he was a little gang leader, I don't mean in the way that we got them now, don't get me wrong, you know what I'm on about. Give you a clip around the ear, and you know, 'I'll get my big brother on you'. It was — no, nothing was happening. There were no air raids going on. Nothing at all.

²Interviewer: So did your — the rest of your — did your family come together for Christmas or were they all separated in the forces and what now?

Raymond: If as and when because as I say, at that time I had two brothers still in service, that were in the services. One in the army and one in the navy. But those — yes, they came together. One of my

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sisters, that was killed, she lived about a mile away, and yes, we would all come together. Definitely, we were a very close family. There's no doubt about that.

Interviewer: And so what happened then after Christmas? Were you evacuated again?

Raymond: I was but not until June 1940.

Interviewer: Oh, so you were there for a good sort of six months.

Raymond: This phoney war business, and don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to be clever about it, but the phoney war business went on until May, really, and then the Germans started invading Europe, you know, Belgium, France, da-da-da. It was, the Battle of Britain for instance, officially, officially, started 10th of July and it went through to the end of October. That was the Battle of Britain part of it. Forget the Blitz, that sort of continuation of the Battle of Britain and so round about that period, the middle of July, whether by accident, well, it must have been by accident, it wasn't by design. But by accident there were a few bombs dropped on London. I mean a few from one plane or what have you. Whoosh, we all went away again. Torquay, down in Devon, this time and it's strange, and again, I was talking about it with my wife this morning. Although I was evacuated three times, I remember the first one very well, the second one, we went to Torquay. The people weren't quite so nice and bearing in mind I only lived in a little back street with, not ten kids, two or three were away in the army and one was a married sister of course, who had her own children before I was born, I was an uncle before I was born, and so they were at home and nothing happened and, anyway, off we went to Torquay. The only thing I remember about it, which is quite strange, was that we used to go to this little evangelist hall type thing on a Sunday, you know, for Sunday school and after I came home, I was only there for about a month, in Torquay, for nothing still happened. Mum appeared again and take them home and the little church that I used to go to in Torquay, a little chapel, with all the London kids, was hit by a bomb, a direct hit, and seven children were killed. But I'd been taken home by that time. But that period, I remember going to one or two little beaches in that month like Oddicombe and Babbacombe in Torquay, but I think I don't remember it because it wasn't quite as nice as I got the first time I went and the last time I went, which we'll come to, of course, very shortly. When we got back home, again nothing was happening, but then things did start to happen, of course, and until in the middle of August when it was getting very, very close to being invaded by the Germans.

Interviewer: And there was bombing at that time?

Raymond: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: What was the first you knew, personally, of bombs locally to where you were?

Raymond: When they dropped them, straight away [laughs]. No, that's a silly answer but it's true. But the very first time that London was heavily bombed, of course, was the 7th of September 1940 and that was a daylight raid and that was heavy. The whole of London, because as you can appreciate the factories and the river Thames was full of boats and barges and the docks was full of boats, not now of course, and the whole of London was alight. Basically the riverside and all the docks and the

surrounding areas, of course, dropping things from an aircraft in those days wasn't totally accurate as again we'll come to.

Interviewer: So did you see that? Could you see that?

Raymond: Was I there? Yes!

Interviewer: Do you remember being in your house and looking out and seeing that view?

Raymond: Yeah, I'll tell you what. We used to — as children we used to — before that the Battle of Britain was going on and you've seen photographs I'm sure of all the contrails of all the dogs fights — dog fights going on. We used to be out in the streets watch all this going on. We didn't know we were being so stupid, you know. Mum, 'Come in!'. I don't think that was going to do but —

Interviewer: Did you have anything like air raid shelters at — homemade ones?

Raymond: No, no. We did not. We did not have air raid shelter but we used to go around to there is a road called Herbert Road, again — could I just ask one question? Are you very au fait with the area at all?

Interviewer: I am, yes.

Raymond: Do you know Herbert Road then?

Interviewer: Herbert Road —

Raymond: Eglinton Hill —

Interviewer: Oh, yes. I do know —

Raymond: There used to be a shop, like what we call a [unclear] or Perks and people like that in the years gone by. And they had a basement so half of the people in Plumstead used to — who hadn't got the shelters rolled up their blankets and off you went family and all the little kids in tow. Spent the night down there and when the all clear went the next morning back home if it was there —

Interviewer: How many people would be down there, do you reckon?

Raymond: Probably, the one that we went to, probably talking in the region of probably 50 to 60 people and you all —

Interviewer: And how big was the basement?

Raymond: It was just a basement. It wouldn't have saved anything. It wouldn't have saved a slice of bacon if a bomb had hit it. But nevertheless, we thought it was good and — but it wasn't³. Like all

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those things that were useless. The two things that were, that did have a lot of uses and did actually work on occasions were the Anderson shelters and the Morrison shelters.

Interviewer: So nobody, that was sort of locally to you had those in their garden? That you remember?

Raymond: Yeah, a couple of doors away from me and it saved them when our house was bombed. Yeah. Could I just go to the 7th of September again, I was in one of those shelters, not in that particular ones, I was in one of the public shelters and we heard — we could hear and aircraft that had been shot down, it was actually one of our own aircrafts and I was literally sort of standing here and we ran out of the shelter to have a look at this thing and there was a bloke coming down in a parachute and we realised that one of our own Spitfires, actually, had been shot down and it crashed in to a wall and if I'm standing here, God forbid me if I'm not telling you the truth, and the thing crashed, like if you took the door at the other side of here, wait straight through a wall.

Interviewer: So about 20 feet away?

Raymond: Yeah and the guy that was coming down in the parachute was a chap called Sarre, S-A-R-R-E, and he was Sergeant Sarre and he was shot down three times, including that one, three times in the war and he survived the war and died about five years ago. Out — to you know Shoreham in Kent? Shoreham?

Interviewer: I do.

Raymond: You do? Well, they have a weekend through from May to October —

Interviewer: Oh, yes. I've been there.

Raymond: Yes, you've been there. Ok. In latter years, probably about 10 years ago, I went in there. They used to [unclear] and only do about I think it was one a weekend or something like that and every weekend through the summer period. This is how I found out about Sergeant Sarre, because, obviously, I didn't know who he was coming down the parachute and they'd done one of the digs, you know what I mean? Digging all these things up and they dug in this particular place and they found things like from the Spitfire, remnants from the Spitfire, the canons from it and instruments and all that things. As you can imagine it was a hell of a mess, it went through a brick wall and the brick wall wasn't very good either [laughs] and it went down some depth. I mean, we can joke about it, why not at the moment and the pilot lived and things like that.

Interviewer: So when he landed, did he land near you?

Raymond: No, no. It was just like jumping out of an airplane somewhere cos the hell, your plane's just been shot to pieces. Let's get out of this. And they were lucky to get out if they were, I mean, they didn't have ejection seats or anything like that. It was —

Interviewer: So did that frighten you then when — was that a scary experience or —?

Raymond: No. No, it didn't. Not to the point of standing there shivering and all that. Maybe run home like hell, I'd tell you [laughs]. But I wasn't the only one. But I remember that very vividly, yeah.

Interviewer: So then on the 7th September were you evacuated? When were you next evacuated?

Raymond: The 7th September was the very first time London was bombed, daylight, I mean, it started sort of late afternoon and it knocked the hell out London, it's no doubt about that. Fires were going for ages and people everywhere were killed, all typed of people.

Interviewer: Can I just asked were you at school at this time or —

Raymond: Pardon?

Interviewer: Did you have school? Cos that would be sort of the beginning —

Raymond: Yes, we did have school [laughs]. I've must have gone to about seven or eight different schools in Plumstead. Going away and coming back and, god knows. I didn't know who my teachers were at that stage. Anyway, yes, we were at school.

Interviewer: Was that sort of the beginning of the term?

Raymond: This is one of the things we say when we were talking about children and their education now. I mean, we were — I feel that I was fairly well educated, ok, I've been to the junior school and the progression during the war of going to a school if there was one open, god knows what. To take the last years of our time at school, I went to, it was all part of your Greenwich University, Woolwich Polytechnic and I went there for three and a half years and I studied building and construction right the way through and that include everything, like technical drawings and graphic studies and all that sort of kind. We had the normal ABC and things like that and I was there three and a half years and I actually ended up a plumber, which my father was. I did five years of apprenticeship plumbing and things like that.

Interviewer: Going back, when you were evacuated and you came back to London, you went to a different school from the one you had just left.

Raymond: Yes, we did. I went to a little place for a few days, a little place called Fox Hill. Do you know Fox Hill?

Interviewer: I don't actually, no. Where is that?

Raymond: You don't. Um, how can I best put it? Do you know — you know Broomfield Road — Herbert Road, Herbert Road?

Interviewer: Herbert Road, yeah.

Raymond: The — it must be the north end of it, the end towards the river. There is a crossroads there, a little crossroad. If you turn left and go down the hill, up the other side took you to Woolwich Common. The Fox Hill School is down, just down there, yeah.

Interviewer: Ok, yeah.

Raymond: I went to one right over the other side of Plumstead, The Slade and a place called the Gordon School in Eltham and that's where I took my exams to get forward. Anyway, so the 7th of September and from then on, of course, it became quite nasty. Even after that was finished after about an hour later they were back again and they were bombing all night and⁴ then it went on from there. I mean, London was hit by night bombings 59 days on the trot and the only time they stopped was for a couple of days over Christmas 1940. That period, the 26th September, my mother had already decided, by then, that this wasn't the right place for myself, my sister, not Ronny, the younger brother, because he had just started work, when we left Hawkhurst he was out of the bit that he was a school boy 14 years of age and you're —. We were gone and I last saw my mother alive, last time I saw my mother full stop. [Clears throat] No, I had this blooming cold, as I said, I thought it was a rasp at the beginning. I'm fine now.

Interviewer: Yeah, have a sip of water.

Raymond: Cheers. Am I rattling on to quick?

[Drinks water]

Interviewer: Nuh huh. It's absolutely fine.

Raymond: Oh, that's lovely. Thank you very much. On 26th September we went to Henwick Road, it'd just of — do you know Well Hall Odeon?

Interviewer: Well Hall —

Raymond: Odeon. Well Hall, at all? Eltham?

Interviewer: I know Well Hall, yes.

Raymond: Yes, well there is a big school behind — it's a big St. Baranbys Church beyond that.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Raymond: St. Henwick Road School, big school. We all meet around there and we went on buses to Waterloo and my mother was there and 'good bye' and that's the last time I saw my mother. Anyway, we went to Waterloo and we all piled on the train. Again, Londoners from everywhere and we hadn't got a clue where we were going. We only knew that we were going away from London and we ended up in Ilfracombe in North Devon, yeah, and we got down there, probably, round about eight — nine at

⁴ 20 min

night. I think in those days — in those days, of course, you had little railway stations all over the place, you know, in cuttings and god knows where. We ended up in Ilfracombe and we were in the Hall and we got down, my sister was with me as I say. 'Do not leave your brother', my mum — right, ok. We were down there and [makes snoring sound], I mean, we were tired, absolutely dead tired. We were laying there and we could see all these people disappearing around the room and getting down to being not many of us left.

Interviewer: Oh, when the children were being picked, you mean?

Raymond: Yeah, it was a meat market [laughs].

Interviewer: I see.

Raymond: 'That one', and 'that one' and you go sort of. I was with my sister, anyway, and we got down, in all seriousness, we got down to the, probably, last half dozen couples and that was the problem, you see, Johnny didn't want to leave his sister and his sister didn't want to leave Johnny, and all that sort of kind. I know, I was in that position, obviously, and the people that were left, which wasn't us because we were extremely lucky as it happened. A young lady came in — she was a very fussy little lady, she was. She was probably mid-forties or something like that and only about that tall and she walked round, passed us and — 'What about these two?' [unclear] 'Come along', you know, so we went but what was left was sent off to one of the homes which I'm sure you've heard bad things about. Do excuse me if I do that [points], it's rude but I do it, alright. Mr and Mrs Patterson, now if I can just interject a little bit, Mrs Patterson at that very moment had a son who was seventeen, Robert, and he was at sea in the Merchant Navy and his boat had torpedoed and she didn't know where her son was, whether he was dead, alive or whatever. As it happens, he was dead. But so she was having all that while this was going on. Her husband, a broad Scot, I mean, broad, you probably, couldn't get further north. I don't know exactly where he came from. He was a coach driver and his job was driving troops about — moving them about in block through the countryside and he might be away for six weeks at a time, then home for two or three weeks but anyway we went home late at night and we didn't have a clue where we were. And didn't even know it was called Ilfracombe. We were somewhere away from mum and dad and we went to stay there. Can I say this, at this moment, because I have never got much of a chance to say it elsewhere. We must have been the luckiest kids around because they were absolutely marvellous and they were really, really lovely people — absolutely. But the first time we met Mr Patterson [laughs] — we used to have to sit at the table with aprons on when we ate our food but don't get me wrong she was a gorgeous lady and he came home and was sitting down, and the first meal, this is absolutely truth, believe me, we started to eat the food and Mrs Patterson, 'Hmm huh', Mr Patterson started saying grace you see and, I said to my wife this morning, I said, 'That's the only thing I never found out, all the year and a half I was there'. I never found out what he used to say at grace! He used to mumble away and Mrs Patterson's⁵ eyes were going [moves eyes back and forth], you know. Anyway we learnt what the business was but then

⁵ 25 min

again he was a lovely guy and we used to go back in latter years when my daughter was in sort of her teens and things like that. You'd see old man Patterson, as we called him, out the local on a bike. Have you ever been to Ilfracombe?

Interviewer: I have, yeah. It's a lot of hills.

Raymond: On a bike! [laughs]. Cutting gardens and God knows what. We'd stop and have a chat him and what have you. I lived in a road called Whittingham Road which if you —. Do you remember the Capston Hill down on the front? Well, if you look back up towards the back of Ilfracombe, the road up there, Whittingham Road.

Interviewer: How lovely.

Raymond: And, of course, the view out from there down towards the [unclear], you could see the Capston, you could see part of the harbour and everything. It was fantastic. Again, school children, all London school children, London school teachers and what have you. We were quite happy skipping around, God knows what. We started writing letters home to my mum and dad and they started to come back with things like 'No such number', 'This address' — not in these words but 'This address does not exist' with a big blue pencil through. It was a blue pencil, censorship.

Interviewer: What did you make of that at the time?

Raymond: Well, we didn't realise what was going on and bearing in mind that, this is the crux of the whole matter. First of all my mother and my father, I might be jumping the gun but my mother and my father, two brothers and two sisters and one of my sisters who was married, her husband were in the house at the time that this incident happened. The reason my married sister and her husband were there, they'd been to see mum, stay with mum during the day and the raid was getting quite heavy and they decided to stay the night. Well, at — bear in mind we went away the 26th September, ok. This was in early morning, quarter past one in the morning the 5th of October this happened. A land mine — an aerial mine — a parachute mine hit the house, effectively within a couple of yards from the house, anyway. At that time the two brothers were the only ones who were in bed at the time. The two brothers that were in bed at the time were my brother Ronny, who was the next boy who went on the first evacuation, and the brother that is still alive in Canada now, who is 88, and they were blown out into the street, the two of them and I only found this next thing that I'm going to say, I only found this out very recently because I was always under the impression that my brother didn't know anything about it. Well he didn't really but there were certain things and he told me on the phone within the last eighteen months. He said that Ronny, he was the younger brother, the next one up from me, he said, 'I remember Ronny speaking to me and saying I can't breathe' and he said there was just a hole, they could actually see through it. They were covered in rubble and god knows what. Ronny was taken to hospital, St. Nicholas Hospital as was — do you remember or know of St Nicholas? No? It was over the other side of Woolwich/Plumstead. It's been demolished since. And Ronny was taken to hospital and he died seven hours later. The other one, that is the one in Canada, he —

Interviewer: And what's his name?

Raymond: Well, he — Leslie. Yeah, he was so badly injured that he was in hospital for about twelve weeks and he didn't know what had actually had gone on. Nobody was telling him that his whole family had been killed sort of thing.

Interviewer: What was the matter — do you know what injury he had at that point?

Raymond: Yeah, both legs crushed — broken and various internal injuries and things like that.

Interviewer: Just from the ceiling?

Raymond: Oh, every — the whole house was disintegrated. I mean, those things are hellish, particularly the blast. I mean, bombs coming in drilling in to the ground a bit before it exploded. It was the same when we had the V1's and the V2's. The V1's are flying bombs gave more blast because they'd explode as soon as they hit something. Whereas the V1's, the V2's rather, which came down with the speed of — what about three times the sound? And by the time they sort of gone in about thirty foot then they exploded and blast would go up [figures 'going up' with hands] rather than there [figures blast going low]. Les was convalescent for 18 months after that, so you can see he was fairly badly injured, and then he joined the air force afterwards. So he was in the air force. At that time, another brother was away in the Navy and eventually somebody found him.

Interviewer: What was his name?

Raymond: Bill. He wasn't, it was Thomas Albert and we had a Lawrence Alfred. We had a Lawrence Alfred and a Thomas Albert and they used to call them Bill and Burt [laughs]. But that was Bill. He died about two years ago, I went to his funeral up in Edinburgh. He was away, the brother that was in the army was one of those who were killed because he was home on leave. He had an appendix operation, that's Burt,⁶ he had an appendix operation and he was home after convalescence. He was getting some leave, so he was killed. Yeah. Then the sister, my eldest sister, very eldest sister, was married and had a child of her own before I was born.

Interviewer: What was her name?

Raymond: Peggy.

Interviewer: Peggy.

Raymond: But they didn't get names like that. My sister, Ruby, her name was Hazel Ruby Ella sort of thing. And the other sister, the youngest sister, was killed, Muriel, she was seventeen and Peggy, as we called her, her name was Hazel as well but with another second name. So in those days — my mother's name Adelina Amelia and my great-granddaughter she got one of her names, Amelia. Sophie Amelia, so that's been carried on. But —

⁶ 30 min

Interviewer: Were they, if you don't mind me asking, were they killed sort of outright when the bomb landed?

Raymond: I'm glad you asked me that question because one of my quests since this happened is to try to find out exactly what happened that night because, and the reason I'm saying that to you is that I never knew anything about this until two months after they had been killed, buried and it had all been done and we were still writing letters to home and they were still coming back. One morning, about two months after it happened, my sister, the one that's not well now, had a stroke sometime ago and she's in a home somewhere, she's 18 months older than me. We were called in to the headmistress room at the school, which we were using, all London children and London teachers. Her name — surname was Reeks, R-double E-K-S and mine is Weeks. We were called over to her room and she had the horrible job, I don't know but I'm sure she probably had the same thing to do again and again, but we were told we were orphans. That our parents had been killed and things like that and quite frankly nobody knew exactly what to do with us, you know. We got sent off to a cinema to watch a film for God's sake.

Interviewer: What were you thinking at the time? Did you —

Raymond: I don't know. It's a blur really and I think — I think the thing that helped it was these fantastic people we stayed with and put that in its context. My aunt, who was my mother's youngest sister, who was the one who took us on, she had been nominated by my mother, if you like, should anything have happened to them, which it did in the end she would have been our guardian, her and her husband. Well, my mother had ten children that I'm aware of, whether like in those days they had some, you know, loss or whatever I don't know. The aunt and uncle I went to live with, I know it sounds strange but she was totally Victorian, absolutely Victorian to the extent where, when I was living there, in Eltham, if my mates came and knocked on the door — nobody was ever invited in to my house. It was just a [unclear], it's true and when she died, she was just coming up to 96, in 1993 she died and a friend of mine, we had been friends, we started school together, we were both four and a half and I shall be 79 next Thursday and his birthday is two days after mine and he'll be 79 and we've been mates ever since we started school together. Well, yeah, he came to the funeral and when we went back to the house afterwards he turned around to me and said, I know quite what he said, 'Do you realise something?' I said, 'What?'. 'It's the first time I've even been inside this house'. You see? Honestly. But again she didn't — she owed us nothing. She looked after us and she had no children of her own.

Interviewer: So going — So winding back to Ilfracombe, so you went to the cinema after you been told that you were orphans.

Raymond: And, I don't know what we did.

Interviewer: Do you remember what the film was? I remember going to the cinema

Raymond: No, what the hell. There's all sorts of things going through your mind. You know, what's this all about? I think that because of the people we were with, were the people that we were with, that we — it sort of softened the blow somehow because we — yeah.

Interviewer: Were they a great comfort to you?

Raymond: They were so nice and we — but, of course, we didn't know until a couple of months, when she first found out about it she had the job somehow to getting us told about it and it was obviously her that it went through to. But in those days, in Herbert Road, everybody was a family some way or another, the baker, the butcher, the candlestick makers and that sort of thing. My sister, it was my sister who told her, before she knew what had happened, sort of mentioned to her, because I asked the lady because I used to go back and see them with my daughter, my own daughter in later years, and she told me that it might be an idea to get in touch with the local butcher and that's how we were first informed. Through the channels of the local butcher being the first person if you like to find out where we were. My eldest sister, who was married before I was born, it's like all daughters⁷ and sons, I mean, they're married and they're living away and she lived about — over in Charlton about four or five miles away from where mum was and you don't go and see your mum particularly when some bloke up there is bombing the hell out of you, you know. She didn't know where we were, didn't know where we were at all, my brother in the navy didn't know where we were. My brother who is still alive and got out alive, he didn't know where we were. Nobody knew where we were.

Interviewer: Did your mother know where you were?

Raymond: My mother was killed. Yes, she knew where we were.

Interviewer: Yes, I know. Presumably she got that information —

Raymond: I've got a letter, the last letter my mother wrote to me. I've got the remnants of it. A little bit is missing, I've got it with me. But my — she wrote that letter on the 1st of October. That's the last letter I got from her. I've seen her on the 26th of September when we said 'bye' at Henwick Road. But the 1st of October was the letter that she wrote telling us she was going to come down and see us and bring things down and she was killed on the 5th of October. I know I'm jumping around a bit but all these years I've tried to find out when the house was hit, were they all killed instantly apart from the two brothers but I knew they weren't but the younger one died seven hours later. I've heard tales that my mother was alive and that she was brought out. I don't know how badly they were injured and this might sound morbid but it's my problem nobody else's. I've never been able to find any photographs of what the mess was like afterwards. You might find that odd that you'd want to know that but it's not. It's sort of writing the book and getting to the end of it, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely.

⁷ 35 min

Raymond: And wherever I went I've come up against a brick wall and I thought the thing is there must be something else. I always work on the basis that if a rocket went straight up in space nobody is going to tell me it's going to find a brick wall there must be something on the other side. But I've never been able to get anywhere that would actually —. I've got a book here that shows you the photograph it's called doodlebugs and rockets [looks for book].

Interviewer: But to your knowledge the house was destroyed completely, was it?

Raymond: Yeah. [Picks up book from bag]

Interviewer: And what is there now?

Raymond: Oh, flats. Don't go and live there. It's as much as I will say if you excuse me. [Shows book to interviewer]. This is Barnefield Road, see the little cross there, well, my house was just further down. These are these interconnecting streets. Herbert Road would be here, you see.

Interviewer: It's all gone, hasn't it?

Raymond: Yes, the whole thing but if you but if you read the bottom it tells you that there were flying bombs as well. But that area — I used to live, if you continued over that road it was another one there and I lived about here in effect. But I never been able to find another photograph of it at all. And that was quite by accident, my daughter gave me that book and I was just going through it reading and I thought, 'My God, I know that place'. Plum Lane School is up there.

Interviewer: Ok.

Raymond: You can see what else has happened and it gives you a little brief — a resume there. It was a little back street and — a typical south east London back street.

Interviewer: With Victorian houses?

Raymond: Yeah, but I never found out if it was post mortem and it doesn't matter if someone shoots you in the head they always do a post mortem don't they. And I never been able to find out the post mortem — I never know — I know where they're buried, obviously, but I never been able to find out when the funeral took place and who was there or anything like that because there is nobody that knows. I don't know, that's one of the reasons why I quite enjoyed coming here because I thought there just might — just might be someone who heard my name being called out this morning. I mean, I didn't start waving my hands around and all of that. I thought if anybody knows the name or recognise the name, it might come out at some point or another and perhaps I could find out a bit more. So we go back to Anderson shelters, alright. I've got remnants of the Evening News of the day, I've got all the certificates which I did get from the Imperial War Museum. By the way, while I'm saying this, there was a gentleman called Tony Low — Lord. He used to write for the local Kentish Mercury and he wrote a little article about this. I mean, it hasn't in anyway been put in to a museum — museum is not the right word but you know what I mean.

Interviewer: An archive.

Raymond: Pardon?

Interviewer: Maybe an archive or something like that?

Raymond: Yeah, not put in to an archive as the intention is with some of the stuff from here, wasn't it. So but Tony Lord – I was up in – at the top of Blackheath, it used to be part of the library up there and I was in there one day sitting down and just going through the little scans seeing if I could find any more information. I'm going back a few years now. Tony Lord was – I didn't know him from hell and he was sitting next to me and said, 'Could I be of any help?' and I said, 'No, I don't think so', I said, 'It's pretty personal'. He said⁸, 'Well, I do write little articles for the local Mercury paper so he said, 'Can I help?' so I said, 'Alright then' so I started to tell him and then we found out from the curator of the place, a lady, and he gave – she gave him all the numbers, I knew where my mum and dad and that where all buried but she gave him all the proper numbers and all that sort of information which – and think he wanted it to prove that what I was saying was right and that's fair enough. I mean, I could have walked in here and given you all sorts of tales but I can prove what I have [laughs – unclear].

Interviewer: Of course.

Raymond: And the – [searches in bag]. You know –. I'm should stop talking [continues to search in bag].

Interviewer: I was just going to say, would you say that it has, obviously, stayed with you very vividly?

Raymond: My wife tells me that I am very much my own man and I am too, you know. If people like it, they like it. If people don't like it, well, it's tough because I am this way. If you bring it down to simple things like food, I won't eat any food that I don't like and I won't drink anything that I don't like. I played cricket all my life and I was a very good cricketer and I was a good sportsman. I played cricket all my life and until I was seventy I ended up playing for the Woddies (??) when I was seventy and I played it at a good level too. I was a good cricketer all round and things like that. But anything that I wanted to do, if it wasn't that I wanted to do it, I'm not talking about in sport games, obviously, it's different you're a member of a team and things like that. I don't eat the things but, cricket, what you used to drink afterwards, especially on a hot day a beer and things like that but I said, 'I don't like beer'. 'No, you have to acquire the taste' but how the hell do you acquire a taste for something that you don't like [laughs] and all that sort of tango.

Interviewer: Do you put that – do you put that down to – are you making a connection then between losing all your family in such a tragic way and sort of being very much an individual –?

Raymond: But if I make friends and quite a little case right now. If I make friends, they're friends, I mean, I'm not – these people that gushes in to fear – if you ask my daughter, my daughter and I think

⁸ 40 min

the earth might –. Unfortunately, I keep saying my daughter, but my wife could only have the first child because she was told that – because she was told – it wasn't that she couldn't have children but she was advised not to have any more. My wife is 81 now and she's fine, my daughter is 50 – 55 this year and she's got the three grandchildren, my grandchildren, of course, things like that. And my grand – I lost my grandson. He was killed in a motorbike accident when he was just coming up for his 21st birthday but that was 1996. My sister, the one that was evacuated to Hawkhurst, the youngest sister, she had a loss very similar. Her young grandson, he was eight and he was hit by a car on the A2 and was killed. Yeah, things like that. Anyway, to come back to myself, and I'm sure it's in it's on way it's put me on to a path that I followed but I don't relate it to that as such. People say to me, 'Do you hate the Germans?' and I say, 'What do you mean do I hate the Germans?' and they say, 'Well, they killed your family and things like that'. I say, 'That guy up there –'. Just to go a bit on one thing. I swim a lot, I can swim a hundred lengths a day if I wanted to, but anyway, I swim a lot and I go over to David Lloyd Club in Sidcup, I go to all things, I was over at the RAF club at West Maling and I was on the air traffic control there. But one of the guys, Bob Pierce, he's 92 now and he flew Lancaster bombers during the war and he said to me, he said, 'Every time I took off –', I said, 'Where you really frightened every time you started that?' and he completed 58 missions and that's a miracle for bomber pilots, I tell you. But Bob, he says, 'I was scared as hell', he says. But – but – he was in the Dresden raid as well.

Interviewer: Was he?

Raymond: Yes, he's – it was a marshal [unclear], I mean, he goes in to all the history and when you listen to him it's fantastic. He's a really good speaker and he can talk about all subjects. He was in the Dresden raid and also the Pinnacle raid, when they were bombing places that was developing the V1's and the V2's. I said to him, 'What about Dresden?'. He said, 'It just annoys me, I wouldn't want to do it again but I'm not sorry that I did it', because the Russian troops were being, the Germans troops rather, on the Russian front were being supplied through the marshalling yards via Dresden and that's why it got bombed in the first place. As it turned out it was a bit of a no-no in a way because what started as a small fire enveloped the whole town, you know. But, for God sake, my mother and father, seven of my family were killed by a landmine and one landmine is no worse than Dresden in flames, is it? In a way, sort of thing, what I am saying is one kills the other just as bad. But I don't believe that.⁹

Interviewer: Did you bring anything else? You said that you had some other bits and bobs?

Raymond: Oh, I have this [showing interviewer photograph]. The 7th of September this little – my daughter came across a chap in a pub. Is that a date on there somewhere? Sorry I'm –

Interviewer: Oh, here we are 7th of September 1940.

⁹ 45 min

Raymond: This was one of the original photographs that was taken from, after the raids started, taken from one of the German aircrafts coming over while a raid was in place. They were photographing it, you know, the results of the bombing. You know where this is don't you?

Interviewer: Oh, yes. This is where I live just down here somewhere.

Raymond: But all the way up the Thames was absolutely – it was appalling. It was nothing –

Interviewer: Plumstead is sort of –?

Raymond: No, where are we?

Interviewer: There is Greenwich – there is Blackheath isn't it? And Greenwich park –

Raymond: Yes, there is where the Dome is, isn't it?

Interviewer: The Dome is there.

Raymond: Well, yes there. It used to be a gasworks. So Plumstead is over here. Somewhere over there, that little thing, I think, there used to be a pub called the 'Welcome In'. Not far from Shooters Hill, what used to be the police station at Shooters Hill and where I used to live with my wife – aunt, in Eltham Archway. But Plumstead is that area, yeah. So, it's that and –

Interviewer: Do you think there's any chance that we could possibly use that?

Raymond: Yeah, of course. Will I get it back?

Interviewer: Yes, of course you will.

Raymond: These sorts of things may interest you. Is it alright if I'm sort of –?

Interviewer: Yes, that's fine.

Raymond: That by the way, that – what I'm going to say you – I don't know how I got it. It must have been in the house when it was bombed. My aunt and I used to go – can you read that just there? A little bit – just read – and that will show you something about the Anderson shelters as well.

Interviewer: 'Two sisters Margaret Giles, aged 6, and Diana Giles, aged 12 –'

Raymond: No, where are we? Let's see if I got the right bit. 'Sisters and brothers dug out near Anderson –'. Hold on. Is this the bit where –? Sorry, read these two paragraphs.

Interviewer: Ok, here we are. 'Parents Escape'. 'When finally rescued they were uninjured and suffering from shock only. The parents were resting in their house although it was practically demolished they managed to escape without a scratch'.

Raymond: Yeah, they lived three or four doors away. The blast went the other way.

Interviewer: 'Anderson shelters also saved people's lives in southeast London during the night when an H.E. bombs wrecked two-storey properties in a small backstreet'.

Raymond: There are three copies – various copies for each of them. That was my brother who was in the army. [Folds papers]

Interviewer: Alright.

Raymond: I actually got that from the Imperial War Museum. I went up there and took my great-grandson with me one day and one of the guys I swim with he said, 'When you're up there', he said, 'you'll find a video that you can look at and you'll be able to roll up the names' and that was one bit of success that I got.

Interviewer: But that's the closest that you got to finding any more about it?

Raymond: Yeah, I've got, this is on the end of there. I've got – the only death certificates that I have been able to get copies of were for my mum and, you know what, by the way, [Shows photograph] that's all the five in my family can you see the name of Forsdyke, on one of those, that was my married sister and her husband so five –

Interviewer: Were they buried together then?

Raymond: Well, the grave there, there are about 27 of those stones and in total there is a 128 people buried there. All civilians of Woolwich. There are more places elsewhere but this is in Plumstead Cemetery. Do you know Plumstead at all?

Interviewer: I do not the cemetery, no.

Raymond: No, not particularly. It's off Welling High Street; Lodge Hill is a place it goes in to the back gate.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah, I think so.

Raymond: That one [unclear] Ruby and Fred and that's the rest of my family there.

Interviewer: So this is the photocopy of the last letter from your mum?

Raymond: Yeah, yes.

Interviewer: It looks very fragile. Are they original?

Raymond: Yes, I did have the whole thing at one time but little bits and pieces of all these things get – you see?

Interviewer: Lots of kisses.

Raymond: Hmm? Yeah.

Interviewer: Lots of kisses.

Raymond: Sad, really, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yes, very sad.

Raymond: But – and little things. Well, this is quite interesting. This guy – I tried to find out – this bloke, Mr. Dennington, does that say his name is –. Oh, these, I went to what was Woolwich Barracks¹⁰ in Greenwich and the only two copies of death certificates I could get are those, mum and dad.

Interviewer: 'Due to war operations'.

Raymond: Yeah, and that comes to my point of not knowing whether – what really killed them.

Interviewer: It doesn't say. It doesn't explain anything really.

Raymond: No, it doesn't. No, it doesn't. This bit might interest you. I wrote to him and he wrote back to me. The little bit there will tell you about the whole thing. As he said, it was very difficult getting more than just official ARP – which is one of them actually.

Interviewer: 'The bare facts about Barnefield Road derive from official CD reports of the time and they seldom give more than the bare facts are these, number one: A parachute mine exploded in Barnefield Road, Woolwich, 1.17am 5th October 1940; number 2: 13 reported killed, 28 seriously injured plus 17 treated at First Aid Post; number 3: among the killed 11 died at 57 to 65 Barnefield Road, including members of your family at 57 and the concentration of fatalities at your house shows fairly conclusively that it took the full force of the blast and was probably only yards away from the point of the explosion'. That's helpful, isn't it?

Raymond: He wrote a book called *Red Alert* and it was all about the Blitz in South-East London and he wrote under the name of Lewis Blake and I found that out when I was up at Blackheath going through things and it was a lady up there who told me to contact him cos he might know some things more of it but further on in that letter he says, 'I am aware', when it comes to the closing of it in that paragraph, he says, 'I am aware of incidents were more than a hundred people were killed and nobody ever knew anything about it because it was heavily censored. The government didn't want to know that many people had killed in one incident and things like that and he quotes there about 'some of the details that you get are very bare', well, if you look just at the bottom there. What that is, is several incidents that happened during Woolwich, you know, from the ARP and things like that.

Interviewer: Air attacks.

Raymond: If you look at the very bottom one, that's the incident.

¹⁰ 50 min

Interviewer: '13 killed and 45 injured by mine, Barnefield Road, Woolwich, large [unclear]'. So it said less than that on the other letter.

Raymond: Yeah, but, I mean, obviously, he was in to – he was the Reverend somebody. But anyway, he probably had other avenues he could a bit more out. Squeeze a bit more out.

Interviewer: That's really interesting. Well, good luck with your search for more information.

Raymond: Yeah, I hope so anyway. I don't really know where to go from here but –

Interviewer: Well, you never know things might come out from here. In the exhibition –

Raymond: Well, that's right and if they did have –. I hope I haven't bored you too much.

Interviewer: No, it is absolutely – well, it's very moving and thank you so much for sharing it with us. It is very kind of you.

Raymond: No, it is in a way – I put that on there and somebody might know me.

Interviewer: Here we are then. These are yours as well aren't they?

Raymond: But I have actually got copies of that bit that is torn up and well you saw the photocopied bits from my mum's letter. But going back to this business, 'How did I feel about the Germans?'. All I know is — the reason I was saying about Bob Pierce, the Lancaster bomber, as I said, old Bobby he was as scared as hell. The guy that dropped when you drop parachute – the mine leaves the aircraft and the wind takes it, alright, it is indiscriminate really. I mean, bombs to an extent, particularly these days you can direct them much more accurately and things like that but landmines, Churchill, who didn't like that – didn't allow that to be known for a long time afterwards because they were so indiscriminate things. But as I said, that airman up there (a) he might even have been shot down and killed himself that night that's number one, two he almost certainly was as frightened as the next bloke and three he thought, 'Let's get rid of this lot and then go home'.

Interviewer: Exactly.

Raymond: And he probably, probably as this guy Bob is – Bob is one of the nicest people that you can meet, he is a real gentleman, he is 92, he's been through all that and he's a real gentleman and who knows the guy who was up there and dropped that he might be a real gentleman.

Interviewer: He might be the same, yeah.

Raymond: We – I mean, we're not better than anybody else. Some of the people who fought on our side, if you like, some of those weren't that good in certain areas or that nice should we say. But I – how do I pick someone out to blame for something like that? How do I pick them out?

Interviewer: You can't, can you?

Raymond: No, I don't think so anyway.

Interviewer: I'm not sure it's helpful.

Raymond: But my brother that was in navy, he died two years ago and he was 88. My brother, who's in Canada, the one that got out and lived, he's 88 now. As I say, I shall be 79 next Thursday and my sister, bless her heart, she's 81 now and who's to know. My aunt, who I went to live with, who was my mum's youngest sister, she died when she was in her 96th year so I'm hoping somebody has given me something [laughs].

Interviewer: It looks like it [laughs]. It sounds like it doesn't it.

Raymond: But don't think I'm blasé about all of this because I'm not.

Interviewer: I didn't think that for a minute. No, definitely not.

Raymond: We have to take life as it comes along don't we? Yes, absolutely and I was here all through the flying bombs and the V1's because my aunt came down to Ilfracombe and took us home, at the beginning of April 1942. If at that moment somebody had said to me, 'Right your aunt is going to come and pick you up, what do you feel about it?' I would probably have said, 'Can I stay with Mrs Patterson?'. And it wouldn't have worried me to have said that. One thing that we did have offered to us was the chance of the American Eight Air force of adopting us, they did that to a lot of children who were orphans. And then one last thing we were, believe this, we were – there were 20 of us, 10 boys and 10 girls all were orphans and all the age of sixteen/seventeen at the end of the war we were up to – what were the eldest 16 and we were a wedding present to who was then Princess Elizabeth, now the Queen, and we were all sent to Belgium for a holiday the Christmas 1947 for a chap called Van Holbeck, he had started to run a fleet of coaches as they were starting to get everything together again after the war and he paid for the whole lot. We got over there and he gave us pocket money to spend to each of us and we travelled the country and we were interviewed for Woman's Hour at London and –. It was quite the experience leading from this and some of the offshoots that we've had subsequently more informative of the actual night.

Interviewer: Well, it sounds like you –

Raymond: You know. But I don't know what sort of person I would have grown up be had it not happened.

Interviewer: If things would have been different.

Raymond: And I'll never know. So I'm not going to worry about it too much. But can I thank you for your time.

Interviewer: Oh no, it's been a joy. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that.

Raymond: Pleasure to meet you. Can I just have a little drink [laughs].

End of Interview.