

Interviewee: Albert Potterton

Interviewer: Garry Bodenham

Location: University of Greenwich

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Interviewer: Where you were when the war started and what you were doing in 1939?

Albert: Well, in 1939 I was still a messenger boy, really, running around the City of London and working very, very close to the Stock Exchange because we were printing the prices and so forth so I had a lot of contact with the Stock Exchanges on Morden Street and all the brokers and so forth in that area and so really I had to leave school at the age of fourteen because I lost mother and father at the age of eight and education had to stop at the age of fourteen. So, really, speaking I had no makeup really of my [unclear] education if you like so I had to take what everybody did in those days, look for a job and raise enough money. I first of all started off at five shillings a week working for a bank fifty hours and then eventually I became a messenger boy which gave me about sixteen shillings a week. The reason why I had to do that because my sister who kindly took over responsibility, I was actually going to go to Doctor's Barnardos Home with my two brothers but she took pity on us and she decided, she only just got married, she was twenty-three, and three brothers were held together and she looked after us. Because I living with – we were living like that I received an orphans pension which she was paid which was seven shillings a week so when I went to the City of London she took seven shillings away from ten shillings, that only left three shillings and that was the fare etc. to the City so there was nothing left. So that's the reason why I went for – as a messenger boy and carrying packets and so forth which gave me the sixteen shillings which gave me a little bit more allowance to travel to London and to start my work. During that period because we went through the 1938 flare-up, which was – we thought was gonna be a war and I was still too young then to join the services and certainly the London Stock Exchange almost came to a stop because trading was restricted and so forth and I looked around then for work of national importance which was being advertised on the various news at the cinemas and so forth and I finished up and was living in, sorry, I was living in those days at East Ham in East London and I took up employment with the Woolwich Arsenal. I went there and they asked me what engineering experience and I said I had none. So they said would I go into the explosives department which was making flairs, bombs and what have you and I was there until unfortunately the night of the Blitz we were released. We were, actually, we were doing twelve hours a day working each day of the week and fourteen hours on Sunday and that fitted in with the transportation arrangement and at the time there was a – there was a Battle of Britain going on overhead and we were in a very compare – compare, what's the word I should use? It was a very, very dangerous area because we had the cordite at the side of us and it only needed one spark to blow it up. I stayed in that position and unfortunately we ran short of explosive to make the full shift so we actually were invited to leave on the Saturday at 1 o'clock as long as we span of on a coin and the shift which was in two parts. We won and we were able to come home and we came home and I

remember crossing the river Thames and arriving at my sister's home and I thought, 'Well, there's an opportunity here. I'll go and meet the young lady and take her dancing', and just as I was walking along the Old Southend Road towards Dagenham I suddenly saw these enormous flights of aircraft coming across and this was the start of the Blitz¹. The first thing I saw was bombs coming down in the Woolwich and Plumstead area and an almighty explosion and then they came across the Beckton gas works and they blew up six of the gas armatures one after another. I went and – I – I – the next morning when I went back to the factory at Woolwich Arsenal, the first thing I saw was to the mortuary and I'd realised then there'd been quite a day and I think we lost something like about two thousand members of the staff and one of them was the cordite factory which exploded and so I was spared the – my life in that sense. From then on I took other work to keep me going cos I wanted to go into the Royal Navy and we'd lost all the big ships in those days and I was delayed for a while. I tried to volunteer for the subs because I knew that there was vacancies in there but then they realised that they had more naval ratings than needed so that was the opportunity there was changed and then I – I received a letter from the Admiralty to say I'd been accepted by the Admiralty but in another branch and they classified it as the Royal Marines and I had no idea what a Royal Marine was like. I always thought they were about ten foot tall [laughs] then I realised they were a lot smaller than that. From there on I joined the – eventually I went to Lympstone which was a training barracks at – in Devon near Exeter. Went and joined the battalions in those days because they formed there because they couldn't find enough ships for the Royal – Royal Marines onboard the ship. So we – we came fighting battalions and I joined the – in 1942, in the early part of 1942 and eventually Lord Mountbatten was called by Winston Churchill at the time to make some special service troops and I tried to volunteer for that. Eventually the battalion was split into two parts, either you were going to be a commando or a sea – a sea rating and which were the using the smaller crafts and I actually thought I'd go back to sea again when I saw the colonel, he said, 'Oh, no', he said, 'you already volunteered for the special service so you're now a commando'.

Interviewer: Albert, can I stop you there.

Albert: Yeah, sorry if I've –

Interviewer: No, no, that's fine. That's really good so far I'm just going to get a slightly different shot here. Before we move on to your active service, before we leave London can you tell me a little bit more about what the atmosphere was like at the beginning of the war and you mentioned you saw the bombers coming over.

Albert: Mm.

Interviewer: Can you remember what the general feeling was in the population? Was it, well, you –

Albert: No, generally speaking there was a great fear in 1938 when the possibility of going to war, everybody then, I don't remember, there were a lot of people around who, well, in their forties and

¹ 5 min

fifties who were in the First World War so there was a lot of fear that they were going to go through that sort of thing again and everybody was really rather nervous what was gonna happen. Eventually the great relief came when in the end of '38 it was decided we weren't going to go to the war and so we went into tranquillity again. Back to the normal things which was we didn't have much money but we entertained ourselves in many sorts of way. I was in the scouting moment and cycling and things like that and that went on for about another nine months and then suddenly Hitler started moving around the continent again and of course Czechoslovakia was the country that maimed. That fear suddenly started building up again but it was also the feeling if we go² to war we are Britain, we are England and we would do the same sort of thing again. So we really lived in limbo it was unfortunate when we sort – when we did eventually go to war after that Neville Chamberlain had this visit with Hitler. We certainly found ourselves in the situation that we were very, very badly equipped and then suddenly we heard about the British Expeditionary Force which was in the continent in that time moving towards the coast and Dieppe and trying to come back home. Then it really hit us and then they started asking everybody, the older generation and the younger generation, to join what was called the, we talk about it now as the Dad's Army, but the Home Guard, the Local Defence Force as it was called then. In my own experience I joined them and I remember going and reporting to the police in – on the Old Southend Road and there was a roundabout then on the motorway there and I was left on guard and – in case any tanks or anything came from Southend or that area. They gave me my weapon which happened to be a hayfork and the rest of them had [unclear] and things – I think we had two rifles, one, well, the rifle couldn't work because the bolt was broken and the second one was able to fire and we were given five rounds each that was all that we could have ten rounds. I remember on one occasion we thought we heard – we – somebody was flashing some lights and it turned out to be – a – an exposed cable arching and I can remember that I was with another young lad at the time and we didn't know – we – we said halt two or three times but after the second time we didn't wait for the third time. We fired the gun – he fired the gun I unfortunately had the one that – without the – without working. I remember going back and seeing the person in charge and we had to write a report that we'd used one bullet. So it was the kind of – we had very little really to work on and again we went in a limbo because we – we had no services really. We were supplying the services to the African campaign, the older generation came back with the expeditionary force and they were still left in this country and we were really in that time trying to build up our defences with – with the troops for training and then eventually moving them abroad. They were going out to the Far East and so forth and there was quite a large contingent in those days which were generally being trained in to a new army and really at that stage is when I suddenly came in to the picture and joined and was called up.

Interviewer: Ok. So you're in the Royal Marines.

Albert: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me what happened after that.

² 10 min

Albert: Well, I mentioned the fact that in the – when I joined the Royal Marines as I say there was no major ships left – the big battle ships so the Royal Marines were really not doing their full duties which was in serving the main guns on the derrick of the big warships and so we were – because the ships were already fully manned we then became a fighter battalion. Almost like the army. We held on to that role for quite some time, maybe about another twelve months and eventually Churchill decided that we needed special service troops and he called in Lord Mountbatten to form what was then called the combined operation – combined³ operation. Their badge was a – an anchor, a pair of wings and a Tommy gun and they were the special forces and we had – they were a part from the ordinary regimental, you know, the army and the serv – and the air force. But we then formed commandos and airborne which were classified as the special service troops. We then – from then we went up to Scotland to a place called Achnacarry which was near a place called Spean Bridge near Fort William and we trained for twelve – twelve weeks under canvas right through the winter period. Even climbed Ben Nevis on Boxing Day we were asked to prepare the food if we could find any dried bracken and it had been raining for about three weeks so we couldn't find it so we were told we go to climb Ben Nevis and we got our ration which happened to be two sausages and a potato and of course we couldn't cook them. We had them raw but we still climbed the mountain. Then we came back to the camp and we had five hundred troops in to – in – from the Royal Marines from the battalion and they made us – we all wore our green beret which we were very proud to pick up and we'd been – we were then named as number forty-seven Royal Marine Commando. From then on we went back in to training which – any general training we were up about half past four or five o'clock every morning. Did a seven mile run and gallop if you like, did various field craft and we were really mainly in small groups so that if we had a – a project to either blow up or meet whatever the case may be we could move in these small groups, who, was ever obviously not wounded or unfortunately killed we could carry out that plan of campaign where the regiments obviously was working in very large number of battalions and things like that so from then on we were doing – we were either linked up with work to be done in small raids which were going up in Norway and eventually, obviously, being trained for the great day when the invasion came on D-Day.

Interviewer: Ok. So tell me about your experiences of D-Day and what happened after that.

Albert: Well, what happened? D-Day to me was – I can remember it very, very vividly. I was – we were eventually on the south coast. We were at Herne Bay and then we were told we were going to report to Southampton. When we got to Southampton the whole of the place was a buzz. With all types of invasion equipment, troops by the thousands or millions if you like. All types, all our British forces, also the Empire forces as well and a tremendous number of the Americans and people like that. I can remember that we were suddenly detailed off. We went out to the River Hamble and we found our mother ship there which was carrying the invasion crafts that we would land and our approach to that, well, we were actually already informed that we were gonna go to a place in France. We didn't know exactly where it was at that time and we boarded our ships and I think it was round

³ 15 min

about the 2nd or 3rd of June. We thought we were going to shoot off immediately but apparently as everybody knows now, the weather deteriorated so badly. Now, I think it was the worst storm I can ever remember and it was very, very bad for the invasion craft⁴ because the calmer the water the better the invasion because you – you have control of the craft. You're not bouncing about too much. They were all flat-bottom boats so we were very, very uncomfortable. Each landing craft had something like thirty-five or thirty-six commandos, in our case, onboard and I happened to be a corporal in charge of one and then I lost my sergeant for some reason or other and so I was in charge of the section that was actually landing on D-Day. It turned out to be a trip – well it was going to be, obviously, Normandy at that time. We knew then. We were actually – our raid was going to be on a place called Port-en-Bessin which happened to be the end of the pipeline from Southampton to the Continent which eventually would have been – feed the services with all the petroleum they need. We were also going to the – the linkup between the Americans from Omaha beaches there and we were gonna climb the cliffs exactly the same as the Americans did and there they were unfortunately were badly slaughtered. Fortunately for our sake, our colonel – Colonel Phillips of the 47th Royal Marine Commando, decided that we would land, which happened to be called Juno Beach I think it was. I – I – I'm vague actually because of the beaches were – weren't named at that stage, obviously. Just prior to that, while, because of this very, very rough weather, we lost a lot of the landing craft in the landing and because the excessive waves that were there the boats were being lifted up and dropped on to these teller mines which were attached to the structure work, yes, that was there. So quite a number of crafts was lost and one can remem – I can remember – if I just go back a little bit. When we were leaving Southampton, I can remember the captain calling over the tannoy system, 'We're now entering mined waters' and that really put the fear up with us because we realised that we had such a long crossing to do and eventually we were onboard ship. We were delayed because of the weather so we were in this precarious sort of position so we had the fear of the – of the floating mines. We knew we were gonna face the enemy very, very soon and so we were all very, very uncertain, trying to keep up our cheerfulness which was very much lacking at time [laughs].

Interviewer: Albert can I just – sorry – just to – this has slipped down a little bit.

Albert: Sorry.

Interviewer: No, no. Just wrap that round there. That's great. Yeah, you can –

Albert: Ok.

Interviewer: Right, so you're – you're the landing craft and you – you're all pretty nervous presumably?

Albert: Well, as we were, obviously, as we started to – we started about – about five miles off land actually. We got into our landing craft and the landing craft was put on the derricks to come off. We were on actually mother ships, they were actually old ferry boats which had rigging fixed on them so

⁴ 20 min

they carried these boats into the water. As I say the boats were the ordinary landing craft itself which carry thirty – thirty odd men and as we were trying to take off the sea was so rough that the waves are actually raising themselves above the deck of the mother craft. It was as bad as that. Eventually the naval – two Naval ratings who were on who were on our particular derrick he couldn't release the gun – the derrick lines on to the landing craft. Actually axed them with the – with an axe so the ropes were cut just at the right time when a wave was conveniently high and it immediately took us away from the ship we never – never moved so fast away from a ship. We were, as I say, we were roughly about four miles of shore then. So we were – just as we were really motoring in⁵, they must have woken up to the fact that the invasion and then the shells started coming. So we were really distant shelling and then the beach got a bit closer and then we saw a lot of our flame throwers throwing off of these other landing craft which had come close rim. Eventually, we fortunately and a dry land, well, we got – we had landing, we didn't have a dry landing. But the craft landed and just as we got off the – the whole of the crew got off and the Marine – the Commando. They suddenly hit the back of t and blew it to smithereens so I remember saying to the chaps, 'Well, there's no way back now. We got to go forward'. So that meant running up the beach going through the minefield and hoping and we managed through on to the main road and then we started meeting the enemy and we did whatever was necessary to move forward. Either we deviated but we where somewhere about ten miles from Port-en-Bessin at a village called La – La Aine – La Asnelles which was to the east of Arromanches. So we had about a ten mile march, we had to get inland to get behind the enemy and to come behind the port. We proved to – at the end of the day that was the better way than what the poor old Americans were facing at Omaha and –

Interviewer: Albert, can I just take you back to before you move on.

Albert: Yes.

Interviewer: What I'm trying to get is a feel of what it was like in – can you remember any emotions you were feeling when you were running up that beach? Or was it just a matter of your training kicked in and you didn't think? Were you feeling any fear or anger or what were – just, you know, what was going through your mind?

Albert: Well, we realised that first of all, all our training that we'd had which had been quite extensive that we were doing what we were trained to do. We got over the, in a sense, the fear that we eventually got on to dry land again. Then the fear came again because we were amongst all this explosion, I mean, the noise of them was tremendous. We'd never, although we'd done tremendous amount of live training in – in the UK we really didn't experience the sort of noise the big guns that were firing. Don't forget we were having guns in front of us fired and then the monitors, which were the battleships, the horse bite (??) and the Roberts and so forth, were firing over our heads. There was tremendous number of rockets being fired from these various ships so the – the noise was tremendous so that in one sense was easing us in one way but we're fearful because obviously we

⁵ 25 min

knew that any moment we might – might been hit or fallen. It was – we – we were really amazed that we were running and was still standing.

Interviewer: And were you aware of bullets going past you?

Albert: Well, there was everything going – going, I mean, at one stage, actually, we're being mortared and we obviously threw ourselves to the ground for the time being to find out exactly where it was. I can remember a mortar bomb actually coming to the side of us and landing and it's just like a dart and it was only a matter of three feet away and I thought, 'My God', you know. That put the more fear into you but the more fear you got, in a sense, made you go forward. But don't – don't run away with the idea, the fear is always there. I mean, you were hoping that you were gonna get – come through it clean. That was the only way you could appreciate it.

Interviewer: Were you aware of any of your colleagues who had been hit or?

Albert: Oh, yes. I mean, a few of them were hit. Were we could do, we attended to them if possible. If unfortunately we thought it was too bad we'd have to leave them. Whatever the case may have been, if the enemy was there and needed to be attended to then you had to obviously forward all the time⁶. It was –the picture was unfolding minute by minute because you – you're meeting situations you never experienced before. You knew that everything was being throwing you in. Actually at that stage you hadn't really seen a soldier in front of you. It was all done by long range explosives and things like that so –

Interviewer: Could you actually see the German soldiers?

Albert: Yes. Eventually we – we met up German soldiers. Some of them were fighting, some were giving themselves up, others were more determined so we had to meet those situations as we came. Each – each group had its own problems but, I mean, you didn't really know and landing on that beach so far away from where we wanted to go to. Our main purpose was to get inland, get behind the German troops as much as possible and then be able to make our way to the west again to where our objective which was Port-en-Bessin.

Interviewer: Can I just put – if you put your arm over that – that's great, thank you. Can I just ask you, Albert, if you don't want to answer it feel free. When you were, you know, you're trained basically to train somebody else, did you have any feelings about that when you had to do it on that beach or were you automatic –

Albert: It wasn't so much on the beach actually. It was once you got onto – beyond the sand itself. That's when you really met them. I don't want to talk about the killing side if you don't mind [Interviewer: That's fine] this is not right. I – I – I don't know. I fired my guns and things like that

⁶ 30 min

wherever it was necessary and I hope to goodness I might not have killed anybody. If that's any satisfaction.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Albert: It gives me no pleasure. At the end of the day it was a soldier fighting a soldier. I mean, when you did capture them or when you did physically meet them you realised that you were in a sense one of the same, you know, he was fearful for his life and he was doing whatever he could and been told to do exactly the same way we did. It's a game of luck really. I mean I came very, very close to losing my life on many occasions and thank the lord afterwards that I'm still living and I suppose everybody else was roughly in the same. There were heroes but they're not heroes to start off with at that precise moment, they became heroes for what they did and one should be very proud of them. But heroes are not made, they happen, in my opinion and that's the situation.

Interviewer: Ok. So you were heading towards the road [Albert: Yes] and off the beach and once you got there was there any sense of relief or were you still in height and sense –?

Albert: Yes, because it – you've gone through the first line of defence. That was the most important thing. You – you'd broken through and you got beyond the road way which I suppose in a sense was a kind of a beach road or a promenade or wherever they – wherever you were landing. You came to realise that you coming in to a little quieter area and then you were scouting around trying to find where the enemy where and obviously they were doing exactly the same thing for you so after that we really running into pockets of resistance, either they were fairly large or they were – you were able to cope with them and move yourself into the appointed places of joining up with the rest of the commando if possible and moving the towards your main objective and the main objective was to get to the back of the port using as little of the ammunition that we had and moving as fast as we could⁷ and as I say it was ten miles. It was quite a long haul and the – you got a situation where the enemy really didn't know where you were and you didn't know where the enemy were so it was a game of cat and mouse sort of game and this went on during the whole of the fighting day of D-Day itself. We arrived ourselves and at our place behind the port itself and then we were – once we recognised our casualties – we were counting our casualties because we'd been depleted by somewhere in excess of a third. We had five hundred men so we'd lost a third of those but we didn't know but that was the as – as the situation arose and we then were formed up and given our various roles. My own section were detailed off to go to the main road from the port to – excuse me I'm trying to think of the name of the – where the tapestry where in – Bayeux.

Interviewer: Bayeux.

Albert: Bayeux, sorry. We went – because we'd heard at that stage that the – the enemy had apparently found some tanks that we understood they could have been Tiger Tanks coming along there. So I was detailed off with my section to guard that road and left the main part of the platoon

⁷ 35 min

behind and we went and took up our position on the road and eventually we went and met a young [unclear] who came along and we spoke to him. I don't know whether he – he – he reported the fact that we were there to the enemy but we found out afterwards we were very close to a chateau in that region and that's where the main German regiment was actually. We held our position for a while, we couldn't make contact, we didn't know why we couldn't make contact back to our own commando group and eventually we were overrun by the Germans and obviously we were outnumbered and then as it was getting rather late at night we were left in the ditches that we'd actually found and the Germans really were really not quite sure what was happening. We were very, very fearful because we knew that if we were captured, they shot troops which were the airborne, certainly, and the commando were informed by Goering they would be shot. So during the course of the night I said there was one thing that we must do is we must try and break away and because of the confusion and so forth I decided that break of dawn or just as dawn was breaking that we'd make a run for it. We – we – we decided to spread ourselves out and run in all directions which we did do. I think one of our fellows was hit, I don't know whether he was wounded or killed at the time but the rest of us managed to find refuge in various place and eventually we linked up again with our commandos for the next morning and by that time we were then a little stronger because we were all together again and then we made an attack onto the port itself and during the course of that day we eventually captured the port. As I say, this was very important because as I say it was the fire plain for England and we were waiting there for the Americans to join us but unfortunately the Americans took a while because of their unfortunate experience with Omaha. They didn't arrive until about two days later actually before they managed to form up and by that time⁸ we were fortunately in a more firmer bridgehead position so we were able to defend ourselves with the sea of the back of us and we were only looking one way then instead of the all around us.

Interviewer: Right. Well, so after that did you – did you carry on going through Normandy or where you –?

Albert: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Directly after that within a few days, actually, I think two days to be exact once we'd met the Americans. Met up with the Americans we'd realised or had instructions that General Gale who as running the 6th Airborne Division on the first end of the bridgehead, in other words, by that time we'd gone west, we went back to east side of the bridgehead which was near Ouistreham (??) and linked up with the 6th Airborne Division at Pegasus Bridge and because they had been badly mowed we then helped them to build up the defences on the wa – on the east side of the bridgehead. So we were then used as patrols to go forward, meet the enemy, found out exactly their strengths and so forth. This went on for mainly in excess of another almost up to two months actually. Eventually the – by that time the Americans had started moving forward. General Patton had actually moved his tank corps forward on the west side through Saint-Lô and that region. He managed to once they formed up, they had a vast number of troops the Americans, they went forward. He was of blood and thunder, sort of cowboy, with either ivory handle pistols – I can remember him someone drive his

⁸ 40 min

tank and he went forward fairly quickly. Montgomery couldn't move because we had a stronger force of tanks around Caen by that time. We'd captured Caen by all accounts on the first day but it was retaken and then the – the German forces got stronger and our tanks were having tank battles around Troarn (??) in that period and the Falaise gap which became quite famous. So we waited there until eventually we – the forces were landed and we were getting stronger and eventually we had the – a very heavy bombing raid by the Lancasters and the Halifaxes on the pile up of the German serv – equip – heavy equipment. Unfortunately they were reactive in their bombing and the Falaise gap was then formed, tanks then started breaking out. Once the tanks broke through then we as a commando formed up again and we started moving along the coast road, no, inland, sorry, not coast road, to Pont L'Eveque and that area. We eventually were making our way then through the Falaise gap and that was really the worst part of the battle I can remember seeing. There were many, many bodies. The German Army was just slaughtered by this terrible raid. Their equipment was blown to smithereens. There were tremendous number of animals because the German Army used a lot of cavalry units for their – they were still very active with their cavalry and we suddenly started pushing out and went along the road and we were then making our way to Le Havre. Eventually we – we were moving forward sometimes a mile or two, sometimes only yards beating resistance and keep on fighting moving forward. But we had the backup then behind us to feed us all the time and eventually we moved up. Eventually got to the Seine, we crossed the Seine and went to – to Reims, no, Roen, sorry, not Reims, Rouen⁹. Then we made our way and liberated Fecamp on the coast. We then moved along through the Port de Calais and saw the original guns that had been firing over to Canterbury and places like that. We then moved up and eventually arrived at Dieppe. Dieppe then was just surrounded by the British Army and Commonwealth Army at that time. We – it was decided because the ground was so flat there that it wasn't worth trying to fight them so we – we formed up to hold it as a placement until they actually surrendered but it didn't in my – our time. We then moved up to Ostende and then we were called a halt there because they – they wanted us to be re-trained to do another raid. We didn't know at that time that it was gonna be the raid of Walcheren, which was the Dutch island which was in the entry to the Scheldt, was going to be eventually relieve Antwerp. But that's another stage that they come into at that time.

Interviewer: So that was the sort of end of one stage of the war for you.

Albert: More or less. Just – there was a brief, well, in actual fact we went into the training again – if – if you call that the pause, yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, and did that seem a bit, sorry I'm just –. Did that seem strange everything you'd been through? You must have felt like a veteran.

Albert: Well, it – it kind of heavy load, well, in actual fact when you're the victorious army you feel like though you're six foot tall, you know, every man had done what it was hoped to be done. We then kind of counted our losses and felt sorry for the comrades we'd lost obviously. But it gave us time to

⁹ 45 min

reflect, we started really training again. We went to a place called Wenduine in Belgium and on the beaches there which go up to Blankenberge and Zeebrugge and we did all our training there in preparation of the island Walcheren. The reason why they wanted Walcheren was two – two folded operation, really. We'd seen – when we got to Belgium then we found that we were – they were sending over many, many doodlebugs over to England but then they developed the rocket and we'd seen the rocket being fired from Belgium, it was being fired in Rotterdam and places like that and the rocket was rather strange. It was just like the American rockets, shaped exactly the same but the strange thing was as they fired them they kind of climbed in steps up into the sky. I can always remember – it – it was – and they were obviously radio controlled to a point and when they got to a certain point they lost – radio control was lost. But they were directed to England and obviously to the various cities of wherever it was and we realised that they were gonna cause a tremendous amount of devastation. It was proved that on the island of Walcheren they were also building rocket sites and also the same time the services were being stretched for equipment and so forth because they were still using Zeebrugge (??) which we captured fairly quick. Half was badly mutilated and so Monty was told by Eisenhower he had to shorten the line so we had to take – needed to take Antwerp and there was no way they could take Antwerp because of the land force there. So they decided that – and because of the rocket situation, they decided to blow up¹⁰ the dikes on the Isle of Walcheren in four places and flood the island and eventually it finished up like a – the rim edge of a saucer with these gaps in between. We prepared ourselves for that raid, which was gonna be, on that time, was going to be the – 31st of October. My birthday [laughs]. We had to do a daylight raid from – we – we travelled from Ostende at night but we actually had to do 10 o'clock in the morning raid so it was broad daylight. We were going to use something quite new which was the amphibious equipment, which was with the ducks, the weasels and – duck, weasels – there was another name, I'll try to think of it in a minute. But all the amphibious things because a lot of Holland – a lot of Belgium had already been flooded by the Germans as they were retreating so they were using these sort of equipment to move around. So it was decided to load them on to tank landing craft and we were to go in on the tank landing craft, when we landed on the island then we were going to start the – start the motors up and be able to motor across the water if you like. But because it was daylight raid and we had fit their fixed lines of guns ready long-range gun so we were hitting all our ships if we were going in so we were badly mutilated on that occasion. When we eventually did arrive on the beach some left – quite a number of the boats went down. I again managed to be on the one that was hit but we landed – but as again it was blown up so there was never [laughs] went back – back again. We then landed on the wrong side of the gap. We eventually had to get on to the other side which we did. Then we moved up to fight the enemy and take on to the big guns and we moved along that coast line until we got to a place called Zuidland and when we were preparing ourselves an 88 millimetre landed about three foot away from me and I lost my hearing and sounded like a low – I had a bomb blasting in my ear – my ears and I had to be taken to the Red Cross, you know, the First Aid place. Although I was able to talk, I couldn't – the balance and everything had gone completely from my ears that is why I wear the

¹⁰ 50 min

earpieces now. After about three or four days I joined the commando again and I heard all the reports of how the battle had been going on. Eventually we managed to make our way down to Flushing, which was one of the other towns on the island, and when we arrived there we were very, very depleted. Of our original five hundred, we must have gone down to maybe only a hundred of us left – roughly. So we were in a very, very poor state.

Interviewer: So for you that was far more dangerous than D-Day landing?

Albert: That was, well, it – it was and it wasn't. It was the – there wasn't so much stuff thrown at us, you know, although there was say six lines we knew we had to go through these six lines. We couldn't avoid that. I mean, what they were doing firing a shell every so often and as you – as your ships were coming – as – as the landing craft coming, they were being hit or very near misses and this was what was happening. But it was – it was quieter affair, if you like, because it was only the commando that were in that area at that particular time and with the monitors just throwing over the shells and so forth onto there. But there was a lot of firing and a closer range but small firing as opposed to¹¹ the actual D-Day. So let's say we were better equipped in knowing what we were going to face. It was – it was a smaller campaign obviously. We weren't the masses we were on D-Day but we had a more positive objective to go to – we knew that it was fairly – much closer and fortunately we relived the island of the garrisons and the guns with the help of services coming from the southern – southern end. They came across the bruskin stretch of water that was from the – which was the Zeebrugge side of Belgium across the Scheldt there and linked us up. We all linked up together again and from then on we went into a third stage that that was the – after the – that battle we were quite – we quietened down quite a bit. After that we – we then moved up into Bergen op Zoom, Holland, and we – we actually just prior to that we – we had – we had to relieve some of our forces to help the 6th Airborne – not the 6th Airborne – the Airborne raid on Alamo, Nijmegen. Then as Christmas approached when we thought everything was quieting down. We were doing very, very well. We from the – the CI for the Germans built up all their tanks and so forth and made their raid on Malmedy in Belgium and attacked the Americans and if you're American – if you remember the Americans lost quite a lot of people there and there was a great fear that they were gonna break through and we were called in again to defend the line in whatever way that was possible. Fortunately they were stopped eventually, the Germans, and we then made our way up to the Maas and the Rhone which are the tributaries, if you like, to the Rhine and we arrived up there and we crossed the Maas that time and then more or less the war was coming to an end. Various fighting was going on but not in our particular region, although the enemy was there. Eventually the Germans capitulated. That was really the end of the activity of the 47th Royal Marine Commando at that stage.

Interviewer: Well, that's fascinating. I'd love to go on and listen to you all afternoon but we've gone way over.

Albert: I'm sorry about that.

¹¹ 55 min

Interviewer: No, no, no. It – it was really fascinating. Is there anything just in the – just for the last minute, is there anything else you want to say and also could you tell us what it was like when the war ended and what you felt when you had to go back to civilian life? What – was it easy or how did you feel about that?

Albert: Not very happy. Delirious of the fact that the war was over was nice but then we realised that we had to come back to a life of working and the majority of us because, I mean, after all we were eighteen or nineteen when we joined the service by the time – by the time I came out I was – I was about twenty-three/twenty-four, I realised that I had nothing to go back to. I realised I had to find a job. I got the experience so I was developed adult if you like because the commando made you that way, thank god, and I thought, well, the only thing I could do – I came back and I thought, 'What am I going to do?'. I managed to get a position with the stock exchange, strange enough, I applied for there and I eventually took up work at the City of London College to get my accountancy, because I was good with figures¹², I decided to take up accountancy and that was how I entered the new world, if you like, But it was not so glamorous as one thought it was going to be. You'd lost a lot of youth. You'd realised you'd become an adult. You realised that all you'd learnt was behind you, it wasn't gonna be a lot of good again for future life. The only thing is I developed in mind and body and I knew I was a man and I could stand on my own two feet and that's what I think the commando did for me.

Interviewer: Yeah, brilliant. Well, that's a nice place to stop and –

End of Interview.

¹² 60 min