

Interviewee: Dick Hughes

Interviewer: Linda Taylor

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Interviewer: This is Linda Taylor, 9th of December interviewing Dick Hughes.

Dick: My name is Dick Hughes, known to my mother and my family as Richard, but nobody else. I was born in November 1932. So the war started in '39 and I was seven years old. I don't remember very much about the beginning. I didn't listen to the wireless to any great extent and I don't remember reading any newspapers. In fact, the first indication I remember is when sticky paper started appearing on the windows, sticky tape across the windowpanes, the idea I was told was to reduce the risk of glass shatter if a bomb dropped nearby. Shortly after this we had wooden shutters put up on our windows and the idea again was to try to stop the glass from coming in to the room which my father had designated as a sort of air raid shelter. He also stuck sticky tape round the windows and we had a roll of sticky tape by the door so within the event of a gas attack we would shut the door, my mother was told that she would put on sticky plaster, sticky tape, all around the way around the edge to stop the gas getting in. The reason why my father wasn't involved was because he was an air raid warden and he apparently would have been out patrolling the streets with his gas mask on. No doubt frightening anyone who had happened to see him cos it all looked rather eerie with people wandering around like that, I should think.

We also had our own gas mask, this were dif – of a different sort. They were a simple rubber sleeve with a Bakelite window which you could see through and two filters fixed on the bottle. You pulled them over your head, pulled the mask over your head and tightened the straps at the back and then when you breathe in the air was sucked in, in through, the filters and when you breathe out it went out over your cheeks at the side of your face. It was an unpleasant experience because they became very wet and sweaty. The humidity of the breath caused them to become damp and unpleasant and so we didn't like wearing them at all and we were made to do so at – in – in classes at school in order to get used to the idea. My younger brother, who was about two at the time, he had a Mickey Mouse mask which was slightly different because it had two circular lenses instead of the single strip of – of transparent plastic on the front. And also instead of the air going out over your cheeks there was a little flapper valve on the front which was easier in which was less strong than in – in – in its content. Sorry, I'm getting that wrong. It was easier to breathe through the flapper bit than to breathe out through over your cheeks. Even you younger children were put in a canvas bag and the mother used a hand pump to pulling out through a filter into the babies. We became very familiar with all these things because we went to a public shelter which was in Petersham Park behind my school and we had mums and dads and children of all ages there in – in various degrees of terror as the aircraft guns went off and the bombs dropped and we sought to contain our own fear. The sight of this air raid shelter is still just visible in the park is next door to a large playing tree and I visited it recently. The

school, however, which – which was behind was demolished by a bomb in 1941 and all that's left now is a small grove of trees which mark the sight.¹ Eh, pause whilst I –?

Interviewer: Yes.

[Recorder paused]

Interviewer: Can you tell us what you felt like to be involved in an air raid?

Dick: Yes, the – the air raids started to, for us, in September and on the 26th of September we had our first exploding H.E. bomb dropped on – dropped on the village, prior to that we'd had one stray bomb which fell but did not explode. To begin with we stayed in our house, in the reinforced room my father had been, but since my father was never present my mother became very anxious about this and decided she'd preferred to go into the public shelter which I've described above. I can remember to this day the feeling of it. It was very hot and humid and full of tension and even as a child we could feel this. I was allowed to go to the entrance when the searchlights were shining up above. I remember them criss-crossing in the sky but then when aeroplanes started to be heard I was ushered back in the shelter and the doors were firmly shut. There was one occasion when we had a lot of thermite bombs dropped and what – they were called by us a bread basket. It was a large container which was dropped out of the aeroplanes and then burst open half way down as it were and this little bombs, no more than 18 inches long, about 400 ml, dropped on the ground and it was necessary to put them out as quickly as possible otherwise they caused fire, which was the object of the exercise. Now during one of these occasions in the middle of the night I wanted a pee and I knew that my mother had brought our pot which had been stuck under the bunk I was sleeping in and I fumbled around to try to find it and was asked what I wanted and when I told the lady in question she said, 'Oh, well. Look you're going to have to hang on for a little bit because we're using the pot to put the fires out. What had happened was they needed every container they could to scrape up earth to throw on these burning thermite bombs which were dotted around the whole area.

Interviewer: How did you feel in – in yourself? Your emotions?

Dick: My – my own feeling was – was excitement. I must confess that I was a great shrapnel collector. I still have a piece, which from – to this day that I had collected and also we collected the steel tail fins from these thermite incendiary bombs which were only about six inches long but they didn't burn like the thermite bombs were the whole casing of the incendiary bomb itself was part of the weapon and burnt but we collected the steel tail things and we swapped them for bigger and better bits of shrapnel if we could or best still if you could find a shard of a bomb case rather than a shell case that was even more priced because they tended to be buried in the bomb craters and were much more difficult to find. We had a number of bombs dropped in Petersham. I estimate looking at the local bomb map which we still have in the local council offices that about 15 bombs dropped and exploded in Petersham. One of them dropped about thirty or forty yards away from our house on – on a house,

¹ 5 min

called Thatch Cottage, and killed both the inhabitants. Another bomb dropped in the road next door to my grandmother's house and severely damaged the house together with the old Post Office building, which was right by it. My father who was an ARP man at the time, you've heard of this of course, rushed to see what was going on and found his mother standing at the entrance to her Anderson shelter² which had been – been erected in the front garden in the front of the house, calling 'Tom, Tom, Tom'. Tom was the name of her cat and she was much more worried about the survival of the cat than she was about anything else.

We had several other bombs dropped in the area some of which I have strong memories of, some of which have been covered without a trace. It's – I can't remember any more of that point [laughs].

Interviewer: Shall I pause?

Dick: Shut it down, what do you want to –?

[Recorder paused]

Interviewer: Ok, if you can tell us something about everyday life during the war?

Dick: Yes, the thing that dominated our thoughts, I suppose, and was food. The –problem was that all the nice things, particularly looking at it from the point of view for a child, were the sweet things which you couldn't get hold of. Some of the things like the concentrated orange juice, which we as children were forced to drink to push up or vitamin C input, really tasted foul. And I still remember the unpleasantness of it. Meat started be rationed in March of 1940 and it was about that time that my father started running chickens and ducks. We had rabbits for a while but they were difficult to run because they tended to burrow underneath the net which went round their cage and also I think because my father didn't like killing them. I mean he was prepared to ring a chicken's neck but didn't like the idea of killing rabbits. We – we traded with them; eggs were swapped for meat and fat. Sugar didn't figure largely in our diet my mother used as much as she could to preserve things to make jams and as for chocolates, well, this we rarely saw. In fact, I remember that this was one of the biggest [unclear] benefits I recall of going to Wales because my father kicked my mother and my brother and I out of the house in late September 1940 and sent us to live in Wales inland from Aberystwyth and there we found the locals didn't eat sweets. I suppose, perhaps cos they couldn't afford them. I don't know what it was but we found that we could go to Woolworths and buy as much chocolate as we liked. I remember that being one of the high points of our stay there.

[Recorder paused]

Interviewer: Ok. If you can tell us a little bit more about the time when you went to Wales?

Dick: Mm. Yes, this was the end of September 1940 when we had had these nasty experiences of fatalities in Petersham and my father packed my brother and my mother off to Wales. We went to live

² 10 min

in the first place in a small village just inland from Aberystwyth called Capel Bangor. There my mother met up with a number of other villages indeed looking back on it, it was as small colony of people – people who seemed to come from Petersham. Why they went there in the first place I don't know but I suppose once one or two people go and form a connection of some sort then other people tend to follow but certainly we went and my mother got together with another lady from the – from the village and their daughter and we went to live in a small cottage on the side of the hill. It was called Perinclough (??), that was a charming little cottage with a glorious view. At summer, of course, was particularly nice and I remember building a tree house adjacent to the cottage and enjoying the warm summer sunshine. However, later on when the weather changed completely and heavy rainstorms we found came through the house with the back wall of the house and out of the front door and it was all very uncomfortable. When the – when the snow came our only source of water which was a spring in the side of the hill became snowed up and froze and³ we had to melt snow in order to get water to drink. The toilet was a wooden hut with a glorious view out over the – over the valley but it was very, very chilly. My mother lasted about two weeks of this and then gave up, left the house and went back to Capel Bangor. Almost immediately, it seemed to me, we went to live in another house in the next door valley which was called Goginan Pla (??) and this was quite a large farmer's house with a servant's wing on it. The servant's wing was occupied by a tenant farmer who farmed the land and we lived in the main house itself. Heat, of course, was by open fires and light was by paraffin lamps. We got the wood together to burn in the fires by pulling of the dead branches and pulling down dead trees on a pine plantation close by and we sawed them up and burnt them. We reckoned that the wood warmed us twice, once in the sawing them up and twice in the burning. It was quite a primitive existence although we did have a loo which was part of the building even the access was from the outside. I went to the local school which meant I walked across fields of stubble and to this day I can remember threading on the stubble and making it crunch and along [unclear] roads to the school. But I don't think I learnt very much because the language used to teach was Welsh. English was spoke and only as a taught second language and so except for subjects such as maths, mathematics, or rhythmatcs, I didn't really know very much was – what was going on. I did, however, learn the Lord's Prayer in Welsh, although, I'm afraid that I don't recall it at this time. I still – I only have a few words left of that time.

When the winter finished, come March/April time when the snow finally melted away, it left me in a sort of wonderland for a child. The hills rolled away in all directions. The farmer was plying the land using horses, of course, and collecting sheep in using his dogs. I went wandered around these – these small farming establishments and got to know the farmers well and also learnt the commands for both horses and dogs. I tried to plough but I'm afraid I wasn't strong enough to hold the plough on a line but I can still remember trying and remember the – the satisfying hiss that the – the plough sheer made as it cut through the soil. Down in the valley there was a small stream with small brown trout in it which I used to try to catch using a bent pin and a worm. Not with much success though and there was a buzzards nest up in the tall trees by a quarry upon one of the hillsides which I was

³ 15 min

forbidden to go to because it was considered a too dangerous, quite rightly for a small boy to be in. That's – that took us really to the June coming up at the harvest time in 1941 but then my father had decided that it wasn't too dangerous to have his family back and so we went back to London via Crew on a train. It was a terrible journey. It took us ages and I remember sitting most of the time on the corridor floor but when we got to London and saw those double-decker red buses I regarded myself as being home and was very glad for it.

[Recorder paused]

Interviewer: And what were your experiences like in your school days?

Dick: When we came back from Wales, my father arranged for me to go to a boarding school away from London and, in fact, he choose Colet Court which had taken over one of the houses at Wellington College down in Crowthorne in Berkshire. This was a pleasant large hostel which coped with, I suppose, about fifty boys and⁴ it was situated on the side of heath land. Most of this heath land was used by the Army for manoeuvres and was dotted around with old tanks and other ex – and dug-outs and other exciting things which we children used to explore when the manoeuvres were not taking place. The tanks we used to climb in and it was really quite dangerous in the sense that they were made of heavy section steel and fingers could easily have been lost. I'm glad to say that we didn't suffer in that way, although, we really should have done because we collected unexploded ammunition whenever we could. In particular, there was a crashed aeroplane which had spread a whole lot of 0.5 inch ammunition around the place which we collected and took back and exploded. We also collected smoke bombs, 2 inch mortars, smoke bombs which hadn't exploded and also small thermite hand grenades I think they were which gave out a lot of smoke when you pulled the plug. What we used to do with the thermite bombs, hand grenades was bury them in the ground with a piece of string round the firing pin and then pull the string and set the thing off and then it would smoke happily for a day or two until it finally lost all its – all its smoke giving chemicals. The 0.5 rounds we would wedge in the ground with – with the bullet downwards and the cartridge case upwards bounce a nail on the top of the percussion cap on one side of the wall and then standing on the other side of wall we would drop bricks onto these nails which – which when it worked they set the – set the percussion cap of and there'd be a most satisfying explosion. At some stage – some stage – one stage we had a great deal of explosives tucked under our floorboards, although, I'm glad to say that the schoolmasters didn't know about it. In the spring of 1944, it was arranged for Montgomery to come and – and cheer up everybody he could in the school, in both schools, Wellington College and ourselves, to try and improve our morale. He came along at the time of a boxing match which I expect had been arranged for him to come and see but following one of the very bloody encounters Monty took the opportunity to stand up and give us words of encouragement. I remember him saying that he believed that what we would like to – like him to tell us was the date when the second front would open and there was a dramatic pause and then he said, 'Well, I'm not going to tell you but it's not very

⁴ 20 min

far away and when it is we're going to win'. Of course we all cheered like mad and when he left he walked along the side of the gym under the wall bars that I was sitting on and I could just about have touched his hat as I went by. I was very proud. Particularly as he went to the same school as I did and that sort of thing was considered very important at that time.

[Recorder paused]

Dick: Alongside the heath I referred to earlier was a munitions dump and this consisted of a series of semi-circular corrugated iron sheds, open ended sheds, in which ammunition was stored. They were twenty-five pound a round and I recognised them from my time in the Army later on and these were all connected by a small gauge railway line. When then the – when they wished to move any of the content of the ammunition dump they would bring the small engine along and connected up to the trucks which were otherwise left in the siding. Well, we children loved this because⁵ we could push these trucks up to the top of a slope and then jump in and have a ride down on this rather perilous narrow gauge railway. It all got a bit out of hand, however, cos on one occasion one of our number was a bit disgruntled because perhaps he hadn't been allowed a go on the truck on that time and he changed the points at the bottom. Well, this, of course, meant that the car – the truck which was going down the hill jumped the points and ended up upside down with the poor boy who was riding in it trapped underneath shouting to be let out. He was very lucky because he didn't hurt himself but that was the end of that game. We also had another unfortunate incident which was a fatality because there were the – the land there was soft sand stand and was quite easy to bury into and we used to bury in, tunnel in and prepare – pretend that we were soldiers. Unfortunately one of the boys was there on his own and went into one of these tunnels which collapsed on him and – and unfortunately he was – when we got him out he was dead.

[Recorder paused]

Dick: From time to time the effect of war and the fatalities of war was brought home to us boys even though we were away from London in a quiet rural area. What happened was – what tended to happen was that if a brother or relation of anyone at the school was killed then the luckless boy was taken into the headmasters study and the news were broken to him. But he was then encouraged by giving a treat. In the summer time the treat would be to go to Wokingham Swimming Bath and the boy in question was allowed to choose two or three friends to go with him and this made up a party and the idea was to distract the child. We would go off and enjoy the time in the swimming pool and then we would have a huge treat because a Mars bar would be taken and cut into four pieces so we all had a quarter of a Mars bar to distract ourselves from the sadness of the event.

End of Interview.

⁵ 25 min