

Interviewee: Eric Hasted

Interviewer: Vivian Hamley

Location: University of Greenwich

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VH: Ok that's ready, thank you. Do you mind if I just get you to hold that so that we know for sure who you are. My name's Vivian Hamley and I'm interviewing Mr Eric Hasted.

EH: Thank you.

VH: It's the 24th July 2010. Thank you very much. So you were about eighteen at the outbreak of war is that right?

EH: Sorry?

VH: You were about eighteen when the war broke out were you?

EH: Yes.

VH: And were you in the forces then or –

EH: No.

VH: Tell me what –

EH: I volunteered in 1940.

VH: You volunteered in 1940 and –

EH: Yup.

VH: So how did that come about? Where did you have to go and –?

EH: I was working in Maidstone County – County Hall in Maidstone and a lot of my friends were in the Air Force reserve and during 1940 they were going one by one and I guess I had a guilty conscience so I went down and volunteered.

VH: Right, could you volunteer for a particular force at that time or did they just allocate you, how did, tell me how it –?

EH: No it was a territorial engagement for the Royal Armoured Corps.

VH: Right and so then did you go straight off to training?

EH: No, I had a medical and I got sworn in and a Kings shilling, I was given a Kings shilling for the day and I reported for training on the 13th February 1941 at Farnborough in Hampshire the 55th Training Regiment.

VH: So tell me what training consisted of?

EH: Well the first six weeks was general training, where you learned to square bash [laughs]. You learnt amongst the year arms, you learnt the pistol, the tommy gun, the bren gun and the beezee. The beezee is a machinegun that's in mounted normally in a tank. And you did some dummy firing in a tank. There was a mock up of a tank and you sat in it and you fired and it was a darkened room and round the wall was sort of panorama of the woods and things and you were given orders what to fire at, then you fired a little spot of light shot out on to the wall showing where the hit was.

VH: Yeah.

EH: And then at the end of the training you actually fired in what was called a ripper that was a rolling pitching apparatus. It was a tank turret which was specially mounted and when you sat in it, it could be made to spin around and do all the things the tank would do cross country. And you actually fired the beezee, the machine gun, and I went home on leave and I, oh you did it with a gas mask on –

VH: Oh ok.

EH: as well at one point. And I went home with a gas mask case full of empty cases from the machine gun.

VH: What as souvenirs?

EH: I didn't know they were there.

VH: Oh I see. Where was home then were you living in Maidstone or?

EH: No, I was living in Gillingham.

VH: Gillingham, yeah and who did you have at home when – did you have brothers and sisters?

EH: I had – at home I had a younger sister. An elder sister was married and living in Strood.

VH: Yeah,

EH: And of course mother and father.

VH: Yes

EH: My father was an old soldier.

VH: And so how much leave did you get after your initial training?

EH: A weekend.

VH: Oh right, ok, so then you were back did – where was your first posting then?

EH: Oh my, there's something I must tell you about then.

VH: Yes

EH: On that weekend's leave I got off the train at Gillingham and I thought, 'there's a bus, save time I'll get on the bus'. So I got on the bus and got my money ready and a conductress came up to me and says really leaned very close to me so we're nose to nose and in a very loud voice she said 'foreign troops travel for nothing on our buses'. And I put the money away. I was wearing a beret and they weren't used to people – soldiers wearing berets. She obviously thought I was French [laughs]!

VH: That's a great story. You didn't own up then?

EH: No, no, no, no. But if I jumped the gun in 1945 in Austria we had a POW camp and the officers were on patrol, the German officers, had allowed to walk around and I met a German officer coming down the road and he immediately spoke to me in French [laughs].

VH: You've obviously got that look about you. **(Five minutes)**

EH: Yeah, the beret once more.

VH: Yes, so did you go – when you went back after your training did you get posted straight away?

EH: No, you did your specialist training then.

VH: Ok.

EH: So although in your initial training you played with all the new guns, but you never fired them [laughs] you learnt to drive, whether you could drive or not you had driving lessons. At the end of that period when you went back you chose what trade you wanted to take on.

VH: And what did you –

EH: I opted for Driver Operator.

VH: Ok.

EH: That's principally an operator the driver bit is a reserve in case you need an extra driver for any reason.

VH: Is this tanks? Was this in tanks or was this –

EH: Yeah in tanks.

VH: Yep, yep. Ok so you could, explain that to me again, Driver Operator.

EH: Pardon?

VH: Explain that bit to me again about the Driver Operator.

EH: I'm an operator primarily and a driver in reserve.

VH: I see.

EH: So should anything happen to the driver you've got somebody who can stand in and drive.

VH: Ok so how long did your specialist training last for?

EH: I can't remember exactly, several weeks.

VH: Several weeks.

EH: But in the middle of it unfortunately we were all moved out of the – Farnborough the training there and we principally moved to Catterick.

VH: Right

EH: Where we had to finish our training.

VH: Yes and so then you were posted after that were you?

EH: No we had to finish our training. If I may make a point, the barracks I was in at Catterick were the ones my father had been in during the Great War. So he knew exactly where I was.

VH: Yes, yeah.

EH: But our training at Farnborough had been so good that really they didn't know quite what to do with us at Catterick to fill in the time so we spent a lot of time learning lamp – Morse lamp and heliograph. They thought we were going to India with the mountains and things like that. Oh, and Morse by flag as well as semaphore virtually anything to fill in the time.

VH: Yeah, and then what happened next, what –?

EH: I can't remember exactly when it was – about the August I should think.

VH: Is this 1941?

EH: Yeah.

VH: Yeah.

EH: Got embarkation leave. Went home had leave, went back to camp. It had all been cancelled [laughs].

VH: Oh no.

EH: So we stand down and then two or three weeks later it's on again [laughs]. So this time we're given a weekends leave then we went back, we were given our tropical kits and our topis, our sun helmets.

VH: Did you know where you were going at that point or not? Did you have any idea where you were going? I mean other than the climate.

EH: Well we guessed Egypt because we were given all tropical kit.

VH: Ok.

EH: Mustn't tell anybody you're going abroad. That was the order of the day.

VH: Yeah.

EH: And so you packed. When the time came we packed our kit. You'd have you pack on your back, strapped on to the pack was your tin helmet and over the tin helmet was the sun helmet exposed to human view and we had to march from Catterick down to Richmond to get the train.

VH: How far is that? I don't really know.

EH: Oh about three miles, three or four miles.

VH: Oh ok.

EH: And it was in the early hours of the morning so it was dark and the chap on the outside at the front carried a white hurricane lamp and his corresponding number at the back carried a red hurricane lamp and off we marched. We were about half way there and some wag amongst us suddenly broke into song, started singing 'hi ho hi ho it's off to work we go' from the film of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Once we got down to Richmond and got in the train we didn't know where we were going but we got off when we got to where we were going and where we were going was Glasgow. And then we marched down to the docks and we stood on the dockside, and we stood on the dockside, and we stood on the dockside. We didn't get any food we didn't get anything. The ship was there but we weren't allowed on it. Eventually some of us went round finding what we could find and we found some boxes of dried fruit so we all had dried fruit. Next day we knew we'd had dried fruit.

VH: I can imagine.

EH: **(Ten minutes)** And so we were on the ship. That was the Leopoldville.

VH: Ok.

EH: A Belgian ship.

VH: Was that a type – was that a merchant ship was that a –

EH: It was a merchant ship.

VH: That had been commandeered?

EH: Very low on, in the water, very low in the water. And there was a photograph in the Daily Mail a few weeks – months ago. Somebody asked about it because it had been torpedoed in the channel later on in the war with a lot of Americans on board, and there was a photograph of it.

VH: Oh right.

EH: And you could see it was very, very low in the water. So we set sail, packed, packed solid, with troops.

VH: On deck?

EH: All over.

VH: Ok.

EH: Every deck had been cleared completely.

VH: Yeah.

EH: On each deck there were a table and that was to the to the side of the ship and a bench on either side which sleeps six, and that was your living space for the six people. Just that table and those benches.

VH: Ok.

EH: And you were given a hammock if you could find anywhere to hang it up because it was virtually no room with the number of troops onboard.

VH: Yes, how well – could you guess at how many troops were on this ship how many – the number?

EH: I don't know because there was – I don't know probably forty of fifty of us from Catterick. There were Air Force people on there, there were foreign troops from the Middle East. Several hundred, several hundred.

VH: So how long did your journey take then on the –?

EH: Oh hang on a minute because we no sooner got out into the high seas and they threw all the potatoes overboard because they were rotten.

VH: Oh god, yes.

EH: So meals from then on was whatever they could dish up. Whatever they could dish up as far as we could tell was cape oxen.

VH: Oh ok.

EH: Because it was like a beef but it got bones bigger than we'd ever seen in beef in England. We came to the conclusion that it had done the trip was on its way back from a trip and refuelled and taken on food and stuff in South Africa ready for this journey that we were on so –

VH: And so –

EH: The food was a bit make – make do.

VH: Yeah, so conditions weren't everything they could be really then?

EH: No, not at all.

VH: What about sea sickness?

EH: I don't think – I think most people got on quite well.

VH: Did they?

EH: Quite well.

VH: Yeah

EH: Yeah

VH: Yeah

EH: Although of course when you – you, as far as we could tell when you leave Glasgow you skirt Greenland and you go all the way around there and the sea is very rough.

VH: I was going to say you're in the mid Atlantic there.

EH: And with a low down boat the waves frequently came over completely over the deck and whooshed along. And certainly whooshed along our deck, the little, the piano we had at one end was there going up and down the deck on the waves, but that was it.

VH: Yeah.

EH: You put up with it.

VH: Yeah.

EH: And as far as we could tell you went across the Atlantic, down close to the coast of America. Then you skedaddled all the way back like mad across the Atlantic and to Africa. So as you missed all the region where, principally, the u-boats gathered.

VH: Ok, so the longest journey –

EH: It's a long journey, made worse by the fact that because we're a troop ship and the u-boats would recognise a troop ship by the noise of the boots and that we had to wear our gym shoes.

VH: Did you ok I thought you were going to say your socks [laughs].

EH: No, no we had to wear gym shoes. And by the time we got further on the journey there was an outbreak of foot troubles and ankle troubles where we'd been walking flat footed for so long, so long. Oh no, you weren't allowed to smoke on deck at night because the u-boats could see the glow of the cigarettes.

VH: So did that feel like it took a really long time then that journey?

EH: It was a long journey.

VH: How long do you think it took all in all?

EH: Weeks and weeks.

VH: Yeah.

EH: When we came back across on the first leg back we called into Freetown.

VH: Ok.

EH: We weren't allowed ashore [laughs].

VH: Oh no.

EH: No.

VH: So you actually didn't touch, you didn't go off the ship for all of that time.

EH: No, no you – you – I think they were – risk that you might not come back on the ship. So you're on the ship. **(Fifteen minutes)** but the local population used to come round in their little boats and bring out bananas and things and I bought a big stalk of bananas. They were green but by the time we got to Cape Town they were nice and ripe and we were eating bananas. At least it was some fresh fruit.

VH: So where did you finally land then when you – when you docked? Where did you –?

EH: The first dock – place we docked was Cape Town.

VH: Yeah, still not allowed off?

EH: Oh yes, we were allowed off.

VH: Oh you were –

EH: It was wonderful, really, really wonderful Cape Town. The local population lined up their cars at the dockside and when you were given leave you went out and they were waiting to pick you up and take you and look after you for the day. And take you out and show you the country, oh anything and

everything, and then bring you back at night. But some of the convoy docked at Durban and there they were all greeted by a lady who stood on the quayside and sang [laughs]. Yeah.

VH: Ok, so next stop after Cape Town was –

EH: We went all the way up the east coast of Africa. I'm not sure if I get the order right, we called in at Aiden, took on some – took on some more troops from Aiden and we called in at Masao which is in Eritrea. We were only allowed on the island part. We weren't allowed on the mainland and it was during our stay there at Masao that the Colonel aboard the ship was knocked down and killed by a taxi and as far as we knew there was only one taxi ever on the island. And we – I'm afraid we wondered, it was a very strong wonder, whether he was so, how do I describe it, disgusted with the ship and the state and the food that we were that he was going to report it.

VH: Oh

EH: And they wanted to shut him up and that was the easiest way to do so.

VH: Yes

EH: Yes so –

VH: So does that mean that you had no commanding officer then at that point or was it?

EH: Not at that point, no.

VH: No.

EH: Not that it made any difference [laughs].

VH: So when did you finally make it to Egypt?

EH: Port Said.

VH: Yeah.

EH: No sorry Port Suez down at the south end of the canal and the across and then we went across to Cairo. To the barracks and the base depot in Cairo.

VH: And when did you first go into sort of combat as such?

EH: Well, the first thing we had to do in – when we got to Cairo was apart from booking and doing the paperwork we were trade tested once more to make sure that we were fit. And for some reason or another they decided I needed more radio training, more operator training. The next thing I know all my friends had gone they had all been sent off to the desert and I was still there. But the class – a new class re-formed and I was in it and after a couple of days the instructor said 'What are you doing here?'. 'I don't know I've been put in here', 'you shouldn't be here. You're fit'. So I was declared fit and I ended up going up virtually on my own up the desert.

VH: Did you? I mean, how were you transported up there?

EH: Usually on tank transporters. The tank would go and you would travel with it. But not always it just depended on what was what.

VH: Did you know where you were going at that point? Did you know where the areas of conflict were or?

EH: No.

VH: No.

EH: We were just going up the blue as it was called in those days.

VH: Was it? That's very jolly. So what happened when you arrived at the –?

EH: I went to the LOB camp. That's the Left Out of Battle camp, where the troops, cooks and people for example who weren't required were left or reinforcements were there waiting to be posted. And next door to it was the tank delivery squadron and I quite enjoyed it because they used to poach us drivers to drive the tanks for the tank delivery squadron. First time I'd been – ever been in a tank **(twenty minutes)** let alone driven one [laughs].

VH: Well, so was it exciting what was it?

EH: I remember we took a number of honey tanks. They used to – they were called – there was a General Stuart in the American tone but commonly known as the honey. They'd been scrapped in America in the early thirties [laughs].

VH: Ok.

EH: You knew that because you got the log book when the tank came so you knew how old it was and we ferried those up quite a long way to an area west of Tobruk, Msus, M S U S. Msus, to the troops up there, not a very nice sensation really when you're doing it because you have a little scout car at the front and he's the navigator then behind him is the tank and behind that is another tank. You're all up there single file and you can merely follow the chap in front of you so if anybody gets lost at some point everybody else behind him gets lost.

VH: Yeah.

EH: But you just drive, drive and drive. Then we came back by lorry, we'd just got in the lorry when word went round that the Germans had broken through and they were coming that way and there were lorries moving in all directions it was absolutely chaotic. But we managed to – our driver managed to find his way back to camp, we got back to the LOB camp.

VH: What were the conditions like in the camp there compared to elsewhere?

EH: There was a tent. You sat on the ground as you always did and there was a cook house and they prepared meals and that was quite good.

VH: And water and everything it was all supplied or?

EH: Ah water was strictly rationed but it wasn't bad in the camp. Later on when you're – when I was in the regiment it was a quart of water a day for all purposes.

VH: That's not a lot is it?

EH: So you cooked by it, you made your tea by it. You washed by it, you washed your clothes by it if your – if your clothes needed a wash. That was a quart of water a day.

VH: And heat – what about the heat? Was that difficult to deal with or –

EH: In the winter months it's quite, quite cool. At night time it can be bitterly cold so you make your bed and put your greatcoat on top and everything else to try and get warm. But the sort of the summer months you can't touch the tank because it's too hot and you burn yourself.

VH: Did that affect the operations there then?

EH: Not particularly.

VH: No.

EH: There was always a rumour that there won't be any battles in the summer. It's too hot.

VH: That's very English [laughs].

EH: They did tell the powers [unclear] [laughs].

VH: No, so did you take on a different role then after you'd been doing the sort of tank delivery.

EH: I got posted.

VH: Yes.

EH: I got posted to the Second Royal Gloucestershire Hussars. That's a yeomanry regiment in the 22nd Armoured Brigade. The other two regiments in that Armoured Brigade were the 3rd and the 4th County of London Yeomanry.

VH: Oh were they.

EH: Only recently I found out our local territorial's are County of London Yeomanry.

VH: Well, there you are.

EH: Yeah.

VH: Was that as a tank driver?

EH: No as an operator.

VH: Operator, yeah.

EH: I was posted with F squadron and in our squadron I was put in the second in commands tank, tank group. That was – that's when we were withdrawn to Sidi Bishr. Sidi Bishr was a camp on the outskirts of Alexandria, and that's where you had the chance to relax and enjoy yourself and get into Alexandria. We knew one – the restaurant there you could get individual meat pie – meat puddings.

VH: Very important.

EH: The only place we knew that you could get meat puddings.

VH: Yeah.

EH: You could get fish and chips at Port Said if ever you went there but you couldn't get it in Alexandria. So it was quite pleasant there. Oh, I must tell you on one – on one occasion in leave in Alexandria myself and two friends went to the cinema. There were three seats empty in front of us in the row in front of us and just before the programme started three WRENS came in sat down (**twenty-five minutes**). The one that sat down in front of me was a girl I'd know since I was a toddler.

VH: No!?

EH: She lived normally about three or four doors down from our house on the other side of the road.

VH: How extraordinary.

EH: Yeah, but she went home long, long before I did and was able to tell my mother that she'd seen me although I'd already told my mother.

VH: That must have been really funny. Yes, so did you spend sort of much time then on leave or how did it work when did, you know, you were –?

EH: Well it just depended what – what was happening. The state of play as it were.

VH: Yeah.

EH: Because although we had – we weren't there very long before we were moved down to Beni Yusef. That's a camp just south of the Pyramids so you come along the Cairo Road to the Mena House Hotel down a dirt road passed the sphinx and there was our camp and we went there to reequip.

VH: So had you actually seen any fighting – any action by this or not?

EH: No, not at this point we hadn't.

VH: No, did you think you would?

EH: This was all reforming.

VH: Yes.

EH: Because, you know, things don't happen very quickly. The equipment doesn't come very quickly and it takes time.

VH: So when did that first happen – when did you get in a sort of combat situation?

EH: Well we – we got there, our squadron got grant tanks and I was in the second in commands crew and I was a loader of the seventy five millimetre gun down in the hull. And we went on tank transporters up the desert to near El Alam Airdrome where the tracks across there and that was known as Knightsbridge [laughs]. All had the weird code names and so we set up camp there and there we had big camouflage woods on the tanks to make them look like lorries and we sat there knowing that the mine field was just a short distance away from us and the other side of the minefield was Jerry. And we hadn't been there so very long when we were all given orders to take off the camouflage woods, which we liked very much because we lived in them.

VH: What – sort of tents?

EH: Yeah, nice and big like that you can walk in and sit down and you were out of the sun. It was wonderful, just like, well better than a tent. So we – we did a bit of practice of running the tank, crewing it, getting to know it. We'd already had men down at Beni Yusef. We'd had firing practice so we knew what the seventy five millimetre gun was like. And one day we had a devil of a sandstorm when it cleared I went walk about to find out what had happened and what state the tank was in and I found two things that amazed me. I found a book, a paperback one of the penguins or pelicans in those days, *Worst Journey in the World* about one of the minor trips from a troop in the South Pole in Scott's expedition. I thought that's an appropriate book to read in the desert. And I found also a pair of wicket keeping gloves.

VH: Did you?

EH: Yeah.

VH: All sort of kicked up by the sandstorm?

EH: Been blown about from somewhere or other.

VH: Yes, yes.

EH: Don't know where they come from. They were an absolute god send.

VH: Were they?

EH: Because they – we were supposed to be given gloves for loading the tank but we never got them but we did write to our MP's about it. And with the reinforced tips on the fingers for the wicket keeper you could pick up the hot empty cases as they come out the gun without burning yourself. So they were an absolute god send. More so because only a few days later we were told stand to so we lashed up everything on the tank stood to and we stood to for about half an hour then we were given stand down its the south Africans. Because our South Africans were reconnaissance and we could see all this cloud of sand and dimly see vehicles moving so we stood down relaxed. I suppose about five minutes they said 'No its not! Stand to!' **(Thirty minutes)**

VH: Oh my god.

EH: So we all piled back in our tanks again and we got the order to line up and to the line across the track and it was Jerry coming. When we opened fire and they opened fire and there was twelve of us and there were in excess of sixty of them. So we just kept firing and firing. Me down in the hull loading the gun couldn't see what was going on but the whole tank was rocking and banging and rocking. I thought I wouldn't want to be up in the turret he's really firing away with the turret gun up there and I suppose after about an hour we withdrew. When we withdrew we found only four of us were still fit the other eight had been knocked out. One was fit to fight on, two had to go to regimental workshops and we had to go to Trobuk workshops. When we got out the tank and had a look to see what the damage was we realised that one of the coppola flaps, which were normally up and open, one had been shot off completely and then we realised the tank commander had bandages round here. He would normally have his head out but fortunately he was down when that went and a piece of shrapnel hit him on the top of the head, laid him out and the crew in the turret had bandaged him up. But he put his head back out there again and went on as though nothing had happened.

VH: Wow.

EH: Absolutely amazing.

VH: Yes.

EH: Absolutely amazing.

VH: Were there any other casualties that day?

EH: In the squadron we did, a lot, an awful lot. Lieutenant Ades was killed. He was the son of the a man who owned a big saw down in Cairo where they used to take the officers and they used to be fed and watered and they could get all their equipment there. He was killed and he was a bit of a rough neck and they used to joke, 'I bet he was charging them with his pistol' [laughs]. But no, there were a lot of casualties that day, a lot of casualties.

VH: Was that quite difficult to deal with?

EH: Pardon?

VH: Was that quite difficult for you personally to deal with that or did you –?

EH: You didn't have time to deal with it.

VH: Just get on with it.

EH: You just had to get on with it. Our tank was so badly battered the gun didn't work, the electricity supply had failed, the track had been partly shot through and I've lost count of how many hits we'd had. On the front glacier plate there was a big groove that you could put your fist in where the – it had been hit there but the round had come out and hadn't gone through otherwise the driver sitting there would have gotten more than he bargained for. And we were told to buzz off to Tobruk to the army workshops and get yourself repaired, which was alright but the driver had forgotten the batteries had failed and he couldn't start the engine [laughs].

VH: Oh no, so what did you do?

EH: You had what we called a cranking handle with a long shaft that went into the back doors and into the engine and because it was a radial engine there was always a risk of oil being in the bottom radiator if the engine stood for any length of time. So you had this handle and you turned it and turned it and turned it and eventually you turned over the engine inside and it would – you'd know whether there was oil there because it would block whereas if you tried to fire the engine and the oil was there it would smash the engine. So the gunman in the turret, old Nobby and I, we got out, we got to cranking the handle and we cranked and we cranked and we actually cranked fast enough to get the magneto to fire and the engine fired. Now I've never heard of anybody else doing it but we did [laughs]!

VH: You got back to Tobruk?

EH: And then we went off to Tobruk, not a nice journey, a two day journey to Tobruk because you were a lone tank and being a lone tank you were a welcome target for – **(Thirty-five minutes)**.

VH: Yeah, vulnerable.

EH: Yeah, very vulnerable and with this mobile anti-tank gun, eighty-eight millimetre anti-tank gun, we wouldn't have stood on the earth if fired.

VH: No.

EH: But we didn't. We got there. I don't know how but our tank commander Colonel Pitman got to know the code word for getting us through the defences otherwise we wouldn't have got into Tobruk. But he must have got it from somewhere and we went down to into to Tobruk and down to our army workshops and were there two or three days while they did the repairs.

VH: And then back out again?

EH: That's the time when I saw desert rats the real little ones. There were loads of them down there when you kipped, because you sleep on the ground, they come out hop round the bed at night. Have a little see what was going on. Yeah, then after a couple of days the tank was fit. We went up onto cliff tops and fired out to see make sure the guns were ok and then we went back to the regiment. Again the tank commander had to find out where the regiment had gone to because it's always on the move and you have a regimental navigator plotting where they're going but he found out where they were and we went back and joined the regiment. And about a day or two after that we took tanks off another regiment and reequipped completely.

VH: What with a new type of tank or the same kind of tank?

EH: No, no, the same sort. But they gave up the tanks and we took them in. They were very good at doing that in the desert, you know, your battle hardened you take their tanks and then they don't know anything about it. They keep using the same ones over and over again to do the dirty work.

VH: So how long did you spend all in all in North Africa then?

EH: The whole of 1942.

VH: Yes.

EH: When we got these tanks we went back into action two or three days later. On June the 5th my dad's birthday, I can remember that one.

VH: So was that a sort of regular pattern then that you'd sort of go into combat or whatever you call it every sort of few days or every couple of weeks or?

EH: Well, it depended on how long your equipment lasted.

VH: Right.

EH: Once – once your tanks – you'd run out of tanks you cleared off and reequipped.

VH: And what was the – how were the allies doing at that point how were you fairing against the sort of German Armies at that point?

EH: The German equipment was far superior. We – we had inferior, a lot less armour on our tanks than they had and we didn't have the fire power that they had. So that with our little two pounders which most British tanks were equipped with you couldn't do any damage unless you were about a hundred yards away. And they're knocking pieces off you at quarter of a mile, half a mile away with, with theirs. When they started fitting the eighty-eight millimetre on to the tanks we didn't stand an earthly.

VH: Did you – so did you feel personally that it was worthwhile what you were doing or do you think it was –?

EH: Oh I don't know we thought anything. It was just a job which had to be done and we'd get on and do it.

VH: Yeah, yeah.

EH: The best we could.

VH: Yeah, so how did your time in North Africa end then for you?

EH: We gave up our tank and came back to Sidi Bishr and at the end of the year we sat down to a Christmas dinner. The whole regiment sat down to a Christmas dinner. In the morning the officers would play the sergeants football in a comic football match. We sat down had Christmas dinner, I got lumbered for the washing up.

VH: Oh no, for how many people?

EH: Amongst others. And we thought because there were rumours that the headquarters were packing up the all the records and things, we're going home. They're thanking us and we're going home. About the 31st of December they told us you're being disbanded, and that's why you had a good Christmas and the regiment will cease to exist. **(Forty minutes)** So our squadron went to the 4th Queens Own Hussars, Mr Churchill's regiment, he'd been commissioned in the –

VH: Is this the end of 1941?

EH: The end of '42.

VH: '42 yeah.

EH: End of '42.

VH: So if you were disbanded does that mean that you came back to England?

EH: No, we were used as reinforcements.

VH: Oh I see.

EH: We went to the 4th Hussars, one squadron went to the – Wiltshire Yeomanry I think it was another yeomanry regiment. One went to the 5th – I think it's the 5th hussars. I know the 5th and the 4th got amalgamated afterwards and I thought they're putting the old regiment back together [laughs].

VH: So did you spend – so how when did you actually leave North Africa, at the end of the war –?

EH: No, the end of '42. Oh I went into hospital I had hepatitis it was – broke out through the – everybody had it and when I came out the regiment had gone and I had to join them and the regiment had been posted to Cyprus. Because there was a fear of Jerry having got Crete he would then hop Cyprus then he could hop into – into Egypt so troops had to maintain their presence on Cyprus. So

we spent about a year there. The tanks we had there were British ones which had been scrapped in about 1932.

VH: Does that make them older than the American ones then?

EH: Oh dear, one – we had one that sat there our troop and it wasn't run and it didn't run and it never did run when we left it was still a non runner. No, being British tanks when you the tracks are held together like a hinge with a track pin and you put a lead plug in at the end and hammer it in to stop the track pin from coming out. On one occasion the troop leader because I was in number one troop now, in the troop leaders crew, he said go and get the rest of them I want to talk to everybody. I walked across just as they were hammering a plug in and a piece of that lead hit me straight in the eye embedded itself, fortunately in the white part of my eye. I had to go the local hospital have it cut out.

VH: Oh, did it affect your sight at all?

EH: No, because it's in the white part of my eye fortunately. The surgeon who did it was a German [laughs].

VH: And so Cyprus you were in for a year?

EH: For a year.

VH: So 19 – most of 1943.

EH: That's 1943.

VH: Yeah, and what about the rest of you war.

EH: We came back to Egypt, Beni Yusef once more.

VH: Ok.

EH: Reequipped with Sherman's, Sherman tanks. Did a lot of training on Sherman tanks to get used to them. Did a show off parades for Churchill because he came out to see them and so did Anthony Eden. And because we had a new radio at that time and I was dead keen on radio I always have been I was asked if I would demonstrate this to Anthony Eden and show him the new radio. When I reported to Anthony Eden he just said 'I'll pick who I want to see I don't want people anybody whose been picked by the regiment thank you' and that was it.

VH: Oh, what a shame.

EH: So I didn't get to demonstrate the thing.

VH: Yeah.

EH: And having got used to the – to the Sherman's we got ready for Italy because we knew we were going to Italy. I can't remember exactly the sequence of events then but it happened then or when it

happened in Italy. I'll say it happened in Italy. And hope it's right. We – early in '44 we went across to Italy, we knew we were going there because we went down and asked the money lender down at the gates and he knew where we were going [laughs]. They always knew, they always knew where you were going and they had little money ready for you to go.

VH: Did they? **(Forty-five minutes)**

EH: So went to Italy landed in at Taranto and there I think is where the change takes place each troop now retained one Sherman and took on two new American honey tanks with the turrets taken off. Because the powers of be thought if you have a little low tank like that you can get behind a hedge and you can observe whereas if you go with a Sherman it's sticking up that high. You're exposed to everybody. That's when we knew we were doing armoured reconnaissance for the first time with div. So we – we – our job was to go forward all the way up the Adriatic side of Italy probing, probing, probing. Making sure that what was what and if there was a – if there was a big German camp or something like that. It wasn't our job to deal with it the – the tanks following behind us would deal with that all we had to do was to see and observe. Because sometimes we needed to be able to fire say an isolated German tank. We eventually got equipped with a fire fly.

VH: Which is – what's that?

EH: Now a fire fly is Sherman with a British anti-tank gun fitted instead of the American anti-tank gun. And that anti-tank gun was one of the best anti-tank guns of the war. And those were fitted down at Woolwich.

VH: Were they?

EH: Woolwich Arsenal.

VH: Arsenal, yeah.

EH: A friend of mine who was workshop technician at the school I was at he'd been apprenticing there and he'd been doing this job during the war putting the – putting the new anti-tank guns on. The Americans wouldn't accept them because they would be relying upon ammunition from England and they liked to be, as it were, self contained. They had their gun, they would have the ammunition. But it was an excellent gun. But we had one. But we did have cab-rank.

VH: What's that?

EH: Cab-rank was the flight of aircraft.

VH: Oh, yes.

EH: And at regiment HQ there was an aircraft, air force armoured car, and if we came across a tank that we couldn't by pass but had to be got rid of, you know, like a tiger or something that sort of. We'd

tell the Air Force they'd call up cab-rank for us and give them our reference and they would deal with it.

VH: Deal with it, yeah.

EH: Thank the lord they were British Air Force because if it had been American Air Force we'd have all got it.

VH: Why do you say that?

EH: Because they would bomb and strike anything that moved.

VH: Did they?

EH: Regardless. They did some terrible damage in Italy, terrible damage, especially to the poles, and on one occasion we got our forward troop over a little bridge into a little village and along came an American aircraft and attacked them. The next day you get a letter of apology. Oh dear.

VH: So were you still in Italy when the war in Europe ended or were you –?

EH: Yes, I was still in Italy. When we got up to overlooking the Po valley we –

VH: So you were right up in the north by then?

EH: Yeah. We gave up our – our tanks and took on kangaroos. Now kangaroos were basically the tank chaise built up round the sides so that with everything stripped out except the driver's seat and the controls. So that we could carry infantry and my job was to train every other member of the tank crews as an operator because someone would be the tank commander operator on these things. And we had to – they had to be in touch with the tanks that we were going to work with and they also had to be in touch with us so we could things back together at the end of the day and sort things out. So it was essential that they could operate reliably. We supported the 9th Lancers, that was the photograph in the book the Imperial War Museum, they got a photograph of a kangaroo manned by one of 9th Lancers and I wrote and told them, 'I'm sorry, you got it wrong'. They were supporting the 9th Lancers it was manned by 4th Hussars. **(Fifty minutes)** So you had the normal three squadrons of armour augmented by one of our squadrons of armour to make it four and our four troops would have kangaroos behind each squad of armour carrying a company of infantry. And we in the – I was in the squadron leader's operator at that time and we carried the colonel of the infantry and his entourage and we towed alongside the colonel of the armoured regiment. So that all the lot were in radio contact. The colonel of the 9th Lancers was in charge and when he said advance, advance went out around all the radio links and off we went. My god it was frightening. You had two squadrons of tanks, two companies of infantry and behind us two squadrons of tanks followed by two companies of infantry and there all charging out through the argenta gap and along the Po valley. We – poor old Jerry I felt sorry for them because they were merely youngsters. They were really quite boys some of

them and they saw this lot coming and they just walked out of their hidey holes and gave themselves up really.

VH: Did they? Yeah.

EH: Yeah, they – I don't blame them. It was really, I don't know, awe inspiring. It used to put the wind on me when I used to think all this lot charging along there. We charged along there and got to about just north of, oh dear, Ferrara where there had been a river crossing and there we stopped. The armour went on, the infantry got out and they did whatever they had to do and we were just left there. Eventually we moved back down towards the Adriatic coast once more, down in that direction. Oh no, before that while we were there the war ended!

VH: Oh, some detail.

EH: Yeah, the war ended. We fired every blooming machine gun we could find, all the tracers up in the air.

VH: Were you allowed to sort of celebrate in style?

EH: Nobody said anything I think everybody was so glad that it was over. Then we withdrew, and on VE day most of the regiment had leave and we had leave in Venice.

VH: Oh, how wonderful, quite nice.

EH: Yeah so wandering round in Venice picking up some of the drunks out the canals. They stepped off the pavement and there wasn't a road there [laughs]. Ah, wonderful.

VH: Yeah, so were you shipped back home – how did – from there or?

EH: No, oh no. We haven't finished our –

VH: Oh.

EH: No, things don't finish that easily. They ought to but they don't. We moved up into Austria, a little village called Ferndorf. There was a railway track, there were fields and one morning the squad leader said to me 'you learnt German at school didn't you?' 'Yeah' 'there's a train coming in with a thousand POWs on it, get 'em off and get 'em in that field over there' [laughs].

VH: Oh, what just you?

EH: Yeah, I gathered up some men together and got them off and got them in the field. We had this POW camp and next to it was a field with horses. We had horses, thousands of horses because the Germans had used lots and lots of horses. And I had an old mare and I used to ride around the camp on this horse, oh dear, I made my father jealous I bet.

VH: So you – was this a permanent situation? Was this like a holding area for prisoners of war?

EH: It was holding. Our job in our squadron was to sort the Austrians from the Germans and send them home. Another one of our squadrons was sorting out the Russians who'd been prisoners there who had been slave workers and that and sending them home. We didn't know at the time that when they got to Russia they'd be killed off by old Joe Stalin. We thought we were doing –

VH: A favour.

EH: What had been agreed between the big wigs that at the end of the war people would be sent home (**Fifty-five minutes**). So we were doing it without – without knowing.

VH: Yeah.

EH: And we stayed there a few weeks gave up our kangaroos and took on armoured cars. Staghound armoured cars, big American staghound armoured cars with power steering, automatic gear box, things that you think of as being fairly modern.

VH: Quite modern, yeah.

EH: Yeah, they were on there and they were like a tank on wheels. The gun was the size of the gun that was normally in the turret of the tank. It was quite big. The only manual bit on it was the transmission gear; you had the high and the low transmission gear apart from the actual gear box.

VH: And what did you have to do with those? What – why were they needed?

EH: Well, we didn't know what we had to do with those, except they were there so that they could be used. We found eventually the – I can't think of what you call people, from Yugoslavia, who'd been badly treated by the Germans were coming up into Austria to pinch the horses to loot this, loot that and anything else. And our job was to mill round with these big armoured cars and get them back down into Yugoslavia

VH: Yes.

EH: Yeah, and then thinking probably sometime in middle – middle '45, yes, perhaps towards August, we moved up north to a little town right on the borders of Austria and Germany and our regimental band came out. They used to play in the village square and all the people came out to listen and at the end they always played the regimental march so we all had to get up make sure we were properly dressed with the berets on and everything buttoned up. Then they eventually they – they found out that when we were doing this the population thought it was the national anthem that was being played and it was our – thought it was our national anthem so they had to stop that [laughs] and relax it a bit. Equally as funny – it wasn't funny at the time – one Sunday morning somebody had the radio on BBC and they do a morning service on a Sunday and they started singing a hymn but the tune they were singing to which was common to us was the tune of the German national anthem. All the local population thought the Nazi's were back [laughs] and we had to go around quieting everybody down, quieting everybody down.

VH: That really would put the wind up people wouldn't it?

EH: Yeah, oh, you see the funny side of it afterwards and it was only a few days later, 'that's it you're going home'. I'd done –

VH: What did that feel like?

EH: I'd done four years and I think I was about the first in the regiment for four years. At one point in the regiment it was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years because the regiment had come from India. Straight from the Middle East they'd never been home. So I thought myself lucky. I went off to the – to a transit camp where, you know, other troops came and got together. A convoy of trucks arrived and we all piled in the trucks and we just travelled in the back of the lorries and we travelled home. I remember that the first day we went back into Italy up the Po valley over the Brenner pass to outside Innsbruck and we stayed the night there in the in a big house. Then I think it was the next night after that we moved on and stopped at Ulm, Ulm in Germany, in southern Germany, and when I got there the regiment I had left had moved – had already taken up residency and was running the place. So it took – how long it took for us to get organised and that our – the regiment could – could go there – could go more direct. **(Sixty minutes)** And we did [unclear] right all the way to Calais. When we got to Calais, 'oh showers', we could have a shower! We'd been in the back of lorries for weeks on – week on end or more

VH: yeah

EH: 'Sorry, the showers are reserved for troops going home from Germany. You can't have a shower'. 'Oh well, never mind, never mind, we'll soon be home' and a couple of days later we got onboard ship and got out the harbour and announcement over the loud speaker system 'Because of the number of troops on board there are not enough life jackets to go around they will be reserved for troops going home on leave from Germany'. Oh well, few more miles, another announcement, 'While it's normal to allow you to send telegrams from here we shall have to reserve because of the numbers on board. It will be reserved for troops going home from Germany'. Never mind. We got to Dover, we got off the ship and we stood around and we stood around and we stood around. Trains came in and troops from Germany got on and troops from Germany went. Now we stood around and we stood around, we stood there all day. Eventually a train did come and we got in and it was getting dark and overnight we travelled all the way up to Catterick booked in at Catterick in the early, early morning 'We don't know what we're gonna do with you lot. We haven't got room for you, get your passes and go home'.

VH: Oh no, what in the middle of the night?

EH: So I got my passes, ah, and I think they fiddled about we had to book in and do all sorts of things. There's a day pass and later on – late in the day I got the train back down to London. Just in time to find that the last train down to Gillingham had gone. So I had to go around the local Salvation Army hostel and stay the night and get the first train out in the morning and home.

VH: And would you – would your family have known that you were coming home?

EH: No.

VH: Oh right, so you were a complete surprise.

EH: We couldn't send telegrams and in any case I don't think would have done because a telegram during wartime meant that something serious had happened and I think I would have not sent it any way.

VH: Yeah.

EH: No, so my elder sister was staying with my mother she came to the door, 'Oh, it's Eric! It' Eric!' and I went in, my younger sister, god she hardly knew me, she was hiding under the dining room table, I always remember that.

VH: How old was she?

EH: She was born in 1935 so she'd be ten.

VH: Yeah so she had, yeah, so you'd been away solidly for –

EH: For four years.

VH: Yeah.

EH: And a bit more besides.

VH: Yeah, exactly.

EH: Because the training before hand.

VH: Yeah.

EH: So eventually, oh that's right, then the – after my leave I got posted to the wireless wing of the Royal Armoured Corps school down at Bobbington camp as an instructor, training instructors.

VH: Oh right, did you stay in the forces after the war or did you –?

EH: I would have stayed in if I could have stayed there but –

VH: Yeah.

EH: I don't think I would have stayed there. They were still looking for troops to go out to Burma and various places and I had, I didn't fancy anymore of that.

VH: I think you'd done your suit hadn't you really.

EH: No so I enjoyed it. Very nice time there, very nice time.

VH: You obviously had quite a variety of experiences didn't you?

EH: Oh yes.

VH: Along the way.

EH: Well it would be about August '46 my number came up and I got de-mobbed. I think I was group thirty something.

VH: Well, what a fascinating story. Thank you so much for sharing it with us.

EH: Oh, you're welcome.

VH: Goodness me, it's a – it's fascinating how – how boring and mundane our lives are by comparison when you've done all these fantastic things.

EH: No, no.

VH: Yeah, well thank you so much Eric. It's very, very kind of you.

EH: I was thinking when we went to Italy (**Sixty-five minutes**) the Germans used to sing Lili Marlene, the German version, the Italians used to sing an Italian version of Lili Marlene and we used to sing we're the D-day dodgers. And there was a version of the D-Day dodgers to the tune of Lili Marlene.

VH: That's a very British thing.

EH: And we all thought it was a huge joke [VH: Yeah] in Italy but we got a bit sort of –

VH: It does sound like you've got a lot of memories that you've got are, you know, of the humour aren't they.

EH: Yeah

VH: Of how to get through it all I suppose.

EH: Yeah.

VH: Yeah, well thank you so much Eric.

EH: Well, you're most welcome.

VH: It's been very, very kind of you.

End of Interview.