

Interviewee: Len Perry

Interviewer: Garry Bodenham

Location: University of Greenwich

Interviewer: Right. Ok Len. So can you tell me where you were when the war started and what you were doing at the time?

Len: Yes, I was a young – I was still a teenager at sixteen and I was a young apprentice, engineer apprentice. Very much involved in the Boys Brigade. The war started in 1939 – September '39, as you will know. Things – things changed really over night when war was declared, everything was shot down. There was no football, there was no cinemas, there were no organised meetings were allowed. There were no church services, sadly no Boys Brigade. So it was a strange time to be around as a teenager. We were in between. The whole of the generation of children had left home, there were no children to be seen, which was strange, and everyone above eighteen to twenty was in the forces or been called to the forces so as a teenager we almost felt in a vacuum. And yes, I was in where I lived in Deptford at the time and that was the situation that we had to cope with.

Interviewer: So how old – what age were people evacuated? Up to twelve?

Len: Up to fourteen.

Interviewer: Fourteen and how old were you?

Len: I was sixteen.

Interviewer: Ok. So what – what was your first experience apart from the no children around, what was your first actual experience that the war had started?

Len: Well, the only thing is there was a complete blackout. This was difficult to cope with, we had the double-lined curtains, we had to organise them. These we used to help mum and dad to do, to cover the house completely black. It was very dangerous at night really. Walking around, in fact, we used to – we used to laugh because people would bump into things and it was strange to see the number of black eyes, you know. In fact, if you had a black eye it was quite funny really because you were in the fashion, you know. But they were long nights to cope with, really.

Interviewer: And were – was this when the – the bombing had started or was it –?

Len: Oh, no. No, no.

Interviewer: No.

Len: This was – this is what they called the phoney war, really. Nothing had happened at all. In fact the whole place didn't – we couldn't believe there's a war on. No one – there was no fighting going on. So I mean the bombing didn't start for another year. But the thing we noticed the – immediately the

war started an air raid warning went, you see, and we immediately thought that the – that we were going to be bombed immediately so we all had to take to the shelters. We took to the shelter in the garden, the Anderson shelter. Those that didn't have an Anderson shelter, in flats and things, they went to a public shelter and that lasted for – until the all clear sounded. That lasted for some half an hour. The air raid wardens were in the street playing whistles, taking everyone – telling everyone to take cover, which we had to. This is, I remember, being a teenager that, a little but rebellious, like when he told me to take cover I said, well, you know, 'I'm ok. I'll do what I want' and he said, 'You'll do – you'll take cover in the shelter otherwise you will be arrested', you know. It'd be just like that. So I took shelter, well, this was – this was on the – on the Sunday morning of the 3rd of September, very shortly after the announcement by Chamberlain on the news when the air raid warning went, you see. So that – in fact, it was – it was purely a mistake apparently. There was – there were¹ no planes coming or anything. In fact, the paper reported the next day that the – while the air raid warning went was that a flight of geese was spotted coming over the North Sea and this was re-laid by the air – the spotters and it finally got out of hand so they decided to set the air raid warning going. It was a sound that was a chilling sound, really. The very fact that the warning went I think – I always thought caused more panic than the bombing, you know. But, that's how things were during that time.

Interviewer: So tell me. We had the phoney war, as it was called, or was it called that later?

Len: It was called that later, yes. Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: And so tell me then what happened when that came to an end?

Len: Well, when that came to an end at – during January 1940 and August, the Luftwaffe had been bombing fairly heavily at the RAF airfields in Kent, mainly. Although we lived in south London we saw nothing of those, the bombers never came as far as the outskirts of London. But we used to follow because it was announced most days on the wireless of how many Germans had been shot down. As young teenagers we were quite involved in this, it was like a football match. 'What's the score today?' you know, and this became quite an entertainment for us during this period, you know. But then we had our first daylight raid on the – on the – in September, the 7th of September. We'd been swimming with – during this time, the summer of 1940 things had relaxed no end during the phoney war so from that point of view we were doing things in the long summer evenings. They didn't allow meeting but as youngsters we were playing our football and we were meeting with all Boys Brigade fellows that we knew before so we had a little group that we used to run around on. On the 7th of September we were – we went for a swim which we – it was a lovely day so we went for a swim and it was the first daylight bombing on the capital and it was a heavy one. This broke the phoney war because following that daylight raid on the 7th of September they bombed – they followed up immediately with bombing at night and they then bombed for the next month, every night. Every night we had to go to the shelter and that became quite a – we got used to that. In fact, we used to talk about what we must do before the air raid sirens go, you know. So we would hurry along get home from work, have our meal and get

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down to the shelter before the, as it was called, 'Moaning Minnie', it was the nickname was, we must get – 'Let's all get to the shelter before Moaning Minnie starts'. Then we settled down to, really, we used to the bombing, you know. The planes we could hear, some bombs we could hear and unfortunately, mid November, we were bombed, actually, in our Anderson shelter. But we survived but that, you know, the bombing was quite intense at that time. We were – we were trapped in Anderson shelter for some half an hour before neighbours sort of got us out. But we – when we looked at the situation, we were extremely lucky because the bomb had fallen in next door's garden and it had actually pushed us into the side of the crater. The Anderson shelter, in matter of fact, had folded so there were three of us in there that were quite cramped, you know, and that was my mother, my sister and myself². My father was in the house and he looked out the backdoor and only saw a crater and just assumed we were all gone, you know. So when the heavy – heavy rescue people finally came and dug us out the shelter and took us to the – the public shelter and that's where we found my father cos he – he really couldn't believe that we had survived so he was quite traumatised. They'd got him up there to calm him down a bit which – I'm going on a bit [laughs].

Interviewer: That's what we want.

Len: But this – this is something that happens and you don't – you don't do a lot on that until [unclear], you know.

Interviewer: So that was your first experience of danger?

Len: Absolutely.

Interviewer: And was that followed by other incidences? Or was that the worst?

Len: I think so because, as I say, I was an apprentice engineer, we were lift engineers actually so going to work, well, we used to cycle and going to work we would often get part of the way to work and put your bike on the shoulder and it was impossible to cycle because of debris. So it was – plus the fact that you didn't want puncture on your bike so nine times out of ten you – your bike was on your shoulder and you were walking, you know. But, yes, it – I must admit that when they bombed the City of London and set fire to it around St Pauls and that area, we were working quite near that area and it was frightening to see the – the fires that were – you really got the feeling that – that London was gonna burn, you know. So that, in a way, really made you a little bit concerned but as teenagers, you know, it was – part of it was quite exciting really, you know. It was – after – after the nine months or ten months of the phoney war, the bombing was – was fairly exciting. And we had to form in the evening we had to do a job. We had to register as – as firewatchers. We had to do that, you know, and street fire watching we had to register and they would have a board up there where we filled in watch, take a key. That key unlocked a shed that had the stirrup pumps and sand case and we did in fact – we did in fact save some houses and some older people in the fire watching system. It was quite a good thing but I always remember that finally – I don't know why, as a teenager you get very tired

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and it's very difficult to sort of get up at midnight and do your two hours stint and I'm afraid that I went to sleep on two occasions and was reported to the Town Hall. They – they then called me in and said, well, you know, 'This isn't good enough so we're gonna – we're gonna take you away from the street and you've got to then report to a public building', which was the Electric Light Company. But as it turned out it was great because I had – there was a bed and a little room and they laid on tea. It was much more comfortable than doing the street run so from that point of it I was – I was – but then come 1942 I was eighteen and I was called up for service, you know. Called up for the Navy and so that was the end of my civilian experience, really.

Interviewer: Did you actually experience at first hand any of the battle that was going on? Did you see any airplanes?

Len: Oh, well, yes, I mean, on the 7th – on the 7th of September we really saw the aircraft and they were fairly low but I mentioned that because of my old Boy Brigade friends that we used to³ meet up at each other's houses during the phoney war. We'd either play Monopoly or cards and well, we were – we used to study aircraft recognition, actually, and the German as well as English. When the – when the heavy raid came on the 7th of September we really knew what we were looking at. Even, quite honestly the Dornier 17 and 217s, we knew the – we actually knew the different marks, you know. We were so excited there we – we weren't – we weren't scared at all. We were seeing the Heinkel 111s, the Dorniers and the Junkers 88s. We really – we were really knew what we were looking at and they looked magnificent. They were in groups of sixty. Afterwards the reports were that there was nearly six hundred aircraft in the air and the noise was tremendous because the – the engines, the Daimler-Benz and BMW engines were fuel injected. The Germans used fuel injection instead of carbonation and this gave them a heavy drone, more than British aircraft. This combined together was – was a tremendous vibration in the air but as I say it was exciting and I think it's a sight we shall never forget and never see again.

Interviewer: And were you aware of the English planes trying to defend?

Len: None, none whatsoever. There was no combat whatsoever, we didn't see anything. But as I – as I did write in a letter that we did – we did see a plane fall out of the sky and that plane was – we later found out was a Hurricane so there must have been combat of some description.

Interviewer: Did you see anybody get out of it?

Len: Yes. We didn't see someone get out of it but we saw something fall off the plane and we later found out it was the pilot and his parachute didn't open. Without repeating myself, I wrote this down, and I don't know if you read it but – but to carry on with that story we saw this plane tumble out of the sky. It didn't – it didn't dive out of the sky, it came out like – like a Catherine wheel and halfway down we saw whatever it was fall from it. Then we cycled home across Blackheath and we saw the wreckage of a plane. The pilot apparently fell nearby but we didn't see that. As I – as I said, the next

³ 15 min

morning we went – we went up to see the wreckage with some other friends and it'd completely gone – completely cleared. But it's very strange because my grandson was doing a project at school and I mentioned to him and the master that was doing the project said, 'Do you think you can take us to the spot where you saw the plane go down?' I said, 'Certainly I can'. I took him there and they had a detector and they did find one or two bits of the plane which was rather nice. It was very nice for me because no one had seen this plane, I don't know why, my particular friends at the time they've now gone and so I couldn't sort of clarify with them. But several people that I've met in the Blackheath area, you know, said, 'Do you remember a plane that came down on Blackheath?', and they said, 'No, we lived there and we had no – we didn't know a plane came down'. Well, it's quite – it's quite reasonable because the air raid was on and everybody was in the air raid shelter so people weren't wandering around so that plane could, well, have come down. It was clear the next morning. Greenwich had no record of it, you see, because we had a little – an exhibition of war, wartime Greenwich and they had no – they had no record. But what I did find out that after⁴ the war where it actually came down was a small part of Lewisham so Lewisham had a record of it and that's why we didn't follow up.

But how I got to know was that I was with my granddaughter and we went to Tangmere Airfield Museum and at that time I asked one of the stewards there and I just said that I saw a plane crash during the war at Blackheath. He said, well, 'Could you hang on for a minute the curator would like a chat with you, you see' and he came out with a little smile and then said, 'I understand you saw a Spitfire come down on Blackheath'. I said, 'Yeah', he said, 'Well, I'm sorry you didn't'. I thought, here we go again, you know, I'm sure I'm not imagining this. 'No', he said, 'What you saw was a Hurricane come down and it was flight lieutenant Reynolds, an Australian, that took off from this airfield and we think he was involved in an air crash rather than shooting'. There was an air collision because there was a Messerschmitt 199 that came down on Woolwich Common, damaged, and they said they think there may have been a collision in – mid air collision. They said, 'Can you tell me how it came down?', I said, 'Well, it came down like a Catherine wheel', they said, 'It's just like we'd thought. We think the tyre was sliced straight off'. The very fact that the plane was spinning he just – he just couldn't get himself clear enough to pull the ripcord and he died, you know. But they did tell me where he's buried [pause] and I went to see his – his grave [pause] – I do apologize, it's stupid. Makes me so mad when this happens, it takes over.

Interviewer: That's alright don't worry.

Len: So really that – that really is an episode, you know.

Interviewer: Where was he buried?

Len: Oh, he was buried at Goodwood Cemetery, which is a Commonwealth cemetery near – near the Alderton area in Surrey. But he's not buried in the Commonwealth section, he's in a small – a small site with no stone or identification it's – it's so sad. In fact I had to go to reception, well, I was at

⁴ 20 min

reception really, we – when I was in the navy we were on the Russian Convoys and the Russian memorial is in Goodwood Cemetery so each year we go to Goodwood for a little service. And then I realised that Flight Lieutenant Reynolds was buried at Goodwood so I went to reception while I was there and they took me – they had to take me. They said, well, ‘You won’t find it. You’ll have to come with us’. It was the same, it’s unattended and it’s really just a [unclear] with a little bit of grass round it, you know. It’s so sad that the family – the family opted for this, a private burial which apparently all servicemen could have particularly if they were killed in Britain. It would have been much nicer because the Commonwealth section is beautifully kept and –

Interviewer: Mm, very sad.

Len: [laughs] It isn’t it. I do apologise. It was – sometimes when – sometimes when the – this emotion is at roar you know –

Interviewer: Very emotional time I should think.

Len: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah, it was, yeah.

Interviewer: That’s interesting, so tell me know about what happened to you when you were involved in the war?

Len: Well, when I was called up?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Len: Yeah, well, naturally, I was trained as a – having an apprentice background in engineering so then I was an engine room⁵ mechanic, you see. So – and I was drafted to Devonport and at that time, you see, 1942, everything was focused on the second front so everything was being worked out. The Americans were coming over in their hundreds, their thousands actually. So the whole of the West Country, the Americans had almost taken over. They were everywhere. Everything was focused towards the, as I say, the second front as it was then known and they formed an outfield called the – oh, it’s left me now. But everybody that was called up Army, Navy and Air Force, combined operation, that’s – that’s the word. So we trained as combined operations and you were trained in the three forces, really. This was – this was something that was Mountbatten – Mountbatten’s idea. He set up combined operations, it was his idea which apparently was a very good one. So we all knew what each other were doing. Well, naturally being in the Navy we – our combined operations section was on landing craft rather than general service. General service being destroyers, battleships, things like that. So we were – we were – we were trained on the combined operations landing craft.

Well, it so happened that when training finished we were lined up and we were sent up to Liverpool. Now the landing craft mainly were being built in the United States so the small landing crafts, the assault craft, as they were called, they were actually loaded on a freighter and they were unloaded at Liverpool. But they had to be taken down to the south coast and so they – they put us really raw

⁵ 25 min

recruits on these things. Being engineers and we were trained in – in the diesel engine (??) to drive the boat - assault boat and we – something like a dozen or so were grouped together one day and we had to bring them round to the south coast . So we didn't go very far out to sea and we had one escort with us which was a – it wasn't a proper naval boat, really, it was – it was more of a – I forget what they call it. But it was almost like a small minelayer which I don't think could have looked after us very well. But we made it round to Portland in the south but we understand that the – in the same class those that were picked and left earlier were apprehended by an E-boat, a German E-boat, going round just off of Falmouth apparently. The German E-boat took of as many men as he could and then sunk the rest of the craft so that class I was in, within six months of being in the navy were prisoners of war. They were taken back to Holland, actually, and made prisoners of war. This I learned because when we – when we were finally demobbed, we demobbed by number. I met one of my old class – training fellows that had been in Germany three years, actually. But his number still came up for demob and that's how we met him again and he told me what happened. He then said that – how well they were treated when they got to Holland and by the German Navy. What gentlemen – until they were handed to the Army and then finally the SS and then he said they were quite brutal in the – in the – I think he went to a Stalag in Poland somewhere⁶. But, this is your luck. It was only because my name was 'P' that I was further down the line. If my name had been starting at 'C', I'd been Prisoner of war within six months [laughs].

Interviewer: So you – you presumably weren't aware of – of what had happened? Everything was kept secret?

Len: Oh, no, we didn't – we didn't know. These – these assault craft after we got to the south coast somehow. There was a danger because there was a lot of activity in the channel with E-boats so therefore – therefore the freighters, the American freighters weren't going to the south coast so they were dropping off at Liverpool. Milford Haven they were unloading as well but they – it was too dangerous to go round the south coast with the E-boat. The E-boats were nipping over thirty odd knots from Dutch – French coast and they were vicious, they really were. We lost a lot of boats during that period as we did after the invasion. But then – then they decided that after we'd – after we'd done all that training, they decided that too many in-takers were going in to combined operations and general service navy were short of men [laughs]. So I was then re-trained more or less for steam proportion so – and then posted to a Destroyer. This I picked up in Scotland and we went off on the Russian convoys which were absolute hell. We only went in winter time and there was two hours twilight every twenty-four hours. You never knew whether it was twelve o'clock midday or twelve o'clock midnight. It was cold and the Destroyers were never, never equipped. They were – cos they were fairly warm because of the ships activities and bitterly cold outside, the whole place used to drip with condensation. The whole time we were wet and damp and, of course, we were on – we were then attacked. When we went out north of – we used to leave from Iceland and when we – when we rounded the North Cape then the wolf packs would be behind us and they – the torpedo bombers those would come out from Norway and attack. I don't know why but they were extremely brave pilots

⁶ 30 min

really. Our firepower in the convoy was quite significant and not only the escorts were well armed but the ships themselves had – had anti-aircraft guns. When they'd attack the amount of anti-aircraft flack was tremendous⁷. But they would fly on and sometimes they would be shot down. But never pick – we would never pick them up but these attacks were in twilight so we never really saw them. You know – you knew they were being hit but they would disappear and whether they did get down or not, I don't know. But whether they were shot down? Our gunners used to claim one occasionally. We all thought that, you know, to hell with it, they were brave blokes.

But it's strange that you should feel that, you know, when you see one of your own blokes go down you're not very happy with them. So, yes, we did – we did see many – many of went down and pick it up. But when we got to – we used to go to the Kola Inlet which was Murmansk and we weren't received very well there at all. I don't know why but we had restrictions and we very rarely went ashore. But we were lucky enough, we would tie up against a much bigger boat, a cruiser, and there we could go ashore on the cruiser and have a nice shower and quite a nice meal. But to go ashore – the Russians, really felt sorry for them, that part of Russia they were terribly poor and they suffered no end. So we didn't go ashore much. Nothing to do there. But we were only there, sometimes, five or six days before there was an empty convoy to come back. They would still attack the empty convoys on the way back. But not so hard as though full convoys going up, the whole time – the whole time we were – we were shadowed by a Focke-Wulf condor, that's a four engine condor. Sometimes you could just about see him but other times you could only just hear him and he was relaying back the position the convoy most of the time. So you couldn't get rid of him, he was too high to shoot at. The escort carriers that we had were flying Hurricanes; they too found it too high to take the condor. But they done a great job in defending the convoy, the Hurricane pilots. They were mainly RAF, actually, on the escort carriers.

Then, of course, we were called south for – to prepare for the invasion. We came down about April time 1944 to Devonport and we had to have a bit of an overhaul but we had to have several extra guns fitted and the depth charges taken away because we weren't – we weren't escorting as such although we were escorting invasion convoys. It wasn't like a long convoy that – we didn't expect submarines in the shallower waters of the channel. But then we were – we'd done several exercises, sometimes American, sometimes British we were doing training on the beaches. Then we came to the – it was the – it was the night of the 5th of – yeah, the 5th of June 1944. Eisenhower had sent a message, we were not to – to the skipper of each unit and this was – they cleared lower deck and he read this out to us, you know. I think it started, 'Sailors' – 'Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied forces you're embarking – you are embarking on a great crusade' [laughs]⁸. And [clears throat] we all lined up listened to this and the skipper said, 'That's it lads. We're going in fairly early. I don't know what will happen. The only thing I know is that this old bastard's gonna do – it's gonna do its job'. So we had to stand down there because the weather was so bad, on the 5th and so we had to hang about. I felt so sorry for all the troops in the – in the – all the troops were loaded in the barges and it

⁷ 35 min

⁸ 40 min

was hell for them. They had to wait there another twelve hours before they went and then finally, apparently, there was a gap. Then in the early hours of the 5th – the 6th we left much sooner than the invasion and, of course, we went over to the French coast with the minesweepers. The minesweepers cleared an [unclear] for us – for the invasion to go in and we were there while they were sweeping giving them an escort. We saw no Germans strangely enough. Our sister ship, the Bulldog, she apparently did – there was a German gunboat around which she saw off pretty quickly. They didn't want to open fire because this would have alerted the whole coast really. But the Germans weren't aware of what we were doing.

Then we came back to Portland and we picked up a war correspondent. He was from Reuters – Reuters correspondent. His name was Desmond Tighe and he was an official war correspondent. Now this really worried us cos these lads, these war correspondents, real, 'I'm gonna get me a jack-business', you know, and we – we didn't fancy that cos he was gonna take us with him but we didn't want to go. Anyway, he was onboard and we saw the invasion. We went to Gold Beach and we – that looked fairly calm from where we were we never went within several hundred yards of, you know. We were back when the assault crafts were – they used to – the assault craft they loaded from much bigger ships, you know. Much bigger landing craft, they loaded then and then the smaller assault craft went in. But they seemed to go in, there was gunfire and smoke knocking about but we didn't see too much of it. But then he, Desmond Tighe, the advent had gone pretty well apparently and there were five beaches and he wanted to see each one. So he – we took him first of all to the other two British ones and then we went to Omaha and that had gone wrong, absolutely –. After Omaha, we – he wanted to see Utah Beach and Utah Beach had gone well so we didn't see anyone there. It was clear. They'd moved inland. Then he wanted – then he had to send his communicate back to United News or something or other. But he tried and there was so much – so much flack and that going on so much – there were so many aircraft in the air. There was a lot of firing going on that in no way could he get his radio through so he approached the skipper and he said, 'Can we get back?', and he said, 'Yes, I'll take you back to Portsmouth'. So – and this was the most strange – most strange thing ever happened to us because we dashed back to Portsmouth and I remember going along south seafront and kiddies were playing, it wasn't a bad day, kiddies were playing in the beach as we went along the south seafront to go into Portsmouth Harbour and we'd left⁹ – we'd left a hell.

Then we came back and we came into Portsmouth, it was quite unreal. We tied up and he went – he went to do his landline to report international secret news, or something. Everything had to go in to be censored. When he went one of the – the officer's stewards – we weren't allowed to show us, but one of the officer's stewards went ashore to get one or two niceties for the officers so. When he came back he'd been into a shop to get something and the assistant had said to him, 'God, news are great about the invasion', and then [laughs] and she said to him, 'I bet you're glad you weren't in it, were you?', and he said 'I couldn't answer. I couldn't say I was there'. I mean, for one thing two o'clock in the morning before dinner time we were back in Portsmouth. Anyway, I've got to hand it to Desmond Tighe he could have pushed of then and done his job but he came back onboard and we left – we left

⁹ 45 min

the next morning and took five LSTs, American LSTs. We were taking them into Cherbourg actually. Cherbourg was almost falling at the time, it was – I think it was – I think it was the 13th. No, right about – yeah 13th of June, we were taking these five LSTs over to the Cherbourg peninsula and two of them, immediately were torpedoed and that was a hell of a night. They both burst in to flames and they were packed with soldiers and they were all – they were Patton's men, the follow up. Patton – Patton didn't go on the initial invasion but Patton went in with his army on the follow up which was a tough lot, tough outfit. We picked up nearly three hundred men out of the water. Several of them died onboard but our boat was in an awful state, they were covered in fuel oil and vomit and they were an awful state and it was bitterly cold that night. For June, bitterly cold, so a lot died from exposure but we got back to Portsmouth and cleaned up a bit and got rid of the dead and what have you.

Then we had to carry on then until we were – we were still escorting and then the Germans got their act together actually. There was no – there was no air activity, we'd taken command of the skies but the – they got to their act together at night, actually. The E-boats and several others and they'd got some sort of inshore submarines they were using and they were knocking off a lot of these suppliers getting to, in fact, they had to pick up at night because the Germans were doing too well and this slowed down the advance no end apparently, until we could clear a little more and get on top of them. It was – it was a job – they had – they had certain night observation things that we didn't know they had. Several, several airplanes were torpedoed at night. We were quite amazed that they were flying in and they had certain technical things and then one night we – we were just off the French coast and saw a plane which we thought was in trouble. It was flaring out of its tail and the skipper – skipper gave the order to standby for rescue. Whether it was German or whether it's English we don't know but it suddenly picked up and went, shot off. Then the next night¹⁰ we saw another couple of these things, we didn't know, and then the order came through that there – there was – it was an unmanned – an unmanned aircraft and not to open fire. Now, this I couldn't understand because when they were launched off the French coast they were going slow and they were low and I'm sure we could have picked them off. But I think they were so worried about if we hit them what they would do. So we never opened fire on them. They were, in fact, the flying bomb, and we actually saw them very early. Before they were actually officially announced to the people of Britain that they are under attack by unmanned aircraft.

Then we finally, come the end of July, I was on HMS Beagle and we were tired, Beagle was tired. She hadn't had a long break from the convoys in Russia and none of us had much sleep during the invasion and after. As I say, the activity in the channel was a lot and so we actually were brought in for some repairs and we came right in to – came right up the Thames because the south coast shipyards were so full anyway. We came in right into Poplar and I could get a bus home to Deptford and, oh, they had a laugh, they said, I don't know, 'The first time you go out to sea and you get a bus to come home!' [laughs]. So, in – really that's it, you know. We had the honour as the war petered out a bit because we'd done quite – the boat itself from 1939 had been in action nearly all that time. Long

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before I was on it and I didn't join it until 1943 and we were given the honour to go to the Channel Islands our boat – the surrender of the Channel Islands was signed on the Beagle and then went back to shore for their celebration and that was tremendous. So never the little honour they gave to the boat and we're invited back most Liberation Day, the crew, we went this year and there was only five of us left [laughs]. So from that point of view, yeah, I mean, when we were first invited back after about ten years, I think, after the war there was – there was something like eighty of us, you know, onboard, and it was sad really. We just saw those and –

Interviewer: Do you think you'll go back again?

Len: Pardon?

Interviewer: Do you think you'll go back again?

Len: What to Jersey?

Interviewer: To Jersey.

Len: Yeah, yeah. I was – I was there this May for Liberation. It's very nice, the – we meet one or two folk, you know, but –

Interviewer: It's fascinating.

Len: What? I'm fas – that's it Garry [laughs]. You should have stopped me, you know.

Interviewer: No. No, not at all, that's just what we want. It's fantastic. Is there anything else that you know that you've forgotten that –?

Len: No, not really, you know, as I say, when I came back – when we came in we came in to Poplar with – we went in to dry dock and that's when – that's when Desmond Tighe left us, Reuters. About two years ago I – I thought, I don't know, I got on the Docklands Light Railway and I thought, I wonder if the old dock is still there, where we were and I couldn't pinpoint at all. But then I thought I saw – recognised where it was and it was a huge building on top of it, you know. So – and there was a gatekeeper there and lo and behold it was Reuters [laughs]. So I said to the – I said to the gatekeeper, I said¹¹, 'I was here during the war'. I said, 'There was a dry dock there and my Destroyer came in for repairs', and I said that 'we had one of your war correspondents onboard Desmond Tighe'. So he said, well, 'This is a very secure building at the moment. I can't let you in'. But he gave me addresses, 'You write to that address and I'm sure they'll be interested to hear what', you know. I did that and they invited me down there and showed me and they took me in the basement and I – it was one of the – it's quite a building, really, this – Norman Foster, apparently built it. It was so sound underneath and the old Georgian dry dock or something. So sound that he didn't know he built the

¹¹ 55 min

building on those foundations and they took me to the basement and there's the dry dock, out of belief.

Interviewer: Amazing.

Len: He said – he was the engineer, the building engineer took me down there and he said, 'We just had one or two new electrical mains fitted there', and he said, 'We had to chop out quite a lot of Granit'. So he said, 'Would you like a handful?' [laughs] so I said, 'Yeah, why not', so I took it home and I've got that handful. But what – what is so nice because we were in this – we were in dry dock for nearly two months before we went back on – went back to Russia again, I'm afraid, before Christmas. Because of the – there's nothing to do on a boat when you're in dry dock. It's hell. You can't even go to the toilet, you know, you got to find – so therefore you can't even find sleep, you know. But because of that and there was so much rubbish about, I fancied making a model of the boat [laughs]. So I made a model of the boat, in actual fact, and I still got it at home. As a lad of eighteen, now I made this model, nineteen, really, and I've still got that and right alongside it I've got me the bit of Granit [laughs].

Interviewer: Excellent.

Len: So I don't know whether you – you wouldn't want anything like that in the exhibition cos –

Interviewer: I think we might.

Len: Well, I mean, I – I – how relevant would it be, you know? It's not – it's not a great model and it's not to scale but –

Interviewer: That doesn't matter. It's the fact that you made it.

Len: Every bit of it. Every bit of that is from the old boat, is from the Beagle. I mean the plinth it's on is from the Captain's cabin and, well, to me and certainly to my son – one of my sons he's got his eye on it [laughs]. But I said, I can't really see how significant it is to you, you know.

Interviewer: I'm sure they'd love something like that in the exhibition.

Len: How would they – yeah, well, how would they – how would they present it really, you know?

Interviewer: They'd have to just explain, you know, that it was made by you in dry dock in between [unclear].

Len: Yeah, right, and, well, they're both so significant because, well, I say when we came in the flying bombs were at their height and as we – as we were preparing to go into dry dock we went into the dry dock and they pumped it out and a flying bomb dropped in the Thames and almost a tidal wave hit the, well, because it was such an old dock. In fact, I think the old sailing boats were built there. They had what they called a kason and they didn't have locked gates. So this kason was a floating little barge, really, which they used to take – pump out, you know, and then they'd fetch it in and then they

– they'd pump out the water and it would drop down and become a gate. Then they'd pump out the – well, apparently, they're very, very strong, they go down between two runners. And one of the dockyard workers said that if it had been gates the blast of that water would have – the water would have rushed in and Beagle would have been lost for sure. The water would have come in and the boat would have fell over so – so that was fairly significant really [laughs].

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Len: And unfortunately the Petty Officer in charge of me, a lovely chap, he went down¹² the East India Dock Road to the Salvation Army for a couple of nights sleep, you know. We used to go to the West End, of course, and he'd been up to the West End and came back to the Salvation Army and that had a direct hit with a flying bomb and he was killed. But that was very sad cos there was – there was quite a few servicemen in there from the docks, you know. But we were then banned from sleeping ashore. They wouldn't let – they wouldn't let us sleep ashore then so. How on earth we slept on the boat [laughs]. It was awful, you know, they – they thought –

Interviewer: It's ironic isn't it that your greatest risk was when you were actually almost home.

Len: Oh, yeah. Oh, we hated it. We couldn't fight back so. No, we really – we were scared actually, scared of them flying bombs. We used to watch them. Some – they – they come over and the motor would stop, you didn't – some would glide on, some would turn right back on themselves. They were most erratic and you'd follow the damn thing down [laughs]. We were so glad to go back to sea.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Len: We really were. So –

Interviewer: Well, that's really good. That's fantastic.

Len: [Laughs] for goodness sake stop me.

Interviewer: Yeah, I think we better stop there actually cos we've done at least three quarters of an hour haven't we. Is there anything else you want to say?

Len: [Laughs]. Oh, you shouldn't keep on. No, I mean, really, no, that was it, you know.

Interviewer: Would you say you – was the war, I mean, I know it's a horrible thing, you know, the war cos for obvious reasons, but would you say it – it was a positive experience for you personally?

Len: Nothing like it.

Interviewer: No.

¹² 60 min

Len: I mean, I can't see anything like it – I feel so privileged to been involved, you know. It's so personal, really, don't talk about it much but you feel quite special, you know [laughs]. Whether that's pompous or not I don't know but you do. You look at – you look at some of these lads now and say, 'My God', you know, 'What did I do that for?' you know.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Len: But then by the same rule it wasn't by choice, you know, you were – you're no hero because you're pulled into this thing and you got no choice. You – you're called up, you – you damn well do it. That's it.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Len: You know, so –

Interviewer: Yeah, right. Well, one would hope that we do –

[Recorder paused].

Len: As I say just as well, 'Steady on son', you know, this, you know, keep your head – great blokes and, you know, they – they –

Interviewer: One big family.

Len: He carried it – he carried it, yeah, yeah, so.

Interviewer: Good.

End of Interview.