

Interviewee: Patricia Pennington

Interviewer: Linda Taylor

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Interviewer: This is Linda Taylor interviewing Patricia Pennington, Thursday the 4th of November.

Patricia: Ok. My name is Patricia Pennington my birthday is in July 1937.

Interviewer: Ok. If you just like to –

Patricia: Well, believe it or not my earliest real memory was the announcement on the radio that we were at war with Germany. I know that's hard to believe but I can remember the fear because my mother was actually washing me in the kitchen sink and she left me standing on the draining board ran to the radio and I have this very strong memory of my mother sobbing and I was screaming because I was petrified, I'd just been left standing on the draining board. I obviously didn't know that was what it was all about, that I found out from my mother a good time later. You know, I remember asking her I said, 'I have this memory' and she said, 'Yes, that's right', she said, 'I did leave you', she said, 'I was'. My mother was the sort of person who thought once the war was announced that the very next day the bombs were going to start dropping. So that's my very earliest recollection. I've got very distorted memories of Anderson shelters and Morrisons being built, putting in the garden. Again I'm getting this all wrong chronologically, I know, but sorry if it sounds like I'm rambling. I remember in the Anderson shelter that it filled with water. It was always water at the bottom of this shelter in the garden outside and my dad said he hated it ever since I peed in his ear because I was it the top bunk. He thought the water was coming from above, in actual fact, I had done that so the Anderson shelter was not used after that and we used the Morrison shelter, the indoor shelter. Of course, I loved it all the excitement because I was too young to realise how frightening the whole thing was. To me it was tremendously exciting. I know my mother used to cry. I used to say, 'I don't know why you're crying? We're in the shelter; if a bomb drops we're fine'. And I totally believed that. So for me the war was quite good fun, most of it. But I have to say when the air raid warden – siren used to go off I used to feel the tightening at the time but the excitement took over. I do remember on one occasion and was standing at the back door after the siren had gone off and I watched the searchlight dancing across the sky showing up the silver barrage balloons and I could hear the thud of the guns and see the puff smoke whilst I searched desperately for the object of the attack and I wasn't disappointed. There it was, an enemy plane, int – intermittently exposed by the searchlights. I stood mesmerised, I was totally ignoring the fact that my mother had been calling to get into the shelter. I'm afraid I ignored her to my cost, in her panic to get me to the shelter she grabbed me by whatever came to hand and it happened to be my pigtails. I can remember physically being dragged by my mother by my pigtails into the shelter [laughs].

Interviewer: Where were you at this time?

Patricia: I was in Lincoln Avenue at – in Whitton, a couple of roads away, yeah. Um, that's [unclear], really. I can remember all the ration books, obviously, and the dried eggs.

Interviewer: What sort of meals did you eat?

Patricia: We – my mother managed to eke out the frugal meat allowance by cooking fan – I mean, I remember fantastic food as a child. We had no money or we had no hardly any food to – we recall nowadays good food but my mother used to make sort of stew and dumplings and that sort of thing because it would fill you up and it would eke out your allowances. But I remember mum used to fly to the shops if someone said, 'They got oranges', you know, and she would queue for maybe two hours and bring home to oranges if she was lucky and feel really good, you know. That's extraordinary to think of nowadays isn't that you could, you know, actually get excited by having an orange [laughs]. I remember the gas mask. I got it down here because I do actually really remember it. We had to go to the local clinic and I was given a Mickey Mouse gas mask. Well, I was obviously still very small at this stage and it was hideous and I was very frightened and of course I wouldn't put it on at first. I did give in I tried it on and it had a rubber tongue and it used to blow a raspberry¹ every time I exhaled this thing, you know, and I didn't care what happened after that I was never gonna put it on my head again, you know. We had to carry them everywhere. But I can remember the smell of that rubber, do you know? Even now it was really frightening because you can't explain to a small child what gas is. That the Germans are going to gas us, what does that mean, you know, gas us? My mother got paranoid every time she smelt anything. If it was something a different smell she wasn't used to she assumed that the gas had come and she tried make us put these gas masks on [laughs].

When as I say the bombing got particularly bad my father told – sent us up to Hull but when we arrived at the station in Hull to our absolute horror, of course, it had been, all the area around, it had been bombed. There were no lights, no street lights anywhere. My mother had a torch and we were totally lost and we kept tripping into potholes. I can remember hanging onto my mother's coat, you know, desperately hanging on to her while she was trying to find the way. Both of us crying, you know, cos my mother couldn't believe it cos she thought she was gonna go somewhere where it was all safe and lovely, you know. Unfortunately, the bombs followed – they followed us up there and – but I have again this is probably totally irrelevant, not interesting to anybody, but what I can remember when we finally got to my grandparents house was my grandmother opened larder and there was earthenware bowl full of real eggs. I stood there with my mouth open. I couldn't – I'd never seen real eggs. All we had at home were dried eggs but he kept chickens my grandfather. So there was this earthenware bowl full of real eggs and I was paralysed, you know, and he used to let me collect the chickens – the eggs sometimes as well so that was a good side of it. The bad side was I contracted impetigo up there and my mother sent a tele – my father sent my mother a telegram to say that we had been bombed and that she needed to come home and I wasn't allowed to go. Again, I can remember crying very much because my mother left me up there. But what had happened, there's a

¹ 5 min

field at the back of Lincoln Avenue and behind the fields there were some poplar trees and a doodlebug had come over and it had clipped the top of the poplar tree which deflected it downwards. Fortunately in to the field not on to all the houses, well, of course, it blew all the windows out so, you know, the house was damaged but that was such a lucky escape. It was for an awful lot of people, I mean, two elderly ladies at the end of the road that we lived on, they were sleeping in a big double bed and their bed just came through the ceiling and they landed downstairs totally unharmed but still lying in the bed so to speak. Of course, all the windows were gone, absolutely all the windows were gone. I mean, consequently we used to play in the crater as children which was absolutely great fun because we used to dig for shrapnel. Sometimes you'd find pieces of crystal, pieces of, you know, china that had all been – that wasn't the excitement. The excitement was finding the pieces of shrapnel. I mean, I wish I had the collection now but – I had quite a collection of pieces of shrapnel from this doodlebug. I have to say that's the one thing of which I was frightened, nothing else frightened me but I did – I was frightened of the doodlebug and I can – I can almost feel it now, the fear when you heard the drone of this thing coming over and you prayed that it would just keep going. You know, as long as it kept going, it kept going you were alright but if it stopped you just expected it to drop on top of you cos as soon as it stopped, I mean, that's when it came down. That was a very fearful thing, I think that was. That was towards the end of the war, wasn't it, the doodlebugs came over. Yes, I was very frightened of that. But we had that lucky escape with that one.

This is all distorted out I'm afraid but I have a memory also of, we had prefabs were built all along the Chertsey Road here during the war but they were built by Italian prisoners of war and as a child I used to go up with my friend and we used to sit in the workman's hut and the worker there – English supervisor used to give us great big mugs of stinging tea and although the Italians who came in for their² tea couldn't speak any English they used to show us all the photographs of their families. That's a strange thing isn't it when you think about it? It's strange that my mother would let me go and do that even. Can you imagine nowadays but back then we used to sit there fascinated. We used to talk to them but they didn't know what we were saying and we didn't know what they were saying but they – they really wanted us to see all these pictures they had of their families so that's, you know, something else that I can remember. I can – sorry –

Interviewer: Carry on.

Patricia: I was just gonna say I can remember going up to – after one of the doodlebugs fell in Whitton High Street that was very frightening because it was very close. The whole place – it shut the whole High Street so we knew it was very close. Went up to High Street in the morning and it had been flattened, we couldn't get beyond the bridge and people had been killed in that one. That's the closest I think that we had, you know, really, when it was really bad. But as I say I'm just jumping about in my mind at the moment so –

Interviewer: What about your school days? How was it going to school?

² 10 min

Patricia: Well, I was only – don't forget I was only two when the war started so I didn't really go to school until I was – I started when I was under four – over four cos this is all in here – this is totally irrelevant to this cos I went to a Catholic school cos my mother was a Catholic and they treated you very badly in those days. It was pretty awful. In fact it was – I've got it all here which I won't bore you with cos it's nothing to do with the war but my father took me away and I just went to the ordinary. But I haven't got a lot of memories of – of the war affecting me at school, it's strange isn't it? I suppose –

Interviewer: But no air raids took place while you were at school?

Patricia: Yes, there were air raids, yes, and we went into sort of shelters I seem to remember we went into the shelters but it was – I wasn't fearful, you see. So I suppose, that's why, I wasn't fearful except for the doodlebugs. As I say, I really found it really quite exciting the whole – the whole experience awful thing to say, isn't it, really [laughs]? But then I was so young we had a – living next door to us, here, was a Spitfire pilot and loved to talking to him and he actually used to fly across the channel, again, this isn't relevant I'm sure, but he used to fly across the channel in – intercept the doodlebugs and they used to tip the wing of the doodlebug to deflect it into the sea and that took some courage didn't cos they were – he was only eighteen at the time and they – they were boys, weren't they flying these Spitfires. Apparently an awful lot of them went down that way, a lot of pilots were sent down to intercepts these doodlebugs. It was amazing, wasn't it? Yeah, yeah [laughs]. But, I mean, I know going into hospital I had an earache and I had to have my tonsils out [unclear] so that wasn't very – very good. Yeah, I think I've said most of the bits.

Interviewer: What does it feel like being in an air raid shelter? How would that – you covered it to an extent?

Patricia: I covered it to an extent, well, I had implicit faith. Implicit faith in any shelter because I was young enough to believe if somebody told me that you would be ok, well, then I was gonna be ok if a bomb dropped. I couldn't understand why my mother, she used to sit in the shelter with me and from the moment the air raid siren – the siren went off she used to shake me, physically, like this, she used to shake and hold on to me and I could feel – I can feel it now, my mother shaking and she didn't stop shaking until the all-clear was sounded. I used to say, 'But we're gonna be fine. If a bomb drops we're alright we're in the shelter'. So I couldn't – I really couldn't understand it, why she was so frightened. My dad was in the Home Guard so he, I mean, when the bomb went off in the field behind he – he says that he was staying along the road with a friend and they were in the shelter and after the bomb had gone off. So the friend put his head out and dad grabbed him back just before the ceiling came down so but then dad said he went and sort of knocked on houses to check on people and several doors looked as if they were perfectly intact, knocked on the door and the door went in. The blast had literally taken them of their hinges but, you know, they were still standing. So it's only little things like that really, you know, that I can remember my dad telling me. But as I say, overall, I can only say that my memories³ were very good fun, sounds awful. But they were good fun, apart from the doodlebugs

³ 15 min

as I say but we were very lucky that that – I mean, that poplar tree is still there. You know, I've shown the kids and I've shown the grandchildren, 'That's the tree that stopped our house being flattened', because it was on its way down but it just deflected it sufficiently. But the crater was the best fun as I say because we just – it used to fill up with ice on the bottom in the winter time, you know, the winters we used to have, well, you don't know, but we – we used to have pretty tough winters. We used to just slide around on the ice at the bottom of this crater. Yeah, it was lovely. Yes, yeah, so – weird experience. My daughters, 'How can you say it was fun?', I said, 'Because I was young enough'. I wasn't old enough to – to know the real – real fear of it all. I mean, my, eh, my uncles were in the Merchant Navy and another uncle was captured by the Japanese and he worked on that awful bridge and he suffered terribly in the hands of the Japanese to the extent that he – he never spoke about it when he came home. Never. He – people used to ask him to talk about it and he wouldn't. The only thing he did say once was that they tried to cook a leather boot. I mean, would you cook a shoe for – I suppose anything they tried to cook for food. But he died of relating problems – related to the treatment he got fighting the Japanese. So, I suppose one thing the war has left me with is a – this is probably were it's a good thing our generation will die out one day is I have a total mistrust of the Germans and a hate for the Japanese. But, I mean, because of what happened it's very hard to – to when we welcome the Japanese leader over here, you know, and all I can see was my – my – my uncle. He was just walking bones and ruined him. It was very hard. That's what I do with memories specifically so that's how my family were involved. My dad worked for the Air Ministry so he didn't go into the Army and – cos he was doing secret war work so he said. I suppose he wasn't suppose to tell anyone but –

Interviewer: Was that in London?

Patricia: West Drayton. I think there was an underground place there where they used to do a lot of work. So that's why he was in the Home Guard, did his bit that way, you know. But, no, what else? It is interesting about the VE-parties?

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Patricia: I remember the VE-party. My day used to – they pushed the piano out of the house into the street cos my dad used to play the piano and all the trestle tables were all out in the avenue and it was absolutely fantastic, you know, and dad played the piano and people eating and dancing and that was good fun, tremendous fun. But my – one of my uncles had come home on leave and my mum and dad, my uncle went up to the winning post and put me to bed to be minded by the lady next door. I can remember being quite redigent and I remember getting up and telling the lady next door that my mum said I could get up if the noise was too much [unclear] and I went back to the party and that's my memory of the VE. I don't remember VJ, I don't suppose, I suppose we celebrated but I don't remember in the same way but that was the VE-party, really.

Interviewer: What kind of things did you do for entertainment in the war generally?

Patricia: Eh, again I was only a child so, you know, it's – it was really more interesting people who have had lives, you know, going out in the evenings and pic – we used to go to the pictures a lot [unclear]. I say a lot once a week, it was almost compulsory you went to the pictures and you always queued as well. You never just walked straight in, you had to queue behind the various price tags. The one at 9, there's one at 11 and the 2s and 3s or something, you know. So, you know, so you had to look at the people standing behind the 2 and 3, thinking, 'Well, they must be the worst seats in the cinema'. But of course the cinemas then was so beautiful, I mean, the Odeon at Whitton was just absolutely magnificent. Oh, that survived the bombings, even though Whitton High Street was devastated, that survived cos it was a beautiful building. Unfortunately it didn't survive in later years due to the planning of flats up there, that's fairly sad. We did what the Germans didn't do, you know. It's an awful shame isn't it [laughs]. But so there's not a tremendous amount but as I say I can only say that I found it⁴ quite exciting and the only fear I really did have was the doodlebugs and I feel we were very lucky that that one, particularly, hit the – hit the tree, was deflected otherwise all of that would have been flattened. Maybe even here, you know, cos it's only a couple of streets away. But I think my mother's fear is something I remember specifically. Her fear was tangible, absolutely tangible, because she did literally shake and I didn't like seeing that I must admit. But that I do remember, my mother's fear, she talked subsequently, obviously after the war, I used to talk to her about it and she said she couldn't help it. She just assumed that that every time the air raid warning went that was gonna be our last moments and that's how she saw it. She couldn't help it, you know, she couldn't be optimistic about it. She said that's just what she thought. I mean, I can't even imagine what it must have been like to be grownup and not know was – what was gonna happen. Especially during the blitz, where, I forget how many nights now it was, but it was just night after night after night. We used to see them going over, that I do remember and my dad used to be so upset when he used to see all these going over because he said, 'My god, London's gonna get it tonight again'. I can hear him saying that now and the people of London, I mean, it was just night after night after night. It was – how the hell they survived a lot of them I just don't know. But, as I say, I do have the very strong memories of seeing the searchlights and the barrage balloons cos that was quite exciting, you know, with the light dancing off the balloons and then we used to try to see the aircrafts that they were after, you know, and it would suddenly be illuminated for a second and then it would go and then it would come back again. So that was and you see the guns they used to have in the park over here so. Of course, it was quite loud, you know, trying to pick out the aircraft and shoot it down. I don't remember any being shot down locally but they obviously used to try. I do remember the mass of them, seeing them in the sky going into London and I wasn't aware then, of course, they were going to London but my dad used to say, 'London's getting it again tonight', you know. So that's more or less it. It's not an awful lot really but that's about, you know.

[Recorder paused].

Interviewer: Ok, go ahead.

⁴ 20 min

Patricia: I can remember my mother taking me to the cinema, obviously, it must have been, I suppose, after the war – after – when all the prisoner of war camps – the concentration camps, were being liberated and my mother took me into the cinema and she – she started to walk down the aisle and she said, 'No, we'll stay at the back here' and she pushed me to one side she said, 'You – you're not gonna see this'. Of course, a child being a child the fact that I had been told I mustn't look meant that I was going to look and I can still see the image of the people in Belsen as they were liberated and they were just filming them and they were just these bones walking about really with these uniforms. No, I do remember that so clearly because I was shocked. I had never seen anything like that. I had never seen people look like that so that is a very strong memory I remember my mother taking me and she was very crossed that I looked because I was quite upset by it, you know, but it's childlike isn't it. If they say you're not to look, you obviously know it's something worth looking at, you know. But that was, you know, we used to get the newsreels in those days. That's where you used to get your news was when you went to the cinema cos they had the movietown or Pathe news or something, you know. Sadly, my, I'm jumping around a bit, my uncle I lost one uncle on HMS Barham and the boat went down very quickly and I think, virtually, all hands were lost. Someone had taken my grandmother, his mother obviously, to the cinema and they didn't know it was gonna happen but there was the – it was filmed and she saw the boat going down with her son and that was pretty ghastly. Yeah, absolutely ghastly. I think they probably took her to try to take her – cheer her up a bit or something and sadly that's what she saw. But, yes, I do remember that so that was –

Interviewer: Ok. Thank you.

End of Interview.