

Interviewee: Walter Bellsham

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 19.11.2010

Interviewer: This is an interview with Walter Bellsham and the interviewer is Malin Lundin and the date is 19th of November 2010. Would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

Walter: July 1932.

Interviewer: So how old were you when the war broke out then?

Walter: I was eight, going on nine.

Interviewer: And where were you living at this point?

Walter: I was living at Widmore Road, 193 Widmore Road, which is just outside Bromley town centre.

Interviewer: And who were you living with?

Walter: My mother and father. I wasn't evacuated, you had the choice so I lived all though the blitz at home with my mother and father.

Interviewer: Do you know why you weren't evacuated?

Walter: I was the only child and mum perhaps thought there's some [unclear] probably, I don't know. Thought that she want to hang on and look after me, if I'd had brothers and sisters, like my wife, who I've lost now, she had a sister and they were both evacuated. Of course, at that time her father was in the army in Africa, North Africa, at the start of the war and her mother was a warden as I've just showed you, you know. So her mother had enough to do so it was thought to have them evacuated which they were. But as the war progressed and the bombing got less, then they were brought back after a couple of years, I think it was if I recall. So I never went to school for two years.

Interviewer: So the first two years of the war?

Walter: Yeah, yeah. Your mother sort of – I think at that time you were trusted to teach your son, you know, when you could. Because in those conditions, you know, it was –. For the first of 1940, we were being bombed every day. Every day: day raids, night raids. I used to see – oh god – I used to see London cos looking across there and there you could see the red glow, you know. Red glow and cos often the Germans – they used to drop their bombs before they got to London. A lot of the jerries, they didn't want to get involved with the flak. We had an ack-ack gun which used to be parked on the side of the house, on the corner just up the road here. A mobile unit, you know, with [unclear] so they were everywhere with that gun. So as they used to drop their bombs, before they got to the middle of London. A lot did of course cos the fire guided them in. They used to come up as Thames Estuary, which is over there. So they would drop their bombs on the outskirts of London which is here. We

were in a London borough so all round this area Croydon, Beckenham, Bromley, Catford, Down, all south of the river and parts because they tried to get to the dock 's which is the East End, that's what they were after. They would drop their bombs in places like this which although we're a London borough, we're rural. We're rural so we used to get a pasting – we used to get a pasting.

Interviewer: Did you have a shelter in your garden?

Walter: We had an Anderson shelter which my father dug – dug the hole. Always had six inches of water in the bottom [laughs] cos London is all clay so if you dig, there's all clay so, of course, the water used to get trapped at the bottom. I used to stand at the entrance, dad used to be doing his Home Guard. Before the Home Guard, people in those days when there was a raid on they became wardens. They helped the wardens and firewatchers, my father burnt all his hands putting out incendiary bombs in the garage up here, just at the top of the road, saving it being burnt down. Cos he – cos, well, his hand – his skin was pretty hard cos he was a cobbler working with wax and that saved the tips of his fingers to a certain extent but he was badly burnt. Yeah, yeah. So ask me another question, I'm going on.

Interviewer: What other duties did – did your father have when he was in the Home Guard?

Walter: Well, as the war went on – people don't realise they did war damage. Home Guard, because all the builders – I went to college, I was – I'm a retired builder. I went to college, when the war ended 1948 – sorry 1945. But 1948 when I left school – left school, you left school at fourteen then, fourteen, so that'll be '46 – '46 – yeah, 1946-47¹, years go by. Well, I went to building college because a lot of the tradesmen – craftsmen were killed during the war. So we have a situation where all the bombing – devastation all over London, and other cities in the country, but there was nobody to put roofs back on to make them secure, make them watertight, get the water running, get the gas service and do all the services. So the Home Guard used to be brought in and apart from my father carrying a rifle and – and doing these army duties, such as they were, guard duties, then they had to get up a ladder and put plastic – well, not plastic but tarpaulin, it wasn't plastic in those days, to try to make houses secure so the population could have somewhere to stay and live, you know. So – so there was other duties that you did as a Home Guard person, you know, mm.

Interviewer: So was he in the Home Guard throughout the war?

Walter: Throughout the war, yes. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, he had sort of a TB. He had weak lungs in those days it was quite prominent amongst youngsters in between the wars, First and the Second World War. A lot of people had TB and it was at that time, you know, it was bad. And cos being East Enders, the family was East End, he moved south just before the war started to Bromley – to Bromley. And he started a business up here shoe repairing, a cobbler, he was a good craftsman. He worked with his hands. Cos this area was a lot of money, it was rural in those days. It was a lot of money here. I mean London spreading out, so he used to get involved in boots. A lot of people used to ride, you know,

¹ 5 min

[unclear] be repairing saddles so he was quite a craftsman in – you know, in his own right. So he carried on, as I say, through the war, he carried on running the shop.

He lost the shop front and the front of the business three times with various bombs. The landmine was – demolished the school which I've showed you. That came down in the day. That created havoc, took down all the shops and houses this side of Tylney Road. Also houses backing on from this road which ran parallel through the road where the school is cos a landmine used to come down on a parachute in those days, an enormous thing, you know. Cos a bomb would come down and explode but it would go down into the ground, it wouldn't explode and go like that, you know. I was in the army so I understand. I fought in Malaya just after the war. I went to Malaya fighting the communists almost exactly at the same time as Korea so that's another story. But the landmine – the landmine would as soon as it touched you get a lot of blast on the surface. That's why it created so much havoc, it wiped out the whole of the street. The school, as you saw, and, as I say, some of the houses backing on from this road. Devastation, devastation. Another one came down in Plaistow Lane which is just up the road again [laughs]. My Uncle Charlie, that's my father's brother, he was in the pub, The Oak, he was fire – he was a warden and cos he was older, and [laughs] they saw the parachute coming down in the moonlight and thought it was a German parachutist or pilot bailed out. So cos they had a few drinks as you do in a pub [laughs] they got the billiard queues and they came out the pub and went towards this parachute coming down. Of course it was a mine and it hit this big oak tree, which I could take you and show you now, and it blew the top of the oak tree right off, demolished some of the houses round and about and cos it was a lot of wooden area then it took a lot of the blast. The big houses, laid back, money people again, you know, and blew – blew Uncle Charlie, my father's brother, over three gardens [laughs]. He was alright though. He got up and walked away [laughs]. Cos he had a few drinks I think he was a bit subtle, like [laughs]. As you would be, wouldn't you? [Laughs]. So he was very lucky Charlie, yeah.

He used to take his things Chislehurst Caves, which you've heard about probably?² Just up the road. We had the Anderson shelter and cos you could only fit one, two, three, four – four and another one across the end, five, at a pinch. Four adults and a child or two children and three adults, whatever it was. So cos we couldn't get the two families – cos Uncle Charlie used to live in the flat for a time, which we had cos it was a big property up there, it's still there, it's rebuilt war damage. So cos he used to go to Chislehurst Caves over night and walk with his bed, he made up a lightweight bed, some people had camp beds. The old-fashion canvas camp beds and you'd see a procession of people going to the caves because, I mean, you used to get thieving the same as you do now, it wasn't like it is now, of course, but so you – for safety you didn't leave your bed in the caves, you took it back home if you lived sort of local and that's what people used to do. So Uncle Charlie was with Emma, his wife, he had no children. He was a bundle of nerves, really. He was shook up by the bombing. And as soon as the – the evening came when they finished work, then they'd be off to the caves. I used to go in there sometime and stay the night. That was an experience for a boy.

² 10 min

Interviewer: Did you feel more safe in the caves than you did in the – the shelter?

Walter: Yes, yes. It, I mean, in the caves, when you were in there that's it you were cut off, everything was quiet and there was a cinema in there, you know, entertainment, you know. I mean, you know, we did our best, you know. Some artists used to come and visit and, as I say, there was a cinema so they used to run films, you know, and a cafe, or whatever you like to call it, you know. So it was a self-sufficient – a lot of people used to be down there too.

Interviewer: How many people would you – would you say?

Walter: Well, it is reported somewhere but thousands, you know. At a height of a raid – when the raids were bad 1940 to '41 there'd be a lot of people down there. Yeah, there was a lot of people, I can remember that. I can remember that and then my father – I can remember my father and so when the raids – the all-clear went then the warden would come in and say, 'Right, would you like to', you know, 'leave now' and we'd all travel home. You know, whatever, people would go to wherever they lived and see if their house was still there or damaged or burnt or whatever, you know. We had a lot of damage round here. A lot of damage, a lot of damage, yeah.

Interviewer: So can you tell me a bit about what you were doing the two first years of the war? When you weren't in school?

Walter: When I was –

Interviewer: Did your mum look after you?

Walter: My mother looked after me. I was a scout. I would be leaving the cubs then I think and just joining the 15th. So as a lad, as lads, there was three of us, just three boys, we were the only boys that were left in this area. We never went to school for two years and we were great friends. I turned out to become a builder, one became an architect and the other one I think he was a surveyor, something like that, you know. The connection being that a lot of properties were damaged so it was a natural thing for boys to think, well, you know, to work the hands if you – you know. To sort of follow that sort of thing, yeah, yeah. We used to go on our bikes and cos in those days there was no health and safety. God forbid, I mean, if we ever had a war now, my God, we wouldn't stand a chance. In those days you'd never had people saying, 'You mustn't do this' and 'You mustn't do that'. You all mucked in, you know, if there was a message to be taken for A to B, 'I'll do it on me bike', you know. We used to stand and watch the dog fights from Biggin Hill which is not far away. That compass comes out of a Hurricane. We used to stand and watch the dog fights, could you imagine health and safety now, say letting a group of kids stand and watch people killing each other up there, you know. And all – what goes up must come down, you see, this is what people don't realise. A lot of people were killed and wounded through falling shrapnel. When you fire an ack-ack gun – used to be bombing away, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG. All that metal went up and, of course, afterwards stuff would come down again. So, of course, if you were – if you were a warden, I mean, a warden used to suffer a lot – a lot of casualties. You had a tin helmet but you didn't have anything to protect your shoulders, you know,

and the rest of your body. I³ used to stand – if you said, ‘What did you do?’, often the daylight raids or it was a night time raid cos dad was of doing duty, whatever he was doing. Mum – women used to help were they could, if there was somebody bombed out just up the road, you know, they would leave me and – cos I was, you know, ten – eleven, nine – ten – eleven, and I was – I’d like to think I was a sensible boy and the other two lads. So mothers used to get involved, voluntary, helping other people, you know, clear out their house, take their valuables out. You had pilfering in those days, it was a lot of pilfering, you’d be surprised. They used to get away with it too.

Yeah, um huh, we used to go and have a look at the – there used to be stations – bomb disposal units – they used to requisition because a lot of properties here, as I told you, were money people and cos when the bombing started they would de-camp. Go off and stay with relatives in the country and their houses stood empty. I could take you to several houses which as kids we used to get into during the war because, you know, they weren’t boarded up properly and we used to play in the gardens, enormous gardens, some had pools with, you know, ponds and, yeah. So the army used to requisition those. The Observer Corps used to use them, there’s one particular house that used to be up – up the back of us and it was all – the Observer Corps were right up in the dormer in the roof, looking for planes coming, you know. And cos they radioed through or phone through – phones were used a lot in those days to warn the guns, you know, that another lot was coming in. So we used to sort of go from one camp to another as it were. We knew where the bomb disposal unit was, we knew where the Auxiliary Fire Service Unit was, which also is up there and I could take you and show you the actual garage where the units were in. Where the pumps were in, used to – behind a thirty-five hundred weight truck. I could – if you had a camera man, I could take you and show you all these places, you know. The firing range which is just up the road where the Home Guard used to practice. The dig was still there and the air raid shelter which they used to run to when there was a raid. It’s still buried – concrete – it’s still there underneath all the ivy – yeah. I often walk by when I go for my walk now and that bring back memories that does, you know.

So as kids – just the three of us there wasn’t like we have now, health and safety, ‘mustn’t do this’. You got involved as kids. I can remember, I suppose, a quarter of a mile away a Messerschmitt came down during the day – was shot down and managed to pancake down and he landed on a block of terraced houses and bounced along the roof and the pilot was still in the cockpit. He was dead and it was sitting on the roof so, of course, ‘Oh, we must go and see that’. Of course, as kids we went down there so you stood across the other side of the road and there was the plane but nobody moved you on, you know, people came and you absorbed it all. I can distinctly remember it. There’s a block of flats been built there since, you know. And people when I go there and shop some of them [unclear], they say, ‘Oh, you –’ I said, ‘I can remember that, I can remember that as a kid coming down on my bike’. ‘So do you remember?’ so I said, ‘Yeah, a Messerschmitt came down, it was a single –’, it used to be two, one 09 and then I forget. There was a single seater, a twin engine and a single engine, two

³ 15 min

different Messerschmitts. This was a small one and he pancaked because when he finally hit it all caved in and he was – he was actually in the cockpit. I remember seeing – seeing, yeah.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Walter: Bitter. You had [sighs] – I can remember – I always been in my army career on my papers etc. – a sense of duty. I've always had as a kid, it's always been in the family, goes back. I don't know why. I was resentful but I can remember the last year of the war when we were going across Europe. I can remember going to the Odeon Bromley with my mother and seeing the newsreel and it showed Belsen where the Jews were massacred in gas chambers and I've got goose pimples thinking about that. I can remember that and that's firmly imprinted in there⁴, you know. Yeah, yeah, that used to – I've always felt very strongly – very strongly about things. I'm neighbourhood watch coordinator. I get involved in duties around here. I served in the infantry just after the war, went to Malaya in 1950, same time as Korea, fighting communists then. Ideology not religion, ideology was a different thing then. God help us if we ever go to war with China, we haven't got a hope in hell. Not a hope in hell, mate [laughs]. So, yeah, that's – I always felt some – I used to stand and watch and because later in the war. I used to watch the doodlebugs come over and I can remember the noise now. As a young man – flying bombs –

[Recorder paused].

Walter: As kids we used to watch – the Spitfire – Typhoon and another plane, which was an American plane. Which was much faster than the Spitfire and they used to fly alongside the doodlebug and then bank away and create a vacuum and that would upset the compass, a gyro compass in the doodlebug. And the doodlebug they used to come straight down, you know. That was – cos that used to explode straight away. But then the other experience with these were when they used up all their fuel, just about here, South London, a lot of them – most of them fell in South London. They only had enough fuel just to get here and then it would stop and then it was eerie silence, you know. As they came down, well, in the night you couldn't see them. Once it stopped the light went out cos it was a rocket on the back. Yeah, we used to watch those. As kids we used to watch dog fights the trail of – the trail – the vapour trail seen in the sky depending on the weather. I'm looking at you, she was about your age. What are you twenty?

Interviewer: Four.

Walter: Huh?

Interviewer: Twenty-four.

Walter: Twenty-four, well, you look younger than that. But she was a slim girl like you and she used to call me Pickle and she was a warden. Her father was a warden and she was a warden but I think she

⁴ 20 min

was about eighteen and poor girl. Just up the road from where we lived, she went to the window just as this doodlebug came down and landed on the other side of the road and they never found bits of her, it was an awful thing (??). Poor girl, hmmm, I remember that. Her father was a tubby man, he was always in charge. He was the chief – one of the chief wardens in the area, in this particular area. Nice family though, nice family. Cos being shoe repairers everybody used to bring their shoes – who lived in the area or didn't move out. As I say, a lot of people – people with some money about, they didn't –. Titled people, my father made shoes for the Lord Mayor of London in his time, you know. The Lord Mayor of London used to live just up the road at that time or during those years. So as a community we, rich and poor, we knew, each other, you know. Apart from that during the war business used to have to carry on. My father used to have to – he had – he had special contracts with the army. He used to repair army boots and I can remember heaps of army boots, as high as that. The smell – can you imagine of each – of every individual soldiers feet [laughs]. A pile and cos he used to repair them, you see. In those days they were riveted not rubber like they are now. I mean, when I was in the army they had rubber boots and I had jungle boots. You – they were army – with studs, you know, and leather, you know, and hand stitched some of them. Some were riveted, I can remember that, hmmm, God, you know.

Interviewer: Did you have a lot of soldiers in the area?

Walter: A lot of soldiers? Yes, yes, we did. Yeah, as I said to you we had Bomb Disposal units and then, of course, we had the Home Guard unit as well, it was quite strong –. My – my father's commander lived just up on the right, his daughter's still alive⁵. I told her about you coming but she wasn't interested. She said no, definite no. I think she's about two years older than me. She went to St. George's, the same school, you know. Yeah. Yeah, what else can I remember? Oh my God –

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier that you saw some soldiers coming back from Dunkirk, would you tell me a bit about that?

Walter: Oh, yes. Well, at that time Dunkirk was chaotic – I'm – I'm a yachts man now, I'm part time Auxiliary Coast Guard. I've got a boat in the garden that I'm fitting out and friends of mine have got boats down on Medway and friends just been over to Dunkirk with a lifeboat, you know, which went to Dunkirk, you know, and it's still got the plaque, you know. They were chaotic days, they were chaotic days and we were making it up as we went along. I've got a book on it there. I've got books on it. I've read them through and being a sailor, I've got my own yacht down at Medway. I've been over to France, sailed over there and other places. So it's all firmly absorbed cos it was chaotic – chaotic, peop – we had the Navy which was – was – they didn't want to have anything to do with the Army, the Air Force being the youngest service, obviously not so old so it was always that rival – rivalry between the three services and it cost thousands of lives. It was a terrible thing, men that should have known better were arguing, you know, they wanted their way and this other officer wanted his way. I'm talking about higher rank, you know, staff officers, you know. It was very bad, very bad. I can distinctly

⁵ 25 min

remember the train coming into Bickley Station and you got a penny platform ticket which allowed you on to the platform and you used to go down there and wait for the trains to come one after another, they would come in. They were electric, some were steam, but most of them were electric by then. You know, some of them were wounded, half naked, burnt, covered in oil, terrible state. But still smiling, still laughing, cracking jokes with the WVS, that's the Women's Voluntary Service, and the mums. As I say we all mucked in together with sandwiches and tea and whatever, you know, and comfort, you know, talking and all the rest of it and passing on different things. And cos as kids, we used to shout, 'Any coins?' – marks, because they had, you know, money as they retreated too, you know. They took them of the German soldiers that were killed or whatever at the time, you know, as they retreated to Dunkirk so I used to have a little box full of all foreign coins. Flemish money, French money, Netherlands and German Marks, that was the thing which boys did in those days, you know, you collected foreign coins.

Interviewer: Did you realise what was happening?

Walter: Oh, yes, firmly in my mind. From the word go – I can show you this book. This is the Daily Mail book and they have – that's me at the start at the war. It's not me personally, but that would have been me at that age and there's my father, he would be dressed the same as that and there's my mother. That's how you were dressed, that's how you were dressed. Exactly the same as that. They got it right with this one, this is Daily Mail. That rifle, I suppose, another year later when dad got his rifle, at the age of ten, yeah, yeah, about that I suppose. I could strip that rifle down and put it back together [laughs]. He used to let me do it. No, I – they never – the Home Guard never bought the – their rounds of ammunition home. They weren't allowed to – the rifle was always in the cupboard in the bedroom or whatever, you know, or under the bed with the uniform and all the packs and that. But they were only issued rounds when they were on duty and then they had to hand them back in and that's how it worked in those days. But that rifle there, that's a very early one. I can remember [laughs] and it's all recorded round here a lot of people with money, they had shotguns and, of course. The Home Guard when it first started, they didn't have anything so the next best thing was personal weapons⁶ and that's how it worked. Again make it up as you go along. About the time of Dunkirk, it was chaotic really, chaotic. We used to watch the tanks and the columns used to go along Widmore Road here cos it's on the way down to the A20 which is down to the coast obviously and dad used to stand at the window of the shop and I used to stand with him and the poor devils, you know, they had – the equipment they had was, you know, really way behind. Left over from the First World War and in between the wars, as you know, they didn't – wouldn't accept what Hitler was doing. They knew but thought it would go away and I can remember Chamberlain coming back to Croydon Airport and it was on the radio, cos we didn't have TV's unless you had money, and there wasn't TVs about. On the radio, 'Peace in our time' and he was waiving that bit of paper, disgraceful, disgraceful. Again, you see, it was chaotic, chaotic.

⁶ 30 min

Interviewer: Had your father served in the First World War?

Walter: No, no. No, he was too young, he was too young. His brothers did, his brothers did. Uncle Charlie, Uncle George and Uncle Sam, they all served cos then during the war they were in the Home Guard. They all had cobbler shops, shoe repairers and they were over at the other side of the river which was very bad cos they were after the docks. Stratford, Bromley-by-Bow, Dagenham, all around there, they took it very badly cos my – as I told you, my grandfather was killed in daylight raids. They were after the docks all the time during the night and during the day. During the night they were lit up and as they bombed the docks and cos during the day they could see the docks. Similarly – they actually used to fly up the Thames Estuary. They used to fly up the Thames Estuary and they used to use that as a navigation ways the Germans, you know. During the day they didn't need a compass, they just followed the Thames Estuary and it took them straight to the docks, didn't it? As you probably know, you know. Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So when did you go back to school?

Walter: [Sighs]. When did I go back to school? I must think about it, I must think about it. Well, the school was bombed. The school was bombed so I didn't go to school for two years along with these two other guys, I've forgot his name now. I nearly had it there. I've forgotten it now. I see one of them from time to time, he's still alive. Costin, one was the name of Costin and he used to live in the cottages down by the pub where they put the thing across the road, Raymond Costin. I can't think of the other guy. For two years we didn't go to school and then they decided – the Church Hall which is just down the road here which was attached to the school by way of an alleyway. It was the 15th scout group there as well. That's when they started the school again, when the children had started coming back from being evacuated which was about 1942 cos the bombing had eased a bit and the war was taking shape. Hitler realised that we'd won the Battle of Britain, which as kids we'd watched, you know. And that compass there, which I showed you, probably was up in a Hurricane at the time, not a Spitfire but a Hurricane. Hurricanes did a good job as well as the Spitfire but we mustn't forget the Hurricane and that was there before the Spitfire was in the early days.

So it was decided to open up the church hall, which was attached to St George's School then. So that's our first school was in a hall. We were being taught in a church hall with a curtain in between the classes, now, you know, and kids being kids, you know, you can imagine can't you? I mean, I've been over to the school to get those photos out of the archives which she's given me there, the Head Teacher there. And it's noisy enough now, you know, but can you imagine. You can imagine, can't you? And then we were moved to another hall which was just down the road and also a church – a church just down the road here which is now a Workingman's Club at the side of it. So that was our schooling we did move, we went down to Girl's County School which was down the bottom of the hill and then cos being a Girl's County School, which was money, their daughters went to, you know, they had scholarships or whatever⁷ and they used to pay for it or whatever, you did in those days. So we

⁷ 35 min

were allowed part of the school as juveniles, we used that. So we were pushed from pillar to post being taught. But we did well, really, considering, I mean, my opinion now, you know, they say, you know, kids can't be taught. That's nonsense. Must have more money, you either have the ability or you haven't got the ability, you know. If you want to learn, you learn. Just like me-self, you know, you're an educated girl. You want to learn, you want to do a good job, have a family and do what you got to do. But it was different then, I lost two years of schooling but I still went to college, passed out with honours and got a good living from building houses. In fact, I was doing war damage not so many years after the war. The different firms I was working for, you know, still putting roofs and slates back on and joinery and brickwork and all of this. I'm a bricklayer and mas – mason – a stone mason, a skill, I'm skilled, you know. I'm all – I'm known all around Bromley, all know me. There's bits of me all over the south-east, down at Greenwich where you are. I've built everywhere. So that's another story but it's nonsense to say that money – throw money at facilities creates people with brain, that's nonsense, nonsense. We managed if you could learn – if you want to learn – your brain – you can do it in a tent, you know. You don't have to have central heating and all the rest of it, you don't need it. It's nonsense – in my opinion, in my opinion. We managed, we managed. We've done alright, we kept the world going, haven't we? In my time, when I was a teenager there wasn't the – the crime there is now, a few punch-ups, I was a teddy boy for a time. But you knew the limit. You knew when to stop and the girls were the same. There was no drugs then, we smoked a cigarette but no drugs, there wasn't a lot of alcohol, really, as I recall. So, you know, if – it's – we managed, we managed and that started round about 1942-43.

Interviewer: So what year was your – the school bombed?

Walter: 1940. 1940.

Interviewer: So it was bombed – there were actually no children in the school when it was bombed?

Walter: No, it came – I believe it was the weekend – luckily. But the week before that I was actually in the shelter before – because the children weren't evacuated in 1940, it was only when the bombing got really bad and the government realised that they had to do something cos kill – children were being killed, you know, obviously, with the bombing being so terrible, terrible thing. So then cos they rushed it in – the evacuation and kids went. Caused a lot of heartache, a lot of heartache, but, as I say, you had the option and believe it or not, mum's with one child, I would suspect, even if it was a girl or boy, they didn't let them go because I was an only child and the other two boys were only children – only child. That's interesting, isn't it? That's something to think about. The mothers didn't want them to go so they didn't go. Before we had the Anderson shelter, we used to sleep under the stairs. Oh god, I can remember one bomb came down and I swear the whole of that wall went up and come back down again as I laid there with my mother on the floor cos dad was doing his Home Guard bit and fire watching or whatever, he was out in it, you know. Oh god, yeah. Yeah, I remember that. I can take you and show, if you had a cameraman, I could take you and show the lintels have been put back now where it all collapsed.

Interviewer: What year did you get the shelter in the garden?

Walter: They didn't come along till 1941. About 1941. As I said to you, we slept – people slept under the floor, you know, under the stairs, anywhere there was a bit of support. It didn't make any difference because as a builder I understand mixtures of mortar, stone. A lot of people, although, they were bombed they weren't necessarily crushed or took the blast, they just died of suffocation because the majority London was built with stock bricks with lime mortar, which is a mixture⁸ without any cement in it. So when you break it down, you get enormous dust, you know. People used to suffocate rather than being, alright a lot of people were crushed and took the blast but a lot of people died purely from suffocation, they couldn't breathe you see because of the thick dust. Terrible thing, I mean, they brought out a table shelter, a Morrison – Anderson shelter – Anderson shelter was the one with the corrugation which we had which came out about 1940. I remember dad struggling to get it bolted together, oh my god, get the lines – you had to get the holes in line with these three-quarter inch bolts. We did it in the end and then covered it over with dirt but, I mean, if the bomb dropped near it was, I mean, it was alright but they – a lot of people were killed. But the other one, the Morrison shelter, which was a table shelter which was a seven foot by four/foot six, say, a double bed. In heavy iron to about that height, that's why they called it a table shelter, about a yard – a meter – new money – old money. Three feet high and people used to use them as a table during the day, put a cloth over. Then there was heavy wire mesh down the side with red clips, which is ok, but, of course, again you were trapped inside and if a bomb dropped on your house or a nearby house collapsed you laid there and suffocated, in my opinion. Not all but the majority of the houses in London itself were lime mortar, I mean, you could check – check up that now and they will tell you. If you talk to any architect who knows his stuff will tell you the same thing. So although it saved lives in a lot of cases, a lot of people, you couldn't get out and cos of the dust you died.

Interviewer: Can you remember when – can you remember VE-day and when the war ended?

Walter: Yeah, I, oh, I – that's another lot of stories. My god, [laughs] that's another lot of stories [laughs]. VE – we had VE-day and then we had VJ-day, which is the Japanese when they finished. That's another story cos I've seen what they've done when I served in Malaya five years later [sighs] or thereabouts –. VE day as kids, there used to be a bombsite – spotted about, where bombs had dropped and then they cleared it and cos the reason they cleared it was to fill the bomb craters in the road. A lot of the stuff, the hardcore, the bricks and that were carted away and filled – and went up to the airfield to – to repair the runway at Biggin Hill and all sorts. So you had vast areas of – as you know, you know, where there was bombsites. So, of course, as kids we were gonna have a bonfire, weren't we so, of course, that's what we used to do. We used to go around all the houses – any rubbish and that used to bring all out and we'd make a fire. Well, up here we had one, which we built ourselves, enormous thing. Then down the road here was another site, I could take you down there and show you the flats where it was bombed. It took six houses down with a bomb of five hundred

⁸ 40 min

pounds, or whatever it was, a thousand pounds? And cos there's little gangs of kids they would come and set light to the fire prior to the time when it was VJ-day coming or VE-day was coming, you understand? So it was all – that was always a laugh – well, it wasn't a laugh it was used to be annoying cos the fathers used to get involved as well, you know, obviously, you know. And they've done all that ready, you know, and cos you couldn't – you could get fireworks, just a few. They were restricted, anything with explosives in was restricted. It was all rationed, or whatever, you know. Yeah, I can remember that and I can remember my mother's gramophone – oh god, yeah. Just down the road, here, the Girls County School, as I've told you about earlier, we decided to have a dance. Thereabouts on that day, either just the nearest weekend or what it was. People didn't have it actually on the day sometimes, only cos it – I can't remember what day it was in the week when they decided the actual VE-day was signed, you know. Whatever – it's all – you know where it is, you probably have it all recorded, when the Germans gave in. But I took the gramophone down there and again we put a fire in the middle of the road. You can imagine doing it now with the council, my god, and health and safety. We built a bonfire in the middle of the road. I could take you down and show you the exact spot, well, it melted all the tarmac⁹ [laughs], leaving a hole in the road and that's – we all danced round it and I used my mother's gramophone with the latest records at the time and I was playing the records and the – all the mums and dads who were there at the time, a lot of elderly people and young people and that's what we did. It was just down the road, yeah, I can remember that. I went – when I cycle by when I go to Bromley, it brings back all those mem – and the walls – they're still there where I sat as a kid, yeah, I'd be thirteen – fourteen – thirteen then, yeah. I was very impressionable, thirteen, absorbed a lot, absorbed a lot. I mean, some boys thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, were in the army at fifteen, if you were a bit more developed, you know. They could lie about their age and they did, they went in. They died too, terrible.

And D-Day I can remember that, oh god. I can remember D-Day, it used to be endless lines of tanks and trucks going through and, of course, then the Yanks were here. My mother, her brother, he was a Auxiliary policeman, you know, and – what's it called? Is it auxiliary? I can't remember – anyway, he was a part-time policeman – cop. He worked for ENSA and he was a professional musician, played clarinet and saxophone. He played for Geraldo, Amanda Ross. And my mother she played – I can play the accordion. I play it on the boats now. She used to play for the Yanks and they were stationed all around here, in private houses, again the money people houses which they requisitioned. I can take you up the road and show you. Of course, during the war we carried on trading I used to ride a trades bike and deliver the shoes to these houses, those who stayed behind. And, of course, as the war progressed they came back when there was less chance of being killed, you know. Yeah. So where was I? Where was I? Remind me cos I've lost the track of that story.

Interviewer: You were talking about the Americans.

⁹ 45 min

Walter: Yeah, yeah, well, the Americans were stationed all around. Now, we [laughs], well I can – I can tell you this because you'll understand what I'm saying. There used to be a woman's hairdressers just up the road here, in the basement of one of the houses. And she was a bit of a girl – a bit of a girl [laughs] and there used to be more Yanks going to the hairdressers during the war [laughs] and as kids we [laughs] –. It was funny that was with the local mums, you know, tot-tot-tot, you know, it was cos of Yanks everywhere and cos they had the money, you see. They had the money. They were always giving us chewing gum and that sort of thing. The poor devils, the suffered the same as we did. They went over for D-Day, you know. Terrible, terrible things.

Interviewer: What was your experience of the Americans? Did they seem to get along well with the locals?

Interviewer: [Clears throat] my mother used to play the piano in East Street in Bromley, again which was badly bombed. But there was an antiques chap, Cedric, dead and gone now, and cos he used to sell pianos as being an antique dealer and cos my mother – we had a big grand piano which my father thought had gone through the floor when the bombs dropped. It's a beautiful grand piano which my mother used to play and she used to play in the shop and, of course, the Yanks used to stand around and sign. That was another thing. Yeah, yeah, she was known for that. Yeah and her sister she was a GI-bride, yeah, yeah. She – cos she became pregnant and he – she didn't want to go to America and they broke up after that. It was – sad thing that was. So I've got a cousin – but, yeah, – I don't see her now. Yeah, well, what can I say [sighs], over here, overpaid and oversexed. That's how the Yanks were. Alright, I was in the army and I served in Malaya, I mean, when you serve in a hot country your – your physical fitness, you know. It's a strain, isn't it? It's a strain, I mean, as a woman I don't know whether you can understand that cos as a young man it's very hard, very hard cos we used to go on leave and we used to live it up, you know. You do and the Yanks did the same, you can understand it now. The squaddies were the same. British troops abroad were the same, you know, during the war. So that's life isn't it? That's what happens, you know. But by and large¹⁰ – by and large I've got no bad memories of the Yanks. I always got – I got good memories, really. It's good and bad everywhere.

I can remember with the Bomb Disposal unit, cos now, I'm getting a bit deep now. The Bomb Disposal unit at Plaistow Lane and – but during the war all round here were a lot Sweet Chestnut trees, long gone, and cos you can eat sweet chestnuts, as you probably know, it's a nice meal. It took – during the war people used them and collected them and took the place of potatoes, food was scarce. You had your ration book to use your – and cos as kids we used to go and collect sweet chestnuts and this particular area in – just up the road here down by Hampstead Lane where there was a big wood and also it was one of the entrances to – to Chislehurst Caves, which was blocked off at that time. It was used as an air raid shelter but only for the local landowner who lived there but that's another story. And we used to get in there as kids sometimes but we had the unfortunate – myself and – this

¹⁰ 50 min

is after they became – the kids – some of the kids came back, you know. Kenny York, who was in – served in Malaya with me and he was wounded out there, he's just had a stroke and we went to St George's together, grew up together. We were picking the sweet chestnuts outside – the other side of the road there was a lodge which is the entrance to the big house, again, money people, which the Bomb Disposal units was in. A small – that consisted of about ten guys with trucks and then when the disable – bomb came down and it didn't go off and with a lot of work they would disable it. So they were brave men but we had the misfortune, Ken and I, Kenny York and I, of being molested by one of those soldiers, yes, he got hold of us and I ran and yelled and, of course, he let go of Ken but that's another story. It's another story. But they were still about then, paedophiles, they were still about then as they are now. I can remember a boy sitting in the wreck up there during the war, there was another old boy used to wander around the park and they're still about. It wasn't talk about it like it is now but it went on. It was tucked away – tucked away, terrible thing.

Interviewer: Did you tell your parents about it?

Walter: Yeah, I did. My father came down with this particular lad and the old boy, he was going to thump him. Cos in those days that's what you did, you know. It didn't – now, you know, it's – it's tragedy now but he was going to thump him because he got away this particular chap. Because, as I say, it was wartime, you see, wartime. People had a different frame of mind for whatever reason – for whatever reason. Terrible thing really, I mean, it's like my mother's sister, you know, he was in the Air Force, American Air Force, and she got put in the family way and it created problems. She didn't go to America and she had to have the baby, of course, yeah, you know.

Interviewer: Did they get married?

Walter: No, no. No, again, you see, they – she was friendly with a woman of Twickenham, which is up the Thames, as you probably know, nice area, and they opened up a caf because it used to be frequented by the Yanks that's how they met, that's how they met. I can remember him, just, I can remember him. But he could have been married, he caused a rift in the family to a certain extent, you know, it was –. But, yeah, overpaid and oversexed and over here, that's the famous saying – they say about Yanks. But it's like soldiers everywhere. We were the same when we were abroad, just the same. But, as I say, what can you do? It's life – it's life.

Interviewer: How did you deal with the blackout? Did you feel safe going out when it was all dark?

Walter: Well, that was another thing. That brought out thieves and rouges and rapists and all the rest of it. People of – you know, that – that was the fact everything was dark, absolutely dark, and there was no street lights. Vehicles had little slips on the headlights and you had to put all the blackout curtains that you would put across and the warden would shout, 'Put that light out', 'Pull your curtains' otherwise he'd come and knock on the door, you know. That was frightening, that was frightening but then cos you'd get used to it¹¹ – you get used to it and people could move about outside. It was like

¹¹ 55 min

living in the country, you know, I'll say to people, 'If you're gonna buy a house in the country, go there in the dark'. Don't look at it in the daytime – look at it in the daytime, of course, but go back and have a look at it when it's dark and then see how you feel, living with no street lights, you know. It's a different – it's a different feeling isn't it? And that's how it was during the war, you know, it was all dark. But then, of course, when the raids started then there was fires and incendiary bombs. All sorts, you know, all sorts. I used to stand – I used to stand in the air raid shelter and mum used to say, there used to be a block wall just in front of the entrance to stop the glass coming in, and I used to stand and look up and see the flashes and that and you'd have a constant ping, ping, ping. All the shrapnel coming down and, of course, they used to stick in slates on the roofs and in the garden. Anything that was quite porous, you know, woodwork, doorframes, window frames and, of course, as kids we used to dig it up the next day, yeah. I remember my father [sighs], I've told you the Home Guard ranges where up there and they had a post and cos they used to go in the – the pub which is now the Widmore, which was the Bird-In-Hand and it's a very old pub. Goes back sixteenth/ seventeenth century [sighs] – I've lost it now, it's gone. It's gone, gone. I've lost that story, it's gone. No, start again, start again, now, go on, it will come back to me, it will come back to me.

Yeah. But there was a lot of – there was one guy – how can I put it, thieving, not – pilfering. There was one guy he went to prison [unclear] he was in the Home Guard and a warden. He used to do both of, whatever it was he was in. The pub that was bombed at Bromley Common and – I can't think of the name of the pub now. They were going through debris and he stole a bottle of whisky, these – these things went on cos you had the black market. Everything was rationed. Anyway, somebody saw him and told the police and he was in prison for three years. Imagine sending somebody to prison for stealing a bottle of whiskey now. They say, [smacks hand] 'Don't do it again'. Bloody ridiculous weren't it. But thieving and pilfering, yeah.

Interviewer: But you experienced a lot of that going on?

Walter: Yeah, it was a lot of it going on. There was a lot of it – a lot of crime. There was a lot of irregularities, you know, it was – and cos with the war to fight local police had so much to do. You know, they did have officers. I've since learnt being a neighbourhood watch and towards the end of the – the end of the war my father was involved with the Bromley Police. He was a good footballer in his young days. During the twenties he played for West Ham, he was a good footballer. So he was co-opt into the Bromley Police team so we used to have police come to the house on a weekend. Mum used to do a roast cos it was just after the war – after the war. Cos you pick up these things, you know, word of mouth people say things to you, you know. But they used to have a squad that used to go around for people pilfering and stealing things – I'm trying to think of the word now. It's some, it used to go on all the time, you know, a lot of things went on which weren't talked about. Rape, molesting and fights, it used to be terrible. I mean, I can remember I worked with a parish church Bromley, which I built the last wing which the Queen opened. Cos I'm a mason I've done a lot of stone work on the main entrance. I go and visit now and again they know me. And one of the guys there, he came back on leave and he found his wife in bed with a sailor. He set about the sailor and nearly killed him. But poor man, Billy Wilson (??), he's name, he was never the same. He'd done all that,

fought through North Africa, you know, to find that happen, alright whatever the circumstances. It's a terrible thing isn't it? He was never the same, he used to have fits. We'd be working away and next would be –. Terrible, terrible. They used to relate that story¹², my father knew him, he used to come in the shop. Terrible thing, terrible thing. Whether she was a bitch or not, I don't know. That's ha – that's physically happened, I could take you to the house, what was – they've built flats there now but there was – it was another lovely house. But cos a lot of the places were requisitioned and turned into, not proper flats, but bed sets cos people were bombed out, you see, so they had to live somewhere. So that's what they used to do – what they used to do.

Interviewer: What did you use to hear about the black market?

Walter: There was always black market, there was always black market. We were lucky during the war because my father's sister, Uncle Bill, who was in the First World War, he was a bundle of nerves, every time a bomb dropped he'd go like that shaking cos of the shelling. He was in the artillery and he used to feel for horses. A lot of horses killed, obviously, in the First World War. And he had a greengrocers in Bromley so we were never short of grocers – green – green, you know, potatoes which was scarce, greens and that. We'd always managed to get that but it really wasn't – it was, I suppose, illegal. But a lot of it went on. A lot of it went on, oh yeah, a lot of it went on. There was the odd bit of butter, eggs and meat. Sausages – sausages weren't rationed quite so much but then they used to put anything in sausages, they put in sawdust half the time. I can remember tins of bananas which came over from America, tinned – can you imagine bananas in tins. It was like dipping a banana in treacle [laughs] and they were all packed together [laughs], so they got flat [laughs]. We used to think they were marvellous [laughs]. That was a special treat but again they were rare you see. We used to raid the allotments cos then if any bombsites that were for instance out here which was rural. Big gardens of the big old houses, they turned them in to allotments. So, of course, as kids we used to raid the carrots sometimes. Oh, I did that, yeah. Turnips, carrots, celery nicked those, radishes, you know. Take them home [laughs]. If we didn't eat them ourselves [laughs]. That went on all the time. Not in London, of course, it was just in – on the rural areas. That went on all the time [laughs].

Interviewer: What did your mum say about that? When you came home with carrots and turnips?

Walter: She used to say, 'Oh, it's another meal', cos it was very hard. We finished up eating horsemeat, actually. We did actually have horsemeat. That's a fact.

Interviewer: Where did you get that from?

Walter: Butchers, yeah, the butcher used to get it, horsemeat. The fat was always yellow, always yellow. You always know horsemeat, if you ever have horsemeat in a restaurant which you do, it's probably a delicacy now, the fat is always yellow. Any restaurateur, anybody who cooks meat, he will tell you that, yeah. Horsemeat and fish eggs, that was another one, cos it was easy to get hold of fish

¹² 60 min

eggs. They were cheaper and fish was rationed I think, I'm not sure. But because then fish wasn't about like it is now because all the boats, I mean, all the coast was all mined. Fishermen only had certain areas they could get out, you know. I've got to go and have a pee.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Walter: You have a break.

[Recorder paused].

Interviewer: How would you summarise your experience of the war?

Walter: Very good. You grow up because the age I was you see sights that [sighs], you see – how can I answer? I just paraded this weekend, you know, Malaya, I've got me gongs and bits and pieces. I've seen so much death and destruction at a young age and then at the age of eighteen, you know, I've seen another lot. As I've told you, Malaya, the Chinese and [unclear] you know, I've seen so much. You grow up when you see these things, you grow up. And, of course, at the age of eight to thirteen, they're impressionable years and you're, like, you know, youth, girls or boys, you know. A lot of the young girls were, you know, I – I – presumably not evacuated, I don't know but if you lived through – actually lived through the bombing if you wasn't evacuated, you know, but then again, you see. Eve, my wife, there she is there, that's her, the blonde one in the front. I lost her in the beginning of last year. That's the rest of my family, a girl and a boy.

Interviewer: Ok.

Walter: My daughter's in Australia¹³, she emigrated, been out there fifteen years now. But Eve was evacuated down in Kent but it used to be unpleasant when you were evacuated, it was hard. It was potluck, if you got a hard family, if you got a paedophile, you know, she was molested by the local vicar – not the vicar, the local gentleman. He was a landowner and, she told me about it that, when she was fourteen. Yeah, yeah, cos she was six months older than me so she was approaching that and before she came back – she came – cos some come back later it depended where you lived in the area. She lived in Downham which is further in London. I think it was [unclear] and – or round about that time anyway, thirteen or twelve or whatever and, yeah, she was molested. I remember her telling me. So when you was evacuated it was very hard, it was very hard. Some of them put on bloody bread and water. They were you know, I mean, they used to draw the money – draw the money for it. I mean, the government used to pay them but they used to cash in it a lot of them. A lot of people were good, you know, how can I put it? Loving people, you know, but others weren't – they weren't. Eve, my wife would have told you if she would have been here.

Interviewer: Do you think that the war affected you as – as a person in what you – what you became in later years of your life?

¹³ 65 min

Walter: Well, I've seen in my time, I've seen so much – of all sorts and it – it – how can I put it? I'm involved with the neighbourhood watch and if there was somebody doing something – somebody I'd be out there like a shot. And I, you know, I've – I'm not a sort – I would step up to the plate. I'm that sort of guy and I think living through the war does that to you, you know, and seen that abroad. For instance moving on a bit now, in Malaya we – we lost – you see, it's all happened before, I mean, we got these lads coming back – it's all happened before. Chaps out there – I nearly died, I still carry the scars. I nearly died. I had Weil's disease from drinking bad water from swamp. A lot of guys died of it out there, I was lucky I pulled through.

But I can remember – how can I put it? How can I put it? Having told you all that and seen all that with my eyes and heard all that and seen my mother crying, weeping, my father shaking and my uncles and the old boy next door, who used to come in our air raid shelter, Mr Tasker, who I had to see when he died in bed. Poor man. You put all these things together, now, we were on patrol once – I went to St Georges, sang in the choir up there [unclear] and St. George, so I'm brought up with Christian values as a family, as you did in those days, even if you was poor, you had Christian values. Not so much now, it's a pity but there you go. Whether it's true or not, whether you believe that something is there or not it doesn't matter it hold us all together as it did through the war but having said that I was fired on by Chinese and I fired back. And I can remember, distinctly, being confronted with a young girl alright I might be a ladies-man I don't know, I was no angel when I was a young fellow. I can remember confronting that communist section leader a black girl, all in black Chinese girl, all in black, about the same age as me, I was nineteen. She'd be about the same, screaming to the six guys behind her and I'm tracing (??) a machinegun on her and waiting for the command for the Officer to fire and I don't think I could have done it. I wasn't scared of her, if it been a fellow I'd have killed him, you know. But because it was a young girl and my Christian background, I would have had difficulty. I would have fired over her head. I don't think I'd have killed her. She'd have killed me, if she'd got the chance. She had a stun gun or something like that. But, of course, she was a communist. But there's an instance, you see. It's something that – it's – it's very difficult to explain, it's very difficult to explain and to the younger generation now they just [unclear] – well, I don't know¹⁴.

I – I – they say the older generations – all – all the older generations are the same but I don't know. I've got – I've got a total different outlook because I lived through all that, you see. I don't know what it is. I've got a competitive facet, I race power boats and I race yachts and, oh, I've got trophies and that, with my wife. That's always been competitive, probably I get it from my father. I don't know, he was a footballer, you know. That's sometimes followed on through your genes isn't it, so they say, you know. I've always been competitive like that but the war done me good. It did me good. I think so. It did me good, it gave me a trade. I could have followed in my father's footsteps. He told me how to repair, I can do leatherwork and that, you know, I still – I do it now, I do it on boats actually. But, yeah, the war as a person I think it did my wife good as well. We – it brings you down to earth, you know. I know it's easy for me to say but I've done alright, I've got a nice house, well, I lost my wife now. I'm

¹⁴ 70 min

not particularly broke, I've got a nice boat, you know. I've done alright but I started with nothing, worked hard and I've done it, you know. I haven't made a fortune but I'm comfortable, you know. My father was the same, his brothers were the same, you know, and that's how – that's how life should be but I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you ever talk about the war with your family?

Walter: It goes in one ear and out the other. I entertained them here last night. I had – I had my son and his wife here. That's those two on the right, in the pink crescent. The family ration books you've seen on the top there are her mother's, actually. They lived in North London before she was married – no, when she was married or before, I forget, anyway. So – so – but they're a little bit younger than me, her mum and dad so they wouldn't relate so much as what I've done to you. But, no, my son he doesn't – he doesn't absorb it. Although he went to St. George's after me, they rebuilt it you see, no, it doesn't register. I don't – it doesn't register. I mean, I go – I – when we came back from Malaya we were given the freedom at Maidstone and I marched down the High Street to the memorial and we stand there and we pay homage, you know, on Armistice Day. Ken couldn't come this time. He was wounded, because he'd just had a partial stroke. So I thought I'd put him in the wheelchair but, no. But, no, I – we stood at the memorial there. We got our own memorial there in the gardens, Brenchley Gardens at Maidstone. To the West Kent – Royal West Kents, cos in those days when you did your National Service, from the war ending on till July 1960, and a lot of the regiments were named after counties. You had the Ken – the West Kent, the East Kent, the East Sussex, the West Sussex, the Surreys, the Gloucesters wiped out in Korea, the same time as I was in Malaya. It's all recorded. It was on here the other night. No, no, I've forgot what I was saying now. I get carried away. It goes in one ear and out the other with youngsters. As I say we was founded our own memorial, which we got in Brenchley Gardens in Maidstone, and we're all standing there paying homage and then they're playing the last post and we're putting the wreath on and all of us are – and these – these jobs just walking by [shouts], a beer can goes there and you feel like going over [slaps], bang, you know, terrible thing. But that's how we are. That's – so all old boys we could go over there and give them a bloody hiding, for sure that [laughs].

Interviewer: How many years were you in the army?

Walter: Four – five and a half years in total. You did two years National Service but you had to join, you didn't have any option. And a lot of us went abroad. We went to Korea and Malaya. Two years and then when you came back, you had to do three and a half years TA, so you were a part time soldier. You had a uniform there and then you formed at the camps weekends and nightly parades, down at Beckenham. We had a hall down there. And, of course, weapons training so you was a reserve. I nearly went back to – to Suez when Suez started. And then there was a panic station and then that was a big mistake we made. Sir Anthony Eden, I think it was who was Prime Minister then. Went in cahoots with the French and the French let us down as they always do. They've never

forgiven us for Trafalgar. But, yeah, so that was – you did five and a half years¹⁵ then. Two years regular and you went and done your service abroad, active service, and then you did three and a half years, either territorial or strategic reserve. There were two then. Strategic reserve was – you didn't have a uniform but then you would pick up over the phone or letter and then you were waiting and to start to be trained. Because territorial were – we were always constantly trained so we could go, you know, cos you're being trained part-time after you've done your National Service. That's how it worked in those days and it did work. Of course, another thing it kept jobs of the street. See, if you was a bit of a Teddy boy and a bit of a lad as there were quite a few. But when you went in if you had a D.A., which they used to call a D.A., a Duck's Arse they used to call it. Cos the hair to come round to be pruned (??). The barber used to go, pffffffhhhh, like that [laughs]. Like it or not and the chaps used to be in tears nearly [laughs]. Their pride and joy! I can remember going down on the train to Shorncliffe where we had the basic training before we went to Malaya and [laughs] chaps from southeast London. Up your way as well, you're at Greenwich, of course, yeah, cos a lot of lads were working class boys. Well, obviously, I used to have some laughs but, of course, it has the making of you, you see. If you thought you were Jack the lad it was knocked out of you. You always met somebody who was better than you. If you thought you was clever, you were put in your place. And you were better off for it, believe it you were. They should bring back National Service.

Interviewer: After two years active service did you go in to employment straight away?

Walter: Oh, yes. I – yeah. Yeah, yeah, when I came back I went in to employment. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, because prior to that I went to building college, you see. But then cos you had to do your National Service, I have a National Certificate, what they call, National Certificate. In those days and then you had to do your National Service and then cos when I came back I went straight into building again and of course at that time because of the result of the bombing and the policy of the government they were trying to re-house people. So that's when the start of the council estates, the big estates, all over London, all round London and then other cities, they re-housed people. But they weren't flats, not – not, you know, the later blocks which they pulled down since – since – that wasn't flats. They were just normal terraced, sometimes maisonettes. But, you know, low-line buildings and it worked. The system worked. Because they'd run out of land and I think, I mean, there's quite a few [unclear] space round here. Because then policy since then have been buy it yourself and, of course, that's helped a lot of people. I mean, a lot of working class people have managed to buy their house and cos – how can I tell you? If you're a dustman or whatever and you buy your own house it's a lift and socially you go up the ladder a bit, don't you? You know, and Maggie Thatcher's idea was – it was – it worked. It worked, I think. I – it was a lot to do with Maggie Thatcher in that time. She promoted a lot of that, buying your own council house or council flat. I wouldn't buy a flat but buy a council house and get the freehold. It worked, it did work. Again, you see, draconian – you fly in the army, that's the word. draconian steps and you must have it. The way – the state we are in now, the country, because of no draconian – I was talking to a police sergeant out here last night, we've had break-ins over the back. I

¹⁵ 75 min

take the crime – they give me the crime-sheet every fortnight which I deliver around and tell people to lock up and he's fighting crime with one arm bound up his back. Because he's stacked high with forms, you know, and then if he gets hold of a – a suspected druggie or somebody breaking in, he could be had up for assault. I made a citizen's – I – we made a citizen's arrest several years back. The chap was stealing radios then – what it was then – this is years back and we grabbed him and we made a citizen's arrest. Now, that's fifteen – ten – fifteen years ago and I was obviously younger then and fitter. I'd still do it now if I had to. But we'd be had up for assault now. Good chance cos that – that thief or villain he could – he could take me to court. He could take me to court. It's wrong isn't it? The system is not working. I'm going on a bit now but I'm not happy with it. We're not happy with it and – cos it's my generation, you see, my generation. We had – when I served in Malaya if we caught a terrorist he was hung, simple as that. He was taken up to Trolek (??) Prison or down to¹⁶ Singapore and he has a trial. Cos I was out there in '53 – '50 to '53 so they stopped hanging, I think we did away with hanging in 1957. But if you went to Malay now – they have no trouble out there now. It's a beautiful country, Malaya. We solved it didn't we, we solved it.

The Yanks they had trouble in Vietnam, they had to pull-out. They can't quite get it right [laughs]. It's a terrible thing to say but they –. When we came home cos the two liners we went out on the Empire – they were confiscated from the war and came back on the Empire Pride, both German liners which – since the war started what we're talking about made confiscated and then cos they were used as troop carriers. I remember getting onboard the boat at Singapore and I – I was medical patient then because I was getting over this Weil's disease and they flew me down to the coast on a stretcher and I was in the same ward, believe it or not, as when the Japanese overrun Singapore. Because Singapore – it was horrendous so it wasn't damaged badly and I actually laid in the same ward where the Japanese came in and killed all the British, Canadian and Australian troop, well not Canadian but New Zealand, the wounded they killed them all. Wicked thing. We often – I get goose pimples thinking about it. I was actually in the ward waiting to go on to the troop ship, the Empire Pride, which I've got pictures of here, and one of the guys onboard he served in Korea, he was serving in Korea, and Cook his name was, went to Raglan Road School together. And, 'Hello Wally', he said, 'Hello Wally', rather than Walter, Wally. 'Oh', I said, 'Alright. What's up with you?', and he got hit with a bullet.

Interviewer: Ok. I don't have any more questions now. Is there anything that – that you feel like you haven't had the chance to talk about that you would want to – to add?

Walter: Not really, other than – than I could take you and show you all where the bomb sites were and some are still left, you know, the areas and you could still see where the bombs landed. Fire station up the road places where planes have come down. No, not really, I think I've covered everything really. I suppose after you've gone I'll think of some more things that's always the way ain't it?

Interviewer: Yeah. Ok, I'm going to turn this –

¹⁶ 80 min

End of Interview.