Interviewee: William Epps

Interviewer: William Francis

Date: 03.08.2010

Interviewer: This is William Francis interviewing William Epps, no not William, yeah, William Epps, on the 3rd of August 2010. So where were you when the war started?

William: Well, I was living with my parents in RAF housing at RAF Cranwell in Sleaford in Lincolnshire and I was about – about four and – four and a half, little over four and a half when it started. My sort of experience of it cos obviously these are earliest memories when I been out playing in a field at the back of the houses with a boy and as we came back to the house there were lots of men of the station in fatigues filling what I now know to be sandbags, digging holes and when I got indoors my parents and some neighbours were there and they were all listening to the radio and I rather gathered from what they said that Britain had declared war on Germany.

Interviewer: So – so whereabouts did you spend the war? What areas did you live in?

William: We stayed up in Lincolnshire for a while and then I think would have been probably around early 1940 my father was posted to the Air Ministry in London and we moved to a place called Brockley in southeast London. Rented a very, I remember it as a very tall house, it was on three floors, and it was near a park called Hilly Fields so quite high ground. It was while we were there – there was just, at that stage of my life, there was just my mother and I and my baby sister, who was about one and my father was away most of the time. There was one night, there was a lot of noise, my mother took me to the back bedroom window, we looked out towards East London and all you could see was the sky was totally red. Searchlights crisscrossing the sky and, as I say, an awful lot of noise and that was the beginning of the Blitz.

Interviewer: So you say you were living with your mother, sister – little sister and yourself at the time.

William: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So did – did you move around during the war?

William: Yeah, as – as the Blitz got worse and we're now spending most nights in an Anderson shelter in the garden. I used to lie there in the bunk listening to the bombs whistling and guns exploding, you know, the shells exploding and guns firing and then the all clear would go and you go outside and look at that night's damage. It was getting worse and then the grandfather of the family next door was killed when their house was partially damaged. He – he'd left the toilet – he left the shelter to go to the toilet, was unlucky caught outside and our house was damaged so my father decided to move us off to the country. So we moved to a village near Cranleigh in Surrey. Initially stayed with a family in a big house and then rented a little hatch cottage surrounded by fields near a small – it wasn't a village it was a hamlet with a little collection of farm workers cottages and an Inn further down and that was the

village. Of course, we were back to quite quiet again, odd convoys of troops going by. The odd plane going over. Spent a lot of time out in the countryside, started school because up until then, I'd started once before for a week but the school got bombed so we all packed up again. It was while I was there and, as I say, I spent a lot of time out in the countryside but a friend and I we were going through the woods and we saw a parachute tangled up in the tops of a tree. As we got closer to it we saw a man in what – like orange overalls lying at the bottom of the tree so, how – how old were we? Six? So we just ran, ran off to a field found some farm labourers and later on they told us that it was a German airman but that he was dead, you know. He'd had an accident bailing out or something. And stayed there till about 1942 when my father was posted to RAF Biggin Hill in Kent and we moved to the village Keston which is about three/four miles from Biggin Hill. In Keston, most of the big houses along the main road[1] had been already requisitioned by the RAF and were used as billets, messes, offices and we rented a bungalow down the lakes end of the village. And now you saw a lot more activity because you were very close to an – a fighter station you saw a lot of aircraft in the sky. There were gunners all across the Commons with anti-aircraft guns, you used to see them walking about. There were airmen from the accommodation at the top of the road walking through the village and, you know, but it was still – the village itself was still quite pleasant and as a boy we, you know, played on the Common, went down the lakes, had a great time until the flying bombs started. With all the V1s or doodlebugs whichever you cared to call them and they used to go over and the Tempest from the Air Force base would try to tip them over, just flick them whilst all the gunners on the Common would try to blow them out of the sky. But largely they glided on to London and if they did get knocked down they fell somewhere on the Common and, you know, generally speaking did no harm except to the squirrels. But one day we'd gone – I'd gone with my father to Lewisham on a Saturday I think it was and gone shopping and suddenly there was an almighty explosion up – we were by the clock tower and it was further up the road in the direction of Bromley. The air was full, it was like cloud, like dust everywhere and an air raid warden person came running up. My father was in uniform and he asked him to come and help, 'Woolworths has been hit', he said, 'come and help'. And I was told to stay rooted to the spot, not move. So I stood there and my father went off and I saw emergency vehicles coming and going people carrying other people out from the rubble. And I saw some men, it would have been over in the direction of Lewis Grove, some men lifted a horse up and there was a woman underneath it and she was covered with blood probably the intestines of the horse. And so it's all a bit scary for a kid and I was very relieved when my father got back but now it was getting late and the buses because of the blackout didn't run after dark. So we were only able to get a bus from Lewisham to Bromley and we had – then had to walk from Bromley to Keston which means going through Hayes and across Hayes Common. We were sort of going across the Common when obviously a raid started, all the guns started up, searchlights were crisscrossing the sky and you could hear the shrapnel hitting the road from exploding shells. So my father pushed me in a ditch and we stayed in the ditch until the guns stopped and then made our way home.

[1] 5 min

Then not long after that I was playing a bit of knock-out cricket in the road with some friends in Lake Road Crest and we'd drawn chalked [unclear] stumps on someone's end wall and were playing in the road. And a doodlebug cut out right over the – the village and we looked up and instead of gliding it was coming straight down. There was an alleyway led between St. Terrance Cottage so the five or six of us ran into the alleyway and as we were getting to the alleyway all I have – know the world went black. I saw something glowing coming towards me and then I knew nothing and then the next thing I knew there were air raid people pulling bricks and rubble off me. I was still buried from the shoulders downwards. Right next to me one of my friends, Bobby, his head was sticking out covered in blood and gradually they got me out asked me if I could stand. I stood so they said, 'Are you ok lad?', so I said I was fine. It was this awful dusty smell that you got in the Blitz which I hadn't encountered since living in Brockley, until then. They said, 'There's a First Aid post down the road go there'. So I set off down the road, the row of Terrace Cottages virtually gone. It was just piles of rubble and – and bits of timber sticking up in the air and I saw some more air raid people carrying friend's grandfather[2] across the rubble. I'm – halfway down the road I met my mother running towards me and her legs were all covered in blood. We went to the First Aid post and I was checked over and apart from cuts and bruises and a lump behind my ear and a burn on the back of one hand, I was ok. They put some stuff on the burn and cleaned up the cuts and grazes and what have you. My mother was also treated for the lacerations in her legs. She'd been in the bungalow and we had a Morrison shelter, it's like an iron table inside the house and she'd been bundling the younger children, by then I had a brother and a new baby sister. They were – she was bundling them into the Morrison and she'd sort of been caught with her leg sticking out and the glass from the window had blasted across the room, with such force some of it actually stuck in the dressing table mirror. She – this is what caused the cuts on her legs.

Anyway, that finished living there because the bungalow no longer had a roof and we spent a few days staying with my grandmother in Eltham. My father's unit were moved to Manston and so my father rented a house for us to come and live in Broadstairs, so I came to Broadstairs. The initial impression wasn't terrible favourable, all the beached were barbed wired off. There were tank obstacles on the roads leading to the beaches. The beaches had wire obstacles and mines and there were done in placements along Clifftops, particularly out towards North Foreland. Many of these were now empty cos the heavy guns had gone. There were still anti-aircraft guns. But compared with Keston, with its Commons and woodland and what have you, it seemed like without the beaches there was nothing but town. So I was about nine then but there was still lots to see. The channel was very busy because it was late June '44; Normandy invasion had already taken place. The big sections of the Marlborough Harbour were being towed down tunnel, channel white tugs escorted by warships. There was lots of air activity from Manston. I recall one day the sky was just full Dakotas and gliders, probably to do with Arnham, but I not absolutely sure. It certainly wasn't D-Day cos that had already happened. Often one saw a squadrons of mosquitoes flying off in the direction of the continent. There was also an Air Sea Rescue, RAF Sea Rescue unit, down in Ramsgate Harbour and they had these very high speed launches that cut out through the waves, you know, when they were going. There –

[2] 10 min

there was lots for a small boy to see. No more real war because it was all being taken now from Europe, sorry, from England to Europe, and – and that. Although there was theoretically still a risk of bombing and shelling, I – I was never witness to any.

But then I remember the ending of the war, my mother, sister, my auntie Ethel and my cousin Bill, was a little older than me, was down staying with us and they made the 8th of May 1945 a public holiday and we had a party on the road, up the vale, up on the approach, you know, the approach up of the vale. We had a party in the road and after it was over we went down to the seafront, would have been afternoon, late afternoon. Absolutely packed, packed with people. There was red, white and blue bunting and flags and people dancing around the bandstand. Lots of people in uniform, the guest houses and hotels and cafes were packed. Having largely been empty for the whole war and there was just this wonderful atmosphere of people enjoying themselves. Of course, it wasn't over, my mother's brother was still somewhere in a German PoW camp yet to be released and come home. My father's brother, Jim, was on a warship somewhere out in the East and his younger brother Bert was in the Far East Army, 14th Army, so, you know, the war wasn't over. The Japanese bit was still going on but from this end it was now restoration and returning to peace.

I remember them coming to clear the beaches, these were engineers and bomb disposal people from the navy and the army and they cleared[3] the obstacles and the barbed wire and they cleared the mines. There was lots of explosions when they were clearing the mines as they blew up the ones that could – they couldn't take away safely. Then there was the great excitement of the beaches reopening and, of course, with a hoard of small boys down the beach we went and home we went with two inch mortar bombs and cartridge cases and bullet heads prised out of the chalk rocks with penknives. And, you know, a bit dangerous really, I suppose, and then one day there were about six of us and we found this big round sea mine with spikes on Stone Gap and we decided that this would be great. So we tried to tow it along the beach and fortunately for us a policeman appeared and – and gave us all a clip and sent us of and from the cliff tops we watched the navy come and they blew it up on the beach and it was quite a big bang, so.

Then I remember the, what is now Thanet College, was then the Yarrow Convalescent Home which taken over for the Australian and New Zeeland soldiers that had come back from the Japanese prisoner of war camps. They were sent to England first, to get them well to send them home to Australia. So they came all the way from Japan to England, well, the Far East to England and there – and that. But they, I mean, a lot of them were desperately thin, very ill indeed. And they used to sit on the wall at the front of the home there in their slouch hats and hand out bars of chocolate and chewing gum to the kids which was total luxuries. I remember one gave me a little brown paper bag one day, well, quite a big brown paper bag and said, 'Take that home for your mum' and in it was condensed milk and tins of spam and, you know. Gradually, you know, uncles came back and everything went back to normal and the war was over, and, you know, it returned to peace. Now, as a someone who was four when it started and nearly eleven when it finished, turning ten and a half when it finished I'd

[3] 15 min

never know anything really, in my memory other than war and in many ways it seemed a bit tame [laughs]. You know, there was far less to see and, you know, but gradually it returned to normal. And off to Chatham House and, you know, many of the younger teachers had come back from the war and we used to fantasise about what they'd done, some had been with the French Resistance and Mr Weeks was reckoned to be a tank driver cos the way he drove his car [laughs]. That was really my war.

Interviewer: So what kind of challenges did you have on daily life? I know you're a youngster but what kind of impact did it have on you?

William: The challenges really were that you had to grow up very quickly. I mean, although my father – theoretically we lived fairly close to my father for much of the war, we actually didn't see an awful lot of him. And typically when we came to Broadstairs – when we came to Broadstairs I was nine. We came to be near my father but we no sooner got here and he was sent off to RAF Cosford and RAF Cardington and all over the place and so he wasn't at home most of the time. For months on end we didn't see him and so as a nine year old, my mother then had a five year old, my sister – my oldest sister, my brother who was two and my other sister who was a brand new baby. So she was pretty much had her hands full and so a lot fell on me. I mean, I was her companion, I sat up with her on an evening listening to the radio and I can even remember some of the funny old programmes, you know, like ITMA and things.

I did most of the shopping for her, she sent me off with a list. There was rationing and then there was – everywhere you queued. I mean, if you come in to Broadstairs you queued at the baker, you queued at the butcher, you queued at the grocers, you queued at the greengrocers. Everyone had a queue and it was almost like a British thing, you had these orderly queues of people. When you were queuing for non-rationed items, say like cakes and things like that, you frequently found by the time you got to the front of the queue there wasn't none left. Rationed[4] things were not so bad, with the rationing you could get your ration but the non-rationed you – you – you frequently found they weren't any. But the shopkeepers would sometimes look at your list and say, 'Take that for your mum instead', and they'd give you something that wasn't on the list but they would recommend that and Broadstairs was small enough in those days for most of the shopkeepers to know there customers anyway. So I did a lot of shopping and I did a lot of looking after small fry, you know, even my, you know, five year old sister did a lot of help around the house. So in that respect, yes, one grew up a lot faster in to facing of responsibilities and helping around the home, you know.

Interviewer: Did this have an impact on your schooling? How did your schooling –?

William: It had an impact in the early years in my schooling when I was five and should have started school, I started but only went for a week and the school was bombed. I didn't start school again until I was well over six and that was down in Cranleigh. So I was - I was a little bit late to start school. And, of course, I'd – I – in the – in – in my primary years I was at a school in London that was

[4] 20 min

bombed. I was in a little village school in Cranleigh, I was at the village school in Keston and then the little school at the back of Holy Trinity Church in Broadstairs which was then a Boys Primary. So I had four schools in four and a half years, that I was at school. There was a lot of changes of going on.

Interviewer: How did you find your social life and entertainment during the period of the war? As a kid you had to find your own entertainment, obviously, but –

William: Well, yeah. I mean, don't forget there was a generation that found its own entertainment anyway because we didn't have television and Gameboy and things like that. So playing out was what children did and weren't, well, the world wasn't obsessed with paedophilia and what have you in those days. I'm not saying it didn't exist but it wasn't an obsession and coppers was still George Dickson and you felt terribly safe with them, you know. So playing out was it and I was fortunate in that respect that, I mean, apart from the bit in London, I lived in places which were close to open countryside. I spent a lot of time in the countryside, you did things for the farmers, like collecting rosehips and nuts and crab apples which they use for animal fodder and you're paid for it. They pay you so much a sack for collecting these things, you know, and one made one's own entertainment.

We also, of course, had this fascination thing of collecting shrapnel and bits of bombs and shells were much treasured, particularly by small boys. Bits with thread, bits with marking, bits of obvious tailfin were worth more the orderly shaggerd old bits of method. You know, in this trade they could command several ordinary bits and a few marbles to get this. But but, as I say, these – these were much sought after. Also, of course, traditional old things like conkers and that, were still played by – by small boys. So, yeah, life was far from all bad. I was quite young really, I think I must have been about eight, I learnt to score at cricket because my father always tended to run the Airfield Station cricket team, he was a mad keen cricketer, and I learnt to score and I remember Biggin Hill. We had Jimmy Cornford, the Sussex fast bowler regularly in the team, Jack Davies who played for Kent he used to sometimes turn out. We played against sides that had Dennis Compton in, the Bedstead twins, Bill Edrich, a couple of the Australians. I remember Keith Miller, Arthur Morris and so seeing these, particularly the Test cricketers playing inter-station cricket, you know, was really quite something for a small boy cos these are like heroes and, yeah. I developed a love for cricket which stayed with me all my life.

Interviewer: So in regard to the air raids, how did you feel about the air raids, like, the anticipation of them as the siren went? And then compared to that after you had the unfortunate[5] acc – well not accident but when you were injured? How –?

William: I [clears throat] in the early part of the air raids, I suppose, I was so young that I didn't really realise the – the full danger of the air raid. I mean, you went to the shelter when the air raid siren sounded and you lived in a shelter and because they – adults had built the shelter you assumed the shelter was safe. So although you listened to all this noise and sometimes the shelter shook as a bomb was near. I don't think I ever thought I was particularly in danger in the shelter when I was that

[5] 25 min

young. I think I became more aware of the danger as I got a little bit older sort of eight-ish, and the – and the – you know, and eight/nine when the flying bombs started and you were there much more seeing the results. My – one of my cousins, female cousin, she got actually with some other people, was machine-gunned by a Messerschmitt in Bromley High Street on her bicycle. She was wounded in the leg and that kind of brings it home when people you know get hurt. And then when I had the experience of being buried under the rubble of a collapsed house and a bomb, after that, yes, I changed. I actually became very scared of – of anything flying in the sky. I went through a spell of running for shelter even from just an airplane flying over, for a time. But I – I grew out of it. I think a lot depends on your age, I mean, I was young enough to – to grow with it. It was – as I have said, I really hadn't know any memories but war so I went with it and I think for, certainly, teenage children when it started it was probably a lot scarier in some ways. And because they were more aware, you know, little imagination doesn't go very far does it. You – you know, if you – if your adult says you're safe in a shelter, you're safe in the shelter.

Interviewer: So how was life for your mother and father? How did you feel as a kid it affected them? Did you see any impact on them?

William: Yes, I did. I think it, my mother had a lot of – she worried obviously, she'd not just got her husband away and, you know, but she'd got her brother, you know, who was in a – he was captured at Dunkirk so he was a prisoner of war for all and sometimes – there was months on end with no news. And, of course, my – my father was one of five boys so all his brothers were in the war and what have you. So – so they – they had worries about relations. She also was raising her family on her own. She was also having to cope with rationing. Also, forces weren't desperately well-paid in the war so she was living on, you know, the marriage allowance she received so, yes, she had money worries. She had feeding a family worries, she had missing men folk in her life worries and she also from time to time had other members of family come and stay because we were in a safer area then them, like my – my cousin, Renee, who lived in London, who was a teenager. She came to stay when we were at Cranleigh and she, no, from a small boys point of view, she was an obnoxious girl, by –. We used to get these convoys of soldiers going by and Rene would rush to the gate, she was about fifteen/sixteen and leap on the gate and sit there swinging her legs and waiving and they'd all whistle. So I decided one day it was time and I caught a grass snake, popped it down the back of her blouse while she was sat on the gate and there was much screaming and shrieking and I was banished to my room without supper. But – but it was worth it. She treated me with more respect after that.

Interviewer: Oh, dear. So when – when the war[6] ended and did you stay in Broadstairs after that?

William: Yes. My father didn't actually leave the forces until – because he joined before the war and engaged for nine years, he wasn't actually demobilised till 1948 but we stayed on in Broadstairs when the war finished. My father came back to Manston for his last year and then he went back to teaching,

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cos he was a teacher by profession after the war and he taught at St John's Secondary School for Boys in Margate, as was then, and – and so, yes, we stayed on in Broadstairs.

Interviewer: Did – did the area around here change after – after the war? Did Broadstairs see a different sort of light almost after the war?

William: Oh, yeah. Broadstairs – Broadstairs – Broadstairs quite quickly returned to its pre-war thing of being a seaside holiday resort and very much the family holiday resort of Thanet. The two, if you like, Ramsgate and Margate were the weekend charabanc type resort where people came and put on a silly hat and walked around the seafront with candyfloss and had a writer's weekend Dreamland or Merry England. Broadstairs was the place where people with young kids came, sandy safe beach, lots of guest houses, small hotels and it very quickly got back in to that. I remember Broadstairs as being very, very busy in the summer, the beach packed, lots of people promenading along from the West Cliff to the East Cliff and it was quite a nice place to be. And, of course, at that stage, people were readjusting after war. Men were trying to get back into careers and work after years in the military and money wasn't plenty full and so it was the two weeks at the seaside was the holiday that most people, certainly from London, had, you know. And they used to be the ones that gravitated down here, down to Broadstairs, to – for their holidays. So, yes, it – it – it was quite an interesting time and it was well before the – they discovered Benidorm.

Interviewer: So living around here did many of your friends – were they evacuated?

William: Well, I – I didn't come here, of course, until 1944 so evacuation then was coming to an end and people coming back. I mean, I started at Chatham House in 1946 and most of the boys ahead of me at the school had been evacuated with Chatham House to Stafford during the war years, cos the school was evacuated. And there was in amongst the older boys, they talked a lot about the evacuation and it must have been quite disruptive because they were lit around buildings and some of the older staff went with them but many of the younger staff were called up and I don't know quite how that worked. It must have been disrupting of their education.

Interviewer: So looking – looking back on the war now, how would you say it's impacted upon your life?

William: Impacted upon my life? I suppose it impacted on my life as it did many of my – the boys of my generation in that we grew up with the war. You – after the war was over you knew that you would ultimately would face National Service at eighteen. Living in a place by the – like Thanet at that time which had [unclear] employment unless your father owned a hotel [laughs]. It was almost an inevitability that you would join the forces, so most of my generation went off to do their – well, they all – my generation went off to do their National Service and very many of them turned National Service into a career or joined the Merchant Navy. I can remember lots of friends at school who went to the Merchant Navy Training College up at Greenhithe, to train as Merchant Service officers and many of the friends I have now are retired Sea Captains, who – from those times, you know.

Interviewer: So you would say that the war has, eh, impacted on your career?

William: It impacted, yes. It impacted, except the – it wasn't so much, I think difference really between what – if one was in – in a normal choice situation where you were looking at a series of careers and decided that you wanted to go to Sandhurst or Cranwell and be a regular serviceman, that would be your career, with us[7] it was more a case of got to go anyway. So you went from National Service to short service to extended service, you always had that feeling that it – certainly I did and I know many of did that it was only a stepping stone and ultimately you would have to do something else. But then, of course, it impacted on that second career because by the time, in my case I did sixteen years, by the time you've done sixteen years you're now starting a new career in your searches when everybody else started when they were twenty-odd after they came out of college, you know. So, yes, it did impact on that. National Service impacted on that.

Interviewer: Well, I think that's all.

William: Ok.

Interviewer: Unless there's anything you like to add or?

William: No, that's fine.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

William: Ok, pleasure.

End of Interview.

[7] 35 min