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JR & JOE

Interviewer: Pam Schweitzer.

Joe: You singed your name and address and they used to send it home to your parents to tell 'em you were allright.

P: Was it a form?

Joe: No an ordinary card.

P: So they'd write back "Dear Mr so and so, Joe is fine, I have seen him..."

J: Yes. "Joe's fine. I've just seen your son and he's in good spirits." and that sort of thing. There's a picture ofn the back of a church I think.

P: The lady I was just talkingto was talking about when her brother came home - One didn't live but the one who did survive had this amazing thing on the front of the house saying "Welcome home". Did you get that when you came back?

Joe: No, nothing like that. It would depend on your family. Our family's never made a fuss of anything. We was never made a fuss of as kids. You take it as you're granted. Come home there and you practically start where you left off.

?: I can't recollect seeing any.

P: You came from this area and you came back to this area. And you don't remember posters on the wall or flags and things?

?: No

P: Did you come back at the end of the war or after the end of the war?

?: When did the war end?

P: May 45.

J: I was up in Scotland then.

?: Round about September.

P: You came back in September?

?: No, no. I went on. My job went on till I got demobbed which was in 1946.

P: Were you working in big cities in other parts of the country on bomb disposal? Where were you placed, mainly?

?: Most of our work was outside the big cities. See. the bomb disposal company was split up into small units who was stationed in various places. Obviously you didn't need more than about 10 men at the most - that covered 2 bombs. Therefore, when this flying bomb came dwn but never exploded, I was stationed at Haywards Heath. There was only about 10 of us there. I happened to be one of those that was in the squad that went to defuse it. Really, that's all there was. I was stationed in Sussex for a while and then in Hampshire for a while. In those days with the old army lorries you could get about quite easily. You didn't have to worry about the bomb being near. It could be several miles away and still get to it.

P: Was it you who started off in Sainsburys and wouldn't go back there afterwards? Yes? What did you do after the war?

?: I went to work for the - finished up being the gas industry - it was the South Metropolitan Gas Company - that was it's original name. They changed to the South Eastern Gas Board, SEGB.

P: And you had a desk job there? What was your position?

?: I had no real position. I was just a worker there. I liked it.

P: And you think it was easy for you to get work when you came back?

?: I think it was easy for anybody.

J: You could walk out of one job into the other. Easy.

P: Quite a lot of people have told me different.

J: I'm talking about the building trade. For years and years, you'd go in and out. There's an old saying in the building trade that if you're doing a job and you'd earn more money next door, you chuck it in and go next door. That's the truth. You could pack it in when you liked. Take a week if you got a few bob, knowing you'd get in again. When you went back after 2 or 3 weeks you got an income tax rebate as well in them days. I kept in regular employment all the time in them days, but different firms, always changing.

P: Some people have been telling me that they came back from the war years in pretty poor physical state and they weren't fit. One woman told me her husband was out of work for 3 years.

J: That's possible. If a man's not fit, I should think it makes a difference.

?: I may have spoken too quickly. When you asked was it easy to get a job, and I said yes. But really, I should not have said that. I found it easy. The job that I applied for, the GAS Board, I got the job. But it could have been difficult, I don't know. If I'd have refused that job...

J: I worked all round these factories all round this area nad they had plenty of work for people, they was all taking on people. Pearce Duffs.

?: But were they there? A lot of these places were bombed.

J: I was going to Pearce Duffs after the war. They were still going strong. They never got bombed.

P: You were the one who bought a motorbike after the war? What did you do with your free time? Where did you take the motorbike?

J: I had a mate of mine, he bought one as well on his gratuity. We used to go all about down the coast and have a good run out. A very good time.

P: Did you get a car after the war?

?: Yes. After the war.

P: and where did you go to in that?

?: Only to the coast. I was married. I had a son and a duaghter by then. My son was very young but we used to go to the coast. Usually local places - Ramsgate, Margate.

P: Did you get back together with the friends you'd had before the war?

?: Yes. Not so much my men friends - they, like me had got themselves married and obviously they were sort of family men, so those happy go lucky single days before the war had all disappeared. But apart from that, life was pretty much the same.

P: And did you keep all your friends from pre-war time?

J: You do lose a few cos they get married off and they go to different parts of the country. Even now, as life goes on, you lose friends.

P: But you were not married. Were you Jack the Lad with the motorbike?

J: Well, yes. I really enjoyed it.

P: All the girls wanted to go for a ride on it?

J: That's right. There was very few cars in them days. It was all motorbikes. If anyone had a car, he must have had a few bob.

P: So you and your mate having the motorbikes? Did you sometimes take a girl on the back?

J: Sometimes, oh yes.

?: Joe might know better than me - I've never had a motorcycle - but I understood that if you had a motorcycle, if you rode across Blackheath, the girls used to be along. I don't mean anything bad by that, cos I don't know. They used to be willing to go for a ride.

J: Oh yeah. It was like a magnet. It's true.

P: Did you wear special gear?

J: I used to have an ex-army overalls, really heavy. Ideal for motorcycling. Overalls that zipped up, meant for cold weather. Used to have to wear goggles cos the wind was so bad on the eyes.

P: But not safety helmets?

J: Never wore a safety helmet, no.

P: And you still had your army short back & sides?

J: Yes. Always have done.

?: I used to laugh - When we were at the seaside, the motorcycles used to come along and stop. He usedd to lift his goggles and as he lifted it up, he had two lovely black marks all the way round!

J: I had good times on the motorbike. Nearly got killed two or three times. You're bound to. Took some terrible risks, though.

P: Some of the roads must have been quite mashed up still?

J: No, the roads was good.

P: Did they repair the roads very quickly then?

J: The country roads hadn't been altered, hadn't been touched really. They weren't affected by the bombing.

P: On the coast, had they already removed all the barbed wire?

J: No. It was still there for some time.

P: But you could get to the sea?

J: Yeah, everything was in order again. Used to be out of bounds, I understand, during the war, a lot of them places. Even the people lived on the coast had to move out.

?: The only beaches that would have barbed wire were those that were still mined. We took up the beach mines at Brighton. And once we were satisfied the beach was clear, we just took the barbed wire away.

J: I used to go down to Bournemouth - Sandbanks, that was all mined. You had pathways going through it. That was after the war.

P: Were there a lot of Americans hanging around the girls?

J: Not after the war. They all went back home.

P: Were there a lot of Americans stationed round here?

J: I was in the army all the time, I don't know what happened but I do know there was a lot of Canadians in Lewisham. They even named a place Canadian Avenue in Lewisham. That's where the Canadians been, I understand.

?: Speaking as someone that was in this country, I don't think the Americans and the British troops mixed. That wasn't to do with bad feeling. That was to do with money.

P: That they could afford to do the kind of things that you couldn't?

?: Yes. Naturally enough. I don't blame the girls. If a man can say "There's nylon stockings and there's chocolates". Chocolates was rare. You had to have a coupon to get chocolates. But they didn't. It's obvious, but it did make a rift between us.

J: When I went abroad, Australia, South Africa, New York, you got treated like bleeding royalty. Really good. They never got the same treatment here. I was on the Queen Elizabeth for about 10 months as a gunner on there. If you apply for leave you come off that ship and go on another when you come back. When you went onto the Queen Elizabeth you automatically captained the gun cos it's a British ship. They had American gunners on there, but they was on loan. As soon as a British man went on, he was captain of the gun, they was under you cos that was British. You had 3 watches - red, white and blue. I had one watch and the other 2 Americans had the red and white. They used to go back to Guerrock (?), this ship, the Queen Elizabeth. Go across - about three and a half days to New York, that's all it would take, zig-zagging all the way because of U-boats. Where we had a good time every time we went to New York and Halifax, Nova Scotia, somewhere like that - these Americans very rarely went ashore. They got terribly beaten up. The Scotsmen, I don't know why. They beat up up and all if they got half a chance. I'm talking about Guerrock, Scotland. On this ship you had American gunners as well. They wouldn't take a leave in Guerrock - when the ship come to Scotland that's where we used to go to. They wouldn't go ashore cos they'd get beaten up. I'll give you an idea of what they was like up there. We was based up in a place about 16 miles from Glasgow. That was our main barracks. When you was down on a draft - that's on a ship - they sent you into Glasgow - a school called Mary Hill. When you went there, you waited there 2 or 3 days and you'd get ..(?) and they'd detail all these ships. If a ship has come in, the sergeant would be there. Even us, going back - say you go out to Glasgow - they'd set about

you or any soldier. Don't know why, but they did. They're very rough and cruel to you up in Scotland, in the Gorbals, all round there.

P: How do you spell Gourrock?

J: It's a port, on the river Clyde. The ship used to come in and you'd get on a liberty boat to come ashore.

P: so you had a much better time in America than they did over here?

J: Everywhere, all over the world. Australia, the lot. Had a marvellous time. They had peacetime conditions in wartime. Back here, we couldn't give them the treatment they gave us, cos we never had it. The food and that.

P: So because you were going to places like America and South Africa, you didn't have the same feeling at the end of the war as say Joe would have had with blackout for 5 years. That feeling of things lifting.

J: I was lucky. I went in the Artillery. You do your month's training - everybody does that - then I went in the Artillery and they allocate you in different regiments, like Mixed Ack-Ack - that's women and men. I'd already volunteered for the maritime regiment. There was 5 of us out of 300 volunteers. The sergeant said "You're bloody mugs going on that". Anyway, we was green. We volunteered. Then at the end of the month when they detailed to different branches, we got detailed to a mixed battery. We went to see the Sergeant Major and said "Look. We've volunteered for this maritime regiment and we've been put in this. "Oh" he said "There's been a mistake". So they put us in a little hut for 2 or 3 days and then went up to Scotland and done our proper training as a maritime regiment.

P: Were you objecting to being stationed with women?

J: No. We'd already volunteered before that to go in the maritime regiment. Actually, if I wanted a safe job I could have stopped in there because they stopped in all the war.

P: Were there some ships which went to America that did get attacked by the U-boats?

J: Oh yes. I got torpedoed myself in 1943. In my army pay book - In the army you get 2 books. One is Part 1, one is Part 2. Part 2 is your pay book. Part One is all your particulars - all your gunnery and god knows what. Well, when I got torpedoed we had the submarine come up alongside of us. We slung all our papers over the side cos we was gunners, shouldn't be on the ships. It was put about - propaganda come from America - we knew this when we went out - that all army gunners had got to be shot because they was called Churchill's pirates. They shouldn't have been allowed on the ships, only Navy. All these Army gunners. Anyway, we was in the boats, an engineer gave me a jacket to put on to cover my uniform. Fortunatley it happened to be a decent U-boat skipper. He went round "Anybody hurt? No?" After the skipper. The skipper they'd take off them days. Took the skipper on the submarine. They said he'd gone down with the ship. We was on our own, not in convoy. He submerged again, but he kept looking at us all the bleeding time through the periscope for about a day. We were torpedoed about 40 or 50 miles up the Azores. Right in the middle of the Atlantic. If we'd have missed that we'd have been in real trouble. Four boats all out in the open sea. We were down ...(?) in the boats. It's worked out - everyone's got ..(?), another one has got the injured in. They all linked up. We rowed best part of a day because the skipper who was in charge gave the signal "Don't link up because he's still watching us"...

P: This was the German U-boat?

J: Yes, through the periscope. Eventually, we hooked all the four boats up and started the engine and started going towards the Azores.

P: You knew the Azores were there?

J: You could see them, just at a distance. After a time a Portuguese boat came out and towed us all in. They told us after that this U-boat had radioed and told them we was out there.

P: Why did they put army gunners on a navy vessel?

J: It's a shortage of gunners. The Navy couldn't spare the gunners. When you went on a merchant ship you had Army and Navy gunners. Royal Navy gunners. We was all called 'Dems'. It means Defence and Equip Merchant Ships. It varied. You'd get say, 8 Navy gunners on a merchant ship and say 2 Army. ..(?) ..equal.

P: In whose eyes was that illegal?

J: They said an Army gunner shouldn't be on a ship. At all.

P: And yet they asked you to volunteer as maritime...

J: This maritime regiment was apparently a few 100 years old and they'd revived it like a maritime regiment.

P: How long were you stuck on the Azores?

J: About a fortnight, 3 weeks. Then suddenly one day - it was all neutral, Portugal in the war, the Azores belonged to the Portuguese - You could see all the German consuls and different nationalities all up on there. It wasn't in the war, was it?

P: So when you were a British gunner landing on the Azores, you could see other combatants? Resting?

J: There was 3 or 4 other torpedo crews on there. Other what'sname. But you could see the consuls of the different nationalities along the streets cos they was neutral. Eventually - I've even got a photo of the ship - the Serpa Pinto, it's called. One day they got us on the Serpa Pinto and took us to Lisbon. The ship was all lighted up cos it was neutral. We got to Lisbon and stopped in there about a week or more. There was other 3 or 4 torpedo crews there as well, different nationalities again. And suddenly they said "Come on. Get up" . It wads about 4 o'clock in the morning. Rushed us down to an airport. Got us on a plane and we went straight over and landed at Bristol. Back at the local barracks, the Sixth Regiment, got kitted out again, and went on leave and went back to our own regiment. Started all over again.

P: To America?

J: No, no - to another ship.

P: Which happened to be going to where?

J: When anyone got torpedoed in our regiment, they always put them on what are called a "safe ship". That was the Queen Elizabeth, Aquitania and the Queen Mary.

P: Of your group who were torpedoed, did anyone actually lose their nerve or were people quite calm and ok about it?

J: I can't say I ever see anybody - like, for instance, when we got a previous ship come over like that, we all got off. We had the battle 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. When we got off the boats that side could hardly get off cos they was laying beside the ship. When they got off we was overcrowded in our boat. But when all the boats got off..

P: Did you redistribute the men?

J: We redistribute the men. But as soon as we got clear, another torpedo went in there after that, while we was waiting for everybody to get off. It went right into the bloody engine room and she turned right up and went down just like a ...(?) you see on a film.

P: Do you mean that the Germans actually gave you time to get off?

J: They must have given us time because...

P: Why didn't they just destroy you?

J: I don't honestly know. This is what happened. The torpedo, we all got off and we all rowed ashore. Another thing that happened - We was carrying caustic acid. When you are on watch you have them old duffle coats - we was first to have them - Mine was actually burnt all the way through - I got a load of caustic acid on my head. Didn't actually burn my head but it burnt the hood away. I didn't realise what we was carrying. When we was in the life boats - It is worked out beforehand, you get an officer in each lifeboat. We had the chief mate in our boat. We rowed off. After we got well clear of the ship, there's about 3 or 4 merchant navy blokes, they'd already been torpedoed several times, they'd gone back for their gear. This is what happened, god's honest truth. They were talking about going back, going under the ship to pick them up. The blokes in the boat said "Why should we. Why not let them swim for it. It's bloody dangerous". The chief mate said "No. We'll go back". We rowed back, right underneath the bloody ship. They come down the mat - they drop a big mat over about that wide for everybody to get down, 3 or 4 people at a time. They clamoured down that. That bloke could have slammed a torpedo in then, quite easy. When we got clear we rowed off again. I thought "Gor blimey, its asking for trouble". As we rowed off another torpedo went in "Bang!". That was when it went up. He could have had us, easy.

P: You had already thrown all your papers overboard?

J: Oh yeah. Because - Army Gunner Part One. The Part One I've got now is the one we was issued to (?). In that it has got "survivor's leave". If you are in England and you've just had your leave - say 7 days every 3 months - you'd go out, some blokes actually did, come back off leave, go out a week, get torpedoed. Come back and you get survivor's leave. I got 3 weeks leave. I remember sitting in that bleeding boat saying to myself "Sod this. I ain't going to go in this sea no more". We were a volunteer mob anyway. I thought "I won't go to sea no more. I'll go back in another regiment. But you get back, and you're young. You forget all about it. I went on the Queen Elizabeth for 10 months. After that I got a leave off of there after 10 months. I got on this last ship and I went all around the world - Australia, right through the Mediterranean, beautiful trip.

P: Was there a different code of honour at sea? Why would they not torpedo the ship...?

J: No, no. There was a lot of people actually machine-gunned in their boats. Bu different submarine people. We just happened to come onto a decent bloke, we must have done. There was quite an interval between the two torpedoes. We come down, the blokes are on the other side, the ship, they had a job to get off to come in our boat, we was like that, they all come in our boat, it was quite a while before the second torpedo went in. When we rowed under to pick these 4 or 5 blokes up. It just shows you what it's like, discipline. Half of us in the boat was saying "Sod 'em. Let them swim. They are risking all our lives". This bloke said "No, we'll go back and get 'em". The chief mate. And we had to row back and get 'em!

P: You're very lucky to be here today!...Thankyou....Names: You are Joe French and the other gentleman I was talking to about bomb disposal was Joe Seely. We're in Blue Anchor Library.

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JF: Nobody claimed their medals after the war but they made it a stipulation - to claim your prize money you had to claim your medals. That's the only reason I got the medals. Otherwise I would never have claimed them. When you get that, they don't even put your name on it. Just your number.

P: It suddenly makes sense to me why quite a lot of people did pawn their medals when they hit bad times.

JF: I've seen medals now. They're worth quite a bit now. I've seen them take £10 or £15 for some of those medals now. It's not much but it's not nothing.

P: You weren't given any kind of ceremony?

JF: Oh no. I got these after the war, after I come out of the army. To get the prize money - cos being a plumber, apprentice - you still had to have the plumbing books - the first lot of books I bought plumbing was 4 guineas exactly, exactly the same as the prize money. That just come in right.

P: So you hadn't learned about plumbing before the war?

J: Oh yes, before the war. I was in that before I went.

P: That was great. I'm off to Baker's School now.

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