

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with Beverley Kay (BK) • Schoolboy Evacuee

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 26.09.2005

K: If I could begin by asking you your name?

BK: Beverley Kay, I know it's strange for a man's name but when I was born it was a man's name really. It's like Lesley is used by girls a lot now, but Beverley was a boy's name in the 30's, and how it came about, I was named after an author called Beverley Nichols who was touring the Middle East where I was born. My Mother had run out of all her favourite names, so I ended up being called Beverley after him. He came round the actual hospital when I'd been born.

K: And whereabouts was that?

BK: Moascar Garrison, Ismailia in Egypt. My Father was posted over there and of course in those days the families went with them in married quarters and it's near the Suez Canal, and it depended what rank you were, how good a house you got.

K: What was the date of your birth?

BK: 1934. I had three elder brothers, so I was the fourth one. They went over to Egypt but they were all born in the United Kingdom, and I was the only one who was actually born abroad. They later had my sister Jacqueline and she was born in Sussex, I think, a place called Worthy Down.

K: So what did your Father do?

BK: Well, he was brought up in St Helens, and the only real job in St Helens in them days was working at Pilkington's in the glass works, and his father worked there as a glass blower. It was a bit of a sweatshop, the factory and just at that time I think he'd been labouring for 2/3 years after he'd left school and the RAF was formed as a separate body from the Army in 1918. He'd probably be about 17 years old then. He joined the newly formed RAF and decided to make it his career. He trained as a cook, and he actually ended up as a flight sergeant, acting warrant officer, when he was discharged 30 years later in 1948, so he actually did 30 years in the RAF, it was the main part of his life. He met my Mother whilst travelling around; she worked in the café on Southampton station. With passing through quite a lot he used to call in for a cup of tea and that's when they actually met, and they subsequently got married and she joined him in his tour around the country. They used to have to move every 2/3 years because it's the policy of the forces not to let you settle too much in one place and they reckon after 2/3 years they like you to move to another place, you don't get to send roots down too deeply that way, and that suits the RAF. Most of the camps were down South, around Kent, and a few were around Lincolnshire. Then, I think it was 1933, he was posted abroad to Ismailia. It's a big RAF centre in Egypt, and from there they controlled all the Middle East at that particular time, guarding the Suez Canal, and all our assets, the oil fields in Iran, well it wasn't Iran then, I think it was Persia. They were there till I think it was 1935 early 36, because my sister Jacqueline was born in August 1936 and by that time they were back in England. I don't remember living in Egypt at all; of course I'd only be nearly two when they came back. We must have gone round several RAF camps, I remember them talking about Maidstone in Kent, but the first camp I remember was RAF Dishforth in Yorkshire, it's close to Ripon, and when the War started I'd be what, five years old something like that, nearly five. The Germans had captured Norway at that time, and up to that time they only bombed the airfields down the South Coast, but having captured Norway they could then go across the North Sea and attack all the airfields on the East Coast, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. There were a lot of camps round there, bomber camps too, so when they started bombing the camps all the civilian personnel had to vacate them because the married quarters were right near to the hangers and the runway so any stray bombs would hit the houses. The order came through they had to evacuate, I think it was within 48 hours. My Mother seemed to say it was a couple of days they had to be off the camp. Some of the people had aunties or uncles or relations they could go to but at that time they just had to get off fairly quickly and I think they were taken by RAF transport to a place called Nidd Hall which now is a luxury hotel I believe. It was the country seat of Lord Mountgarret at that time and he opened his estate to evacuees on a temporary basis whilst they sorted themselves out, so my Mother landed there with five children, no possessions apart from her clothes and she really didn't know what to do. Anyway, my Father who had three sisters, who'd all moved out of St Helens. Two moved to Bolton, one moved to Darwen. The two in Bolton both lived in the same street funnily enough, Portugal Street, the one in Darwen lived in Greenway Street, near the railway station, and with their being five plus my Mother that's six people. We couldn't all stay in the one house, so my eldest brother Ken, who'd be about 16 at that time, went to live at Darwen with my Auntie Annie.

My other two brothers Ivan and Colin, they'd be 14 and Colin 8 or 9, they went staying with Auntie Elsie, that was 9 Portugal Street. Me and my sister, the youngest, and my Mother stayed at 21 Portugal Street with my Auntie Nellie, so the family was split up a bit although we were in close touch, and then after a few weeks they were looking round for accommodation. We found a house on Bradford Street which is not far from Portugal Street, and it was a rented house, a big Victorian terrace which suited us admirably because it had enough room to take all of us. We couldn't believe our luck really, and my Father used to come home on leave to that house, so that was ideal. Anyway when we arrived in Bolton we were made very welcome with my Father's sisters.

K: What did you think of Bolton, can you remember?

BK: Well, we'd been mostly used to living in villages because most RAF camps of course are not in built up areas, so it was a bit strange coming to a town with lots of buildings and hardly any fields at all really, but as kids you soon adapt. When we got into our own house, each district seemed to have its own community. Where we lived there was a street at the back called Halton Street and you never seemed to mix with any other friends other than your own community. Another district, Brookfield, that's just off Tong Bridge, they seemed to have their own community, and you more or less formed a gang, not like they are nowadays fighting, but kept to your own mates really. There were about 5 or 6 friends who I really got on very well with and I went to a little school called Ridgeways, Ridgeways Endowed School, which was on Bury New Road. It was a really good school because it was not a great big school, everyone knew everybody else and they all lived in the area.

KB: Do you remember any particular air raids, or did you have an air raid shelter?

BK: We had an air raid shelter in the back, it was a brick built one, with a very thick brick concrete roof and a small door at the side, not a very pleasant place because it was very dark, and it was in the back yard. We didn't have gardens as such, it was just a back yard, it was only about 5 yards from the house, and I often wondered if a bomb hit the shelter we'd have been safer in the house. It weren't as if it was miles underground or anything like that. I think you felt just as vulnerable in the shelter as you did in the house, so my Mother used to take the smaller ones in, but my elder brothers never really bothered going in the shelters when the air raid sirens went. By that time my eldest brother Ken was in the Navy when they started really bombing. Ivan and Colin sometimes even stayed in bed, but nothing seemed to happen so in the end me and my Mother and sister, if it went she used to take us down stairs. We had a very old oak table, and we used to sit under there when the air raid sirens went. When the all clear went, you could look out of our back window in the direction of Manchester and you could see the red glow in the sky, even from Bolton. I think the only bombs that dropped were up Deane Road, and there weren't so many of them.

KB: Did they cause fear, because people were killed?

BK: It were exciting really, rather than being frightened because we hadn't seen the horrors of what bombing could actually do, so to us they were just aeroplanes which we were very used to. We were used to hearing aircraft engines, they used to just be part of our life really, I don't know how my mates felt but, we didn't actually say we were frightened of anything like that, at that time.

K: How did your Mother manage for food with five children?

BK: Well, you hadn't a lot of money to spend on food, but there wasn't a lot of food to spend money on because everything was rationed. She went working at a firm called Webster's on Spa Road and they made ammunition boxes, wooden ammunition boxes, not the metal ones, so that, along with a grant from the RAF for my Father's service, that made up the money. We didn't have anything special, there was a little corner shop called Bailey's which occasionally got any luxury food, like a tin of salmon which was luxury them days. It was mostly basic food; we didn't have any fancy food in them days.

K: Was there any particular Wartime food you hated, or enjoyed particularly?

BK: I used to enjoy the egg powder from USA and it used to make lovely egg omelettes, I used to really enjoy that. We used to get castor oil and the orange juice; I didn't mind either of those. Cod liver oil, yes, and we used to have to take that to supplement the lack of other foods I think. There was very little sweet stuff, the bread was a lot darker then it is now, but I think as children you soon adapt to change and just accept it, and that were it.

KB: Was there anything different about school during Wartime?

BK: Well we used to have to take our gas masks, in a little cardboard box, and anyone in assembly in the morning who hadn't got it, had to go home and fetch it back, which quite a lot used to

forget on purpose then they could miss half the first lesson which was maths. You used to have to take your gas masks and the shelters at Ridgeways were at the bottom of the school yard and a few times the air raid sirens did sound during school hours, and we had to go down there with our teacher, Miss Gillis. They used to just chat to you probably to take our mind off what were going on, and then when the all clear went we went back into the school. We used to have school dinners at that time, because of my Mother working, and they were quite good, there were a cooked meal, you had all English vegetables then because there weren't much coming from abroad. We used to get out of school before my Mother got home from work, me and my sister, and we used to have our own tasks to do. I used to light the fire and get the fire going, and she used to tidy up so that by the time my Mother had come home she were ready to do our tea which was usually something quick. We used to have bubble and squeak quite a lot, what was left over from Sunday.

My other brother Ivan, he worked at a leather factory I think. He eventually went into the Paratroopers, just after the War that was, when Israel was being formed and the British had the job of policing, which looking at things over there now was quite a big job, forming a new country, and our Colin, he worked as a mechanic. He worked down the pit for a while, but he hated that, being a miner, and he got a job in a garage. Then he went in the RAF, and he was stationed in Germany. I remember at one time my Father was in the Air Force, our Ken was in the Navy and our Ivan had just joined up and they were all home on leave together, so you had the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. You had to wear your uniform then when you were on leave. Nowadays you've not got to wear your uniform when you're on leave.

K: So your Mother did ammunitions work as well?

BK: Well she made these ammunition boxes at Webster's, I think Webster's is still going on Spa Road, near Queen's Park, I think they had something to do with the War effort.

K: Do you remember doing anything special like recycling?

BK: Yes, at the bottom of the street we used to have a big pig bin, and any peelings or any food left over were put in there and they were emptied on a regular basis by farmers nearby. It must have helped them out to feed the live stock. But other recycling no, because, our dustbin was the old type which had to be emptied by shovel, I think they were called ash pits in them days. And the dustbin men used to have to take the wooden board in the back street, out of the wall, and empty the rubbish into the cart by hand with shovels. But there wasn't a lot of stuff to recycle really, because the papers were only about two pages thick and they helped to light the fire. My Mother used to fetch scraps of wood home from Webster's, so we never had to buy any firewood. Big celebrations when the coal man used to call, because we were always running short of coal, and we used to get it off the Co-op. It was delivered by horse and cart in them days, a big dray horse, pulling a cart full of coal bags, hundredweight bags, and they used to dump it in the backyard, and it all used to get wet through. So under the stairs, in the scullery, we had a scullery as well as a kitchen, because it was a big house, under the stairs it was quite warm, so we used to take quite a lot of the coal under the stairs so it would dry out and it used to burn a lot better that way. By the way, in the scullery, it must have been owned by someone rich, because it had a servant's board with little spring bells on, and in all the bedrooms, they had push buttons, and we used to lie in bed sometimes and push the buttons, they actually still worked, and the bell would ring in the scullery downstairs.

K: Do you know what number it was?

BK: 136, the only one with the big bay window in that row. It's still there, in fact, when I met my wife, we bought the house next door, 138, and lived there for a number of years, until we started having children and the main road got very busy. I remember we used to play football at the bottom of our row of houses. There were a Co-op, and a little side street, Fawcett Street, but the ball used to go on the main road, which is Bradford Street now. There were hardly any traffic; you could actually have played football on the main road at that time. The only thing that used to come past on a regular basis were bren gun carriers, who used to practice on Leverhulme Park, I don't know whether they'd come from Fletcher Street, around that area, but they used to come down Bradford Street and go on to Leverhulme Park, because we used to go and watch them going down the hills in the bren gun carriers.

K: You soon got used to Bolton life then did you? Your mates didn't think you were different?

BK: Well, we used to speak a bit different, because my Mother was from Southampton. She had a southern accent, and they thought she was a bit toffee nosed at first, the other mothers, because she spoke in a southern accent. She never really integrated, like people at some of the shops, they used to get extra tins of salmon and things like that, but my Mother always seemed

to be at the end of the pecking order. But that's just how she spoke, my Father was from St Helens, he had a northern accent. And I've noticed my elder brother, Ken, spoke very much with a southern accent, but I wasn't conscious of being ostracised because of my accent, and very quickly, as you can hear now, I got a Lancashire accent so, I think in my formative years I became integrated with the Lancashire accent. I suppose they wondered where the devil we'd come from, suddenly a big family arriving, but they were very friendly. We all used to call for one another, I remember we formed this gang and we all got used car tyres, and we pretended we were a convoy of vehicles, and we used to take them, probably six children in a line, rolling the tyres down Radcliffe Road, and all round that area, pretending we were a convoy of vehicles, because we used to see them Army vehicles in a convoy, and we used to copy more or less what they were doing really.

K: Do you remember the blackout particularly?

BK: Yeah, we had these blackout curtains, and we had the, Air Raid Warden for our district, he was called Mr Dooley, and he used to run the paper shop on Bury New Road. But then, when he'd finished his papers, he'd don his hat and carry out his duties as Air Raid Warden, but we never had to be told to put ours up. We used to live in the back room and used to put the blackout thing up every night, it was of course a usual procedure really. What I remember about the blackout, was the cars, the headlights, all had little vents over the lights, pointing downwards, so the light just shone on the ground in front of them and not in the air. And we used to go to a little cinema called the Palace Cinema which was further round Radcliffe Road. It's now Church Wharf Garage, it's called, and we all used to carry a torch with us, because, when you're coming out, there'd be no street lights, and it were actually pitch black some nights, and we seemed to get a lot more fog in them days, with everyone burning coal, and all the mills working. During winter it was foggy very, very often and you could hardly make your way home, but, of course, we used to go two or three times a week to the Palace, that was the only form of entertainment and very rarely did we go into the cinemas in town.

K: Was there anything else you did for entertainment?

BK: Well, it was mostly playing out with your mates until it went dark, and then we'd either go to the pictures, or listen to the wireless. We used to play, as children, board games, but after a while, you got fed up of them.

K: Did you worry about your Father?

BK: No, not really, he were never stationed abroad during the War, but I think by that time he'd be in his forties and really speaking there weren't a lot of places to be stationed abroad, after the Germans had captured nearly all of Europe. There were some RAF personnel in the Far East, around India and Burma. Most of the Forces had withdrawn back into United Kingdom, so at that time of the War there weren't really a lot posted abroad. We used to see him, perhaps, once a month. The front door was never locked, with our Ken being in the Navy and my Father being in the Air Force, they used to arrive home at two o'clock in the morning sometimes. And I remember the key from Bradford Street, was one of them very big ones, not like a Yale key, so they couldn't really carry one of them around with them. So my Mother never locked the front door, all through the War the door was left unlocked, night and day. You know, you couldn't take a big key to school, so the door was never locked, we all used to leave the house and just close the door, and we were never, ever burgled or robbed. Of course there weren't much to pinch.

K: That house was furnished, was it when you rented it?

BK: We got some furniture from our aunties, they had some left over furniture, and I think there were a couple of second hand beds that were bought. Because, new things, you couldn't buy them because they just weren't there. Most of your Christmas presents and things like that, the annuals, they were from the year previous or even two years previous, and when you'd finished and read them, you took them back to Mr Dooley, who was the newsagent, and he used to give you a little bit, like half the cost back. You can bet by next Christmas they were out on sale again, if you kept them in good nick. So in 1943/44 you were reading annuals from 1938 and '39.

K: Which ones would they be?

BK: There were some Wild Bill Hickock, western type, and there were some connected to the comics, like, The Beano, and there were film annuals as well, stars of 1940 and that type of thing. But of course, when they were wrapped up they looked just as exciting as opening an expensive present nowadays. My Father always seemed to manage to get hold of a few sweets for Christmas, being in the Forces, I think they got better looked after than most of the civilians. And he used to manage to fetch some of them home, to supplement the Christmas part of it.

K: And is there anything else about the War, about Bolton?

BK: I remember the end of the War. I can't remember War being announced, it must have been a real shock to the adults, but, things didn't change for months, really. It was just going on the same, I think they called that 'The Phoney War' didn't they? And it wasn't until they started dropping bombs before we realised we were at War. I don't remember it being announced, but I remember the end of the War, 1945, we had the usual big bonfire and there were a load of rubbish to be burned, for about four or five years it had been amassing in back gardens and for years you couldn't light a fire of course because of the blackout, so there were nothing burned outside for all the period of the War. And our gang collected trees and rotting timber, and we all stored it in our back yards and on top of the shelter and when the day came when it was actually announced that the War was over, we had a big bonfire on Halton Street.

K: Actually on VE Day was that?

BK: On VE Day yes. I remember one of my best friends, Brian Lowe, who helped to collect all the stuff and organise it, actually fell ill, and he was in bed, downstairs in the front room, and we had the bonfire near the house, so he could look through the window and enjoy that side of it. We had to move it back a bit, because we were frightened of it blistering the doors, but the opposite side of Halton Street ran down to the River Tonge, so it were just a tip at the back, so we could move it quite safely away from the houses and it was a big bonfire. And then we had another smaller one, on VJ Night. There wasn't as much left to burn by then, but we still celebrated that.

K: What else did you do as well as have the bonfire? Did you have any food or drink?

BK: Yes, we had roast potatoes, or course, and I can't remember having chestnuts, and black peas. Different families, they got it organized, the mothers, one would make potato pie, one would do the black peas, one would supply the potatoes, so everyone joined in so it wasn't duplicated, so it were pretty well organized. We all had plenty of food. There weren't many fireworks, just the penny bangers, and there weren't so many of them. Of course, our guy was Hitler, it wasn't Guy Fawkes then it was Adolf Hitler and he was put on top of the bonfire and set on fire.

K: Were you singing, or cheering or..?

BK: Oh, they were all cheering around it. No there weren't much singing. We were just more interested in where the black peas were being served and where the potato pie was, and setting fireworks off. And then the morning after, of course, you all go round, start clearing up and looking round. The fire was still in the following morning, and we had to clear it all away and throw all the ashes away then.

K: Was it easy to adjust then, after the War?

BK: It was still pretty hard, just after the War, because when the War ended, things didn't immediately change. Things were still very scarce. And the job of, like, rebuilding, didn't start for several months. People were still coming to terms with peacetime.

K: But you stayed in Bolton then?

BK: Well, my Father continued in the RAF until 1948. He was discharged on medical grounds. I think he had ulcers. Although I think he wanted to sign on for a further five years, he wasn't allowed to do so. We stayed in Bolton, and he was last stationed in Bristol, and he got a job down in Bristol. And we used to just see him as if he was still in the Air Force. He didn't really settle, at all, my Father, after the War.

K: So he didn't come back?

BK: No, I think the War had altered the relationship a bit, and they separated my Father and Mother, but he still used to come home and see us, of course, and do a little bit of decorating. From when the War started we didn't see so much of my Dad except on odd occasions, and that continued after the War... Pity really.

K: Did you stay on Bradford Street?

BK: We stayed in Bradford Street until I went in the Air Force. I was an airframe mechanic in the RAF and I'd already met Edith. We'd met at the Palais de Dance and we'd started courting at that time, so when I went in the Air Force, I used to come home on leave, and we actually got married about three months after I'd gone in. We were engaged when I went in the Air Force, and I'd finished square-bashing and I had a week's leave, so we got married that week at Saviour's Church, up Deane Road. So for about, eighteen or so months I was in the Air Force as a married man, so we were just like my Father and Mother really. And when I was in I was offered a technician's course, in the Air Force, and they wanted me to sign on. I was speaking to my dad about it; I was a skilled pattern maker at that time, which was considered to be quite a good job. And I said 'what do you think? They've offered me this technicians course but I'd have

to sign on for five years, minimum, because it's a three year course, and they didn't want me to finish the course and then leave, they wanted at least two years service'. He said 'Well, you can see me and your Mother, we never had a home of our own really, nothing at all' he said 'you've got a good job, whereas I was only a labourer, so if I were you I wouldn't do it' and so I didn't. So I suppose it was good advice at the time, although I could have retired when I was about forty five then. I retired on my 65th birthday. But we'd had a little girl by then, Susan, so I came back out and went back to my old job at Dobson and Barlow's, worked in the pattern shop there. When we'd got married, just shortly after I'd come out of the forces, we actually managed to purchase 138 Bradford Street, which was next to my Mother's. We were quite friendly with the people. It only cost us what? £850. The lady next door left most of the furniture, they were moving to a new bungalow at Cleveleys, I think her father had owned Moore Brothers fire places, everyone had a fireplace in those days, and he must have made a fortune. It was only about £20 for a houseful of furniture, so we were really lucky in that respect. And then we had three children, by that time at Bradford Street.

K: So, nothing else you want to mention about the War..?

BK: I remember staying with my Auntie Nellie, just to refer back, my Mother, my sister, and me, stayed at Auntie Nellie's. Auntie Nellie had a son, Gordon, and we were both around the same age. I remember we set the attic on fire, we were messing around in the attic, and it had an old gas fitment, they had electricity, but, a lot of the old gas fitments were still in. And we were trying to light it and one of the matches must have fallen near some picture frames and it set all on fire, and me and Gordon were running up and down with water. We managed to put it out, but it could have been quite disastrous.

We used to go watching Bolton Wanderers on occasions, and I can remember my first match was against Grimsby Town, in the Northern League, at that time, they only used to have two leagues, the Northern League and the Southern League. And there were an imaginary line drawn across England and it depends which side of the line you was, whether you played in the northern or the southern section, and it were a little bit iffy who played. The programmes were a penny each, it was a single sheet, and on a number of occasions, they'd just put 'A N Other', because they didn't know who was available on leave. If they were in the Forces and they were on leave, in town, they could come and have a game. And where we stood, it was on the railway embankment. On the opposite side, which was the Great Lever End, it was covered in. It were used for storage, big skips, I never did find out what was stored in them, whether it were something to do with the cotton industry, because they looked like they were out of the cotton mill. And then we used to go home, down the back of the football ground, across the River Croal, and up the tow path of the Manchester to Bolton Canal, it was a bit of a short cut then, onto Bradford Street, and then to our house.

K: Do you remember any other matches during the War? Any particular players that you saw?

BK: Well, I used to see Nat Lofthouse, he was a pretty regular player, and there was Albert Geldard and one called Hunt, George Hunt I think he was called. Who else was there? I think Stan Hanson occasionally played, he was the goalkeeper, but he must have been in the Forces and Willie Moir, he was in the Air Force, he was a Scottish International, Willie Moir, and whenever he was on leave, he used to play for Bolton, a very good player. I can remember Woodward, but I can't remember if that were just after the War, he was a winger, I think that's all I can remember of the footballers.

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