BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with Ernest Holden (EH) • Royal Army Medical Corps

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 31.01.2006

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

EH: Ernest Holden.

K: And when were you born Ernest?

EH: 1918.

K: And where were you born?

EH: I was born at 37 Brackley Street, Farnworth.

K: And what did your parents do?

EH: Well my Mother was a weaver and my Father worked at Mosley Common Colliery, a miner.

K: Do you know which mill, your Mother worked at?

EH: Suez Mill, down Worsley Road, Farnworth.

K: And am I right in saying your Father's father was a miner as well?

EH: Yes, the all were... Originally he came from Mosley Common and he was waggoning for his father when he was about 13 year old, down the mine, so it stretches back a while, doesn't it, you know, the mining. Even my wife, her father was a miner as well, so we seem to be wrapped up in mining, you know.

K: Yes. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

EH: Yes, I had a brother. Funnily enough he wouldn't go down the mine at all, he hated it and he went into the mill as a little piecer, at Wallwork's, Gladstone Road, and he was older than me. And my sister worked at Hodgkinson and Gillibrand's, at Bolton. I think she was a knitter... knitting place.

K: Where did you go to school?

EH: I went to St John's at Kearsley, I lived in Farnworth, you see, but my brother and my sister both went there as well, so naturally I followed them and went there. And Mr Hall was the headmaster, and he took an interest in me and my brother because we were pretty decent at drawing - we were always in the drawing class. In fact, we were both monitors, we used to give the pencils and crayons out in the class, and when he left school I was left on my own there as a monitor as well, and I did very few lessons. The headmaster used to come and say 'Could I have Ernest Holden please' to the teacher and they used to send me on to the main street, Market Street, to draw all down Market Street, and I learned how to do etchings with him you see, and he was a decent artist himself, the headmaster, he did water colours and... and of course I did water colours as well. And I always remember I was doing one, a picture in the class once and another teacher came and looked over my shoulder and said 'When you've finished it Holden', she said 'I'll give you sixpence for that' (laughs) - which seemed a lot of money then, to me.

And when I left school, he wanted to find me a job you see, so he told me to apply for a job at Cusson's soap works, at Kersal Vale, which was at Pendleton, so I went and I had an interview. It was a lady interviewing and they wanted somebody for the art department. It was a long way to go, I had a bicycle you see, you know, I had to go on a bicycle, and it was wintertime and it was very cold, you know, pedalling all that way from Farnworth. Anyway, I started there and I didn't like it at all! I was sat round a table with about seven or eight young women, and I was only 14 then, you see, and we were painting bath salts vases, to put bath salts in and it was like Art Deco type and, in the thirties, and we used different colours on, were already marked where we had to paint on the vases, you know, and I hated it. I wanted … it were too soft a job for me you know, and we weren't well paid at all. And anyway after a month or two there was a recession and we was only working four days a week, and I was bringing very little money home at all, so I asked my Father to get me work down the mine, you know. I were more interested in engineering and things like that, you know, that this, it were too soft this job. In fact, my sister used to sniff me, I had a good smell on me when I came home I smelled scenty, you know, with all this scented soap! (laughs) And I used to bring her rejections, scent home, you know, bottles that had been rejected. My Father got me on at Mosley Common and I went working down there then, you see, and started work at the pit bottom, very little training - just used to send you with another lad to show you how to couple the wagons up and things like that, you know. And after,

when you got a little bit older, you were sent into the far end towards the coal face, you see, from the pit bottom , you had to work your way up, different jobs.

And then, what happened... there was going to be a War, there was a threat of War 1938 to 39 and they brought a conscription out, everybody had to register at my age, and then we were supposed to be called up then for six months training and then we spent the time, three and a half years on the reserve, and if there were going to be a War, we were going to be called up. Anyway, I registered at King Street, the unemployment exchange in May 1939 and we were called up in June from the colliery, and we went to Carlisle. I was called up in the Royal Artillery. And I did training in the infantry and the artillery, and we loaded ammunition at Longtown near Carlisle, we loaded ammunition dumps as well. And then September War was declared.

K: Do you remember that moment?

EH: Yes, we was outside a tent. There was a radio going, one of our men had a radio which was unusual at that time because, you know, there wasn't many radios kicking about and we heard it on the news, you know. Anyway, we were altered by the wage as well. Originally it were only one and six a day, and then when Wartime came, that was a basic two shillings a day then - we got a rise. And then we were sent down to Aldershot and we were sent over into France as reinforcements to all the regular troops there, and we were transferred from the artillery to stretcher bearers in the Medical Corps. And we went to a Field Ambulance and it was a small village in Northern France, where we were stationed, but there was no fighting, or no action at all, until May 1940, when the Germans invaded Belgium and France, you see.

So we went up from this village, we went up to Belgium, and the Germans there were very... mixed - it wasn't like a fixed battle at all. The Panzer divisions were rampaging around, up and down, you know, and you never knew where we were or when the Germans would arrive or nothing. Then we moved up to this farm - Proven it was called, in Belgium, and we just settled in among the straw in a barn, and a dive bomber came over and dropped his bombs all over the farm, and it killed two of my mates, and that... We all ran away from the farm, and when we came back we had to bury the two mates, and there were one or two wounded as well. My eardrums were blasted. I felt a bit shocked as well.

Anyway, after everything had settled down a bit, we was told we were going to be evacuated from Dunkirk, and the Major said, 'Well, we'll get you so far to Dunkirk with our lorries, and then you've got to smash them up so the Germans won't use them again'. So, anyway we got on the lorries and we travelled to a place called Burges, which is like a little medieval town and there's a moat all round it, with little bridges going in and gatehouses. So before we got there, we went to this field and smashed all the vehicles up and then we made our way to this Burges, to these little bridges and I'll always remember there were a tank wedged in one of these bridges, you know, and we had to sidle our way past it, you know, and there were a dead man draped on the tank. And when you looked behind you could see in the distance, you could see the Germans setting their guns up!

Anyway, we went through this archway and soon after that there was a mighty explosion, they were blowing all these bridges up all around the moat, and we thought it was shelling so we all ran, and there were some German prisoners of War there at the time, and we all got mixed among them, they were all running out of the way (laughs) trying to get cover.

Anyway when things settled down a bit there were a lot of banging, and you know, shelling and one thing and another. This lorry came round the corner, with the tail board down, and there were some troops in the back and they shouted, 'Come on, get on!' so all my mates ran forward and I was the last one and I missed the lorry, and they'd all gone and went, so I was left on my own. So I thought how do I get to Dunkirk now, from here, you know. And I could see this pall of black smoke in the distance, so I assumed it was Dunkirk.

So I started along this road, and there was a canal and a road side by side. I started walking, and funnily enough there wasn't much traffic on it at all, there was nothing only a few horse-drawn artillery, French artillery going along, and you could hear the shells whistling overhead, you know, both ways, because the Navy was anchored off Dunkirk and they were shelling the Germans and the Germans were replying back you see. So I was in between, you know, underneath it all like. The clouds came and it started raining, and up to then it had been perfect weather, so there were no fear of being bombed at all, you know, because it was too cloudy. So I made my way along, and I kept walking and I had some sugar in my pocket, some sugar cubes, I thought these'll keep me going, you know, because there were no sign, I'd had nothing to eat at all, you know.

So I got within reasonable distance of Dunkirk, I heard this ambulance, I heard the motor behind and he slowed down, it was an ambulance, he said 'Come on, I'll give you a lift.' So I jumped in

the ambulance, there were four seriously injured troops in the back - the driver told me anyway. So he took me to the docks. The docks had been bombed there, the inner docks and there was all these wounded all lying round this docks, you know, and there were no sign of any ship there, whether it'd been there before or not, I don't know, a hospital ship... and we just left it then you see. And one of these ambulances, something went wrong and it dropped into the dock and there must have been wounded on that ambulance, you know.

Anyway, I thought I'd got to wander my way and look for the beach. So I wandered away and an officer came along, and a lot of vehicles and he said 'Let's try and get one going' he says, and we kept trying these vehicles and nothing would happen, they'd been damaged or something, there were something wrong with them. Then suddenly, one of my mates, from my unit, I met him and he was in a daze, I don't know what were wrong with him, he were bomb happy or something. I said 'Come on Jock!' you know, I said 'Let's go and find the beach!' Anyway we got into the town, and we went along this street and there was smoke and there was bodies lying about and one thing and another, and the gas main were set afire and the pavements were... there were flames licking out of the pavements. So we went down into this cellar, and there were a lot of, they must have been drinking, these lot. They looked all drunk these troops and I thought, I'm not stopping down here. If there are any bombs let on this cellar we'll all be buried, you know. So I wandered out and funnily enough, out of the smoke and everything, there were an officer arrived on a white horse, and he was collecting all the troops and taking them to the beach. So we all got fell in and wandered down at back of him, you know, to the beach, and when I got to the beach, there were no sign of any ships, and there were rows of troops in columns waiting, you know. And I thought, well, there's not much chance here. Anyway I scooped a hole in the sand and thought if there's any bombers come over, you know, I'd get my head below the ground.

And after a while, it was getting a bit late, towards evening, I thought I'm not stopping here and so I wandered along, there were like a front there. There were all these vehicles all smashed up, and I came to the end of a group of men, and they were all queuing up and they were going onto the quay, there was like a quay stretched out and the ships decided not to go in the inner harbour and to anchor this quay. But it was tidal, you see, because one minute the ship would be level with the quayside and next minute it would be down, you see, it depended on the tide. Anyway, I stood in this queue and funnily enough, I looked ahead and I saw a mate of mine. One of our unit, and I stepped out of the queue and I felt this prodding to my back, and it was Royal Marines, they were keeping law and order there, stopping the panic, and they said 'Get back into that queue!' Oh I got back in smartly, you know. Anyway we got to the start of the quay, it were like a jetty, I should say, and it had been bombed you see, and there were planks across and we had to run, so many at a time to the end of the jetty and try and find a ship there.

So my turn came and we ran along, and I heard somebody shout '13th Field Ambulance!' and it was a converted hospital ship, that was anchored there, and I shouted 'Oh here, I'm one of 13th Field Ambulance' and it was one of our officers, he got us on board. There was about, I should say about five or six of us of our unit. And I crawled across onto the boat, and we were asked if we were wounded, and I said, 'Well I'm just a bit... my eardrums are a bit, a bit of concussion', 'Well', he said 'You can go down below' into this cabin, '...but if there's any badly wounded, any more badly wounded and you'll have to get out' they said, and we said 'All right' and we went down, me and... Funnily enough he came from Farnworth, this other member from my unit - lived in Kent Street at Farnworth, Len Brooks, he were called. And me and him, we stuck together like... and we went into this cabin and there were these two bunks and oh, we were dirty and sweaty and we needed a shave and we looked horrible, but we were exhausted so we both got down on the bunks and we fell fast asleep. And the next time I woke up we was out to sea, and they'd been bombing all night, and it'd slightly damaged the hospital ship, but it could still sail alright, and we got away, like, and they looked at us and it was a nurse, and she said 'Are you wounded?' We said 'No, we've been asleep like, you know' and she said 'Oh, we've been bombed all night' and she said, 'Would you like to go on deck and peel some potatoes?' We said we didn't mind, you know, so we nipped up on deck and we sat peeling potatoes with another half a dozen men, you know. I mean we were still not very far away from Dunkirk, you know, there were a lot of attacks on the ship, with aircraft, but we weren't bothered you know, satisfied we'd got on a ship and landed.

And we landed at Newhaven, and from there, we was put into buses and we were taken to Leeds, Beckett's Park. There's a Medical Corps depot, but funnily enough, they'd no room for us. So what happened... they must have been round to all the civilian houses and asked them would they take the troops in from Dunkirk, had they room? And a lot of them volunteered, they said, yes, we'll take them in. Anyway we were marched round with the billeting officer, and we

went all round the avenues at Headingley, and they kept dropping two off here and two off there, you know, different houses and we finished up, the last of the lot, me and Len Brooks. So we went up to this house, and knocked at the door, and this lady came and said 'We've got two soldiers here', you know, and she looked at us and we looked a bit scruffy, and she says, 'Well, things have altered now and we can't take them.' So anyway, we said 'Oh alright' so we walked down the path and he were scratching his head, the billeting officer, he said 'I don't know what to do now' he says with us two that were left. And then the lady came back to the door, and she shouted us 'They'll have to sleep in one bed, we've only one bed now.' 'Oh' we said, 'We're not bothered!' you know, so me and Len went in (laughs) and they looked after us and they were an elderly couple and he'd just retired from the brewery, Tetley's Brewery it were. He had a presentation clock on the mantelpiece, but they'd asked him to come back with the War and carry on working you see, so they used to bring us bottled beers, you know! (laughs) We were sunbathing in their garden. Anyway, we used to have to parade, and we used to keep marching through the streets, you know.

Anyway, we got re-formed, the unit were coming back, we didn't know who'd been killed or anything and they used to keep coming back, one or two, and we'd lost a few. And then we all got together, we were sent to Southall in Nottingham, and we were in tents there, you know, and then they got 48 hours leave, home, you see. And my son, he were a baby then. He were born in, let's see, September and I'd only seen him once - he was only a few months old. And anyway we got 48 hours leave and then we was issued with a tropical kit, so we said, 'Why? Are we going abroad so soon?' and we were. And we got 48 hours leave then and we was going to West Africa. What happened, the French packed up, they signed an Armistice, didn't they with Germany, and the battleships that they had were in North Africa, the French Navy, and in Dakar in West Africa and we didn't want them battleships to fall into German hands, so we were planning an invasion to stop them, to Dakar and Oran in North Africa, and we was booked down for the Dakar trip.

So we were taken to Liverpool and we sailed on August 5th to West Africa. Well, what happened - word had got round with the French that we were going to attack them, and it all failed, we never got landed at all. And we were sent down to Freetown then, Sierra Leone, and what happened, we were there for eleven months. Treating malaria cases more than anybody. They were going down like flies with the malaria - in fact, Sierra Leone was called 'the white man's grave'.

Anyway it was supposed to be a twelve months station, but we did eleven months and then we were sailed down, straight down, round South Africa, stayed at Durban for about three days, and then we sailed up to Suez in the Red Sea, from there we went up into the desert then, and we were operating in the desert then. We used to get leave occasionally, seven days, in Cairo, then we did a session in Palestine, and Cyprus and then El Alamein - we were at Alamein and then from there we did a landing at... when they invaded Sicily. And after that, they rounded all the men, the long serving men - this was in early 1944, and the invasion was coming off then, you see, so they sent all the experienced troops under Montgomery back to England for the invasion.

So I came back, and my son was going to school then and he'd never seen me properly (laughs) - he were five year old! Anyway we got a month's leave, and then we went on Normandy, on the D Day thing, you know, which wasn't too bad, it was better then Dunkirk really for me, but... And then we moved out of Normandy and went up into Holland and Belgium and all there and finished up in Germany.

I was de-mobbed in 1946, and I went back down Mosley Common, you know, so I went back on the same job, you know.

K: If I could ask you a few questions relating to what you've said. Did you get married before the War?

EH: What happened, when I was at home, you see, my Dad was out of work at that particular time, you see, they used to lay them off in the summer, collieries, you know, they didn't need the coal. And he was on the Means Test, my brother and sister both married and left home, you see, we'd only so much to come in the house, you know, dole. And there was a kind of a Means Test. It meant if I did any overtime when I was working, you see, it was all deducted off, you see, what was coming in, you'd only that amount amount, so it wasn't making it worth while. And I knew I was going in the Army, and I was courting at the time, you see, so we decided as I would be able to allot my wife and it wouldn't affect my Mother, you see, at all they'd get the full amount, you know, without me, so we got married and we lived with her mother, you see, with the wife's mother. That's one of the reasons, you know, we got married really.

K: So you were in the Field Ambulance Unit, what was your basic training like?

EH: Well, when we went to France, they were still based on what it were in 1914 - a fixed trench system. Now the system that we operated on as stretcher bearers, we had a Advanced Dressing Station, and then there were three companies with their dressing station, but they were fixed behind the line. Well, in this last War, it was all mobile - different again you see, we were like mobile all the time, you know, moving from one to another. It were old hat really the training, you know, with a modern warfare, you know? You couldn't operate that, and you'd no fixed line at all. The French had the Maginot Line, and they imagined that like a front line, you know, but it didn't continue on the Belgian frontier at all. There were only little bit of forks and a trench or two, you know - that was the weak link, the weakest link in the whole lot. They came through Belgium, the Germans, they broke through with the Panzer division, you see, and the trench warfare were no use at all.

Do you know the funniest experience I once had, in the Middle East, I was in Palestine at the time. What happened, I the desert you never got any fresh vegetables, but the least cut or anything used to turn into a sore, you were deficient of greenery, you know, vegetables, and if you could get near the sea, the treatment was salt water, you know, bathing in salt water, you know. You used to get sores on your lips as well. Anyway, they used to send us to a hospital in Palestine, like, for a spell, you know, and what we seemed to do, we seemed to get all the dirty jobs in this hospital. They had barrack rooms, you know, for the staff, and we were at the one side in tents. Anyway we had all the jobs, we had to go and clear up after post mortem examinations, clear up. They had a mortuary there, jobs like that. And the funniest experience I had, was the company officer came to me and he said 'Holden' he said 'Would you like to go on an execution?' Well I was a bit taken aback, you know, and I said 'Yes, I don't mind, like' he said 'Well, it's all hush hush at the moment' he said, 'But pick a mate, I want two of you, don't tell anybody else in the unit.' So I went to a particular friend of mine - Fitzjohn - he come from St Albans, and I said to him, I said 'Would you like to go to an execution?' (laughs) He said 'You what?!!'(laughs) he said 'Aye, we'll have a go.' Anyway we saw this company officer, Captain Abelson he was called, he had a practice near Manchester, I think, and he said 'What's going to happen, you'll be woken up about half past five in the morning on this particular day' he says 'And you'll be taken with the Military Police to this detention camp' he says 'And then you'll pick your prisoner up and then you'll go to this site. He'll be shot with the Military Police and your job is to pick him up after he's been shot, put shell dressings on his wounds, put him on this stretcher, and then take him to this lorry with the Military Police, hand his body over, and that'll be it, you've finished then' So we said 'All right'. Anyway we were called up, and we hadn't to tell the rest of the unit - they knew nothing about this. So we were called up and it were one of those mornings you wished to live, you know... and we went to this camp, for a start off, and picked the prisoner up, and he was handcuffed between two Military Police. Had his head shaved, an' all, as well, an Arab in the British Army you see, he'd done a murder, I think and he had to be tried with Military Law, and he'd been sentenced... He'd badly wounded another... somebody else, as well. I don't know what it were all about. Anyway, we went there and I think there were about ten Military Police there, with their rifles, and there were supposed to be so many blanks, so they can't prove whether you've shot them or not, you know, it's a funny thing, shooting a fellow in cold blood - it doesn't suit anybody does it?

K: No.

EH: Anyway, they tied him to this stake and they blindfolded him, and they read the charge out, you know, this officer. Then they shot him, you know. And then the medical officer runs over, pronounces him dead, and if he's not dead, he's shot with a revolver by the Provost Major, who's in charge of the firing party. They shoot them, you see - put them out of their agony. Anyway, they pronounced him dead, and we run over with the stretcher, me and Fitz, and he was shattered. They said there was only a few live rounds, but, to me, they must have been all live rounds. You see, the bullets penetrate, they make a hole in the front of the chest, but they all blast out at the back, and all his back were wide open, you know. We had to bind him up you know, he were bleeding a lot. And we put him on this lorry and the Military Police said 'Are you coming with us?' we said 'No, not now' you know, and they had to take his body home, he lived in Palestine. (laughs) But what a thing taking him home, I wonder what his family thought when he was suddenly dumped on them, you know? We were full of blood, our hands, and we went back to this detention camp. You could see the prisoners looking at us, because we'd blood on our hands, and that, they were looking at us, you know, and we just cleaned ourselves up and went back to the unit, and we hadn't to tell anybody. We never told anybody about all this, you know.

K: What was your rank then?

EH: I were a Private, if I'd of stayed behind when they said we were going home for the Invasion, you know, but I wanted … I'd have enough, you know, abroad, away from family and everything. I was an acting sergeant in West Africa. We had to be, because we were dealing with native troops, you see, we were supposed to be above them, you know like, in rank! I wasn't any Army man, anyway. I didn't like the Medical Corps, I'd have rather been in the infantry or the artillery, you know. More interesting. I felt very useless as regards medical, you know. I mean, when you're stuck in an ambulance many a time, like we had done, with about four badly wounded men, you can't do nothing for them at all, you know. I hadn't even a drink of water many a time to give them.

No. It wasn't a pleasant task at all. We saw the dirty end of it all.

K: So what was the Field Ambulance attached to? Anything, or..?

EH: Well we were in the 1st Corps in France, and then we were in 4th Indian Division in the desert. You see, we acted with the regiments, you know. I mean the 4th Indian, they had the Essex Regiments and they had British regiments and they've got their own Medical Corps as well, you know.

K: So really the Medical Corps was just something you were drafted in to do, it wasn't by choice, at all?

EH: Aye, aye. You had to do - it wasn't by choice at all, no, I didn't like it at all.

K: Do you remember VE Day? Would you be in Germany then?

EH: I was in Germany, yeah, VE Day, yeah.

K: Whereabouts in Germany?

EH: Bad Oeynhausen that was 21st Army Group Headquarters. I was with 23rd Scottish General Hospital, at Bad Oeynhausen.

K: And did you have any particular celebration on that day? Or …

EH: No, no, nothing much. We were just relived, you know. Well I was de-mobbed in February, you know, 1946, I came home.

K: And what was it like coming back to Farnworth?

EH: Well what were amusing about me, was listening to the broad Lancashire talk, you see. You see, in the Army, everybody speaks the same, like, on a level, adjusts theirself. You see, when women came to our house, listen them talking broad Lancashire. (laughs)

K: You didn't think you spoke like that?

EH: I didn't for a start, you know. I just slipped back into it later on.

K: But was it easy to adjust?

EH: You see, I'd so much service abroad, you used to get leave, you know, paid leave, I'd hundred and odd days leave - paid leave, so I did a bit of sign writing on shop fronts. I did shops on Market Street, Meadowcroft's printers, and Clayton's, for posters, I did chip shops an' all. I tell you, I'll always remember, 1946, you know the Bolton Disaster? You know at Burnden Park? Well, I'd have been a watching them but that particular day I was painting a chip shop on top of Northumberland Street, Farnworth, and putting Chips, Peas and Beans on the front. I did quite a lot of that. And then I decided well, I must go back to making a wage. It were funny, you lost all idea of money, see, what the wages were, you see, I was thinking of before the War, the wages were low, you know. But through the War, the War workers they got... And I was wondering what was the rate, you know for the jobs you were doing, you know, what was a decent wage, you see? It were a bit funny like that. Otherwise, you know, there were a lot of them that worked at Mosley Common, had advanced down the pit, they got on better jobs, you see. I missed out on all that, you see, being away, you know.

K: Were there still Bevin Boys working there when you went?

EH: Yeah, yeah. Lofthouse was there. Lofthouse worked on the same level as me, when I came back and they used to kid him. They said he'd never make a footballer, you know! (laughs) Aye, I used to see Lofthouse, he worked on the loadery he did. Of course I didn't know him, you see, I'd been away all that time, I only knew as he played football, you know. And Tommy Banks worked there and all. He did his National Service though, later on, he went in the Army, did Tommy. He's been here a time or two. And that were it.

K: How long were you working there then?

EH: It finished in 1948 - they closed the colliery, you see, then. We were on the scrap heap really, because we hadn't been trained on any surface jobs at all. I mean I was no tradesman or

nothing. We had to accept any sort of a job. I had back injuries, you see, and I couldn't be transferred to another colliery when they closed it, because I wanted a lighter job, you see. That were a problem. They couldn't give me a light job.

K: Was the injury from the War? Or was it..?

EH: No, down the mine, yeah, I'd one or two injuries. I've got osteoarthritis now you know, in my spine, see I've got a narrowing of the spine, you see. With bending down, bending down, you get wear and tear on your spine and that's my problem. I've had like acupuncture you know, to kill the pain. It were terrible once... Anyway I got a job labouring at Hawker Siddeley. I did very well there. I finished up... I got semi-skilled eventually, but I used to do all the, oh, the posters for the club and everything there. I did the backcloths on the stage there, they were 20 feet. I did three back cloths, you know, for the concerts, different seasons. I did one for summer and one for winter and one for the Navy. You see, we did a lot of work, all electronics for the Navy, and they came visiting us, I did a backcloth for them. We had like a concert for them and everything, and they landed a helicopter on the car park there and they came. We used to do a lot of work for the Sea King helicopters there you know. Anyway, eventually, I got early retirement when I was about 63 and I did all right, you see, after that. I could concentrate a bit on my painting and that you know, I got a bit more opportunity.

K: Is there anything we haven't covered, you'd like to talk about? Did you have any other relatives in the services at all?

EH: Well my brother was in. My brother served. Funnily enough he was a lorry driver before the War. He finished in the mill, he got a good job, well he were second mate at Moscrop's Lion Oil, Bolton and he were second man, and it were a steam wagon at that particular time, you know, in the Thirties. They had a steam wagon. It was an oil refiners and dry salters, Moscrops, and I had an uncle and he was a foreman there and he got him on. Anyway, he finished up driving then, you see, he got his driving licence and he went on the Reserve, the Royal Army Service Corps. They wanted people for the Army, there were going to be a War, and he used to get 30 shillings every, I think it were every month. And on the Reserve, they did no drills or nothing, they were just on the Reserve, because they were a driver. And he were all right, it were a good spending money for him. Anyway when the War started he was automatically called up straightaway, and he went up into Scotland, near Glasgow, to this camp. And what happened, while he'd been driving, he were putting a spare wheel or something on and it slipped off and it damaged his little finger. And what they'd done, they hadn't took it off, it was badly damaged, and they'd like... the sinews... they'd stitched the sinews down and it were all, practically bent over the palm of his hand. Anyway, while he was up in Glasgow in the Army, and he'd been called up at this camp, they said 'Anybody as wants to go sick? They used to come round in the Army, in a sick parade and anybody as weren't so good... And this fellow' saw this finger of my brother's, he said 'Ee, he said, 'You want to go sick with that, report it' and he said 'I will do', so he went and they looked at him and they said 'Oh, you can't hold a rifle can you properly' and they said 'We'll give you a temporary discharge' so they discharged him (laughs) and then he came home! Anyway, he must have been home 12 months, and he was working, and some Military Police came to their house and they were looking, whether it were the same name as him, they were looking for a deserter, and it wasn't him. So, in fact, they said 'Well, we'll look your case up as well.' So they looked into his case and they recalled him up. And funnily enough, he got called up - he did a month or two over here, and he was sent to the Middle East, and do you know, this hospital that I'd been, where I went to the execution, you know... I happened to be there, and he knew I'd been in Palestine. And what happened, he arrived in Egypt, and these 11th Hussars, they came back for a rest behind the line, and he was posted to them in this truck. He carried the rations with them, and they were going towards Syria, he knew I were in Palestine, he said to them 'My brother's in Palestine. Can I go to this hospital?' the 12th General it were called, and they said 'Aye, go on, you can spend the night' you know. Funnily enough I was on night duty at that time. I was on reception, emergencies like, and... We had mosquito nets, and I was asleep in this hut, and he enquired where I were, and he came, and he lifted the net up and there he was! Wasn't that marvellous? So anyway, he managed another two days, and I managed to get a pass and I went to Tel Aviv with him, you know, that were nearest town and we had a drink or two. Anyway, funnily enough we came back to Palestine before I came home, and I were ready for going home, and he knew. Oh it was aggravated, because I were going..! I mean he hadn't been there long. Anyway he come home, eventually, from there, he never went in any action at all, you know. He were based in Egypt, everything were finished then, you know. There were no fighting going on in desert or anything. Funny how we met like that, it were a big surprise when he bobbed through, under that tent. (laughs)

K: I mean other people have been asked questions about food...

EH: In the Army it were all tinned stuff... When we used to get bread, even in Palestine, there were all weevils in, you know weevils? You could see little dots in the bread, but they reckon that they did you no harm, you know, you could eat them, they were some sort of .. they said Prisoners of War used to get weevils in their stuff and there were like a vitamin in the weevil! (laughs) One thing about the desert, food was the main thing. Many a time you used to have a bit of a meal in the evening, because you were moving about a lot and you used to think, this has got to last me now, all the night, and it'll be tomorrow morning... You've no other means of getting anything at all, you see. And when our despatch riders were away from the unit, they had to put a guard on that food, you know, to make sure as they got it when they come back, you know, wherever they'd been, you know. And when we used to get leave, we used to spend all our money in the cafés in Cairo, with chicken and chips, and things like that. A good pint of beer, you know. I always remember we went to an open air cinema in Cairo and we'd been drinking this... and we had our shorts on and we'd had a pint or two of iced beer and we were shivering we had to come out. An open air cinema, you know, because it gets cold at night, we are in the desert, you have your greatcoat and everything on, you know, at night. Mornings, as soon as the sun comes up, it's hot.

They used to come over bombing, you see, where we were. For a start of we were against an airfield. Every moonlight night they used to come down the coast and they used to bomb. And this particular night, the Italians came over and there was a siding from the railway with all aerial bombs in and they caught the petrol wagon and they were coming over all night, bombing the flames and the whole lot went up, about five o'clock at morning. And I always remember looking out of the trench, and the clouds were low and the force of the explosion damaged my ears again, you see, my ears were already damaged. And it were such a bang, it were like an atomic blast, and it blew the clouds away and everything, you know. We had to send men over to see if there were any casualties, you know. But they didn't do so bad, you know, they didn't kill a lot, but the bombs were scattered all over the airfields and everything. And then in Palestine I had to handle an air crash there, an American bomber came down, you know, and they were being brought in and they were in a terrible state the Yanks, the bodies. There were one fellow with no face on and there were one fellow with a piece of a tree stuck in him and their legs were like corkscrews and they were terrible, they were. We used to handle all sorts in that hospital, you know, as well. There's some had been in the sea, been torpedoed. In the desert, after Crete, we used to have to go along the coastline there and there were bodies being washed up, especially Navy fellows and we had to bury them. And it was hard work, because it was like rock, you know, the ground, and we had to dodge them many a time, you know, because it was hard work, saying 'Oh there a few more down there, let's go the other way' and all things like that. Aye. I had some photographs of all them bodies, and we got burgled and they took my wallet with all my photographs in, after the War. There were one fellow, Australian, he was in a dinghy. He must have got out of the aircraft, you know, and he'd come ashore, but he must have died from exposure, and he had all his uniform and everything on, you know. You had to try and identify them you see? Now the Navy had a belt with their number on. There were a little pocket on this belt as well, and you used to try and identify them and put it on their cross.

I finished up in Germany painting crosses, even then, when the War finished. We took a place over, it had been a, funnily enough, it had been a hospital for people with deformities and that, and they reckon, if they couldn't do a job, they got rid of them, you know - the Nazis. They wanted a perfect race, didn't they? But if they could work, they were still there next to the hospital as we were, in this big building.

K: What place was that called?

EH: Wittekindshof* it's called and there was a chapel there and this German took us round this chapel and there were all murals on the wall, like religious figures, you know. In fact, I've got some photos upstairs of it, and he said 'Have you noticed anything about these figures?' and I said 'No'. He says 'Well, they've all got German faces' and they had. They were Nordic... you know, the bible faces, you don't err... he says and they were all German like. They all looked like Germans.

*(*Wittekindshof in Bad Oeynhausen was (and is) a residential institution for physically and mentally disabled children and young people. Hundreds of its patients were deported or exterminated during the War by the Nazi authorities - with the enthusiastic co-operation of many of the medical staff.)*

K: Did you ever have any entertainment at the camps from ENSA, or..?

EH: Oh aye. We had Geraldo in Germany after the War, Geraldo's band... and when we got up to Holland, after we broke out of Normandy, we started getting leave. So I got three days and you

could either go to Brussels or to Paris, and they hadn't been liberated very long, you know. So me and my mate we opted for Paris. We went on the train to Paris - they'd got the railways running - and we arrived at this hotel. Ambassadors it was called and what you could do... in the foyer, there was a women's orchestra and all. And what happened when we arrived there, there was a Sergeant Major in charge - the Army had took it over completely - and he said 'Now, lads' he said 'I want no funny business while you're here' he says 'I'm on a good job, you know. Now look here, you're supposed to be in a twelve o'clock, now' he says 'The doors'll not be locked, but I want no trouble here at all with you in the hotel. Do what you want outside' So we said 'Oh all right' Anyway there was a desk there you could book all the shows, the Folies Bergere, the Moulin Rouge and I booked a concert by the Glenn Miller Orchestra. So it was in Olympia, it was a big hall, so anyway we got the tickets and me and my mate went, and when we got there, there was a big long queue, all American. You see the Americans, they helped to liberate Paris, you see. We didn't get there our British troops we bypassed that, and they were in the majority, the Yanks. So, anyway we saw this queue and we thought they were queuing up to the box office to pay, and we'd got tickets, so we walked past all this queue straight to the front (laughs) and there wasn't a murmur at all! We went straight in and sat right in the front row in chairs like, three-piece suite chairs, straight at front of the balcony. And the band came on and Glenn Miller... He was missing then you see, was Glenn, because he was supposed to be on the advance party to Paris, from over here and he went over and were lost wasn't he in that small plane, in the channel somewhere? Anyway the band carried on. I think Tex Beneke took over off him, you know, as a leader. But all the band were there you know, and after the War I had quite a few records of his, you know. I've got a lot now anyway, long players of Glenn Miller's. It were a good, a good show. And then we went to the Folies Bergere - that were a marvellous show that, it were. What happened the back cloth was there of a big scene and they put like a muslin and it give them the distance and everything, marvellous, the theatre, the effect, it were, you know on the stage. It were a marvellous show. I think it's still going yet, I'm not sure, Follies. Well, I've been to Paris not long since, when I went Normandy this last time, and Moulin Rouge, went all round, that's still going you know. I've not been there though, that's the Red Windmill, Moulin Rouge, that's what it means isn't it? But it was something unusual that leave, you know, it were classy, you know, different leave altogether, you know, the Army, a good set out. They'd gone to town really you know... the troops. A lot of them went to Brussels, you know, they said. It were alright there as well.

K: You never got to go there as well then?

EH: I've been to Brussels, but I never went on leave there. There were quite a few of our troops there. I mean they liberated Brussels you see. The Yanks did Paris. We went up the coast, you see, we bypassed Dunkirk, you know, Dunkirk held out 'til the War finished. It were longest siege were Dunkirk. Because they were helpless, you know, the troops... the Germans were there, but they couldn't do nothing, you know. The harbour wasn't usable or nothing. So what they used to do, they used to lob a shell or two into there, to tell them, you know, we were still watching them you know, and that were it. Aye, it was a long siege that. He got commended that general, of theirs, for lasting out so long (laughs) but it didn't do them any good!

ENDS