

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with Harry Higson (HH) • Royal Navy

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 08.06.2005

K: What's your name?

HH: Harry Higson.

K: When were you born?

HH: 1917, at 116 Brandwood Street, and I was brought up with my grandparents.

K: What did your grandparents do? Were they working?

HH: My granddad was in the insurance business. He was a superintendent, Blackburn Philanthropic Insurance. He got on all right.

K: And did you have any brothers or sisters?

HH: Yes, I've two brothers. One lives in Germany and the other one died in '49

K: So where did you go to school?

HH: Brandwood Street.

K: I thought you'd say that! (laughs)

HH: Well I went from when I was four and a half, to fourteen. Finished up in Standard 7, that was the limit. I left school when I was fourteen. I had my three weeks holiday, and then I started work as a milk boy on a farm. Sam Roberts, Moody Fold Farm, at Lostock, now Junction Road. I started at six o'clock and by the time I got back home it was six o'clock. That was a twelve hour day, seven days a week, 84 pence, eight shillings, no, 40 pence, eight shillings, and two slices of toast for my breakfast! (laughs) I used to deliver the milk on the way home from the farm, you know, back to Brandwood Street.

K: And what was Brandwood Street like around then, in those days?

HH: Very nice. Completely different. I lived at the top end all decent people - you know what I mean, everybody's working and what. Good people and decent people, you know what I mean? None of what you get today, you know what I mean. It's a terrible world in it like, today? Everybody was working, they all worked in the mill.. you left school, you started work. Where do they go today?

K: Well, it's a big school isn't it?

HH: It is yes, it's still there.

K: What did you do after milk boy? How long did you do that?

HH: Let's see, must have been about twelve months or so or two years... Say twelve months and then I worked for Scott's pop merchants, on Morris Green. Have you heard of them? Quite a family concern, and they brewed all the ginger ale and all that and I think I were there about a couple of years or so or something like that, do you know what I mean?

K: Where did you..? It would be about 1933, 34 now

HH: Well, I think I went working in a mill, Dove Mill. A little piecer, in the cotton industry I mean. Running about in your bare feet and all that, you know?

K: Was it very hot?

HH: Yeah - the spinner got all the money. I think I got about fourteen shillings a week in them days, do you know what I mean? But the spinner, who run the mules, he was on about a fiver, you know what I mean?

K: Was it very noisy?

HH: Yeah, lousy. Not a pleasant thing at all. Then I went on the railway, a porter at Trinity Street. And once again, my eyesight let me down. You do temporary, you know, on the platform - two 'til ten and ten 'til two and all that, unloading all the fish in the morning, you know, early on. Loading the baggage and what and helping people and getting a tip, you know, and some of these people used to come to the Grand, the stars, you know, and you'd get a tip off 'um and er...

K: It would be a very busy station.

HH: Oh yeah, oh God yeah, and everything... bang on time, never late, bang on time. And so like I had to go for the exam to be made permanent. My eyesight's not good enough, failed. Finished. So what did I do then?

K: What were you doing when... before the War? Just before the War?

HH: I was working for Webster's timber yard on Spa Road, labouring there, and oh, in the meantime, when I was about seventeen and a half, I wanted to join the Navy. Went to Manchester to join the Navy, seventeen and a half, I failed, what did I fail with? 'You've got no back molars!' (laughs) That was it. But when the War come and I were a volunteer... No trouble - in!

K: So you volunteered?

HH: I wanted to be in the Navy.

K: Do you remember when War was declared what were you doing?

HH: I was working a Webster's timber yard, making all these munition boxes and that, for the War effort, like. Well I got called up.

K: Where did you enlist?

HH: Well they sent for me like... I can't remember where we went to for a medical, probably Manchester, somewhere like that, or they send for you and you're in. You get a railway ticket and you go to Plymouth barracks.

K: When War broke out, did you think 'I'll have the chance to join the Navy now?'

HH: Well, I wanted to be in the Navy and I volunteered so I wouldn't go in the Army, and it's just what I wanted. I went for a medical and what... I'm in the Navy now, and at Devonport barracks, Plymouth, and they used to put chits on the table, like little chits with a number on for a draught to go to a ship or something. I've joined the Navy to be on a ship, not playing in the barracks. So, I pick this chit up, and what is it? It's the Cotswold, Hunt Class destroyer, brand new. We go up to Scotland, and it's brand new there... Scotstoun I think it was, the place where the ship was somewhere, where the ship was... commissioned it, like. It was brand new and all the new ship's company and working-up trials and we go to sea, like, and I was sick as a dog! I thought seven Hail Mary's next time it goes down, go straight to the bottom, don't come up! Oh, it's a terrible sickness, seasickness, but, you get used to it. So I was on that, and we were on east coast convoys, Channel. Be going through the Channel and they'd be firing from on the French side. You had the dive bombers coming up - E-boats chasing you, and I was on there for about what? From about 1940 to I think it was about '41 I got blew up with a mine. And that's what I say about Peter Gerald Charles Dickens, and he was Number One, like, after the Captain.

K: Are you on this picture?

HH: Yes. You'll see a fellow just bobbed his head in, because I got a bad place, because I'd just come off watch. Can you see the fellow sticking his head in? At the top of the picture? You can just see my face.

K: This got blown up?

HH: That's the one I'm telling you about, and we beached it. They towed us in. The deck was awash, we were all sitting on the fo'c'sle and that being towed in, and beached over at Harwich. HMS Ganges, the boys' training ship. So I got kitted up. I was up to here with oil and water with Dickens, and he said 'I think we'd better go up on top' I said 'I think it's a good idea, Sir.' We go up and batten down. So when I go ashore I throw all my things away, handed in like. Now my vest and underpants, I throw 'em away because they're full of oil and water, you know. No good. But when I gets kitted up, I've got a little whatsit here, chit. One vest and one pair of underpants, I'm being charged for, and I've just... we've just saved millions of pounds of a ship, you know what I mean! (laughs)

K: So then, what happened?

HH: So then I went back to barracks then. Back to Plymouth and I got a draught to the Obdurate. That was another brand new ship. Went and picked that up, they were working-up trials and all that business and we did all different convoys and what. We was escort for Churchill, one time, on the Queen Mary. He was going across to America, and we were escort. Of course, the Queen Mary, it could lose us, with speed, you know what I mean, and middle of the Atlantic, we leave them and they'd go and we come back again. And then like we were the workhorses for the Navy, because we had anti-submarine detecting gear, you see. Battleships never had that, so we escorted for them, when there doing working-up trials, gunnery and all that you know, and we'd sort of escort them like, you know what I mean.

This is a good thing, this is the gospel truth, I *volunteered* for that ship, Obdurate, but my Class, I think the name was 28 Class, I volunteered and went on the Obdurate, and all my Class went on the Prince of Wales. What happened? The Japanese sunk it, and they were all prisoners and

that, so I've had a charmed life. In spite of the action, like, up on the Russian front, you know what I mean? We were really lucky.

K: So the Obdurate was an escort for convoys, and how many runs did you do? Trips, how many runs did you do, do you think?

HH: Oh about three up there, about three. And we're on the Obdurate and it's Christmas Eve, and we sail out of Seidisfiord off Valfjord and we get clear of the land, and then the Captain speaks to you over the Tannoy, you know - the loud speaker like, and he'd say like 'Well chaps, you're probably wondering...' Well, of course, we already knew where we were going, because they always did know, it wasn't a secret, he says 'You're all wondering where we're going on this trip, well I can't think of a better way of spending Christmas, as taking a convoy to our great ally, Russia.' Now I thought about The Fleece and the Prince Bill, (laughs) you know what I mean, just to be humorous. So we sailed out in a terrible gale and whatnot...

K: Was your uniform warm?

HH: Well, you'd woollies on and boiler suits and them duffle coats, you know what I mean? Even down in the boiler room, you'd go up on watch, well it's all frozen and that and they had to have safety whatsit... because they'd have 45 degree roll, like that. And I'm going on watch this particular day, and I'm hold of the whatsit, and ship's going like that, I thought - it's going to turn over. All my life passed in front of me (laughs) And so we sailed out there, and it was like the last day of the year, because it took us a while to get up there, you know what I mean? Having sailed out on Christmas Eve, you know, in a terrible gale - wicked, evil.

K: So you didn't celebrate Christmas? You just did nothing...

HH: Oh no, no. So anyway, there's only two hours daylight up there. That's from ten to twelve o'clock, and I remember this particular morning, the last day of the year, I'm up on deck, like, because we used to walk up and down for exercise. Because that's all you could do for exercise, walk up and down. And I'm walking up and down the deck and I look across there. Alarm bells, go, action stations, and my action station, I had to go down in the magazine and pass the shells up to the guns like, and we had a real rough time. We got badly damaged. I were picking a fellow's eyebrows up off the deck. It were one of our gunners on the pom-poms you know.

K: That's New Year's Eve, then?

HH: Up to Kola Inlet, where all the convoys come in like there, and then we go alongside and re-fuel, and that was the one chance I had to walk down the gangplank onto Russian soil, and the Russians like... I give them a block of chocolate and some fags. They thought I were a millionaire. Couldn't believe it! (laughs)

K: That was very generous of you!

HH: Yeah, yeah...

K: So the ship was damaged then?

HH: Yeah, we were badly damaged then, a big hole in the side of the ship, and that, but we were lucky...

K: Were there any men killed or injured?

HH: Yes, they were on the pom-poms. So when we get there we re-fuel, and we got to come back then. Now when we were coming back, with all these casualties, some off the Onslow. You can smell rotting flesh and that, what do you call it? Gangrene and that, legs off and arms off and what... We had to bring 'em back. Some of the ship's company off the Onslow they had to stay in Russia, while they got repaired, you know what I mean? But we brought a lot of the survivors back home. The Germans were about forty miles away, and we got bombed like mad there, you know, in Kola Inlet, but we were dead lucky, really, really, it's amazing. Coming back home to Scapa Flow, where we spent all our time, in Scapa Flow. We sailed into Scapa Flow and we get the heroes welcome, all blowing their hooters and that you know, and we sail in like, heroes, because it was an outstanding thing, it was. And then after that, the King comes to visit the fleet.

K: So you did three runs, yes, and the Obdurate was it repaired?

HH: Yeah, at Newcastle, you know, to be repaired and that, at the dock. Because you know, the best thing about... I got seven days leave.

K: And did you come back to Bolton?

HH: Yes, I came back on leave, yeah.

K: And what was that like?

HH: Well, my granddad was still alive then, and I was telling him what happened and that was it.

K: And did you see anyone else in Bolton?

HH: No, there were nobody else in Bolton on my ship, from Bolton. But there were different ones, all Scousers and Scotsmen, Irishmen and whatever.

K: Were people aware of what you'd done?

HH: As far as I know anyway. It'd be in the paper, and I've got the letter to this day, what I sent him, and it's a bit tatty, and like and what and I'd be seeing him and it were like, rather rough like. We lost a destroyer and a minesweeper, which got sunk, you know, and come back.

K: And you've still got the letter that you wrote?

HH: Yeah, yeah.

K: That was the nearest you came to... well, being killed really

HH: Yes, I was, dead lucky.

K: Did you have plenty of food on board?

HH: No. After we got up to past Iceland we were on corned beef and ship's biscuits. No fresh fruit, no fresh veg, nothing. And we'd go alongside the Cumberland, a big cruiser, and we'd get our bread and that off them.

K: So you came back to Bolton... Did you just have the one leave?

HH: Seven days leave and went back, erm.

K: And then what?

HH: I picked my ship and then we went back escorting battery ships and that, when they doing work up there and guns and everything, you know what I mean?

K: You went back on the same ship?

HH: Yeah, back on the Obdurate yeah, and from there - Atlantic convoys and I finished up in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and I think, whether it was nerves or what, I got psoriasis rosea, all weeping, between my legs, under my arms and so I had to leave the ship, and went in the hospital in Halifax, Nova Scotia. And from there I went from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Boston, Massachusetts, by train, all across. And I was in Chelsea Hospital there, and they gave me that ultra-violet ray, I got badly burnt, and I'm walking like this... because they'd over done it, you know what I mean? Because it were all weeping you know.

Now I had some relations in America you see, so I had a chance to go and see them. So while we're on there, being repaired, I picked the Leander. We went as the maintenance party aboard Leander because it belonged to the Kiwis - New Zealanders and they'd been torpedoed out in the Pacific. So we were like maintenance party on board there, in Boston. When they'd finished repairing the Leander we were all coming back home on that ship and we sailed up the St Lawrence to Montreal, right up the St Lawrence to Montreal, and we go in there, and we're picking up diplomats, some crown jewels, and bullion and what, all the mounted police and that, Mounties and everything - quite an occasion... and I thought, next time I join, I won't join as a stoker, I'll join either as a Captain or a Commander! (laughs) When we picked all this stuff up and the diplomats and that, we were sailing down the St Lawrence, in the evening, all the officers were in their dinner whites and the marine band's playing on the quarterdeck and the upper society are dancing on there. I think, there's summat' wrong here! (laughs) That's the life for me. (laughs) Then we come back, back into our barracks and I think I got de-mobbed then.

K: Do you remember where you were when War was over?

HH: I was in America.

K: Yes, you were actually in America?

HH: Yeah, in America, on that ship.

K: So was there a lot of celebration?

HH: Oh yeah.

K: It was a good place to be, America, I expect when... so, you have a party on the ship..?

HH: No, no just got drunk ashore and whatnot. Come home, back to barracks and de-mobbed. And I got the largest sum of money I've ever had in my life before - £73 for my six years in the playing at sailors!

K: What was it like adjusting back to life in Bolton? After you'd been to America?

HH: Well, I was glad to be back home, you know what I mean, and that. And then, oh yes, I'm on my de-mob leave, and I meet my wife!

K: Oh right, where did you meet...?

HH: She was a silver waitress in the Swan Hotel. So I used to go in there for a pint, like, you know. This beautiful lady was in there, and I met the wife, and we were courting for about twelve months and she says to me, she says 'Eh, you. Either we get married or finish' Oh yeah, I'd forgotten I'd bought a motorbike for fifty quid on Deane Road, that were my ambition before the War, to have a motorbike, you know. And I bought this motorbike for fifty quid.

K: Did you buy that with the £73?

HH: Out of my 73 quid yeah, yeah, that's right. So I've got the motorbike, and I've got my girlfriend, which is now my wife, she's been, we've been married for 59 years in November, and she said like 'Well, are you? We get married or we finish' and I said, she were gorgeous, I loved her, I said 'I'll tell you what I'll do, darling, I'll sell my motorbike and marry you.' That's what happened. We'd been married twelve months, we got married in 1946, in 1947, I don't know you know about it, there were the big freeze-up, everything stopped in the building... They couldn't even get the coal out of the wagons and that, everything were froze, terrible. You may recall that. I'm on the dole, I've just been playing at sailors for six year. I've just got married, twelve months, I'm not going get anywhere am I? I'm on the dole. And my mate, who were in the Navy with me, Walter, he worked down the pit. So I said to Walter, I said... and the Union rate for bricklaying then, I went on a Government course and I went bricklaying... and the Union rate was half a crown an hour, so I were getting about seven pounds something shillings a week, when I were working like. And when I were working down the pit, I were getting about 15 quid, so I said to Walter, 'What kind of money are you getting down pit now Walt? 'I get about £15', 'I'm having some of that' So I want go down the pit, so I go have a medical and I went down pit and I were down pit for eighteen years.

K: Which pit?

HH: I worked at Sandhole, I worked at Brackley pit, at Sandhole and Agecroft.

ENDS