

Interview

with

MR. P. DAVIES

and

Pupils of Lady Hawkins School, Kington

Peter Davies was a wireless operator in the 27th Armoured Brigade. He was born in Monmouth in South Wales, and moved as a boy to Hereford where he attended the Lord Scudamore School. He joined the RAF as a wireless operator, and trained in Blackpool where he lived in a seaside boarding houses for 6 months. He joined the 27th Armoured Brigade, an assault brigade tank division, who arrived in Caen, then moved through northern France and into Belgium and Holland. He then took part in the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes in December 1944. He then went into Germany and back into Holland to deliver food to starving Dutch people. The Germans there surrendered, followed a few days later by the rest of Germans. He then stayed on in Germany, working to transport displaced people home across Europe.

Driving tanks in Caen; two battles in Le Havre; Regiment's musical instruments kept by a Frenchman; battles in Belgium and Holland; Battle of the Bulge; Reichswald Forest, fighting German paratroopers and the Hitler Jungen; delivering food to starving Dutch people; the end of the war; taking care of your tank in the evening; premonitions about being killed; fear; sport as recreation in the army; lack of trees in Belgium; amusing incident while crossing French Belgian border; dance at the Benedictine monastery; incident when mine exploded tin of beans; training in Blackpool; finding and disarming mines; 'Funny' money; escape kit; sleeping outside in the snow; copy of the surrender document that Montgomery signed; German map of South Wales for invasion; boats across the Solent; preparing for the invasion; Hill 112; Chateau at Garmanche; disbanding of 27th Armoured Brigade.

[P. Davies(?) – recording commenced at 00:00]

MR. DAVIES: I mentioned that on 7th June, on the morning of 7th June, we went out on reconnaissance and that was really to test the strength of the enemy ... **[recording stopped and restarted]** This is what you've got to put up with.

I mentioned that on 7th June we were going in towards Caen, three tanks, which is a troop of tanks, and my squadron was chosen to send three tanks in, and we got within about, oh, I suppose, two miles of Caen itself and we certainly found what the strength of the enemy was, far greater than we were. I suddenly found that there was dust flying up at the side of my tank and I couldn't make out why. I thought it was a shell that had failed to go off and just blew a cloud of dust at the side of me, and then suddenly I realised that it wasn't; it was someone firing armour-piercing shells at me, which don't explode. And that was the first time in my life that anyone had really fired back at me. So that wasn't a nice thought. And suddenly we were zigzagging across a little bit of open ground. I should mention that, before that, we had lost radio contact because we'd dropped down a sunken road, into a sunken road, about eight feet, which smashed every valve in our radio. We didn't, of course, have printed circuits in those days; they all had valves. So we had lost communication with the other two tanks. And suddenly, as I say, I saw this dust coming up at the side of my tank and realised that I was being shot at, but it was coming from behind me, so I thought it was actually some of our own people firing on it, which didn't please me until suddenly, as we were turning, we were hit and it took a piece out of the ... one bogey out of the one side of the track but the track didn't break and therefore we were still mobile. So we continued to zigzag across this piece of open ground in the hope that they couldn't hit us again. We were half-way across when they did hit us again and they hit us right in the rear, came up through the engine and into the diesel tank and we were ankle-deep in diesel inside. That, in fact, saved my life, that I had a diesel tank and not a petrol one. If it had been a petrol one it would have gone up in flames. I had the only diesel tank in the regiment, the only old tank in the regiment and I was complaining that my tank might not even get up on to the green belt, but it did. But it only lasted until the following morning. Then, finally, as we tried to bail out, we did bail out all five of us, and they hit the top of the turret and cut a groove across the top of the turret as we were getting out. But we were lucky. The other two tanks also got into trouble: in one, when it was hit the five men were killed; in the second one that was hit, two out of the five were killed; and in mine all five of us lived. So when I say that I'm a lucky man, you can see why: I'm still here 60-odd years later and my friends aren't.

[02:40]

I mentioned that we went into Le Havre and took part in the two battles in Le Havre and got in and took the town of Le Havre. A rather amusing thing, an interesting thing, afterwards happened when a local man came up to my squadron leader and said that he had something for us. My regiment had been there in 1940 when they had pulled out to go to Dunkirk. I wasn't there with the regiment at

that time but they left behind all their band instruments and this gentleman had kept some of our band instruments in a barn, and the band instruments that we had lost four years before were handed back to the regiment. So that was a very nice gesture, considering the fact that the man took tremendous risks with his life. Had he been found with that in his store, the Germans undoubtedly would have punished him and his family very severely. But we had our band instruments back and that was nice. It just shows a nice gesture that happens even in war.

We took part in the battles up through Belgium into Holland and, whilst we were in Holland, we were there ... It was coming up to Christmas and we were planning to celebrate Christmas. We were at a monastery with the brothers and they were very, very good to us. They were giving us ... They were teaching us French, German, any language we wanted basically, and helping us with all sorts of things, making plans for Christmas. And we'd got tanks with engines out and guns out and tracks off and everything off because we knew that we were due to have four/five days' rest. And then we had an ENSA party come and did Blythe Spirit with Emlyn Williams in it for us as a play. Then we had two days to go to Christmas and then suddenly we had a message come through that we had to move in 24 hours to go to the Ardennes, and that was something like 140 miles away. We'd got these tanks stripped down, as I say, and we had to work all through the night and the next day to get them back together and, of course, we lost our chance of a peaceful Christmas because we went down to the Ardennes where the Battle of the Bulge was taking place, and that was in severe snow and ice. And if you've ever slept out in snow and ice, it's not funny; I woke up one morning to find four inches of snow covering me. It's one of those things that happen when battles change. Because my regiment was in an assault brigade (which was the 27th Armoured Brigade) and wore as its emblem a seahorse because we came out of the sea with our swimming tanks and tanks going in to land (and we had that as our emblem), we then had to go everywhere where there was trouble. In other words, we fought with something like 11 different divisions during the course of those few months. Of course, anywhere where there was a problem one of the tank assault brigades would have to be sent in to help. We were looking forward to Christmas, as I say; we ended up in the Ardennes. We actually celebrated Christmas on January 4th and we had taken with us two barrels of beer which we had got from the NAAFI to celebrate Christmas when we were in Holland, and when we tried to come to use it down in the Ardennes the barrels had frozen solid so we couldn't get the beer out, which was bad. That was a terrible place to fight in, in so much as the tank tracks slide very badly on ice and snow and you couldn't control the vehicles. So many tanks were going off the roads and even the recovery vehicles coming to pick us up went off the roads.

[6:11]

So we fought in the Battle of the Bulge and we fought in many other battles right throughout Holland and we then fought into Germany into the Reichswald Forest and that was the very, very desperate battle; it was defended by German paratroopers and Hitler Jungen (the young children, not a

lot older than some of you) and though we called on them three times to surrender when we had about 400 of them covered on three sides, they refused to surrender and we tried four times to get these young people to surrender and they refused and we had no option but to go in. So, as I say, there's no glory, no pleasure in war; don't ever think that there's glory in war.

We then had numerous battles in Holland, but at the end, in April, towards the end of April, we were moved from Germany back into Holland. Part of Holland had never been cleared; the northern half of Holland was still occupied by the Germans and we were given special dispensation, though the Germans were in occupation, to go back to take food because the Dutch people were starving; they were even resorting to eating their bulbs, their tulip bulbs, daffodil bulbs and everything else, which are normally stated to be poison but they were eating them anyway. And I stopped for a coffee ... Well, I stopped in Eindhoven and someone said there was a Philips factory in front of us where there was a canteen; so we thought we'd go in there and see if we could have a cup of coffee, which we did. It was the worst coffee I have ever had in my life. When I asked what it was, I was told that it was roasted parsnips ground up. It didn't taste a bit like coffee. But there you are, these people, that was all they had. But we were given special dispensation to take this food in. A unit of the Dutch army, a unit of the Belgian army and my unit went in as a special force and, with the Germans alongside us – they didn't look too pleased to see us, to be honest, but they worked with us for a couple of days and – we delivered food, took food, to the starving people in Holland. And quite suddenly, on 4th May the Dutch people all came out singing and dancing in the streets saying “The War is over! The Germans have surrendered!” So we joined in the celebrations, needless to say. They brought out various bottles that they had concealed for years, kept in the hope of peace, and we joined with them and we sang and danced through most of the night and no doubt had perhaps more to drink than we should have done. The next morning we got a very severe talking to by the colonel: the War wasn't over at all; it was only the Germans in Holland that had decided to surrender and the War went on for four more days. So I celebrated my VE-day four days before everybody else, which was nice at the time.

[9:01]

We then ended up in Germany working with the military government, and that was taking so many thousands, hundreds of thousands, of displaced persons back to somewhere near their homes. We dealt with so many nationalities, places I'd never even heard of, to be honest. I spoke to two young girls and said, “Where do you come from?” and the one said “Estonia” and I said “That's Russia” and she said, “No, it's not.” To me it was Russia; I knew it was somewhere up there but I wasn't sure where it was. And we met so many thousands of people then that had been taken from their homes, working as slave labour, put in concentration camps and everything else and we gave up our tanks and simply used all our soft-tops, the ordinary lorries and vehicles to move prisoners about, back to Germany, taking them from Holland and down into Germany and moving and sorting out people, trying to get them organized to get back towards their homes. But they spoke so many languages that it

was almost impossible for us to cope with them. We then started taking reparations from Kiel, where we were stationed, back up to Russia; Russia wanted to claim all sorts of things, so we started ferrying different pieces of equipment up the Baltic into the Russian zone. So I met quite a lot of Russians as well.

Eventually I got demobbed and came home and back to a normal life again. And that's a very quickly a resume of what I did in the Second World War.

Now I've said all sorts of bits and pieces to you. I've got a few photographs that you might like to see and a few bits and pieces, but if you want to ask me some questions, because there are a hundred and one things that I haven't mentioned and perhaps you might like to ask, and if there are any questions I'll do my best to answer. I don't know all the answers – I'll tell you that before you start – but if there are any questions that you have in mind, if I can help, fire away. You've been very patient listening to me; now it's my turn to listen to you.

Q. Would you mind telling me what your medals are for?

A. Yes. These three are mostly, or usually, referred to as Pipsqueak and Wilfred! The first one there is the 1939-45 Star, to say that I served from or a period from '39 to '45. That second one is the France and Germany Star which shows that I fought in the north-west Europe campaign and that third one is the medal which the King gave us ... Bear in mind that it was the King on the throne then and the Queen was in the ATS, serving in the army as I did. That's the one the King gave us for the ending of the War. I have a lot of other medals that were given me by other governments but they have to be worn beneath the campaign stars. Any campaign medals I have take precedence over any other foreign ones. I have foreign ones from France, Holland and various other countries that have given me medals and, basically, those are our ... **This** one commemorates the D-Day landings and is the combined services one which shows the Army, Navy and Air-force emblems on. **That** one is the one given to me by France for 1944 when I was in France, which shows chains, if you like, around it and the chains are broken, that we were there to break the chains; they had had four years of oppression and occupation and we had broken that chain.

[12:38]

That's another one which the French government gave me which is the medal commemorating the 40th anniversary of the D-Day landings and that final one is one they gave us on the 50th anniversary and it's classed as the peace medal, which shows all the beaches and the flags where we landed. So those are, basically, the medals that I wear.

People sometimes ask me why I wear those medals. Basically because I'm proud to wear them; I earned them, at least I believe I did; we believed that we were fighting for the right and for freedom; we believed that God was on our side, but then so did the Germans, and the buckle on a German's belt says, "Gott sie mit uns" (God is with us), and we thought he was with us as well. But I wear them mainly because so many of my friends never came home to collect their medals, never had the

opportunity to wear them. I'm lucky, I came back home to my family; they didn't. And so basically in my heart and my mind I wear those medals for the friends that I lost and who didn't come home. OK?

Q. Thank you.

A. You've got another one written out obviously. Fire away.

Q. Where did you live before the War?

A. Where did I live? I came from South Wales as a boy and I lived in Hereford. I spent two years in Lord Scudamore School before I finished my schooling. It's still there, I think, although they're talking about taking it down now, aren't they?

Q. Yes. Did you have, like, a closest friend in the War, someone who you ...

A. Yes; I had two or three very close friends. Two of them survived with me; two didn't. You hear all sorts of stories about people and people in life and in battle and everything else as to whether people have a premonition of death – I don't know; I can't honestly say – but I believe that sometimes people do. I had a friend who lived in Monmouth and he came to us as a replacement (that is when you've lost a number of tanks, of course, you have to get new ones coming in to make up the numbers to keep you at the full strength of a fighting regiment) and he was with – and he had been in battle but he was in – a different squadron to me: I was in B squadron and he was in C squadron (it just means that there's a different ... there are 19 tanks in a squadron and he was in one lot and I was in another), so we could go in battle on different days, perhaps, often on the same day or the full regiment would have to go in some days. Some days you would split: one troop or one squadron would go one way to a village and the others would go to another village and so you covered a fair amount of ground.

[15:38]

But we came out of action one night and it was almost dark and the first thing you have to do ... I was in a former cavalry regiment and in a cavalry regiment your horse is more important to you than you are, so the first thing you do when the battle stops is to feed and water your horse; and the tank men are the same. They have to put fuel into that tank because if it isn't mobile it can't shift. If it hasn't got any fuel it won't go anywhere. If it hasn't got ammunition and shells up the spout it can't fire back that gun. So you've got two or three things there that have to be done and that is always done before you feed yourself. But normally, being soldiers, the first thing you do is make a fire and get a kettle boiling or a pot boiling so that you can make a cup of tea. That's while you're topping up the tank and putting the ammunition in and everything else. And we'd always have a cup of tea when we'd pull out if we'd get half a chance and we were stood; and I sat on a log by this fire (we'd finished our chores) and this lad from Monmouth came up, and two or three of the lads in my troop said "Shove off and go and make your own tea, don't come here scrounging ours!" and he stayed with us and had a cup of tea; and we were just chatting and bantering and laughing about things, the fact that we were alive, I suppose, and he said to me, "What's it like in there, where you've come out of?" I said "Why? Same as always, no different to anything else." And he said, "Well, no, what's it **like**?" and I said,

“Well, you’ve been in enough times to know what it’s like; we’ve done all the hard work; there’s very little opposition left for you; it’ll be easier for you tomorrow,” and I kidded him on and bits and pieces. But he was obviously worried and eventually I got out of him that he didn’t want to go into action the following morning, and I couldn’t understand why. None of us wanted to go but we had to go; it was our duty and it was our job to go, and if your tank was going in you had to go with it. He kept on about this and I said, “Look, the best thing you can do is to drink that tea and get back to your own area and get your head down for the night; you’ll feel better in the morning. And he said, “Well, I don’t want to go.” And I said, “Well, you’ve got to go so just shove off. There’s nothing to worry about; you’ve been in many times before. It’s no different,” and two or three of the others were trying to pull his leg and make him laugh, but he didn’t, and he went off eventually back to his own tank. And the next thing, when I was going into action the following morning, I heard that his tank had been hit and all five of them had been killed.

[18:09]

So whether that man had a premonition of his death, I don’t know. I have a feeling that he must have had something in his mind, but it’s odd when you hear something like that. Soldiers will laugh at anything and they have the wildest sense of humour, the crudest sense of humour sometimes, but it’s only a shield that’s put round because if you don’t laugh you’ll end up crying and you have this feeling, nobody likes it, and there are times when you get ... You’re not desperately frightened, but you know in the back of your mind that you think it’s going to happen to everybody else and the man next to you is going to go down and you’re going to be protected, you’re going to be safer than him. It doesn’t work out that way. I’ve been hit by bomb blast, by shell blast; I’ve even had what they call so-called friendly fire, when I was bombed by the American 8th Air-force. I didn’t think it was at all friendly, but they said it was friendly fire, but when you’re on the receiving end, there is no friendly fire, believe me; it just isn’t friendly. And I’ve been shot at and I’ve been hit a bit, but I’m still standing, so I’m one of the lucky ones. But there are always times when you start to worry, you think that it might happen but you then have to push it out of your mind and think ‘Well, it isn’t going to happen to me; it happens to everybody else.’ But of course at times it doesn’t happen to everybody else but it’s always frightening but you get over it, you have a job to do and you’re trained to do it and that’s the only thing that you have to do. You believe that in your mind that you’re right and that what you’re doing is fighting for your country and that the family at home that you’re fighting for, the friends that you have that you’re fighting for, the pattern of life, the standard of life, the type of life you have, all is part and parcel of what you do when you go into battle. But there are so many things that happen that you really at times don’t have time to be frightened because it happens so suddenly. Right, let’s have another question then before I ramble on any more.

Q. What did you do off duty?

[20:14]

A. Off duty? All sorts of things. Most armies are ... All armies are very keen on sport so you get a lot of chances whilst you are in barracks or in depots in this country – rather than actual action that you get plenty of opportunities – for sport. There was a tremendous range of sports in the forces because, first of all, they have to keep you fit; you are the fittest people around. Your rations are pretty good; you may not always like them but they're pretty good. Therefore, you end up being very, very fit and, of course, you then have competitions. I played football for the army, for the regiment; I played hockey for the regiment; I did some Olympic-style wrestling for the regiment. And you meet other armies, other regiments and you have friendly bouts and days with them and, you know, with us, of course, on these D-Day landings there were Americans, Canadians, Poles, Czechs and a whole load of Irish, Welsh, Scottish, British regiments, so there were so many, but you meet so many nationalities. And even friendly competitions with the locals. I played football against a French team in the first month that we were in Normandy and you make your own entertainment, basically, in the forces.

Q. How much time have we got because we need to look at the photographs?

Q2. You've got about 25 minutes.

Q. What was your funniest memory of the War – laugh?

A. Sorry, just repeat that; I'm a little bit deaf in my one ear because I had a gun going off 90 times a day in my left ear and it doesn't do you a lot of good! Sorry.

Q. What is the funniest memory you have of the War?

A. The finest?

Q. The funniest?

A. The funniest. Right. I can think of so many but bear with me on this one. We travelled through Belgium and I didn't fight; we weren't in battle much in Belgium and I was very grateful because Belgium had suffered 20 years before us when the First World War took place; Belgium was terribly hammered and flattened and spoilt. We had to travel about 80-odd miles and in which case because tanks cut up the roads so badly we used transporters; they put you on a transporter, a terribly slow thing and you could walk faster than it sometimes. But they put 35-tonne tanks on to transporters. We are going along and you can get off and jump off and walk along if you're going up an incline. My number 2 gunner and I were sat on the top of the tank – it was an early Sunday morning, very early and we had travelled through the night on this transporter – and I couldn't make out what was different in Belgium. And it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn't seen a tree bigger than one of these shrubs outside and it then dawned on me, of course, that all their trees had been flattened 20 years before and what we were seeing were all young trees; there wasn't a big tree anywhere and that was puzzling me until I realized why. And we passed through the frontier from France to Belgium and we didn't have to stop, of course, because you didn't stop for frontiers in those days even though there were frontier posts. And I said to this friend of mine, we've got to stop and think about this, you know; in 20 or 30 years' time we may have children of our own, grandchildren even, and we've crossed frontiers and we

haven't seen a thing or noticed a thing; let's look out ... We're approaching the frontier between Belgium and Holland, let's look out for something that we see, the first thing that we see, crossing the frontier as a memory for the future; we'll save that for the future; we'll make a specific point of remembering this to tell our grandchildren. It was very early morning and we were passing some trees and the road ... There was a big bend in front of us and we went round this bend and there was a lady, an elderly lady in black walking along the road; most of the women wore black in those countries. This lady suddenly needed to attend to nature, lifted her clothes and stopped on the side of the road and I nearly fell off the top of the tank laughing because this friend of mine said, "What a thing to remember for the future generations of the first thing that we have seen." That was funny.

[24:50]

The other one was that we had a dance in ... Or where Radio [radio? – 24:54] Normandy is and where the Benedictine monastery is, where they make Benedictine, and we had the monks, and we'd arrived an hour and a half before the Germans were ready to and they'd all got the monks to put their stocks out in the yard but we arrived a bit early so we had all the Benedictine stocks and we had a glorious time; the monks gave us every sized bottles from miniatures to large ones, so we had a whale of a time. We decided that we would put on a dance in a hall; we had spoken to the mayor and said, "Well, you know, we can provide some food and we'll have a dance with the young ladies, if you've got 20 or 30 young ladies in the town; we'll put on a dance. We've got our band instruments and we'll do this, that and the other." So they said, send up the goods, so the local padre rounded up these young ladies and brought them all in and we decided that we'd have a bar with what beer we'd got and what few wines we'd got and I said, "I don't dance; I'm not a dancer and I never have been. So, if you like, I'll be one of the barmen." So they said, ok, well you look after the food, Pete, and just see." So we got all the regimental silver salvers out, big things, and we cut up a whole load of Spam and corned beef sandwiches – we had plenty of Spam and plenty of corned bully beef – so we made all these sandwiches with white bread that we got from the NAAFI and at the interval, when they announced the interval, to bring the refreshments out, so I said, "OK, I'll bring a tray out," and I did. As soon as the band stopped and they announced the interval they said we would have the food. So I came around from this bar with a huge silver salver like this and the next minute I was hit by about 40 ladies; I was trampled to the floor. I was on my hands and knees. I had the silver salver, the regimental silver, holding still in my hand and I'd got half, one half of a slice of a sandwich left on it, one piece of white bread, and as I tried to get up off the floor that went. So I said, well, someone else can take that next tray of sandwiches out because you can bet your bottom dollar I'm not going to. And that was funny. So even in battle and in the height of problems there is humour. You have to laugh at everything that is remotely funny because if you didn't laugh you'd cry. So you laugh at ridiculous situations.

[27:16]

It was my turn to do the cooking and you take ... Each of you does a bit of cooking and you have to take that in turns and we were stationary and some infantry were moving up but it was in a battle and we said we hadn't eaten and it was quiet, let's eat. So we did. And I started to get some things out. On the back of my tank there's a large box called a blanket box in which we keep our supplies; it was always full of food, never mind the blankets. I'd started to get ready to get the stove out and I'm stood in the turret with my head and shoulders out and some Canadians were coming past and an infantryman suddenly yelled out "Mine!" And he had trodden on an antipersonnel mine, a little thing that was like two cocoa tins, one inside another, or beans tins. It has three prongs on the top of it which just stick through the grass and you tread on those and it clicks and shoots this one tin up into the air about a yard and it explodes in all directions and it's got ball-bearings and all sorts of things in it, not very nice things at all. And I'm stood at the top of the tank and I suddenly felt this tremendous blow in the back of the neck and I thought, "Oh, dear God, I'm hit." And there was something running down my face and everything else and I thought, well, that's it and I could feel the blow but I was still conscious and I thought, well, I'm alive anyway and I said ... When the fellow said "Are you hit?" and I said, "Yes, I can feel the blood" and he said, "It's not blood, it's tomato sauce." I'd put a tin of beans on the top of the blanket box and one of these ball-bearings had come out of this mine, the mine incident, and it took the man's leg off, but he held his foot on it and shouted to give everybody else half a chance to go away, but one of these ball-bearings must have hit this tin of beans which I'd put on the blanket box behind me, that exploded, hit me in the back of the neck and the rest of it was tomato sauce that was running down my face. That was a great relief. I still have that ball-bearing at home now; it's all flat and smooth on the one side where it went through the tin but it didn't hit me and that was the main thing. But, yes, there are funny things like that, amusing things. You find humour in everything.

[29:30]

Q. Where were you based during the War?

A. Where was I based? The simple answer is all over the place because you don't stay in one place in war-time; you move around the country for training, for exercises, what they call exercises where you join up with three or four other regiments and have a battle plan that you've got to do this. You see the infantry advances and the ... There are two or three different sorts of tanks. You first of all get the assault tanks that go in and they are the fast ones. Ours was an assault tank so we had to go in front of the infantry. Sometimes you'd carry the infantry on the back of your tank, other times they walk in between you and your tanks, spread out with infantry, walking in between. And we were based in ... I served in England, I served in Wales, I served in Scotland. So we had bases all over the place at different times during the War. When I joined the RAF as a wireless operator, well, a young rookie, I was stationed in Blackpool of all places in civilian billets in what were seaside boarding houses and we were in civilian billets there in Blackpool for the first six months. I did my Morse training in the Blackpool tram-sheds so that was fun. The trouble was, with being in Blackpool you were broke.

Every time you had a pay day ... And we were only paid once a fortnight and we only had at that time a shilling a day, out of which I sent sixpence home every day to my mother, at least it went into a fund that went to my mother as my contribution to her and to my father and so I lost part of my pay every day. When you were paid once a fortnight you hadn't got much and if you had been paid on a Saturday morning I was guaranteed by Sunday morning or Sunday evening to have about four pence left. It didn't go very far when you were in a place like Blackpool with so many entertainments which still carried on during War-time. We could go to a dance in the Tower Ballroom for four pence; you could go to the Winter Gardens also for four pence (that's four old pennies). When I think of it now it's unbelievable.

[31:48]

But there, I've been around a long time and in those 60/70/80 years I've seen all sorts of things, but we never had an official base, although the home of my regiment is Hull, Kingston-upon-Hull in Yorkshire. This regiment was formed in the 17th century and to become a member you had to pay £50 and bring your own horse. That's why it's got the hunting all underneath the forehead, which is a Yorkshire hunting cry, and the fox emblem still on. It was the East Riding of Yorkshire Imperial Yeomanry at one time and then we lost the title "imperial" back before the First World War and the regiment was then, in those days, cavalry with chain mail on your shoulders, even our walking-out dress, our best dress, had chain mail on the shoulder and we wore silver spurs. But all cavalry regiments were then mechanized in 1938/'39 and they became tank or armoured car regiments to move fast in the same way as they would have cavalry leading the charge; the tanks have to lead the charge. But then you get other tanks now like, which are infantry tanks which move much slower, heavier tanks which move slower, and they support the infantry and they are the ones usually that end up with flamethrowers on them, flails for flogging mines out of your path and you get all sorts of things.

But your job, as I say, you have to learn everybody's job in the tank and, in addition, I was a mines instructor and it was my job to crawl through a minefield and pick up the mines so that the tanks could go through. If a tank had got caught on a minefield ... I've only ever had to go once, crawl through a minefield on my stomach and you have two white tapes, one tied to each arm so that you make a pathway to get the men out of the tank and you might have to go from **here** into Whitecross Road or something, crawling on your stomach and you do what is called "feel, pat, prod"; you feel everything and feel everything for a tripwire, then you pat it and then you take your little bayonet out and you stick it in the ground, so you prod to find anything that is buried beneath the ground. And that can take you from here to get to the end of **that** road that would take you about five hours crawling on your stomach, checking every bit of ground. And there were two white tapes attached to your arms to make a pathway through so that they can come out safely. Believe you me, the perspiration was rolling off the end of my nose and it was dripping in my eyes and all sorts of things, but every time I found a mine, of course, I had to make it safe for everybody else and you have to take the detonator out or you

have to put a pin through it to stop it operating and you carry a couple of nails in your pockets and all sorts of things just to make those mines safe.

[34:46]

So there you are, I had a very mixed life in War-time; I enjoyed it in a way. The fact that I lived through it made me enjoy it. OK.

Q. Could I possibly ask to see some of your photos, if I may?

A. Yes. I didn't know what to expect today or what you wanted but I've got a couple of little bits and pieces and I'll show you a couple of these but then if you want photographs of them you're more than welcome. **That's** taken in Eindhoven in my working kit. You can see the beret that I'm wearing is waterproofed with grease because I've crawled under the tank many times with it and it's a scruffy-looking beret but it's not too bad. It was my working one. **That** was me as a young man. **That's** one I sent home and on the back it says, "All my love to my darling Mother." That was taken on 1st November 1944 in Holland. **That's** me in my tidy kit, wearing my best uniform, not my walking-out dress but just my best uniform. OK. There you see that little cap badge. I said that that badge is on the gravestones of all the lads ...[recording interruption – 36:07]

This is perhaps interesting. This is a safe-conduct pass which was dropped by the aircraft on to the Germans saying that if they had ... anyone that we found with one of these in his possession he was to be taken prisoner and well treated, not attacked and it's written in German and in English. **That's** a letter number 3 from the Commander-in-Chief on non-fraternization. That happened when we went into Germany. As we moved into Germany we weren't allowed to fraternize with the civilians; we had to keep a distance from them and not speak to them and that lasted for about three months and then it was removed, it was lifted.

[36:57]

When we landed in France we were given special funny money. That says to any Frenchman that the British Army and the British Government would pay 5 francs for anything that I had bought, that they can redeem that, because there was no government and that when we pushed the Germans out we had this funny money. **That's** the same one going into Germany, which was a mark, one mark, but the same thing applied: you could use it in shops or anywhere and the government would reimburse them for whatever we had had or whatever we had paid for. I picked these few bits up in a hurry. I'm just thinking of what ... I'll go back a little bit further.

That's my entitlement to wear a white flash in my hat, which I did, as a trainee aircrew and on it it says that I had passed all the bits and pieces necessary, was entitled to wear my white flash. I passed when I joined as pilot observer, radio operator and gunner and I could choose any one. I was supposed to have gone to Canada to train as a pilot but I thought if I went to Canada the War would be over by the time I came back and I didn't want that at all. But this is part of my escape kit, and if you can look at it, it says, "Not to be produced in public." And there are all sorts of different languages on there, just

words and phrases. It's in German, it's in Spanish, it's in all sorts of thing, it's in French, it's in Dutch, and this enabled us just to talk to people if we were escaping and wanted something. It gave us a few phrases, a few words, a few sentences, purely and simple. So those are the couple of bits and pieces that I picked up in a hurry, as I say.

[38:55]

But what I did do was to pull out two things that may have nothing whatsoever to do with what we are doing today but might help you a little bit. **That's** a photograph, not of my tank or anything else, and that was taken in the Ardennes in the snow. That gives you an idea of what it was like working in severe snowstorm conditions and it was bitterly cold. When you sleep alongside your tank ... I was giving a talk to some French children some years ago and I had a big cut-out section of a tank, a photograph, and one of them said to me, "I couldn't see the beds. Where do you sleep? I couldn't see the bed in the tank." Quite simply, there's no room in that five-foot turret to put a bed in and you sleep outside or underneath it. You're not supposed to sleep underneath it because the tank settles down at night and we lost a number of crew who were flattened in the night. So that's what a tank is like.

These couple of bits and pieces. Now, for your information, just to have a look at, and I'll try and take them in some sort of order, I was in the 27th Armoured Brigade and those are the emblems of all the different units that landed in France in Normandy on D-Day. My regiment, I said, came from the sea and was the 27th Armoured and has a seahorse as its emblem, a seahorse known affectionately in the regiment as a pregnant prawn but it looks a little bit perhaps that way. But those are all the different units that landed in Normandy, the different divisional signs and you can see all the different ones. I don't know – yes, I think I have; did I or did I not put something in my pocket; I thought I had somewhere ... I'm sorry, I'm blocking out your microphone. Somewhere I've got my little things, the emblems off my shoulder.

[40:53]

That is a copy of the surrender document that Montgomery signed for the Germans to surrender on Luneberg Heath when they all surrendered in May and you'll notice that there are some little bits written on it because he'd forgotten a couple of bits which had to be written in; that they'd made a mistake and ... They forgot about the ships and the navy and they had to write in the top of it. And that's the copy of the surrender document.

I've brought this other thing for you to see just purely and simply to show you what might have happened. If I get this the right way, it's in two pieces. We were short of maps and American map-makers were with us in the different units and they found a German map centre and took all the paper out, all the old maps because we were desperately short of paper and they printed on it **that** map which is of the Reichswald forest. If I put it up that way, you can see what it says on it, The Reichswald Forest and Kleve and various other things are on there. If you turn it over and look what's cancelled on the back and you will see that it covers part of South Wales, Bridgend. And if you look at the legend

on the bottom the legend is in German and that was part of a map that Germany had prepared for the invasion of Britain. Do you see? You can read the towns and the bits and pieces on there and it shows you that it is South Wales and the legend is all in German. So the map paper that we were using, pinched off the Germans, cancelled, but it was a map for the invasion of South Wales. When you think about it, if the Germans had been here ...

That's just of the invasion beaches and some of the different units that landed and it tells you where the different beaches are. I landed on Sword Beach and I said we were on the eastern flank. The landing beaches were 60 miles long from one end to the other. Some of you have been out, I believe, to Normandy, have you? So that ... Where did you go to, Ouistreham, Arromanches or where?

[43:11]

Q. We stayed at Merville.

A. You stayed by the Merville battery, with the battery on the top.

Q. Yes, and then we travelled along the British ...

A. Along the section of beaches.

Q. Yes. We didn't get as far, or we couldn't get as far as the Americans last June; it was all very tight.

A. Well, it is always I'm afraid, but that's just it for you. There you are, that's only a few bits and pieces. What else have I got here, nothing of value. No, that's it. That's again just another one of the ... I've given talks to other young ... school children. **That** one is interesting in so much as that it is the map of the south coast where we took off from to go to the Isle of Wight and you could literally walk from Gosport to the Isle of Wight on ships; there were so many landing craft crammed into that area in the weeks before the invasion that sailors were jumping from one to the other and running across from one ship to the next and if you look at all those little units ... You can pass that round. All those were little units of landing craft and different groups of tanks that all had to be put on to go. Some were infantry, some were tanks, some were artillery. Everything that we needed had to be on boats. And, as I say, for almost three days that area in the Solent and that there was full of boats. I'd never seen so many boats; I never realised we had so many boats. On the morning of the invasion at about six o'clock we were stopped. We were ready to go in. The Americans landed at 6.30; we landed at 7.30, but we were held up because the guns at Le Havre were still firing on us across the beach and causing tremendous casualties. And when you're on the water you're under the control of the Navy. There's a command ship for each beach and the officers, top brass, usually generals and everybody else and admirals, the Air-force, the Army and the Navy senior officers would be on this one ship, the command ship and they decide, the Navy decides actually whilst you are still on the water, they have full control, and they stopped us going in and we could hear our infantry calling for tank support; the Lincolnshire regiment was asking for tanks and we couldn't get in because we had such heavy fire coming down from the guns at Le Havre which were supposed to have been silenced the night before by an RAF bombing raid

but weren't and were still firing merrily and we were held up before we went in for that reason. But there you are, that's just a very quick resume of what it is, what it's like and everything else.

Have we gone through all your questions or not?

[45:50]

Q. You weren't involved, in any way, in the hill ...

A. 112.

Q. Hill 112, yes.

A. No. A lot of the Welsh regiments were involved in Hill 112 and they had a tremendous hammering. I have a lot of friends who were at Hill 112 and when we are out they say, "You must remember that ..." so and so when they are talking about it and I say no. One of my friends lost a leg at the bottom of Hill 112 behind a wall and when we went back he found the wall and he found where he had lost his leg, which luckily he took quite happily. Hill 112 was about four miles, five miles from where I was at the time and friends often say, "Well, you remember so and so at Hill 112" and I say, "No, I don't. I was about four or five miles away. I had enough trouble where I was, worrying about what was in front of me, not with Hill 112. I couldn't even see Hill 112." But it was an area of very high ground of course that commanded the whole of that plain down towards Caen and for that reason whoever held that had control over the whole of that area down below. It was undoubtedly one of the many, many battles. But there were so many battles, I've lost count of the battles that I fought in. You went into so many little hamlets, basically. One that stands out and will always stand out in my mind is a little village called Garmanche(?), which no longer exists, but there was a chateau at Garmanche and there were about, I suppose, eight or ten farms, cottages and things in it. We went into this battle in the morning and there were four regiments in that area and we got trapped because the infantry ... A lot of our infantry were killed as we went in and I suppose we lost about 500 infantrymen in that run-in. And we had to try and hold this village and keep control of that chateau where there were very, very heavy German defences and we didn't know how heavy but we knew they were supposed to be heavy and, believe me, they were. And we were shelled continuously for about four hours. What we had to do was to move the tank because we were being shelled by heavy guns but mortared by smaller ones, and the mortars, of course, are literally a tube on the floor which they'd drop a shell in and it rockets back out after he hits the pin at the bottom. And a mortar you don't hear coming; it just comes, crump, and it lands amongst you. With a shell you hear the whine.

[48:34]

When the Warspite opened fire behind us on the morning of D-Day it sounded to me like an express train going overhead as their shells went over the top of me. But mortar just comes down, crump, and lands on you. What they were doing was ... They were on the high ground by this chateau and we were in full view obviously and we had very few infantry left and they were plastering our tanks with mortar and what they would do is if he dropped one ... If it landed in front of you

they would then put the range up and drop one behind you. And the next thing, of course, is that you bracket that and you halve that range and therefore whoever is firing that mortar will adjust the setting so that the next one lands bang in the middle of those fields too. So what we had to do for about four hours was keep rolling the tank back and rolling it forward, and they saw this happening and then they suddenly changed their pattern and they dropped one in front of you and one behind and if you moved forward or moved back the next one would be in the same place as that previous one that you thought was going to land in the middle. We lost 11 commanders out of 19 that morning in those four hours. Each tank commander usually stands with his head and shoulders out of the turret, a very dangerous place because you can either be shot by snipers or hit by shrapnel or anything that's flying past. We lost all those commanders that morning. But we managed to hold it without the infantry for that day and then we pulled back and we then learnt that one of the German regiments had pulled out the night before and we didn't know this and the official War Office record stated afterwards that if that regiment had not been removed in the night before (the Germans had moved them over about five miles) if that regiment hadn't gone, my squadron would never have survived the day.

[50:34]

One of the interesting things, if you like, just as an aside, the 27th Armoured Brigade that I've mentioned was disbanded in August and it was disbanded because we'd had so many casualties and lost so many tanks that we weren't classed as a fighting unit and we had to give all the remaining tanks over to the Canadians and we took everything out of them and handed them over to the Canadians and we were then waiting for new tanks. Whilst we were waiting for these four days, waiting for the tanks, Monty came up in his jeep to speak to us and we were all stood outside these tents, had been sleeping under canvas, and he said "I have a problem with you fellows, you've upset my plans for the rest of the War." He said he'd planned the rest of the War without us! That wasn't a very, very nice thing to hear but it was nice to hear it after all, that we were still there and still standing. But what he meant was that they had expected more than 10 000 casualties on D-Day and we didn't get that number of casualties luckily. So my 27th Armoured Brigade was disbanded and I went and my tanks went to the 33rd Armoured Brigade. But that was a bit of a double-barrelled thing, you know, the way ... It was a compliment but it wasn't a very nice one to know that it was intended that we wouldn't have survived but that we were ... Of course, some wag at the back who heard Monty say that he'd planned the rest of the War without us, says, "OK, we'll shove off home then!" Needless to say that offer wasn't taken up; we didn't go back home. But we thought if he's managed the rest of the War without us we could go and leave it. So there is humour, as you say, even in battle at times, and you have to think always that you will survive. If you don't you're beaten before you start, I think.

So there you are. I've covered a lot of things, rambled on about all sorts of things. I hope it's been interesting; I hope you've found it useful to your studies and I'll leave you to it if you've got no more questions.

P. Davies

SEVERAL VOICES: Thank you very, very much.

[recording ended at 52:56]