

Dennis Wood

**Interview**

with

**MR. DENNIS WOOD**

and

**Pupils and staff of Lady Hawkins School, Kington**

On

**2<sup>nd</sup> July 2009**

**[The interview commenced at 3:02]**

DENNIS WOOD: I am Dennis Wood. I am 85 years of age but I was in the War and I will tell you a bit now about what it was like to be a schoolboy at the outbreak of war.

I was a scholarship pupil at the Walsall Grammar School, Queen Mary School. I was not what you would call a very studious person. I wasn't making the most of my education. My mother was very ill, she was in hospital and she had an operation which affected her brain and my dad decided ... No, I am getting on a bit too far now. The War broke, and I had my 15th birthday just before the War actually started. My dad decided that because of the situation with the War, the fact that my mother was so ill, the fact that he was having to pay for a lot of the medication, etc., that it would be a good idea if I left school and started work.

So that was how I came to go into a factory that was making parts for aeroplanes that was situated in Aston, in Birmingham. I stuck that for six months, decided I didn't like it and changed jobs to another factory that was making transmissions for tanks and for big lorries. It was a well-known ... Hardy Spicer is the manufacturer, and I think they still make transmissions. I stuck that for six months and thought surely there is something better than this and I found out that the place where my dad worked (he was an engine driver) had vacancies for clerical staff, so I thought that is more my line so I went there, the depot where my dad worked, and I was there until I reached the age of 18.

**[5:26]**

We had several big air raids while I worked there. On one occasion there were three of us youngsters (who were juniors, I suppose you would call us) who at lunchtime we used to walk along the railway line and suddenly this big plane came out of the mist – it was a foggy day, mist – and it was a big German plane. We had the fright of our lives, but he flew on; he didn't shoot at us or anything, but it was quite a shock for this suddenly to appear and come straight at you.

Then I got to the age of 18 and I thought "What do I want to do? I want to go in the Navy," so I put my name forward for the Navy and when I got to 18 that is where my life started in the Navy. Am I all right to there?

Q. Excellent, that is great – a really nice chunk.

JUDITH GARDNER: I like the bit about the aeroplane coming. That sounds really menacing.

Q. Out of the fog. Irene asked a question earlier on when you were talking to the sixth form, it was a really good one; she talks about, you know, knowing people – she is 18 – knowing people who are 18. Perhaps in the next bit you could talk about how you felt, you know, what [were] your emotions about going into the Navy, what it meant to you, and just general experiences getting into the Navy.

Q2. Also, I had another question related this. Do you think people grew up a lot quicker back then or do you think the War forced you to grow up faster?

A. It taught us how to kill people at the age of 18. I don't think they do that now.

Q. If you could talk then about how you felt aged 18.

[7:30]

A. Are you ready?

Q. Yes.

A. At the age of 18 time came to think seriously about what I was to do to help fight the War and I decided that I wanted to go into the Navy. It was more attractive for various reasons. One, I did like the sea. The second one, I didn't fancy having to meet the person I had got to kill eye to eye. I thought it better to do it at a remote distance. That is the reason I went into the Navy. I joined the Navy at HMS Royal Arthur Skegness, which was an ex-holiday camp, and for six weeks it was a case of getting us used to discipline, getting us used to the life in one of the armed forces.

We did all sorts of things. We did unarmed combat, where they taught you how to kill a person without leaving a mark, and things that I didn't see they were going to be an awful lot of use in the Navy but it was all part of the getting you into a mould and that was why we did that sort of thing. It was also to toughen you up a bit because some of the people that came were not in a healthy state. I remember one chap who came from the Hebrides and he had all his teeth out as soon as he got there because they were all rotten. That was the state of things in those days, you know. We were not aware of the need to clean teeth so much as you are now and poor chap .... and his name was Wood, the same as me, and he

had all his teeth out. I am transgressing (*sic*). I should stick to the subject, shouldn't I?

**[9:27]**

I went on from the shakedown, you might call it, where you would fall into shape as a prospective sailor, to the occupation that I was going to take up in the Navy, which was to be a telegraphist. I went up to Glasgow to an annex of the hospital there that had been taken over as a unit in the Navy and they called it "HMS Shrapnel" because it was one of many bits that were scattered round the country and they were all Shrapnel 1, Shrapnel 2, Shrapnel 3, etc., and for 18 weeks I enjoyed Glasgow. It was a wonderful place to be. The YMCA there had a big blackboard and on it they would say "There is a party and so and so," and it would be a factory, perhaps, or it could be a private house, "Six sailors wanted," and we would pick out which one we fancied of the various places that were on offer. The hospitality of the Glaswegians is tremendous and we used to march right through Sauchiehall Street, which is the main street in Glasgow, to Kelvin Park, the Scottish signal school, which was a civilian marine establishment that had been taken over by the Navy in the War and there we learnt the Morse code and a bit about practices in communication and had a lovely 18 weeks.

I also was a keen skater and I used to go to the Paisley ice rink skating in the evenings ... some evenings, and I met a girl, Jean Frazer, and when we moved down to Ayrshire to the next establishment where we were to do six weeks they had an ice rink there and Jean came down there for the six weeks. So I had quite an interesting period at that time. It was something that has just come back to my memory now and I haven't thought about it for years, but it was a nice time.

**[11:58]**

Going on to Ayrshire, to what was called HMS Scotia, which was again a Butlins Holiday Camp taken over, here we learnt about the naval way of doing things, you know, the types of codes and the procedures they use and such like and what all the names of the various communication bits, books and things like that, what they were. This was quite an intensive learning. Our instructors were ex-chief petty officers who had retired from the Navy and then been recalled; they were on pension and they were a laughable lot. I'll always remember the one that

took us – and they used to be transmitting on the Morse scheme – the slow .... he had had his tot of rum earlier and he would slowly fall to sleep, the keys stick down and "Brrr" and you would have to go and wake him up so he would continue to send. We called him the admiral. Almost at the top of my mind is his name but it just won't come.

After that I went down to barracks down at Plymouth and there got changed over to the "telegraphist S" (the "S" means special), where we had to learn about the German way of doing things, and there was either to go to a shore station to be taking the intercepts that eventually were used by Bletchley to break down the German codes or else to a ship to be there to take direction-finding intercepts of U-boats so that we could find them when they had transmitted their messages. I chose to go to sea; I didn't want to be a sailor onshore, so this is how I finished my education in the Navy.

**[14:18]**

Q. Feel free to ... I mean, I can ask questions but, you know, it would be good if everyone else gets involved as well.

You were talking earlier, Dennis, about being assigned to "HMS Moorsom." Could you recall the events around that, where you were, how you felt about being assigned there and perhaps how you felt when you first saw the frigate, how it appeared to you, just as a short piece explaining that.

JUDITH GARDNER: Had you been on a boat before?

A. I had been. Before the War I had been on a week's holiday with my parents up on the Scottish lochs and we went on these paddle-boats, you know, and each day you went on a different trip on a paddle-boat. And I rather liked it. So I think that might have been what made me want to go in the Navy, you know, life at sea on a paddle-boat. I was 14 then, I think, no earlier than that, 13, yes.

Q. How did you feel when you first saw "HMS Moorsom" and were told that is where you are going to be?

A. Actually, that is a story that I should start at the beginning. At barracks we were allocated to ships piecemeal. It would come up, they would call your name and you were in. On the occasion when my posting came to "Moorsom" there were two of us allocated on that day: one was Charlie Cubitt(?), who we called

“Cupid,” I didn't know his proper name until I saw his name in the roll of honour, but, anyway, that is by the way. There was him and me were appointed and one of us went to the Whittaker and the other went to “The Moorsom”. I drew “The Moorsom” and he drew “The Whittaker”. We went on a train from Devonport. 24 hours we were on this train; it got shunted into sidings for periods to allow other trains to go through, but eventually we got up to Stranraer, got on a ferry there and we were all sea-sick, it was such a rough trip across the Irish Sea, and got to Belfast and the ship had sailed. So we had to go then by rail across to Londonderry – Londonderry, it had sailed again. And we had to go on the “Host”, which was a similar sort of ship, and sail back to Belfast and there pick up “The Moorsom.” So I had seen life on a frigate a day or two before I actually got “The Moorsom.”

**[17:33]**

There is a sequel to this in as far as Cupid, who had been appointed to the Whittaker ... I knew the Whittaker had been torpedoed, I knew ... I had seen her, in fact, in Belfast harbour with the whole of her front end missing. She had been towed in with half the ship missing and I thought what on earth happened to Cupid. I didn't know what happened to him until three years ago, two or three years ago, when I saw the roll of honour of the Whittaker at the museum for the captain class frigates up in Warwick and his name was there and it brought tears to my eyes, because even over those years I hadn't really thought about it, but then realizing that he was one of those killed and he was such a wonderful chap; he was dry humour, he could keep conversations going with the most outlandish things and it hurts you when you think, you know, such potential destroyed just like that.

To carry on, though, with “The Moorsom,” our first trip was across the Atlantic and it was manned by, I should say, 80% raw recruits who were learning specialties, and they had never been to sea before, and perhaps 20% who were the backbone of the ship who had got their sea legs and knew a bit about what you did on a ship and such like. But we had such storms across the Atlantic, for days ... in fact, the skipper, he spent three days on his back in his cabin, he never came out. It was such a rough passage and we were all sick, sick, sick, sick, no buckets. The things that we needed specially for going to sea weren't on, things like buckets and

such like. So you were sick where you stood, you know. We had what we called a gonio, which we used to get the DF bearing on, used to turn the handle, left, right, to find the bearing and it had a lid on it and we used that for being sick in and it had three holes in the bottom. So it wasn't very effective. Anyway, that was my introduction to the Atlantic. I think it cured me for all time as to being sea-sick. I haven't tried it recently but I think it has cured me.

**[20:29]**

As far as Argentia is concerned, which was the base we went to into Newfoundland, it was marvellous. I have never seen anything like it. We had things on sale in the, what they call the, PX. This was the American Navy shops. Bread: they gave us bread and it was white; it was like sponge cake; it was beautiful. I hadn't seen anything like that for years. We entertained the Americans a little bit by putting on a little bit of a show and we had a bit of amateur talent on board. The Americans, I think, were pleased to see us and we got on very well with them. They were in the same war as us on the same side so we were happy to join them. We sailed back with a convoy – the weather was rather better then so it was not quite so bad – and back into Belfast. At that point, I think I will tell you a bit about Belfast.

Belfast, again, was a wonderful place but you had to be careful. If you went ashore, you never went in the Falls Road because that was republican territory, but it was easy to not know where you were, and I went down the Falls Road by accident. I had always fancied having a shave by a barber. You don't see them these days but they have these cutthroat razors, or they used to in those days, and shave you with that and I thought, I have never tried that; I will try that. So I went into this barber's shop and I didn't realize I was in a republican area and they really treated me rough, scared the life out of me. That was my introduction into the barrier there is in Belfast, or was then in Belfast. Thank God at this moment in time it looks like that is all over. Pause!

**[22:47]**

Q. Very good. I wonder now, just a little bit about “HMS Moorsom” itself. You were talking earlier about it being an American destroyer escort, different ... it was

a frigate, how it was different from other frigates. You talked a bit about the weaponry, the technology, perhaps just a short bit on “HMS Moorsom”.

- A. Right. “HMS Moorsom” was what was known as a destroyer escort in the American Navy. The destroyer escorts that they had, they had torpedo tubes that made them destroyers. We didn't need these torpedo tubes because we weren't acting as destroyers; we were frigates that protected convoys and went after submarines; we didn't need torpedoes. So we ceased to be destroyers, we were now frigates.

“HMS Moorsom” was one of ... I don't know the exact number but there must have been 50 to 60 of them that we got on lease then from the Americans. There were two types: there were those that were diesel electric where the diesel engines drove generators that generated electricity that then drove the motors that drive the propellers. The other type were steam turbine where they burnt the oil to make the steam in the boiler and they then drove the propellers with steam propulsion, steam turbines. We were in a slightly inferior class to the steam turbine ones because they had about two knots faster speed than us. I think we were about 20 knots and they were about 22 knots.

[25:13]

The other thing that was different was that we had, with the diesel electric we had, no communication if there was rough weather between the front of the ship and the back of the ship. We had to take our opportunity on the upper deck to make a dash in whichever direction we were going, front ... towards the front or towards the back. When the ship rolled to one side, water ran away and you could run to the other end. And you didn't always get it right because sometimes a big sea would come and change the direction of us moving, and very rapidly, and you would get soaked. That was one of the hardships. When it was really, really rough and there was no chance of walking along the deck you could climb up a ladder on to one of the gun mountings and there was a catwalk across from one gun mounting to the next gun mounting and on to the flag deck and then into the main bridge structure and you could take your chances on there but you had something to hang on to if you went there because you walked along this catwalk,



but you were up in the air above some of the sea anyway. That was one of the things.

Now talking about the ship itself, the latest armament that was being fitted on frigates was the hedgehog, which was a number of rockets, and I think it was 32 but I am not absolutely certain in my mind but I think it was 32, that would be fired over the bows of the ship and these went into the sea. And as soon as they entered the sea a little propeller in the rear end started turning and primed the primer so that they would explode, well, if they hit anything. If one of them did hit a submarine then all of them would be exploded by pressure fuses that the first one ignited. That is not the right word, not ignited.

[27:40]

Q. Detonated?

A. Actioned. I can't think of the right word.

Q. Set off?

A. Set off, right, that is a good word. The old method that we had up to then was to attack a possible U-boat sighting – or not sighting, ASDAC or sonar contact – was to steam at full speed and as we got over the spot where we had worked out the submarine would be, fire the depth charges, 14 in a pattern and they would spread out over a proper pattern on the sea and they would be set to certain depths, different depths, but some would be deeper than others and they could all be very much deeper in stages, you know, to the maximum that they could go to. But the point of this was that the U-boat heard us coming, had time to move to one side or go down or go up or whatever to get out of the way. So it was not a terribly efficient way to attack the U-boat. But the hedgehog resolved this because now it became a case of identifying where the U-boat was, keeping quiet, not revving your engine, perhaps have two of the frigates helping outside by feeding you with sonar readings, ASDAC readings, to tell you where the U-boat was and you just crept up very, very, very slowly and fired them. And you had a better chance of locating him. If one of them did hit him then they all went off and he was a goner.

[29:37]

That was a change in tactics. It occurred at the same time as we got more planes. We got the long-range bombers and the flying boats and also about that

time we had the little aircraft carriers that were converted tankers or cargo boats, flat deck, and they would carry about ten swordfish aircraft that carry depth charges and attack the submarine from the air. Also at that time they had planes that had terrific strong searchlights on them and these were used after dark. The U-boats used to go across the Bay of Biscay to their depots in the dark. They would wait until it was dark and then they would dash across. Now they found they couldn't do this; they had lost so many U-boats thinking they could still do it but the RAF would suddenly appear from nowhere to the Germans, switch on its search lights and go into the attack and know exactly where the U-boat was and the U-boat was surprised so much that they didn't fire back and the chances are that they would sink the U-boat and they did. They sank so many that the Germans stopped that tactic. I will stop for a bit!

Q. That is brilliant.

Q2. Whoever thought up that hedgehog ----

Q. Ingenious, wasn't it.

Q2. It was a terrific weapon, wasn't it?

Q. Yes, and massively increased the numbers of U-boats being sunk, didn't it, the hedgehog.

Q2. An Amazing idea, whoever thought it up.

[31:49]

Q. Technology was so vital in the Battle of the Atlantic, wasn't it, on both sides.

Perhaps if we focus now on being in action. Earlier on to the sixth form you had that lovely sequence you talked about with "Leopoldville" and D-Day, hunting down the U-boat and HMS "Affleck". It would be great to have that.

A. If I keep it in chronological order, I ought to mention D-Day first.

Q. That would be great. So maybe start with D-Day, the build-up to D-Day; there were hundreds of frigates, weren't there, that formed the ring?

A. Yes.

Q. We can talk about that?

A. There was an awful lot of them. I never counted them, but it seemed there were hundreds.

Q. So that must have been an amazing sight, to see all those frigates all sailing out and you probably hadn't seen so many frigates, had you, before?

A. Yes, that is right.

Q. And then perhaps your recollection of the whole armada and the aircrafts blacking out the skies, going to D-Day, and then lead on to the "Leopoldville" and hunting down the U-boat, what you remember of that.

A. Excuse me a minute. Could I have a drink?

Q. Shall we pause?

A. No, it is all right.

**[Short pause - 33:12 - 33.41]**

Q2. When you spoke about Devonport, Dennis, it like suddenly clicked in the back of my head that my eldest brother was there and he was a signalman in the Navy and he was out on a little rock most of the time, just off Plymouth.

A. Well, if he was a signalman, it used to amaze me, the signalmen, when we were in signal school, there would be a platoon of signalmen marching around and they never used to march, say, left, turn right, turn or go faster, double up or something; they used to do it all with flag hoists and, you see, if you hoist a number 9 flag it means go at 90 miles an hour which is ... sorry, sorry, I have got that wrong. Flag 9 was 90° turn, so you did a turn. So they used to say "Flag 9 masthead," and that meant it was going up to the masthead, "down," and that was the action; and then they would turn, you see, and there would be blue 9 and red 9 and there used to be a sort of wheel or turn, you see, and it used to be lovely to watch them doing these. That instilled into their minds, second nature, you know, when they were aboard ship, to do these things, watch for flag 9 and down and, you know, do the turn or whatever was.

Q2. Yes. My brother went to the middle-east and he ended up in New York for some unknown reason. When war was finished he ended up in New York.

A. Anyway, coming back to when we were talking about D-Day, are you ready? We were very much aware that there was pressure on to open a new front in Europe. The Russians at the time were making a lot of the fact that we weren't in the War like they were and the Communist Party were having parades – in the UK this was – saying, "Second front now," a second front was the big thing, and that we

weren't doing our bit and that the Russians were doing all the fighting. And we knew that there would have to be an invasion of Europe, but it is good to look back now and realize just what an organization had to be set up in order to do this. It was not the sort of thing where you could just drive up to the coast, get off. You had to have a terrific organization. You had to make sure that you could ship them over, that the tides were right, that the places you were choosing had a certain amount of secrecy possible, and this is where we were in the beginning of 1943 ... sorry, '44.

**[37:00]**

In 1944 it was obvious that something was going to happen. There were right across the United Kingdom, camps were ... There were American soldiers, Canadian soldiers, British soldiers, waiting for something to happen. There were forests that were full of tanks ready to go. This then became, "When is it going to happen?" The first thing that we knew about it on "The Moorsom" was when we were told to go to Moelfre Bay in Anglesey and there we met with lots and lots more frigates – I don't know how many there were, but if I said a hundred that might be too many, but there were a lot of frigates – and we slowly accumulated over the course of a week or two until all this number were ready. And then ... We didn't know at the time that we were sailing 24 hours too early because ... Because of the storms that were blowing in the Atlantic, the date had been put back, but we sailed while the original date was still in operation so we sailed 24 hours early for the Channel. And on the morning that we sailed the sun was rising and the ships were sailing right into the rising sun, a straight line of beautiful frigates. It was a lovely sight. It sticks in my mind now after all these years just what it looked like. We sailed but we had to kill 24 hours because we had got the early date and we sailed into the Atlantic so that we wouldn't give the game away by approaching France, and when it became probable that the next day would be the day then we set up to take our places on the approaches to the Channel to stop any U-boats, MTBs, or whatever, from getting through to the landing craft and playing havoc with them. We patrolled backwards and forwards and we had one or two possibles; and then about a week after D-Day, the U-boats did try to get through and they made a massive attack, all the U-boats they could ... In fact,

I have read “Iron Coffins” (by Hans Werther [*sic*] [*should be “Goebeler”*]) since, in which he talks about the U-boat captain’s aspect of this and they were ordered by Hitler that they virtually had to commit suicide and attack the invasion beaches.

**[40:02]**

But to come back to the point I was on, we were part of the screen and one of the U-boats fired an acoustic torpedo in our direction and it hit us and it didn't explode. We didn't know what had happened. We just knew that we had been ... that something had happened, made a hell of a noise at the back. We went into Falmouth harbour, limped in because we could hardly move; there was something wrong with the transmission and a diver went down and came to the conclusion that we had been hit by an acoustic torpedo. Well, we were detached, nobody took much interest in us, we were told to get up to Glasgow, and it took us three days to get there, we were that slow, and we went into Govan docks, into dry dock there, and it was reckoned that it would be six weeks to repair it.

So during that period, or part of that period, I went to Eastbourne to St. Bedes, Meads, a girls' school which had been taken over as a signal school by the Navy, where they specialized in German intercepts, and brought myself up to date on the latest alterations or procedures that the Germans were introducing. At the same time that I got there the Germans started using the V-1s (the doodlebugs) to attack London, and Eastbourne was right in the path and we had these doodlebugs going over and it was an awful lot of gunfire because they were trying to shoot them down before they got to London. We were told afterwards that they had used these special shells that had a little radar device that when the shell came in proximity of the plane, or whatever, it would explode; close-proximity fuses they called them. These were being used to try and bring down these doodlebugs. This was quite a noisy time and you didn't relax because you didn't know if these damn things were going to fall on top of you, so I was glad to get back to Glasgow.

**[42:45]**

But anyway, it took six weeks to repair “The Moorsom” and off we went back to sea again and we did a lot of ferrying – not ferrying, that’s not the right word – accompanying ferries backwards and forwards, taking supplies or troops into Normandy.

At the end of the year we had ... still on this sort of job and we joined ... We were due to relieve Escort Group 1, which was six frigates. We were Escort Group 17 and instead of relieving them we joined them, and I will explain what had happened. The Germans had torpedoed the "SS" ----

Q. ---- "Leopoldville"?

A. "Leopoldville," which was ferrying American troops over to Cherbourg. This ship sank fairly quickly and it was December, very cold seas, and there were 783, I think it was, American troops that died as a result of this action. Escort Group 1 that we were relieving had had a contact on this U-boat, so we joined in the hunt and it went on all Christmas Day and then on Boxing Day it seemed that things had calmed down a bit and I went to get the rum for the communications mess and I had this 'fanny' full of rum that I was walking along the upper deck with when "The Capel," which was on our port bow, had a torpedo. She blew up, so the torpedo must have ignited her ammunition. It was one big bang and she just disappeared. And action stations went and I went to my little cubicle with a 'fanny' full of rum, on the floor, and I strengthened my determination by having a little sip now and then.

[45:25]

Anyway, to proceed, after "The Capel" got hit, about two hours later, "The Affleck," the skipper who was in charge of all twelve ships (he was the senior one), he came on screaming or shouting at the top of his voice "I'm hit, I'm hit, I'm hit" and it was nine people were killed on there. It was a terrible day that was. The outcome of this was that we didn't know at the time that the Germans now had ... Well, we did know they had Schnorkels, but we didn't know quite how effective they were, but in addition to the Schnorkels they also had short-burst transmission so they could communicate with Berlin without us being able to intercept because they were "Brrr!" and the thing was over, the message was so fast; it was compressed. And that was the reason that the Germans were able to sort of partly recover their potential again.

Now the captain of "The Brilliant" (which was this ship that was actually with "The Leopoldville," a British destroyer), I believe he was court-martialled for not guarding the ship, but, you know, in hindsight, what chance has he got when

tactics had changed so much. But I think it did cause a little bit of anti-British reaction by the Americans. The Americans and the British never, never mentioned the loss of this ship to the general public; it was kept a secret for years and years. It was not a very happy time for anglo [*sic*] relationships, I think, for a time, but anyway that was what happened in the Christmas period in 1944.

**[48:08]**

- Q. Take a breather. Great, that is brilliant. Thank you. A couple more sections, at least, I thought we could do.
- A. Well, all I have to mention now is the end of the War, isn't it?
- Q. Well, the end of the War and you had some lovely bits you were saying earlier about, you know, life on board, the water, the hygiene, monotony, perhaps, you know, what you did to entertain yourselves, the lack of contact with families. It must have been hard. So, you know, the general life and your feelings and how you all got on and how you made mates and buddies?
- A. I will definitely have to have a copy of this!
- Q. Yes. It is great. After this, I will show you what we have done with the other veterans and, you know, the question I am asking, we have got sections on "in action" we have got sections on, you know "Life during the War" so all this will fit in with the different sections. It would be really nice to have a short section perhaps on remembrance. You mentioned Cupid earlier. We can copy and paste that and put that into the nice remembrance bit and maybe towards the end we can have a little section on your feelings about the War and how you feel about it today, something like that, and that would be a really nice end to the whole thing.
- A. I don't know about the last bit because it is so different now, so different. I tend to be critical of the way they are doing things these days but, you know, I have got no right to be critical because I don't know the intimate things that are happening
- Q. What I was thinking was you talked about cupid but you were also talking about other friends you had been to school with and what it means for you today to remember them, and things like that. But before what we have just been saying, could I ask you now to talk about life on board: we talked about the water, the food, the bread, the lack of hygiene, close proximity to all these blokes and friendship and so forth, it would be nice to have a little sequence on life on board.

Let us have a break because it is tiring, isn't it.

**[Break 51:03 - 52:11]**

Q. When did you do "My Gap Years," is that recently you have put that together?

A. I started it originally for my granddaughter. She had a project at school and she said "Can you tell me something about the War" and so I did it, but it is very different to what that final one is now. I have had about seven or eight attempts, you know, to polish it up a bit and that is the final one. I have only done that this week.

**[Break 52:40 - 54:20]**

Can I tell them something like: my peer group, all the smokers have died.

There's only non-smokers left! Put them off ever smoking.

**[Break 54:37 - 55:29]**

Q. Were you allowed to smoke on the boat?

A. Oh, yes, we were encouraged to; we were given duty free. I mean, you felt that you were losing something unless you took advantage.

Q. So did you smoke back then, but then gave up?

A. Oh, I smoked then, yes.

**[Break 55:50 - 58:49]**

A. Right. Time presses on.

Q. The final sequence then. First of all, life on board "Moorsom," a whole collection of ideas.

A. I have been asked what was life like on "The Moorsom," so I will now tell you. It was difficult, to say the least. We were deprived of water most of the time, fresh water. We were ... Water was available in the taps in the heads for quarter of an hour in the morning and quarter of an hour in the evening. You had to do your ablutions, washing, whatever you wanted to do that used water, during those hours. Initially we didn't even have buckets in which to wash our clothes. It was difficult for youngsters of 18/19/20 to know what you have to do to look after yourselves. We didn't wash, we didn't bathe, we stunk. We lived in terrible conditions because if it was rough, some people would be a bit wheezy, they might be sick. The atmosphere: we were battened down, people smoked quite a lot then; you had a smoky atmosphere. You lived in these conditions. It was not easy to



entertain yourselves. We used to have to make do in the evenings. The evening was the only time we had off. You had to be very careful because some of the people would be waiting to go on to the middle watch in the middle of the night. They would want to catch a bit of sleep so you had to be very careful that you didn't make too much noise. You played ludo or cards. There wasn't any way that you could get radio signals that told you what was going on in the outside world so you were in a little enclave that was cut off from the rest of the world. You were in your own little environment. You had to be very careful how you lived because, on one occasion, the chap who was cook in the mess (which involved clearing up afterwards and washing the cutlery and plates and cups, on one occasion) this fella forgot he had left the cutlery in the bottom of the water when he ditched it over the side, so we were without cutlery for a long time until we had gone into harbour next time.

**[1:01:53]**

We had three layers of bunks; the top one, which was mine, was very close to a big pipe that was encased in asbestos, which would not be allowed now. My blanket turned to almost a black state because it really could have done with a wash, but it never had one. It was a rolling ship; you would get water spilled and it would go slopping across the floor. It was not a very, very good environment at all. But it was our life and we lived with it and we didn't know any different really. And it must have been just as bad for sailors in Nelson's time. Life at sea, once you get used to it, is wonderful; but the time when you are first having to live with it, you would be anywhere in the world except on board a ship.

The time when we would be out to sea for four or five weeks and then come in and have a week ashore, that was wonderful. We would aim to go to the local dance hall (which was the War-time meeting place for boys and girls) looking for girls. It was the one thing that you craved - girls. But I must tell you a little aside here.

**[1:03:42]**

I used to meet a girl called May Armstrong at the Mariners' Club in Belfast, and I used to meet her regularly when we came in. There were ships out at sea that we never saw because they came in when we were out and we went out when

they came in, and on this occasion I met her at the Mariners' Club and she said, "While you have been away, I have got married to a sailor on "The Affleck", so I was a bit disgruntled about this. But anyway I was young so it did not really, really matter. But many years later, about five years ago, Olga and I were sitting up in Los Cristianos at The Razzmatazz Restaurant, and we were sitting down at this table and in came a couple and they were waiting for the plane back to Belfast and could they share our table, so we said yes. So we got talking to them and they said they were from Belfast, so I said, "Oh, I was at Belfast." I said I used to go dancing there, I really liked it in Belfast. I said I met a girl called May Armstrong and I was keen on her but she went and married a sailor on "The Affleck". She said, "My mother's name was May Armstrong!" So, a bit taken aback, was going to ask more, you know, but she went funny and they dashed off; they didn't stay, they didn't say goodbye, so I don't know why it was, what was the embarrassment, but evidently she was embarrassed by this information. I got in touch with the BBC afterwards on Radio Gloucestershire and they went and put a Part 2 to my story I had got with them, "Can anybody help to find May Armstrong?" but I never heard anything. Anyway, to come back full circle ... Where has the circle got to?

**[1:05:55]**

- Q. Life on board, in Belfast and back to life on board, really.
- A. Life on board the ship, I will come back to that again. We used to wear, most of us wore, just boiler suits; and with a boiler suit you can have woollies underneath if it is cold or you could have virtually nothing if it was good weather. Your body sweated and there was nowhere for the sweat to go except into whatever it was you were wearing, and we never washed those things so we all stunk, but, after a while stinks don't register and you don't notice them. So we managed to live with it. If you had a towel it stayed dirty and [got] dirtier and dirtier every day. It was not an easy life, I suppose, but we had no enter ... any radios or anything like that, we couldn't hear bulletins, we didn't know what was happening in the outside world. We didn't know if we were winning the War or losing the War. All we knew was our little environment on board the ship. We were out of touch with the outside world.

Q. Was it a frightening environment much of the time?

A. No, it wasn't. We were skylarking and, you know, you do ... You don't let circumstances get on top of you. You try to be cheerful in life, don't you, although I suppose there are some people that don't. I can think of some miserable buggers I have met in my time.

Q. Don't talk about Fred like that! That's brilliant, Dennis. I think we can probably move towards the final sequence.

**[Short pause 1:07: 51 - 1:08:27]**

Q. We will do one last bit – I promise one last bit. How about now talking about the end of your war, you know, “Moorsom,” end of war with Germany, you go to learn Japanese codes and then perhaps that could lead on to your school-friends and friends that died and remembrance, how it is important for you today to remember those.

A. Yes.

Q. So when you are ready.

A. Right. The end of the War, the War in Europe was approaching and it became obvious that the U-boats were beaten and were unlikely to make signals, so the telegraphists on board who were there for the intercept of German signals were posted back to barracks. I was one of them. This is about a week before the War actually ended. I was then put on a course to learn Japanese Morse code and the Japanese practices and also learn a sort of shorthand that denoted whatever the Japanese character was, although we couldn't understand Japanese or know what the character was; it was a little shorthand we used so that the linguists or people that had to transcribe the information would understand. This was a course that lasted about three or four weeks, I think, but before we could be sent to the place they were intending to send us out in the Far East – I think it was actually in Australia, it had a code name and I forget what it actually meant, but this ... But the War finished in Japan in the Pacific and so we never put into use the knowledge we gained about the Japanese Morse code.

**[1:10:47]**

I might add something about the “HMS Moorsom” and the ... well, not so much “HMS Moorsom” as what happened on the east coast of America with the ...

After Pearl Harbor, when the War began for America, the Americans concentrated all their naval effort in the Pacific, which is understandable. The east coast of America was unprotected. The U-boats found this out, found out that they could sink ships left right and centre with no hostile action against them and the cities along the coast were all illuminated and they provided perfect silhouettes of the ships and it was called “The happy days” by the U-boat commanders and it was something that I think stirred the Americans into putting a terrific effort into building ships, because they were losing so many ships that had to be replaced (that is, merchant ships). Also we wanted a lot more frigates and destroyer escorts in order to protect those ships. So they initiated a terrific building programme. They had prefabricated parts of frigates and parts of merchant ships (“liberty ships,” they called them) and brought these prefabricated parts together at the side of the sea, assembled them together and turned out perfectly good sound ships by this mass-production system. They could turn out a frigate in four weeks (that is, ignoring the prefabrication bit). It was the industrial might of America that, I think, contributed most to the ability of the allies to win the War. Will that do?

**[1:13:14]**

Q. That is great. I think one small bit. You talked about ... I know. If you want to stop there we can. It was just that you talked about school-friends. You have already done about Cupid. We can use that. You talked about a school-friend and perhaps, you know, maybe why it is important for you to do things like this and go ... You went over to Normandy, what it means to you and perhaps what you hope.

A. Let me collect my thoughts on this.

Q. Yes. There is no rush.

JUDITH GARDNER: You are a very good speaker, a wonderful interviewee.

A. Recently, two years ago, I joined the Captain Class Frigate Association, which holds meetings regularly, once a year, and old shipmates meet each other and we talk about things that happened. They also have a little museum and in this museum they have roll-calls of the ships that were sunk and the names of those men that died at that time. I remember when I was posted to “Moorsom” there was a chap named Cubitt (who we called Cupid) who was appointed to “The Whittaker” at the same time. And it could have been either way: he could have

had “The Moorsom” and I could have had “The Whittaker,” but that is the way it turned out and “The Whittaker” was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland and I think 90 people were killed. I saw her in Belfast where she was towed in and the whole of the front end of the ship had disappeared. There was just the after part of the ship. I knew that Cupid had been appointed to her but I didn't know whether he had been killed or not and I didn't think much of the matter afterwards until I joined the Captain Class Frigates and there were the rolls of honour to say who had been killed, and there was his name on it. And I wept because even over that period of time something inside twisted me up, you know, an emotional feeling. There was old Cupid, that lovely fellow who had such a dry wit who kept us all amused, and he just went like that.

**[1:16:03]**

I think of Percy Love, which he was in the Air Force, and was killed over Germany in a bomber. And Kenny Hunt, another friend of mine, he went. And Big Orme, as we called him, he went; he was in the Army. And then there was ... I can't remember his name now, a parachutist, and he broke his back and was in a wheelchair ever after. These are the little bits of the War that are there but we tend to forget them. I don't know ... I would have to really, really dig back into my memory to think of all the things that happened to mates of mine. But anyway, that is the general feeling I have had about it.

Q. What do you want to achieve by doing things like this? What do you feel that you are doing?

A. What advantage will it be from having this completed?

Q. Yes, to others and to you, for young people?

A. To young people, yes. What can I say that would be meaningful? I am an old man, I am 85 next month. I am lucky that I am surviving, I am lucky that I have got most of my faculties. You have got to go through life and you have got to take what comes. You might go early, like some of my mates did, or you might hang on till grim death, like I do. But whatever it is, take what comes and be aware that there is no way you can dodge issues. You have got to face up to them, meet them and be cheerful about them. I believe in having no religion. I don't believe in religion. If I have a religion it is Charles Darwin and evolution. This is the only

religion I think that has scientific proof. The rest I think are mythology, and so my religion is Charles Darwinism. Is that too much?

JUDITH GARDNER: No. I am with you on that one!

Q. I think we are going to stop there. You have been brilliant, I must say. Thank you, Dennis. That was brilliant. What a speaker, what an amazing story. It is great to have the opportunity to share your story. That is fabulous.

JUDITH GARDNER: Superb, very moving as well.

**[The interview concluded at 1:19:16]**