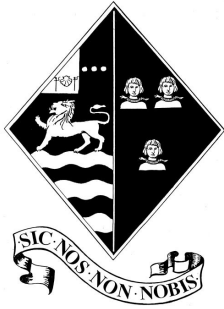


Tony Sargeant



Interview

with



**MR. TONY SARGEANT**

and

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

on

**10 March 2011**



**[11:29:08]**

Q. Welcome, everyone. The date is 10th March 2011. We are delighted to have with us today Tony Sargeant, who is a Normandy veteran. We have quite a lot of questions, I am sure. Tony, it is your opportunity to talk about any memories that you have. I will introduce our students. We have Dan Smith, Kieran Herbert, Johnny Waugh, Anna Yeomans and Callum Kitching-Williams. We are going to be asking lots of questions. Any questions, first of all, for Tony?

A. I can run through what happened to me if you like.

Q. It would be interesting perhaps to hear a little bit about before the war. Which school you went to might be interesting—any quick memories about school life—and then perhaps what you were doing at the outbreak of war.

A. OK. Do you want me to start now?

Q. Yes, please.

A. In June 1939 I went to camp with the Territorial Army to Weston-super-Mare for a fortnight with the Herefords. After that, I came back and was working at home then. War broke out in September that year. Previous to that the Territorials were called up the day before. We were issued with equipment, etc., and on the 2nd we got on buses in Kington and went all the way through to Hereford. We were billeted on some unfortunate people in Hereford in Westfield. We were there for a fortnight. I should have said how I got there. I was there because I was the one able to drive the truck. They didn't bother about my age or anything else, you see. So that is how I was in Hereford. With the Herefords then, after a time, we had a week's hop picking, in the hop yard. Then we moved down to Tenby. We were billeted in those big hotels on the front. After we had been there a fortnight, they came round and said, "Is anybody under 18 here? Fall out." So I fell out. They said, "Get your kit together. You are going up to Norfolk."

**[11:33:00]**

Q. Can I ask how old you were at this time?

A. I was 17 then. I had never been any further than Hereford. There was another chap that I knew out of the town and we went up on this train to Norfolk. We eventually went into London—the middle of London—and found our way up to Norfolk some

way or another. We never knew how but we did. They said, “You are posted to a searchlight regiment now.” So we joined the searchlight regiment on the east coast. We were up there, somewhere like Bradnor Hill (in Kington), for two years, not knowing what was going on at all. We did eventually find out that there was such a thing as Dunkirk but where that was, we hadn’t a clue or anything else. All we knew of the invasion scare was that we had a day off once. We went into Swaffham and they were building pill boxes in the streets everywhere and Swaffham had been evacuated. Anyway, time went on and on and on—and this was all before anything happened much—and what did we do? We moved all down the east coast. As time went on, I was given two months off—I was sent home for two months—because they said I was important to the business. How they arranged that, I don’t know, but it was very nice, so “Thank you very much”. That went on for two months and then they sent me back to Eastbourne. I got down to Eastbourne and they said, “Right, we have to train you now.” There was no aircraft coming over now much, so there was counter-mortar training ... No, it was anti-craft training with huge guns, not the searchlight with guns, yes. I had several months’ training with identifying the anti-aircraft guns. Where did we go then?

**[11:36:01]**

- Q. Can I ask what part of the force was this? If you were on searchlights, was it still army?
- A. Yes, army, the 60th Searchlight Regiment. Then it became—I forget the name—anti-aircraft with Beaufort guns. They were light anti-aircraft guns that were towed behind a lorry. We did that for several months and it was getting to D-Day time eventually and we were sent on to Salisbury Plain to stand by for going over the water. We had a bit of instruction in German, etc. D-Day came and went and we didn’t know—“You are the next lot to go. Not this lot, you are the next lot,” you see. We were there for seven days or more before we went.
- Q. Which port were you in?
- A. I was stationed on Salisbury Plain. We went up to Church Stretton, funnily enough, to get the equipment and then we went—Canadian Ford lorries—over there. They took us down to London then to get on a ship, not on the coast but on a ship out of the dock at Tilbury. We got on this ship—this was sometime after D-Day—and got off

the coast of France. I remember it so well because it was the time of the buzz bombs. The buzz bombs were coming over all the time, the V2s. They were doing quite a bit of damage. The ship sailed over that night and pulled up on the French coast and we had got to get off this ship then and they came off the shore in Normandy with a lot of things like oil drums together, like a raft, with an outboard motor on, and lifted us and our lorries off this ship and on to a floating platform. They pulled off about 30 or 40 yards off the coast and we had to drive down the ramp and away.

**[11:39:16]**

Q. What were you driving?

A. This Canadian ford truck pulling the gun. It surprised us because we thought we were going to go down and up the beach. We didn't. We came down and across. That was a surprise. There was a French destroyer out there and we missed him—just. We were supposed to have two engines on this raft and we had lost the one before we got there so we were only driving in one direction. But we got off the raft all right and I remember it was quite an experience because it was instilled in you that, whatever, don't take your foot off the accelerator. So you sat in this lorry, and the water is up to **here**.

Q. Up to your neck.

A. Up to your neck: "Don't let your foot off the accelerator. If you do, all is lost." So we did eventually; to everybody's surprise, it came out.

Q. Had you waterproofed everything, the gun, everything?

A. Yes. That was a several-months job—waterproofing. It was stage 2 then for de-waterproofing. As soon as we were clear of the water we had to take all the waterproofing off, all round the distributor and everything like that, everything electrical, and get off the beach as soon as you could. We were fortunate because the fighting had gone on by the time we got there, much to our happiness.

**[11:41:22]**

Q. Can you remember which beach it was? Was it Sword?

A. Gold, I think.

Q. Gold beach.

A. I think it was. The names weren't mentioned much. We went off the beach into Bayeux. Of course, when the invasion was made, there was a perimeter all round this

and it was a couple of months before they broke out of this perimeter. We were messing about in this perimeter all this time and not getting a lot to eat, etc. K-rations we had to eat.

Q. What were K-rations?

A. K-rations was a little box, about 12 inches by 6 inches which contained biscuits, and boiled sweets, funnily enough. It was proved that boiled sweets satisfied a lot of the longing people had for something different. But I remember what I missed the most, and everybody else did, was no bread. This went on for weeks. It was a bit boring.

Q. Did you see any combat in those first few weeks?

A. No.

Q. You had an anti-aircraft gun.

A. Yes, and waiting for some aircraft to come and they never came. So eventually somebody came one day and said “We’ve got some good news for you,” and we thought that is nice. They said, “You might not think it is good, but you are going back to England”—after all this. So they marched us down to the beach again and I remember we walked ... There was like what looked like a toilet roll on the top of the water and you walked across this thing, right out to sea to get on to a landing craft and off the landing craft, scramble up the nets on to the ship, and arrived back in England, after all that business.

**[11:43:53]**

Q. Incredible. So while you were in Normandy you must have seen some fighting. You must have seen something.

A. Well, we saw the results of fighting but we were never involved in any, no.

Q. Did you see burnt-out tanks?

A. Yes. I remember so well. I saw one or two burnt-out tanks and I saw one and I thought while we are around we will have a look in here, you know, and there was a pile of bones on the seat. That was all that was left of the tanks ... A Sherman tank, was it? I saw the Bayeux Tapestry while I was in Bayeux.

Q. Well done—a history lesson.

A. They wanted to put it on show, yes. They thought we had better have a bath, you see—we had been there a month or so—so they sent us off for a bath into Bayeux. We never got there ... Well, we did, but we never found any baths. It was bombed.

Q. With your anti-aircraft battalion, were you linked to any of the regiments or divisions in Normandy or were you acting autonomously, on your own?

A. We were independent. We went where we were told to go, that is all. There were one or two bits of services but nothing much.

Q. Did you see any Herefords, having—

A. No, I never saw the Herefords. I didn't know they were in Normandy. I didn't even know, no. When we came back we were sent to ... I believe, as soon as I came back, it was a general thing, and then [I was] sent to Falmouth to train as a wireless operator. We did that for a couple of months and then were posted to the other side of Builth Wells somewhere. They said, "Right when you get there you have got to get together and you are going out to the East." So out to India we went then. We had six weeks on a ship."

**[11:46:48]**

Q. What year was this?

A. This would be about 1944, I suppose, yes. So we spent a lot of time in India, wasting time, and the idea ... We had previously been trained not as anti-aircraft but as counter-mortar. We had radar plotting these mortar shells, when they were coming over, and by radar they could tell where they were coming from and our job was to direct the guns on to those positions there. Having trained for months at that, one day they came along and said, "The war is over." Very good. So eventually we came out. We were making for Japan, you see, then, and the atomic bomb dropped and we didn't have to go any further, thank goodness.

Q. So in India, where were you stationed? Whereabouts were you?

A. A place called Ranchi where we had this training, in the state of Bihar. It is into north India. Calcutta was a launch place for invading Japan from. We were down there for some time.

Q. Were there a lot of British forces sent out there at that time?

A. Yes, a lot. What used to annoy most of us was we were given demob because the war was over in Europe and we were going out the other way. Our demob number was lower than the ones that were demobbed. We were going the wrong way, you know. Eventually it got put right. We had another six weeks on the boat and that is very boring.

[11:49:05]

Q. What sort of things did you do on the boat for six weeks?

A. Going out, because we were still training, we did a lot of physical exercise. Coming back, nothing whatsoever because they couldn't care less what happened to us. That is how it went. The years went by, and I am here anyway.

Q. You certainly are.

A. Nothing very glorious about it. I was bored stiff most of the time.

Q. It is incredible that, with all that training, you saw no enemy aircraft.

A. I saw plenty of enemy aircraft while in this country. We were stationed at aerodromes and they would come over it. Norfolk, Horsham and St. Faiths, they would come and straff that, yes.

Q. Was that 1940?

A. Yes. It was such a waste. It was all done for nothing. To do anything, they'd have to have so much reserve behind them before they started. They never just start off with a few men and that is it, no. Anyway, I have not got anything exciting to tell you.

Q. It is very interesting. Have we got any questions to ask? They are all very quiet.

A. Your granddad, Anna, was—where was he—in India. He is not with us now. I don't think I would bother to do that again, though.

Q. We also have photos of your father. Could you tell us a bit about him?

[11:51:22]

A. He was very, very keen on the Home Guard, and that is telling my father's story. All this generation see about the Home Guard is Dad's Army, which is a comic thing. It wasn't a bit like that. Up to a point it was, but it was quite serious, I think. Invasion was imminent and there was nothing to stop anybody here, whatever—nothing. If Germany had decided to invade, the likes of the Home Guard was all there was to stop them, and they would have done too because they were vicious, some of them, yes. Dad was very keen on it. He was in the First World War. He was in the RASC then. But he used to live for it. I think he was in charge most of the time.

Q. So he was captain in the Kington Home Guard.

A. That is right, he was, yes.

Q. Presumably you saw little of the Kington Home Guard because you were off in other places.

A. That is right, I didn't see anything of them, no.

Q. But we have a photo, and very fine they look too.

A. A lot of those photographs of the Home Guard, a lot of the young ones, you see, they were in the forces after. They left the Home Guard and they were forced to enlist.

I didn't see much of the Home Guard, no, only [knew] that dad was very keen on it.

Q. Have you got any funny memories of the war, comradeship, things that you can remember that you look back and think that was amusing?

**[11:53:30]**

A. Only during the blitz. Myself and a chap called Harry Tipton(?)—we were both under age—had some very funny carryings on trying to find our way back off leave and things like that with the blitz on. Sometimes we got there, sometimes we didn't.

Q. So you tried to extend your leave, you mean?

A. No, we weren't very familiar with any travel further on, especially London, and especially after it had been knocked about; it was all over the place, you know. We spent one night in Bath, I think, in the theatre, sleeping in the theatre. Nobody knew we were there, I don't think, but we did it. It was quite funny, yes. In Doncaster racecourse, we spent nights there in the stand because it was dry there. We would just get in the dry, you see. When you are young you don't worry too much, no.

Q. You did come back on leave to Kington during the war.

A. Yes. I had several leaves in Kington during the early years of the war, yes.

**[11:55:20]**

Q. Did you notice things had changed much in Kington when you came back?

A. Yes. A lot of people were missing, yes. I suppose it had changed, and the way of life had changed a lot, but not so much as it has in recent years, all the shops shutting and things like that—terrible. I didn't have much, I am afraid, to do with the Herefords, because I wasn't with them, you see, only at the very start.

Q. That is before they were sent over ... They were sent over to Northern Ireland, weren't they?

A. They went to Ireland, yes.

Q. But you were involved before then.



A. Yes. I couldn't understand why I couldn't go there. I was supposed to go there but we didn't know about the troubles they would get in Ireland, no. That is as it was, nothing very exciting.

Q. You have got incredible stories, very interesting.

A. I must say that there was a community spirit. Everybody was looking after everybody else, sort of thing, in those days. It doesn't happen today.

Q. You experienced that in the army as well, a sense of comradeship and support.

A. Yes.

Q. Coming back to Normandy and the fact that you didn't have a bath—and you talked a bit about the food—did that worry you?

A. Not at the time, no.

Q. Did you get to shave?

A. Yes, now and again. Nobody worried too much about that either, no. But, as I say, you can live for a certain time on these K-rations. Have you heard of K-rations before?

**[11:57:44]**

Q. You were telling us, yes. You told us what was in the K-rations.

A. A few cigarettes were in there, toilet paper, which you don't think of, and biscuits. It was all nutritious stuff, you see. There was nobody cooking anything, you see. In Normandy there wasn't anything.

Q. Did you come across the French people?

A. One or two that I said "bonjour" to, but nothing much. They were fed up with us, the Germans and everybody else, I think—they were, yes.

Q. Understandably so, I think. They were sick of the whole thing I should think, weren't they?

A. Yes.

Q. Have you ever been back to France or Normandy since the war?

A. Yes. Not to the beaches, no. Where did we go? We saw the war cemeteries at Dunkirk. That was in the 1960s. I was not there long enough to get to know anybody. I am afraid it is not very exciting.

Q. It certainly is. It is very interesting indeed.

Q (NEW SPEAKER): What regiment was Harry in, your father?

A. Dad was in the RASC, Royal Army Service Corps. He joined up, like me, before he should have.

[11:59:46]

Q. (NEW SPEAKER): This was the First World War, wasn't it? He was in France.

A. It was the First World War. He joined up and because he could drive a lorry he was given 6 shillings a day, whereas the ordinary private soldier was given a shilling a day. So he was there for the money.

Q. (NEW SPEAKER): Was he a Kington man?

A. Yes. He was born in Kington, yes.

Q. (NEW SPEAKER): He was in France, wasn't he?

A. He was in France all the time, yes. He said he would never ever ... And he didn't, he never went abroad again. He had had enough of them, he said.

Q. (NEW SPEAKER): Here is a picture of him in France.

Q. (NEW SPEAKER): Amazing, incredible, a young man there, your father in France there on the left.

A. That is in France, yes. He used to say they used to eat jam on toast there.

Q. If we have no more questions, I think we have learnt an awful lot. Callum, have you got a question?

Q. (CALLUM): Were you in any combat?

A. No; not as such, no. Not far away, but, no, I was not sticking knives into anybody.

Q. (NEW SPEAKER): You were one of the lucky ones, I think.

A. One of the lucky ones, yes.

Q. So you came through unscathed.

A. Yes. I was very lucky.

Q. No ill health or anything during the war?

A. When I came back from Normandy, I was off sick for three weeks, that is all, and that was because we weren't eating properly and things like that. That is all.

Q. It is a bit more than "That is all". It is incredible, amazing, and [these are] fabulous photos. Perhaps we could scan some of these. The whole idea now is we get this transcribed and we will select some small excerpts that we can put on to our website, on our archive. If we could use some of the photos it would be lovely and we will create a special page for you for everyone to see. It will be lovely to see. Of course,

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the students will be involved in putting that together. If I stop the interview now, it would be nice if we could get some photos. Kieran is a very keen photographer and he can take some photos. Would you mind, Tony?

A. No.

**[12:02:52]**