

**MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

**‘TIME TO REMEMBER’**

**Interviewee(s):** Mr Doug Cannell

**Date of birth:** 24<sup>th</sup> December 1917

**Place of birth:**

**Interviewer(s):** David Callister

**Recorded by:** David Callister

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**Topics:** Memories of parents  
Henry Ford connection  
Training as an electrician  
The 1930's depression  
Working for various shipping companies  
Outbreak of WW2  
Escorted convoys  
*Atlantic Star* medal  
Injuries and treatment  
Merchant Navy post war years  
Getting married  
The blowing up of *The Graf Spee*  
Battle of the River Plate

**Doug Cannell - Mr C**  
**David Callister - DC**

**DC** Now it's Doug Cannell, so that's Douglas, is it?

**Mr C** Yes, yes.

**DC** Any other name apart from Douglas?

**Mr C** No.

**DC** Just Douglas Cannell?

**Mr C** Just Douglas.

**DC** Where were you born, Doug?

**Mr C** In Ilford in Essex.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** My father was a teacher out there. He was a Peel lad, and he went to the Cloth Worker's School. He got, eventually, he went London University. And he took two – he had to take two subjects then, and he got English Literature and Theology, 'cos his father – a lot of my ancestors were vicars. There's a book in the museum library about this – a lot of our family mentioned, and one of my ancestors was vicar of Kirk Michael, and he's credited with having translated the Bible into the Manx language.

**DC** Oh, right.

**Mr C** But I think he might have been involved in it, because that would be more than one man's life span.

**DC** I think so, yes.

**Mr C** Anyway. So my grandfather wanted my father to go into the Church. So he went to London University, he got two degrees, and when he finished, his tutor said, 'Now what are you going to do?' So he said – my father said, 'Well, my father wants me to go into the Church.' 'Well,' he said, 'if you do that, you'd have to find a living.' In those days they weren't on a stipend.

**DC** No.

**Mr C** ‘But,’ he said, ‘if you go in for teaching,’ he said, ‘you’d get a job straight away.’ So he said, ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I think I’d better go and be a teacher.’ So he said, ‘Alright.’ So they sent him over to the Teacher Training College in Battersea, which is part of London University. He did his teaching, when he came out he went to – well, he thought he’d start, and Ilford in Essex was taking on teachers and that was the best – around the best wages at the time. ‘Oh, I’ll go there for a year or two, get some experience.’

**DC** Hmmmm.

**Mr C** Well then the school year was out, my mother was a teacher as well, so he met my mother, they were married and that’s it – they stayed there!

**DC** Yea, yea. Where were you educated yourself?

**Mr C** Well, I was educated in – we lived in a place called Chadwell Heath. It’s just on the outskirts – it’s in Essex.

**DC** Yes, yes.

**Mr C** And I was educated – the first, the very infants school I went to was – it was called Ford’s and Dell’s School. Now Henry Ford’s ancestors came from Essex ...

**DC** Right.

**Mr C** ... they owned a lot of Essex land, and they, and when, I think it was Henry Ford’s grandfather endowed this school, an infants’ school – it only had two classrooms – a little school. It was Ford’s and Dell’s School. I went there from five – you went there from five to seven. When you got to seven, you went to the Junior School. I went to Junior School, and then when I left there, when I was in me teens, I was keen on going to be an electrician. And a friend of me father’s was a manager of an engineering company and they were using a lot of electric motors and whatnot, so he said, ‘Well, the best place is Crompton Parkinson’s.’ And they’d got a factory in Chelmsford in Essex, so it would be handy there for the factory, so, anyway, I went to Crompton – got an interview

with Crompton & Parkinson's in Bush House in London, and they said, 'Oh yes, that's alright, everything's alright.' He says, 'We've got quite a lot,' he said, 'you'll be number 473 on the list for apprenticeship.' (*laughter*) 'The best thing is go to a technical college for a couple of years.' So, alright, I took an entrance exam for Leyton Technical College which was the best on in the whole of Essex, apparently.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** They'd got some quite notable ex-students. One was A.V. Roe who invented the aeroplane. It came to Avro Aircraft Company eventually, well, he was one of the old students from there, anyway. I finished me time there, went back to Crompton Parkinson and said, 'How are we doing?' 'Oh,' he said, 'you've come down a bit – you're 300 and something,' he said, 'you'll be about another three years yet.' (*laughter*) Oh dear! Anyway, they weren't taking – 'cos it was in the 1930s and the Depression was on ...

**DC** Oh, yes.

**Mr C** Not much work going. Anyway, the people that were taking the most apprentices at that time was Waygood-Otis – for the escalator. The London underground was all lifts when it started, and they were all converted to escalators ...

**DC** Oh, right, yes.

**Mr C** ... and Waygood-Otis had a contract for escalators at all underground stations, so they were taking on apprentices, so I said, 'Well, I don't think I want to go in for that.' Anyway, one day the Principal came in and he said, 'Oh, we've got somebody wants an apprenticeship at a ship repairing company.' Oh, my hand went up like – I didn't know – my hand just ...

**DC** Yes, right.

**Mr C** ... all right – he gave me a letter to go for an interview – okay – they took me on straight away.

**DC** Ship repairing?

**Mr C** Ship repairing – so I went there, you see?

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** So when I finished me apprenticeship, we were doing mostly tankers – Eagle Oil Tankers and ... British tanker company.

**DC** What kind of work was that – what did you do?

**Mr C** Well, I was working on engine repairs mainly.

**DC** Oh yes.

**Mr C** I just sort of fitted in with engine repairs, so anyway, so, when I finished I thought, oh well, the best thing is go to sea. Go and have a look at the world.

**DC** There was no family history of seafaring then, was there?

**Mr C** Well, yes.

**DC** Was there?

**Mr C** Part of me father's family ... eh ... one of his cousins, actually, was a captain of one of the Pacific Steam Navigation Companies, which was part of Royal Mail Lines.

**DC** Oh, right.

**Mr C** Anyway, that was a Liverpool concern, but the Royal Mail Lines were working from London and Southampton, you see, anyway.

**DC** So did this idea of going to sea appeal to you, did it?

**Mr C** Oh yes. I thought, go to sea and have a look around the world for a couple of years. Then, of course, the war broke out.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** So that's how that happened, sort of thing.

**DC** Before the war broke out, then, you'd be straight onto a vessel, were you?

**Mr C** Yes, straight onto this one. I went straight onto that one.

**DC** That was the *Highland Monarch*.

**Mr C** *Highland Monarch*, yes.

**DC** How many tonner would that be?

**Mr C** Twenty-two and a half thousand ton. They classed that as – depending on the type of ship – a passenger ship goes by the size of the ship, but a cargo ship goes – a lot of them by what they can carry, you see?

**DC** Was that a passenger ship, the *Monarch*?

**Mr C** Yes, oh yes, oh yes, a passenger liner. The ship could carry four hundred passengers.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** Passengers and mail was the main thing, but to make it – also on that run was, you see – Argentina was supplying a lot of meat. It was – they used to call it the unofficial British Colony.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** The Lord Vestey meat company were there, the Anglo Meat Company, Anglo-Argentine Meat Company – that was Lord Vestey's company. And they also supplies grain and all sorts of things, and fruit, but they used to carry – there were five of those ships, Royal Mail, and Blue Star had five – they were Vestey's ships, the Blue Star, and they all carried six thousand tons of meat ...

**DC** Right.

**Mr C** ... so there were about twelve thousand tons of meat coming from Argentina

every week.

**DC** Where was that going to? Was that going into retail shops?

**Mr C** Oh yea, yea. Vestey had retail shops all over England ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** ... but this was going into retail shops and they were – Victoria Dock – when you see into Victoria Dock and all the refrigerated warehouses there, and the different companies would take them and they'd go to Smithfield Market for a start ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** ... and then sold. But then the ... when you went in the start of, you got to the mouth of the River Plate, you met the dredger – Solent Dredging Company – you went up the river, you got into the new dock. The cranes were all Babcock & Wilcox. You got in – came out of the docks into Plaza Britannica, which was British Square, in there was a big carillon of bells presented by Birmingham which was a twin city to Buenos Aires at the time ...

**DC** Oh right, yes.

**Mr C** ... you got – went onto the road. The buses were all Bedford buses, the trams were all made by the Brush Company of Loughborough ...

**DC** Yes. *(laughter)*

**Mr C** ... they all drive on the left hand side of the road.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** The trains were all – there was a southern railway which was the Southern Railway of England. There was a northern railway which was LER ...

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** ... and there was the western railway which was the Great Western.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** They all had the railways out there!

**DC** *(laughter)* Right.

**Mr C** This was all before the war.

**DC** Yes, of course.

**Mr C** It changed afterwards – that's the difference from it, it all changed afterwards.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** So they used to call it the unofficial British colony.

**DC** *(laughter)* Yes, yes.

**Mr C** Anyway, so we brought a lot of meat home from there, so that was alright.

**DC** Then war came along, then.

**Mr C** That's right, yes.

**DC** Well, what was the situation for you, then, when that happened?

**Mr C** Well, we carried on, as I say, I was on this one, we converted to a troopship.

**DC** The *Monarch* was converted to a troopship, yes?

**Mr C** A troopship to carry a thousand troops.

**DC** So what did that conversion involve?

**Mr C** Oh – just strip the cabins out and put bunks and what in.



**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** So that wasn't a lot. They put the gun on the stern ...

**DC** Did you have a gun forward as well?

**Mr C** They had two machine guns there, and two machine guns here.

**DC** That's front and back, then, isn't it, yes?

**Mr C** Yea, and a six inch – ha, ha, this is a laugh [rustling of paper], it was a six inch Vickers 1912 – it had a date on it. (*laughter*) There's a picture of it here somewhere.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** This is a boat drill, you know, this is on *The Highland Monarch*, this is a boat drill, all these.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** Somewhere I've got a picture of a gun, somewhere ...

**DC** Yes. Yes, you'll get to it there, somewhere. The old photographs, yes. Oh there we are!

**Mr C** That's a six inch *Vickers 1912*.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** I don't know if I've got – oh yes, that's it, that's *HMS Ajax* ...

**DC** Ah, right.

**Mr C** We used to rendezvous with them for – we used to bring stores and mail to them.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** There was *The Ajax, Achilles* and *Exeter*.

**DC** Right.

**Mr C** And we used to rendezvous with all of them with mail and stores for them.

**DC** Anyway, so we've got – you're in the vessel, it's been converted for military purposes ...

**Mr C** Yes.

**DC** ... umm ... what sort of missions were you first involved with?

**Mr C** Well, our first troop envoys was, we took doctors and nurses out to Dakar. To the RAF – the RAF had a station there ...

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** ... and they were setting up a hospital. Now the first one, we took the doctors and nurses out to Dakar. Then we came home, then we got – no, we didn't come all the way home, we only got back as far as Gibraltar. And we took, then troops in Gibraltar on a Malta convoy. So that was an escorted convoy in with troops, so that was an escorted convoy.

**DC** What vessels would escort you, then?

**Mr C** I know one of the, well, one of the vessels in the convoy was *Ark Royal* ...

**DC** Really?

**Mr C** ... and me brother happened to be on that, (*laughter*) only we didn't know, like.

**DC** Oh, right!

**Mr C** He was on *Ark Royal* and I was on this one – we went to Malta that time. We'd troops, well, air force and troops for Malta.

**DC** How many vessels would make up a convoy, then?

**Mr C** Well, now, that depended. I think on this one there weren't many, about ten or twelve troop ships ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** But some of the Atlantic convoys you'd get forty or fifty ships in a convoy.

**DC** Really?

**Mr C** Oh yes.

**DC** Yea. And they'd have some escorts as well then, did they?

**Mr C** Oh yes, yea, oh yes. But convoys were all escorted. That's why they put them in a convoy – so they could escort them, you see?

**DC** Right, so that was protection for the merchant fleet, really, was it?

**Mr C** That's right, yes, yes, yes. The Royal Navy ships were the escorts ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** ... and the merchant ships were the – they put some armament on the merchant ships, they called them protective armament, you know, self-defence.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** So you could go, with that, you could go into a foreign port – we were classed as civilians going into a foreign port ...

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** ... but with protective armament – that was all.

**DC** That protection didn't always work, though, because once the U-boats came, things happened, didn't they?

**Mr C** That's right, yes, yes.

**DC** Tell me about your memories of all that.

**Mr C** Well, we'll go back to the Atlantic convoys, then, shall we now?

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Most of them – I got on another ship – that was another story. I left this one – I wanted to get me second engineer's certificate. Well, the Royal Mail always gave us, paid us a month's leave to go to the School of Engineering and Navigation in London, to brush up on theory and whatnot ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... for your certificate. So I took me month's leave from this one, I got me certificate, I went to the officer and said, 'I got me certificate.' 'Oh, just in time, we've got the – we've just been given ...' In those ... when they were building new ships, when the war started, they were all government owed. They were Her Majesty's supply, I think it was, and they all went to the Ministry of Supply. Now they dished them out to companies who'd lost ships and had spare crews.

**DC** Right.

**Mr C** He said, 'We've just got one ...' he said, 'she's just done her maiden voyage across the Atlantic, but ...' he said, 'the consumption is pretty horrible, and so the engine needs adjusting,' he said, 'you've just got your certificate, but ...' he said, 'they haven't got the instruments for testing them.' Because Royal Mail had – all their ships, we had the instruments for adjusting the engines and setting them ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** ... but the Ministry's shipping didn't supply them.

**DC** No.

**Mr C** So he said, 'Now here's the ...' what they call the [unclear]. He said, 'Now here's one ... they're in a nice box, now that's yours. Use it, and when you've

done with it, we want it back – you’re responsible for it.’ So I said, ‘Okay.’ So I took it. Anyway, eventually we got there. But this was a ship called *The Empire Tide* – they’re all Empires – all the government ships – all Empire.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Now then, there’s another thing about this one. *(laughter)* It was called a CAM ship.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Now then, the CAM ship was Catapult Aircraft Merchantman. We had a fighter aircraft on the catapult on the foredeck.

**DC** Right. *(laughter)*

**Mr C** Now this was a bit of a laugh, because the people in Whitehall, who decided on this thing, first of all they couldn’t have known the difference between the Atlantic in the wintertime with twenty or thirty foot waves ...

**DC** Yes. *(laughter)*

**Mr C** ... and the Serpentine in Hyde Park which was totally smooth!

**DC** Yes. *(laughter)*

**Mr C** First of all, this poor fellow in the aeroplane – it was a *Hurricane* – a sea *Hurricane* ...

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** ... this poor fellow – he had to be catapulted off, and the catapult was worked on rockets – they put a number of rockets in the catapult to ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... he had to steam on into the wind, and then the catapult ... it was for when the *Focke-Wulf* long range spy planes were coming out of the Atlantic, spying on

the convoys ...

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** ... and they were directing the U-boats to the convoys, you see?

**DC** Oh yes, yes.

**Mr C** There were only about five of these ships and they found these useless, because ...

**DC** What happened when they tried to catapult these things?

**Mr C** Well, you can get it off, if you're lucky, and the poor fellow, it would be alright, he'd get off. He might go and shoot a plane down. His job then was to ditch the plane in the sea, as near to his pay-ship as possible.

**DC** Yea?

**Mr C** You sent a motorboat out to pick him up – the airplane was scrapped in any case. You sent a motorboat out to pick him up. Well, in twenty or thirty foot waves, to try to ditch the plane for a start ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... then pick the man up in a motor boat. (*laughter*)

**DC** That's terrible. Did any of them fail, those catapult moves? I mean, did you have aircraft go straight into the sea?

**Mr C** I don't know if anybody had ever used them – we'd never used ours, only for testing. The only time I saw it used was when we were at anchor in the Clyde, now, for testing it. (*laughter*)

**DC** They improved airport – air carriers a bit later, I think, didn't they?

**Mr C** Yes.

**DC** But anyway, you were talking there about U-boats, then, because at this stage you were right into the situation where you could have been torpedoed?

**Mr C** Atlantic convoys, yes.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** I mean ...

**DC** What were the Atlantic convoys – what were you transporting and so on?

**Mr C** Oh – it was all American supplies – aircraft, tanks, guns, ammunition – anything.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** What we used to do, we'd go to Halifax – the one – what we were doing, mainly, ones were going to different places. Some went to New York; some went to Halifax, some St Johns. But we used to go to Halifax, and they'd load us with – put a load of tanks in the bottom, cover them over with sacking and pour grain in to fill up all the spaces round about.

**DC** Yes?

**Mr C** Then they'd put some plates across, put another load of tanks or aircraft – aircraft all in packing cases – more sacking over them and pour grain in until we were full up. And then, when we were full up they'd put some more aircraft on deck, because they didn't have their wings on, so it didn't matter – the wings were separate.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Put them – weld them to the deck so that they wouldn't get washed overboard ...

**DC** Really?

**Mr C** ... and then we set off.

**DC** When – just let me stop you there for a second. You were putting on tanks on these vessels. You were putting on aircraft, in bits and pieces. How were they loaded?

**Mr C** Oh, with cranes.

**DC** Oh, they had cranes.

**Mr C** Oh yes. And this ship we had, actually, was – it had what they called the jumbo derrick, which was – the normal cranes on the – like the dockside cranes would load them when you – but the normal cranes you could lift was normally five tons, but we had this jumbo derrick would lift twenty tons, so we could lift a tank with it, you see.

**DC** Ah yes.

**Mr C** But anyway, that was just – that’s another thing beside the point, but anyway, because a lot of the ships – the Liberty ships didn’t have jumbo derricks, they just had to rely on the dockside cranes loading them on.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** But when we got back – we used to come into Liverpool, when we got back to Liverpool, they’d suck all the grain out with a grain-sucker ...

**DC** Yes. *(laughter)*

**Mr C** Big tubes they’d put in and suck all the grain out ...

**DC** Yes, yes

**Mr C** ... a load of grain as well as the tanks and aircraft.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Anyway ...

**DC** So this is Atlantic convoys, then.



**Mr C** That's Atlantic, yes, well then, we'd get an escort from America out – for about three days out. Then in the middle we'd be on our own, and about three days before we got this side, the British convoys – escorts would come out and pick us up and bring us in. So the middle was on your own, sort of thing, you know.

**DC** Hmmm, hmmm.

**Mr C** Some of the U-boats, at first, when the war first started, the U-boats couldn't get out that far. But they were building bigger ones that could get out ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** ... so that got a bit more dicey, like, after a bit, anyway. I did – to do – if you did five Atlantic convoys, five each way, you qualified for an *Atlantic Star*.

**DC** Hmmm – what does that mean?

**Mr C** It was a medal.

**DC** Oh, a medal, yes, right.

**Mr C** But then they were losing so many ships that they cut it down to three each way, you see?

**DC** Ah – 'cos they lost a tremendous number, didn't they?

**Mr C** They say, on the Atlantic convoys, all during the war, over 30,000 merchant seamen lost, besides the Royal Navy escort seamen.

**DC** Yes, yes.

**Mr C** 'Cos quite a lot of the escorts were lost, as well, you see?

**DC** Did you come anywhere near to being attacked?

**Mr C** Oh, many a time.

**DC** Tell me. Tell me about the experience of that, then.

**Mr C** Well, I mean, you're just going and then the U-boats would be there. And there'd be one convoy I was in, we'd an ammunition ship with us, and they put the ammunition ship right in the middle of the convoy thinking it would be protected. Usually you went in five lines – two and a centre and two ...

**DC** Right.

**Mr C** ... and now the convoy Commodore would be in the centre at the front of the – first ship in the centre leading them, you see? They'd usually put a tanker or an ammunition ship in the middle so they had – if anybody was going to get torpedoed they'd get the outside.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Well this one, the U-boat, he must have come – it was at night time, he must have come alongside, known which one to go for and just came up and got him. My word, what an explosion!

**DC** Yes – was that close to you?

**Mr C** Well, we're in the next row to him – we're in the second row in.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** And my word, it wasn't only a bang, but there wasn't nothing left of the ship, there wasn't a soul on board that could have survived, you know, just went.

**DC** So that would be torpedoed, would it?

**Mr C** Oh, yes, yes.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** A tanker went one night, as well, like that. Just a sheet of flame, you know, full of oil.

**DC** They used to say these merchant vessels were sitting ducks for these U-boats.

**Mr C** They were, they were, yes, yes.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** But anyway, that was the Atlantic convoys. We got over that, but then we got, then, they were pushing on for the Russian convoys.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** That's when the trouble started. The Atlantic convoys were bad enough, but quite easy compared with the – because the Russian convoys, not only was it so much enemy activity about, but you had the cold water.

**DC** Oh yes.

**Mr C** It was said, if you got in the water, eight minutes and that was it, you wouldn't survive after eight minutes, anyway.

**DC** Right. So tell me where you sailed from and to for those, then. This was into the Arctic, of course, wasn't it?

**Mr C** Into the Arctic, yes. Started – you start from Iceland there, from Reykjavik. Now the convoy I was in was called PQ17, and it's the one that had all the trouble. They're getting bad enough, and Winston Churchill described it as the worse journey in the world. The First Sea Lord described it as a voyage through hell. But, anyway, the one I got in was the worse one of the lot, because to start off with, there should have been 42 ships in the convoy leaving Iceland. Now some of us were in Reykjavik and some were in other parts. Anyway, two of them didn't even join up with the convoy in Reykjavik. One went ashore on the rocks and another one hit an iceberg, so those two – so anyway, there were 40 ships actually started off from Iceland and one of them, the very first night out, they got boiler trouble, they had to turn back, another one got steering gear trouble, they had to turn back, so eventually there were about 38 of us altogether. Scattered over five square miles – that's the size of the convoy ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ...course, the admiralty escorts, as well, we had *HMS Belfast* was a cruiser, and *HMS Edinburgh* were two cruisers, and then there were destroyers, quite a

number. And then there were armed trawlers – they used those a lot. And they had some tugs, which they called them rescue vessels because they were low in the water. And, anyway, we'd armed tugs as well, so there was quite a big escort. Now then, we were – we'd left at the end of June, or the beginning of July, but anyway, the first thing that happened, just after midnight on the 4<sup>th</sup> July – American Independence Day, the first ship went.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** American.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** They got that – that's America – they've got you for a start. Anyway, as we got further on we had to go up past Norway. Now of course, the Germans had got Norway at the time ... all the airfields all the way along. Now we didn't know until after – there's several books been written about it and one said that they brought – they had – Hitler said these convoys got to be stopped because we were taking supplies to the Russians when they were defending Stalingrad ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... on the Eastern Front. And the big problem would have been if the Germans had defeated Russia, they would have had the Russian oil wells which they were so desperate to get, because the Germans didn't have any oil supplies of their own ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... ummm ... they wanted to have Russian oil wells. Anyway, so they had to be stopped. So we were taking supplies up to them and it was, again, tanks and guns and aircraft and all sorts. Anyway, to stop them he got – he brought two squadrons of torpedo bombers back from Italy to Norway to attack us. And they had 40 U-boats in the North Sea, so ... it was pretty rough. Anyway, going up ... ummm ... past Norway, of course, the aircraft were coming out. Now then, by a bit of misinformation from the Ministry of Information, the battleship *Tirpitz* was in one of the Norwegian fjords and they got information that she was coming out to attack us. They got the order from Whitehall to disperse the

convoy. The escorts were to leave us and withdraw to so far to the west and all the rest of it, because they didn't want to fight a sea battle with a convoy in the middle of them ...

**DC** No.

**Mr C** ... so they dispersed – so we were on our own after that. That was somewhere about 7-8 July – about a week into July, anyway.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** So we were on our own after that. So anyway, we – our captain thought we'd get as far away from Norway as we can, so we headed for Greenland. We went up to Greenland, we got up to Greenland, met the ice – followed all the icebergs round and got up to Novaya Zemlya, which is two islands right up the very north, but they were Russian islands.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** Anyway, we got there and there was a – got into a safe anchorage there, anyway, for a start. But in the meantime we were running out of food ...

**DC** Oh yes.

**Mr C** ... because apparently they were told that we would be away for a month, so they provisioned us for two months provisions. Well, we were away six months altogether, so we were short of food.

**DC** Really, yes.

**Mr C** Anyway, when we got up to this place there was a Russian weather station there and there was a little village, a fishing – not actually a village – a few fishermen working from there.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** So, anyway, we had a Russian student that they gave us as an interpreter, so he was alright, so he could speak to these people. So he said that we were short of

food, so they said, ‘Oh well, there’s an American ship got out of a previous convoy got wrecked a few miles up the coast.’

**DC** So it was wrecked?

**Mr C** It was wrecked.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** And they’d been up there, and said there’s plenty of food on board. So they took our motorboat and went up there and came back loaded with Spam. *(laughter)*

**DC** Spam! *(laughter)*

**Mr C** Cases of tins of Spam. *(laughter)*

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** Anyway, eventually we got to Archangel. We found out eleven ships got there out of the forty.

**DC** Really?!

**Mr C** Thirty eight that actually sailed in the convoy – eleven got there.

**DC** You were one of the eleven.

**Mr C** We were one of the eleven.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Anyway, on the way up – this is a very ... I’m pleased about this in a way – but on the way up ... the engine room had two greasers on watch, you see, and anyway, the top greaser – the top and bottom greaser, ‘cos the engine room was – about three decks high ...

**DC** Yea, hmmm.

**Mr C** Not like these days – the old fashioned engines ...

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** ... anyway, the top greaser had to go to steering gear and all that and he came back and he said, ‘There’s a steam gland leaking, I think it needs tightening up.’ I said, ‘Alright, I’ll go and see it when I come off watch.’ When I came off watch I took some spanners, there was all quiet – they had to make sure it was all quiet and that. I just got partly a way long and all hell broke loose. Two aircraft, two torpedo bombers came in out of the sun ...

**DC** Yea?

**Mr C** ... and lower down we had what they called a radio direction finder, because we’d got this catapult aircraft, which was a forerun of the radar.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** They came in low over the sea under the – they knew what they were doing – long under the sea, out of the sun where you couldn’t see them ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... and the next thing was bullets flying all over ... so I just dropped to the deck and rolled up against the hatch covering, which was about that high.

**DC** Yea – two or three feet, yea.

**Mr C** And anyway, afterwards it all went quiet, and oh, me leg hurts! Me overall leg was all covered in blood. Oh dear! I didn’t know what. Anyway, I went and did the job I’d set out for and then came back. The First Mate was a first aider, so it err ... well, he put a dressing on it, he didn’t know what it is, he put a dressing on it. Anyway, when we eventually got to Archangel it hadn’t – they kept putting dressings on – it wasn’t much – they asked for medical assistance. And the next thing – it was a Bedford lorry, actually, that came ...

**DC** Yes?

**Mr C** ... and they were going to take me to the clinic. The interpreter came with me, and it was at the naval airbase – there's a big naval airbase in Archangel. It was a naval airbase clinic. So, anyway, they took the – a lady doctor came, 'Oh yes,' anyway, then afterward she gave me ... 'drink that' ... so I drank that. Oh, golly, it was neat vodka! (*laughter*) And after a little while two nurses come and picked me up and lifted me onto an operating table ...

**DC** Yes?

**Mr C** ... so this doctor fiddled a bit about with it, so I didn't – I knew that there was something going on, but I didn't know what. Anyway, the interpreter said they'd found a piece of metal imbedded in it.

**DC** Ah!

**Mr C** So they didn't know whether it was a piece of shrapnel of some sort.

**DC** They wanted to get it out, did they?

**Mr C** Oh yes. She took it out ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... and cleaned up. Anyway, I had to go – they would take me back every day to have the dressing renewed. But after about a week or so, it wasn't healing up. Well, one evening – this is what I'm very thankful for – one evening – it would be about eight o'clock in the evening, I suppose – the First Mate came and he said, 'There's transport here, they're going to take you to the clinic.' 'Oh,' I said, 'what for?' And I thought, what's gone wrong, you know, I hope they are not going to take me leg off, something like that! (*laughter*) Anyway, when I got there, they didn't go into the clinic itself, they took me to the doctor's quarters ...

**DC** Hmmm, hmmm?

**Mr C** ... and this doctor was there. And she – and they took me to a room and there was a dining table in the room. And I thought, alright so, 'Sit there.' Anyway, she brought all stewed fruit in. She said, 'Eat that.'



**DC** Hmmm?

**Mr C** So anyway, I thought, oh well, alright, so I ate it and it was tasty. So anyway, that was alright, so anyway, I finished it and the interpreter was there and he said, 'Alright, we can go back to the ship, now.' So we went back. The next day he said, 'Do you know what you had?' He said, 'That doctor went out that afternoon, walked out into the country, picked berries, brought them back and stewed them, and used a week's sugar rations to sweeten them with.'

**DC** Yes?

**Mr C** Now can you imagine any doctor here doing a thing like that?

**DC** What was the purpose of that, then?

**Mr C** For me blood.

**DC** Ha!

**Mr C** Said it wouldn't heal up because me blood was out of condition.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** So she picked these berries ...

**DC** So she knew what to give you.

**Mr C** She knew what to give me!

**DC** Yes. Did it put you right?

**Mr C** Well, partly. It still wasn't healing up. I had to get it seen to when we got back home – that's alright. It was – eventually it was alright. But, I mean, I was so thankful with nothing much on the ship. So I said to the Chief Steward, 'Is there anything I can get – you've got that I can give to her?' So he said, after a bit, he got me a tin of sweetened condensed milk. Well, I took it to her the next day when I went for a dressing. She was so thankful for it she gave me a big kiss on me cheek! (*laughter*) So I say – some people say, 'Oh, the Russians, this that

and the other ...’

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** ... what more could you – you couldn’t wish for any better thanks, could you?

**DC** Yes, yes.

**Mr C** Anyway ...

**DC** What other incidents do you remember, then?

**Mr C** Well, now, you were saying about me ears. I went on watch one morning – I was on eight to twelve watch. At about half past eight the telegraph rang for double full ahead – that means that you’re in trouble. It was the morning after the convoy was disbursed. Now then, the engine builders – as a sort of rule of thumb – they said, now you can increase the power by about twenty percent for ten minutes or ten percent for twenty minutes – that sort of rule of thumb ...

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** ... but now, if you are in – I mean, they want all speed now, if you – you can’t guarantee that you’ll increase your power and that’ll increase your speed by the same amount. If you increase your power twenty percent, doesn’t mean to say your speed’s going to increase by twenty percent. Anyway, I thought, well, now – so I pushed it out to twenty percent and I thought, well ... oh, the bridge telegraph came out, it said, ‘Gerry’s on our tail!’ So I pushed it out to twenty percent. They carried on and I thought, the ten minutes is up, so giving it hell, you see. ‘Oh, we’re doing fine, but he’s still there,’ he said, ‘carry on if you can.’ So we kept it going, kept it going. Now then, that engine was a new type – well, it was an update of an old type of engine ...

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** ... and it had got a treble supercharger. Now this supercharger worked off the exhaust gas, so you couldn’t do anything, the exhaust went through the turbine and drove the supercharger. The supercharger was six foot in diameter – big fan, blowing air for the intake. Well, the scream from that was absolutely

shocking ...

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** ... and in fact they thought it was going to explode, and they – it was on the starboard side of the engine room, at the top there. Everybody got off the starboard side of the ship – they thought it was going to blow up.

**DC** Yes?

**Mr C** The scream was absolutely shocking. So anyway, I kept it going and kept it going, and eventually, I kept it – it was three and a quarter hours!

**DC** Yes?

**Mr C** Instead of twenty minutes.

**DC** Really?

**Mr C** It was kept going. *(laughter)* Eventually the telegraph – the bridge telephone, he said I think that we can ease down now – we've lost him. And err – anyway, apparently, our gun – we had a 4.7 gun on the stern, and the gunners were potting at him, and they think they might have hit his periscope or something.

**DC** Oh aye.

**Mr C** He dropped back but, the unfortunate part of it – when they first saw it, when the convoy – we had two British submarines with us – P class submarines – a *Porpoise* and ... I forget what. Anyway, *Porpoise* was on our stern, and they thought it was *Porpoise* coming – they thought, 'Oh, *Porpoise* has joined us again, see?' *(laughter)*

**DC** It wasn't!

**Mr C** No, just giving pleasantries to them, and it wasn't, it was a Gerry! *(laughter)*

**DC** So what would have happened if ...

- Mr C** Next thing, they opened fire with a gun, you see?
- DC** Right.
- Mr C** So our gunners returned, you see, so they were keeping on firing back, we were going fast enough to keep firing off. Anyway, eventually we lost him.
- DC** So they couldn't make a great speed, these U-boats then, could they?
- Mr C** Yea.
- DC** Were they faster than your vessels?
- Mr C** No, they were about the same.
- DC** Yea – so what would have happened to that engine if it had got to its limit and beyond?
- Mr C** Oh, it would have just fallen apart.
- DC** Yea?
- Mr C** We were just – well, it would have just all fallen apart – that was it.
- DC** Right. So you'd have no power?
- Mr C** No.
- DC** Right
- Mr C** Well, I thought, it's either that – it's one or the other. Either you kept in front of Gerry, or you dropped back and let him torpedo you, you see?
- DC** Yes, yes. So that was quite a chase then, was it?
- Mr C** Yes. But that's when me ears went for a about two or three days afterwards ...
- DC** Oh aye.

**Mr C** ... all I could hear was the squeal ...

**DC** The squeal, yes.

**Mr C** ... and they said that it didn't burst the eardrums, but it numbed them ...

**DC** Oh aye.

**Mr C** ... so it – they've never been right since.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** I've had a – I've got two hearing aids, but neither of them are any use 'cos – this ear's the best ear.

**DC** That's your left ear?

**Mr C** Yea.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** And I got a National Health hearing aid, and I was getting – after about ten minutes, quarter of an hour, I was getting pains all up here with it, so they said, oh it might be because it's too heavy, 'cos they're a bit heavy things, anyway. But me wife bought me one from 'Hidden Hearing' – a little thing, but that's the same, after about quarter of an hour, twenty minutes, all pain – right up here.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** So I can't wear it. And this ear I got a little tumour came in this ear and they burnt it out at Nobles with lasers.

**DC** Oh right.

**Mr C** Burnt it out, so that ear's not much good either, so ...

**DC** No, but you've been able to hear me?

**Mr C** Apart from that I'm alright.

**DC** But you've heard me, haven't you?

**Mr C** Oh yes.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Some voices are as clear as a bell.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** Music I can hear alright.

**DC** Ah, good.

**Mr C** Some voices.

**DC** You play the piano, there, do you?

**Mr C** No, she plays the piano.

**DC** Oh aye, yes. That's your daughter, yes?

**Mr C** That was my wife's piano – that was hers. But now that the – Border Television – I can't hear a word – it's just a mumble.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** All their announcers – it's just a mumble. But I watch the television, 'cos I know what's going on by the picture. *(laughter)*

**DC** Right, yes, yea. Now when you were aboard these vessels, then, were you generally below deck?

**Mr C** Oh yes – I was engineer.

**DC** Yes. So most of the time you were below deck, were you?

**Mr C** Oh yes. I've got ... somewhere here – oh – now that's me at the controls of the starboard engine on *The Island Monarch*.

**DC** So, in the – even up in Iceland in the cold, in Greenland and so on, you'd be fairly warm down there, would you?

**Mr C** Not really.

**DC** No?

**Mr C** You were wearing a sweater all the time ...

**DC** Really, yes?

**Mr C** ... yea, because you see, you've got to blow air down for ventilation; you're blowing cold air down.

**DC** Oh yes, yea.

**Mr C** But that ...

**DC** Do you always have reasonable food or was it boring, or what was it like?

**Mr C** Oh – ninety per cent perfect good food.

**DC** Yea?

**Mr C** And Royal Mail, we always had three or four course breakfast, three or four course lunch and always a four course dinner at six o'clock. And then there was always sort of snacks in between.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr C** But err – oh no, they used to reckon that Royal Mail was the best feeding company in the whole of British ...

**DC** Yes, yea. What about the skippers of these various vessels then – were they tough men?

**Mr C** Well, yes and no. I mean, they had to sort of keep control, but you wouldn't say they were tough, like, they were all – you could always have a chat with them and that, no problem there, you know, I mean you'd be walking on deck and stop and have a chat and that.

**DC** Yea. What size crews – how many crew would there be on these, generally then?

**Mr C** Well, there were ordinary cargo ship – well *The Highland Monarch* for a start, there were, the engine room staff was twenty-nine.

**DC** Really?

**Mr C** That's like with electricians as well, you see, you know, 'cos they had lifts and everything on these ships, you see, got an electrician an all.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** All the deck equipment, the winches, they're all electric, so, but there were twenty-nine in the engineer's department. And there'd be probably about the same for the deck, you know, the skipper and three mates ...

**DC** How many Arctic convoys were you in, then?

**Mr C** Oh, just the one.

**DC** Just the one?

**Mr C** They stopped them after that for twelve months.

**DC** Ah.

**Mr C** We came over in – it was PQ17 and we came back in PQ18. They were all PQs, the Arctic convoys, there was eighteen. But we had a lot of survivors from previous convoys.

**DC** Hmmm. Did you stop to pick up survivors?



**Mr C** No.

**DC** Did anybody stop to ...

**Mr C** Yes, they had these rescue vessels, the tugs, armed tugs.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** There's a picture of a tug, here, you see? See, tugboats lie low in the water.

**DC** Yea, right. A tugboat could pick some up, but they wouldn't all get picked up would they, those fellows?

**Mr C** No, they wouldn't, because they'd got to get to them in time, you know?

**DC** Yea, and you only had, really, minutes in some of these icy waters.

**Mr C** They reckoned eight minutes in the icy waters.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr C** But I mean, we used to sail amongst icebergs and that. In fact, do you remember there used to be an advert for Foxes Glacier Mints?

**DC** *(laughter)* Yes.

**Mr C** With a polar bear?

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** I've actually seen that with these eyes.

**DC** You've seen the polar bears?

**Mr C** An iceberg came along one day and there was a polar bear on top of it. *(laughter)* But unfortunately – we weren't allowed to have cameras in those days, otherwise I'd have had a photograph of that and said that's where you got it from!

- DC** That would have been worth a bit today, I think. (*laughter*)
- Mr C** It would, it would, yes, yes. Things like that, you know, you sort of remember it, yes.
- DC** Yes. Did you ever meet up with the Royal Navy boys then, or not?
- Mr C** Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.
- DC** What was the relationship between the Merchant men and the Royal men?
- Mr C** It just had to be good.
- DC** (*laughter*) Yes.
- Mr C** I mean, you see, in Archangel, there was – what was previous *The Intourist Hotel*, quite a big hotel, and that was given over to the British crews, like, so the navy and merchant navy, the lot, were all there, you know.
- DC** Yea, yea.
- Mr C** And I know there's a – a went there one day and there was a fellow there playing a piano, and they were singing all the old songs, like, you know – 'We'll Meet Again,' and all of that sort of thing.
- DC** Yea, yea.
- Mr C** But going back to that, I say, eleven of the ships got there, and only two of the same ships, same company got back. I was on one of the two that got back.
- DC** You were mighty lucky weren't you, really?
- Mr C** I was, yea.
- DC** Yea. What happened on those vessels if somebody fell ill? Was there any doctors on board?
- Mr C** No. Well, not the merchant ships – none of the merchant ships had doctors.

**DC** No

**Mr C** You just had to – all the First Mates had to – part of their certificate was first aid, you see.

**DC** Oh yea, yes.

**Mr C** So they were the first aiders, like. So we just had first aid.

**DC** Otherwise you had to wait until you got into port, yea.

**Mr C** The passenger ships, we had two doctors and two nurses on that one.

**DC** On *The Monarch*, originally, yes, yes.

**Mr C** That's a passenger ship, you see but the cargo ships, they just had the First Mate was always the first aider, like.

**DC** Was your – were the cargos you carried always weapons and tanks and guns and what have you, or was anything else?

**Mr C** No, it was always weapons, tanks and guns and whatnot. Except, as I say, coming back, if you came back from Halifax, they filled you up with grain and all the spare spaces around they filled it up and sucked it out again with the vacuums.

**DC** Yea, yea. But you weren't carrying other merchandise and food and that sort of thing then?

**Mr C** No, we didn't.

**DC** No.

**Mr C** But some of the ships would have done. It would probably be the American ones from – you see, we had these Liberty Ships, and Roosevelt said that they'd call that the Atlantic Bridge, Liberty Ships, but they're only built – but they said if they did one voyage they were alright. But they were mostly food in those ...

- DC** Yes, yes.
- Mr C** ... but err ... some of them had arms and aircraft and that, but they were bringing most of the food over.
- DC** Did you stay in the Merchant service after the war?
- Mr C** Oh yes. I stayed there until 1948.
- DC** Yes.
- Mr C** Then I packed up, and thought – I'd have ten years, and I thought, well, that's enough, and I met me wife and got married and settled down, so ...
- DC** Right. 'Cos we can't show pictures on the radio, you see? (*laughter*)
- Mr C** No, that's right. Now then ...
- DC** Now let me just get the question to you. Another experience that you were going to tell me about is the blowing up of *The Graf Spee*.
- Mr C** Yes. Well, when we – we were in Montevideo and *The Exeter*, *Achilles* and *Ajax* had been looking for her for months ...
- DC** Hmmm.
- Mr C** ... and she was – *The Graf Spee* was raided in the South Atlantic, you see, and they could never find her. Anyway, so they thought, well, evident ... we didn't know this at the time, but we found out afterwards that, if they – they got a – sets ... a target for her, you see, so they did – we were in Montevideo and the – somebody put a little advert in one of the papers, a little announcement in one of the papers, '*Highland Monarch* will be leaving for London on such and such a date from Montevideo and there was a VIP on board.'
- DC** Ah ha!
- Mr C** Now then, we didn't know this at the time, but anyway, the time came – the sailing time from Montevideo, and when we left, the British Consul there

apparently handed the captain a sealed envelope to be opened – now I don't know whether it was at a certain time or a certain distance out. Anyway, when he opened this envelope, the instruction was to turn back immediately and go back another – just off the south coast of Brazil there's a row of islands which small ships would sail it and be a hunting zone, but the bigger ships didn't, they went round the outside of them ...

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** ... return back and get behind the islands and stay there until further orders. So we – of course we went back and stayed behind – of course the next moment the radio operators heard the battle was going on – they'd got *The Graf Spee*.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr C** They thought that the – so the German intelligence sent the message that we were on that track and *Exeter*, *Achilles* and *Ajax* were waiting for her. So they caught her there and then – that's how they caught her.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** So that was it. So of course, then, after the battle, she was knocked about so much she managed to get into Montevideo.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** But we didn't know even then, at the time, that the reason that they blew her up was because they were just about out of fuel. She should have been re-fuelling – either the day or the day after the battle, but of course she couldn't get out.

**DC** No.

**Mr C** But so ... there's another book been written by a Captain Dove, who was a *Graf Spee* prisoner. He was on – it was called, 'I was Graf Spee's prisoner' – this book was called, 'I was Graf Spee's prisoner.'

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** It says on it then that the Langsdorf told them, ‘Tomorrow morning you’ll be having breakfast with a VIP and the officers of *The Highland Monarch*.’

**DC** Langsdorf was the skipper of *The Graf Spee*.

**Mr C** Of *The Graf Spee*, yea, yea.

**DC** And did you see, yourself see the remnants of the ship, or not?

**Mr C** Oh yes, oh yes – saw it several times. It was three or four times, I suppose, we went into Montevideo and she was still there.

**DC** Yes. How important was that ship being lost to the Germans?

**Mr C** Oh well, very important. They had – two – what they called pocket battleships, and then, they were both in the South Atlantic, and they were just picking off the ships in the South Atlantic, you see? And they had – there was – they had the supply – the – there were two supply ships that they had, but they were classed as civilian ships so they could go in – they were going in foreign ports and getting all the food and whatnot and bringing it out to the – rendezvousing with these two battleships and keeping them supplied.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr C** But, oh no, it was, it was – the Battle of the River Plate was very important, particularly with – there was the – getting the ships going into Buenos Aires for the meat and grain and that, and they were just picking them off on the way home.

**DC** Yea, right. And you wouldn’t like to go through all this again, I suppose, would you?

**Mr C** Never, never, no this is enough, once is enough. (*laughter*)

**END OF INTERVIEW**