

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

‘TIME TO REMEMBER’

Interviewee(s): Mr Tom Houghton

Date of birth: 12th July 1926

Place of birth:

Interviewer(s): David Callister

Recorded by: David Callister

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Topic(s): The Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers
WWII
The 303 *Enfield* rifle
Conscription
Servicing QL *Bedford* lorries
V2 *Doodlebugs* over London
Barrage balloons
VE Day at Buckingham Palace
Hospitalisation due to TB
Artificial Pneumothorax treatment for TB
Treatment in hospital for returning prisoners of war

Tom Houghton - Mr H
David Callister - DC

- DC** Thomas Houghton, just Thomas, no middle name is there?
- Mr H** No, just Thomas.
- DC** Just Thomas.
- Mr H** Tom, I'm known as, really.
- DC** Tom Houghton, of course. And born – where were you actually born, Tom, St Helens was it?
- Mr H** Yes, St Helens, yes. I was born in Parr, St Helens.
- DC** What date would that be – just for the record?
- Mr H** 1926 – 12th July 1926
- DC** Right, '26, so err – when you – so if we get started on this thing, now – oh I see, you've got your wartime number written here, as well.
- Mr H** That's my army number, yes.
- DC** Now I'm going to test you on that – can you remember it?
- Mr H** 14822996 (*laughter*) – you never forget it!
- DC** Well, some people do, but (*laughter*) you certainly remember it. (*laughter*)
- Mr H** I'll always remember that. And I used to remember my rifle number as well.
- DC** Really?!
- Mr H** I did – 6OL – something – but I've forgotten that – that wasn't as important as that was.
- DC** Yes, yea – but what's this – an *Enfield* rifle was it?
- Mr H** Aye, the old fashioned rifles, yes, the 303s.

DC The 303, yes.

Mr H Yea, and I did my range, my rifle range – what's its name ...

DC Training ...

Mr H At Altcar.

DC Oh – at where?

Mr H Altcar.

DC Where's that?

Mr H Just outside Liverpool.

DC Oh yes, right.

Mr H Yea, when I was at Formby.

DC Oh right.

Mr H Hmm.

DC Anyway, you were called up in 1944.

Mr H That's correct, yes.

DC You had just turned 18 at that time?

Mr H Just turned 18. I reported for duty at Harrington Barracks at Formby ...

DC Hmm.

Mr H ... and there was thousands of men there.

DC Yea.

Mr H Yea.

DC And when you got this call-up then, I mean, it – what did it come in – in a letter through the post – what was it?

Mr H Oh well, the postman used to deliver it in those days, and you had to sign ...

DC Oh!

Mr H ... if you got called up.

DC Yes.

Mr H Yea – I remember me father shouting for me, ‘Tom, your papers are here.’

DC Oh yes.

Mr H You know, they knew.

DC You knew you had to go.

Mr H Old Seth, our postman ...

DC Yea.

Mr H ... used to whisper to me dad, ‘Your Tom’s papers are here.’

DC When you went with these thousands of men, then, who were going to be in the war, although it was getting towards the end of the war, what – I mean, you didn’t have a choice – did you have a choice of regiment to go to?

Mr H No, no, they allocated you to – you see, we was conscripts, really, you know, called up.

DC Of course, yes, yes

Mr H Yes.

DC So it was army initially anyway, was it?

Mr H You could either go – when you went to Renshaw Hall to have you medical, which I did only about a fortnight before I was called up – you could have signed on for the Navy, the Air Force or the Army ...

DC Right.

Mr H ... and me dad said to me, ‘Now don’t forget, Tom, sign up for the Navy.’

DC Yes.

Mr H And it was the worse mistake I ever made, you see, because they said – I was in the queue there and they said, ‘Oh, you’re in the wrong queue if you want to go in the Navy, you should have been in the Army queue.’ (*laughter*)

DC So eventually you finished up in the Army, then?

Mr H Yea, that correct, yea.

DC With the Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers – is that right?

Mr H Yes. Well, when I went to – after we’d finished, I had a trade test in Harrington Barracks, you see, because I was serving me time ...

DC Oh yes.

Mr H ... as a motor engineer, actually, at Birkenwood Motor Engineering Works, you see, and so I was away to a good start. And so was the man, the lad that went with me. And we was together all the way through. He went on that boat to Burma.

DC Who was that – Tom Barker, was it?

Mr H Tom Barker, yea.

DC Yea?

Mr H Yea. The other lad that I didn't really want to mention about him, because he got killed in France, you know, yea.

DC Yea, right, right. So then, you're in REME [Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers] – where do you go then, when you've done your training?

Mr H Well, when I went, we went to – I only ever worked in that one big garage ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... in London, you see ...

DC Right.

Mr H ... and we was working on *QL Bedfords*.

DC What are they – lorries?

Mr H Yes, the old army *Bedfords*, you know, the *QL Bedfords*.

DC Hmmm hmmm.

Mr H Yea.

DC Doing what – just getting them tuned up or what?

Mr H Oh, they'd sent hundreds of them ...

DC Yea?

Mr H ... and they'd come back with – I believe – in the desert.

DC Right.

Mr H And all the diffs and the sumps – everything was full of sand ...

DC Of course, yes!

Mr H ... you see and – I really don't know why they brought them back, you know, I mean, they wouldn't do that these days, would they?

DC Couldn't you do anything with them, or could you get them right?

Mr H Oh no, we washed them all out.

DC Yes.

Mr H They were all to be stripped down and washed out and then they went ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... I mean, delivered to various regiments, I suppose.

DC So this – this was similar to a civilian job, in a way, though.

Mr H Oh yes.

DC You'd be doing a lot of hours?

Mr H Well, they really took those garages over, you know.

DC Yes.

Mr H You see, there was three garages in Deansgate in Manchester that they took over, you see?

DC Right

Mr H Well, I went – I was in Deansgate for about two or three months.

DC Hmmm – before you went to London?

Mr H Yes – no – in between, and then I went back again to London.

DC Oh, I see, Right.

- Mr H** Yea.
- DC** Had the bombing stopped in London?
- Mr H** No. Oh no. They hadn't, no, the bombs 1945 the *Doodlebugs* was coming over then.
- DC** The *V1s*?
- Mr H** The *V1s*, yes, and then the *V2* – I heard the first *V2* come over.
- DC** Right. What was it like – now, I've no idea what a *Doodlebug* was like, but they made a sound, didn't they?
- Mr H** Oh yes. They sounded like about – you know the motorbikes going past here at TT time?
- DC** Yea, yea
- Mr H** The old fashioned motorbikes – they sounded like them, you see, coming over. But when they cut out, they came straight down.
- DC** Yea, yea.
- Mr H** You see. There was no escaping them once – we used to say, 'Keep going, keep going.'
- DC** (*laughter*) Yes?
- Mr H** And I'll tell you something else, too, I saw – I used to go to Caterham, with Tom Barker, 'cos his grandmother lived there – he was a Londoner, really, but he'd been brought up in St Helens, you see ...
- DC** Yea.
- Mr H** ... and we used to go for Sunday tea there, and I used to see the *Doodlebugs* coming over on a summer's night, nice summer's evening, you know, on a Sunday evening ...

- DC** Hmmm.
- Mr H** ... and they had barrage balloons across that valley, you see ...
- DC** Yes, yes.
- Mr H** And do you know what?
- DC** That was a form of defence, wasn't it?
- Mr H** Yea. And do you know what? They slide down the wires and killed the women that was manning them in those days.
- DC** Really?
- Mr H** Yea, at that time.
- DC** They could do colossal damage, though, couldn't they?
- Mr H** Oh, terrific damage, yes, I've seen some damage, I'll tell you.
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** Yea – I've seen some sights, actually.
- DC** Hmmm – sights that you don't want to talk about.
- Mr H** No, I'd rather I forget it.
- DC** Right.
- Mr H** You know, I've seen whole blocks of property knocked down, you know, and ...
- DC** Yes. Where did you stay in London, then, because you were working in the garage, you must have had digs of some sort?
- Mr H** Well, I stayed in Lewisham flats; they were called ...

DC Hmmm.

Mr H ... and then – but the first time as I was in London, before I went to Manchester, the first time I was in London I was billeted in St Dunstan’s College ...

DC Oh yes.

Mr H ... and I’ve only heard them mention St Dunstan’s College when I was listening to the radio only about twelve months ago.

DC Right.

Mr H So it must still be there, you see.

DC Yes, yes

Mr H And I can tell you what – Catford Dog Track was behind St Dunstan’s College because we used do our PT training there, and running around the track.

DC Were they still running dog races?

Mr H No, no, but it was still there.

DC Right.

Mr H And it’s still running; I see sometimes in the paper, you know.

DC Yes. Well, anyway, after – I mean, you were talking here about 1944 -’45, the war was coming to an end then, wasn’t it?

Mr H Oh, it was, yes, it was, and that’s what I say, some of my old friends, now like, who’s been in the army or the last war ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... you know, they said, when I said I’d only joined up in 1944, they said, ‘Well, the war was nearly over then.’ I said, ‘It was.’

DC Right.

Mr H You know, you know.

DC Yes, but it wasn't over for you!

Mr H But I suffered out there with the bombing!

DC Yes.

Mr H You know.

DC But then VE Day came – what was that like?

Mr H VE Day – well I was in – I left early morning because we knew it was happening, you know, I caught the train into Charing Cross, that's the west end of London, you know, and went down the Mall ...

DC Hmmm hmmm.

Mr H ... and what a crowd was there – so I must have landed there about lunchtime, say, and yea – what a crowd, and err – I only got back next morning, you see.

DC What do you remember of VE Day?

Mr H VE Day – well, I climbed up a lamp (*laughter*) 'cos I was fit then. And it wasn't long before I took ill, you see?

DC Yes, right yea.

Mr H Yea. And I ...

DC Did you get to Buckingham Palace?

Mr H Oh yes, I was – I looked many a time at the crowd at Buckingham Palace because I could have touched Winston Churchill when he got out of car.

DC (*laughter*) Oh really?

- Mr H** Yea, because they couldn't get through – he came late, you see ...
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** ... and I was – my face was through the railings of Buckingham Palace ...
- DC** *(laughter)* Right.
- Mr H** ... and I've wondered many a time if I could freeze it, you know, when they've shown you all the crowds ...
- DC** When they've shown the pictures, yes.
- Mr H** Yea, oh yes. And the Mall was full ...
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** ... right down to Admiralty Arch.
- DC** Right.
- Mr H** I think it's Admiralty Arch, isn't it?
- DC** But, as I said, your war wasn't over because they decided that you were going to move somewhere else, then.
- Mr H** Well, I was going to Burma, yea, well, you see, the war was on in Burma then, you see ...
- DC** That's right.
- Mr H** ... because I was in the hospital at VJ Day.
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** That was August ...
- DC** Right.

- Mr H** ... and it all happened to me between June and August.
- DC** Tell me what happened then.
- Mr H** Well, I took ill. I reported sick in St Dunstan's College, you see, and I felt terrible.
- DC** Hmmm hmmm.
- Mr H** And I think they must have thought that I was one of the sick, lame and lazy, you know.
- DC** What, did they send you home, did they?
- Mr H** No, no, they sent me on the train to Liverpool, to go on the train – I was on ...
- DC** To go to Burma?
- Mr H** Yes, yes. We was on – I was issued with all the kit – tropical kit and everything.
- DC** Had inoculations and everything?
- Mr H** Yea – everything fixed up. And I told the doc – I said, 'I'm not well, you know, doctor.' I said to him, you know. And he said – he listened to me chest and all that carry on – same as they do, you know, and he said, 'You're A1 – get out!'
- DC** Really?
- Mr H** Aye. And I was on the train then, the day after, I think, and I tell you what, I was in agony, I was terrible.
- DC** Really? What happened after that?
- Mr H** They gave us railway passes – we were at certain barracks in Chester, and I went home – I just went home. I went to St Helen's Station – must have got home on the bus – landed home. And they didn't know me when I got home. They didn't.

DC What happened – did you get the doctor there, did you?

Mr H Well, me dad took me to the doctors – get in the car straight away, get to the doctors – Doctor Lawton. I can remember all the names now, marvellous, isn't it? (*laughter*) And he said, 'Well, Bill,' he called me dad by his first name because he was our family doctor, you see ...

DC Hmmm.

Mr H ... he said, 'Your Tom's seriously ill.' They went outside and had a talk so as I couldn't hear, you know.

DC Yes, yes.

Mr H And I think – I don't know whether it was then that he told me dad that I was ready for off!

DC Really?

Mr H It's amazing, yea.

DC What was wrong with you, then?

Mr H TB [Tuberculosis].

DC Oh!

Mr H You see, that's why I've never spoken much about it, you know.

DC No.

Mr H It was kind of a ... when people were dying ...

DC Well, people didn't mention it in those days, did they?

Mr H No, they didn't, no.

DC TB was one of those 'no, no' things.

- Mr H** And I caught it – I caught it in London in those barracks, I think.
- DC** Yea.
- Mr H** And, you know, and of course all the windows out – it was a bombed-out place we were staying in, you know.
- DC** Right.
- Mr H** It was an awful place, really.
- DC** So, when TB happened to anyone in those days, it was a sanatorium that normally ...
- Mr H** Sanatorium ...
- DC** Is that what they ...?
- Mr H** Well, they took – they sent me to Winwick Hospital, near Warrington, and that was our family doctor that arranged that, and me dad took me in the car.
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** And then I remember hardly anything else until I woke up in Blackpool.
- DC** In Blackpool, yea.
- Mr H** About a week later.
- DC** Yea?
- Mr H** Yea.
- DC** What, in another hospital?
- Mr H** Yes. In where they'd built for the prisoners of war coming home.
- DC** Oh right.

- Mr H** Yea.
- DC** So was it full of prisoners of war then, or ...?
- Mr H** No, no – there was – I was the only one in. They hadn't arrived then, the prisoners of war.
- DC** Oh, I see. Then rather than being in Burma, there you are in bed in hospital in Blackpool.
- Mr H** In Blackpool, yes.
- DC** In what sort of condition?
- Mr H** Well, they came and saw me, you see, an officer came to see me from the REME [Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers], and he said, he told me then, he said, 'You've finished with the army now, son.'
- DC** Hmm.
- Mr H** Yea – and that was all I remember, you know.
- DC** How did it affect your health – I mean, was TB something that – where you lost weight, for instance?
- Mr H** Oh yes, you lost weight and you just faded away, more or less.
- DC** Yea.
- Mr H** You see, and coughing, and some of them used to – well, I can tell you, when I was in Eccleston Hall in St Helens for nine months after they'd discharged me out of the army, I saw one fellar there bleed to death.
- DC** Really?
- Mr H** In the – yea, in St Helens.
- DC** Now you're here today, so they must have had some treatment there to get you

right, now what happened?

Mr H Dr McGuiness ...

DC Yes?

Mr H ... flattened me lung – it was a new treatment that he said he was going to perform on me ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... and I had that – I was having that for about five or six years afterwards.

DC Yes, what sort of treatment was that, then?

Mr H It was AP treatment – Artificial Pneumothorax ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... you see, yes.

DC So you were in this hospital, then, for how long do you think?

Mr H In ...

DC Blackpool.

Mr H ... in Blackpool – for four months.

DC Yes.

Mr H About four months.

DC Right.

Mr H And then they discharged me, took me from Blackpool by rail to St Helens.

DC Hmm.

Mr H And they had the blinds drawn – just to show you how serious it was in those days.

DC Yes, that's right, yes.

Mr H They had the blinds drawn and two nurses came with me ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... with masks on them.

DC Right yes, yes.

Mr H Yes, yes – it's amazing, isn't it?!

DC But in Blackpool, you say, this was for the prisoners of war?

Mr H Yes.

DC Some eventually did arrive, didn't they?

Mr H Yes, well, they all arrived, they all arrived there.

DC Yea.

Mr H Oh yes – and died, while I was in treatment.

DC What was wrong with them – did they have all sorts of things wrong with them?

Mr H Oh yes – they all went mad, because some of them had been – some of them had been prisoners of war for years, you know, and they was all issued with 'hospital blues,' you see.

DC What's 'hospital blues'?

Mr H Blue uniforms.

DC Oh yes.

Mr H If you were sick ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... you see, yea.

DC And what was – was it a bad time for you in there, then, was it?

Mr H Oh yes, it was – very painful, too, very painful – it was very painful treatment ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... where they shoved a needle through your ribs, you see ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... and I got that every other day ...

DC Right.

Mr H ... and I stuck to it – I went for three months down to the Blackpool clinic. They took me in the ambulance every other morning ...

DC Hmmm.

Mr H ... yes. And Dr McGuinness – he was a wonderful man, really. And that's what he did.

DC What was the condition, then, generally, of these prisoners of war – were they coming back and being healed, do you think, or not?

Mr H I don't think they all had TB, but they were all in a bad state.

DC Yes.

Mr H They were like skeletons.

DC Right.

- Mr H** Yes – they’d been badly treated ...
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** ... and particularly the lads that dropped at Arnhem.
- DC** Ah yes, hmmm hmmm.
- Mr H** They told me – old Paddy used to come and tell me everything that had happened – sat on my bed telling me.
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** Used to bring me cups of tea and all that, you know. There’s always one of these in a ward, isn’t there, you know, yes?
- DC** Yes, yes.
- Mr H** And, yes, he did – he was a very nice fellow he was. And he told me all about – he’d been a prisoner of war – all the war.
- DC** Right.
- Mr H** He been – he was captured at Dunkirk.
- DC** Really, yes.
- Mr H** Yes, 1940 – old Paddy was. And he worked down pit there, he told me.
- DC** Now then eventually they get you well enough to be discharged from hospital and ...
- Mr H** Well, they got me well enough in – Dr McGuiness – they transferred me to Eccleston Hall in St Helens ...
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** ... which was a wonderful – that was a wonderful hospital.

DC Hmmm Hmmm.

Mr H People didn't like going there because it was the last post ...

DC Oh, yes.

Mr H ... called it the last post, you know (*laughter*) because Fred Barrow said to me, you know, he said, 'No, I'm not going there, Tommy,' he said, the lad that was in the same village, as it where I was – I knew him before he joined the army ...

DC Right.

Mr H ... and he'd been a prisoner for about four or five years ...

DC Yes.

Mr H ... 'I'm not going there,' he said, 'that's the last step.' I said, 'Where are you going, Fred?' He said, 'I'm going to Delamere.'

DC Oh yes?

Mr H That was another big sanatorium, you see, in Delamere – Delamere Forest.

DC But if you hadn't had this illness, if you hadn't had TB, you would have been on that boat for Burma, wouldn't you?

Mr H Oh yes, I would, definitely.

END OF INTERVIEW