

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

‘TIME TO REMEMBER’

Interviewee(s): Mr Ernest Lionel Taggart

Date of birth: 18th March 1922

Place of birth: Douglas, Isle of Man

Interviewer(s): Elizabeth Ardern-Corris

Recorded by: Elizabeth Ardern-Corris

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Topic(s): Early schooldays
Joining the Navy
Training and discipline
Life on board ship
Outbreak of WWII
Re-training as submarine detector
Nicknames and tattoos
Serving on board *The Quilliam*
Convoy escort duties
Shore leave
Drafting to Scotland after peace declared
Serving in Malta
Prince Phillip and Princess Elizabeth
Leaving the Navy
Caretaker job at Ballakermeen High School
Retirement

Lionel Taggart - Mr T
Elizabeth Ardern-Corris - EA-C

EA-C I'm Elizabeth Ardern-Corris, it's the 10th October 2012, and I'm at the home of Mr Lionel Taggart in Douglas. Mr Taggart, could you tell your full name, please?

Mr T Ernest Lionel Taggart.

EA-C And what date were you born?

Mr T 18th March 1922. Well, I was born in Douglas and I used to live in Hope Street then, and that's where I was brought up.

EA-C Can you tell me about your parents – what were their names?

Mr T Well, George and Blanch. My father, he was a clerk in the Steampacket [Isle of Man Steam Packet Company] and my mother was at home, and my grandmother lived with us at the time. I went to Tynwald Street School, then onto Demesne Road School, and then to St Ninian's.

EA-C Did you enjoy school?

Mr T I didn't dislike it, but I wasn't overjoyed exactly with going to school.

EA-C Can you remember who the head teacher was at Tynwald Street School?

Mr T No, not at Tynwald Street School, but Demesne Road School it was Mr Shimmin.

EA-C And what was he like as a head?

Mr T He ... quite a disciplinarian, but otherwise very good.

EA-C Did you ever get into trouble at school?

Mr T No, I think my worse thing when I was going to school was pinching apples.
(*laughter*)

EA-C And where would you have pinched apples from?

Mr T Oh, anybody's garden roundabout Douglas.

EA-C What was it like growing up in Douglas?

Mr T Well, it was alright, 'course there wasn't so much traffic in those days, so once I found out where Tynwald Street School was, I was going on me own when I was about six years old. And then always on me own. We walked to school, but at the High School ... I had a bicycle and I used to cycle up to school.

EA-C Where there any particular subjects that you enjoyed?

Mr T Geography – that was my favourite subject. Drawing maps – used to have a roller where they roll a map of anywhere out and they'd give you that, and then you could fill in all the different things and towns and mountain ranges ... lakes – anything like that.

EA-C Were you involved with any sport at school?

Mr T Well, I ran at the cross-country at St Ninian's, but I wasn't proficient at football or anything else. So ... I wouldn't say I was a sportsman.

EA-C And what about music, did you have any interest in music?

Mr T Well, Mr Dougie Buxton used to take us for music and singing but never ... I was never a soloist. I went into The Guild once when I was trying to learn to play the piano, but me and the piano didn't get on very well. *(laughter)*

EA-C Did you know what you wanted to do when you were at school – did you have any ambition?

Mr T No, I just took things as they come. And then when I was at the High School my pal and I thought ... we were living in Onchan then. We left Hope Street and went to Selbourne Road to live and then we went to Onchan to live. And my pal, Walter Cubbon, his father was a captain on the Manx boats and, later on, commodore and we decided we'd join the Navy. Well, he went about a fortnight before me, and he was sent to *HMS Ganges*. I went and I was sent up to Caledonia and during our time in the Navy we met, although I believe Walter was in Alexandria the same time as me, but we never actually met.

- EA-C** What age were you when you joined the Navy?
- Mr T** I was fifteen.
- EA-C** And was that the usual age that you would join up at?
- Mr T** Well, they take you as a boy up to the age of seventeen, I think it was, and then you became an ordinary seaman provided you were recommended by the officers.
- EA-C** And what year would that have been Mr Taggart?
- Mr T** That would be 1939.
- EA-C** Did your parents, Mr Taggart, approve of you joining the Royal Navy?
- Mr T** Well, they thought hard of it but they approved, so away I went.
- EA-C** How did you feel about leaving the Isle of Man – was it excitement or trepidation and fear?
- Mr T** Well, it was sort of looking forward to whatever you were going to get.
- EA-C** Had you been off the Island before you joined up?
- Mr T** Only as a kid – been to Liverpool. I used to play on the lifts in Lewis's. The girls even got to know me – I'd be going up one and coming down the next one.
(laughter)
- EA-C** When you left the Isle of Man to go to your training, did anybody come to see you off?
- Mr T** Only me mother. She went to Liverpool with me and when I come out of the recruiting office in the Liver Buildings I think you were given 7/6d – that was to get accommodation for the night and a meal. And then the next morning me mother's seen me off from Lime Street Station and I ... the other two Irish lads were with me and off we went up to Edinburgh and then onto Rosyth. And when you hit the Forth Bridge, you wondered what on earth was happening with

the noise of it going over. But we survived everything.

EA-C Tell me about the training you had.

Mr T Well, on *The Caledonia*, roughly, you'd go to school for five half days – academic, and the other five half days you'd be doing either gunnery or seamanship. And ... Saturdays you had a half day off – what was known as a 'make and mend' – that is make and mend clothes, or you could go ashore. So Dunfermline, but you couldn't go ashore when you were only getting a shilling a week spending money. When you became a first class boy, you got 1/6d a week and your wages went up to 8/9d a week. So the 1/6d I think it worked out you could get a bus from Rosyth to Dunfermline, go to the pictures in the afternoon, get the bus back and there was a sort of canteen at the dockyard entrance and you could get a cup of tea and a *Wagon Wheel* biscuit. That was your 1/6d gone! The first thing when you got your wages was to get a three-halfpenny stamp so you could write home, because if you didn't write home, you were in trouble, (*laughter*) and they could make you jump if they wanted to.

EA-C Were you an only child or did you have siblings?

Mr T No, I was an only child.

EA-C So those letters home would be very important to your parents.

Mr T Oh yes. You had to write home once a week because if your parents wrote and said you hadn't, that was for the high-jump then.

EA-C What kind of discipline would you have received then?

Mr T Oh, there was strict discipline. I think you rose for reveille at 5.30 and you were sleeping in hammocks. And then you had to lash up and stow your hammock and put it in the paddock where they went, then it was coffee and ship's biscuit at six o'clock and the only way you could break the ship's biscuit was to put it on the table and hit it with your elbow! (*laughter*) And the coffee ... and sometimes you could see the castor oil floating round the top of the coffee – in the cocoa rather. And then at quarter past six, you were on deck. One week you scrubbed decks, and the next week you were on the hands and knees scrubbing the canteen floor. You'd be a line across and you'd all be scrubbing down that

way. And then, when you were scrubbing decks, you could look out at the Fife coastline and see all the snow there on the coastline, and then you hear, ‘Right, off shoes and socks, man your scrubbers!’ And you’d be scrubbing decks bare-footed! That was in the winter time as well as the summer. Then at seven o’clock you finished scrubbing decks, you went down, breakfast, and then you went back to your dormitories and prepared for ‘divisions’ – what they called ‘divisions.’ You’d be all lined up, be inspected, and then you went to your ... whichever instructions you were ... in. If you went to Gunnery, you’d be there with a rifle, square-bashing. If you went to Seamanship, you’d be learning knots, splices, maybe out in a cutter, rowing or sailing if the weather was suitable, and when you went to School, you were with the schoolmaster who taught you the same as you were at school, and you could sit for three examinations – Educational Test 2, or Higher Educational Test. And if you passed HST, that give you a sort of recommendation to go through as an officer. But when you passed ET2 it gave you six month’s advantage provided you’re recommended of becoming an able Seaman at seventeen and a half instead of eighteen.

EA-C Did you pass that test?

Mr T I passed ET2, and I was recommended to four month’s advancement.

EA-C Do you think the training you received, Mr Taggart, was good? Did it prepare you for what lay ahead?

Mr T Oh, I think it prepared me for my whole life ahead of me.

EA-C In what respect?

Mr T Discipline. If you stepped out of line you knew what you were going to get. So the ideal thing was ... don’t get caught! (*laughter*)

EA-C Do you think it’s a good idea for young people today to join up and get that discipline?

Mr T Well, I think it is, I mean, if you done something wrong, like I did, I missed a confirmation class and then you’re not allowed ashore and you’re jogging round the jetty with a broom – they wouldn’t give you a rifle for that, the men got the

rifles – and you'd be jogging along and then they'd say, 'Aircraft in sight.' So that's when you put the broom up above your head and carried on running round. And then you had to muster at certain times on board – to make sure you're still there, like.

EA-C What was life on board the ship like, what was the food like, and the sleeping accommodation?

Mr T Well, we slept in hammocks and you slung those on the rails provided, and you're issued with a blanket and your hammock, and the food, they'd have cooks of ... what they called the cooks of the mess. You'd have four and they get the food from the distribution point and they'd serve all the food out. You were lined up outside and if the Petty Officer in charge of the class was satisfied that the food was served out properly and evenly he'd indicate for you to come in. If he didn't like the way it was served out he used to stand the cooks up in the aisle, call the class in, 'Help yourself!' and then the cooks got what was left, so they knew in future they'd serve it out evenly. And your ration of bread was a sixth of a loaf – cut the loaf into six – with your meals. A week during our training, you went with the cooks and that, and they showed you how to cook and used to put the potatoes in and the roast on top of it and that was known as schooner on the rocks. And then the rest of you, you'd be washing all the plates up. They'd have a line, put the plates down at one end, and a fellow would plonk them between two revolving bushes in water, the next fellow would pick them out, put them in a tray, when the tray was full then the next fellow would dip the whole tray in boiling water. When you took that out, they more or less dried, and he'd stack them and give them away to be used – taken away to be used again. The knives and forks and that, they all went in to be sterilized.

EA-C Where were you when you heard about the war?

Mr T I was half-way across the South Atlantic. I finished training and in February 1939 I was sent down to Chatham – not on my own, the rest of the class were all London fellows and that were sent down there to Chatham, and that was your home base for all the time you were in the Navy. And in the barracks there was a special place for boys known as East Camp, and that's where we were billeted.

EA-C What was your reaction when you heard about the outbreak of war?

Mr T Well, everybody was cheering. It was on a Sunday morning, we had just finished divisions and the captain come on the tannoy and said that we'd just declared war on Germany. So then we went into a war routine, darkened ship at night, down with all the dead-lights and that, and you went to defence stations. That was one half on duty manning guns, and the other half asleep. And then, after four hours, you changed over, and then another four hours you changed back. And at eight o'clock in the morning you reverted to armed – your state of readiness – and the rest of the people carried on working as normal, cleaning up below decks and scrubbing decks and paintwork and all that sort of thing.

EA-C Were there times that you ever felt homesick?

Mr T Fortunately no. Some boys did, but it didn't seem to worry me. When you were on the ship you were in a mess, and that was like the table and two stools along each side, and that was your privacy and in the mess you had a day or turns cook of the mess, and you used to go to where the hotplates were – they were all numbered according to the messes – and you'd get the food out, bring it to your mess and serve it out and then you could sit down and have your dinner or tea or whatever. They didn't have tea as you'd know it – it was six o'clock supper, which was like cooked meal, or a salad meal – whatever they could get.

EA-C Having been brought up as an only child, Mr Taggart, did you find it difficult making that transition to living at close quarters with so many other people?

Mr T No. I mean, everybody else was the same as you, and that was it. Well, I got very friendly with a Newcastle chap, Gordy Smith, and I met up with him a couple of time afterwards, after I'd left *The Cumberland*. He went into the Navy equivalent of the Red Caps; and I met him on Liverpool station once, when I was coming home on leave, which was very nice.

EA-C How well did you cope with the rough sea conditions? Did you ever get seasick?

Mr T Oh, the first time out we were seasick. We left Chatham on *The Cumberland* and we went down the Channel to Devonport, and then we went down the Bay of Biscay and we hit a right storm. And at that time my job for the exercises was masthead lookout. And we used ... there was four of us – an hour on and three hours off. And we used to go up a ladder to the crow's nest, and get in

there, but you didn't know whether you'd be an hour or two hours up there 'cos the petty officer in charge, he'd be going round looking for where the other three were – they were sick!

EA-C That must have been the worst place to be!

Mr T Yes, you were moving most, and it was bloomin' cold up there! (*laughter*) So after that you get used to it eventually you get your sea-legs.

EA-C How often would you have got off-shore leave?

Mr T On the money we were getting you couldn't go ashore very often. So a lot of us didn't bother, sort of thing. Before we left Chatham we got ... I think it was a week's or a fortnight's leave from *The Cumberland*, so we knew we were going foreign. And after the Bay of Biscay episode we went down ... we went and got issued with tropical gear, and in the peacetime Navy, in tropical gear, you wore pith helmets, and you weren't allowed to go half-naked until four o'clock, because of sunstroke and things like that. And we finished up in Freetown and then when we left Freetown we were halfway across the South Atlantic when war was declared, and then we carried on to the coast of South America, looking for German merchant ships. And the first hundred and twenty five days of the war we were at sea for a hundred and nineteen, 'cos, according to international law, a warship could go into Rio for 24 hours once every three months. So when we went into port, the first thing you done was tie up to an oiler to get enough oil to do you another month at sea. There was provisions to get aboard and it was everybody – hands in to do it, you might get a couple of hours each watch to go ashore, but you were too fatigued to bother for a couple of hours. And then the next month we went into Montevideo, and that was the same thing. The month after that we went into Buenos Aires and I think in Buenos Aires we got a day's extension and the British colony in Buenos Aires arranged for charabanc trips for us all round and then a meal in the grounds – al fresco, if you want. (*laughter*) And then after another month we went down to the Falkland Islands and we had Christmas in the Falkland Islands in 1939. I did go ashore in the Falkland Islands but there wasn't an awful lot to see or do, and then we got word of a certain ship, *The Graf Spee* was sighted. So we had to get back up to the River Plate, and I think we went up there at about 25 knots all the way. And when we got to the River Plate we teamed up with the three six-inch cruisers – we were an eight-inch cruiser – and they were waiting for *The Graf*

Spee to come out – it'd gone into Montevideo, but it come out and scuttled itself because in the action with the other three British cruisers its condensers had been damaged and they had no water – they couldn't provide water at sea. So that was it, and some of the boys had a little wireless and there was a Yankee ashore giving a commentary and he was saying, 'Oh, here's *HMS Cumberland*, she's got three smoke stacks, (*laughter*) and they were hearing that. But then we went back to the Montevideo and I think we got a special dispensation for time there, and while we were there it was arranged we'd go through Swift's corned beef factory so we were taken in charas [charabancs] to this place, the factory, and there was cattle in a field next to it, and the *vaqueros* were there on horseback with their ponchos round them and that, and when they got the signal they'd bring in three or four cattle, and the cattle went in a lift and their heads were poking out the ... you know, like, going in the stocks for human beings ... their heads were stuck out and they'd go up to the top floor and when they got there there'd be a – oh no! A fellow hit them between the head and killed them! And when they dropped, they put clamps round their ankles – rear ankles – and lifted them up. And they went all round the factory on a rail and I was thinking to myself, 'This is just like being in Tossy Cowins!' (*laughter*) You remember when you go in there, and if you bought anything, they used to put it in a little cup, put it on the rail and it'd go up to the cashier who'd give you the change and the receipt and send it back? (*laughter*) But as they went round there was a fellow there and he'd split the beef right down the middle, and another fellow would do the legs as it moved along a bit. And then you'd get a couple of fellows who'd come on and they'd get the skin, like, and they'd just slide – pull it all off. And there were muscles everywhere on those fellows! (*laughter*) And then it went around and everything in it was used. And when it got back down to the ground floor we could see crates of corned beef coming out, and we were loaded up with them. And then we got word, we wanted a re-fit and that, and we got word to go to Capetown, so on the way to Capetown we called at Tristan Da Cunha. Well, there's no berthing facilities there, and they come out in a boat, these people, and we loaded up the boat with as many supplies as we could for them to take ashore, then we carried on to Simon's Town in South Africa for a re-fit.

EA-C What did you do during the re-fit? Were you still on board or allowed leave?

Mr T Oh, we were still on board for the time, and you were allowed ashore, you got shore leave, and we got sent to a rest-camp called Froggy Pond. And we went

there, it was more or less you could do whatever you want, but there was officers in charge, you had to behave yourself etcetera.

EA-C Did anybody every go absent without leave?

Mr T Not out there. Some used to abscond sort of thing, but, no ... and then I put in to be a ... in the submarine detection side.

EA-C What age were you at this time?

Mr T Sixteen, I think – seventeen. And I was an Ordinary Seaman then, not a boy. (*laughter*) And word come through that there was a German merchant ship sighted and all us people who were going to be sent home to England were used as a boarding party. And we went onto *HMS Dragon* looking for this ship, but we didn't find it, so we were put off at Saint Helena onto a Danish merchant ship for passage to England. We'd go home and then we'd get in training for submarine work.

EA-C Why did that particularly interest you?

Mr T Well, a friend of mine said you're far better off sitting looking at a compass in shelter than standing out on the gun, so that's why I went into it.

EA-C And how long did training last?

Mr T Well, we eventually got home, we got sent to Chatham and I was sent on leave for about six weeks, and then when I come back I was drafted up to Dunoon in Scotland – *HMS Osprey*, the submarine detection school sort of thing, and I qualified as a submarine detector and I was drafted to Liverpool as a pool rating, and we were based in Vernon's football coupon place in Linacre Lane in Liverpool, and we used to go down to Gladstone Dock every day for working on different ships, if they wanted help and that sort of thing. And when the ships would be going to sea, for convoy duty, if one of their ASDIC ratings didn't make it, sick on shore or something like that, you had to Pier Head jump – you'd be back, get your kit which was already packed and everything, and on that ship.

EA-C You mentioned the word 'ASDIC' rating – what does that stand for?

Mr T Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee.

EA-C Did you spend your leave in the Isle of Man?

Mr T Oh yes, oh yes.

EA-C What was that like? Can you remember when you came back?

Mr T Well, it was a case of going round seeing relatives and that, and before you knew it, you were going round again to say, 'Ta rah!' (*laughter*) You'd go to the pictures and what have you.

EA-C Did you meet up with any of your school friends?

Mr T No I didn't, I ... the only time I met up with school friends was when I was going home from the training ship, but when I got home, most of them would ... had been called up, or joined up or whatever. So ...

EA-C Can you remember your parents putting on a welcoming party for you?

Mr T Oh, they were glad to see me home, me mother was. And her wish was that I never got tattooed.

EA-C Did you get tattooed?

Mr T No.

EA-C Was that quite a common thing that young men would have done?

Mr T Well, they used to get all sorts of tattoos on their shoulders here, and their arms, but small ones. Some used to have like a dagger tattooed as if it was going through the skin on their arm. Others used to have an anchor. Some used to have names tattooed on their fingers – girl's names.

EA-C Were you courting at the time, did you have a sweetheart in the Isle of Man?

Mr T No, oh no.

EA-C No?

Mr T Well, I mean, I'd been away for about nineteen months then. I met a few that I ... the girls that used to be at same time as me, but that was all, 'cos I think some of them was going in for the Wrens and everything – ATS, WAFF ...

EA-C What did you do to pass the time when you were on the ship?

Mr T Well, you ... washing, bathing – the luxury was when you owned your own bucket! (*laughter*) That's what you washed in, you bathed in, you done everything in! (*laughter*)

EA-C And what kind of things would you do to entertain yourselves?

Mr T Well, when you were crossing the line they used to have the old camaraderie of beating Father Neptune and this, that and the other. And they used to play *Ludo*, they used to call it *Hookers* in the Navy, and they'd have a couple of dice and they'd play it on the upper deck and see who would win – that was as well as cards. Some used to gamble – *Brag*. And they carried a projector for films at times which they could show.

EA-C Can you remember the names of any of the films you would have seen?

Mr T Well, I wasn't into films, so I never worried whether I went to see them or not. But that was it.

EA-C Did you keep a diary?

Mr T No.

EA-C Did any of your colleagues keep diaries?

Mr T I ... I don't think any of them ... there was one chap on *The Cumberland* kept a diary – well, not a diary, a notebook. He was an author outside, before he come in, and if he used to hear any witty remarks or something from sailors, he used to write them all down. I often wondered what his name was, but I've forgotten it. He had wrote a book about it I believe.

EA-C Were people given nicknames?

Mr T Oh, they all had nicknames. Err ... if your name was White, you'd be either 'Knocker' – 'Knocker' White, or 'Chalky.' Err ... 'Smithy' or 'Smudge' for Smith ... err ... Millar – 'Dusty' – 'Dusty' Mill. They all had pally names sort of thing. If you were called by your surname ... 'Oooh, am I in trouble?' (*laughter*).

EA-C What were you known as?

Mr T 'Ping' – for the ASDIC ratings, you know, ping ... do, ping ... do – you're getting the echo of the submarine back in your earphones – used to call you 'Ping.' The torpedo men were known as 'Torps,' and gunners ... they were known as ... well, the gun-layer, oh, he's the 'Layer.' 'Captain of the Gun Turret' and that sort of thing.

EA-C Let's talk just a little bit about any encounters you had. Did you ever form any part of a convoy, an escort convoy?

Mr T Well, when I was in Liverpool, one of the ships I went on was *HMS Broke*, and Sir Peter Scott, who designed all the camouflage for the ships, was the First Lieutenant on *The Broke*, and we done a couple of convoys. And I was also on a Frigate – was it called *The Larkspur* ... no, not *The Larkspur* ... *The Jasmine*. I done a trip on there ... I've forgotten the other one I was on. But after a year I left Liverpool to go back to Dunoon to qualify as an HSD – that's Higher Submarine Detector – and when I passed that okay I was drafted to *HMS Quilliam*.

EA-C That sounds like a Manx name for a boat.

Mr T Well, it is, it was called after Captain Quilliam who's First Lieutenant to Admiral Nelson.

EA-C Were you the only Manxman who served on board?

Mr T Yes, I was the only Manxman on *The Quilliam*. When I went to join her I went to Hebburn on Tyne, and we were billeted with a Mrs Welsh in *Colsia House* because *The Quilliam* was still being and we were like, what they call, key ratings – as HSD I was responsible for the maintenance of the ASDIC and ...

equipment on *The Quilliam* and also the sound detectors and that.

EA-C Did you work as part of a team or were you on your own?

Mr T Well, I was the only HSD on *The Quilliam* and there was no other crew until it commissioned. And it had to go round checking to see all the spares according to the inventory were on board and this that and the other, and when the time come, we'd done the sea trials, and then it commissioned, and we went from the Tyne, up to the Kyle of Lochalsh in Scotland to work-up, as they called it. In other words, you'd be on board and you'd press the buzzer for action stations and they'd be timing you to see how long it took to get up and ... you kept at it until you got down to the best time you could. This would be in 1942.

EA-C So right in the middle years of the war.

Mr T Yes.

EA-C And what active service did you see in the *HMS Quilliam*?

Mr T Well, while we were up at the Kyle of Lochalsh there was a signal come through, 'Proceed Liverpool.' Seven days leave each watch. Well, we were delighted to be going on leave, but we knew that meant we were going foreign, so after we come back from leave and got all ready, we went up to the Clyde ... I've forgotten the name of the place now ... Govan, I think, on the Clyde. And when we got there, there was six liners, including *The Queen Mary*, and they had 50,000 troops on board, and our job was to escort them to Kenya. Well, we set sail and we went out and of course the liners, they could do an economical speed – say about 17 or 18 knots – and we went and we ran into a right hooligan, as they called it – storm. And on *The Quilliam*, the breakwater on the forecastle was getting hit with the waves and got cracked back a bit, and the water was coming in on the mess deck. Of course, things were getting knocked over, there was raisins in the water, there was currants, there was rice, and anything else that could get knocked over. And we escorted them down as far as the Azores and we went into the Azores, tied up, fuelled, back out and caught up with them and eventually got them to Freetown. And after a rest there we got the breakwater fixed, we set off down to Capetown, then round up to Durban, then we went up to ... in Kenya – Mombasa, and we tied up alongside *The Queen Mary*. We were like ... (*laughter*) and the soldiers were all landed and

they were the soldiers that went up into Egypt to join up with the ... Montgomery for the big push. And during that time, there was also what they called Rommel's remission, in other words, anybody in 'Chalky' – or jail – serviceman, if you want out, you can get out, but you're going up to the front line. And they joined in with those men. Meanwhile we went from Mombasa into the Seychelles, oiled up, back down to Durban, and we managed to have a bit of a rest there. And we done a couple of patrols from Durban to Capetown, Capetown back to Durban, looking in case there was any ships, merchant ships, but there wasn't. And when you went into Durban you went between two piers, and when you came out there was a black lady on the pier and she'd be singing, and when you'd be going through she'd be singing, 'We'll Meet Again,' and Vera Lynn songs. Well, eventually we get to Capetown and word come through – Gibraltar. So off we go, Freetown, Gibraltar, and into the Mediterranean, and that was to help the landing into Sicily. And we went from Gibraltar to Malta. 'Course you sleep on the upper deck on a camp bed when it was hot out there, and the sirens went! Oooh, forget it! Next salute the shore batteries opened up – there wasn't half a scattering match to get underneath in case of shrapnel coming down! (*laughter*) And a cruiser in dry-dock there, she was known as *HMS Pepper-Pot* with all the shrapnel holes in her. Well, eventually Montgomery was this time was going through with his troops and he got to Tobruk and we went there to sort of stand-off in case we were wanted or ... had a few four inch shells here and there on land and what have you, and got the troops over, and then we went to Augusta in Sicily. And in Augusta we used to go out every night, up the Adriatic and the coast road, and there were bridges and things and if we saw any tanks or troop movements we used to open fire on them. And in the daytime we'd go back to lie up at Augusta. Well, eventually they got through Sicily and we went over the Messina Strait and we were lying off waiting, they were putting – the soldiers were putting a bombardment over from the biggest on-shore, and then down and the troops would be going across and we were hanging about in case they wanted a few shells here or there, and they landed in Italy. And as they made their way up through Italy we left to Augusta and got up as far as Bari and our sister ship, *The Quail* and us used to go out at night, up the coast again, same old thing, and when we came back to Bari, we went in and *The Quail* was coming behind us, and the next salute – BANG – she'd hit a mine, and that was it! However, they managed to get her in and patched up and that, and some of the crew come aboard us, and we carried on alone. And then we got ... had to have another re-fit – all that time at sea.

EA-C Was there any loss of life on the *HMS Quail*?

Mr T I think there was a few, but I'm not sure. The eight ships to a destroyer flotilla, *Quilliam* was Captain Day – that's the leader. There was *The Quail*, *Quality*, *Quiberon*, *Quickmatch* – they were Australian manned; and I don't know the other ones, whether they were built or what – I don't know. We left the Adriatic, went to Alexandria and we had a re-fit there, and while we were there we were sent [to] Ishmaelia to a rest camp, and in those days you used to have WD pickups, and some of us hitchhiked up to Cairo. If you get to a pickup and a soldier come along you were glad to see him, but he was more glad to see you to talk to, and how's ... have you been home ... and this that the other. And he says, 'Where do you want to go?' 'Cairo.' He says, 'I'll drop you off at another pickup.' And that's how we got there. Well, eventually when the refit was over we went back and we went down through the Suez Canal to Aden, which was more or less British then, wasn't it? And we oiled up and we went across the Indian Ocean to Bombay and then after I think about a week in Bombay, we went down to Ceylon. And then we went up to Trincomalee, and in Trincomalee we used to do carrier-borne attacks on the East Indies. And the first one we done was on Sabang. And a submarine used to go out first and then the tanker would go out second, and then the fleet would go. And half-way or more there, we'd oil at sea, and then we went to Sabang, carried out the attack – bombing them with planes from the carriers and one of the planes got down, but were lucky because when the sub [submarine] come up, they rescued the two pilots, or the crew, took them aboard and eventually they got back to Trincomalee.

EA-C Did you ever have an opportunity to go on board a submarine?

Mr T No, I've never been on one.

EA-C Would you like to have?

Mr T I'd like to have as a ... sightseeing. And then when we'd done the second, the target was Surabaya, so it was the same thing – out, oil at sea, we got to Surabaya, done the bombing and *The Quilliam* put a couple of torpedoes into the harbour on an 'S' pattern, in other words, it comes like that, and into the harbour. Fortunately there was no planes come down so the sub wasn't needed. And then we got back to Trincomalee and decided that we'd had enough there,

so they sent us to Freemantle in Australia and when we got to Freemantle they had the stores lined up on the shore, and there was sticks of rhubarb nearly as thick as your wrist, and cabbage, and everything else you wanted. And coming across the Indian Ocean there – worse dinner we ever had – was dehydrated potatoes, dehydrated meat and dehydrated cabbage! That’s what we were living on – a lot of dehydrated stuff.

EA-C Well, did any of the crew suffer any health problems because of the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables and meat?

Mr T Well, not that I know of, they seemed to pull through, they had a doctor on board the leader and a little bit of a sickbay with a couple of cots in it. And when we left Freemantle we went round the corner to a place called St Alvin’s. And then we left there and we went across the Australian bit to Melbourne. Well, when we got to Melbourne you gave shore leave to one watch, but whilst they were ashore, there was a signal come in, a Japanese submarine sighted, so it was prepare for sea again, get everybody back aboard and the last one aboard, we were on our way and he was coming in a motorboat behind us! Anyway, we got him aboard and we went round, but we couldn’t see anything of a submarine so we went into Sydney and we had to get into harbour and check up as much as we could, into dry dock, and then we went up to Admiralty Islands in the Pacific. And we were tied up alongside an American destroyer so that we could fraternise and all that. And the Yanks telling us how they got on and what money they could get and everything, they didn’t credit us when they knew what we got. Some fellow was getting more money than us because his mother was dependent on him in an allowance, as well as his pay. And when we got back to Sydney my relief had disappeared, but they got somebody in the end, and we went from Sydney by train to Melbourne. And the thing that struck me most on the train was a notice – ‘Anyone pulling the communication cord would be fined £5.’ And underneath, ‘Anyone throwing a lighted cigarette out through the window will be fined £50.’ Bush fires! So we got to Melbourne and we went on board *The Rangatiki*, and there was lots of Americans there. There was lots of woman and children who’d managed to get out of Singapore. There was us and a few others that were to go home – home to England. And when we got to Wellington in New Zealand we were given the option of working to load up the fresh meat into the fridge, go ashore for 22 hours a day or go out with guests. So my mate says to me, ‘Working in a fridge won’t get us home any earlier, will it?’ And we went out to a place called Pirinoa, to a farm, a Mr and

Mrs MacDonald.

EA-C How long did you spend there?

Mr T A week. We sailed from Wellington, we headed north for the Panama Canal, and *The Rangitata* was the sister ship to *The Rangitiki* and the steward on *The Rangitata* was John Prescott – he became the Deputy Prime Minister eventually. And while we were at sea and the wars were on, the servicemen used to have to do lookout duties at night, in case, but half-way across the South Pacific, peace was declared in the war in Europe.

EA-C And what was your reaction to that?

Mr T Well, we were all glad. And of course everybody rejoicing on board and they put a special meal on for us. I've got a copy of the menu in front of me, and we, eight servicemen, was on a table for our meals, and the steward was a Scouser – Liverpudlian, and he said, 'You're getting the lot tonight!' (*laughter*) So when the choice come up tomato or vegetable soup, he come with tomato, then he come with the vegetable soup, and then the choice of the main meal – say roast lamb or roast beef or what, you got two of them and a sweet, (*laughter*) and coffee – we were bloated! *The Rangitiki* was a luxury liner and when war was over we didn't even have to do lookouts. When we got to the Panama Canal we went through and the American servicemen on board were discharged ashore in Panama. And then we made our way across the Atlantic to England. And on the voyage we got friendly with some of the children who liked to play with us and their mothers had a bit of peace. (*laughter*) And when we arrived at England we landed and eventually got back to Chatham where we were sent on leave. And when I got back to Chatham after leave I was drafted up to *The Gairlock* in Scotland – that's where they were putting the tank landing crafts into mothballs and things like that. And I was up there for a year and then I was drafted to Sheerness. The duties on *The Gairlock* – I had a short spell as postman, going on shore for the mail and that – taking the bets ashore ... to put on, collect the winnings, go back aboard. And then I was made coxswain of *The Phineas*. And I was coxswain of *The Phineas* for a good while up there – 24 hours on, 24 hours off. And your 24 hours on, if *The Phineas* was wanted, irrespective of time – day or night – that was you and the rest of the crew. Then I was drafted down to Sheerness to a ship called *HMS Eglinton*. And we used to do trips to Cuxhaven in Germany. And when we come back after the first trip we were all

transferred to *HMS Cowdray*. And we carried on to Cuxhaven which was a home base for submarine crews – U-boats. And everybody in Sheerness knew when we going out because ‘Jack’ would be buying bottles of *Nescafe* and anything else like that, and cigarettes and you could sell a packet of cigarettes for 20 Marks, and then you could buy a pound postal order for 20 Marks which you could send home and get a £1 for. And you could also swap for cameras or telescopes and things like that. I was 23 when the war ended and after a year at Sheerness they decided I’d been home long enough so I was sent back to Chatham barracks and drafted out to Malta where I served for two and a half years.

EA-C In what capacity?

Mr T On *HMS Surprise* – *HMS Surprise* being the C&C’s dispatch vessel – or yacht, as it was known.

EA-C What were your duties at that point?

Mr T Just ordinary, seamanship duties, like. But *The Surprise* was used for diplomatic reasons. If the C&C come aboard to go somewhere, we’d have a guard of honour for whoever it was when he come on and the poop deck would be done up – awnings up, side screens, weather cloths, ceremonial awnings, green and white would be put up inside. Lights under the ventilators with the wooden thing on top of them for the guests when they come and brass dolphins on the handrail of the gangway and they’d be serving out drinks and what have you – not to us! (*laughter*) Well, I was two and a half years out there at the same time as Prince Phillip was the First Lieutenant of *The Chequers* and the Queen, as Princess Elizabeth, she was also out there. And when Prince Phillip wanted his cabin painted we were in dry dock, and he had the use of a cabin on *The Surprise* for sleeping on. And if you were going ashore he’d come along and he’d ask if anybody wanted a lift – Prince Phillip would give them a lift into Valletta, and he’d carry on and they’d go their way. And we also went travelling round several Greek islands and that and when we went to Greece we used to go to Piraeus and then get the train into Athens.

EA-C During all these travels, Mr Taggart, did you find time to meet any future girlfriends?

Mr T No. It means you were here today and gone tomorrow, and that was it more or less. I think the girl I got to know best was the girl in the paper shop in Sheerness; because seven o'clock every morning, as a postman, I used to go ashore, grab the papers, get back aboard, serve the papers out, then, when I went ashore at nine o'clock with the mail, call into the paper-shop again, and pay for the papers, collect a bit of commission, and ... she was the only girl I really got to know. But she was only a young girl of about sixteen – seventeen.

EA-C And you'd be what – 24 at this time?

Mr T Yea.

EA-C So whereabouts – how many years did you spend in the Royal Navy?

Mr T Well, when I come home from Malta, I went on holiday again – leave – then back to Chatham and I was drafted down to Sheerness again to the minesweeper, *HMS Cockatrice*. And we used to do trips and exercises around. Then I was rated up to Acting PO and after a year there I was discharged, because when Clement Attlee got to be Prime Minister, 'wink, wink,' 'nudge, nudge,' 'Clem, we don't want all these NCOs now the war is over. If we sold – let them buy themselves out at £25 a head, we could make a bob or two!' Which he did! But there was so many bought themselves out, it was Clem – 'We won't have anybody in the way of NCOs.' 'Oh well, in that case, all NCOs still in the Navy will have to serve eighteen month's service.' The papers you signed to say you'd do twelve years weren't worth the paper they were printed on, so that's how I was so long extra in the Navy.

EA-C And did you come back to live on the Isle of Man afterwards?

Mr T I come back to the Isle of Man and I got a job on the Steam Packet driving a lorry in the summer and on the cargo in the winter.

EA-C How did it feel to see your family again – what was that like?

Mr T Oh, it was great to see them and get settled down into a home and then I eventually met the wife. (*laughter*)

EA-C Tell me about meeting your wife.

Mr T Well, there was a friend of mine who was an auntie to a boy I used to be in the same class as. And she worked in the Jane Crookall maternity home. And they used to have a party at Christmas and invite people in and she invited me. And I met the wife at the parties.

EA-C And what was her name?

Mr T Millie – Millie Skillicorn, known as ‘Skillie.’ (*laughter*) And eventually we got married. I saw this advert for the paper for an assistant school caretaker and I put in for it, I was lucky enough to get it, and I done three years as an assistant in Ballakermeen High School and then the Head Caretaker retired and I took over as Head Caretaker for 23 years and then I became the peripatetic supervisory caretaker for three years. I used to drive all round the Island and if anybody on the Island was off sick I could step in and take their place – especially in these little country schools where there was a woman cleaner. And in the summer holidays I used to take the floor-scrubbing machines and polishers to these country schools and do them up and that, and I also used to take notes if they wanted anything. If Ballaugh [school] wanted paper towels or toilet rolls or anything else, I’d take it there the next time I was passing, and North and South of the Island and West – all over.

EA-C During your time as assistant caretaker and caretaker at Ballakermeen, you must have seen a lot of changes to the school itself over the years.

Mr T Oh yes, they used to have huts as extra classrooms but then they put up a technology block. Woodwork classes, metalwork – they had labs upstairs and domestic science rooms. And then they built ‘H’ block, which is more classrooms and everything else that they wanted. So ...

EA-C What would your duties have been?

Mr T Well, I used to be responsible for the caretakers. I had two assistants, a female caretaker and three ... six ... nine ... eleven women cleaners to go round to see to and ... anything you wanted – kids giving you any hassle. Anything in the cleaning line ... that was it.

EA-C Who was the head at the school when you started there?

Mr T Mr Lockman was one of the head teachers up there.

EA-C Hmm ... were the children well behaved or did they get up to mischief?

Mr T There were some that were very, very good, there were others that were normal, and there were some that were very, very bad. And nearly always, those that were bad, you'd see their names in the papers. One I know that was bad – he was arrested for having a knife in a pub. And others ... well, I won't mention names or anything, but the names used to crop up.

EA-C What's the worst thing you had to deal with in that job?

Mr T I think the worst thing was cleaning out the filter for the baths. The old filter, it had perforated copper panels round the inside. And there was like shingle between that and the side of the tank. Then in the middle it was full of sand. And there was like a manhole in the top and when you cleared it out you had to get all the sand out and everything inside and it was pretty dirty and you had to come up for air every so often. And then you'd have to wash the sand and wash the shingle and put it all back in and do it up. Well, sometimes we'd drain it – it would depend on the circumstances. If we didn't, when we'd finished cleaning it, we'd have to drain it then and wash the bath out, because the algae would start growing. So I think that was the worst and dirtiest job of the lot. I was lucky, I had good staff, good staff indeed!

EA-C What year did you retire from that job?

Mr T I retired in February 1984.

EA-C And what did you go on to do in your retirement years?

Mr T Well, I retired in the February, which was a busy time coming up for gardening, so I was fully occupied 'til the following autumn, so I didn't miss going to work, 'cos I was working at home.

EA-C Do you spend a lot of time gardening now?

Mr T Yes, and I used to go out, the wife was in the bowling green – the bowling club. She used to do the teas, so most of the summer she was over there and I was in

the garden, which suited us both.

EA-C Do you belong to any veteran associations or organisations?

Mr T No. When I left the Navy the war-cry was – or when I was in the Navy – ‘When I get out of this I won’t even join a Christmas Club!’

EA-C Did you keep in contact with any of your shipmates?

Mr T No, we all lost touch. And then ... you don’t know if they got killed or not. You don’t know anything like that – just drifted apart. You make new friends every ship you go on.

EA-C What impact do you think your time in the Navy has had on the rest of your life?

Mr T Well, the Navy teaches you self-discipline. And ... it serves you in good stead in future years – makes you think twice before you do anything. And you try not to rush into things – you know, think them over first. Well, I’ve been on me own since the wife died ten years ago, and I can cope with the cleaning, caretaker ... the ironing and the washing and all that. I can do a bit of painting here and there ... when necessary, but I wouldn’t go up a ladder now. I wouldn’t be allowed to. Well, once when I was working in St Mary’s School, I was kneeling down in the kitchen and afterwards one of the kitchen girls said to me – well, she was a woman – ‘I know you were in the Services,’ she says, ‘the insteps of your shoes are polished!’ You know, between the heel and the sole – used to polish that – force of habit! (*laughter*) Used to have kit inspections when we were on the training ship and the idea was, get pieces of cardboard about that size and you’d fold your things up, put the cardboard underneath the name and roll it up into a roll and tie it. And when you’d done that to all your kit that you could do, you used to lay it out on your spare hammock, and you’d have rolls of jerseys and shirts and that with all the names in line, the string used to have to be in line, the name of your kitbag had to be showing on the bottom, and err ... it looked very nice!

EA-C Are you still as organised in your own home?

Mr T Oh, I think I’m pretty regular in everything I do. I mean, I’m usually about

twenty to seven of a morning, and dinner time – twelve o'clock, tea time – five to six, and I never have anything after tea 'til breakfast the following morning, so I suppose that's routine – Navy routine, isn't it?

EA-C Looking back over your life, Mr Taggart, would you say you've had a good life?

Mr T Oh, I can't complain. I've seen a lot more than most people. I've been around (*laughter*) – that's about all I can say!

END OF INTERVIEW