

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

**‘TIME TO REMEMBER’**

**Interviewee(s):** Mr Bill Harrison

**Date of birth:** 18<sup>th</sup> February 1918

**Place of birth:**

**Interviewer(s):** David Callister

**Recorded by:** David Callister

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**Topic(s):** Royal Engineer during WWII  
D-Day in Normandy  
*Bailey* pontoon bridging  
Wartime living conditions  
The Battle at Falaise  
Failure of Operation ‘Market Garden’  
Rations  
Digging slit trenches  
The Stern Gang in Palestine  
Getting demobbed  
Returning to the Isle of Man  
Working as a joiner for Local Commissioners  
Builders McCormick & Davis  
Government assisted schemes for hotels

**Bill Harrison - Mr H**  
**David Callister - DC**

**DC** Okay – the interview with Bill Harrison. We’re at 5 High View Road, and it’s, I think, the tenth, probably, is it the tenth, eleventh? It is ... it’s the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2005, and Bill is going to talk about – what – it’s W P Harrison, isn’t it?

**Mr H** No, that was the name of the business – my father’s name.

**DC** Oh – do you have any other name – is it William Harrison, isn’t it?

**Mr H** No, just William.

**DC** Just William, right – there’s a character for you! (*laughter*)

**Mr H** Yes, just William.

**DC** Just William.

**Mr H** Yes.

**DC** Anyway, we’re going to talk about the thing, which I understand was called, ‘Operation Overlord,’ D-Day in Normandy, in June of 1944. As a Royal Engineer, then, you’d already been trained, I mean you knew a *Bailey* bridge from bottom to top and top to bottom, I suppose?

**Mr H** Yes, we’d been trained for over two years on assault crossings, *Bailey* pontoon bridging, demolitions and various other engineering work. Most of it was done in Northern Ireland, preparing for the invasion of France.

**DC** Yea. So when it came to D-Day then, or these landings, at least, for Normandy, did you have any idea where you were going?

**Mr H** Well we were moved from Northern Ireland, first to Southampton waters, where we were building barges made up of metal casings with two large diesel engines, one starboard and one forward, and err ... after these were built, we were then moved off to I do not know where – somewhere on the southeast coast into a forest, like hundreds of thousands of other troops were, and we were barbed wired in and fenced in, that you could not get out, and we were there about four weeks under very secret – strict secrecy ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... so all we could do was write so many words on a letter home, and everything was censored ...

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** ... and then we ended up being on a train round London, and I – and roll round the country area down that south area, and we landed up at somewhere – coast – where there were ‘hards’ built – as they called them – a ‘hard’ – for the landing craft to pull in and take the vehicles and various other equipment on, and we were split up into platoons, that we were not all in one ship, in case it was sunk. Split up into twenty parties on each different ship. We actually left on 2<sup>nd</sup> June and D-Day was supposed to be the 5<sup>th</sup> June. And during that time we must have gone right round the English Channel in real force gales, which most of the men were so violently sick that they were glad to land, even under the opposition that was on the other side.

**DC** Right.

**Mr H** Luckily I was not subject to seasickness, so I was okay.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** And then the invasion was then cancelled for one day.

**DC** Due to bad weather.

**Mr H** Due to very bad weather.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** And we landed the next morning on the 6<sup>th</sup> at mid-morning about eleven o'clock.

**DC** Just before we get to that, then, what were these landing craft like, and what – how bad was the state of the sea when you arrived?

**Mr H** Oh, it must have been force seven or eight, and they were flat bottomed. They were big landing craft which took so many tanks on them and so many other vehicles.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr H** LCTs was the name of them.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** Yea. And when we did land, it was amongst – oh, many of them were mined. Sunk bodies floating in the water, bodies on the beaches and we landed at Gold Beach and the sign was Versa Mer ...

**DC** Aversa Mer, yea.

**Mr H** Yes, yes, Versa Mer.

**DC** This landing, when you saw all these bodies around – presumably there would be injured there, as well – in other words, not dead – was there any backup of any kind to deal with the wounded?

**Mr H** Well, well, they were actually landing at about eight o'clock in the morning, so most of the bodies that we'd seen were ships that had been holed or shelled and sunk and the bodies of the soldiers with their equipment on, drowned, and then they were floating in the water, and my first thing, when I came off the craft, made our way up to a hedgerow, to get cover, and there was a great heap alongside us – about six of us there, and I remember blankets, and we just lifted the blanket and there was some of the dead infantry.

**DC** Hmmm – underneath.

**Mr H** Covered over, yes.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** So we were then checking up for mines on the beaches until the next day when our barges had come over by the tugs, and for two weeks we did beach work,

such as using these barges to ferry out prisoners to the supply ships, and bring back ammunition and rations and various other equipment.

**DC** Where did you sleep overnight?

**Mr H** On the ground – well, we dug-in actually, in a field just the other side of the road – we always – I never seen a bed 'til later on in the campaign at a place called Blerick.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** But what we used to do was two men, we'd dig a trench about two feet deep, and put the ground sheets on it and you'd get a couple of hours sleep and then on duty for four hours, and so on. And if it was wet, you'd use your gas-capes to cover you over.

**DC** You wouldn't be under fire, though, in any case at this time, would you?

**Mr H** Well, there was shell fire ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** ... but that was more or less in the distance.

**DC** Yes. Then you – at this stage, probably didn't know what the objective was or where you were going, anyway, would you?

**Mr H** Well, through the grapevine, the main point was to try and take Caen in the first day.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr H** But Montgomery, in that section, was in command, and the Americans landed over on the west, and they did a detour while the British and the Canadians took all the flack on our area and Caen was not taken until the end of July.

**DC** Yea – when did you move away from the beaches and what was your next move, then?

**Mr H** Well, our next move was – our companies were specially for large *Bailey* pontoon bridging and also the assault crossing for the main rivers, and the main rivers – the first one – was the Seine, the next one was Nijmegen, with Operation ‘Market Garden,’ for Arnhem, and the next one after that was at Venlo and the next – the largest bridge was on the Rhine at Xanten across to Wessel.

**DC** That would be a colossal bridge to make, wouldn’t it?

**Mr H** The one was the largest bridge at the Rhine, which was sixteen hundred foot, with the landing bays included, across.

**DC** Now, *Bailey* bridging, then, is the speciality of the Royal Engineers.

**Mr H** Well, of our – there are different – there are construction engineers, there are also port company engineers. Now in the – on the invasion beaches at Arromanches, the engineers were the ones that built the complete *Mulberry* harbour, which was all towed over with tugs ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... and it arrived there about D plus two, and they built that so their job was always for ports, and they were always railway companies that when the railways were taken over, engineers could use the railways.

**DC** Right. Now you, then, were headed for Caen; how long – you say you didn’t get there ‘til – how long?

**Mr H** Oh – it was the end of July ‘til Caen was completely taken – it was practically – might have been the 29<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> July.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** And then there was an operation called ‘Goodwood,’ where the British army was involved with – and the Canadians – and that was a complete failure. There were three hundred British tanks completely blown up by the Germans, and thousands of dead, and the next thing was the battle for Falaise, and they were – where the Germans were encircled on one side by the Canadians and the British

army, and on the other side, the Americans and the Poles.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr H** And in that operation there were four hundred thousand German lost to prisoners killed and wounded.

**DC** Really?

**Mr H** Four hundred thousand – and one thousand five hundred German tanks were also wiped out. But, unfortunately, some of the top Germans – SS and their tanks – managed to escape and we caught up with them at Nijmegen and Arnhem.

**DC** Hmmm. The infantry, then, would be ahead of you – you'd actually shipped most of the infantry over from the UK, presumably – the engineers and other vessels?

**Mr H** The infantry – well, the paratroops were actually the first in on the beaches ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** ... and they also were in – on the Seine.

**DC** I'm just trying to get this picture of the engineers going in ...

**Mr H** Yes.

**DC** ... and a vast number – a vast amount of metal work, because these *Bailey* bridges were big and they required a lot, didn't they?

**Mr H** Yes.

**DC** How did that get there?

**Mr H** Well, the Royal Army Service Corp, they had – I don't know whether they call themselves companies, or what, under the Royal Army Service Corp, but they had companies – I'll call them companies – of their trucks that were completely

used for the engineers, by the RASC drivers, loaded with pontoons and all the other *Bailey* panels, transoms and the – all the other metal and the wood planking.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** And they – they would be informed beforehand by the top brass that such and such a bridge was going to [be] built on what they reckoned would be the date after the assault was made to get the infantry across and to get a bridge out on the opposite side.

**DC** What sort of transport did you have and what were the roads like?

**Mr H** Well, the roads varied. Some places we had to fill in roads with bulldozers and that that had been shelled and that. Other places we used what we called *Summerfield* track, it was in great rolls of metal, like wire netting, but very heavy, it was also used for making temporary landing places for the small planes.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** So that was what we used, and we were most thirty hundredweight trucks, fifteen hundredweights ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... and a few jeeps.

**DC** Now, you were talking about Falaise, there, I mean, that was a major battle, presumably?

**Mr H** Oh, Falaise – I've never known anything like that. When we arrived there, there were bodies – the stench – you had to – we were using – muslin over our mouths – the whole area was dead horses, dead cattle – all blown up ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** ... bodies – Germans – lying by the roadside. And they were completely



encircled, so when the – finally broke through there, to the Seine, at a place called Vernon, we then had to take the infantry over, which was the 43<sup>rd</sup> Division, out of 30 Corp, and take them across, overnight, in storm boats. And we took about eighteen to twenty infantry in battle order and landed them the other side, and that went on all night until the next morning. And when they finally got a bridge-head, the next day, we then started to build – the Service Corp would have all the bridging materials up, and I think we had to blow up – demolish two or three houses that were in the way of the landing bays.

**DC** Yes. How long would it take to bridge the Seine with a *Bailey* bridge, then?

**Mr H** The Seine – I should say – they used to have a lighter bridge that could be done in a matter of six hours, but that could only take jeeps over and infantry, but we were on the bridges that were taking the thirty-ton tanks ...

**DC** Right.

**Mr H** ... so, I know on the Seine, I think it took us about 24 hours. We lost a Captain and a bow-man off one of their boats killed there.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** And it took us about 24 hours, and then we stayed on the bridge as maintenance for about three days and then we moved up to Brussels.

**DC** So these bridges would just be left behind, would they?

**Mr H** Oh, for the rest of the war – in fact, there's still *Bailey* bridges in some of the places being used now – I've seen on the television.

**DC** Yea?

**Mr H** Yea.

**DC** Day by day, then, you had to eat, what would you have – were you given packed rations or something?

**Mr H** Compo rations in a – there'd be a box, for I think, so many soldiers – I'm not

sure whether it was for 12 or for 20, and there'd be tins of tea, dried milk and sugar in one go in them. And you had soup tins that, when you pulled the cap off, it self-heated.

**DC** Really!?! (*laughter*)

**Mr H** Yes, self-heated – I remember using that on the beach when we were laying against this pile of dead bodies, and err ... the other thing was the old 'bully-beef' ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... and hard-tack biscuits ...

**DC** Yes

**Mr H** ... and I'd never seen bread until months and months afterwards, and then, when we got it, it was green mouldy!

**DC** Oh, yea.

**Mr H** Yea.

**DC** Did you feel hungry all the time then, or did you get sufficient to see you through?

**Mr H** Well, we existed.

**DC** Yea – I suppose it all was just existing, yea.

**Mr H** Yea.

**DC** What did you – did you come across then, as you were going through all these areas, local residents and anywhere that you could perhaps acquire some food?

**Mr H** Not really, because, in Normandy, in Normandy they – there were a lot of properties demolished by the terrific shell-fire from the battleships at the time, and they were not too friendly to us, because, with them being a country area,

they'd been well fed and they got on well with the Germans.

**DC** Hmmm, so there wouldn't be welcoming you if you knocked on the door.

**Mr H** The only thing I remember was managing to get to Bayeux after it had been taken, and in a little *estaminet*, or bar, or whatever they called them then, that was my first taste of *Calvados* ...

**DC** Oh, right! (*laughter*)

**Mr H** And there was plenty of barrels of cider about, but we were warned not to take any of it in case the Germans had poisoned it.

**DC** Ah, yes, yea ... then you were making some progress – you were across the Seine by now, what's your next target?

**Mr H** Well, when we got over the Seine, and we stayed for maintenance on the bridge until the rear company came up and took over, we then went ahead, behind the infantry and the tanks that had got over the bridge after us building it, and they took – liberated Brussels without any problems.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** Without a lot of problems. And we landed up there in Brussels on the early evening, and we just bivouacked in a field on the outskirts, and I remember the trams that they have in continental places – you know, these long yellow trams, getting a tram and going into Brussels where they made a big of us, and there was music and dancing in the cafes and I think we were there about four days, and then we moved up to Burg Leopold for joining Heri Corp on the operation of 'Market Garden,' which involved the Arnhem paratroops.

**DC** Well, this was the famous 'Bridge Too Far' story, wasn't it?

**Mr H** That was right, 'The Bridge Too Far.' And this was a single road in Holland with the Germans either side blasting us – it took us about five days to get through for the carnage and the tanks and bulldozers were in use pushing the vehicles that were burning off the road to make room for – you know – to get through, and we arrived in Eindhoven and were greeted by the 101<sup>st</sup> American

parachute, that had dropped there and taken it. And then I remember Phillips Electrical Engineering factories. And after that we went on through Grave – we didn't have to bridge that – to Nijmegen and we built a very large bridge – it must have been about 800 foot – at Nijmegen below the existing as the big railway bridge had been demolished by the Germans ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... and actually they had the charges on the Nijmegen bridge, but, fortunately they were faulty, and the Americans – paratroopers, managed to capture the bridge after a great lot of losses – they lost an awful lot of men ...

**DC** Yes, yea.

**Mr H** ... On the crossings.

**DC** Operation 'Market Garden' – is that where you became ill?

**Mr H** No, we – it was at Nijmegen, after the Arnhem – you know, they had to retreat ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... and 2,000 managed to get back out of over 10,000 – that's where Major Caine got the VC there.

**DC** Yes, hmmm.

**Mr H** Well, that winter was a shocking winter in Holland. The roads were flooded – snow – and we were on road works, trying to keep roads going for the tanks and the various things, and they had – in the forest there were big battles going on. And we moved further down river on the Waal, and it was no town – I just remember we were able to get inside to sleep, into an old barn, up in the loft, and the rats running over us all night.

**DC** Oh gosh.

**Mr H** And we started bridging there, and I was full of a cold on the chest, and we

were getting shelled – there was shell-fire going over from the other side, and after about a day's bridging, I collapsed, and the *Bailey* panels came over and hit me on my hip and I was whipped into a field medical place, and then when they checked me and that, I was evacuated to Tilburg to a Canadian hospital which was full of Canadians, and I was there for about 16 days. It was round about December 20<sup>th</sup> and I was then released from hospital on the 4<sup>th</sup> or the 5<sup>th</sup> January – just clear of pneumonia, and went straight into hatching again – bridging in terrible conditions and sleeping under trucks with snow all around you.

**DC** Oh! Now one of the things that people will be wondering about is – you wouldn't have a change of clothes, would you? Did you have – I mean, there was no laundry service, was there?

**Mr H** Well, they did come up with a scheme – this was months – a couple of months after D-Day – that they had mobile – called mobile baths where a truck would come up and it had some sort of water tanks, and they'd rig a shower up in a field, and you just stripped off and went under it and got a wash down like that, and that would be about once a month.

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

**Mr H** And I forget how often we managed to change our underclothes – we only had the one pair on and one spare pair, so you had to wash your own, and sleep in your battledress.

**DC** Yes. You just had to catch a bit of water wherever there was some, then?

**Mr H** Aye.

**DC** You'd not be carrying a lot water – it would mostly be drinking water anyway, mustn't it?

**Mr H** Well, we had some Gerry cans of it.

**DC** Yes?

**Mr H** You could pick up – there wasn't a shortage of water, I don't think – there was

plenty of water.

**DC** Yes, yes. What about the fellers who wanted cigarettes, then, did they ever get them?

**Mr H** Oh well, we got a fifty – a tin of fifty. Free cigarettes, in the compo rations, for each – that was fifty a week, I think – it might have been a bit more than a week. And that’s where I first started to smoke, because you were dug in in trenches overnight – slit-trenches, or under a makeshift gas cape, you know, with a few sticks and that to hold it up.

**DC** Yes, yes.

**Mr H** And also, I remember at Nijmegen we found a wine brewery and we got a cask of red wine and I remember drinking it out of the old white enamel mugs ...

**DC** Oh yes. *(laughter)*

**Mr H** ... and the rain coming down, soaking wet, and it was pure gut-rot, *(laughter)* yea.

**DC** The cold weather must have been the worst of all, wasn’t it?

**Mr H** That was – from December right up ‘til March was deadly.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr H** Hmmm, it was the worse winter they’d had.

**DC** Now we were talking earlier about bridging the Rhine. I mean, people can’t imagine that you could come along and just put a *Bailey* bridge across the Rhine.

**Mr H** Well you couldn’t, because, after I’d been in the hospital and came out in early January, about three or four weeks after that – I can’t say now to a week – we were moved down to the Waal – the River Waal – and we entered a small town called Blerick, it was on the borders of Holland and this was in Belgium where we landed up. And we had to build a *Bailey* across there as Venlo had been the

last place to be taken by the British of Holland.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** And that was the first time I'd ever managed to sleep in a house. And in the whole small town, there wasn't a single civilian in the town. They'd all been evacuated as our bombers, maybe the *Lancasters* – could have been the Americans as well, I don't know – had completely wrecked it. And I remember going into this house with one of me friends that I was chummy with, matey with – he was a Scots bloke, and we found this place, and it was the first time I'd ever seen a duvet, on the bed.

**DC** Oh, right, duvets, they wouldn't be known, then.

**Mr H** I remember going in – it was only the one night – and sleeping in there with the roof wide open. Luckily it never rained.

**DC** Yes – you were actually on a bed then, were you? (*laughter*)

**Mr H** Yes. Now I must tell you this over plot – I don't know whether I should or not, but when we had this bridge built, the rest of the company moved back to reform, to get ready for moving on into Germany, and there was a section of us left for maintenance – twenty of us ...

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** ... and we were doing two hours on and four hours off, through the 24 hours, so you never got more than about three hours sleep. And we hadn't had a drink for ages, because you couldn't get a drink. So this chap, with me being a joiner, we took a heavy hammer and a crowbar out this evening, when we were off duty. Wandered through and we found a place wrecked completely, which was like – what did they call them in Holland, now – they call them *estaminees* in France, don't they?

**DC** I don't know what they call them in Holland.

**Mr H** I can't think of it now, but say it was a bar – it had a bar in it. And the actual bar was there, and the fittings at the back and it was loaded with empty bottles ...

**DC** Right, empty ...

**Mr H** ... loaded with empty bottles, old bottles of gin, cognac, champagne, all sorts of wines, and there was nothing there. But then – with being a joiner, I was looking at bare floor – the bare boarded floor – and I could see joints open. So I got the crowbar and the hammer and opened two or three boards. And the joists between the ceiling below and the joist were packed with gin, cognac, champagne. *(laughter)*

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

**Mr H** Now this place had been completely shelled and I remember having a good drink there and we got a load of this stuff in sort of sacks, wrapped it and going back in the dark, ploughing ourselves through shell holes, you know, half shot. Got back to the bridge, there was an American MP on the other side, and the British MP on the side we were on in Blerrick, and I don't know – I think we gave them a few of these bottles, but I do remember more or less well shot, and there was chaos on the bridge with the traffic both ways and the next thing was the military police came up and took them away – the MPs – and put new ones on ...

**DC** Aye?

**Mr H** And the next morning our sergeant came up with a driver from – back from Belgium – and he got to know that it was Jock and myself that had got this, and he threatened us with a Court-martial.

**DC** Oh?!

**Mr H** And then he said, 'Well, if you tell me where the stuff is ...' he said, *(laughter)* so we took them up and they loaded up and buggered off back to Brussels and flogged it. So we got away with it.

**DC** *(laughter)* That's a lovely story, that! Oh, that's great.

**Mr H** Hmmm.

**DC** So were you there, then, when they got to the Rhine with the group?



**Mr H** After that, we followed up on – when they started to get into Germany, and we landed up on our side of the Rhine, and the Germans the other side of the Rhine, you see?

**DC** Oh, yes.

**Mr H** And there were massive flood-banks that they couldn't see where – we landed at a place called Xanten.

**DC** Where they shelling you?

**Mr H** Oh, they were shelling, yes, oh yes.

**DC** Oh aye.

**Mr H** And our shells – we had the biggest barrage of the war of our artillery on the night of the crossing of the Rhine ...

**DC** Yes, yes.

**Mr H** ... and we were all dug in to slit-trenches. But for about ten days or more, when we were at Xanten, of a night, we used to be driven up to the land this side of the Rhine, with the big flood banks that they couldn't see us ...

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** ... and we were – Service Corp – was – well, for all the different corps, all the different engineers, various other units, were getting all the materials up to be near the banks ...

**DC** Right.

**Mr H** ... and we had all our storm-boards up there, right up to the bank, during the night-time, and bulldozers, because they – when the field part company had the bulldozers and cranes and diggers and all the rest, and when, to build the bridge, you had to cut out the storm-banks, you see, to a level of the fields.

**DC** Yes, right.

**Mr H** We also had to dig ourselves slit-trenches, pretty deep – two foot, six inches to three foot – that’s on – when they decided on the night, we didn’t know, all of a sudden we were brought up when all the gear was on the site, into the slit-trenches, and then that night I remember the two of us in the slit-trench – and all the others were the same – of the most terrific barrage I’ve heard, and all the planes were dropping parachutes – paratroops the other side of the Rhine.

**DC** Yea, right.

**Mr H** So at a certain hour – it would be gone midnight, or roundabout midnight – we then had the infantry – there’s actually a book called, ‘Assault on the Seine’ in the library, where it’s shows you the storm-boats and about twenty infantry, ten either side, getting them into the water, launching them.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr H** And we then, all night, were taking fifteen Scottish infantry over to the other side. And in early morning, when it was daylight, I remember the storm-boat – I was on the motor of it and I had a bow-man for jumping ashore to hold it in while the infantry came up – I remember this night and early morning when it was daylight – might have been 7.30 in March, you know. It would be about seven o’clock, 7.30 daylight, our engine packing up, and we were drifting downstream quite a way, and we were getting fired at from the ‘Jerries’ the other side, and luckily, one of our other boats seen us and came after us and towed us back.

**DC** Oh, right.

**Mr H** Then, once they had a bridge-head the other side, we started bridging, then, and that bridge was massive – it took us three days to do that, and actually Montgomery came us and congratulated, and Sir Brian Horricks and also Churchill.

**DC** Hmmm.

**Mr H** And then I got seven days leave after that – came home.

**DC** What – you got back home to the Island, did you?

**Mr H** Yea – I got back for seven days.

**DC** Yea – would that be your only leave during your war period, was it?

**Mr H** Oh no, I had leave some, from when I was in Ireland.

**DC** Yes, right. So having then bridged the Rhine, what followed from that?

**Mr H** Well, we – when we had – I'd seen all the gliders that were wrecked, you know, and there was quite a lot of the paratroopers dead the other side. And we were there, I think about a week, and then we moved off the follow the troops up, because there were another river at Bremen that we may have to bridge.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** But luckily they'd taken it without blowing it.

**DC** Right.

**Mr H** So we just followed up and we were just on the – this side of Hamburg when they surrendered.

**DC** Oh, right.

**Mr H** Yes.

**DC** So was that the end of the war for you then, virtually?

**Mr H** Not really.

**DC** Oh!

**Mr H** Because we then were to be, in the end, brought back to a place called Osnabruck, in Germany.

**DC** That's even beyond Hamburg, isn't it – further North?

**Mr H** Well, wherever it was, we were brought to Osnabruck and we were working

there then – all sorts of works – road-works, demolition, wrecked property that was in the road.

**DC** Yea, right.

**Mr H** And then the demob – we all had a demob number in our AB64S, and if you were over – if you were under 26 group – you stayed until your demob time came up.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** But if you're over the 26 or 28 – something like that – it was in red ink, 'Far East.' So in my company, everybody that was over that group, we were split up – companies we'd been in five and a half years – sent back to Belgium, to reform the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Div, as they – all their people that were taken out, that were due for – in the next year – demob, were taken out and then all that were above the group were then making up the companies, so we were for the Far East. Well, it came up to – oh, when we were reformed after a few week, I got home – I got embarkation leave from there. And I got home three days and got re-called. And then we moved on up to Brussels, for near the airport to be flown out to – I don't know whether it was going to be Burma or the Far East, anyway ...

**DC** Yea, yea.

**Mr H** ... and the Atom bomb dropped, thank God, and so it was cancelled.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** So what they did then, they flew us out to Cairo, and we landed at Castle Benito Airport to refuel, and there was a statue of Mussolini was there, it was Libya, and then we landed at Cairo – I can remember seeing the pyramids from when we got off the plane. And we went up in the desert and I met, well, there was loads of troops up in the desert, and I met one of the James brothers who used to be in the corporation waterworks.

**DC** *(laughter)* Yea?

**Mr H** What's his first name? Not the dentist – I can't think of his Christian name – I don't know whether he's still alive or not.

**DC** Yes, hmmm.

**Mr H** I met him up there and I also met Jimmy Swindlehurst who was Fleet Air Arm. So after a week or two, we went right through the desert then, to Palestine.

**DC** What for though – what were you doing?

**Mr H** Well, the Stern Gang – were fighting the British. Began was the head, who was the Prime Minister for Israel up to a few years ago. He was the instigator – one of the top men of the Stern Gang, fighting the British because the British still owned, you know, round Palestine.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** It wasn't Israel then.

**DC** No, no.

**Mr H** So I was – we moved up to there and I landed up at Rosh Pinna in Palestine ... and that was ... we used to go from Rosh Pinna – I remember in bivouacs, in an orange grove, and we used to go down, maybe once a week, to the sea at Galilee, Tiberius, and there were hot springs.

**DC** Yes? Oh right, yes.

**Mr H** Hot springs where you just stripped off in the nude, and walked into the hot springs, and it was full-on hot, half the time!

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

**Mr H** Anyway, after that, after I was three or four months there, and then I got demobbed before my time, on account of being a joiner, and they wanted us in the Isle of Man – a lot of tradesman, for building in England, you know, houses were – got out before their time. Only about three months out before me time ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... and I remember coming back and having about four days, and starting up with me father again, and the first job I went to was Milnes, *The Waverley* ...

**DC** Right.

**Mr H** ... that the internees had been in, and all the stairs were all worn down, because everything had been stripped out for the internees, so I and Len Faragher, the other joiner, we renewed every stair-tread in the house, then we had to do the kitchen and the bedrooms, hang all the windows, window cords and glazing ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** ... and that's to get it ready for that summer.

**DC** Who would be paying for that work, though? Was that the Manx Government would have to pay?

**Mr H** Oh, they ...

**DC** Or the British government?

**Mr H** Well, Milnes of *Waverley* paid us, for the bill, but they would be recompensed by the government, because they'd taken the places over.

**DC** Yes, right, right. What was Douglas promenade like then? Was there still the barbed wire about, or not?

**Mr H** Well, they were taking it – they were taking it down. Now the next year, I remember in the winter, working at *The Formby*, next door to *The Claremont*.

**DC** Hmmm, hmmm.

**Mr H** My cousin had bought it to run as a private hotel, and *The Claremont* was next door to it. Now they will – it was – it must have been 1947 when the Navy went out – *Valkyrie*.

- DC** Was it? Oh right – they were still here in 47 - 1947?
- Mr H** Well, it could have been late 1946, but when I came home in – end of February 1946, *Valkyrie* was still there, but the internees had gone, you see.
- DC** Right, right.
- Mr H** And I remember going into *The Formby* to get that ready for that summer, yea.
- DC** What sort of state were these – were they left in? In a poor state, these places that had been used by internees, or were they still reasonably?
- Mr H** Well, there hadn't been any – all the furniture had been taken out when the war started, when they were taken over and put in *The Derby Castle*, so then there was a mad fight at the end, people trying to get their furniture – ones coming before them and taking the best of the furniture.
- DC** *(laughter)* Yes, that's right!
- Mr H** That's what happened.
- DC** Yes.
- Mr H** But I mean, they wanted fully refurbish. You know, there was partitions with holes in them and skirting boards. Because a lot of the internees made all sorts of ornaments – you know, carving and that.
- DC** Yes, on anything they could get their hands on!
- Mr H** Yea, they'd take skirting boards off, and door panels and things like that – the Manx cottage! *(laughter)*
- DC** *(laughter)* Oh yes, yes.
- Mr H** Yes.
- DC** So there was a lot of work, then, after the war, on the promenade?

**Mr H** Oh yea, yes there was.

**DC** Where would the first housing start from there?

**Mr H** The first housing – McCormick & Davis built their first houses on the Castletown Road, it's the start of ... on the main Castletown Road, you know, above the Saddle Road where the houses up ...

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** A man named Clucas the builder originally started that.

**DC** Oh yes, right.

**Mr H** An him and his wife built all round St Catherine's Drive areas – you know, before the war. And she did most of the decorating.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** Well, they emigrated, I think it was to New Zealand – either New Zealand or Australia, and George McCormick and Arthur Davis took over the job and finished it and then after that they built most of Williston.

**DC** Yes, yes.

**Mr H** And all over the Island, they built loads of houses and I did all the staircases for them.

**DC** Did you, yea?

**Mr H** Hmmm, hundreds.

**DC** How is it that staircases last so long with the amount of traffic that goes up and down them?

**Mr H** Well, in my time, the stringers were out of eleven by inch and a half white Swedish, planed all round. The treads were eleven by inch and a half, planed all round, so that was about an inch and three-eighths finished ...



**DC** Yes?

**Mr H** ... and the risers were seven by one.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** Now that was solid timber ...

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** ... but nowadays – oh, for the last twenty years, I've seen them where they're made of half-inch plywood.

**DC** Really?

**Mr H** Yea – five eighths plywood and stuff like that – you never see solid – unless it's a real good job and still do oak.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** I did, I did staircases where the handrails were [unclear] mahogany for McCormick & Davis in the houses up by *Mannin*, the crossroads, you know. But they were supposed to be for civil servants coming from 'across' for temporary housing.

**DC** Oh, I see, yes, yes.

**Mr H** Hmm, yes.

**DC** And could you buy the handrails from stock from somewhere then?

**Mr H** Well, the sawmills in Quiggins used to buy the timber already machined, you know – nosed, for the treads. And the handrails would be shaped.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** But then we had to do all the notching and wedging and all the rest, but I had machinery for that.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** We could maybe get and order – all the staircases for Willaston would be all the one height and one go and one risers you see?

**DC** Yes, yes.

**Mr H** And so you'd have to be set out for that, and you set your routers and everything for it, and what you do is, you'd get enough for say about twenty staircases, and routed them all ready and all the treads cut so, to size, ready for assembling. And then George would ring up and he wants half a dozen tomorrow, or something like that.

**DC** Oh right. *(laughter)*

**Mr H** And it only took about four man-hours for a full staircase.

**DC** Really?!

**Mr H** Yes.

**DC** Hmm.

**Mr H** I was making those staircases for all Willaston and all the various commissioners' houses for between £13 and £14 – the full staircase.

**DC** Really! Amazing!

**Mr H** Yes. And now it costs you hundreds.

**DC** Of course, or thousands, probably. But were the staircases then, inset into the wall or were they set on bearers carrying them?

**Mr H** No, I mean you had your floor like this, and you had your brick wall with the joists from upstairs, with the fascia, and it went straight against that, and the foot cut to the level and sat on it.

**DC** Yes – so they had no support as you go up the steps?

**Mr H** But they didn't have to because they were that solid.

**DC** They were just solid pieces.

**Mr H** Oh yes – eleven by an inch side pieces.

**DC** Later, though, they would get timber walling, presumably, as well, on one side?

**Mr H** Oh yes, span-rail, hmmm, yes, oh aye, that would be panelled on to close it in. And then, usually, a door at the end and they used that for storing stuff in the houses.

**DC** Oh, that's right. And were these units nailed together, glued together – what were they – how were they fixed?

**Mr H** Well, you notch – your notches for the riser, say it was seven eighths, it started at seven eighths to an inch and a quarter ...

**DC** Right.

**Mr H** ... and the same with the tread. And then you'd cut wedges from nothing to about half inch about six inches, glue on them, draw them in to wedge them all tight, and then nail the treads through into the risers.

**DC** Oh right, right. Yes, that's an interesting thing, making a staircase. I would have imagined it would be several days works, but you say you could do it in ...

**Mr H** Well, if you wanted to make one, it would, and if you made it by hand, it would take you maybe a day and a half.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** Yea.

**DC** This was like factory staircase building, I suppose, but I mean, if you were wanting to do particularly gracious housing and all that sort of thing, that would be a different matter. You'd have to bring specialist craftsmen in for that, presumably, wouldn't you?

**Mr H** Oh, well, nowadays you would, but in my time, before the war, most joiners were trained for bench work and for outside work. Now it's first fixes, second fixes, third fixes – roofers, you know?

**DC** Oh, right, yes, of course.

**Mr H** And they get most of their machinery done – there'd be – there are places over here that just do bench work.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** That will make staircases for the builders.

**DC** Oh aye, it's specialisation, isn't it, that's what it's called.

**Mr H** Yes, specialisation. But in years ago, you had to be able to do all that sort of stuff.

**DC** Well, I mean, as a small company, which you were, you weren't building massive housing estates and so on, you had to be versatile, really.

**Mr H** Oh, yea, well, I did an awful lot of work on the promenade.

**DC** Yes.

**Mr H** I did the builders work for, I think, about eight of the hotels on the promenade. I did *Victory House* – the old *Victory House*, also Gelling's Foundry.

**DC** Yes?

**Mr H** And then we, under the government assisted schemes for the hotels, they used to get – not the heavy grants that they get now, but they used to get a grant plus a low interest – you know, when interest rates were about 10%-12%, they'd get for about 6%.

**DC** Yea.

**Mr H** And we used to do, when they started to modernise, doing en suites, and had to

be new kitchens, you know, because in the old days, I remember going into the houses, before the war and after the war, and the back yards on the Loch Promenade, and all the other areas, you'd go over, and the backdoor, crossbar door would be open, some steps down, and you'd see a load of tomato boxes, with the up-stands in the corner on of each other, with the glass, the glass sauce efforts, with the stem on them, with the trifle or the jelly for tonight's tea!

**DC**        *(laughter)* Right!

**Mr H**        So they had bumble bees all over them, yea! Oh yes, that was quite common, actually – and you never heard of food poisoning!

**DC**        No, no *(laughter)*. Those houses, then, say Loch Promenade for a start ...

**Mr H**        Yes?

**DC**        People used to say, 'Oh, they were thrown up. They were built with rubbish,' and so on. What were they really like? Were they well-built or not well built?

**Mr H**        Well, they were all stone, mostly.

**DC**        Yes.

**Mr H**        Yea. And then the partitions were all three by two studding, with lath and plaster, you know, the laths and the plaster?

**DC**        Yes, right.

**Mr H**        Whereas now they usually put the four and a half inch brick or the concrete blocks in, which are more solid.

**DC**        Yes.

**Mr H**        Yea.

**END OF INTERVIEW**