MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

'TIME TO REMEMBER'

Interviewee(s): **Mr Tommy Keggin**

Date of birth: **16th March 1915**

Place of birth: **Friar Street, Everton, Liverpool**

Interviewer(s): **David Callister**

Recorded by: **David Callister**

Date recorded: **3rd June 2003**

Topic(s):
Early schooldays
Apprenticeship with McKibbin builders
McCormick & Davies
Williston housing schemes
Pay and working conditions
Serving with Royal Engineers in Iraq
Misdiagnosis and treatment for rabies
Dunkirk
The Mona's Queen
Eating WW1 food – *Maconochie* Stew

Tommy Keggin - Mr K
David Callister - DC

DC Well, Tommy, tell me about how you came to be in the Isle of Man, because you were only young when you came, weren't you?

Mr K Well, yes, I was four, and my dad was a merchant navy man, and he sailed round – he used to sail sailing ships for starters, and then err, when the war came along they went through the war and he got the Distinguished Service Medal and a host of other things. He was very proud and he got mentioned in the King's despatches, and he had them framed at home and he used to … 'Don't you dare touch them, boy!' *(laughter)*

DC And at home ... where would that be then – before you came ...

Mr K 7 Circular Road.

DC … before you came to the Isle of Man – you'd be born where?

Mr K Oh I was born in Friar Street in Everton, Liverpool.

DC Oh aye, so there it is, on the wall, saying he'd been a sailor of some honour, then, really, aye.

Mr K He'd been a sailor all his life – he came from Foxdale originally and err ... he had a home there, and in those days, they built their own homes, in my father's days. There's about four or five, maybe six boys – all mucked in and built the house.

DC Yes, yes.

Mr K Mostly built with mud *(laughter)* and stones, they didn't have – couldn't afford sand and cement, I don't suppose, in those days, but they used to just … and never quite dry.

DC Yes.

Mr K Of course, I never knew anything about that, but my sister found the house many years after, and she used to tell me about it.

DC Oh, right. So you went to school in Douglas then, did you?

Mr K In Hanover Street, yes, and err, it's not a school any more now, but err … and if you were late for school you got the cane in those days!

DC Did you!

Mr K Yes, you did that – and his name was Callison, and could he handle the cane! *(laughter)* Well, bloody thing!

DC So you were often late then, were you?

Mr K No, no, I was never late after the first time – once was enough, *(laughter)* because he used to nearly take your hand off, but err … there was … Standard Seven was Hardman – just shows you how life can … when I remarried I went to live in Murrays Road. I found out from the deeds that Hardman was tenant of that house – my old school teacher.

DC It had been your teacher …

Mr K At Hanover Street, yes, in Standard Six was Taggart, Standard Five – I forget who that was – Four was Stowell from Castletown … and err … Three was Shimmin and Miss Sayle from Promenade – and she used to pick on me – she used to …'Go and get me two lemons, boy.' And she used to rub her hands, and her face was like a bloody lemon!! *(laughter)* She used to rub lemon juice all over her face and hands.

DC Where did you get the lemons from then?

Mr K Before the war – in the shops!

DC Oh aye … just anywhere – any shops – nearest shops?

Mr K Oh aye – and Connie Best, like it used to be then, on Market Hill.

DC And she rubbed lemons on her face, then, did she?

Mr K Oh terrible face – she turned into a lemon – she was horrible! *(laughter)*

DC So did your parents have any idea what you were going to do when you left

school, or not?

Mr K Well, I was fortunate, I was going to be, when I passed my exams – I was eligible to go to High School. I went home, 'I'm going to High School, Dad!' He said, 'You've had that boy, you're going out to earn some money – we want the money.' So he said, 'I've got you a job.' I'm going to be a baker, in a baker's shop on Prospect Hill – I don't want to be a baker!! He said, 'That's where you're going, I've got you the job.' So I says I'm not going to be a baker to myself, you know, so I went in next door, to see Pop McKibbin. I said, 'Can I be an apprentice?' He said, 'Start tomorrow, boy.' So I said to Pa, 'I'm going to be a bricklayer or stonemason.' 'Well, as long as you get the money.' *(laughter)* Five shillings a week!

DC Yes, of course, but five shillings a week would be important in those days, wouldn't it?

Mr K Well, not to me – to Pop it would be, because I used to get from it, every Friday, one penny pocket money.

DC What could you get with a penny!

Mr K Twenty aniseed balls. *(laughter)* They used to last all week – that's what you used to do.

DC A penny! Oh dear!

Mr K One penny – that's not a pound, like, today.

DC No, no, that's the old penny.

Mr K Twelve pence was a shilling and in fact, I still can turn the money back to sterling, that what I've used today.

DC Oh, right, well, you will, of course, but were they still using farthings when you were a kid then?

Mr K Oh yes, aye, and halfpennies, yea.

DC Oh aye, yea yea. So you go into this apprenticeship, then, to become a stonemason. Now what did it involve first of all, when you first, your first weeks or months or whatever?

Mr K You had to serve your apprenticeship for five years. And I'll always remember – we were building err – when I came out of my apprenticeship, we were building some houses up at The Priory, it was called, Brown Letimes [sp ???] lived there, and he owned that field, so we built houses there, and Brown Letimes [sp ???] son was living in one, and another – he was in Athol Garage. After we built those houses up in The Priory, the next job was Eastfield, we built six or seven houses there, you know, just opposite Brighton Terrace, which is today.

DC Well this would be – you'd be laying bricks by this time, would you?

Mr K No, no, not yet – that's right, you're quite right, yes, bricks then, but all ... Longs, the gardener that's up there, at Alexander Drive, he owned a golf course there, a miniature golf course, which all the youngsters in my day used to go and play golf, with two clubs – a mashie niblick and a putter – that's all you got, and a golf ball. And err, McKibbin & Kewley bought that land, and Jerry Caine was the architect, he was a scream, Jerry Caine – he used to make that many mistakes! *(laughter)* And he'd be ... one house that I built up in Devonshire Road, and he had the chimney stack going up through, right from the bottom to the top, and when you got to the second floor, he had a wardrobe – a built-in wardrobe right where the chimney stack was! *(laughter)* I says, 'How the hell am I going to get … where's this going now?' *(laughter)* Oh my God! So I had to crawl below to miss the valley in the roof, and then take it up. And then between the two spars before it fell down – it's still up!

DC It's still there! *(laughter)*

Mr K It's still there – but that's the sort of fellow he was, a terrific character – Jerry Caine.

DC Now these would be – would they be local bricks you'd be using?

Mr K Yea – Peel brick, Peel bricks then

DC Peel brick with mortar – lime mortar?

Mr K We used to have to make our own mortar.

DC Did you?

Mr K Not like – they don't make – like today – that's all sand and cement – even this house I live in, internal rendering sand and cement, which is not good, it's a … the walls can't breathe ...

DC No.

Mr K ... you get a lot of err … how would you say?

DC There's no expansion, is there?

Mr K There's no expansion, there's nothing, and with lime mortar – as they used to in the olden days, plaster the walls that err, they could breathe, as we used – the expression 'breathe.'

DC When you say you'd mix your own, was that done on the sites then, or what?

Mr K Yea, how they did that in those … my day, there was a chap name of Billy Savage – an elderly man – he's on that photograph I showed you. They used to make a ring of … on the plot – a big ring, a lorry load, horse and carts …

DC Yea, horse and carts, yea?

Mr K They used sand round, and the sand used to come from the railway station, from Peel ...

DC Oh right.

Mr K ... on the train, and loaded up in the horse and cart, pull it up to the bottom of Railway Station Hill – another horse was always stationed there – that'd be two horses it took, and pull up Railway Station Hill and onto the sites, but it always had two horses pulling them up.

DC Oh right, really?

Mr K And the first lorry that ever came in the Isle of Man was from Callisters Hope Street – a huge thing! And my word – the poor horses had to give way to that lot!

DC Well, yes. Where would the sand come from then, was the sand from Peel, was it, or would it be St Johns?

Mr K No – external sand for external rendering was from Peel shore.

DC Oh was it?

Mr K And to make – no salt in it of course, that was the salt in the Peel sand of course, from the shore, but the sand we used to get for internal use was from St Johns.

DC Yes, from the big pit there.

Mr K The big pit there.

DC Oh aye.

Mr K And then, over the years, I see they've moved down another two fields now. And Corlett of Peel own them. And err ...

DC Yes, yes, but what was that sand like to use, then, was it all right?

Mr K Oh yes, wonderful sand.

DC Was it?

Mr K Yes, yes – it was a brownish sand, St Johns, and all that area there is sand.

DC So a lot of that would be used for rendering ...

Mr K Internally – but Peel sand – externally.

DC Right, yes yea.

Mr K And that's how you often see brickwork with white growth on it – it's the salt coming out of the bricks. The sand used to come from the Railway Station, and err, up as far as Park Avenue was the last one we did, and that horse used to have to come up Bray Hill and all, but they used to take a roundabout route to avoid as many hills as possible, and they'd make a ring of and – tip a load, load, load, load – about a dozen loads of sand, and then from a … the lime … Billown, they used to send one lorry – bearer lorry – back that into the sandpit and then another two loads of sand to fill where the hole – where the lime had gone through, and then Bill Savage was the man that used to do all that.

DC Was this lump lime then, or what?

Mr K Yea, lump lime – rock – and then he used to turn the hose on, and saturate it, and it all started steaming, and then he'd go work like a slave, covering it all with all the sand, round and round – and he'd be – sweat would be running off him, but only one man doing all that!

DC Really, yes.

Mr K And err ... in the – next morning it would just be steaming, and he used to cover that all up, and a couple of days after, he'd have to uncover it. And he used to have a huge riddle – sieve, or whatever you like to call it, and then he used to have to throw this sand in – in those days, the tools he had was a spade and huge hoe – like – be about eight feet long, and a rake and a hoe – eight feet long, and as he was pulling it down from the big mountain of it, it was mixing, and then he used to have to spade that through the sieve, through the riddle – that would be the lime, and then after it had gone through – all that had gone through, have to keep moving the riddle to catch up – to meet up with the sand as it was getting further away, and then, of course the sand was – the mortar was gaining on that on the other side. Anyway, the next day he'd have to start mixing it – when he'd gone through that. And he'd have a hosepipe coming over the top and then mixing it, and then he'd have to turn that over – that was the mortar – we trade-men were going to use later on – but what a life that was for him – it must have been torture for him!

DC Oh aye! Did you have labourers as hod-carriers then?

Mr K No such thing as hod-carriers in my day – all wheelbarrows, wheelbarrows.

DC Oh aye – what, planks up?

Mr K Well, once you got up from stone foundations, and once you got up to first storey, the foreman would put a slope – different sized trestles, up about 12 feet away from the house, and then another one going up through the house – through the … leave a window out, and that used to load up all the scaffolding from there.

DC So you had to push it up – the barrow? Oh aye.

Mr K And then load it onto mortar boards, and then if it – the next lift-up, another man would be at the next stage, and he used to take it from him, onto him, onto him until we reached the chimney stack!

DC So they were going up one plank width, were they?

Mr K Oh no, no, no – three plank widths!

DC Oh right, so you didn't fall off then?

Mr K God – they weren't that clever! *(laughter)* They weren't TT riders! *(laughter)* Oh no, those days like, you used to have to work in the rain too. I've gone home with … Christmas week, with 2/6p [two shillings and six pence] for me week's wages – rained off, snowed off … and you'd only get a couple of hours in a week but thank God we – the Union stepped in and I was – got to join the Union and I got to be president of the Union in the end, so I used to have to go to a meeting place – all the bosses one side, all the workmen on this side; and then Miss Cottier was the secretary and, of course, the language was pretty strong between the two of us ...

DC Of course. *(laughter)*

Mr K ... and I used to have apologise to the … she said, 'Don't worry about it – I'm used to it – I come to all these meetings!' I said, 'You must be good with the language.' *(laughter)* I was the 'can' boy when I first started, and I used to get more tips from the tradesmen than what I was getting wages! And one of them –

the Head Foreman – used to meet me outside the *Strand* Cinema and pay for me to go into see the *Strand* pictures.

DC Oh, aye. *(laughter)*

Mr K He thought a lot of me, that man. Jack Chapman his name was – wonderful old man; wonderful craftsman.

DC So to what extent did you use stone, then, 'cos you started out as a stonemason, didn't you?

Mr K Well, Tossy Moore's quarry up on the Head Road – Tossy used to deliver it – he had his own horses and own carts, and you can imagine the journey it was from Head Road, up to say, Park Avenue where we built the terrace houses up there, and of course later on lorries came into the picture, in my time, and, of course, life became a bit easier for that side of it, anyway – still no hod-carriers.

DC Yes, yes, and then – where were you using the stone, then?

Mr K Well the first – there was no such thing as concrete foundations in my time, when I first started – it was stone foundations and they had err – the foreman used to let them know at the quarry what stage they were at, because the stone that went in the foundations was two courses; one of them huge stones, long stones – they be about three foot long – we weren't going through the grinder or anything like that. And err, two courses of that, about three foot wide in the foundations, and then you built from there, eighteen inch stone wall up to damp course. And from there on, bricks came in – from the damp course it was bricks, from the eighteen inch, and that eighteen inch foundation used to form a plinth, and on the inside it used to cup for joist bearing, and then you'd have eleven inch wall in the middle of an eighteen inch wall.

DC Right, right. Do you remember any other brick works, apart from Peel, operating, or not?

Mr K Well these lime bricks came in and then concrete bricks later on in life, but err ...

DC There wasn't another? Peel bricks did most ...

Mr K Peel bricks were superior – most superior brick, and you'd use them for most anything – in fact ...

DC Of course a lot of bricks would be imported, wouldn't they – for specialist facings and such like?

Mr K Well, yes, rustic bricks especially, but err, Peel bricks mostly, but of course the clay ran out eventually at Peel, and they had to bring in concrete bricks.

DC Aye.

Mr K They were bloody awful on the hands.

DC They'd be rough on the hands, wouldn't they?

Mr K Oh, yes ... well we used to have inner tubes with slits in and use ...

DC Oh, instead of gloves – aye.

Mr K Instead of gloves – well we couldn't afford gloves, so we used to pinch inner tubes and make hand gloves with rubber. *(laughter)*

DC Oh aye. *(laughter)*

Mr K And err ... I was very fortunate, my dad was a sail-maker and he used to make leather thumbs for me, and it was the envy of the brick … all I had was Pop's thumbs and of course, he used to keep me going in thumbs, because, if you didn't wear anything your fingers would be all worn out – and I've had that many times – couldn't pick up a brick.

DC Oh aye – and were you under pressure to lay a certain number of bricks a day?

Mr K No, not in those days, no, no, but that came in later on. I've been on jobs where you've … I was on the err … what do you call it – the Pier Head there?

DC Sea Terminal.

Mr K Sea Terminal, I was on that, and there was a lot of brick work there, but err, one

day George Clague the hod carrier said, 'Hang on Tom,' he said, 'we've laid a thousand bricks today.' I said, 'We haven't!' He said, 'We have – I know, I've carried the buggers!' *(laughter)* 'Sorry George – I'll ease off then.' But I used to love to lay bricks – you know, it gets to be a habit with you, and then I finished with McKibbin's of course, long ago, and then, when the war come along, I joined – went back to McKibbin's but then things weren't going very well there – I couldn't get along very well, so I packed it up and started with McCormick & Davies.

DC Yes, well they, of course, were about to build massive housing schemes in the Island at that time, weren't they?

Mr K That's right, they were – they're builders.

DC Aye. Where did you start?

Mr K At Willaston, here.

DC Oh yes.

Mr K And there was two blocks up when I started. Then from there on I went right through from one end to the other, and at night time, after work, I used to go home for me lunch – dinner, and come straight back again for – and I used to put two fireplaces in every night. And, or either that, or tile the sills – all the sills were red tiles, *Ruabon* tile, I think they called it – they used them for floor tiles, as well.

DC Was this for overtime, was it?

Mr K Overtime, aye, but I was stupid, there, wasn't I, 'cos I should have given them a price, 'cos all I was getting was the rate of pay, for putting two bloody fireplaces in, aren't I?!! *(laughter)* The crafty sods!! *(laughter)* I wasn't up to business, like, or I would have been in business on me own! But I wasn't up in that line.

DC These houses went up fairly quickly, didn't they?

Mr K Oh yes, one a week, yes – a complete house.

DC That was pretty good going in those days, wasn't it?

Mr K Oh yes – well we had really good system there; they really did. There was corner men and fellows used to put the corners up – external corners – and run that gable in, and then the squad would be in; coming from the next/last one and fill in between the two full corners – windows and everything – and I was there for about two weeks, and I said to this foreman, 'How long have I been here?' 'Oh, about two weeks.' I said, 'Well, I'm bloody sure I'll not be here for another two weeks!' I said, 'This is slavery!' I said, 'Does that fellow on the corner get any more money than us fellows what's running the middle in?' 'I suppose they do.' 'Well,' I said, 'If I'm not on that corner next week, you've had it – I'm off!' And I was on the corner next week! *(laughter)* And Bill Burns was my mate, and the two of us used to giggle – and he was an awful scream of a man, Bill Burns.

DC *(laughter)* Yes, so you had a bit of a problem then, did you?

Mr K Oh, there was all sorts – all laugh. And then Bill had – in those days – he had big false teeth and he started to laugh and the teeth dropped – shot out – and went down the cavity! *(laughter)* And he said, 'Oh, God!' *(laughter)* And he had a big … so we had to go and dig six courses of bricks out to get his teeth out! *(laughter)* Oh dear – that held us up, that held us up, 'cos we were only allowed so long on running the gable in. And then onto the next block, and the next block, and the next block – God, it was like machines!

DC But it wasn't even piecework, this, you were still on a rate, were you?

Mr K Oh, on a rate, aye, but we objected in the end, we'd seen the light, and we got a shilling an hour more. Well, a shilling an hour more was terrific, but, we had to promise that we'd work in the rain. So I'll always remember the first week, and a shower of rain came down, and it poured down, and I, number one, being a Manxman, as I call meself, straight in, in shelter.

DC So it's – there was a real downpour then was it, and you'd already agreed to work in the rain though.

Mr K Well, for a shilling an hour you'd do anything. *(laughter)* But a shilling an hour – it used to be, if you got a rise in those days, a halfpenny or a penny an hour

was not bad – but a shilling – that was terrific!

DC Big money. But you did pull off that site then, did you? You left that site because it was too wet?

Mr K Well, of course – I'm a human being and I'm not going to get wet through for the sake of a shilling.

DC Did the other men go off the site?

Mr K They just, like sheep, followed me, and Fred was the last in – wet through – wet through.

DC He was the foreman, was he?

Mr K He was the foreman – but he'd made the arrangements that we'd work in the rain and I ruined that for him – he didn't like me any more after that *(laughter)* so I thought I'd better move. But they were good old days – I enjoyed it.

DC Now, let's talk about another part of your career and that was when you were in the Services, in the Royal Engineers, and some of the incidents that happened there – among those was – you were having inoculations against rabies, weren't you – what was that all about?

Mr K Oh yes, well, I've always been fond of dogs, and, of course, you couldn't allow the dogs – pie dogs, they used to call them, the native dogs, and they were full of rabies, and you weren't allowed near them, and in fact there were squads of men used to go round shooting them!

DC Oh aye – this was in Iraq, was it?

Mr K In Iraq – in Basra, and I heard that the Area Commander had a dog and he was a high position, of course, Area Commander, so I heard he had some terriers – pups, so I went – asked for an interview with him – pleaded with him to let me have a dog – as I've always been used to dogs – always had dogs, all me life. And he presented me with a little terrier pup, and I put him in me haversack at the back of me – on me back; brought him back to the billet, and I – it was so hot, I had a fan – I got the electricians in our unit to put a fan in me billet, and

they put a fan – I thought it was a bloody aeroplane they putting in, the size of the fan! *(laughter)* I said, 'Have you got any small ones?' And I built a little kennel for Pat – Pat was the dog's name, and a little fan outside and all. And when it got too hot I used to put ice underneath him.

DC Oh, really! Where d'you get the ice from then?

Mr K The fridge!

DC Oh, yes – they were shipping ice in for you, were they?

Mr K In the [Officers] mess, you see, where we used to keep the whiskey and the ale.

DC It sounds as if you were well treated there if you had whiskey and ale then – not many squaddies allowed that.

Mr K You were allowed, in my – after I got transferred from the construction company to the CRE, it was a life of – lovely life – wonderful life!

DC Was it?

Mr K Wonderful life – well, it was back to civvy life – I was a foreman of works – again!

DC Aye – but what about all these ...

Mr K And that was extra money, you see, foreman of works.

DC Oh, of course.

Mr K So that's what I went after, not anything else, *(laughter)* it was the money I was after.

DC The vaccinations, what were they, then – you had fourteen of them, didn't you – against rabies?

Mr K Oh well, when I was posted home, I said to the chaps in the mess, 'I think I'll put Pat down.' No, they wouldn't allow that, they were so fond of him

themselves – he was a great favourite, but of course, wherever I went, he went. Anyway, when I got – I was posted from Basra, Baghdad, and when you got to Baghdad, you had to go across the desert and senior ranks where allowed in a coach – in a, as I call them, a charabanc in my day. What do you call them now?

DC Coaches.

Mr K Coaches – well, and they give you rations of a ... sandwiches – a few sandwiches and an apple or an orange or whatever or a banana – and the other fellows had to go in lorries, on the ranks, lower ranks, well, I thought that was a bit – not fair, that. Anyway, we went across the desert and we came to a place called ... Jonis [sp ???] Island, in Egypt, and that's where trouble started. I was on parade, being detailed for where we were going to sleep, or billets, and, 'Everybody dismiss, dismiss – stand fast Sergeant Keggin and that Sergeant Lippet, stand fast.' So they all disappeared in this big square – just Sergeant Lippet and me, and I looked at him, 'What the hell's going on now?' So ... two Redcaps come up – I said, 'Good God!' Those are policemen! ...

DC Yes.

Mr K ... Military policemen.' And we were taken and put in a cell in the barracks in Jonis [sp ???] Island, and just left there to rot! I said, 'What's ... what's the trouble, what have we done?' 'Well, there's a telegram arrived from your unit – dog Pat died of rabies so hold Sergeant Keggin and Sergeant Lippet.' It was infectious, seemingly – I didn't know. So I demanded to see the Medical Officer, because I was on me way home – and to have to be out there for so long, and somebody stop you from going home – that wasn't right, at all! So I got to the – and I said, 'Well,' to this doctor I said, 'Can we not get the serum for this rabies?' He said, 'Well, the only way we can get serum is from Cairo.' 'Well,' I said, 'let's get to Cairo!' 'Oh, we can't do that!' So I said, 'I want to see a senior officer.' I see a senior officer and he granted permission to go on a train to go to Cairo. Went to Cairo, to the rabies hospital, policeman each side of us, and walked in – and you've never seen a hospital like it. There was a corridor there – like a zoo, with bars, and fellows in there – Arabs, with rabies, frothing at the mouth, screaming, growling – by Christ, 'My God!' I said, 'What's going to happen to us, Dennis?!' So I said to this Egyptian doctor, 'You give us the serum, you give us the injection?' He said, 'I'll keep you here for three days.' And then, 'Can I go, take the serum with me, back to the unit in

Jonis [sp ???] Island?' and then – it had to be stopped in ice, you see, this casket.

DC Right.

Mr K So, after a lot of persuasion he said, 'I'll treat you for three days here – injections.' And he brought a syringe out, about that long ...

DC About nine inches long.

Mr K ... I said, 'My God! I expected one about the length of me finger!' He said, 'Not with this,' he said. Anyway, he stuck it in here ...

DC In the side.

Mr K ... and they pumped it in – God I thought me hat was going to jump off!

DC Well ...

Mr K And the same with Dennis, and that was that. The next morning I woke up with a bump like that – like a golf ball.

DC Really! Where the needle had gone in?

Mr K Aye, and the next day he put it in this side ...

DC The other side.

Mr K ... and another golf ball. Well, the three days there, and we had three golf balls, and we were starting to shake, you know, so I said, 'Well, we'd better get out of here, somehow.' Anyway, I coaxed him to let us go back to the unit. When we got back to the unit – before we got back to the unit, we had this casket, and I said to Dennis, 'You carry that, and I'll be in front of you, and any bugger that comes near us, he's had it.' Because one day's shaking, and these two policemen keeping the people away from him – it was like being in the pictures, you know – as if we were in a film – it was terrific! *(laughter)* Anyway, when we got back to the unit it was put in the fridge and the doctor said he'd inject me, so I said, 'Well, before you go, doctor,' I said – I'd been scheming this out

all the time – I said, 'Can I see an official to – if a boat comes in, that I can get arrangements with the doctor aboard the ship to treat me?' He said, 'If you can do that ...' But he said, 'You've got to get permission from the Area Commander.' I said, 'Okay, let's see the Area Commander.' Because I was on me way home – betwixt heaven and earth! So, two policemen fell in, took me up to Area Command, so this Area Commander – red hat – posh place – sentries all over the place, so I walked in, saluted him, explained, 'I'd been out here four years, sir, in Basra.' He said, 'That's a dreadful place, yes.' And I said I'd picked up rabies. 'Oh my God!' he says. I said, 'I know, from what I'm told, that it's a fatal disease, and if I'm going to die, I'd like to die in England, or especially more so, the Isle of Man.' 'Permission granted.' Didn't even argue about it – wrote it down, give it to the policemen, back to the ... and then two days after I got there, the doctor in Jonis [sp ???] Island was injecting me, and me stomach was in a terrible state. And a boat came in, and it was from India – full of civvies, Civil Servants, and a very few squaddies, very few soldiers, and I walked up and there was an RSM there, on the deck, and he said, '*You* will take charge of deck.' I said, 'I'll take charge of nothing – I'm going home to die!' 'Are you what?!!' He said, 'You're going on home, aren't you?' I said, 'Have a look at that.' RSM or no RSM, he said, 'On your way, son.' So Dennis and I were put in cabins – cabins!

DC Hmm, yes.

Mr K I thought we were getting – but we were in isolation – I thought we were getting the best of treatment! *(laughter)* And he says – there's a fellow outside the door keeping us in! *(laughter)* Wouldn't let us out. And over the Tannoy each day used to come, 'Fall in, rabies patients.' So by this time we called in, we had to go to ... and as soon as rabies was catching – oh – everybody used to scarper! And we had to – straight through. They were all frightened of us!

DC They wouldn't go near you? No.

Mr K But no. Anyway, the doctor aboard ship injected us and we got – went through the med [Mediterranean] went to Gibraltar, stopped at Gibraltar, everybody – some were allowed ashore, but of course we were still in isolation – locked in, and by the time we got back to England, all the injections had been gone through. I forget – twenty or something, but our stomachs were like a terrible sight – all big bumps of golf balls on each side, and in the last stages we

couldn't walk – we had to crawl.

DC Had to crawl to the doctor – that must have been terrible and humiliating for you, as well.

Mr K Very much so, yes. It was awful, of course. We couldn't do nothing about it, but they wouldn't come to us – we had to go to them for the injection because it came out of the fridge, the serum. Anyway, eventually we were allowed to – the serum was finished, and that was it – they couldn't get any more from boat, if it was still required – I don't know. But by the time we got back to England, we landed at Southampton, and then we went to – where did we go from there?

DC But you had to be in a sort of quarantine there, did you?

Mr K No, we were finished – what I expected to do now was peg-out – was going to die, you know, but I felt alright – Geoff, whatsername – Dennis felt alright but painful here, hardly able to walk. So anyway, we got in a kip and a runner came up with a telegram, and I opened it. 'Dog Pat died of a broken heart, not rabies.'

DC Really!!

Mr K From the officers that sent the rabies one, in Basra.

DC So all of that was completely unnecessary?!

Mr K All of that was no use at all. We didn't have rabies at all.

DC Even if the dog had had rabies, it would have had to have bitten you, in any case, wouldn't it?

Mr K Well, I don't know about that, but if you say so, I'm not too sure what the symptoms are of rabies, I know the conditions you've got to go through after you've got it, but which is dreadful, anyway.

DC How long did it take you to get over that, then?

Mr K Well, I would say my stomach went down after about six weeks, but it was still painful, but the bumps gone, and I was going home to a new wife, and mum and

dad, but that's how it went – it wasn't very nice.

DC Now also, of course, another involvement in your service time was Dunkirk, wasn't it?

Mr K Oh yes.

DC What actually – I mean, to what extent were you involved in Dunkirk?

Mr K Well, we were at a place called – on the Belgium borders – we were – it was called Orchies, and it's about five-ten miles from the Belgium border. So the orders came through one time to move ahead, so we went through to the Belgium borders and the Belgium customs there, with the pole that used to go across the road to stop, opened it up for us – clapped us and clapped us – people cheering us. And we marched in, and I'll always remember, we went to a place – a town called Tournai – a wonderful steeple there – a church steeple – I can see it yet. And we were in – our orders were to build a bridge across one of the canals for the lorries to get up through – advance. And I was in charge of – put that side, and along of the bank pulling ropes across. And eventually we got all these boats lined up, planked across, and then that same day that we got that all finished, Gerry [Germans] came over with his dive bombers. And his first dive bomber hit the ruddy bridge! *(laughter)* I said, 'Well after all that, well,' I said, 'I think I'll resign!' *(laughter)* So, I was on the wrong side of the river! Do you know how I got across – I couldn't swim?

DC No. *(laughter)*

Mr K There was a little house there; I went in, and in the back of the house there was a tin bath *(laughter),* and I was the only one on that side, and all the rest of the company were on *that* side.

DC How far would this river be across, would you think, in yards?

Mr K Oh, I would say … as far across from the … you know the Croke in Douglas Harbour – the Croke?

DC Yes, yes.

Mr K Wide as that.

DC That's wide enough, isn't it?

Mr K Oh, it is that – when you're in a bath! *(laughter)* Anyway, I got this bath, and a shovel, and I put in down, and you didn't have to go like that, 'cos you would have been in! *(laughter)* With me sitting in the back, the bath was up like that! *(laughter)* Anyway, eventually I got over on the right side. Ran up to – company was all getting into lorries, and I'm sure that if I hadn't have got it, they would have left me there – I still think that. Anyway, I jumped on the lorry as they were moving out, and we went back to the little place where we'd have been stationed in the first – before we went up to Belgium. And I'd left me washing – I was friendly with a French family there, and they used to do my washing for me. And I used to pay them ten francs every time they washed – ten francs. So when we advanced, I'd left me washing there of course. So I thought, I wonder if it's still there. So I'll always remember as long as I live; I ran across this field, and it was full of cabbages, and I got in, and there was me laundry on the table. They'd gone – everybody.

DC Oh right.

Mr K The village was abandoned. All gone.

DC They'd left your laundry?

Mr K But they'd left me laundry and I put me ten francs there and went back. I was half way across this cabbage field when Gerry [Germans] – hundreds of planes – bombers went over, all in formation, all low. I dropped down amongst the cabbages. And I wouldn't move until they'd gone, *(laughter)* and went back to where the sergeant and the company was, got me laundry and he said, 'Don't, whatever you do, don't fire, because if you fire, they'll know we're here and they'll blow us to smithereens.' Well, that was that – it's a terrible thing not to have a go, wasn't it.

DC Hmm, right.

Mr K But there you go – that's the orders. Anyway, we were in Orchies and the ... we went into, yes, we went into some trenches there, and in front of us was the

DLIs – Durham Light Infantry – and it was really terrific – well, you've seen it in the films, the evacuation. We could see the tanks – German tanks on the horizon, going over. But what we didn't realise – they were just going past us – surrounding us – all – hundreds of companies in that area. So Lieutenant Buchannon said to me, 'I think you'd better find out, Keggin, from HQ, where they are.' I went up – about half a mile away they were. And when I got there, there wasn't a soul in sight – they'd gone – the whole company had gone. And us – platoon, left there. I said, 'Well, you've had it this time! I know how to say 'Comrade,' because that's all that's left for us!' 'Like hell!' he said, 'we'll get out of here somehow!' So we – as we went to get out and try and get some transport, one of the lorries had returned, and in front of the lorry was a tank – an English tank, and he said, 'What are you fellows doing here?' And I said, 'Waiting for a bus!' *(laughter)* and he said, 'Gerry's [Germans] not far off – get out soon, and head for Dunkirk!' *(laughter)* So we got on the lorry and it was – he didn't have enough room to take us all, so he went so many miles forward – and dropped them off – keep walking!

DC And came back for more!

Mr K And that's how we got out – got to Dunkirk like that. And when we got to Dunkirk there was a terrifying sight. To see all these men on the beaches – it was chaotic! But some of the officers had tried to organise things, but a lot of them got the first boat out. I'll always remember – I was on the beach and there was a boat just come in, full tide, and it was me own commanding officer on the first boat out – and I can always see his face yet, as if it's yesterday. I said, 'What about your men?' He said, – he held a catch – he says, 'I've got to get this back to HQ – very important.' BASTARDS!!! *(laughter)* So I said that's it, look after yourself, Tom. So I was watching the three miles – different squads, moving out to the sea – deep as that – up to their necks – and then they couldn't go any further. And then boats used to come in and haul them in – small boats, onto the bigger boats – if they could get them. So I wasn't having none of that – not doing that – every man for himself, really. So I spotted this pier going out – went out about a mile – it'd been blown a few places, which I'd helped to repair, along with other engineers, but – I was there about a week at Dunkirk. But, err, I thought, I'm getting out of here. So I get underneath the bridge – that pier, and I walked up and down those pylons for about a mile – managed to get to the very end. And I couldn't get up though, because it's counter-levered out, the bridge, and I give a shout and a big Navy face come over the top, 'What are

you doing down there *yessir*?!!' *(laughter)* And he gripped a hold of me by the scruff of me neck and pulled me aboard the bridge. And as I'm getting on the bridge, there's a boat just moving out, and I run like hell, and jumped from the pier into this boat – this cargo boat – small cargo boat – small trawler. And a voice – I hit a fellow in the back of the neck and hung onto him and he said, *'Howl'on yessir*!' I said, 'Of all the bloody people to meet – another Manxman!!' And it was a pal of mine; he was a painter at John Henry's, the painter in Prospect Terrace. And I said – he said, 'Get up the bowels, Tom, and I'll see you later.' So he brought me a huge mug of tea and a sandwich and none of – all the fellows on the ship – we'd been running for miles – days, nights, trying to get away from Germany's people. And I had one sip and one bite of sandwich, I handed it to the fellow next door and he shared and it went right round the bloody ship, and all I got out of that big cup was one sip – and I couldn't get the cup to give it to him back! *(laughter)* And I never met him again until I came back home and I was at a Dunkirk Veterans Society meeting one night in *The Douglas Hotel* and who should walk in but him. And the first time I'd seen him since then.

DC Yes. *The Mona's Queen* was lost there – did you have any recollection of that at all?

Mr K Yes – I was watching her coming across Dunkirk Bay – *The King Orry* was on me right; she was ashore – she was a wreck.

DC Oh?

Mr K You could walk out to her when the tide was out, but she had been hit. And then *The Mona's Queen*, maybe days after, was coming across the bay, and I said, 'That's for me – *The Mona's Queen*.' You could tell them, then, the Manx boats, couldn't you? And I'd been reared with the Manx fish – err, Steam Packet [Isle of Man Steam Packet Company]. Anyways, I'd seen her go up, and I knew a lot of fellows on her. One man, Paul Kelly his name was, he was a mason from Castletown, I think, and he married a girl in Douglas – Dawson, her name was, in Circular Road. Was it Dawson? No, Dawson married his sister – Quayle, I think her name was – I'm not too sure. Anyway, Dawson married a sister – he used to have the pub at err ... err ... where the ... Bride – where they're going to build a new prison, what's the name of that place?

DC Oh, Jurby.

Mr K Jurby – he had a pub there – he was a painter and decorator, Dawson, and his brother.

DC And this explosion, then, that *The Mona's Queen* had – did you recognise how it happened, or what happened?

Mr K Well I was lying on the beaches looking out at her and I don't know whether she hit a mine or, at that time, the stookers [sp ???] were going over dropping bombs – picking up all the ships they could, and err, I seen her go up, and of course my heart went out to them 'cos I knew a lot of the men. I went out on *The Tynwald* to Dunkirk – I landed at Le Havre. And it just shows you how organised the British Army was, they had big boilers on the dockside and err, as you come off the boat – because we hadn't eaten nothing on them – none of the fellows had eaten on the boat – no way. And we'd been days on that ruddy boat, going so far out and coming back again – supposed to be subs [submarines] in the way, or we were in their way – one of the two. And err ... I don't know what happened ...

DC So you could eat when you got there then?

Mr K ... aye ... when we got there, all these boilers were going, and fellows cooking it, and I picked up one of the tins and looked at it – *Maconochie*, 1916! So we were eating food from the last war! *(laughter)* Well, of all the – and there was hundreds and hundreds of tins around, and hundreds of fellows eating it!

DC What was in this? What was ...

Mr K *Maconochie's* stew!

DC Stew?!

Mr K Like potatoes, carrots, a little bit of meat – like a stew!

DC *(laughter)* That's incredible, isn't it?!

Mr K And all the food was from the First World War.

DC Wow! – but also, you must have had – you've told me before, you went for days, sometimes, without eating, then did you?

Mr K Oh yea, on the retreat? Oh course we did. When we were in err ... just below the Belgium borders when we got thrown out, and all the French people used to have pet rabbits, in an old big long head, so, there wasn't a rabbit left when we left. We ate all the rabbits. And then there was a cow in the field, mooing away there, she wanted milking, so we got the cow, and we put it in the lorry, and we had milk, milk all the way until we got to Dunkirk, and then we let it go! *(laughter)* What an experience it was.

DC But you must have had an empty belly by that time.

Mr K But the humour that was there – although it was terrible, the humour was still there, obviously, between us all. But it's no use worrying about it, you were either going to make it or you weren't! But it was wonder – a terrific experience. And then, as I say, jumping on top of a Manxman to get out – God! *(laughter)* And then we – I landed at Ramsgate, and at Ramsgate there was military police everywhere. And as we were coming off the boat, this – I still had me rifle – lots of fellows had chucked theirs away, they weren't having any more of it, but I had mine, because, being small, I said this is the only thing I can defend myself with! *(laughter)* Because I … just that I thought, I'm hanging onto mine, in case I meet up with some of them. Anyway, when I – a policeman just grabbed me like that – pulled me to one side – 'Get over there – take coat off,' he said, 'I'll get a doctor.' I said, 'I don't want a doctor – what do I want a doctor for?' And me coat was drenched in blood – it was saturated in blood. My God, I must have been hit and I didn't know it and I wasn't in no pain. So I took me coat off, and then I realised, that when I was lying on the beaches – neck and neck – the fellow next to me had been hit – it was his blood. So I said, 'I'm all right.' 'Take your coat off!' I said, 'Well, look, there's no bloody – there's only marks of blood – there's nothing – I want to get out of here!' I wanted to get home!

DC So they didn't bother with sending for a doctor.

Mr K No, they didn't, they didn't get the doctors, but when we went from there – from Ramsgate to Devizes, and I can see that food, yet! Bacon and fried tomatoes, and if I had one plateful, I've had six. I was going back, and back,

and back – I was famished! I hate tinned tomatoes, really, but that's what they were, and I ate them all. *(laughter)* Anyway, the next day we were free, I went down to town – Devizes – and it's picturesque little village – not village, a town. And as I'm walking past, there's a big church there, and I don't know what prompted me, but I said I'm going in there to thank God I came out. And I opened the doors, and I never felt so – I don't know how to express it, but the church was absolutely packed with soldiers who'd got out of Dunkirk. All tough looking men, some of them, some of them like me, just normal fellows, but some of them regulars – we were only volunteers. And you couldn't have got a pin between them. All kneeling down to pray – thank God that we got out. Now that shook me to the core, that, because I hadn't realised that people would do such a thing, but I just thought to myself, I'll go in and it was – everybody must have had the same opinion as me – they just prayed that they'd got out. Because it was a terri ... horrendous ordeal. But we made it. We sit back and reminisce about it now.

END OF INTERVIEW