

* So, can you tell me your name, please?

William Feller. F-E-L-L-E-R.

* And how old are you now, William?

Seventy-nine.

* Seventy-nine.

Eighty in October.

* So how old would that make you at the outbreak of the war in '39?

[William works it out] I was 14 wasn't I? 1925, fourteen.

* What, er...could you tell me how you ended up going to Normandy, from being a 14 year old...the events that led up to you going?

At the age of 15, I joined the Home Guard, the North Chingford Home Guard. After a year in the Home Guard I thought I'd go into the army. At 16 I joined the army.

* This is in London, yes?

This is...no, this is Essex, Romford. I moved out of London to Essex.

* So you volunteered for the army?

I volunteered at the age of sixteen, yes.

* So you...the war had already broken out at this point?

Yeah. Oh yes, war was on then, you see. It was 1942 when I volunteered for the army. I was called up in May 1943. I went into the "Buffs" Regiment. How I went into that was that, when I went to the recruiting office the sergeant said to me "Where would you like to go?" and I said "I'm not bothered."

So he gave me a pin, and I just put my pin onto one...like that on the paper [indicates blind stabbing motion] and it came up with the Royal East Kents, which is "The Buffs".

* Why do they call it that? Why do they call it "Buffs"?

Because the uniform was buff.

* Aaah!

Like the Lincolns, they're yellow.

* So The Royal East Kent Regiment?

Yeah, nicknamed "The Buffs". After our initial training, for six weeks, we were sent up to Yorkshire, to Hull.

* Oh, right.

Yes, and we were camped at Burstwick. After training there for a few weeks we were going home on leave, but as we were getting on the lorry to go to the station, a dispatch rider came up. and stopped us and said we're off to Scotland instead of going home. So we got sent to Scotland. I then...I was transferred to the fourth...1st 4th Surreys.

* 1st 4th Surreys?

Surrey Regiment, East Surrey Regiment. And we were sent to North Africa. Landed at Algiers, and we fought our way across from Algiers, across Tunisia, until we got to a place called Bone, and then the campaign in Africa finished.

* So the Africa Campaign was the..?

That was First Army.

* El Alamein?

No, First Army.

* First Army.

Yes, First Army.

* And what was the First Army...what was your role in this?

Infantry.

* And this will have been 1943?

1943. After we got across the mountains to Bone we were camped out a while. They decided to split my Regiment up and we were put...I was transferred to The North Staffordshire Regiment, North Staffordshires. And then from there were asked to volunteer for The Parachute Regiment, which quite a few of us volunteered. Maybe fortunately, I don't know whether it's true or not, but I got a message to say that I was on my way back to England.

My mother had reported me for being under-age, for being in active service. I was only seventeen you see.

* Who reported you?

My mother.

* [incredulously] Did she? [laughs]

She...yeah.

* Did she want you back?

Well, I shouldn't have been in Africa. [laughs] Anyway, I come back. I came back in '43, and I joined my...The North Staffs, The 6th North Staffs in Kent. We were stationed at Herne Bay.

* Herne Bay?

Herne Bay, Kent, yes.

We were training there, erm, for weeks, you know, for D-Day, for The Second Front. I'd guessed that we weren't going to the D-Day because we did no assault training. (Addendum - We did no beach landings.)

* Right, yes.

You see? We did no boat training.

* So you just put two and two together, then?

Yes, we...you see I wasn't under fire, as you know, and I guessed we wasn't going to be in the first day because of the ... we've not even been on a boat. A training craft.

* So, were you not told, then? Were you not told when you were going to go?

Er, no. What we did then was, we used Folkestone as 'house to house' combat. There was a lot of bombed property out there.

* Yes.

Being on the coast facing France it was shelled quite a bit, and we did 'house to house' fighting training there. As I say, we were there quite a while, then suddenly it was D-Day.

* So...

About a week after D-Day we were transferred to a place called Newhaven, expecting to go straight across after a week, but the weather deteriorated, (Addendum - Quite a lot, with very severe storms) as a lot of them have said, storms even the ships couldn't sail, so it put us back a week, and we went, we sailed fourteen days after (D-Day, which was June 6th), and we landed in the Mulberry harbour, which I was very lucky we didn't get wet.

* Did you know that the Mulberry harbour had been built?

No. We knew it was going but we didn't know it had been built. With the weather as well it was a miracle it was put together.

* What kind of impression did it make on you?

I was very pleased I didn't have to wade into the water! There again, see, there was two Mulberry harbours. One was the Americans', one was ours, but the Americans' wasn't put together very well, and on the storms it just all broke up. We were very fortunate in all that. When we got to France we were sent to an area between Bayeux and Creully, where we dug in, waiting for the assault on Caen. When the assault on Caen was started the 3rd Canadian Division were on our left, we were the 59th Division, 176 Brigade, we were in the middle, and the 3rd English Infantry Division was on our right. When the assault on Caen started...I can't pronounce these names in French...

* That's OK.

[Reads from written testimony] "...between Bayeux and Creully. Ten days after landing in France my Battalion went into action in the final drive for Caen. We took our objective but by night time we were driven back by the 12th SS Panzer Division." We came up against the tanks, you see. So we had to withdraw, because we had no...I don't think we had any tanks with us that time, but as I say, when you come up against Tiger tanks you don't argue.

* How close were they?

Well they come in through...we were here, and they were coming straight towards us.

* So you were actually...

In the line...

* ...in visual...

Yeah, and as I say, we were driven back, but next day that objective was taken by another...another Battalion, and we went on, we took another objective which was fortified trenches. And we had to fight our way through the trenches.

* This was in Caen, then?

Outside, just before you got to Caen, on the way to Caen. And then we...it was the hamlet of Malon. Our first battle there, on the day cost us 190 casualties. That was killed and wounded, out of the Battalion, which was a pretty heavy loss.

* What kind of techniques did you use to take the trenches? Was it...

You just go through...by the time we got there everybody [the enemy] had gone, you know. It was a victory.

Using single file, open file, moving on, see, that was it. Straight through. We came across open fields, hedgerows and things like that, you see, but that wasn't so bad, that one wasn't so bad. And then after that we, as I say we went to (Addendum - WE went on to take the village of Haut des Forges)...when we'd taken another village of Haut des Forges, or something, now do you want the spelling?

* Yes, please.

H-A-U-T

* Oh yes.

Then the next word is D-E-S.

* Yes.

Then F-O-R-G-E-S.

* Yes.

We reached the Orne on the 6th August 1944. That's the River Orne, just off Caen, there. The North Staffs were given the job of fording the river and going to the other side to make a bridgehead, while the sappers built a bridge across because there was no bridge for the troops and mechanicals, vehicles to get across.

* Did they make a Bailey bridge?

The engineers did that afterwards but we forded to hold a bridgehead while the sappers built a bridge as the one at Le Bas had been blown.

We were given the job of holding the direct approach road from a place called B-R-I-E-U-X.

Two heavy attacks were beaten off and all day we held onto our exposed position.

Wounded could not be evacuated as the road down to the river was under constant fire, shell-fire, you just moved and you got...brought the shells down onto you, shell-fire down onto you.

Next morning we repulsed another heavy attack, we couldn't do anything then until night-time. We got our wounded out at night, got fed at night, and then, by that time the bridgehead...bridge had been built and the tanks were coming through.

* Right.

We held that road for what...twenty-four hours against heavy attacks, so...and quite a few losses of life there as well, and then after that we...[reads]...on our advance to Falaise, that's the Falaise Gap...

* Yes.

We were advancing through a gully and as we were passing a large rock, there was this big rocky place my Bren gunner in front just dropped. He'd been shot through the head with a sniper. So we consider ourselves lucky that we got through, at that.

* Yeah...

Anyway we went, gone up, still advancing we come to a forest. On the edge of the forest we dug in.

That night we were sent out on patrol to find out where the enemy positions were. I was a Bren gunner with that.

When we reached the enemy, we found they were there, but we didn't know how many, my officer got shot, but he wasn't killed. The sergeant was carrying him back on his back, and I was a rear man, protecting the rear with the Bren gun.

We got to the edge of the forest...[gesticulates] as I say the forest was here, and our positions over there, and I was turning round. As I turned round to face to come back into our positions, the sergeant trod on a land mine. It killed the officer outright, because he was already wounded, the sergeant lost his legs and he died next day. I got a little bit nicked out of my nose and next minute I found out I was in field hospital having a week's rest from shell shock. I consider myself lucky there again.

* Yes, indeed.

You see, I've been through the war, and I always thought when I came out of it, how lives, fate was mapped out for you.

* Yes.

To come through all that. Then after that it was the Falaise Gap, which finished, the...finished the Normandy campaign. And that's as far as I get for Normandy itself. Of course (Addendum - While resting, our Division being the nearest, was split up, owing to the shortage of manpower, and I, along with my Company, was transferred to the 2nd Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment. Then on through Belgium to catch up with the front line. Our next objective was the Escaut Canal. My Company, and another were given the job of crossing first. The boats were dropped into the water by the Border Regiment.) Then we had a long rest and went on from there through Belgium, which we did in Belgium we did a canal crossing. That was in boats, and the only thing I was frightened of there was because I couldn't swim [laughs]. I couldn't swim at all it wasn't anything else. We got to the other side, after this canal crossing and found the walls very high and I thought, "How are we going to get up there?" But we soon did, for they started dropping shells in the water behind us

* So you soon scrambled up?

We soon found a way up. [laughs]

That's as far as, you know, I can go on if you want to up to the River Marrs, but you got some details from Len Wooldridge, didn't you?

* Yes.

Well 2nd Battalion Lincs. Well that time I was transferred to the 2nd Lincs. after the Falaise Gap.

* Oh, right. Yes.

I was transferred to there. And that's where we...from there on we went through to Overloon and Venray, round that area, taking them places, and I finished up on the River Marrs and it was mid-winter and it was cold. Absolutely freezing! And we were there quite a while, and while I was there I got sent home on compassionate leave because my mother was dying with cancer. And then while I was home we had all the 'Doodlebugs' and V2 rockets and goodness knows what coming across.

* When you say you came home, where was that?

Chingford, Essex.

* You came to Essex?

Yeah, and you could see the 'Doodlebugs' coming across, and they stopped dead [their engines] then they knew they was coming down, all that sort of thing. And then after that the war was [unfinished] I didn't go back any more to Germany, because as I say I stayed at home, and while I was there they put me in charge of two Prisoner of War camps. The first one was an Italian one, and just looking after about 48 men, but when that was closed they sent me from South Chingford to North Chingford just to be representative on the German one. The German police run their own camp, but I was there to supervise all the goings-on. And that was the end for me.

* Did you not stay in the army?

I stayed in the army until 1947 and then I got demobbed after getting married. I got married because we said to me, erm, they're sending me on...ah, I'd forgotten about...but, after the war finished...I'd forgotten about that. I'd better do this first.

After the war finished we were sent to Toulon, the 2nd Battalion, ready to go to Japan, but the Japan war finished so they sent us to Palestine instead. When I came back from there, I was, as I say, we were put into these Prisoner of War camps to look after them. And then that was finished. When they closed I was sent back to Beverley barracks, and from there I went on to the Lincoln barracks and I was demobbed in 1947. I did 5 years and 1 day, but I did, I think it was...59, 60, I did about ten or twelve years in the reserves, on reserve. I could have been called up anytime, and that's the story.

* No, it's er...I've got lots of questions for you actually.

[Phone rings and Bill takes call]

You see before I went in the army I was in the Blitz just for a bit, you know, which was a bit hairy, the London Blitz.

* What's your memories of the Blitz? I mean, how do you feel about that, now?

Well, the memories of the Blitz I have is going to work in the day. In the beginning it was a bit quiet [poss. due to the phoney war], but at night-time it got a bit hairy.

All I remember is, I used to go to work...I used to work in a factory. I was an apprentice machinist, when I first left school, and erm, my memories is going home, collecting my three sisters and my mother going down to the air raid shelter, which was at the bottom of a hill, and then to stand outside looking at

the...I always used to go outside and just watch, watch in the distance all the fires, and that on the docks and things like that. Watching the landmines come down. I told my grandson that, about the land mines. Well he said to his teacher at school, one of his teachers she said there was no such thing as land mines, incendiaries. I said "You go back and tell your teacher that there was landmines. They used to come down on parachutes."

Huge things, and one went off near our shelter, and although they were deep underground it really shook the place.

* How big were these landmines, Bill?

Like a big oil drum.

* As big as that, yes?

Oh, yes.

* And they parachuted them down?

Yes. They used to just float about, it'd go anywhere. But, as I say we used to go up at night. If you'd gone out at night you used to have to...as soon as there's bombing or shelling, you used to have to dodge in doorways because the shrapnel used to come down, and that could 'shoot' people, the shrapnel, you see, so we used to dodge in the doorways.

But all I remember is the burning, and when I came up here I was very surprised because we'd never heard anything about Hull. I didn't know about Hull, but to me Hull had got hit in comparative size of a city, comparing the two cities, as much as anybody else. They really got it bad.

* So Hull's was as bad as London?

Yeah, in comparison, if you know what I mean? One big city and one small city. I think they got hit just as bad as London.

* It's concentrated on Hull, isn't it. Yes.

Yes, it is. As I say, the rest of it was watching the dog-fights during the day time. Watching the aeroplanes all over the place. There's quite a few of them, always see them coming down, being shot down and things like that. To a youngster it was exciting. If you know what I mean? When I went into the army, it wasn't fear or fright. I wasn't frightened, I was apprehensive, you know, going into action and all that. I was apprehensive all the time.

* Did you have a feeling of wanting to get involved and do what's right, and stop fascism, or was it just a case of you wanted to...

No, I was...in them days it was 'King and Country', and I wanted to do my bit, if you know what I mean. That's why at 15 I joined the Home Guard to, I mean, I did a year in there. That's where I learned to shoot all types of weapons. Well that stood me in good stead when I went into the army. I knew what I was doing, so when I went in the army I could handle a rifle, Bren gun, machine gun, anything like that. So it stood me in good stead.

Now then, I've got some photographs of when I was in the army if you would like to see them?

* Yes, I would do, yes. That's great. I'll just stop this [recording device].

[Bill describes photographs]

The reason it's white belt and gaiters is because at Canterbury barracks we were near the cathedral, if you know what I mean, Now, every day a person was picked out from the platoon who was the smartest on parade. Then they donned this white gear and we used to have to march from the barracks, with a cane, to about two miles to Canterbury cathedral. While I was at Canterbury cathedral you signed the book of remembrance, and then you marched all the way back again. And that's why I'm dressed in that, there, about three times.

* The book of remembrance for the First World War?

The 'Buffs'. No, for the 'Buffs'. Their book, The Regiment. You sign the Regimental Book.

* Oh, right. Sorry, yes.

So that's that. Then that's our...[photo of many soldiers in rows]...I'm third on the...there. Third from the right. And that's the platoon, in the training battalion. Do you want a light on?

* No I've got some light coming in.

* It's remarkable looking at this photograph of your platoon how young everyone is. You're boys aren't you?

There was...eighteen was the average. I was seventeen, er, sixteen when I went in there, and they were eighteens. I held my own, like, don't worry! [laughs]

That was when I was seventeen. That's the Regimental Crest.

* Yes.

That was...this was taken at Sheerness Rifle Range in 1942. It's got a bit dilapidated because I sent it to my sisters and it got...but I've got it back again now. You used to feel real proud in uniform.

* Yeah. How do you feel now when you're with the NVAs and you're dressed in your...

Oh, very proud when I'm dressed up, oh yes. I mean, you're marching along there and you think, "Well, I did my bit."

And everybody knows it, see?

And as I say when you get dressed up like that you feel really important, if you know what I mean?

* Yes I do, yes.

Now, these two were taken after the campaign in France had finished. That was at Toulon. That was two mates, and myself, and that was on my own. There we were ready for going to Japan, so that finished, so that's where I was sent to Palestine from.

* So you were going to train and go to Japan?

We'd already trained. We were going to America first, then on to Japan.

* And then they dropped the bombs and...[both talk at once]

They dropped the bombs and that was it, then. So we got...sent straight...we went to Palestine, and we were up against the Stern gang. I don't know whether you've heard of it?

* The what, sorry?

The Stern gang. That was the terrorists in Japan, er Palestine in 1945, '45 was it? '45-'46, yes. Oh yes, they were killing British troops.

* Japanese?

No.

* German?

Jews. Israelis.

* Right.

They wanted their own homeland, if you know what I mean? We was keeping them out, trying to keep them out. Eventually they got it [the homeland] as you can see. But they were killing British troops, and we were killing them, because there was fighting and things like that, you see?

* Similar to like Iraq now?

Yeah, yeah, similar to Ireland.

And then, when was the others, now? Those two, that's when I met the wife and I got married.

* When did you get married, Bill?

In Hull, in 1947.

* '47.

Yes.

* That's why you stayed in Hull?

Yes, I never went back to London, no, never went back. I've been up here since 1942. And that one was taken in 1946.

* Ah, so you'd already been decorated then?

Africa. That's the African Campaign.

* Yes, because you've got a row of ribbons on your uniform.

That's the Africa Campaign, the yellow one. The first medal we have on our chest is the War medal, then the next one for me is the African Star 1st Army, and then all the rest are the War Medal and the Defence Medals, yes.

* So how do you wear your medals? Is there a particular order in which to wear them or...?

Yes, oh yes.

So it's the War one first, then it's the campaign medals?

Yes, you see when I was, er, when I came back from Africa I was the only person in the battalion at 6 Staffs with a medal.

* Wonderful. Can I, er, take a photograph of these, please?

Course you can, yes.

* Thank you.

* What's this photograph of?

That photograph's of myself taken, I think it's near Breville, I'm not quite sure, from the Lady Mayoress giving me my medal for the 50th year, for the 50th Anniversary. Everyone got a 50th Anniversary medal, and that's me receiving it from her.

* As a mark of gratitude for what you did in...?

Yes, and that's her giving, er, kissing the French way. [laughs]

* Fantastic.

* Just looking at a sign in the background on a photograph of the veterans receiving their medals in France. It's the D223, Ranville 2KM, Colombelle 7KM, and there's a sign 'Overlord L'Assaut'.

What I was saying at the beginning, it doesn't matter what you write, or what you speak about war, it's not the same as being there.

* No.

I suppose, and you can cross this off if you want to, but the smell of death, I mean you may want to rub it off. The smell of burning flesh, the noise, people dropping around you, is not the same as talking about it. I mean you can think about it, sometimes you think, "Good God! Did I come through all that?" And that's what I mean. People think, 'war', you just talk about it. It's the same as people in the Blitz. A lot of them...what they went through. But war is war and as I say before, it's noise, the smell gurgling, and especially when a tank gets brewed up, and it is, there, and as I say, I wouldn't like to go through that again. I hope nobody has to go through that again, anyway. I don't think they will because I don't think there'll be an infantry war next. So, anyway, you can put that on if you want to or you can turn it off.

* Thank you.

* I was going to ask...

Carry on.

* You went towards Falaise. You went towards Falaise, in Normandy...

The Falaise Gap, yes.

* That, I understand was a particularly bad part of the war in terms of casualties.

In fact it all was, let's face it. The beach was all heavy. But the Falaise Gap was really the encirclement of the German army. I mean they lost...surrendered thousands and thousands of men which the Americans and British joined up which is a good job as they took them all out of the war.

* Did you have any contact with German prisoners?

Yes, well in Egypt I did as well. Sorry, in Algiers (Addendum - Tunisia) we did because we were taking a few back and mostly there were a lot of Italians as well, so...

* What was that like dealing with the enemy at such close quarters?

They are just men.

* So did you sort of get on OK?

No I didn't. I didn't have a lot to do with them, but a lot of people were taking things off them, but I never took...because I thought I wouldn't like anything taken off me.

* Yes.

You know, I mean, I picked up one or two things like a Luger and that, but I lost them in transit. I dunno where they got to, but, and I have an idea where they went to, but I lost them in transit, which is a good job I didn't bring them home did I. I would've been picked up by the police then you see. No, I think as you look at it, a German soldier was a German soldier, they're a bit different to the S.S. and so they were more like us, if you know what I mean, and I suppose they were like us, glad when the war was over.

* So just reading into what you just said, the English, or the Allies had a different view of the S.S. as they did [inaudible 'the Wehrmacht'?]

Oh yes, the German troops. I did anyway, whether the others did or not. I mean they were just fighting the same as we were. But the...I wouldn't like to come [across] really and truly with the A.S., the S.S. rather. I know we got beat back at the beginning of the campaign at Caen by the 12th S.S. Panzer Division, but, er, I think they were just called panzer divisions because they were tanks and things like that. Whether they were S.S. soldiers I don't know. But there were a lot of atrocities caused through that [branch of the German army] you know, some of them you see, but apart from that, that's it. To me they [ordinary German soldiers] were just ordinary people. I know they're arrogant, even now when you go abroad I mean, they are a bit arrogant, so anyway, that's what's there.

Anything else?

[Interview returns to a section of dialogue started off-air, where Bill mentioned the tanks battling to control Caen.]

* So you were saying about Tiger tanks?

As I say, when you've seen Tiger tanks, you look at our tanks, and Tiger tanks and you think "God! What's going to happen, with this lot?" Because they had the 88mm gun, they could outgun our tanks, and the reason we won was because we had more. We had thousands, and the 88mm anti-tank gun, that could shoot a long, long way, and our tanks were useless against it.

* What kind of tanks did we have?

We had Churchills, Maltesers, I mean Matildas, Cromwells, Shermans, that was the Americans', Shermans, but we had more, you see. And then we had the flail tanks and things like that, and they had the things on the front...

* Yes.

...they used to go along setting off mines, and then we had the bridge tanks, so they could put stuff over the bridges, things like that you see. Now as I say, the only ones who I thought had a tank to match them was the Russians.

* The T34s.

Yeah, the T34s, yes and the T...the one after that, was it a T54? They were terrific things.

* Did you see the one at Eden Camp? They've got one there.

Yes, I mean they were, what, seventy tons wasn't they? That's incredible - it's a monster!

* So how...what techniques did you use to fight against German tanks?

Well we didn't, we had the anti...we had the, erm, anti-tank guns all round, but as soon as they [tanks] come you couldn't do anything against them.

* So you just used to have to clear off?

Well, yes, like it sometimes, yes. Lucky for me I didn't come up against a lot of tanks. They were mostly fighting them tank by tank, you see. The only time we came up against tanks was in the...at the first campaign, near Bayeux, when we got driven back. That's the first time I got up against tanks, but apart from that I don't remember...you can hear them, can hear them firing, and see them in the distance but I don't remember them pushing us back any more, because they were fighting tank by tank. You see I was lucky I didn't do any 'house to house' fighting in the villages, like that you see. We were just in the open all the time.

* Did you have any contact with French villagers, French people?

Not really, we, a lot of us...quite a few units were billeted in villages. We were always under canvas or in the open. I never managed to get in [laughs] so we were unlucky, like, you know what I mean, under canvas, I mean we were under canvas, at the end of the Falaise Gap for about a month, and that was a camp. We had to, it was like called 'spit and polish' then. [laughs] As I say it was a queer period then, because after the Falaise Gap we all boarded lorries and I think we went about 200KM to catch them up [the front line soldiers - evidence of no resistance] because we were left behind then. The first action after that was the Escourt Canal so, well no, I was all right. I got through. [laughs] That was the main...[emotional]...that was the main thing.

Bill later spoke about digging in, where you dug a hole and laid in it, sometimes for many hours, out of the firing line of the enemy guns, and sniper fire and away from the horizontal trajectories of shrapnel from exploding shells. Soldiers sometimes had to sleep in these holes, with little or no cover from the elements, and wearing basic military clothing that could well be wet, as they would have had little or no opportunity to dry out, and absolutely none to change. If it was raining whilst you were dug-in, pretty soon you could be laid, or even sleeping in an inch of freezing muddy, water.

I asked if the soldiers slept in villagers' houses, to which Bill replied that they had once been 'billeted' in a farm out-building, but had actually had to sleep in a hole he'd dug in the garden next to a house!

Bill recalled, whilst serving in the deserts of North Africa, the soldiers' technique for building a cooking fire in an environment completely devoid of wood and trees. The men would use their spades or hands to scrape a mound of sand a couple of feet in diameter and then douse this in petrol from their vehicles' storage cans. This would soak into the sand and then the mound could be lit, like a big wick and used for warmth or to cook on by placing their mess tins on top, and cooking food such as soup, 'bully' beef and marmalade pudding!

One thing Bill forgot to mention was being dive-bombed whilst in Tunisia, and also the noise made by the German Mortars. The British troops used to call them 'Moaning Minnies'