

KEN HARMON

Oral Testimony Transcript  
Interviewed

Further information:

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\* So, could you tell me your name, please?

Kenneth Harmon.

\* And how old are you now, Kenneth?

82.

\* And you were in which service during the war?

Royal Navy.

\* How old were you when you joined the Navy?

18.

\* And did you...what rank were you when you first started?

Ordinary Seaman.

\* And what rank were you when you left the Navy?

Able Seaman RP3, radar rating RP3.

\* So you worked on radar?

Yep.

\* Communications. Can you tell me about the circumstances that surrounded your joining up with the Navy, and when you did it, and what training you went through, and that kind of thing?

I went for the Navy because I knew it would be a clean death. I wouldn't be in mud and that. It'd have been a clean death. I'd passed all the tests, I was passed A1 for the Royal Navy. I was calling-up papers, then I went to HMS Raleigh in Devonport, Plymouth. I did ten weeks' training, came...I got ten days' leave after the (training), I went back into barracks and we got a draft sheet to HMS Alaunia which was an armed Merchant Cruiser, an ex-Cunard White Star liner, and it had 4 six inch guns. We did a couple of convoys across to America, escorted convoys. Then we came back and we were sent out to the Indian Ocean, to...which was Columbo, which is now Sri Lanka. That was our base for a bit. Then we were in the Persian Gulf for four months as a control ship, contraband ship. Then from there we did one or two convoys, escorts...(to wife) Have I to tell him about..?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Erm, well, tell...the area first.

Well, I was up the Persian Gulf, India, Bombay, and you could smell Bombay three or four miles before you got there. You could, you could (laughs)...Bombay. We were going ashore in Bombay, with thirty-odd of us in a cutter, and the motor-boat was towing us to go ashore. We were all in whites, and as we are going ashore there was a ship going out, we was going down the channel, this ship come

out and hit the boat...the motor-boat...not the the motor-boat...the life boat with us all in and turned it over, and of course, most of us swam to ships which was anchored in the harbour, and we lost seven lads. Most of us swam to ships that were there that had their gangways down, and one or two, most of the ships that were handy lowered life-boats, and picked us...a lot of us up, out of the water.

\* Yes.

Anyroad, we lost seven lads in that do, and we buried the seven lads in the cemetery in Bombay. Then we went back up the Persian Gulf, and took a convoy across to Durban, South Africa. I had a bad do while I was there. We was anchored in a place called Killendeany in Mombassa, and we had our anchors down, forward, but we had our...moored to a buoy aft. Anyway, the signalman announced the station for leaving harbour, and we're motorboat's crew. Well, I was motorboat's crew, so I got in the motorboat to go to take the manilla off the bouy. Before I can get it off, they let the manilla go, and the shackle dropped on both me feet, and, of course, they were bleeding and one thing and another. Anyway, the Coxwain pulled me back on board the ship...er, the motorboat, and alongside the wall there was a Dutch hospital ship, SS Talambra. Well, the coxwain was going to take me to it, and the officer of the day said, "Bring him back aboard." So, of course, the coxwain took me back aboard, and then when we got aboard he said, "He'd have been a lot better aboard that hospital ship, to be attended to, than the sick-bay we've got." So, the officer of the day said to him, "You heard the pipe announce the stations for leaving harbour" he says, "we're leaving harbour. Put him aboard there we would never know where he was.", you know, "Where would we pick him up?" Twenty-four hours later that hospital ship had sailed, and the Japs sunk it.

\*Mrs Harmon\* All hands went. (everyone on board was killed)

That's the result of it, look, that ankle. It's arthritis that's set in now.

(Ken reveals his mis-shapen ankle)

\* Right, so yes. What's the manilla that you were taking off the bouy?

\*Mrs Harmon\* The manilla, it's a rope. These big ropes. (indicates circle about 15cm across)

\* Huge ropes, yeah.

\*Mrs Harmon\* When we talk about a buoy...I mean is your thing (voice recorder) picking my piece up?

\* Yeah, yeah.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Will you cut that out?

\* If you want me to. I can...I mean I'll...

\*Mrs Harmon\* I'm just prompting him, you see...

\* That's fine.

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...because his memory is not as keen...

\* As long as the children get the story then it doesn't matter.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And when we talk about a buoy in the water, we don't mean these that are in our rivers...

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\*...like a bell. They're huge, and flat, and if you see a cruise liner that's anchored - similar to those.

\* So, they're huge, heavy...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh, they're massive.

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And, of course, he had to jump onto that.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Because in his day he was a big lad.

\* Yeah.

\*Mrs Harmon\* So they got the jobs, those heavy jobs.

\* Physical jobs, yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* So, but, he jumped on the bouy, then he was suspended by his feet in these big ropes, suspended with his feet up and his head in the water.

\* So that's what caused the injury?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh, yes, yeah.

The shackle, I mean, isn't a little thing. I mean, holding a, well, it was an armed merchant cruiser.

\* Oh, yes.

It was holding something...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Like a battleship, type of thing.

...yes, like a battleship, so it wasn't small.

\* So you were caught by your feet, with your head in the water?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Suspended. So they broke. When the coxwain was pulling the motorboat away from the buoy, he was still on the buoy. This is what happened.

\* Just another accident?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* With the thing wrapped round his ankles so...if you imagine it pulling away, he'd go up, wouldn't he, his feet. (laughs) So that was a near miss.

\* But...yeah, two near misses!

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's right.

\* Because you could've drowned with your head in, and then you could've been sunk on the hospital ship?

Yes.

\* You must consider yourself quite lucky, then?

Oh, yes. (laughs)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Then, his mate went all through the war with him. He joined up at Preston because when the war broke out, he was working at Fleetwood.

\* Yes, yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* So he had to join up at Preston. Now, a laddie from Wigan joined up at Preston at the same time and they went all through together for six years, so they were like brothers.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* But he's died since, he's been dead a few years now, but he, when we used to go through and visit them, he said, "Ooh, I've just read this book, Ken. Do you remember, we were in this convoy and they'd just pulled us out. And the convoy would be hit." He said, "By, we didn't realise how close we were, then." So there's lots of things they weren't aware of...

\* Yeah.

\*Mrs Harmon\*...you see, that er...(laughs)

This armed merchant cruiser was an old Cunard White Star liner, and they put 4 six inch guns on it.

\* Right, so they actually converted it from a civilian vessel into a war time...

Yes, yeah. And erm...

\* Is that the Raleigh?

No that was...the Raleigh was where I trained.

\* Was it the Alaunia, did you say?

Yes

\*Mrs Harmon\* The Alaunia.

\* How do you spell that, please?

\*Mrs Harmon\* A-L-U...I is it?

Get the...

\*Mrs Harmon\* I'll bring his 'Crossing the Line' certificate. Going to show you these when you've finished.

(looking at a photograph)

\* Is that it?

A-L-U-A-N-I-A. (mistakenly - actually A-L-A-U-N-I-A)

\* I see, yeah. Alaunia, yes. Thank you.

(handed 'Crossing the Line' certificate)

\*Mrs Harmon\* There you go. That's Alaunia.

\* Yeah, that's it, yes. (reads) Ha, ha, that's great isn't it?

Yeah.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And he has another one for the Slinger, the aircraft carrier.

\* Oh, right, 'cause...because, yes, you won't have stayed on this ship all throughout the war?

Nah.

\* No.

Erm, while I was aboard that, the six inch guns was hopeless, they never...I mean, when you fired a round it used to drop out the end.

\* Yes?

There's no rifling on the armour gun. I had a...I had a bit of a shock. I was only 18, and I was stood behind this six inch gun...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Before you go any further can we explain, a six inch gun, he doesn't mean in length...

\* No, it's the...

\*Mrs Harmon\* The diameter.

\* So, you're looking at the hole at the end of the barrel six inch across.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes. (laughs)

\* It's not a small gun is it, really, or was it considered to be compared to the others?

No, it was. They'd been taken off another ship, erm, they were obsolete. Anyway, I was Number 3 rammer number, behind the gun, and called to 'Action Stations', all guns, Lord knows, (indistinct) 'load, load, load', and the Number 2 was a lad that had been called back into the Navy. He was an ex-Navy man, he'd three badges, you know, he'd done twenty years and been called back in.

\* Yes.

Anyway, we was all called to 'Action Stations', and they put the shell in, I rammed it home, then they put the cordite charge in, and the Number 2 was red hot, he knew his stuff, and he bangs the BM (phonetic) lever to, and he shouts, "Number 2, all ready to fire, Sir!" Well, when he bangs the BM (phonetic) lever to, I saw it come off, you know, spin off. Well, I had visions of all this lot blowing back at me, so instead...well, the drill for a misfire is, "Still!" and everybody stands still, and they say, "Misfire." Well, I didn't say, "Still", when he bangs the BM (phonetic) lever to, I see this lot come off, and he shouts, "Fire!" I shouts, "No, not now!", dropped the rammer, and ran like Hell up the fo'castle, and everybody ran with me! (laughs) Anyway, we goes back to the gun, and the officer of the day says, "Which silly...you know, said, 'Still, not now!'"

\*Mrs Harmon\* No...

"Instead of shouting...who shouted 'Misfire'...'No, not now!' I said, "Me, Sir."

He said, "Don't you know the bloody drill?" I said, "Yeah, it should've been 'Still!'" He says, "Right, Commander's Report." and I got put in the 'Commander's Report', and I got fourteen days.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Desertion in face of the enemy, and they were at sea, nowhere to go.

\* So, what was your punishment?

Well, running round the ship with a rifle above my head. Getting up every morning before hands, and doing jobs.

\* How long did this last?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Fourteen days.

\* So you had two weeks of this?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* In the heat.

Running round, 'cause on that (indistinct) merchant cruiser it was a liner, you know, and you could run round the deck and I had to run round with a rifle above my head, for an hour every night.

\* But what would have happened if it'd have fired, the gun, would you have been injured, would others have been injured/

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, it could've exploded, I suppose.

Yeah, they say it would. The 3 badger, the man that goes behind it said, "It wouldn't have gone, Ken, because it wouldn't have contacted."

\* Right.

You know, but I didn't know that.

\* Even so, I mean, your warning potentially saved other men getting wounded, and you were punished for it, for not saying the right words.

Yes.

\* It's harsh isn't it?

(laughs) Oh, aye.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You think, all they'd had was ten weeks' training.

\* Yeah.

From knowing nothing at all.

\* And in the heat of the situation it's difficult...

Well, I was going to say, in the heat, in the Persian Gulf, because as Ken said, they were four months, couldn't go ashore, because either side was neutral country.

\* Yes.

And was that the time you had smallpox on the ship.

Yes.

They had some lads from erm, Stornaway, you know, the islands off Scotland, well they went mad with the heat. Two, they had to send home, didn't they, they went berserk. So they not only had the actions, and what not, it's things we were not used to in this country.

\* The physical conditions added to the hardships.

Again, I always say with the Navy, the army, all right, they had it hard some of them, but they were on land. They (Navy) had the elements.

We had to be careful with fresh water, you know. It was allocated, water. The gun troops, for the...what you put your rammer in, were all kept fresh water. You couldn't put salt water in, because if you'd have...with the heat from the gun the oxerating (phonetic) pads would get sticky, and you wouldn't, you know, so you had to keep fresh water in the gun tub.

There was an incident there. There was an Australian Lieutenant, he was a right...you know, and I was putting some fresh water in the gun tub, with there being rammer number, it was my job to keep the...I was putting fresh water in whilst were were up the Persian Gulf, well, he come up to me. Oh, he played hell with me, he said, "Don't. There's plenty of water over the side. You don't want to be..!" I said, "I'm sorry, Sir. The ruling is we put fresh water in your gun tubs." So he says, "Oh..!" you know, so I called the lad in charge of the...Leading Seaman in charge of the gun, I told him, "Ketmuss (phonetic name of Australian Lieutenant) is at me for putting fresh water in the gun tub." So, of course, the leading (indistinct) had realised that I was all right.

Anyroad, we'd gone down to our lunch and we were sat in the mess, and I said to the lads, "Ketmuss (phonetic name of Australian Lieutenant) has been on to me about putting fresh water in the guns." So one of the lads says, "Well, that bastard came to me and he says, 'Are you putting fresh water in. We don't want any salty oxerating (phonetic) pads!'" He went straight to one of the lads and said the same! Well, there was all sorts went on.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Tell him about your cockroaches.

Oh, aye. You know the...mess deck, well there's...what was the ballroom when it was a liner, and we used to tie our hammocks up, get into your hammock, and the cockroaches used to...(laughs)...dropping on you.

\* Urgh!

Loads of cockroaches!

\* How did you feel about that, or...did you mind or..?

You got used to it.

\* ...so in actual fact you lived happily, side by side after a while?

Yes, and I remember going in to the galley, and we'd gone in and...to get your food, you know, and one of the lads said, he was a cockney this lad, he said...ooh I forget his name, but he said, "There's a couple of cockroaches in the soup."

So he (the cook) says, "What do you want me to do, throw 'em a bloody lifebelt!" Things like that, you know. That was life, and as I say, I did...we did two stints of four months up the Persian Gulf. I was in the Indian Ocean, Columbo, which is Ceylon, but now Sri Lanka. That was the capital. That was where the base was, er, from there we brought a couple of ships home, convoyed them.

\* Yes.

Then we came back and I went into barracks, had a few days' leave, you know, then I went on a course for radar

\*Mrs Harmon\* But before that you went across on a barge, full of ammunition, across the Channel, for the D-Day landings, didn't you?

Yes, yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Unexpectedly.

And onto the Black Prince. The I...we came back from there, and I went into barracks, did a course on radar, at HMS Valkyrie and Isle of Man, then we came...that was for the practical. The theory, we went to HMS Collinwood, was there a month, and then passed out as a Radar Operator, and I went (indistinct) as RP3, aboard HMS Slinger.

\* What year's this?

194...

\*Mrs Harmon\* '44.

No, 1943.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, but you'd been across...

Ah, yes, 1944.

\* So this is after...

\*Mrs Harmon\* D-Day.

\*...Overlord, yes?

Yes, 1944.

Going out to bomb the Tirpitz we hit a mine. The day before there'd been a raid, and they'd dropped mines in the...in the...and as we're going out, our escort brought this mine up, and we spanked it, and the (indistinct) all out of bounds, they dragged us back into Woolwich dockyard, and they'd been doing this dockyard (work) for six weeks and getting it put right, but I had the good pleasure of getting into London. Well, I was dancing to Glen Miller and his band every Thursday night - for six weeks!

\* That's not bad then, is it?

And, er, the...that was on the thursday night. Friday night it was...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Robert Farmer (correct if required)

Robert Farmer (correct if required) and 'Calling All Canadians', on a Sunday night it was 'Variety Band Box' (correct if required). Well, we had that for six weeks, then we went out to the Pacific. We were operating with the Yanks, as you know, we were in Sydney, went up to Okinawa, all around there, you know.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Saw all the islands.

Then went back into Sydney. We went into Brisbane. We was the first Royal Naval ship to go into Brisbane dry-dock, and when you went into Brisbane, you went up the main street, the river went round the main street. We had to take our

aircraft off because she couldn't, you know (fit)...but, erm, we was in there having a few repairs, then we went back up to the islands, came back, then we went up to Hong Kong, (indistinct) they picked up 23 prisoners of war, Australian prisoners of war that were being held by the Japs, and the sights they were, it was unbelievable. They were all, you know...had beriberi, and the conditions were terrible. Anyway, the 23 Australian prisoners were...they had no clothes or anything, so our mess, on board the ship, gave them some clothes, and we collected some money for them, and we fit them.

(to Mrs. Harmon) Can you get that envelope in front of my drawer?

(Break to look at and record newspaper cuttings about the event)

(The Australians had)...worked, as prisoners of war, on the railway (Burma Siam railway) for the Japanese.

\* And they'd not been fed, or..?

No!

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, they'd be on a bit of rice a day. You don't know the conditions they used to go through, then. Even our lads that were captured, I mean they had dysentery they'd every disease going. The toilets would be heaving with maggots. They'd no clothing - I mean they were beaten if they did anything, well, they only had to look at them the wrong way. They were treated abominably, nothing like the German prisoners of war. They were absolutely treated like animals, then they were used as slave labour. They had to go out whether they were sick or not, and do whatever work the Japanese wanted doing. I mean, they lost thousands of lads. They used to drop down dead whilst they were working, on this Burma railway, or any of the jobs. You see, our lads were not used to the conditions out there, were they?

\* No.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And the lads in Burma, the army in Burma, I mean, they were going through jungle, and up to their waist in mud and stuff, and I mean, the islands they went to...we met some lads at Eden Camp that had been doing the same sort of work, in the Navy, and they were saying, "Weren't those islands Hell holes?"

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You know, 'cause they were going in, supplying stuff for building runways for the aircraft, so they were going in and out of the islands all the time. Well, I mean, there was the heat, smells, lizards, and then I mean you had typhoons, hadn't you. There was all sorts of elements while you were at sea, that all seamen faced, and I say, lads of 18, they came back men. They went as boys but they all had to come back men, from what they had to do, and see.

In fact, on August 26th, all being well, touch wood, we'll be going to Singapore and Australia for the...there's 250 of us from the British Pacific Fleet that operated out there, they're going back to Singapore for the celebrations, the 60th Anniversary of the signing of the peace treaty, and then we'll go from Singapore to Sydney. We're hoping we might get some recognition from some of the prisoners of war that we brought home. 'Cause the money we collected, our mess, there's only...I think there was 20-odd of us in our mess, and with our savings we give them two hundred quid. Well, you think, we were only on a tanner a day.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Sixpence, remember, Ken, you are speaking for children. They won't know what a tanner is.

Oh, sixpence is...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Sixpence a day, they were on, all the time he was in the Navy.

\* It's a lot of money, isn't it? In them days...I mean, two hundred pounds in 1944.

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's a lot of money, out of their money.

\* Because they weren't well paid at all, were they?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Sixpence a day..!

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...were their wages. And then when he came out the gratuity they got for SIX YEARS, was 63 pounds. And we had to put that away because we were saving up to get married.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, but you see when they went, they were just coming into working mens' money.

\* Mmmm.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Mens' money. Well, they were taken away then, so they never got into, you know, earning very much.

\* Did you need money on the ship? Did you have to purchase anything whilst you were aboard?

I mean, you used to buy...while we were up the Persian Gulf we used to drink...coffee, erm...ooh what do they call it?...it was a bit of...beakers of orange juice, you know and you used to buy your cigarettes.

\* So, you had to buy your drink, and food. Did you buy food or were you fed?

Oh, aye. Oh, no, you were fed. You'd chocolates, cigarettes, you had to buy, mind you, the cigarettes, I used to smoke Senior Service, 'cause they didn't have Capstan Full Strength, but I had to have Senior Service. I used to get twenty for sixpence.

\* Yeah.

But, erm, that's about it, you know?

\*Mrs Harmon\* You, er, you see, our fleet went out there to support the Americans. See, the Americans...the Japanese could've got round to America. Up to then the Americans didn't know there was a war on, and when their men came to Britain, and to Hull, I mean, I was a teenager, so the Yanks, you know, they were all for the girls, so you came into contact with them. Well, they came full of 'Gung Ho', you know, they were going to win the war for us, and all the rest of it. They had the equipment. I doubt we could have managed without them, because they had the stuff, but we had this lease/lend from them, but we were paying for that. They weren't giving us it, they were pay...we had to pay for it all it all the time, and we still are paying for some of it. It's still going on, that lease/lend, but in the Pacific their fleet were out there. They came in because of Pearl Harbour, so our fleet, in the Pacific was the biggest fleet put to sea, and they were there supporting the Americans, whereas Ken says they (the Americans) had the ammunition the equipment...

They had everything.

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...and he said the stuff they used to put in the sky when the pla...the Japanese planes were coming over, he said, "We couldn't have done that, because we hadn't got it."

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...and a lot of our stuff was out of date, that they were fighting with, obsolete stuff, but I mean, the lads of eighteen - by then you were twenty-ish weren't you? - it must have been a shock, you know?

And you see when I came home from...when I came home from Alaunia, after two and a half years, I met Pearl, and then I only saw her three times, and I was moved out to the Pacific.

\* Yeah.

And I never saw her for two and a half years.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, I met you when I was seventeen, and then the next time I saw you I was nineteen and a half. They couldn't come home, if they had shore leave, and what the Australians did, er, the local people, mainly people that had emigrated after the First World War, most of them were British, er, they took them in, they called them 'uphomers', and they took them in, for a weekend, for a break, and that was the only thing they could do to get away from the ship.

\* Yes. Did you keep in touch by mail?

\*Mrs Harmon\* They did for so long, and then it, you know, like most things...he should have kept in touch, really, but the family that took you in used to send your mother food parcels, 'cause we didn't have hardly any food, you know?

\* No, no. That's what I've heard from other people as well. The Americans used to trade with the things...the luxury items they used to have.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, I used...when the bombing had eased off, 'cause when the air raids were at its height, you didn't go anywhere really, 'cause you were in the shelter most of the time, but er, when it eased off and we could go to a dance, I used to go to Henlop (phonetic) Barracks, a crowd of us. The Americans, by then had come, 'cause all our lads had gone, they were either in Europe or the Far East or wherever, and er...but we used to go, mainly, for the interval, because when they opened their canteen doors at Henlop (phonetic) Barracks...

\* (laughs)

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...they had everything, roast chickens, tins of fruit, ice-cream, chocolates, you name it, they had it. So, we used to go and hope we could bring some home for our mothers, because our mothers had an awful time. As soon as they'd heard...I mean, we were working, our mothers had to find stuff to pep us up for our lunch, while we were at work. As soon as they heard there was a bit of something in a pork butchers, the word went around amongst the women, and they'd go and queue. And then once it was gone, those at the end of the queue, you see, wouldn't get anything. I mean our mothers had a terrible time.

There was an incident when I came home from India, I'd gone home on leave, and we were sat, and me mam says, "Oh, just a minute." and she climbs up into the cupboard and gets a tin of...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Fruit.

...fruit, well it was banan...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Peaches.

...peaches, or something, and I says, "Well, mum..." I says, "Open my case." And there was three or four tins I've got while I was in South Africa, and she says. "Oh, and I've been saving this for you!"

\* Ohhhh, I bet she was pleased.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You ought to tell him about...you celebrated your twenty-first at the Persian Gulf, didn't you?

(laughs) Oh, no (hesitantly)...I was the rum boatswain...

\* The what, sorry?

...the rum boatswain. There's always, at half past eleven, they used to pipe up spirits. Well, one man from every mess went to collect his rum...the rum ration for whoever was in the mess.

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And it came in a tub, didn't it?

No. You went and took your fammy (phonetic)...

\*Mrs Harmon\* (laughs)

...to the...Petty Officer and the Officer, and he used to go...I went for our mess, and I used to get fourteen tots, and they used to weigh it out, but it was two for one. They always used to have water with it.

\* Right.

Only now and again did I...you get...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Neat.

...neat. When I was in motorboats crew, I got it neat, because nine times out of ten, I wasn't on the ship, but I used to get fourteen tots, then I used to go and get these tots, and dish it out to all the men. Well, it was my twenty-first birthday, so, of course, whoever it was, when it's your birthday you got a tot...you got 'sippers', what they call 'sippers'. You had a sip of everybody's rum. Well, my twenty-first...and then, you used to get your rum same time as your dinner.

\* Yep.

Well, I'd had one or two sips, and sips, and then I just fell into my dinner (laughs). I was out for forty-eight hours!

\* Unconscious on rum?

Oooooof!

\*Mrs Harmon\* But they had to hide him, because it was an offence, really.

\* Really?

\*Mrs Harmon\* So they hid him in a cupboard in a bathroom.

With it being a liner, well, a lot of the ship wasn't used, so they found one of the cabins with all the...you know (original fittings) and they locked me in there, and kept coming to have a look at me to see if I was all right. Well, the Petty Officer in charge of us knew I was missing, but he knew why, and of course everything was smoothed over, but I was out for 48 hours. The only time I went

up on deck, and they was dishing the rum out, oooh I used to run and be sick. I was, you know, for ages after, every time I got the smell of the rum.

\* Can you drink it now?

I do drink it now, on occasion.

\* Do you like it?

I've gone onto whiskey now.

\* Can I just ask a question? I've never known this. Rum, being the traditional drink of the Navy, why rum? What's the point of it?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, in the old days, Nelson's time, a lot of it was to fend off diseases.

\* It was medicinal?

\*Mrs Harmon\* It was really, I think so, wasn't it?

Oh, yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And it was to (fend off) scurvy, and you know, they suffered a lot in those days didn't they?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Because they'd be at sea years...

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...Nelson's lot, and er, fresh food would be very difficult for them. So I think it was medicinal, to ward off all the ailments.

You couldn't (indistinct - probably 'take') your rum 'til you were twenty-one.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* So, you see, he wouldn't be used to having rum, and then he'd have all these 'sippers' from the lads.

\* It's forty percent isn't it, so it's, er...eugh?

I don't know whether it's eighteen or twenty-one before you were allowed it. I think it was eighteen. If you didn't take your rum you got threepence a day.

\* Ah, right, so you had a choice, yes?

Yes, yes.

\* Did you ever suffer with sea sickness?

Eh?

\* Sea sickness.

I didn't, touch wood, I was very fortunate, but I knew a lad that...and I mean there's some of the Captains on board ships, every time they went to sea were seasick, you know, a lot of the Navy men, big, big cheeses were seasick.

\* Is it something you get used to, or is it something you are, sort of, afflicted with?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Varies, doesn't it, really?

A lot of them you get used to and it...you're only seasick maybe for 4 or 5 days, 6 days, and then you were allright, but some men, whenever they went to sea were seasick for maybe a couple of days, and then they were all right.

\* So you had that to contend with as well, then?

Oh, aye, I mean, your Albert was seasick wasn't he?

\*Mrs Harmon\* My father was a trawler skipper, and my eldest brother. Now, my eldest brother was sick when he was approaching land. Now there's a funny thing, and he went to sea all his life. Yes, the sea is a funny thing isn't it? And Ken said, the power of the sea is unbelievable, you see, you saw a ship...

You know when I was coming home from that first do?

\* Yes.

We picked a couple of ships up in jib (phonetic) to run them home to England, and there was these two ships and we were the escort, and there was a couple of destroyers with us and it started to blow, and when I say blow, it did blow. Oooh, it was terrible, and we had one of the American four-funnel things that we bought from the erm...the sea chopped the bows off, took the bows off this ship. Our Captain, Commadore, said to one of the escorts, "Take the stern part in tow, and take the survivors off the forecastle, and take it back into jib (phonetic)."

They towed it back into jib (phonetic). Now, for water to do that, slice a ship in half, that's force isn't it?

\* Yes, yeah. Were you worried that that might happen to you? Did it...was it something that sort of..?

No, touch wood, that ship I was on, the Aluania, when she was built, she was built for passenger work between Liverpool and New York, and it was built for the Cunard White Star Line, and it took 5 days to go from Liverpool and New York, and 5 days to come back, and there was 5 ships, and they were built for the Atlantic.

\* Right.

So, and as I say, there was passengers on board and everything, so they were built, really, for rough weather.

\* So they were quite able to tackle it?

Yes.

\* So you weren't worried for your safety other than the incoming stuff, torpedoes and shells and mines?

And you see that's why she was taken for an armed merchant cruiser. She was a co-escort for convoys, and they could take the rough, you know? And they did it. There was the Rawalpindi, the Jervis Bay, there's quite a few of them. The Jervis Bay got sunk by the Graf Spee (actually the Admiral Scheer). There were...(indistinct)

\*Mrs Harmon\* They were sturdy ships.

Yeah, but they were...inexpendable (correction - expendable). They were...Jervis Bay give herself up against the Graf...was it the Graf Spee, or? One of the big

'pocket' battleships, Jervis Bay. The convoy that she was escorting scattered and most of the convoy got home, but she gave herself up, for...and that's what they were inexpendable (correction - expendable). Rawalpindi was another one, Jervis Bay was one. The one that...erm, Jervis Bay, the Aluania took a convoy to Halifax, Nova Scotia. She sent the convoy in, the Jervis Bay is coming out with a convoy, and she developed engine trouble, so the Jervis Bay went back in to be repaired, and the Aluania took her convoy.

\* Right.

Jervis Bay came out with the convoy Aluania should have had, and that's when the Graf Spee (actually the Admiral Scheer) took her. She was sunk, so another instance, there. Things are...

\*Mrs Harmon\* What about the time, when you were in the Pacific, and you had engine trouble.

That was in the Atlantic, that was...

\*Mrs Harmon\* No, that was the Aluania.

...that was the Aluania, in the Pacific it was the Slinger, the aircraft carrier.

\*Mrs Harmon\* But you, you...the coder had not quoted the code sign for your ship, had he?

No.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And you were left high and dry, there was...you were alone because you had engine trouble, and they didn't know where you were, and they didn't know who you were, they knew you were missing, your ship was missing, but they didn't know where you were or who you were, because the coder had forgotten, when he sent the message about the engine trouble, he hadn't stated which ship. They all had codenames, you see.

Another thing about the Slinger, she was damaged and she, as I say, went into Brisbane dry-dock, and they was going to send us home to Newport in America, on the east coast where she was built, but before we got sent, the war finished. Now, had we gone back to America, I'd have been right round the world.

\* Mmm.

I just avoided, me, being...going across the Pacific.

\* Yes. The last little bit, yeah.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You see, Ken was hardly in the UK all the war. I mean, if it was nine months, including his training, that was your lot wasn't it? Some fellers never really left, you know, depending...

\* Depending on what job you got.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yeah, so, he was home very little, but he didn't realise the bombing we had, 'cause he wasn't here, but they were in action elsewhere.

\* You mentioned earlier, Ken, that you had participation in the D-Day landings. Could you tell me a little bit more about that, please?

Well, I...all I did was went with this ammunition (indistinct)

\*Mrs Harmon\* You were in barracks, start you were in barracks and you and one or two other lads were ordered to get your overalls on...

...and went, 'cause Plymouth dock yard and the barracks is one, you come out the barracks straight into the dock.

\* Yes, yeah.

We find, that being green, I'd only just come back from the...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Middle East.

Middle East, and we goes (indistinct - sounds like 'telling'), they chop each of us off to, erm...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Load a barge.

\* Yes.

...our overalls on, to go and report in the dockyard, and there was a load of ammunition on the side and we had to put it on board the...this barge, and while it was loaded we're getting off, and he said, the Petty Officer said, "Where are you going?", and we said, "Well, it's all been...(loaded), and all that, Sir." and he said, "get back on board. You're going with it!" And, of course, they towed us out to (indistinct) , and of course shoved us aboard, got the ammunition (indistinct), and all I knew about it was just shelling the beaches. Then we came back into barracks and that's when I was put aboard the Slinger, well after I'd done the (indistinct).

\* Yes, so your responsibility was to actually provide ships that were shelling the coast of France with ammunition?

Yes, that's it.

\* Yes, and that's how it worked is it? The ammo came from England, across to France, then you went back, picked some more up, took it back out...

No, we only took the one lot.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, but then they put them aboard the ship. Unexpectedly.

\* Yes.

And then we came back. We would have got some more, I suppose, but we were...went straight back into barracks.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Ready for sailing to the Pacific.

Well, no, to go for the radar course.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh.

You see, nobody knows that, because it isn't in your papers. It's just a job you did, and nobody knew, and when you went back you got your station card and that was it.

\*Mrs Harmon\* So, a lot of the time you actually didn't know where you were going to end up next.

No, no.

\* And it was just a complete surprise. You could be in Australia, you could be in America, and you didn't know, you were away for weeks and months at a time. Did you write to your family, then, back in England?

Nine times out of ten the letters was cut up!

\* Really?

We were censored, well, by then I'd met Ken you see, in between him coming back from the Far East...the Middle East, to going to the Pacific we met, but we only saw one another three times because his leave was cut short. They were shipped out to the Pacific, well, he used to try to write to me every day. Now, he used to number his letters because if one was missing I knew the ship that was bringing them here had been sunk.

\* Right.

But he'd number his letters, 'cause also, they were all read by the Officers, and pieces cut out, if they thought they were sending you a message in code, so there were bits chop...I wish I'd kept them...and all the gaps, there, you had to try to piece...

\* What, they literally snipped them out, or did they just try and..? (cover up, cross out)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh, no, no, they were cut out!

\* So you'd got holes in your letters?

\*Mrs Harmon\* You got strips, strips taken out, oh yes. And then if you put anything personal in, well, I mean, all the Officers, well, not all, but the Officers that were erm, due to check the letters...

And another thing, we didn't know this, but in the 'Navy News' there was a letter...er, a notice, "Anybody that served aboard the Slinger interested in a reunion?"

\* Ah, right.

So, after 50 years, I wrote and said we were keen, so they had a meeting at Chester - that was central for us all - a meeting at Chester, and we went and there was quite a few of us turned up, wasn't there?

\*Mrs Harmon\* There was about fifty.

Fifty of us turned up.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And they took photographs of when they were young, because otherwise they wouldn't have known one another, you see?

Yes, anyway, what I'm getting at then, the padre...er, the...

\*Mrs Harmon\* No, one of the Officers.

Yeah, the Navigator.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, he came. He's now...he's a canon in the...a minister, a vicar.

\* Yes, yeah.

And he was saying...

\*Mrs Harmon\* And he told them lots of things from the Officers' side, you see, because the Officers and men didn't really mix, socially.

\* No, so you got to see what went on behind the scenes?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes.

And he told us about the padre we had, and he got shipped...moved 'cause he was a drunkard, and he got moved, and they said, when they emptied his drawers...

\*Mrs Harmon\* In his cabin.

...in his cabin, they were full of letters...

\*Mrs Harmon\* That he was supposed to censor and forward on, and he'd never done it, so lots of the letters the lads had written home never came. Yes.

\* I bet you were...how did that make you feel?

Ooof, what can you do?

\* Nothing. I bet it made you feel a bit angry, did it? Or did you laugh?

Oooh, he got kicked off the ship because, you know? (drinking)

\*Mrs Harmon\* But you had Fullsome, was it, the film star? Winky Howard, you had, hadn't you, as an Officer? And he...

That was aboard Aluania.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, he was...can't remember his first name...famous film star.

Trevor Howard.

\*Mrs Harmon\* No, not Trevor Howard.

His son, Leslie.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Leslie Howard, it was his son. You called him 'Winky' didn't you? You all called him 'Winky'.

\* (laughs)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, he was an Officer.

On board the Slinger we had one or two rough times, but I did six years in the Navy and I wouldn't have missed any of it. It was a wonderful experience. And I'm pleased for what I've seen.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, I think, through all those experiences, they came out a fine body of men, without a doubt.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You know, they were independant, they were...well I think they could face anything.

\* Yes, I suppose civilian life would have been relatively straightforward compared to life on board a ship. How did you cope with sleeping in a metal box, after the sun's been on it all day, cooped up with no air. How was that?

You had your...you had your, erm...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, you were in hammocks, weren't you, to start with?

On the Aluania we were in hammocks, and sometimes we used to take them on deck and sling them on, or lay them on the deck, your hammock because you had a

blanket and a mattress in your hammock, and sometimes it was quite pleasant on Aluania. Now, on the slinger, they're all bunks, you know?

\* Yes.

You dropped your...(bunk - fold down) and they were...you got used to it because it was air conditioned, you know, they weren't too bad.

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, I think you had to get used to anything, hadn't you? You know, whatever they throw at you you had to accept and just get on with it.

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* I used to say at first, about the food, and I used to say Oh some of it used to be, when you first went in, and he said you might be a couple of days and not eat anything, but after that you were so hungry you'd eat anything.

\* Yeah.

That was when you were in barracks. On board ship, nine times out of ten, you could eat anything that was put in front of you. There was odd meals you didn't fancy, but most of the time your meals was good. That was aboard the two ships I was on. Now, anybody on corvettes and the small ships, things weren't so good.

\* Yes.

You know, like being on a trawler, you know, and you're at sea for four or five days, sometimes weeks, and the food was terrible, but touch wood, the food I had on the two ships I was on was marvellous. You couldn't fault it.

\* The second ship was the Slinger...that was an aircraft carrier?

Yes.

What kind of 'planes did that carry?

Corsairs. We had, er, an Avenger, an Hellcat, it just depends what...our squadron was 1845 Squadron, and they were Corsairs. Now, the Yanks wouldn't fly them at first, because when they came in, you know when they come in to land, they couldn't see the batman, and they had to come in at an angle. Anyway, it was through our ship that they did something...

\*Mrs Harmon\* The engineers...

...engineers

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...worked on them, didn't they?

Yes, and, in the end they got it so as they could come in astern. Of course, the Yanks then took them back and they were using Corsairs as well as...(tails off)

\* Did you have anything to do with the taking-off and landing and looking after the planes, or were you given duties other than that?

I was...I had control in the air.

\* Ah yes, being radar.

Being radar, we controlled them in the air.

\* So, your responsibility was to bring them in to land safely?

Yes.

\* Did you ever have any mishaps?

Let me just...(brings out photo album)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Quite a few, but they also...they were spotting for Japanese 'planes and things, and the kamikazes.

\* Did you, er...were you engaged by kamikaze planes at all?

Yes.

\* So you were attacked by...(handed photograph)

That was the Slinger.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Can I get you a drink, young man?

(Recording stopped in order to look at photographs and drink tea!)

Well, a lad round the corner was on the same ship as me. (Slinger)

\* Really?

Yes, and he was in touch. In the 'Navy News' there was somebody asking, "Anybody aboard the Slinger?" because he couldn't find anything about his Dad. When they rung the War Office they just said he was on the Slinger.

\* Right.

So, of course, he contacted the 'Navy News', and this lad round the corner wrote to them and said he couldn't find where his father was and so he said his father died aboard our ship.

This is a photograph of his father, who was a pilot.

\* So this is actually when they buried him at sea?

Yes.

\* His Dad?

Yes. They wrote to this lad, and said his father...'cause he said his father was a pilot, could it...all it said was his father was aboard the Slinger, and he died aboard the Slinger. Now that...there's these three photographs.

\* Incredible! So you've actually got photographs of his funeral. And did you have these, then?

Yes, we had them, this lad round the corner (shared photos), and he sent these three photographs to the lad to let him know where his Dad was.

\* I bet he was thrilled to bits wasn't he?

Oh aye. He said his mother was in tears, but she was in wonderful spirits to think she knew where he was, and how he died.

\* What a fantastic send off!

Yes. That's burial at sea.

\* Incredible. I'll take some photographs of these.

No problem.

(Pause to take photographs)

Well there's quite a few. You know, you might want one or two.

\* So what's this picture of again?

That's Father Neptune coming aboard the ship.

\*Mrs Harmon\* When they crossed the Equator, they called it 'Crossing The Line'. That's what these are.

\* I've never heard of it! So when you went across the Equator on a ship, they make a big deal out of it?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Even now, even if you're on a cruise ship.

You'll see what I mean.

\* Right, I've never heard of this.

(All laugh at photos)

There he is. (Father Neptune)

\*Mrs Harmon\* And that's what these are, 'Crossing The Line' Certificates.

\* So it's like a coming-of-age-type thing, isn't it, it's..?

Yes.

\* (laughs) Is it an important thing, or is it quite funny?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oooh, it's traditional.

\* But do they have a laugh as well?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh, yes, they tip...

That's his garb.

\*Mrs Harmon\* They cover them with all sorts. They get dressed up as bears and all sorts of...anything they can lay their hands on.

And that's his bears. That's the Commander aboard our ship, and they get him and duck him, you know?

\* Yes, yeah. (laughs)

Father Neptune's giving him orders to say he's been...

\* Are there a lot of superstitions amongst sailors?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oooh, yes.

\* Yes?

\*Mrs Harmon\* The women, well fishermen, especially, the women will never wear green, won't have anything green, always have a cat in the house.

\* You're not allowed to speak about animals on a boat, are you?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Er, well, I think it's pigs mainly.

Yeah, pigs.

\*Mrs Harmon\* But, er, you must never whistle on a ship.

\* Really?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Women, if a woman whistles on a ship. They don't have women on trawlers. It's unlucky, but if a woman's on a ship and whistles, that's bad.

And, you know when the fishermen used to go to sea?

\* Yes.

They never looked back, once they go out the door.

\* Right.

They don't turn round.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And the wives never do...never wash on a Friday, wash day. Clothes. Never wash on a Friday.

That is Sydney Harbour. (shows photo) Where all the ferries live.

\* That's clear. It's changed a bit since then, I bet.

Yes. That's...that's having a party, a do.

\* (laughs) Ah, yes, so you made your own entertainment on board, didn't you?

Yes, yes.

\* Did you have an entertainments committee, that organised things like this?

Yes, oh aye.

\* I suppose that was a fairly major part of life at sea wasn't it, boredom and keeping the lads upbeat?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, I think that...I mean, Ken started smoking, that was one thing a lot of them did. Playing cards if they were off watch. Very often, you were so tired weren't you, you just went to sleep?

Yes.

\* So it was hard work on board?

Oh, yes.

\* So you didn't have to, you know..?

It wasn't...mine wasn't HARD work, it was concentration. I picked an aeroplane up 180 miles away, and someone said, "180?" I said, "Yeah, you had to pick them up like that, because you had to get your own planes up."

\* Yeah.

To intercept them before they got anywhere, the trap went to 100 miles an hour.

\* Yes.

You know? And when you had aircraft up in the air you had to keep contact until the lads, 'cause they used to plot, and you had to keep talking to them, while they write the plot down, for them, you know? It wasn't hard work, it was concentration.

\* I've heard Air Traffic Controllers suffer a great deal of stress.

Yes.

\* You know, commercial airline controllers.

That was a fly-past of our ship. It's the 1845 Squadron.

(Refreshments arrive)

Entering Brisbane dry-dock.

\* So they sail a ship into the dock, which is full of water, and then empty the water out to repair underneath the waterline?

Yes.

\* Ah, that's sailing underneath Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Yes.

\* With the planes on the deck. Is that a Spitfire? Is that a Spitfire?

A Seafire.

\* It looks similar to a Spitfire doesn't it?

\* Is that being repaired, or has it suffered a mishap?

(laughs) It's...mishap.

\* Nose down into the deck!

\*Mrs Harmon\* Has he missed the wire?

Yes, it's missed the wire and it...you have a barrier up, and if it doesn't catch the arrester wires, hits the barrier, and that's how it ends up.

\* Yes. So they don't go off the deck into the water, then?

No...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Sometimes, though, they overrun, could overrun.

\* So you could do, then?

Yes. But when they do catch the arrester wires, the barrier is dropped so it doesn't run into the barrier. Now, we was transferring a body from the destroyer, onto our ship, to go to hospital.

\* So that's how you did it, then. That's how you got goods, or whatever, from one ship to another using a system of ropes and pulleys? I bet that was difficult work when the sea was rough?

Yes. (laughs)

\* Did you get wires snapping, and...?

Oooh, yes (laughs)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, they had a Boatswain's Chair, hadn't they, that sometimes you'd go from one ship to another in like a chair, using that method. Well, you imagine if the sea was rising, and this beam was dipping, you know, it wouldn't be straight across, would it, it would droop a little.

\* So you'd be...

\*Mrs Harmon\* It'd be in the water off and on.

\* Eugh! Hey, I bet that was warm!

(all laugh)

From an Americans' ship that was transferred aboard us.

And that was the Corsair landing on.

That's Father Neptune again.

That's the cinema, in the...that's in the hangar.

\* Did they put on newsreels and things so you could keep abreast of events in other parts of the world?

No.

\* Or was it just films?

Just films.

\* Did you know what was going on elsewhere?

Sometimes we did, but nine times out of ten we were in the...blind about it.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* In the dark. You didn't know what was going on back home, really, did you?

No. That's VJ night.

\*Mrs Harmon\* I'll see if there's a door open, it's quite draughty.

\* What date was VJ Day? Can you remember?

August the...Pearl...what date's VJ Day?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Pardon?

What date's VJ Day?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Er...(laughs)

August the...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, the 6th I think it was. Sixth of the Eighth. (actually 15/08/1945)

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's a long time ago. (1945 - 60 years)

\* Which is after VE Day, presumably, so..?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Ooh, yes, it was...VE Day was June, wasn't it?

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* It was June, July, Au...a good three months actually after, er...and then, even so, as I say, the Japs carried on.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You know, because it was a dishonour for them to surrender.

\* Not like the Germans, who just quit?

\*Mrs Harmon\* No, oh no.

\* So VJ Day was a lot different to VE Day, wasn't it, it was a lot less of a final cut?

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's right, er...

That's inside the hangar. (referring to photographs)

\* I suppose you celebrated anyway, didn't you?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, you had a dance on board ship, you danced with one another, didn't you?

Yes.

(everyone laughs)

\*Mrs Harmon\* There's a photograph there.

\* I've just seen it, yes! (laughs) I bet your rum rations went down that night, didn't they?

Yes, and you see, when you went into harbour you always stood to attention, all alongside the...(barrier on deck)...you know? That's going into Sydney. They're not suitable for (indistinct, sounds like 'post') these or shouldn't be.

\* For what, sorry?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, there were official photog...there was an official photographer on.

Not suitable for...

\*Mrs Harmon\* They were not allowed to keep a diary. I don't know about the Army. A few of them kept diaries, but they, in the Navy used...were not supposed to keep a diary.

\* Some did, though, didn't they?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes. And these photographs, they could not send home, or...that's why he's got them all.

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes.

That's the radar division aboard our ship.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You do know they never had the names of their ships on their cap bands?

\* No, I didn't, no.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Didn't you know that?

\* In case they were captured?

\*Mrs Harmon\* It was just HMS, couldn't have the ship's name on.

That's me.

\* Top left.

Yes.

\* What happened to your uniform when you left?

\*Mrs Harmon\* You'd to hand it in, hadn't you?

\* Did you? Couldn't you keep it?

\*Mrs Harmon\* No. He kept a jumper.

Yes, one or two things we kept, but you weren't allowed...I kept my trousers and...you know?

They weren't much good though, 'bell bottoms', were they? In civvy life.

You know when we said we were pulling that coffin aboard, well, that is part of it, you know, that's...

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Is that the burial?

No.

\*Mrs Harmon\* No.

He's taking photographs of the burial.

\* All that's like an A-frame that you used to...

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* You could spend a week, couldn't you, looking at them? Then there's an album full of Middle East stuff.

There's a lot more of these, but (indistinct).

\*Mrs Harmon\* What he thought you'd be interested in.

\* Yes.

That's some of the lads. I'd just been up the aerial, that's why I've got my overalls on. Been up the aerial to...

\* Ah, right, yes. So you had to repair it as well, if it went wrong?

No, we had a...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Mechanic.

...a mechanic. I wasn't a mechanic.

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\* But why did you go?

There was a reason for me to go up. I don't know what it was.

\*Mrs Harmon\* (laughs) Did you point out the aerial? (on the photo) That big ugly thing that's on one.

Not yet, no. I don't know whether I've got one.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well you have 'cause I looked...saw it last night.

\* Is it going to...if the aerial...is it going to be, like, the highest point on the ship?

Yes.

\* That sticks out the top, so, on this particular ship (refers to photo) it's going to be this one here, isn't it?

Yes.

\* Yes. I bet that was high, wasn't it?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* But the first, er, radar set you had the aerial was like a bedstead, wasn't it, you said?

Yes, there was two Yankee, with it being a Yankee ship, there was two Yankee units, the SG and SK, and they were like big bedsteads. Now, I think I've passed it on to you (photograph), on one of them it shows you.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* He said, when you had to turn it, it was a big wheel, wasn't it? And they turned the aerial manually, right, from this wheel? Am I right?

No. On board the Aircraft Carrier it was all mechanical. When I turned the aerial, that one, was when I first went into radar. That was going back years before.

\*Mrs Harmon\* It was in its infancy, radar, then.

That was aboard...while I was up the Persian Gulf I was put aboard a whaler to do some patrolling and exercises.

\* Yes.

And that's the whaler, HMS Sobcre (phonetic), it was.

\* Is that you in the middle?

Yes.

\* (laughs) Eighteen, were you then, or twenty..?

Be eighteen, nineteen. That's another part of the transferring.

\* Oh, yes. So what size guns would these be then? Would these be like six inch, or are they bigger?

Oh, they were bigger, them.

\* Yes.

They would be six inch, maybe, with it being a Destroyer. It could be six or eight inch.

\* That looks like India?

That was, yes. That was on the first ship I was on.

\* Is that on...is that during a period of shore leave?

Yes.

\* Is that what you used to wear when you went ashore?

That will be either Sri Lanka or Bombay. They were just snaps.

That was alongside in Sydney.

\* So you refuelled, restocked with provisions for the men, while you were ashore?

Yes. And then when we went up to the fleet with the...you know there's planes, you used to take planes up to them, and fuel.

\* Yes. I'll just turn that off.

(Continues looking through photographs)

(The next section begins with Ken recounting stories of his brother during the war, and his time as a POW)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Let me explain. The ships he was on, they were wooden decks, because the magnetic mines, our minesweepers had to be wooden.

\* Yes.

So you can understand if they were machine-gunned they would be sunk...

\* Yes.

...and he was, their ship was sunk, and only seven managed to swim ashore.

And while we were in the water, while they were in the water the Germans were machine-gunning us. Anyway, as the seven got ashore the Greeks hid them in caves and looked after them.

\* Right.

And two of the lads died, and they buried them on board...on the island.

\*Mrs Harmon\* On the island.

And then the Italians captured them, and took them prisoners. When they took them to Italy they were laid on open trucks, on stretchers, and while they were being taken through Italy, the Italians were stoning them, while they were laid on the trucks.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And they were all injured.

Anyway, the Germans took them after that, and of course they get taken to a Prisoner of War camp, so they were going to...he was only young my lad, my brother, you know, eighteen or so. They said, "Come on, let's escape." The Coxwain of the boat was a married man with a family.

He says, "Don't be bloody daft!" He says, "You're in the middle of Germany. You can't speak German. How far are you going to get? Sit it out."

Anyway, they sat it out, and when they came home the Coxwain was a fisherman.

\* Yes.

Anyway, he went back to sea. He did two trips, and he was lost on the Lorella (phonetic). You know when the Lorella and the Roderigo was..?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Went down.

...went down, he was Mate on the Lorella (phonetic). So he went through all that, and he came home and he'd do two trips, and he was lost on board the Lorella (phonetic). It's unbelievable, isn't it?

\* Yes, it is.

\*Mrs Harmon\* But Ken's brother, being a bit of a daredevil, he used to go under the wire on a night. There's a serviette thing there for you, Chris, because it's chocolate and it's gone a bit gooey. Oh it isn't, sorry, it's here. He would go under the wire on a night, because they had one shirt between three of them, so when they got a Red Cross parcel, he would go and barter with one of the guards, with chocolate and stuff, for clothing, and this guard was reasonable, you see?

Anyway, he went under the wire, and he never should be out of the hut. One night he went and the Alsatian dogs got him, so all one arm was damaged with bullets, where he was swimming ashore and the plane was spraying them with machine-gun fire, then the other arm got all bitten with the dogs! (laughs) Well, he couldn't report sick because he shouldn't have been out.

\* What was he going to do when he was under the wire?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Going to find the guard to barter the stuff.

\* Oh, right, so he got out, to go and trade and then come back again when he'd got his stuff?

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's right. Well it was under a wire, you see, you can imagine a concentration camp, and a set of wires this high.

When they were caught, when they was sunk, all they had was what they was stood up in.

\*Mrs Harmon\* A vest and...

Whatever, and being in the Mediterranean they wouldn't have much on, would they?

\* No.

And, do you know how me Mam knew he was a prisoner of war?

\* No.

You'll have heard of him, Lord Haw Haw?

\* Yes.

Well, he was on Lord Haw Haw's programme.

\*Mrs Harmon\* On the radio.

And said, like, his name and everything.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, do you know what...Ken knew nothing of Lord Haw Haw, 'cause he was away, but every so many weeks, on the radio, Lord Haw Haw would come on with a lot of propaganda. We were losing in Africa, we'd lost so many ships, er, the Air Force was badly hit. All untrue, but to frighten us, you see. Anyway, then, every so often they let so many of our lads that were prisoners say who they were, and they were safe. And that was...his brother was one of them.

\* Oh, right, so they actually...

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's how his mother got to know. (about the whereabouts of Ken's brother) The War Office just sent her a telegram, erm, 'Missing'. Didn't know whether he was alive or dead, but when he came home, he came home VE Day. Ken and his (other) younger brother were still in the Pacific. I then met his middle brother (the one just back on VE Day), so I said to him, "Well, what happened, this Lord Haw Haw's programme?" He said, "Well, you were in a small room, a wooden table, a wooden chair, microphone thing, and a soldier with a gun in your back, and you had a card, and you had to read this card and nothing else. If you said anything more that was on the card, there was no doubt they would shoot you." So, but apart from that, he has never told anybody about his experiences, none of his children, I mean, he's dead now, but, you know?

\* Where was he held?

\*Mrs Harmon\* He was in Germany, in a Stalag.

\* Stalag?

Stalag 4b.

\* Stalag 4b. So his experiences must have been so distressing he never spoke of it?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, there's some reason, there was some reason. I think this business of when they were sunk, and had to swim ashore, now...

\* Is this when they were off Greece?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes. Now the Greeks, as he'd say, hid them in caves, and they used to come every day with food for them.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And the only thing Eddie said was someone would come and say, "You are free, today." meaning they hadn't been captured, and the Greeks would feed them, leave them food.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, they had to be careful, the Greeks.

\* 'Cause, was Greece occupied by the Italians, then?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes, and if they were found out they were looking after the British lads, they would have been shot. Anyhow, then one day the lads, in fun, said, "Are we free today?"

"'Fraid not. Look outside." and there were all the Italians there, then. That's how his capture happened, but after that we know very little. He never said very much at all. He used to sit and think a lot. You could see him, off guard, he'd be thinking, but I think a lot of that experience, and swimming ashore for your life...

\* In your boots.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes. I think all that must've weighed very heavily on him.

\* How long after the war was it that he died?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh, it's, er, he was...he went fishing, and they weren't fisherpeople. They weren't fishermen, then, the family, but he decided to go fishing, and he survived quite a number of years.

In fact, you know when I said about whasisname, the Boatswain, the Coxwain..?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Wildboar.

Was it Wildboar? They met, and they were talking on the dock side...

\*Mrs Harmon\* In Hull.

...they said, they met like, and Ernie Wildboar said to our young kid, "Go on, see if you can get..." he'd already signed on the Bruscella (phonetic), says, "Go see if you can get it changed, and come with us on the Lorella." so he goes to the ship's runner, and he's a Normandy vet, is the bloke...

\*Mrs Harmon\* You know Mike Bell? (Secretary Normandy Veterans, Hull)

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well his old uncle was the ship's runner.

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\* For the trawlers.

And he went to him and said, "Take us off Bruscella and put us on Lorella." so he says, "You signed on the Bruscella, you're going on the Bruscella." So there's another one. (near miss) My brother, someone must have been looking.

\*Mrs Harmon\* If he'd been on the Lorella with Ernie Wildboar, the chap he'd been in the camp with, he'd have got lost at...with him.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Life is...there's so many twists and turns, isn't there?

\* That's one, sort of, underlying theme that comes through from speaking to the ex-servicemen. A lot of them have actually said, "I am so lucky to be here, with what happened to me."

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's right.

\* The near misses and...

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's right.

\* You know, you've probably heard Ken's (Watson) story of the cigarette box, with the bullet that bounced off it?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Yes.

\* If he hadn't have...if he'd have stuck by the rules and not had it in that pocket...

\*Mrs Harmon\* That's right.

\* ...he'd have been lost, so...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, as I say, we used to go through to Wigan, and this other lad, as I say, they went all through the war together, so they were...I mean, twenty-four hours a day, they lived together didn't they?

(Ken's brother and his forces pal)

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And so they were like brothers, well when you've to hear those two talking, that's when you got your information really.

\* Right.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And he would say, "Have you read so-and-so book? Well read it, 'cause you'll know, we were there." Ken got something, oh...somebody lent him a book, and there's maps in it, of all the areas that they were in, and you realise all these different islands, you know? And as I say, there...you see we're talking about 1940s, when life was not sophisticated.

\* No.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And a lot of the stuff that they had to use, like the gun for instance, not electronic, all manual.

\* yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* 'cause he forgot to tell you that these guns...did you tell him about them not recoiling back?

You know, these six inch guns were taken off some ship in jib or something, they were obsolete, and when you used to fire the gun the shell used to drop out the end, it didn't go anywhere, it used to drop out the end, 'cause the rifling on the gun wasn't strong enough. And, when fired, a gun recoils doesn't it?

\* Yes.

Well it didn't run out, it stayed out. You had to chock it out to get in firing position. Oh, there was all sorts with it, you know? But, we had nothing, you see, and they're using thes Armed Merchant Cruisers as escorts, and as I say, the Rawalpindi, Jervis Bay, they were all obsolete, really.

\* Yes.

And then this one I was on, Aluania, she did one or two runs, but when they started to get destroyers and corvettes, they took this one I was on, Aluania, and bunged her out to the Middle East, and that's when we were in the Persian Gulf, and all that. But we had no equipment at all.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And when Ken came home from the Far East, his back...you had a fungus hadn't you, all over your back?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And we went to a chemist that was brilliant, he used to be on Anlaby Road, for all sorts of things. The doctors didn't seem to be able to do anything about these funguses, anyway this chappie got rid of it, but then he was in the hospital, some years ago, early fifties, and the consultant he saw said, "Are you aware you have an enlarged liver and spleen?"

He said, "No."

He said, "Were you in the Tropics for any length of time?"

"Oh" he says, "All my war service."

"Oh" he says, "I think you must have picked up a virus." But you try and get a pension. Impossible. He had to go in the hospital again, a few years after that, and an Aisian doctor examined him,

"Are you aware you have an enlarged liver and spleen?"

He said "Yes, Doctor Farr (phonetic) told me about it."

"Were you in the Tropics for any length of time?"

Same story, and this is an Asian doctor, so he says, "Yes, all my war service."

"Oh, you've picked up a virus." but the war was, er...

They put it down I was...I had yellow jaundice when I was ten, eight, nine, ten. I had yellow jaundice, and they put it down to that, yet all the time I was out the Far East, and the Middle East I was given mepacrine (phonetic) tablets, and they were yellow, and you take a load of mepacrine (phonetic) tablets and you'll go yellow, but they put it down to...

\*Mrs Harmon\* When he told them this, you have to go before a board, and oh, it's terrible, they make them feel real small, anyway, er, they went back to his medical records from when he was eight, to do anything to get out of paying pensions. Oh, I was disgusted when we went.

Going back to my brother that was in the Med.

(a document is brought out)

\* (reads) The Royal Naval Patrol Service.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Now this has been done by the son of one of the chaps that was on it. Now, his father was lost, was drowned when the ship went down, now he knows nothing about the prisoner of war time bit. He could only...his father could only tell him, or left...he must have left some records of some sort, up to the ship going down.

\* So, Daniel Sullivan...

Yes.

\* Who's Daniel Sullivan?

He was the son of the Coxwain of the boat.

(Daniel wanted any information Ken might have about his father, who had been imprisoned with Ken's brother - both then deceased)

\* Right. I follow now, yes. Sorry.

\*Mrs Harmon\* And he contacted Ken for any photographs of this brother, or information of what happened. Had he any...well we couldn't tell him anything because his brother (Ken's brother) hadn't said anything. You see, the funny thing was, when all three returned (Ken and his brothers), and eventually got back together as a family, I said, "Didn't you all talk to one another of your experiences?"

"No", he said, "You just shelved it, you just forgot about it."

\* Yes.

I was the only one of us that carried on with the Royal Navy Association.

\* Yes, you're referred to here, aren't you?

\*Mrs Harmon\* No, that's E...is that E. Harmon (Eddie, Ken's brother)

\* Yeah, it talks of brothers Ken and Ben.

(both) Oh, yes, yes.

And you see, most of the crew were Hull lads.

\* Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Some of them were fishermen, weren't they?

Yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* I mean, you can always come back again, and have another chat.

\* I'm thinking it would be nice to publish this as well.

\*Mrs Harmon\* I know, the erm, I mean, you talk about the film 'Saving Private Ryan'. There were three of them (Ken, Ben and Ernie) in the Navy, and their mother didn't know most of the time where any of them were, but our Government didn't send somebody out to save any of them! (laughs)

\* No, I...

(looking through memorabilia)

Well, if you want a different...I've lent one of these out. I've got another that you know, of these.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Copy.

And one of the lads was in the patrol service, and was in one of these ships...

\*Mrs Harmon\* At a similar time.

...with the number on, and I've lent him one of...'cause he wants to see.

(phone rings)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Hello. Oh, hello, there.

(turns voice recorder off)

...married. We lived in a nissan (phonetic) hut, for two...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Two and a half years.

...'cause we couldn't afford...

\* Yes.

And it was an Army hut. That was what we did for Yorkshire Post. Pearl, on the top is my medals, the box with my medals in. Will you..?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Top of where?

The sideboard. In that white box. Waiting for Chris coming to...

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh, yes.

\* When was this? 2004.

Well, it was through 'Heroes' return'. (Lottery funded trips for ex-servicemen to pay respects)

\* Ha ha, yes, it's great that, isn't it? Oh, look at them. (medals brought out)

\*Mrs Harmon\* Somebody's coming to, they've just rewritten those, they're coming to do these next.

\* Fantastic. Goodness! Let's spread them out.

Those are all General Service medals.

\* yes, the War Medal (1939-45), Atlantic Star, Pacific Star, superb.

\*Mrs Harmon\* This one's got caught, Ken, the cotton. These are going to be redone.

\* Who does that, then, is it..?

\*Mrs Harmon\* It's a young man that used to live opposite and he was in the army. He was only young, but he's doing this now he's out of the Army. it's part of a...

(indistinct)

\*Mrs Harmon\* ...he's in the Terratorials.

\* Oh, right, yes, yeah.

\*Mrs Harmon\* The cotton has caught, look, along here, and it's dragging it up. I'll have to break it. That's it.

And those are...

\*Mrs Harmon\* These are Campaign Medals.

...campaign medals.

\* They are beautiful, aren't they, those?

\*Mrs Harmon\* That has to go on, eventually, at this end, really.

That's the Atlantic...

\* Incredible. They look fine all together, don't they?

(takes pictures)

\* Let me just take a photo of this, and then I've got one or two more questions if that's all right, then I'll get out of your hair for a while, then you'll be able to get some food, because I'm taking a lot of your time up.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Oh, don't worry about that. I can...we have one we've cut out, you know, just concerning Ken, because you've got all the newspaper stuff.

\* Yes, I'll just get a picture of this, then I'll...

You'll be better off with that.

\* Oh, right, yes, yes.

\*Mrs Harmon\* I just cut that portion out.

\* I can actually read that, off this photograph. Fantastic.

\*Mrs Harmon\* There we are, that's the article.

\* Great stuff, thank you.

'Cause what I can do is cut...I can actually cut it out and leave it on white, do you know what I mean, when I get it on the computer. I'll do it in bits actually. That's great, thank you.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Did you take a photograph of his 'Crossing the Line'?

\* I'm going to come back.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Are you going to come back? 'Cause he has another one in the...

\* There's too much! I can't do it all.

(laughs)

\* I was just going to ask you, before we conclude, having seen your medals, and having listened to your stories, how would you like children in schools in England to feel about you and your comrades and what you did in the war?

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, appreciate what they've done, mainly.

Yes, the comradeship and the things what we did was great, and I've no qualms about talking about it, because the comradeship and the things that we did, we did wholeheartedly. We didn't...

\*Mrs Harmon\* But how would you like the children to feel about what you did, and remember you all?

Well...

\*Mrs Harmon\* To appreciate, really.

I'd like the children to appreciate what we did and why we did it. We did it for their future, for their peace of mind. They could go to school knowing that they were going to be safe, and that they won't have the worries that our children did, but as I say, I appreciate we did this for their future, for their safety, and I'd like them to look on it as their heritage. We did it for their sake, and their future.

\*Mrs Harmon\* Well, you were protecting our country weren't you?

Yes, we were protecting the country, and we did it for their tomorrows.

\* Mmm.

We did it for their tomorrows.

\* Thank you, that's great. really good. I'll stop it there.

[http://www.btinternet.com/~faahistoryweb/Slinger\\_Assc/INDEX.HTM](http://www.btinternet.com/~faahistoryweb/Slinger_Assc/INDEX.HTM)