

Ken Watson, Légion d'honneur, Verbal Testimony - 28th April 2005, Hull

- The questions I've got...name - I can write that down anyway.

[The interviewer already knew that the name of the ex-serviceman was Ken Watson.]

- How old are you now, Ken?

Eighty-One.

- Eighty-One. How old were you when you were enlisted into the forces?

Nineteen.

- You were nineteen. And were you army, navy...

Army.

- ...Royal Air Force or..?

Army.

- What branch or squadron or regiment or battalion were you?

R-A-O-C. Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

- And what was your rank at the start of the war?

Private.

- And what rank are you now, or when you left the armed forces?

Sergeant.

- Sergeant.

Would you like a biscuit?

- No, I'm fine, thanks. So where, during your time in England, were you based?

The first six weeks, from August '42, to mid September I was at Hilsea Barracks, H-I-L-S-E-A.

- Hilsea.

Hilsea, yes, Barracks, Portsmouth. From there...do you want me to carry on?

- Yeah, that's fine. I'm just making notes so I can refer back to it.

After the six weeks training I was then trans...or posted to the RAOC Training School.

- Yes.

After 6 weeks I was then posted to the [indistinct] Armaments Depot at Greenford, Middlesex.

- Greenford? Right.

I'll carry on if you want, but...

- Yeah, yeah, you just carry on and I'll...

In March, 1943 I was posted to No. 12 O.B.D., Ordnance Beach Detachment.

- Yes.

At Aldershot. Mid April '43 we was moved to the west coast of Scotland.

- Oh right, yes.

And then we finished up in a village called Alness, which is the very...north of Scotland, near the north of Scotland. In May '44 we moved to Petworth, the grounds of Petworth House.

- How do you spell that?

P-E-T-W-O-R-T-H.

- Yes.

Er, and then we went to the outskirts of Portsmouth, before we embarked.

- Yes. That was in preparation for Overlord?

Overlord, yes.

- Could you...can you remember the command structure? Can you remember the names of the commanders of your regiment at the time?

Ohhh..!

- So presumably...the main guy was Eisenhower, underneath Eisenhower you had...

Montgomery...

- ...Montgomery

...and erm, oh General, General, what was his name, he was in charge of the Second Army. Oh, General...I can see him, but I..!

- [laughs]

I can't remember his name.

- Yes.

He was tall, a tall chap.

- Did you meet him?

Dempsey!

* Dempsey.

General Dempsey? No, I didn't. He was in charge of the Second Army.

- Where did you train? I mean, what we are trying to get across to the kids is, when you joined the army you will have gone through, I suppose, basic training, won't you?

Yes.

- All soldiers went through.

Yes, basic training.

- Where did you do your basic training?

That was at Hilsea Barracks.

- That was at Hilsea.

Where was...

- And then, presumably, you did specific training for the actual, er, embarkation?

Yeah, well, if I can give you a picture of the RAOC to start with.

- Please, yes.

The RAOC is divided; well it supplies everything to the army, except food, water, medical supplies, petrol and oil. But everything else the army required came from the RAOC. Then the RAOC is divided into separate sections: you've got the Ammunition Section, Armaments Section, Small Arms Section, MT...

- MT stands for..?

Military Transport.

- Yep.

...and, er, clothing and general items. Now they're all...each section had its own depots throughout the country. After my...er, after passing out of the training school I was sent to an armaments depot. And that's where I was trained as an armaments man. I had a mentor, as you might say, to look after me, and he showed me what to look for, when you received a gun barrel from the manufacturers, you used to inspect it to see there was no hairline cracks in them, or things like that. Or there was perhaps part of a base plate for a mortar missing. So by the time, after three months out, more or less, I could spot anything that was wrong, and at Ordnance Beach Detachment we'd only seventy-five strong. It was a special unit, specifically for the invasion. There were five officers, and seventy other ranks. Of those seventy other ranks we had two cooks, one driver and one office clerk. Of the remaining sixty-six, thirty-three were the...were what you'd call the Stores Section, and thirty-three was the Ammunitions Section.

- Right.

Er, we'll stop there if you want. You carry on and I'll come back to you.

- I'm just checking that the batteries are OK. [in the voice recorder]

Er, so the Stores Sec...the Ammunition, they was all trained. Now, I was armaments-trained so I was ignorant of all the other sections, so from '43, April, May '43 to November '43, in between rehearsals, beach rehearsals, I went on a course for small arms, ammunition, clothing, general, and MT.

- Right.

So that we were fully trained in every section, in case some of us didn't make it. We could all do each other's job. And the beauty of it was...we had to pass all these courses we went on, and come back with what they call a 'distinction'.

- Right.

And if you didn't get a 'distinction' you was out.

- Really? You didn't get a chance to do it again, then?

No. If you didn't come back from a course with a 'distinction' you was out.

- I suppose they didn't have time, did they, to wait for people to..?

No, and the beauty of it was, for every time you came back with a distinction you got sixpence, or two and a half pence increase, and on nine bob a week it was...[laughs]

* Yes.

We got nine shillings, oh forty-five pence a week, I was stopped five pence for savings, and five pence went, came home to my parents. [laughs] That's how much I was worth to 'em! Erm, and of course during '43 we was doing several rehearsals, to make sure that everything went smoothly. We did the last exercise in March '44.

- In March '44, yes. What were your exercises? Was it getting off the boats?

There wasn't any!

- Really?

[Ken's wife enters]

Yes, we did the last exercise, and we had a few landing craft for that one, but every other one was come in, like, from the water's edge because there was no landing craft available.

- Right, right.

Erm, yes, what was I going to say? [coughs] Excuse me. That was about it. [coughs] Excuse me. We did, well at the time, there was four, we didn't know this, but there was four Ordnance Beach Detachments been formed and trained. In December '43, we, because everything that was sent over, stores and ammunition, all had a code. They was all coded, and we got this list of codes and we had to try and remember what everything was.

- So you had to do it by memory?

Mmm. And the last Sunday in December in '43 on the Sunday morning we set off at 8.15am on a full day's exercise, but it was a map reading exercise and we had to be at a certain point at 5.00pm, and it wasn't all smooth walking.

- No.

It was through forests, up hills, down dales, and just after we'd set off it started snowing, and then it became a blizzard all day. We reached the point, the last point at exactly 5 o'clock. The two cooks we had, and the driver was waiting for us with hot tea, but also waiting was a party of what we call 'Top Brass'. There's a General, Brigadier, Cover Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels and

then on the Monday the Unit was divided into Sections, and each one of these 'red caps' took us, 'Top Brass' took us, asking questions etcetera, then we had a group lecture, then we had a, like a test on these codes.

At the end of January the results came through that of these four OBDs in the country, we got top marks, so of course you're 'Top Dogs' and all this, that and the other, laughing like Hell at the others, but the laugh, grin went off our faces when we knew what we'd got because we drew the short straw. We was top...top one in the country. Number 11 was second to us, and the other two was held in reserve, because, you'll find out soon why they was in reserve. And that's how we got SWORD Beach.

- So you went to SWORD?

Yes. [indistinct - both talk at once]

- I was going to say how did you get across to Europe, from where to where, so you went from Portsmouth to SWORD?

No, no. We marched through the outskirts of Portsmouth to Southsea.

- Yes.

And went to the pier at Southsea, and boarded the landing craft at twelve noon.

- Is that on the 5th [June]?

5th.

- So you were actually there on D-Day, not D-Day plus 3?

No, no.

- On the day itself?

Mmm. Well shall we answer your questions, and then I'll come back with anything extra?

- Yes, that would be fantastic, yeah. The question was, how did you get across to Europe?

Landing craft.

- So you were actually in a landing craft?

Landing craft.

- That must have been a Hell of a journey.

Yes. I can tell you about that if you want.

- Yes, please, because I...

Do you want it now?

- The reason I am asking for, Ken, is that I, with my research, I know that they said it was...well Ike [Eisenhower] had held it off because the weather was bad...

That's right.

- A Force 8, wasn't it, when...

On the Sunday.

- Yes.

When we moved into the...from Petworth House to the camp on the outskirts of Portsmouth, we did...we went on the Friday which was the um 5th, 4th, 2nd of June, and on the Friday night it started pouring with rain and it never stopped 'til Sunday, and that's why it was put off on the Monday, on account of the weather conditions. Boarded the landing craft at twelve o'clock. They split us up onto two landing craft, because, the idea being that if we was all on one landing craft, and it went down the front line troops would have nobody to supply them with any items they wanted, like ammunition and small arms, if they lost their rifles, or Sten guns. So that happened. Boarding the landing craft we was give two brown paper bags and some seasickness tablets. We left ground about 1 o'clock. We sailed across the River Hamble, and anchored off the Isle of Wight.

The food we had on that landing craft was disgusting. And I say that, and I mean it. Thinking that it's going to be our last meal, and some of them were going to get...won't be coming back. You knew that. So, I mean the food was atrocious, thick, greasy stew, mashed potato, and a rice pudding that needed a knife and fork to cut it. That was supposed to be our last hot meal.

- Sorry for interrupting, you obviously from what you've just said, you were intensely aware that you were going into something that...this might be your last day.

Oh yes! Because, coming back to Petworth House, it would be what? The Thurs...while we were at Petworth House we received a plaster model and it had various colours on it. Like the front was golden, which was the beach, then there was all the roads and landmarks.

- Were they the villas, the big villas on the beach head?

Yes.

- So you had to memorise that?

We had to memorise everything. And about a...it would be about a mile inland on this plastic, there was a green mark, and a brown mark. Now the green mark was a grass field where we was going to...the Stores section would set up.

- Right. Once you got off the beach that's where you headed?

That's where we headed. There was a fence, and on the other side, this brown patch was where the ammunition section was going.

- Right.

But it wasn't grass. There was very little grass on it. It was very fine, sandy soil so if any fires started. We'd got fire extinguishers, so it had to be the soft soil, the sandy soil that would put it out. Just before we left Petworth House it was collected. At Petworth House, once we went in, the door was locked, barred and gated. They had a twenty foot outer perimeter wall, and on top of that was a roll of barbed wire, so we couldn't get out. All letters had stopped, all them had stopped, and the day before we moved out, I remember this...one of the 'Top Brasses' came in, and told us exactly our destination. We knew where we was going. This is why it had to go on, because so many people knew where they were going, and he finished up by saying words like, "I wish you every success, but I must remind you that the casualty rate, by the War Office, is 93 percent."

That was what we were looking forward to.

And, of course, we were moved to Portsmouth. That was in another camp, with a twelve-foot fence with an armed guard on, to stop you getting out. So there was no chance of getting out, no writing could...you couldn't write any letters.

- So the danger was that the soldiers who were going would get cold feet?

Yes, oh yes.

- Or was it to...I suppose it was also to maintain the secrecy, wasn't it, so you couldn't talk to civilians?

Mmm, oh yes. We couldn't get er...didn't see anybody. The only people we saw was when we was marching from the camp in Portsmouth to Southsea Pier, and the streets was lined with schools...we went past two or three schools, and all the schoolchildren were out waving Union Jacks.

- Did they know what was going on?

Well, they knew...they had a good idea with the movement, because every road, every country road was absolutely bumper-to-bumper with tanks and all types of transport. You couldn't move for them, and there was so many troops down there it was absolutely packed solid.

- There was about 3 million weren't there?

Mmm, yes, so...

- So you knew what you were in for?

We knew what we was in for.

- Fantastic. So, your pals in your Regiment, what were the sort of ages?

Nobody over thirty.

- Really?

Nobody was...if you were over thirty you went back to a depot.

- So you were...when you were enlisted you were nineteen. How old were you in '44?

Er, twenty...well, I was twenty-one in the July (1944).

- Twenty-one. So, presumably, most of your immediate group were all early twenties?

We was early twenties. We'd just had one that was just on the borderline; twenty-nine, thirty.

- Really? Incredible isn't it?

Mmm, and when we was...the first thing we, when we went up to Scotland for the first time, we arrived on the Monday, and on the Tuesday morning, until the Friday lunchtime, there'd be nothing but lectures, and they informed us, that er, the first one, we had to be physically fit. Working in a depot you do no physical training. You do no parade ground work. No route marches. You're just in there working, and that was the first thing - you'll be fully physically fit, you'll be trained to be a first class fighting soldier, and that meant plenty of parade ground bashing, and the...rifle range, and if you didn't obtain those points on the rifle range, and the hand-grenade throwing, you got out, and the

third one was, you was told, "You have to be a first-class all-round store man. That's what...really we're store men, but we had to be fully organised, and then the next lecture was about...they don't know where we was going to...when the invasion was going to happen, where or when, but when it did take place, they told us that when the ramp on the landing craft went down, the deepest the water would ever be would be three feet.

"We may put you straight on the beach; you may be in six inches, twelve inches, two feet, but you're never more than three feet of water."

The Physical Instructor, he came on the Monday afternoon and said, "I know you're not fit, but within a month you'll be so fit you'll wonder what's happened to you."

He said, "Reveille is at 6 o'clock. At 6.15 you'll be out in your PT kit, everybody, officers included. You'll do an hour's PT training. You'll be back at quarter past seven. You'll shower, dress and breakfast at eight o'clock, and you're on parade again at nine o'clock."

And he told us he'd take it steady, because he knew we weren't absolutely fit. And you did, you took it steady. We worked up and worked up, and within the month every man was absolutely physically fit, and some of them had lost some weight, but we were physically fit. We could fire a rifle, Bren gun, Sten gun, and throw hand grenades, as you do, and as I say, at the end of '43 we'd all been on courses so we all knew. We were all first-class store men, so those three points were essential. And as I say, if anybody failed, they were sent back to the depot, and they were replaced.

Now, just before, about five weeks, yes, five weeks before, round about five weeks before D-Day we had an officer, I forget where he went, but we had a replacement officer by the name of Mr Bootland, lived in Newcastle, and he knew nothing. He'd been sitting in an office in one of the depots, and that was it. Now we all started at replacement Storeman, and, of course, we all had like a nickname. Well, this lad, when he came, he was a border case, twenty-nine, thirty. He was not fit. We tried to get him fit but it was hopeless, and he had very dark skin, so naturally, in those days, he was called 'Darky'. I mean, if you said that today, like, you know what would happen. And, er, we'd those two replacements, because later on it comes into it. And then from then on, we got on from six o'clock, on the 5th of June.

You carry on with your questions and I'll keep giving you (the story)...

- Yes, I mean, what you said earlier was that you were told that you were going to be...the door would go down; you're going to be in three feet of water, tops, was that the case?

No! (laughs ironically) When we left at about six o'clock on the 5th June, we sailed out from off the Isle of Wight into the Channel, that's when I saw the most glorious sight...it's indescribable. The English Channel was absolutely packed. There was warships, cruisers, corvettes, destroyers, landing craft of all different types, and there was also a Landing Craft Rocket, firing about a hundred rockets a second...a minute, a hundred rockets a minute, and once in The Channel you got into lines, you went in lines across The Channel. We moved off, and it was a very slow rate, and the further you got into The Channel the choppiest it got. By...before we left...before we left at six o'clock, there were some of the personnel on the Landing Craft who were seasick. On the Landing Craft there were two things; first of all you know, one was the smell of diesel. We was below deck, and it was so hot that in the afternoon myself and three colleagues said enough is enough and we went on the deck. Fortunately nobody stopped us and...that wasn't bad, but by eight o'clock at night the smell of seasickness was eugh!

- Oh yes, because you've got your diesel...

Your diesel, and the heat was coming up...

- Yes, the engines heating everything up.

It was terrible.

- So it took you all day to get across?

No, we set off at six o'clock at night.

- So you went through the night?

Through the night. We, the four of us played cards, 'til it got...we could see no more and we packed up, had a walk round the deck to stretch my legs, and when I came back I stood and looked over the side of the landing craft, and then I started to think. First of all I thought "Well, what would my parents and the rest of the family think if they knew where I was now."

And then I started...I was thinking, "What's it going to be like when we get there. Is it going to be rough? Is it going to be very bad?" You just couldn't imagine what was happening, and then, I'm not afraid to say this, I said a few prayers, like everybody else was doing, because on some of the big Yankee boats they was holding church services.

- Really?

Yes.

- So you didn't know what was going to meet you when you got to France? You'd no idea of the extent of the Atlantic Wall or Rommell's defences? Were you aware of what was going to be on the beach, or the Teller mines or..?

We'd no idea! No. We knew that it was mined, and there was these metal tripod obstacles with a bomb on the top, but er, if we went in at high tide the Landing Craft...the bottom of the Landing Craft would hit them, and explode them. But in the very first wave that went in was a group of engineers, and it was their job to take mines off these tripods, and have a lane for the tanks and infantry to go through. Strange as it may seem, when I boarded the Landing Craft, I knew the Captain. I was at school...well, he was a very good...well, he was friends of mine.

- Yes.

We arrived off SWORD beach about...we were due in on the second wave, which was between eleven and half past in the morning, and we were out there roughly...roughly about half past ten, quarter to eleven, and we just sat there. We couldn't think why. We were a good hundred yards off the beach itself. And then about half past (eleven), twelve o'clock time we saw them fix a rope to the Landing Craft, and one of the Landing Craft crew, the idea was, he swam to the shore, and fastened this rope to one of the metal tripods. Half way there he got swept away. This happened three times. Three members of the crew were drowned, and of course, I seemed to be, I don't know whether to say, in the right place at the wrong time, or the wrong time and the right place, 'cause I was stood talking to my three colleagues, 'cause we were all waiting, then, on board...on the deck, and I said, "I know this so-and-so Skipper. I don't know what he's doing. He should be taking us further in."

Unbeknown to me, my OC was behind me, and he said, "Did you say you knew him?" and I said, "Yes, sir." And he said "Will you go and have a word with him? Tell him he's lost three members of his crew, and will he take this ***** craft further in."

Well I got greeted...the first words were, "Get off this bridge! I don't know who you are, but get off my bridge."

So I said, "Calm down, Jim!" They called him Jim Atkins. "What do you want?" he said when he turned round and he's seen me. I said, "My OC's sent me up to see if you'd take your craft further in."

"Go back and tell your OC, I am not losing my craft. This is where you're going to be getting off."

A bit later on, the fourth member of the crew, we watched him, and he did make the beach. He was absolutely worn out.

- Swimming in kit?

No, no, just swimming. They was Naval personnel.

- Right. So they didn't have all the kit. That was there job to get there.

No, no, no kit. Yes. The rope, it was fastened to one of these metal tripods, securely fastened. The ramp went down, and of course, the idea was that you took hold of the rope and worked along it 'til your feet felt the sea bed, then you let go and you walked off...waded off.

And it was unbelievable, because you stood there, and you watched the first party go off, and as they got hold of the rope, and with all the (weight of kit)...they just sank down. We was in EIGHT feet of water! And you'd to try, as you gripped the rope, and you was going along you tried to work it up to breathe some air in, we were moving along, and I remember when the rope was level with the bottom of my neck I looked across at the beach and there was one German aircraft, flying along the beach, dropping a string of bombs. Then he turned, and came out to sea, and let go of these guns, machine guns.

- So strafing the lads coming off the boats?

Yes.

- So were there any tanks on the beach, at this point, to protect you from the aircraft?

No, no, no. You see he was flying so low even the ack-ack couldn't get down.

- So there's just one plane?

Just one plane.

- What was it? Can you remember?

I can't remember what it was, no. Of course, as we saw him turning in, and starting opening up, everybody went under the water again, 'til it passed over. Well, of course, as you were moving along in the water, you kept feeling things hitting your legs. You didn't know whether it was kits or bodies.

- Or mines?

It could be anything. Well, when I reached the beach, this lad we called 'Darky' was in front of me, and he was moaning and groaning he could go no further, so I'm behind him, I kept saying, "Come on, Darky, you can make it."

"Ooh, I'm shattered!"

I said, "Come on, you can make it." And I kept urging him on and of course we're slowly making our way up the beach. We were coming to one of these metal tripods. I'd seen him about ten yards away from it, and I happened to look down the beach, and it was absolutely littered with injured. There was all Sten guns, rifles, steel helmets, you name it. Chaps had been hit, etcetera, then all of a sudden there was a cry, "Everybody down!" And it shook me and I looked, and there's Darky in front of me. He's just about to put his hand on this metal tripod, and this one still had a bomb on it. Now, it only needed the slightest touch and it would've gone off, and this brought me to my senses, more or less brought me back to earth when I heard this "Everybody down!" and when I looked Darky was just about to grip it. Without thinking or anything I made a rugby tackle on him, just as his hand was about to touch, and dragged him off it, which of course saved his life, saved many lives. So we reached the sea wall. That's where we had to make for.

- This is on SWORD beach?

On SWORD beach.

- Is it Ouistreham?

No, it was the second...the beach was divided into sections, and we was on Queen White, which was at Lyon Sur Mer.

- Yes, Lyon Sur Mer. Yes, went there. Go on, carry on, I'm just er...(retrieving book showing map of beach sections). Queen White.

That's right.

- Yes.

Yes. 'Cause it was divided into five sections. Yes, Queen White, that's where we landed.

- Yes, so, as you were coming off the landing craft onto the beach you talked of a plane that was strafing the men, were there still enemy fortifications along the beach, or had they been knocked out by the aircraft on the first wave?

No, er, on Queen White beach, between the promenade and the main road, there was a block of what you'd call French summer houses, where the French went for holidays. There's either ten or twelve of them, and they were supposed to have been knocked out by the Naval bombardment, and they weren't. They were still standing, so as we were waiting by the beach wall for the rest of the Unit to arrive, the OC picked out this Officer, Mr Bootland, new to the job, and he called me over. He said, "I want you to go and do reconnaissance. Make sure the site isn't mined, and it's clear of all Germans, there's no pockets of Germans about."

So, he says, "Don't be too long about it." So we got onto the beach down to the promenade. We turned left and walked for about 50 yards, because there was a side street to the main road, and just before turning into this side street I looked along the beach, and believe you me, it was horrible. I've never described it to anybody, what the sight I saw, and I never will. That's firmly in there (taps head). But it...nobody knows. I've never told a soul what it was like, and I've no intentions now.

So, we got onto the main road, which ran parallel with the promenade, and we was walking along at the side of the road. The idea was, that we went down this main road, for about 350 yards and on the left was a side road, which led down to the two fields for our dumps, and we're close in to the hedge, that separated these summer houses from the road. How far...we'd only gone about 150 yards, and all of a sudden we heard this...well, I heard this, like a metal ping, quite close to me,

on the roadside, and then the...we heard the rifle shot, both, "A sniper!" So we dived through the hedge, and in what you'd call the car park of the summer houses, was all these British wagons, waiting. So we dived under one of these and waited two or three minutes, then I happened to look across, and I said to myself, "We'd better get out of here. All these wagons are loaded with ammunition."

Instead of sending empty trucks over to do the transport thing, they'd all come over fully laden. So, we made our way very cautiously, found the two dumps...the two fields that were going to be the site. There was no pockets of German resistance, and there was no mines, so, we got back to the beach and then we made it to the site, and of course we're soaking wet through. We reached the site I should think about half past three, quarter to four in the afternoon. We should have been there before that, and within fifteen minutes of being there, the first stores and ammunition started arriving by these Ducks. You'll have heard about the Ducks?

- DUKWs.

Yep, they're erm, they could travel on water.

- There's one at Eden Camp.

And then they could switch off the propellers and then use the motors for coming along the road. What we did, you see, everybody got stuck in, except the two cooks and the clerk, and once you'd unloaded the Ducks, everything came off, it was just piled up, and then the...everybody got stuck in, knew what the codes were, and where they wanted to go. This went on until about seven o'clock at night. At nine o'clock our...what you'd call Sergeant Major, had drawn out a roster for guard duty, which there has to be. This was cancelled because we got the order to 'stand to'. Everybody had to form like a defensive line, for two reasons:

A, they was expecting Jerry's armour to come...break out at night, and there was a gap between GOLD beach and OMAHA beach so that if the Germans broke through there they could get behind us. So we then...we stood down at dawn, next day. About eight o'clock the stores started rolling in. Ammunition, and the stores started rolling in. And there was another rota, where everybody was on it, and you did an hour's Bren gun duty. I was on eleven whilst twelve, and I thought, "That's all right. An hour's rest on this Bren gun." And then we split...did a split for lunch, and I was on the first (indistinct).

"Two hours here, this is nice. Nice and handy." Round about quarter to twelve I'm thinking, "Ah well, another fifteen minutes then I'm off." And then we got the signal; three loud blasts on the whistle, which meant enemy aircraft. I took the Bren gun off the tripod. I found out...looked round and saw where the ack-ack was coming from. One aircraft. So I tried to get it into a firing position, well, a Bren gun's pretty heavy, and I waited for him coming in. He was coming in very low, just above house top, and as he's coming in I saw, it didn't connect at the time, an object leave the plane. Thought no more about it at the time, and I waited, and I waited, and then I said to myself, "You're going to get what you gave us yesterday." And he got a full magazine poured into him. Every one went into him, and as I'm firing there's this terrific explosion, and I'm watching this plane and as he's going away we see black smoke pouring out of him. I found out later that he did crash later, further on, but that was due to, what I call accurate firing. Then when I turned again, just before he'd come, they'd unloaded a Duck of ammunition, and of course, it's all in a big pile, and the object I'd seen leave the aircraft was a bomb, and it hit this stack that was waiting to be moved away. So, you can imagine!

- And you've got guys round there doing their jobs?

Doing their jobs, yes. Fortunately, fortunately, at that stage everybody had taken cover, but, there was shrapnel being showered everywhere. There was fires. Luckily, that morning, we'd unloaded a load of spades, so of course, we rushed into this ammunition section with spades so they could use this fine soil to start and put the fires out, but at the same time, with the fires spreading and hot metal flying around it's setting stacks, 'cause all ammunition was in wooden boxes, so of course it's setting it on fire. Everything was going up. I'd had my lunch break at about ten past one. We was detailed, some of us was detailed to go and relieve the Ammunition Section, so they could go and have a break. I was with a fellow Sergeant and the brigade...what you call the Brigade Ordnance Warrant Officer. He'd only landed on the Tuesday morning. He'd come over to see how things were progressing with us We were lucky, because we'd only had one casualty on the landing.

- Really?

Yes, we'd only lost one man, Sergeant William Jenkinson, and they found his body on June 7th in the River Orne. He'd been drowned, and he's in Bayeux Cemetery.

- So his name's Williamson?

William Jenkinson.

- Sorry, Jenkinson.

Jenkinson. Bill Jenkinson. That was the only casualty we had. As I say, we were damned fortunate. So, there was the three of us and we were at the end of the field, or the dump. We'd a stack of ammunition, and we was told, "Would we go down and save it at all costs? It must be saved at all costs."

We'd no idea what it was, so armed, each of us, with a spade, we set off and we were walking along, and all of a sudden this Brigade Ordnance Warrant Officer, known as a BOWO (bow-wow) for short, gets it in the face from a large piece of shrapnel. All his right side of his face is split open the First Aid...them that's trained in First Aid, personnel. He just collapsed, like, all his face had been smashed open, and then, two or three minutes later I turned to this fellow Sergeant and said, "I've been hit."

"Your face is all right. Is your hands all right?"

"Yes."

"Can you feel anything running down your legs?"

I said, "No."

He said, "You're all right."

But it was such a thump. I thought no more about it after that, and we're going along and this Sergeant gets hit right across his right wrist, and his hand's (gesticulates)...

- Really?

...hanging off, as you might say, and of course you've got hand grenades, you've got .303 ammunition, you've got 9mm ammunition, you've got mortar bombs still going off, and when you've got stacks of them it's no fun, so I just carried...we sent for the First Aiders again, took him away, and I just carried on. And I could see the fire was coming down the hedge. The hedge was still on fire, and with it being dry, and it was, "Err...?" Wondering, when I got there I thought, "Well, what's the first thing we do? What was I trained to do? Right, we'll dig a channel round it first, to stop the fire spreading to it." And all the time I've got ammunition going off round me, and I got the channel dug, so I knew

that the fire couldn't reach it, then, I started putting out the fire on the hedge. I was out there for about an hour and a quarter, hour and a half, on me own, 'cause all the others was everywhere else trying to put the fires out. And at the same time as this was going on ammunition was still coming in, so we had to use the field next to it to start with. Then I got relieved, and when I went back to my own section, one of my comrades said to me, "What's happened to you?"

I said, "Why, what do you mean?"

He said, "Well, have you seen your tunic pocket?"

I said, "No."

I took my tunic off, and there was a hole had been burnt, about the size of a fifty pence piece, and it had burnt this hole. This is what the thump was I'd felt, but just before we'd got off the Landing Craft I did something I shouldn't have done. In your left breast pocket, what you're supposed to carry was your...what you call your AB62, and that was your identity, and I put my cigarette case in that pocket. And when I...when I took my jacket off, my tunic off and saw this hole, then I took the cigarette case out, and there's the dint in the cigarette case. If it hadn't have been for that, whatever hit me would have gone right through, and I should've been another casualty.

- Yes. Have you still got it?

The cigarette case? Yes. Actually, I came home on leave in February 1944, and with it being my twenty-first birthday, I'd said to my parents, "Well, I don't think you'll see me again this year." And I was a pipe smoker. I smoked a few cigarettes, but I smoked a pipe. Well, just before I left, whilst I was in the camp, pre-sixth of June I broke my pipe. There's none in the mess to buy, so I bought some cigarettes, and the cigarette case was in...in front of your trousers in those days was a...what you'd call a map pocket, and it was in there, and I thought...well, when I saw what was happening, disembarking, "Right, I'll try and keep my cigarettes dry." Up, and into this pocket, and that's what saved me. Now, as I say, my parents bought me this cigarette case for my twenty-first, seeing as I shouldn't be at home to celebrate it, and in those days twenty-first birthday was THE thing. Not eighteen, twenty-first, and it was initialled, it had my initials on. And I've still got it today.

- Fantastic!

And then, I mean things just carried on then. Every morning from D+1 to D+11 at eleven o'clock one of German's big guns, that was inland, fired one shot into the town. Every morning at eleven o'clock.

- Why's that?

Coming to it! So someone said, "Enough's enough!" so we sent a patrol into these summer houses, and they searched each house one by one, and underneath was one long tunnel, so they could come up to any house they wished.

- Really?

I think it was either ten or twelve of these houses. I know it was the second from the end. When they went up on the...it was like three stories, second storey they found my sniper. He was sixteen-and-a-half years old, and the reason why he'd missed me was because...

- So that style? (shows photograph of houses off SWORD beach)

That's the one, yes. The reason why he didn't hit me was because he wore glasses, and his lenses were real thick lenses, and that's how he...if he'd been of perfect eyesight he'd have hit me. But that's why he missed me.

And then when they went onto the next floor they found another old German with a radio set, binoculars, everything he required, two months' supply of food. And every sip of size that came in, near to the beach, he was monitoring it and radioing through to...

- One of the batteries.

...one of the batteries. As soon as they'd been taken it finished, it all finished.

- I went to the Merville Battery.

Oh, the Merville Battery. That was a disaster.

- Yeah, I've read about that. It was heavy casualties.

It was a disaster because...it was...the gliders missed the top of it, and the paratroops were dropped in the wrong place. I mean he did well with what troops he had to capture it.

- A hundred and ten, something like that, out of hundreds and hundreds.

Five hundred!

- Yes.

Five hundred were supposed to take it. It was supposed to have been bombed, and the RAF had missed it and bombed the village further on.

- Ranville is it?

No, not Ranville, another village.

- It'll be Merville won't it I suppose, yes?

Er, and as they attacked, the ground forces attacked, the gliders were supposed to land on top of that battery, and they missed it as well, and he had to capture it by, is it five o'clock in the morning. If not the Navy were going to bombard it.

- Ah, yes.

And he did, just before five o'clock.

- He had to give the signal to stop the bombardment...

To give the signal, yes.

- ...otherwise the guys would have been hit by...

I think he finished with about fifty, out of the troops that went in, finished with about fifty.

- Yes. Do you...are you still interested in the events of D-Day? You read up and watch documentaries on TV? Have you been watching the stuff on television at the minute?

(There had been a documentary about the leaders of the Allied invasion the previous night)

Yes. Yes, mmm, and we knew about the aggravation between Eisenhower and Montgomery.

- Oh, that was last night wasn't it?

Oh yes. Tell that a mile away.

- Did you...I'll just carry on if that's OK?

Go on, carry on. Yes, yes.

- What you're saying leads me on, because some of the questions, this...let me just explain, a lot of this ties into the curriculum and what the kids are learning about, that's why I'm pointing at these. Er, what I was going to ask was, when you got onto the beach at SWORD, you carried food, ammo. and your own supplies with you?

We was in what they call 'battle order'. That's steel helmet, gas mask and your small pack, er fifty rounds of ammunition, your either a Sten gun or rifle and your webbing belt with your pouches, you have two pouches on. Your bayonet was on and your water bottle attached to it. The pouches I had, I had to carry six, 3 Bren gun magazines in each pouch. On the morning of the fifth of June, it, round about half past nine in the morning, we all had to have our arms inspected, by an outside, er, drill instructor, to make sure they was clean, your bolt in your rifle was immovable. We was given a waterproof pad to cover the mechanism, and was given fifty rounds of ammunition, and then, half an hour later we was given your rations, emergency rations, which...

- Is that the dried stuff?

Dried stuff. I think it contained, let me think, a tin of corned beef, four small packs of very hard biscuits, some milk and tea powder, some...a couple of sachets of sugar, bar of plain chocolate, and how we worked this out I'll never know, eleven sheets of toilet paper. That's how they worked it out!

- So you just ate where you could get five minutes?

Yes. We was fortunate because we had one fifteen hundred weight wagon, and the driver, when he took it over from England, there were some tarpaulins on it, which the two cooks had to fix up for a field kitchen, and of course we'd saved a lot of rations from this side, which came in useful. Then we was able to do, was...they was able to cook some meals up for us...

- But initially...

But initially it was corned beef, hard biscuits, milk (correction - plain) chocolate and this horrible tea and milk, powdered milk.

- You were soaking wet. How did you get your kit dried out, or did you stay in it until it dried on you?

It dried on you.

- Really?

It was three days until we got a change of (kit)...our OC said, "It's about time we all had a change of clothing."

- So, along with the hardship of getting off the craft, and incoming fire, you're soaking wet, you are physically tired, you're freezing cold, because it's June and it's not nice.

It wasn't nice, that day, no.

- So you're sat shivering?

Yes.

- And you've got hard manual work as well?

Yes. This is why the three things were there. You had to be prepared, know our job, and be a first class soldier.

- And just get on with it.

Get on with it. You see, during the night, June 6th - 7th we was on what they called 'stand by', you got all the dew on you as well, all through the night.

- So you dried out, and you got wet..?

Yes, this is how it went on.

- How awful. I mean, this is what children won't know. They see modern soldiers and the stuff they've got.

People don't know what...I mean, even the infantry, I mean, some of them there, I mean, some of them that...they was lucky. The deepest water that was ever they went through was three feet, which we should have done. Some of them didn't even get wet, some of the Skippers took the Landing Craft straight on to the beach. You see, if it got stuck, they'd what they call the Landing Craft Tug Association, and these tugs was going up and down the beach and if a Landing Craft was stuck on the beach, all they did was pull it off.

- So you...where did you sleep? You slept, presumably, not a lot for the first few days 'cause you were...

No. A slit trench.

- ...and you just got your head down for whatever you could get...

Whatever you could get.

- ...while your mate was looking after you?

While they was on duty. You could get a duty.

- And you didn't...presumably the noise...you didn't get much kip?

No. No, 'cause you'd got everything. You'd got aircraft flying over every night.

- And the ships still firing, so...?

Yep. Oh aye.

- I would guess that you didn't get a lot of sleep for a week or so?

No. True. Well we never, for the first forty-eight hours we never stopped, it was non-stop. Then you, after that you was trying to sneak half-an-hour here, half-an-hour there, if you could.

- I suppose your adrenaline kept you going for a while, but then you'd start to flop, wouldn't you?

Yes, yeah, you were cold, you were miserable, and you were wet through. But, I'll give the Unit its due, we was like one big family - all for one, and one for all, yet they were so closely knit that we had to be like that.

- Had you been with them for a long time, that group of men?

When I joined it (the Unit) in the March of '43, the morning after...I got there on the Monday night...and on the morning, the following morning on the parade ground, the OC explained to us that it was now a fully-manned...he told us all about it - there was seventy-five, five Officers and seventy-five men - all this about it. He said, "You're going to be trained for an invasion. I don't know where, and I don't know when. You WILL go somewhere, and in the meantime I want you to be a unit of...a First Class unit.

- Yes.

And we were! And we all had, like, kind of, nicknames etcetera etcetera, but er, it was so happy! We were so happy.

- Have you remained in...did you remain in contact with these guys after the war?

No, because the idea was, at the end of...it was supposed to be about six weeks...what remained of the Unit, having had ninety-three percent casualties according to the War Office, they then sent in the, what they call the Ordnance Field Parts (correct if wrong) to take over from us, but that didn't happen. We got to September, the end of Sept...no, middle of October. We had to send all our stores and ammunition that was still left and had to go to depots further inland, and we was disintegrated. So many went here, so many went there, we were scattered all over the place.

- Yes. Where they were needed,

And that finished up with twelve of us in Bayeux with a small store. Then I went to Amsterdam. Then I came back to Brussels. Then I went to a place called Ghent, there was a depot at Ghent.

- Is that Belgium?

Mmm. Then I came back to Brusels. From Brussels I went to hospital in the north of Belgium, in the April, April '44. I was classed as a walking wounded, and while I was in hospital the Airbourne had the drop on the Rhine, and they was bringing (indistinct), and they were in a trance there (possibly wrong), and then when VE Day came I was sitting in the grounds of the hospital, and as soon as it was announced all the civilian staff all started singing and dancing, and I felt so elated, and "This is over!" Then I walked back into the hospital, like I said the (Hull Daily) Mail reporter, that elation disappeared when you saw these Airbourne lads, some with their legs missing, arms missing, blind. That brought it back to me what they'd given for this to happen, and then you think back and there's all those in the cemeteries in Normandy. They've given their life for this. I'm lucky at the moment.

I was discharged from hospital about the third week in May, and I just got back to Brussels when I got posted to Germany. I was in Germany for three weeks, and then I was posted back to Donnington in Shropshire, the RAOC depot, where we was told they'd get us some of the old lads that'd been in the 12 O.B.D., there were some of us back, we were going to be made up and trained for landing on the Jap mainland, and when that was happening, of course they dropped the Atomic bombs.

- Yes.

And we stood on the parade ground one day after it was all over. September, October, and the OC said, "When you hear your name called out I want you to fall

out, and stand over here." And part of the unit went out. "Right" he said, "All you that's had your name called out, you're going to Palestine."

- Palestine?

"And the remainder of you..." which I was one, "...you're going to India." And that's what happens.

- You're going to India?

Sail, yes, 5th November 1945, and I left India Boxing Day 1946. Arrived back here in the January, the day before all that snow started, the big freeze up, 1947. I'd several good jobs; in India I was assistant to the Sports Officer. I finished up as a Fire Officer, and the depot I was attached to, it was so large that the circumference was five miles so the size of it...and while I was out there we played a lot of sports. I was selected to represent the British Army against Indian...India was getting its test team back together...

- The cricket?

The cricket team. ...at the...what do they call the gardens in Calcutta where they play? The test ground in Calcutta, and when I got to know this, and this match started on 26th December! So the Admin. Officer sent for me and he said, told me all about it, but he said, "You're due to go on this embarkation, then?" I said, "Yes, Sir. And I'm going." Well, when the CO got to know about it he sent for me. Now the CO was six foot eight in his stockinged feet, and he was as broad...well, called me into his office. Normally when you went into the...

"Straighten yourself up!" he said to me.

(indistinct) he told me.

I said, "No, I'm still going on this embarkation. Demobiliser. Demobilised, and I'm off."

Well, the temper, he tore a right strip off me. I've never had such a rollicking in all my life.

Then he turned round and he said, "Get out of my office!"

- And that's when you came back?

Mmm. Yep, I did...I was told that I was being recommended for this action I took on the beach...

- Yes, with Darky.

...saving the lives. Also, I was being recommended for something, when the three of us went on this ammunition...well the two that got injured got, what they call, mentioned in 'dispatches', that's the (indistinct, possibly 'old way').

- Yes.

I got nothing. Not that...it didn't bother me in those days, I mean, you just carried on, and I thought no more about it. My medals were in the drawer, I'd got my medals through the post: France, German Star, 1939-45 and what have you, aye, it was just in the drawer, then a colleague of mine was talking one day, so I said, "What do you mean Normandy Veterans Association?"

"Oh", he said, "It started last year. Why don't you join?" so I started in January...January '84, 'cause the branch was formed in '83, and in '88 I was voted onto the Committee. I became Treasurer that year, and I'm still the Treasurer. I was Deputy...elected Deputy Chairman, Vice Chairman about '95. I still am.

- Superb. Do you...have you been back to Normandy?

Yes, I've been back several times. Er, I was disappointed. I went on the 50th Anniversary (of D-Day, 6th June 1994), and the 60th Anniversary, and in between. The 60th Anniversary was very disappointing because it was very badly arranged, er, but in 19...let's see...in 2003 we enjoyed that much better, because we visited Bayeux Cemetery (main cemetery for the British D-Day casualties) and we formed up. We had a little march to the memorial, short service, our chaplain said a few prayers and then we had the exultation, then we laid a wreath. Then we did the short march back, and we enjoyed that far better than the 60th Anniversary.

I've been back several times.

- How does it make you feel to go back? Is it a good feeling or...?

No. It always brings back sad memories, as I say, we only lost one person, but you stand on the promenade at any of the beaches, especially SWORD beach, you stand there and look at it. Beautiful golden sands...

- Yes, that's the...yes.

...and your mind goes back all those years, and you remember what it was like then. It's hard to describe what it was like. It's just impossible to describe what it was like. As I said, it was absolutely littered. You've got wounded, you've got the dead lying there, you've got all types of equipment. One of the funny things was, as I hit the beach itself there's a ring of injured East Yorkshires, Regiment lads, and one of them said to me, "Hey, will you show us how to pray?"

And at that, I'd stopped, and your orders were, "Don't stop! You get off the beach as fast as you can.", and all of a sudden...'cause the Beach Master's there walking up and down, and there's the Military Police, and all of a sudden there's this almighty voice, "You know your instructions. Get off this ***** beach!"

So I turned round and said, "Look, I'll find a Padre for you and send him over." Which I couldn't find one at the time. They was waiting to come back.

- So they had people on the beach specifically to get the men off as quickly as they could, like, you know..?

Oh, yes. You couldn't stop on the beach. No. No, er, well you didn't want to stop on the beach 'cause you didn't know what was going to come, whether there was any... so as I say, you didn't know if there was any snipers, if there was any enemy still there. When we went in we had no idea what was happening.

- Yes, I was amazed by how big it is. (SWORD beach) It's a huge flat expanse, isn't it? It's like when we were there, like you said, it's sunny, and kids are playing, and you can't really equate it can you? Well, I can't, because I wasn't there, but you know?

You can't. Oh, no. But you can only...when you see some of the photographs of these metal, like, these metal tripods that Rommel had put in, and I always think, when I look at that beach, did they get all the land mines up that he planted?

- Yes. You never know, do you?

You never know because he planted THOUSANDS of them, all along those beaches.

- There'll be all sorts buried still, won't there?

Absolutely, mmm. And then...

- As you stand there on SWORD, looking up and down, does it look similar to how it did then?

(Ken nods) Mmmm.

- So, the buildings are largely the same? I know it's grown up into a...

Er, its grown up. Lyon Sur Mer, last year, we went along the coast to Arromanches and got to stop, well we had to stop at Lyon Sur Mer. It's gone! It's all been rebuilt down to the proms. What I remember of it, it's all gone now.

- Right.

Those fields have gone. The orchards have gone. It's all new houses. Ah well, sixty years ago. Progress.

- Yeah, it's a long time isn't it?

It is.

- But could you, if pushed, recognise where you actually came ashore?

Yes, I think I could. I remember...I remember the promenade as clear as anything. I don't know whether it's still there or not, but we hadn't time to stop and go and have a look. Well I think, with it being all rebuilt now. I think I should remember the promenade, and the church steeple, or tower.

- When you went back did you, er, how did you find the local people? Did they...how did they treat you, or did you not have a lot of contact with them?

Some, in 1994, they erm, how should I put it, very pleased to see us, but last year, the 60th Anniversary we didn't have much to do with them, and they didn't want to have much to do with us, but the 50th Anniversary, when we came off, we had a big parade round Arromanches beach, and when we came off there were thousands...

- Yes.

...cheering us and that. When we went into the cafes and that at Arromanches you was treated with resp(ect), you know, really good, but this time on the 60th Anniversary things seemed to be changing.

- Yes, perhaps it's because they are forgetting, they move on, the generations change don't they?

Yes, the best for you to talk to is the Dutch.

- Yes, because you liberated the Dutch after the French?

Yes, when we went through Belgium and Holland. We are really respected in Holland. They'll do anything for you, talk to you, and they have a very moving service. I don't know whether you know this about...?

- No.

Well, Operation Market Garden, which was Arnhem, there's a big cemetery there, at Oosterbeek, isn't it, on the outskirts? Well, on the anniversary, the Sunday

nearest to the anniversary, which is round about the 18th of September, you've seen the cemetery at Arnhem haven't you?

- I've not been to Arnhem. Went to Bayeux and Caen.

Oh no you haven't. Oh aye, of course, sorry. But at Arnhem, or Osterbeek, there's this very large cemetery, and it's all Airbourne troops, all members of the Airbourne, and we've been to two, permission to go to this service, you've got to get permission from the Airbourne to go, and behind, when you're all in position, there is two schools every year dedicated to do this job, school children march in, and they've rehearsed it, and they go an stand behind every headstone, and then at a given signal the Dutch pastor, they come round and lay flowers on the actual gravestone and sometimes you see, it might be just a couple of gladioli, or a couple of roses, or a big bunch of flowers, but every child from the age of five is taught in Holland all about...(the liberation)

- Yes.

They know. Their kids are so well trained. They can tell you what you don't know about it.

- Yes.

But to see this happen is...as I say, there's two schools every year dedicated to do this job, and it's fantastic, but the French don't do that.

- No.

No, they don't do anything like that, in fact, I don't know whether you know this or not? In Bayeux the new Town Council are young people and they want, I think they are dong away with the Bayeux Museum, opposite the cemetery.

- It was closed when I went. I wanted to get in, and it was closed for refurbishment, so I couldn't get in.

Yes they moved them out.

- So what are they going to do with it, just break it up?

The Council wants it for something, but somebody is hoping, another French person is hoping to reallocate it to somewhere else, but this young French Council said, "It's been there long enough. It's history."

- It needs to stay forever.

It should do.

- The cemetery should do. Did you...did you see the state of Caen when you were over there in France?

No. I've seen it now.

- Yes, it's quite nice now.

Beautiful city!

- It was bad in '45, '44 wasn't it?

'44 they had to flatten it, yes. I didn't see it when it had been flattened because, as I say, we were stuck there. That was our job, to keep the front...to supply.

- Yes, because it was an infantry/tank thing Caen wasn't it? A bad do.

Mmm. As I say, coming back to this, this stack of ammunition that had to be saved, we knew nothing, we didn't even know, I was told, on the secrets list, and it wasn't until last year I found out what it was.

A month before D-Day they changed all the guns on the Sherman tanks to 17mm.

- Right, yes.

And that's what that stack of ammunition was. 17mm.

- Which was bigger, to make them more competitive against the Panzers because they were getting a pasting.

Yes, that's right, yes. And they didn't...we weren't told because...we didn't know anything about it. All we knew was (thumps table), "You will..!" (protect at all cost).

- Yes. Because if they didn't have that then they're useless aren't they?

That's what it was for.

- Right. Well, that's interesting because you don't read that in books.

No. They changed...they changed the guns on the Sherman tanks and that was a ship...one of our members was a Sherman tank commander, and he..

- Oh, at the NVA?

Yes, Jack McCulloch (phonetic) at Cottingham. He's, er, the tank he had is now mounted on a plinth in Amsterdam.

- Oh is it? The very one?

The very one, the very tank, yes.

- So, because, forgive me for my ignorance but I thought, with Sherman tanks being American, that they would be driven by Americans.

Oh, no.

- They were given to English and French and..?

Were given, yes.

- Right. So everyone used them, because America had massive manufacturing power?

Yes. I'm sure it was a Sherman tank.

- Yes, no, I'm sure you're right, it's just that I didn't realise. I've got one or two more things to ask if that's OK?

You carry on.

- Did you, as you arrived in France on D-Day, did you have anything to do with the local people at that time, the local, I don't know, either the French Resistance or the French that were still there, or was it deserted of French?

None whatsoever. No, none whatsoever.

- Were the French people there or had they been moved away?

They'd been moved away, but we was in an area that had been bare of houses except for these (points at photo) summer houses on the coast.

- You didn't really mix with the..?

No, never saw them. No real need to.

- Did you get to interact with them at any point during your time?

Yes, when we was in Bayeux, er, we was working with some civilians, er, got on quite well with them, one of them was quite a nice chap. He invited us, one Sunday night round to his house for a meal.

"Come at seven o'clock." he said, but we had a curfew on at ten o'clock, and we still hadn't got to the sweet stage at ten o'clock!

- Yes, they are drawn-out processes their meals...

Oooh, one course after another of one item!

- Yes, did you speak French or did they speak a bit of English or..?

Yeah, you could speak to them. We could speak a little bit of French.

- Just to get you by?

To get you by, and they could speak a bit of English. We knew, you know, your...we could get along.

- Yes.

But these French workers were with us, you see, so...the only thing we didn't have...get through was an old French chef, and he did the cooking. Got a joint of meat one day for, as I say there was twelve of us, this joint of meat was for three days, and the butter ration and he cooked the...(laughs)...cooked the meat in the butter.

(both laugh)

With the vegetables, like, you'd just stand everything in a pot! Cooked it in butter, our butter ration.

- Oh dear.

Funny things like that.

- Yes, yeah. And another thing I need to ask is, er, I just wanted you to tell me what the uniform means to you now, the value of it now, and what it says to you about the wearer of the uniform, when you see others in uniform?

I was very proud to wear that uniform, and I was very proud of the flashes that I used to have on.

- Do you still get to wear it? Do you wear it for ceremonial occasions and that?

Well, the NVA dress is flannels, blazer, beret and your tie. White or blue shirt. And I'm still proud to wear that as well.

- And so you should be.

Yes.

- What medals were you decorated with, when you finished?

1939-45 Star, the French and German Star, and the General Medal. I got, er, I can go onto this now, if it's all right with you?

- Yes.

Er, when would it be, April last year, I'm a Football League Assessor, Referees' Assessor..

- Oh yes?

...and I'd been to a local match and I came back, and the wife said to me, "Will you phone this number?" So I rang it up. "Hello, Mr Watson, Kenneth Watson?"

I said, "Yes?"

"We'd like a few details."

Right.

"Can you remember your service number?"

I gave them that.

"What unit were you with? When did you land in France? Can you remember the beach?" Several questions, and when I'd finished, "Well, it all tallies up with what I've got here."

So I said, "What's all this for?"

"Oh, you'll be getting to know shortly."

And then on the 24th, Monday 24th June, er, May, the National Secretary of the NVA rang me up and said, "What are you doing on June 1st?"

I said, "First of all, at ten o'clock, we form the Guard of Honour, at the BBC News studios in Hull, because they are doing a week on D-day, on Normandy, and it's being officially opened by the Lord Mayor."

And I said, "As it's the first Tuesday, after we've been there, I'm off to a meeting, first Tuesday of the month."

"Forget it!"

"What do you mean forget it?"

He said, "I want you to be at 17, Kensington Palace Gardens, no later than 11.15." He said, "It is the residence of the French Ambassador." He said, "You have been awarded this 'Légion d'honneur', and be there."

Which I was there. And we had a very nice time, short and sweet, but...and this is the medal, and that is the highest military award that the French can present to anybody.

- Fantastic! When did you get this, then?

I got that on June 1st.

- Last year?

Last year.

- I will take a photograph of that, if that's OK, before I leave, if you wouldn't mind. That's fantastic!

And that is the certificate to say that...all about it. And I can put behind my name 'Légion d'honneur' like the MBE or OBE I can use that title as well.

- Very nice. Do you have it in a frame?

I'm going to get it framed. This is what the...while I was away this is what the branch did for me, got everybody to sign it at the June meeting. All the members signed it.

- Ah, yes. Fantastic. You must have been very proud.

So that's going to be hung up. I'm a member of the East Riding Referees Association, of which I'm the oldest member, and they presented me with that, on there. (indicates award)

- "Congratulations to K.S. Watson on receiving the French Légion d'honneur medal, from the East Riding Referees Association." Fantastic. I'll stop this now, if that's OK?

01:36:08