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Name: David Craig

Regiment: Merchant Navy/ Wireless Operator.

Date of Transcript:

Transcribed By:

| Time Code | What is Said |
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| 00:00:00 | Start of Film 1 |
| 00:00:01 | <i>We are recording sir. David, what I'd like you to do, just introduce yourself, please. Tell me your name, your rank and where you're from.</i> |
| 01:00:10 | <p>My name is David Craig. I went to school at Inverness and then my parents moved down to Lanarkshire where they originally came from and I had about two or three years at school in Wishaw in Lanarkshire but I was always, well when we lived up in Inverness the sea was always beside us.</p> <p>I always wanted to go to sea to make a living. At that time to go to sea and work your way up to be captain as we all wanted to do, you had to serve four years as an apprentice or a cadet.</p> <p>That was four years and then you had to become a sailor first, which I thought was a really good idea, because when you became an officer, nobody could pull the wool over your eyes.</p> |
| 01:00:56 | <i>What year was it that you actually went and made that big ... yeah, it's a big change from being a boy to ...</i> |
| 01:01:07 | Yeah, there's a big difference. |
| 01:01:08 | <i>Yeah.</i> |
| 01:01:09 | I left ... I joined the first ship in Plymouth in May of 1940, not long after Dunkirk. At that time, the Navy had been cut down before the war by the politicians as they're doing today, and the Germans had been building up area boats as they were doing then. I left Plymouth with eight ships and one Naval trawler as an escort who took us out two days and then left us and we were on our own to go out across the Atlantic. |
| 01:01:42 | <i>What do you remember about the beginning of the war? Did it have any influence on your decision?</i> |
| 01:01:48 | <p>It's a wee bit difficult, because the war had only started in '39. I had been thinking about going to sea anyway though, and the war was just a 130 men. People naturally didn't want me to go and they were quite right, because the losses in the merchant navy were very high.</p> <p>It was the only way you could do it. There was no other way you could become an officer eventually in the merchant navy.</p> |
| 01:02:17 | <i>What was it like travelling from Inverness down to England and Plymouth and do you remember Plymouth?</i> |

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| 01:02:24 | <p>Well I remember Plymouth. It was first time actually i had been at Scotland because we had got the train from Glasgow down to London and then changed trains in London to take us right across to Plymouth. I think we had a sleeper. Yeah, we had a sleeper on one train but I can't recall which one it was now.</p> <p>Then in Plymouth, you sign on as you do in the Merchant Navy, you sign a ship's agreement to take the ship from Britain to anywhere in the world and bring it back. Unfortunately at that time, if you got sunk, you had broken your contract so your pay stops and everybody's pay stopped and the boys didn't get any money after being torpedoed, which was very hard.</p> <p>It was changed further on in the war when the merchant Navy had a pool formed.</p> |
| 01:03:09 | <i>What was it like, seeing the Dover Hill? What do you remember that first day that you see the ship? You wanted to be a sailor.</i> |
| 01:03:17 | No Dover Hill was the one that I went to Russia. The one I served my time on was called the Vimiere. SS V-I-M-I-E-R-E. She was an oil tanker. That was [inaudible 03:30] Glasgow. |
| 01:03:31 | <i>What was that like? You wanted to be sailor, you've seen your ship, you get on board, it's a big tanker. Describe the ship.</i> |
| 01:03:39 | <p>An oil tanker is basically, well it's pretty obvious, it's for carrying aviation spirit petrol heavy oil and then it depends what your cargo are. Consequently it's what we used to call a three-island ship. You have the stern part, where the engine was, midships part, where the navigation bridge and everything and accommodation for the navigating officers was, and then the foxhole, further forward than that where the sailors stayed.</p> <p>She was an old ship, but then that was only 1940. She was quite a nice ship, and she had a good turn of speed. We were quite proud of her.</p> |
| 01:04:16 | <i>What was your first jobs. Can you remember what you did?</i> |
| 01:04:21 | My first job I ever got was the chief officer sent me astern to take the flag down at sunset, so I took it carefully down and rolled it up and brought it back to him and that was the first job I did at sea. |
| 01:04:33 | <i>How were your sea legs?</i> |
| 01:04:36 | Well I was seasick like everybody else when we started. You always are, but you just have to go in and get over it. Being a sailor paid by a shipping company, you always ate your meals because you didn't want to let them get away with saving a meal. You just were sick probably after that. After two or three days you got your sea legs and that was okay. |
| 01:04:58 | <i>Okay, a bit more about the Vimiera. What other stories can you remember from it? Did it have a past? What was your food like, what were your crew like?</i> |
| 01:05:10 | <p>Well funnily enough when I joined it in Plymouth, the crew were mostly Cornish men, and I was a Scotsman and there were men out of Scotland. It took me about a week or two to understand what they were talking about, but I managed to get the hang of it.</p> <p>We came home one trip to London and the Cornish men went home and we signed on a crew of Cockneys. It took me another few weeks to discover what the Cockneys were talking about. When I came home, eventually I had a mixture of Cornish and Cockney and Scottish all mixed up. It didn't do me any harm. They were a good crowd. Excellent crowd.</p> |
| 01:05:49 | <i>You talk about your first convoy. You head out to sea, you've got a basic escort, Royal Naval escort with you. Were there any incidents on that? Did you see a U boat? Did you get threatened?</i> |

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| 01:06:03 | <p>No. You see one convoy coming up after we'd been ... we used to go to Aruba and the West Indies and load oil there as well as America. We used to go up independently up to Bermuda, which was a convoy clearing base and ships would gather there and then a convoy would be formed.</p> <p>At that time, your convoy escort consisted of an armed merchant cruiser, which was a liner in peace time with four 6 inch guns on it. She was no defence against submarines, but she was, there was an admiral usually, a retired admiral on the Naval crew, signal crew aboard. They always got all the messages to avoid certain areas of sea where ships are being sunk.</p> <p>You see, when you got torpedoed, you had to immediately radio position which Britain picked up and put on the chart as a submarine in this area. They could advise other convoys that were going to go through that area to go down about north or south or whatever it was.</p> <p>The worst one, we were quite good. You've probably heard of the Jervis Bay convoy. That was a convoy that was attacked by Admiral Scheer. Well we were very close to her; we had left Bermuda, a few days out of Bermuda.</p> <p>Of course we got orders to scatter as well. We headed back to Bermuda as fast as we could. The armed merchant cruise which we had, she was ahead of us. She was inside the anchorage when we got back. She beat us to it.</p> <p>The first time I saw a ship sunk and men lose their lives was one voyage coming back from America I think it was. We were south of Iceland about two days out of Britain and of course all the boys were talking about their girlfriends and their wives and their families and a sub which, had been following us.</p> |

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| 01:07:58 | <p>They had already sunk one ship. It had broke down and fell astern probably torpedoed, but it managed to get into position and it fired four torpedoes into the convoy. Well one ship not very far from us took two torpedoes. It hit it and she was loaded with iron ore, which is a very dead kind of ore. She just put her nose down and she just steamed right under. Her propeller was turning when she went under.</p> <p>Now there was no time to get boats away or anything but there was three men left, four men left in the water, had been washed off when she went down. It was in the afternoon. It was between five past two and six minutes past two. Well at that time, everybody that's not on duty has to go and have a sleep, you see.</p> <p>Well, I knew that and I got the best advice I ever got in my life from a young sailor came along. He said, "What are you looking at son?" I said, "I'm looking where these men where they're all going." He said, "I know." He says "Listen son." He said, "We're still afloat and there's nothing we can do about the boys that are going who've all lost their lives. But the world goes on and we've got to go with it." He said, "Put your sight on that."</p> <p>It was the best idea, best advice I've ever had in my life. When I was in other situations, I've always remembered that advice from that sailor, whoever he was.</p> <p>I didn't know, we didn't know what happen because our convoy kept moving. I discovered later on, I met a man who had been on another ship in the convoy. We had no escorts later and they ended picking up survivors.</p> <p>One of the merchant ships was to pick up survivors. The second mate was down the rope ladder down the side of the ship and it was very rough. He got one, got the rope around him, hauled him up. He got two, hauled him up. Three, hauled him up. The fourth was the chief engineer and he was badly wounded. There was blood all over the place. However he grabbed him, but a wave came over the two of them and he lost his grip and he was swept astern. Unfortunately he was killed by the ship's screws. He was wounded, anyway.</p> <p>If you read the admiralty records off that convoy it will tell you there were no survivors off of that ship but that's not correct because there was three survivors. I always knew that. I began to wonder what was wrong until I met this lad who had actually been on the ship when they picked them up.</p> |
| 01:10:20 | <i>Where was that convoy?</i> |
| 01:10:21 | <p>We were coming home from Halifax, Nova Scotia that time. We were south of Iceland about two and a half days out of Liverpool. We were just not far from home. Again, one had a merchant cruiser. A sub was following us. He used to alter course at night obviously to try and get away from it.</p> <p>It was before the days of radio, you see. You just use your seamanship and your knowledge of the sea to try and get away. He managed to get into a position he could fire torpedoes into the convoy.</p> |
| | Start of Film 2 |
| 01:10:56 | <i>Talk about your role on the Vimiera. You mentioned that you were the gunner and other jobs that you might have.</i> |

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| 01:11:01 | <p>I was in a gun crew because at that time, we had one naval gunner aboard to maintain the guns. It was before the DEMS organization really was built up. We had one naval gunner. All the crew for the four inch gun crew and the 12 pounder, which was a 3 inch anti-aircraft gun were merchant navy personnel.</p> <p>It was very good. I enjoyed it. I was three number on the three inch. I had a big three on my arm. The breach number ... the navy gives everybody a number. The breach number, the breach man, opened the breach, I put the lip of that into the breach and they slammed on the cartridge in the shell. I shoved it up the breach and got out of the way quick and he shut the breach and then fired it.</p> <p>That was a gun that scared us more than it scared the Germans because it used to, the recoil was colossal and the bang would of frightened anybody. Luckily we didn't have to use it very much but we were on the gun crew.</p> |
| 01:11:58 | <i>Just something else we didn't touch upon, but Bermuda. You talk about this it was a convoy sort of ...</i> |
| 01:12:07 | Convoy clearing base. |
| 01:12:08 | <i>Right.</i> |
| 01:12:09 | <p>Ships gathered there, you see. Bermuda had a very big anchorage inside the lagoon. You came into the lagoon and anchored there and you were quite safe there. The subs couldn't get in. You were safe there until you all gathered, and then the commodore ship would come from somewhere and then you would set out and quite often, part of a convoy would leave Bermuda.</p> <p>We'd done that. Part would leave Bermuda, go north and join the part coming from Halifax, and they would form up into one big Western ocean convoy and then set out across the Atlantic.</p> <p>1940 was very, very early. We didn't have escorts. We didn't have destroyers. We didn't have anything. When we got to within a day of Britain, you were lucky if one destroyer came out to meet you. They weren't there because you couldn't cover everything. It was just one of these positions.</p> |
| 01:12:56 | <i>Did you ever get ashore in Bermuda?</i> |
| 01:12:58 | No, no. You were never ashore in Bermuda. |
| 01:13:01 | <i>Oh, that's a shame.</i> |
| 01:13:02 | Yeah, it's a beautiful place. I fancied it. I've been ashore in Halifax but not in Bermuda, no. |
| 01:13:08 | <i>Were you able to swim or anything like that?</i> |
| 01:13:10 | No I can't swim. I don't swim at all. It's a long way to swim from the middle of the Atlantic. |
| 01:13:16 | <p>Well yeah.</p> <p>When you came back to England, where were you generally bringing your cargo to?</p> |

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| 01:13:24 | <p>Well we brought some of it to Ellesmere Port. We brought some of it to Thames Haven on the Thames and we brought some, no I think Ellesmere Port was more, because you see I had to give up before my apprenticeship.</p> <p>To become a navigation officer, you had to pass a board of trade eye sight test. It was a very strict test. It's not just looking at figures on the wall. It's picking colours and everything else.</p> <p>We were going into the Gulf of Mexico once. I was up on the bridge with a navigating officer and he said, what way is that ship going on the horizon? Another ship. You see we were sailing independently. Well, normally you can tell from the navigation lights, when it's going to starboard, when to port.</p> <p>You know if you can see whichever side you know which way she's going and I got it wrong. He said, listen son. When you go home go ashore and take a board of trade test again because there's no sense in you doing four years, going out for your ticket, and you have to set your eye sight test and you fail. After you finish, you can't go on. You'd have to stay on deck as a sailor or an AB or something like that. He said if you want to go on that's what you want to do.</p> <p>I took my test when I came home one time and failed, so I had to leave the navigation branch but I still liked the sea. However, in 1942, I went to college and the hospital. I trained to be a radio officer because I could go there. I didn't have to wear glasses but I used to get fangled up in the colours.</p> |

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| 01:14:57 | <p>When I talk about that, I know colours, no bother. If you were to look at any wee dot on the horizon, it's a different story than looking on a book or anything like that. I joined the Dover Hill and the Clyde in March, 1943, I got my ticket.</p> <p>From then onwards we went up to Loch Ewe and West Wester Ross which was the convoy clearing station at that time where the ships gathered.</p> <p>We left in February, I have the dates here somewhere ... 13th of January I joined the ship. That was a good day to join a ship going to Russia, wasn't it? We were unhappy because on that ship we had up in number one hold, that's the furthest forward near the bow, we had a big tonnage of cargo and TNT. The ministry were transport in their wisdom or ignorance had put a deck cargo above it of drums of lubricating oil and a layer of sandbags, you see?</p> <p>The mates weren't happy about that. We had tanks and lorries and crates and everything on deck, as the deck cargo. The captain got us all together before we sailed and he said, "Now listen lads." He said, "When we get into rough weather, if the deck cargo wants to break adrift, get out of the road and let it go, because he said I pulled out of convoy once to try and stabilize my deck cargo and I was promptly torpedoed." He said, "We're going to Russia this time." He said, "If you see it going, let it go. Don't risk your neck. Let her go."</p> <p>We went to Loch Ewe that was in the Clyde actually. We went up to Loch Ewe and we lay there until February, wait a minute, no it was 15th of February we left Loch Ewe and convoyed JW 53. JW 53, is that correct? Yes. I have it. I know it well. JW 53, that's right.</p> <p>We set off in a day it was rough weather when we went off to Loch Ewe. By the time we got up off Iceland and went across our escort, we ran into a hurricane and ships began to get damaged. I think five merchant ships, American ships mostly had to leave the convoy because they were damaged with the weather.</p> |

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| 01:17:21 | <p>We lost our deck cargo. All the oil drums went over the side and we were saying good luck when you go mate. You'd go up over a wave and down the other side and when you came up there'd be a crate smashed [inaudible 01:17:30] and Army truck sitting and the no hatch covers.</p> <p>When you went over and down the next one and you came up it was gone as well. Everything went except the tanks. We had Valentine tanks on deck. They were screwed down onto steel plates on the deck with chains and they were secured, so we managed to take them to Russia.</p> <p>Apart from that, we didn't have a great lot of damage. We got through the gale, HMS Sheffield, she lost the top of a turret. She had to leave. HMS Dasher, which was an aircraft carrier, she began to split up the side. She had to leave so we had no air cover.</p> <p>I'm a member of the Dasher Association and she was up in the Clyde after she came home. I've met boys that were on her and I was complaining about taking away our air cover. They said, you never had any. He said, everything was all smashed up with that gale. All the planes were smashed up and down below was all smashed up anyway. We couldn't have flown them off afterwards.</p> <p>She had to go. We plodded on. I've never been in another real hurricane. You went up over the top of the waves and your screw, your propeller would start thrashing. Well the poor engineers had to ease off the engine to save your bearings, then you'd go down the other side and you'd put your bow right into the next wave. Solid water would come over your bow and smash up against the bridge, the lower bridge.</p> <p>When you were on the bridge, you used to get wet with the spray that was thrown up. People can't understand it that way. The icy conditions that used to freeze down the side of your face. You had to have [inaudible 01:19:07] We were issued with things called visors. They were things that came all over your face and had holes cut for your eyes and a hole for your mouth or something like that. They were no use because your condensation inside just froze and you ended up with a pack of ice in your face.</p> <p>We cut the bits out of them.</p> <p>I had a strong [inaudible 01:19:24] before. They were down the side of your face. You tied them. Snow used to freeze up the side of them, because bridges in these days were open bridges. Nowadays, an officer on watch goes out on watch in his shirt sleeves and he sits in a nice big seat and we were out on the bridge facing whatever was coming, right into the gales.</p> |
| 01:19:46 | <i>Do you remember being scared in that situation or did you think the ship was going to handle it?</i> |
| 01:19:50 | <p>I wouldn't say everybody, with great respect for the sea, people don't realize the force of the sea. I mean HMS Sheffield, a six inch gun cruiser just out of Belfast in London, the sea squashed her four tire and the whole top flew off. She had to leave us. The HMS Dasher, she had to leave us because she was damaged. We lost I think it was five merchant ships damaged and had to go back. Way back to Iceland I think they went.</p> <p>You just had to carry on. It was your life. One of the first jobs you got taught when you were a young apprentice was how to tuck your buck in. How to tuck the blankets way underneath the mattress. I often wondered why that was. Well the idea is you went in from the top so you didn't get thrown out. If you just had a blanket on top of you, you would have either gone with the blanket and everything. That was one good thing I was taught first when I joined up.</p> |

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| | Start of Film 3 |
| 01:20:49 | <i>How did you keep in line in your convoy when you were in stormy or foggy conditions?</i> |
| 01:20:54 | <p>In foggy, you had a fog float that you towed astern of you. It was a wooden affair a chute at the thing and the water went through that, chute, backwater went through that and put a sort of two or three feet high spray of water.</p> <p>In thick fog, you were following that, it was very, very, difficult. To maintain position in the convoys you went on the speed of your engines. I mean I've been on the bridge with the navigating officers and they would say, call down son, down two revs, or down two or three revs, or down two revs, 'till you get your position because you tended to creep up on the ship, you see.</p> <p>Well if you were going too fast, there would have been a jam up, so if you down three revs, that's revs of your propeller, it allowed it to slow down a wee bit then they would call, tell the engineers, up to keep us in position. It was a very skilled job. It was a very difficult job.</p> <p>That was in daylight, broad daylight running, but you were following this fog float, fog boiler it was called. In the fog it was very, very bad. You see you had to watch for ships coming in from the side of you. You just see a darker bit of fog and things like that. You didn't know what you were doing. It was all part of the game. It was good for you. It was good exercise.</p> |
| 01:22:19 | <i>Okay. That convoy, JW 53 I think it was, what do you remember when you eventually got into Russia? Did you get ashore?</i> |
| 01:22:29 | <p>Well, when we arrived in Russia, the escort which had brought us up. I should tell you the escorts first of all because it was a colossal escort comparing it to the last one. Yeah the escort was made up of three cruisers, an anti-aircraft cruiser, an aircraft carrier, 16 destroyers, two mine sweepers, four corvettes, two trawlers and HMS Sheffield, she was damaged by the weather and had to go back, and that was the one pictures are taken, and the HMS Dasher, I already said that, she returned to port.</p> <p>Well when we got into the Kola inlet, the escorts, near where we went to anchor, just the entrance to the Kola inlet and a few miles up the inlet there's a place called Polyarny which was a British naval base during the war. The escorts all went into the base, you see, and we lay anchor waiting for a Russian pilot to come down. Well the Russian pilot came down. We maybe had a night or so, I can check it out. Then the pilot came aboard and we set off up the inlet up to Murmansk and as we're going up, halfway up the inlet, we spotted a merchant ship on fire and the crew taking to the lifeboats. We said to the pilot, what's wrong with him? He said well he was getting bombed when I was coming down. It's just an eerie thing, you know. It had been set on fire and the boys were taking off. They managed to go back on board and put the fire out, but that was one from a previous convoy, so it was a daily occurrence.</p> <p>Then we moved up to just outside Murmansk and we anchored there for a night and we went into to go along side to discharge our cargo. Well that was a dangerous job because they used to bomb the docks every night. Regularly, when you were discharging cargo. There was cargo in the key and it was incendiaries going in amongst it.</p> <p>The ship just close to us was sunk alongside the key. The hatches were open and the bomb went down the open hatch and blew the bottom out of her and she just sat down. The boys went ashore down the gangway. It was really nice. That's the best sinking I've ever seen during the war.</p> |

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| 01:24:42 | <i>Did you actually see that?</i> |
| 01:24:43 | <p>Oh yeah. We saw that. The boys went ashore and then went back aboard and got their kit and took it on shore as well. They didn't have to take their lifeboats because she just sat in the bottom, you see.</p> <p>No, they had tanks in the hold, so the Russians who you had to admire, they make the best of what they can. They sent divers down and hooked the tanks on and brought them up cranes and put them in the quay in railway trucks. Well all these tanks were sealed to keep water from getting out to them, so they stripped all the sealing off it, and the red army went inside pressed a button and they started. We were held in very great stock by the Russians at that time.</p> <p>They preferred these tanks. They were lighter tanks. The Russians had really good heavy tanks later on in the war, but these were light tanks. The Valentines and Matilda tanks but they were very pleased to get them.</p> <p>We got ashore when were on Murmansk. The Russians provided what was called the International Sailors Club, or the International Seaman's Club, where we all joined. There was entertainment later on. There was dancing. The girls there were English speaking girls. Tanya she was the boss. She kept an eye on everything.</p> <p>We had quite a good time there. You could buy chives, we called it. That was tea, that was lemon tea, because there was no milk. I mean there was no milk in the country at that time. You could buy a little cake about, what was it we used to get? Well not very much, there wasn't much you could get.</p> <p>They put on entertainment, it was films. There were [inaudible 26:26] at sea and there was a balalaika orchestra came one time. It came from Archangel, I think. They were very good to us, the Russians. You had to get back aboard the ship before curfew was out or you were in trouble.</p> |
| 01:26:38 | <i>That's interesting. A lot of the stories I hear about the Russians they're not positive. Typically for the Royal Navy, I don't think they got in as far as you did did they?</i> |

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| 01:26:48 | <p>They didn't. No. I'll tell you the unfair thing is, as you know. I know the frustrations. For instance, if a Russian civilian was seen to be too friendly with us, they were in trouble with the NKBD. That was the position. That's why they couldn't be friendly. They were all right in the club, but you couldn't go out and walk because they watched you.</p> <p>For instance, I was in a place called Molotovsk in the White Sea for a few months and the poor captain there was Russian merchant navy captain in peace time. When he was aboard the ship, sailors got together and they also blather about ships and sailors and anything that's going. We used to all go down their in a our cabin and you could talk about any subject.</p> <p>We used to ask him questions and it became a wee bit awkward. He would say well you know, my family are in Kiev and I can't really answer that question. You see it was a terrible system at that time. Don't get me wrong, it's totally different today. I have great respect for the Russians. I have a lot of good friends in Russia and they're very, very kind people to us.</p> <p>If he was walking down the main street in Molotovsk and we were walking up the street, he would give you a wave and he would carry on walking, because it wasn't good for him to be seen too friendly with people off the ship, you see.</p> <p>It was a vicious system. That is why a lot of people came home and moaned oh the Russians weren't friendly to us. It wasn't the Russians fault. I'm talking about the Russian people.</p> |
| | Start of Film 4 |

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| 01:28:14 | <p>On the fourth of April, in the same place, lying against the, what we called the German side, but it was only ten kilometres from the German line, we were in the officer's mess, it was a Sunday morning. We were playing chess I think. The action stations went and the gun above us in the bridge opened fire. Well that was the way it was. All these fights were very quick.</p> <p>However I went through the pantry and looked out the door. A favourite trick was just to open the door a wee bit because it were a two inch thick door you see. You felt it gave you protection but I've seen a bit of shrapnel go right through it.</p> <p>I saw two [GAVDH 28:28] coming up, high up. Two of them together and our [inaudible 28:52] were [inaudible 28:53] away at them but the shells were bursting underneath it, so I knew it was the highest fire to them. Their fuses were set to go off at the highest position. However they banked away, you see. I thought well, that's good. We're beating them off, because that happened occasionally.</p> <p>I went out and shut the door and I'm walking across the deck, but what I forgot was they'd released their bomb load before I went out on deck and four or five hundred pounders went off on this side and a 1,000 pounder went off on this side and blew me off my feet. Of course I landed in a pile, I was still on deck, and I'm picking myself up, and the gun layer from one of the bridge Oerlikons had come running down from the bridge on to the boat deck and he's shouting down there, "Are you all right, Sparks? See I was a radio officer at the time.</p> <p>He said, "Are you all right Sparks?" I said, "Oh I'm fine. He said, "It's one right through the deck." I said, "What are you talking about? The ship's blown me off my feet." He said, "Look behind you, man."</p> <p>I turned around and looked and just a few yards from me, there was a nice, round steel hole cut in the steel deck. Maybe about two feet diameter or a wee bit bigger. He says, "It's gone through the deck." I went way over and looked down the hole and I could see the deck below. There was nothing between that deck and the next deck. It had gone right through that one and had gone in to the coal bunker right underneath, you see, where our British coal was stored.</p> |

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| 01:30:15 | <p>The officer on watch came down and he said, I remember the words, it seemed silly, but he said, "Hold my hat, Sparks and I'll go down and see it." He went down the hole. He went down to see where it had gone. The captain arrived and the captain says well I hope it's gone out the bottom. He said send for a chippy. A chippy was a shipwright who was a ship's carpenter. A very skilled man. He came around and sounded around with his sounding rod but it was as dry as you [inaudible 30:42]. He says, "It's absolutely dry, captain."</p> <p>The steward comes out and shouts, "That's grub up. Come and get your ..." Well that was more important than a bomb in the bunkers, so we all went into the officer's mess room and we're sitting around the table. We're talking the talk. He says, Sparks, we are going to send a message by lamp. We'll signal to the senior British Naval officer in Murmansk by signal lamp.</p> <p>We then send a message to the SPNO telling them the position, telling them we've a bomb in the bunkers, it's still aboard. Ask them if they have any bomb disposal personnel in Russia. I did that, I went up the bridge and called him up. Told them the position. Back came the message, Regret no British bomb disposal personnel in Russia. It's up to yourselves to do what you want.</p> <p>I came back and told the old man. He says well ... we'd finished our lunch. He says call all hands out to the poop deck. We were in the stern, it was far away from, it was just right midship, through the deck. He says, Well lads, you know we've got a bomb in our bunker. We think it's a 500 pounder but we don't know." He says, "I'm not leaving the ship when she's still afloat. I'm going to try and get her out." He says, "I'm going to give you three choices. They'll be no come back. You've all got family commitments and one thing and another. It's entirely up to yourselves."</p> <p>He said, "One, you can help me to dig the bomb out. Now I don't want you to volunteer yet. Wait 'till I give you the rest of them. Two, you can stay aboard and fight the ship, man the guns, keep us safe in that respect, or you can take one of the lifeboats and go ashore. It's entirely up to the lot of you."</p> <p>Well, you know, you're 18 years of age and you hope you're a life ahead of you I hesitated for a minute. The officer next to me, he steps forward, and he was a man with a wife and two kids. So I, what could I do? I joined the boys.</p> |

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| 01:32:35 | <p>There was 18 of us volunteered and the captain made us 19 in the squad. After that, we went across to the hatch, we had 19 shovels. There wasn't enough shovels down in the stock hold, but we borrowed what we could. The Navy said, we'll send HMS Jason down to anchor just about half a mile from you and she'll have orders to come along side and pick up a bit if anything goes wrong, you see.</p> <p>Well it was quite handy because she used to call us up and I was the only one in the squad that could use an Aldis signal lamp. An Aldis lamp. The captain said, can you come out of there, stay up on deck and you can return the call, but we didn't get to that first of all because they were digging down in this, you could see where it had crashed the coal on the way through you see, and they were digging down there. Shovelling the coal up the other side.</p> <p>We heard German planes coming over and they bombed us again and all that blooming coal fell in on top of what the boys were doing, so we thought, that's not a very good idea.</p> <p>We got matches and we're in the derrick and we got a big tub. We used to bring the, light up a tub of coal and bring it on deck and come out on deck. He said Sparks, you stay on deck and trim out that coal, so you can go up the bridge whenever you see the Jason calling here because it's no use if you're down below. I said, okay.</p> <p>The captain, he was wanting to dig coal too but the officers persuaded him to [inaudible 34:08] and keep an eye on us. Keep order. He didn't do it, but he was perfectly willing to do it. I had great admiration for that captain.</p> <p>However, this went on for two days and two nights and we were getting pretty tired. One night, of you could lie there and try to have a sleep somewhere. There wasn't 19 shovels, so you couldn't all be working at the same time.</p> <p>I was up on deck and the boys were down below and we had a cluster of lights, the sonar cable lighting up what they were digging. One of our mates was with me and we heard a plane. We knew it was a German plane. So he said, switch the lights off, Sparks. I switched off the lights and of course the crowd down below had gone [inaudible 34:48] they were in the black darkness and the live bomb under their feet. No light. I said, if I leave the lights on you'll get blown from here to kingdom come. You better ...</p> <p>[inaudible 34:59] be cheerful. The plane passed over, it was a reconnaissance plane. Fortunately it didn't see us. I put the light on and started digging again. This went on two days and two nights. The HMS Jason used to call us up and say, how's the bomb doing. This day I was up in the bridge. The Russians, I should have said first of all, the Russians explained to us they were fully committed in the town. There were umpteen unexploded bombs in town, but they said, if you can get it up on deck, we'll take it down that road for you.</p> |

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| 01:35:33 | <p>I was up in the bridge on this day speaking to the Jason and the sailor comes out and says, "Sparks, we've got the bomb up on deck." He said, "We've all got our names on it, but you haven't had you're name on it, and we're not having the Ruski touch it until you get your name on it." I said okay, wait a minute. I came down and of course they had big names scrawled on it. It was a 1,000 pound bomb, you see.</p> <p>Where I am going to put my name? Oh, right at the detonator. I scraped the muck off of the detonator and there was two studs with two plungers on it. I cleaned her and I noticed there were rubber bushes so they said do you know anything about detonator sparks? I said, No, I don't know anything, I know they make a big bang when they go off. I said, that must be an electrical detonator because it's been on charge on the plane, you see. Then the dropped it and it hadn't gone off for some reason.</p> <p>[inaudible 36:27], have no fear. I'm not going to show that mate. Not while I'm here. I scraped the dirt off and got my name around it.</p> <p>The Russian bomb disposal man, he was a very brave man. That picture of the detonators there are long arm extractors. They're long arm. You fit it into the two studs in the detonator and you start turning it to screw it out, you see.</p> <p>Well, he was screwing it out and it stuck and he flew up against it and it stuck and he said, It's stuck. He got damaged as it went down but I've got to get at it. He couldn't speak English at all at all.</p> <p>He goes into one pocket and he brings a wee punch out and another a wee hammer. Engineering practice, if you have a nut that won't shift, you hammer the edge of it, you see. He started hammering the side of the detonator and I had my duffle coat and everything before that.</p> <p>We had decided that we got on deck. Being British, we'll all go and have a cup of tea you see, with the Russian bomb disposal man as well. We're in the mess room, we're having a cup of tea, and we decided now, we're not leaving the Ruski on his own. We're merchant navy officers. We're British Merchant navy officers. Any volunteers?</p> <p>Three of us chose to go down beside him. It wouldn't have made any difference. If that went off, the whole centre of the ship would have been blown anyway. As I say, when he's tapping the wrist punch to get it going, every time he hit it, the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up against my duffle coat. He got it moved a wee bit and then he got the strap on it and it [inaudible 37:56] move and he brought it out.</p> |

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| 01:37:58 | <p>The problem is, the detonators, the Germans sometimes booby trapped them. Then it turns out, you see pictures of them, it's a long thing about that way and screwed in the bomb, and they put another detonator underneath it. When you screwed that one out it went underneath and it would go off, you see, but nobody knew that.</p> <p>The Navy had already cheered us up by saying it could be one of three things. It could be a what is it now, the first one was, the first one was, it could be dud, which we all hoped for. Or it could be just something gone wrong on the firing and if you move it or set it off, or the third thing is, it's a booby trap, but you don't know what's happening and you've just got to wait and see. No, it's a time fuse. The third one was a time fuse, that's it, and it could be taken away but you don't know anything about it.</p> <p>Well Red took it out. Well, we dumped it over the side into the inlet. The tail fins had come off the bomb half way down, and when we found it in the coal, we decided it was a 1,000 pound bomb. It was quite a big one. We took the back off it, we took some of the powder out of it. It was, I think it was a [inaudible 39:13], I'm not really sure. We took that bits out of it and put a match to it to see what would happen. You see high explosives have got to be detonated to explode. It just burned. Just burned. We dumped it over the side. I don't know whether it's still in there today or not or whether somebody's picked it up.</p> |
| 01:39:29 | <i>When you say it's big, how big? In total, the 1,000 pound bomb.</i> |
| 01:39:34 | The bomb itself, would be that width and then there would be the tail fins to go beyond it, you see. The tail fins had already come off halfway down through the coal. It would be at least that length, I think. |
| 01:39:46 | <i>How much coal was in the hole?</i> |
| 01:39:48 | <p>Oh there was a few hundred tons. A few hundred tons in there. We had to dig 22 feet down in the coal before it stopped. We had to shift a lot of coal. That's why it took so long you see.</p> <p>We dumped it over the side and then went down to Murmansk to get the plates welded in the decks where the one hole had been and repaired the deck down below. It had cut through all the communications between the bridge and the engine, the telegraph and the steering and everything like that. We were anchored so it didn't make any difference. It would have been deadly if we had been at sea.</p> |
| 01:40:18 | <i>Amazing story. Amazing story.</i> |
| 01:40:21 | <p>Afterwards, later on about, well I don't know how many months later, we're laying in Molotovsk and captain got us all up and he said now we've got the Gazette here. We've got five OBE's and 14 King's commendations. Everybody got a decoration for it. The captain says, "I'm not happy because" he said, "we all shovelled coal". Which was very fair. I said, "Well captain we got our life out. That was more important than the decoration." He said you're right, Sparks, but that should have been fairer.</p> <p>I'll say that for him. He got a medal for bravery as well. I discovered that years later.</p> |
| 01:40:54 | <i>What medals did you get?</i> |
| 01:40:57 | I got a King's commendation. This one here. |
| | Start of Film 5 |

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| 01:41:02 | <p>When we were in Murmansk and going ashore to the [inaudible 01:41:04] hotel, we were in it one night and there was a little restaurant at the back. It was about four or five story, all made of wood.</p> <p>There was a raid on, but they weren't bombing our part of the city so we weren't going to leave our Chai or our tea, so we were enjoying our tea. Anyway they came running down and they said, the hotel's blazing upstairs. They've dropped incendiary's on the top and it's all on fire. Everybody out, everybody out.</p> <p>My mate, the second radio officer whom I used to share a cabin with said, we're not going to get out of here when there's still some wee biscuits on the table. We'll get these, and put them in our pocket and give them to the kids outside because the kids were desperate for food during the war. They were starving.</p> <p>We go around the table and they're telling us to get out, and the roof began to burn, so I looked at him and we're out. We're going out through the front of the hall, the entrance hall of the hotel, and there was a great big stuffed Russian bear dangling up on its hind legs. Five of the sailors are trying to lug this blooming bear out and of course I said, what are you doing that for? Oh, we're not letting the Germans get our bear.</p> <p>We've got to get out of the hotel but [inaudible 01:42:07]. They took it out and they stuck it in the snow around the back. Well, the fire brigade arrived, but the hoses were freezing. There was a fellow standing in a downstairs window and a wee trickle of water coming out and wasn't any, so the thing burned down.</p> <p>We went across to the international club which was down another street for a few hours. Later on that night, a raid started again and it was in our area. We knew a house, way beyond, open space beyond the old Arctic where we used to go down in the cellars. We felt safer down there. We set out to go for there.</p> <p>Well you can picture about five or six marine merchant navy officers running for their lives and the Canadian third engineer, he ran faster than we did, and he ran around the back of the hotel and we heard a yell and he came flying back and you know we said, what's wrong. He says, I've seen wolves in the town but there's a whacking great grizzly around there! He said, I [inaudible 01:43:07] and the brute was standing above me. Of course we looked around the corner and it was our bear stuck up in the snow and we were helpless with laughter.</p> <p>In the middle of an air raid, there was tracers going on, there was bombs coming down, but there was about four or five of us lying in the snow laughing our head off. That was the things that kept you going because you could see the funny side of life. He never got away with that one.</p> |
| 01:43:30 | <i>Were you ever taking stuff out of Russia or were you literally going back empty?</i> |

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| 01:43:34 | <p>No, I think we had some fertilizer that we took out from Russia. We needed it for a ballast to keep us down, because you know an empty merchant ship would be sitting on top of the water just about.</p> <p>I think I should explain. After we discharge our cargo, I think it was about ten days or a fortnight or something. We were gone quite a wee while. We were taken out and anchored up the western side of the inlet. We called it the German side but it wasn't German. It was still Russia. About half a mile apart. Some ships were anchored up the other side.</p> <p>We were left there, never told what to do. It was May before we left there, and we only left, come to that. The Germans use to harass the life out of us with fighter bombers. Every day that would practically attack. The worst day we had was one day when we were attacked three times. That was only one day that was exceptional.</p> <p>One attack was usual. These fights only lasted a few minutes, or a minute or two. They would come over the hill, down the side, and across the water. I've seen our bridge gunners high up, fighting downwards at planes coming across the water. They would skip over you and drop their bomb, you see. They were good pilots, I admired them.</p> |
| 01:44:49 | <i>Was it scary?</i> |
| 01:44:50 | It was part of life. We eventually, as you probably know, we got bombed. |
| 01:44:59 | <i>I don't know that so we'll go on to that.</i> |
| 01:45:01 | We'll come to that. That was in the inlet where that happened. |
| 01:45:04 | <i>After ten days or so you then set sail but with a bit of fertilizer.</i> |
| 01:45:09 | No, no, No, no, no, no, no. |
| 01:45:11 | <i>Oh, sorry.</i> |
| 01:45:12 | <p>It was ten months before we set sail. We were at anchor, we were at anchor, and it happened down the inlet. We were there from March to May, I think it was. We left Murmansk Anchorage on the 17th of May to go down to the White Sea.</p> <p>There was four of us that we had been bombed and damaged and repaired and stuck together and out and bombed and damaged again. There was four ships. Four merchant ships that were damaged. They decided to send us round to the White Sea, mainly to give our gunners a rest because our gunners were in the guns all daylight hours and by May it was 24 hours daylight. They were very tired.</p> <p>Action stations. We didn't have to go to action stations, the American Navy too because you would line anchor. You couldn't do anything with a ship. You kept out of the road. You could help any way you could but the gunners, they were on all the time.</p> <p>These fights were essentially between one plane and our ship's guns. We had Oerlikons and a Bofer gun was a good gun. The Oerlikons was a great gun for close fighting. We had other Marlins and stuff which we never really used. Of course they just bounced off the bridge.</p> |
| 01:46:23 | <i>Did you ever shoot any down?</i> |

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| 01:46:25 | <p>We shot two down. We got two down that time. One we got full credit for. He was doing the trick down the hillside, across the water and we must have hit him, the [inaudible 46:37] hit him in one of the [inaudible 46:39]. It's a wonder he didn't blow apart.</p> <p>It was obviously wounded the poor pilot because he was sick dropping down, pulling himself up. He went round about us, you see, and if he came too close we helped him on his way and then he set off back for the German lines, but he took over the hill and he hit the top of the hill and blew up. We got credit for that one.</p> <p>The other one, we only got half a credit because he came at us and again we hit him and he was dropping down, pulling himself up. You know, the poor man was probably wounded and he left us and when he came within range of the next ship down the inlet, they opened fire and he blew up, you see.</p> <p>Well they claimed him, but if we hadn't hit him he wouldn't have been down there anyway. We got 50 per cent for that one. We had one swastika and half a swastika pinned on our funnel. Then we got into trouble in Russia because they didn't like a ship with a Swastika in the funnel so we had to go and stick a black canvas over it until we got back to Britain.</p> <p>After we left Murmansk, we were just as you say, four merchant ships. We were a coal burning ship. We had one hold. I'll need to tell you about that later on. We had good bridge of steaming coal, which we were keeping for going home and we were using Russian coal. It wasn't very good quality. It was all the Russians had. We used to laugh and say we blew the whistle, the engine stopped. It was very difficult, keep speed up.</p> <p>There was four of us on our convoy going from Murmansk to Archangel and we got an order, one destroyer, we got an order from the destroyer, 45 degrees turn, you see. Well normally when you're turning ships, you don't know to turn right. You follow the wake of the ship in front of you, so they end up in the same position.</p> |

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| 01:48:23 | <p>Of course we ended up half a mile astern of the ship ahead of us, because we couldn't get our speed up. I got the funniest signal of my life from the commander of the destroyer. He says, "I suggest that Dover Hill cuts the corner at the next alteration of course." I thought that was a good one. He was trying to help.</p> <p>Well, we went around, we went to a place called [???? 01:48:48], which is now where cruise ships go in, but at that time it was just a very small town or village actually, out in the swamps, the swampy area out near Archangel. We used to go out to Archangel. We used to have rattley old trams that ran at one time.</p> <p>In the wintertime, when the river was frozen the tram lines went right across the rivers. They were small rivers and up the other side over the ice. The tram rattled down and rattled up the other side. Of course it couldn't go when it was melted.</p> <p>We were in [???? 01:49:21] from the 19th of May 'till the ... no we arrived in [???? 01:49:43] on the 19th of May and we moved to Molotovsk on the 18th of July, so that was May, June, July we were in [???? 01:49:41]. The reason we went round to Molotovsk I think was to get our fertilizer for cargo.</p> <p>With no trouble. We were in the White Sea. Occasionally the German planes come over, just reconnaissance. We were never bombed in the White Sea. We were very fortunate in that in 1943. They were using them all in Murmansk because the remains of the convoy were still there and they were having a kind of a tough time, you know. We would have liked to be out there but it was only because we were so damaged, we couldn't, I think they thought the boys had had enough, so they picked four that was all damaged and sent us down to the White Sea.</p> <p>We were there, we went to Molotovsk 18th July and we were there 'till the 26th over November, when we set out for home. We got home to London in December and we got home in time for Christmas. It had been a full year for us in the old ship.</p> |
| | Start of Film 6 |
| 01:50:36 | <i>What was it like going back after all that time away? What do you remember of London?</i> |

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| 01:50:41 | <p>Remember we came into Mrthil in the fifth or fourth. After we'd been, we came down into Benton' Birth and down into Methil, because that was a convoy clearing base on the east coast. Then we joined our convoy going to London, which was down, mostly a mine channel. You know you were sailing just two ships. There'd be long line of ships.</p> <p>We were ordered not to fire if a German plane flew above the ship because there were German e-boats outside the mine field, and when they saw their tracers going up, they knew where the ships where and they could fire their torpedoes or [inaudible 51:16].</p> <p>Our gunners of course, to survive in Russia we had a great saying. Sometimes our poor friends the Russians, if they came over that hill, getting too close to blast their gunfire. The point was, when a plane's coming over a hill and right at you, all you see is the round fuse line on their wing. You don't know whether it's a German or not.</p> <p>We were survivors and the orders were, fire first and ask questions afterwards. It was definitely one you'll get the hang of it out the road when he sees the tracers coming up. If he's a German, he'll come right on, because they were good pilots, the Germans. You keep at it.</p> <p>Then on the East coast, one night we were up on the bridge and we heard a plane coming over above us. We knew the German engines. They were a different sound from the British ones, you know. You knew British engines and British aircraft and German planes. He flew right down the convoy and of course, the gunners, the steam's coming out of their ears because whenever they knew it was a German the used to fire but they weren't allowed to fire, you see.</p> <p>He went around and he came down and flew down with his lights on. On the plane. The boys still didn't fire. As I say, by this time the steam was coming out in double force. He went around a third time and he came back down machine gunning the ships, and they still didn't fire! We all got a scatter of machine gun fire. I bet the German pilot was frustrated as well, because his job was to get us to fire to put the tracer streams going up, you see, and the e boats lying off would see the cruisers' streams and they would know where the convoy was.</p> |

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| 01:52:53 | <p>Apart from that, we didn't have any trouble and then we got to London. When I was in the White Sea, we were very scarce of food. I was 8 and a half stone I think when I got home or a wee bit more than that because we were living on Spam and black bread.</p> <p>You got Spam for breakfast. The Americans, who are our friends, they ran ... In a British ship, if you don't have fresh food, you get a pint of lime juice. It goes back to Lord Nelson's days, you see, to keep the scurvy away. We had lime juice, and we kept the scurvy.</p> <p>The Americans had beautiful ships with refrigerators and everything out there and a lot of food and no lime juice and they began to go down with scurvy. Of course they came up to ask to try and borrow some lime juice. We gave them some actually, but we said we'll swap you up for some Spam.</p> <p>Consequently we lived on Spam and we managed to get Spam from our base. Breakfast was three squares of Spam sort of fried or I don't know how they were done, and a black bread. Just a one bit of black bread. Your lunch was Spam. No, no at breakfast I remember it was slice of Spam. At lunchtime it was squares and something over it, I don't know what it was and a big of black bread.</p> <p>Your main meal at night was Spam and black bread and if you were pals with the cook you could squeeze a bit of Spam out of him sometimes at night. I think he felt sorry for us young chaps.</p> <p>You lived on that, well it would be four months, anyway. Of course our weight all went down. We were getting thinner and thinner. When we came back home, it stood me in good stead, because I had a month's leave due and then I went back to our depot.</p> <p>They said, where in the heck were you for the last time? I said, I was in Russia for a year. Oh yeah, well go home and put some beef on your bones. I'll give you another month. I got survivor's leave, so that was great. We put more beef on and we were ready to go back to sea</p> |
| 01:54:57 | <i>Do you still like Spam?</i> |
| 01:54:59 | <p>I still do actually. I'll tell you a joke about that. It's a wee bit unfair but ... A mother seen her son coming in, looking like a blooming ghost. A lightweight and stuff. She says, we're going to have a treat tonight for our meal. You know, this is a working Russian. She said I've saved up some of the points, and I've bought a dinner of American beef. It's quite nice. Of course when I got there it was Spam. I ate that and I said, well that was very kind of you mother. I enjoyed that greatly. I'd been living on it for months. You can't help it, she's your mother.</p> |
| 01:55:33 | <i>How does it feel when you've got to say goodbye to a ship and all the crew that you're with.</i> |
| 01:55:37 | <p>Well quite a lot of, you would had a mixed crew, you know. Some of them had probably been in a Russian convoy at one or themselves, you see. It wasn't I was the only one that had been in Russian, because there had been convoys from 1941 I think 'till the end of the war. Quite a few of them had been in Russia.</p> <p>The thing was, it didn't affect me after the war.</p> |
| 01:56:00 | <i>No, no. I mean, what was it like leaving the Dover Hill and transferring to a new ship?</i> |

| Time Code | What is Said |
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| 01:56:03 | <p>Well, I had to go home for a month's leave and then I got a month's survivor leave after that, so I was quite happy. That was the way it worked. You went on a ship, you were all good ship mates, and you're all pals. Then whenever you came back to Britain, you paid off, and the boy went their ways, different ways to different homes. That was just their life at that time.</p> <p>In the Navy you see, the Royal Navy, sometimes people were sent to a ship and they were there throughout the war. Not in the merchant Navy. Some of the higher officers, maybe the captain would be but not, very seldom. They chief officer might, I mean the chief engineer might have been a good save voyage after voyage.</p> <p>Most of the crowd just ... because you see, the merchant ship came in and discharged its cargo in Britain, and you were away on a month's leave. They couldn't afford that ship lying idle, so they've got to get a crew of another ship that had already been on leave and put them on to it to sail it.</p> <p>People forget, in 1943, that was why we were left behind. Britain was losing the battle of the Atlantic. We were losing more ships than we could replace and more crews than we could replace. Now that colossal escort we had, the Navy just couldn't afford any more. Apart from that, nights were beginning to get lighter, so that was why we were left in Russia all throughout the year.</p> <p>We were never told when we were getting home. We were never told why we were left. She just had to wait. We didn't know we were getting home 'till November, when we had orders to sail from the White Sea back home again. That was the way it was. You just had to accept it.</p> |
| 01:57:33 | <i>Where did you go after the Dover Hill then? What was your next ship?</i> |
| 01:57:37 | <p>Oh, I think I joined, I would need to look at my list but I've sailed on troop ships. I was on a troop ship for a while. I was a special radio officer, a special job on that one. A ship called The Eastern Prince. It was an Anglo-Saxon petroleum company tanker. The safest job I ever had in the world was a Anglo-Saxon tanker. We were what was called a fleet oiler. This was in 1944, I think, or the beginning of '45.</p> <p>We went with the convoys to fuel the escorts. You see it meant that if you had a bad night and a rough night, sometimes the convoys got a bit scattered. In dawn, there was always an escort sitting in your tail because you had his fuel aboard and hang with the convoy. It was the safest ship I ever sailed in the Atlantic on, even though the cargo was heavy with fuel for the escort, so it was quite a safe cargo.</p> <p>Aviation's better. If you went up in the air, you didn't ... we used to laugh and say we got issued with parachutes instead of life jackets on that ship, because when they explode, you hear woof, there's a big bang and that's the need of it.</p> <p>Light oil tankers were the most dangerous, and ammunition ships, of course they were the same. You just had to take, you went and joined a ship.</p> |
| | Start of Film 7 |

| Time Code | What is Said |
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| 01:58:54 | <p>I would go to the depot in Glasgow. When I was in Russia, I studied and I got other certificates. I was able to sail and chief radio officer. There was three radio officers, you see.</p> <p>I would go to a depot and say in Glasgow, anywhere, when you left the ship, you were attached to that depot, if it was London, if it was Port [inaudible 01:59:12], anywhere at all.</p> <p>I went to Glasgow, and I'd go into the depot there and the fellow would say well, Keith I've got a ship for you, if you just wait a minute. Into the waiting room. It was a few of us in the waiting room. Your name used to come through in Morse in a wee buzzer in the wall. I would go through and say well, I've got a ship for you, chief. If you just wait a minute I'll get your juniors.</p> |
| 01:59:39 | <p>The second radio officer was a bank manager in [inaudible 01:59:40]. The third radio officer was a young lad from Wales. The three of all altogether, okay boys. Everybody used to leave their gear in the left luggage office at the station, you see. You know, whatever you came into the station. We'd got to the station, get our gear and get a taxi and go down to the ship. We were a little unit. It was ideal. We had a good unit because, very seldom you got an awkward one, but they were there.</p> <p>When I was chief I used to day well listen lads, on the way down, I'm a big believer that when in port, we're free to go ashore. When you're at sea, you'll do your watches and I may have to call you out or maintenance, but when we're in port, I want to lock the wireless room door and just forget it 'till we sail again.</p> <p>I could do that because I was in charge, you see. Of course, well that's all right, chief. That's fine. We got on fine. We had a good crowd.</p> |
| 02:00:36 | <i>How old were you when you were making these decisions?</i> |

| Time Code | What is Said |
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| 02:00:39 | <p>19. When I was chief radio officer. Yeah. You had to be. The troop ship, I had a special job. It was a, she carried 2 and half thousand troops, I think. You had public address system all throughout the ship where you could talk back to your group of speakers. They were getting a lot of bother with it.</p> <p>I was sent down to try and sort this out. I didn't need to be on duty in the wireless room at all but I had got fed up because I started any trouble in my spare time. The chief radio officer on that ship, who was an older man, I said look chief, there's no sense in you standing your watch. I'll stand your watches. I'm quite happy because I can do anything like that in the spare time. If I'm stuck you can help me out by taking a watch. He said, oh that'd be great, Sparks. I took over his watch.</p> <p>That was on the troop ship, just after VE Day, we went up to Norway to take over from the Germans. We went up to Tromso and what was the other place? I'll get it. I know them well. Funny, I've dropped sign in old age. Went up to a northern place, into Trumso. When we came into Trumso we had one destroyer with us. Not that we really needed it, but she was just there for safety.</p> <p>I can tell you a joke about that. When we got into Trumso there was a row of German U boats and a row of German destroyers, but they were all flying the surrender flag, and it was Norwegian troops we had.</p> <p>They had to go ashore and get peace and quiet in the town because there had been a camp further up from there and the Russians had broken out of that and had armed themselves, and they were daily killing any Germans they could get their hands on.</p> <p>The Norwegians had to go ashore and bring peace back to the place.</p> <p>You had passenger ships, you had troop ships, you had oil tankers, you had tramp steamers. What we call tramp steamer is when it just go all over the world, wherever it was sent, to carry cargo, you see.</p> <p>As I say, I joined one that went out to, I think it was New York. Then we went from there to Bombay in India. We came down across the Atlantic, though the Mediterranean, to the Red Sea, out to Bombay and then we went up to Karachi, and then we went down to Mauritius and then we came back up from there and up to Greece and we were in North Africa, as well. [Nabona 02:03:014] is one of the places in the North African course. You just, whatever your cargo was there, you went for it.</p> |
| 02:03:20 | <i>What was the strangest cargo you ever carried?</i> |

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| 02:03:24 | <p>Well, you know Malta had a great siege during the war. Well, I was on one ship that was ... after the siege was lifted, there wasn't any bombing at the time, but we took very high pedigreed goats in little stalls actually, and we took some cattle through too, to bring cattle back to Malta.</p> <p>That was the funniest things. It was an old American ship that had been built in the last war and I was chief Sparks in it. I used to look out and it wasn't port holes, there was a thing at the window at the back of the wireless room, I could look down on deck, and I saw some sailors doing some dobbie, that's washing their clothes, you see.</p> <p>One had a bucket and he was dobbie. One of the boys took one of the goats out and just leaned him, laid him up. Of course it butted him and he went right over the ... the Malta authorities, you've got highly pedigreed goats in there. What they didn't know didn't do any harm. That was the things that kept us going.</p> |
| 02:04:32 | <i>You carried ...</i> |
| 02:04:36 | Carried livestock. Not in general cargo. Malta was needing a lot of help at the need of the war. It was still a mess. The harbour was still a lot of ships sunk. The Ohio was lying there still when we were there. She was a tanker that was in one of the bad convoys. She was there. |
| 02:04:54 | <i>What was your favourite place that you ever visited as a merchant in the war?</i> |
| 02:05:01 | <p>Greece was very nice. I liked Greece. I mean the Parthenon. I had the honour of being run out of the Parthenon under armed guard because we wanted to go and visit the Parthenon, you see. We were in, what was the place, the big port, I forget, next door to Athens.</p> <p>We were ashore and we had one of the apprentices, and he came from up the West Coast of [inaudible 02:05:30], up in the west coast, you see and he was used to meetings. When we got up to the Parthenon, the man says no, closed today. Closed today? Oh darn, we want to get in.</p> <p>I said to the apprentice, see that cliff there son? Could you go up that cliff? Oh aye, he said, I think I could. He led the way, and about four others were following him. It came up to a wall you see, and he jumped over the wall. Then I jumped over the wall and there was a guard.</p> <p>You should have seen his face when he saw us coming over the wall man. He ran away for his mates. We got marched out down out the front gate and there was some British forces there that were getting the laugh of their life to see four merchant navy officers in the [inaudible 02:06:11] getting marched out. They were getting good fun in it.</p> <p>I was back in Greece as a visitor years later, and I noticed that that point had been bricked up a bit, back at the cliff. That the bottom had been bricked up to a certain height. The same that we climbed up. We left our mark on Greece.</p> <p>We had a lot of good fun. Oh, I could go back on different things. Mauritius was ideal. We liked Mauritius. At night, we used to take one of their life boats and we used to, you could sail around inside there. It was a typical tropical island. A reef all around it. You could go down inside the reef. The boys that liked the water, liked swimming, they would dive down and bring stuff up.</p> <p>I remember them bringing up beautiful shells and putting them in one of the seats in the boat. I kept out of the water. I don't like swimming. They came up the next time and the shells had vanished. They said what have you done with our shells, Sparks? I never touched your shells. There were hermit crabs in them and they had walked off the seat.</p> |

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| 02:07:17 | <i>You never wanted to swim? I mean that's just amazing.</i> |
| 02:07:21 | Well I tried, I learned to swim in Eden actually after the war. There was a bit fenced off to keep the sharks out and I could do a wee bit and a doggy paddle. You see, in your life jacket, you don't need to swim. You're all right. With these big padded, life jackets that came on a waist coat right around you. You unscrew them and they kept you afloat. Oh I've been in the drink with my life jacket on. |
| 02:07:43 | <i>Were you ever torpedoed?</i> |
| 02:07:45 | No. I was never torpedoed. |
| | Start of Film 8 |
| 02:07:49 | <i>When were you most frightened?</i> |
| 02:07:53 | <p>Eh, I think when, you see, there's one of these pictures. You see a monkey out in my position on the Dover Hill when we were in the convoy on the way up. We were attacked by 21 GUADH one day. We were sailing along and the HMS Scylla called us up. There was enemy aircraft approaching from such and such a bearing.</p> <p>Well of course we all got our glasses on and there was three formations. Three formations of seven each. That was 21. Well, there was 22 ships left in the convoy by this time. We knew that somebody was going to be lucky. They would all pick a ship, you see. The one for us, came swung around, in a big, shallow dive, bombed doors open and you're standing in the open. You didn't have one.</p> <p>Bomb doors open, out comes four bombs heading right for you. Well you know that within the next three or four seconds, you're either going to live or you're going to die. If you're wise, you do what I do. You say a very quick prayer and then you duck.</p> <p>The next minute, pandemonium breaks out and bombs go off on either side and the water goes hundreds of feet up in the air and comes crashing down on deck. We didn't get it, we were above the level, but gunners in the boat deck, it was a little square gunner placement in the boat deck. It was full of water and the poor gunner that was in there was trying to climb out soaking wet, icy water.</p> <p>We looked down on the bridge and here's a gun layer standing with a Bren gun and captain says, go down, Sparks and see if you can help guns. I'll call you back if the cruiser calls up. I'll keep an eye on you. I went down and came around the bridge and the gunner was standing there and he was swearing like a trooper. I said, what are you swearing at? He said see that gun, Sparks? That Oerlikon gun. I've cleaned that gun, I've test fired that gun for six months. You know that plane that went over that bombed us? The bomb doors were open and he said my tracer shells were going in the open bomb doors and it jammed. He said, I was so mad.</p> |

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| 02:09:59 | <p>The gun layer had a strap on everybody's back to keep them from getting thrown of the gun. He said, I ran around the front of the gun shield to try and clear the bottle to get if off, to get it off to get the jam cleared. Of course when the bombs burst, they disintegrate. They throw shrapnel all over the place. He'd been hit in the face.</p> <p>I had a look at his face and here it was cut, but it wasn't right through. It was cutting off his chin. By this time I had to wash the blood, it stopped.</p> <p>I said, wait down below guns. He said, no fear Sparksy, see that so and so gun? I'm going to back her up to get it going. The captain shouts from the bridge, quick Sparks, the cruiser's calling. No, he said, quick, there's another lot coming in. They were [inaudible 01:10:38]. Another wave had come in. He said come back up, so I came back up. But guns went back and his gun was firing at the next attack. I learned a lot from these guns.</p> <p>Another thing, when we were lying anchor up there ...</p> |
| 02:10:54 | <i>Was that a scary situation, was it?</i> |
| 02:10:57 | <p>Well, it was a scary situation. When we were lying up in there, we had no [sick bar stewards] or anything like that. The gunners used to sew each other up. Any of the crew used to sew each other up. You're not going to believe this, but a bomb burst, the shrapnel flies, and people get wounded, shrapnel wounds. Well you got them into the officer's mess room, you put them up on the mess room table, you gave them a tot of rum and then you had a little glass vials with needles and sutures in it. You could just break that open and start. So the boys would just sew them up.</p> |
| 02:11:30 | <i>No aesthetic?</i> |

| Time Code | What is Said |
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| 02:11:32 | <p>Well the tot of run, that was the only aesthetic. We had no aesthetic.</p> <p>One gunner one day was getting sewn up. Guns got a bent needle. He says, Guns you're like a Rhinoceros you know. He said, go on. I want to get back to my gun. If there shorthanded, that's all that he was interested in. we sewed him up sent him back.</p> <p>The worst one I saw was one lad who had a gash in his side. He had cut the belt out of his trousers. He came in holding his trousers up. There was two of these mates, when we got him opened up, we were standing looking at him saying, are you all right inside Guns? Nothing's stuck in the works? He said, No, nothing stuck in the works. It was just at my side.</p> <p>We sewed him up. Gave him a wee bit of fine cord to keep his trousers up. The boy said, I'm going back to the gun. He said, I'm going back to the gun because I'm a loader and a Bofor and he said, if I'm not there, someone else has got to do it.</p> <p>He's going back across the deck when one of his mates comes along with a base of an anti-aircraft shell, a jagged and a half side of it and bits of his shirt stuck in that.</p> <p>We said Guns, you're a lucky [inaudible 01:12:40]. He said, if it had been over another inch you'd been dead by this time. That was the things that you had, but it became part of life, you see and you began to accept them.</p> <p>I don't want you to get the impression that you weren't scared. Everybody's scared. Anyone that tells you they weren't scared, they're telling you a lot of nonsense. The first thing in your life is human preservation. Preservation of yourself.</p> <p>But I mean, you could never leave your position. Nobody would ever leave their position, no matter how exposed it was, because that's where you were and it was your position.</p> <p>My action stations as they say at sea was up above the ship. Up in the [inaudible 01:13:18]. The other two chief officers, the chief radio officer and the second radio officer were down below in the wireless room. I just had to accept that that was my position.</p> |

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| 02:13:29 | <p>Everybody was scared. I wouldn't like to say that anybody wasn't. You learned to control fear. You couldn't let ... fear and panic are two different things. Panic is a thing I've never really seen. I've heard of cases where folks panic. Somebody would lay them out probably because it can spread like wildfire if you let it you see.</p> <p>We never had any cases of that at all. You were sensible. You took cover. I mean you didn't just stand and watch everything that was happening. If you saw a plane coming out you'd get down behind a steel door for safety.</p> <p>When we were in Kola and again in the bomb incident, HMS Jason had called up and I was up in the bridge when the Aldis lamp the ship had a big funnel and actually was swinging with the tide. The funnel was getting in the road.</p> <p>I took my lamp and I went up to the stern and I went up to the four inch gun platform, and there were steps going up from it to the Bofor gun platform and the muzzle of the Bofor was just about three feet above my head. I had my lamp on there and I was signalling.</p> <p>It was army gunners that manned the Bofors and the Sargent shouted, Watch out Sparks, there's a plane coming. I looked out and I saw this bomber coming for us. I put my lamp down, turn and ran around the other side of the gun mounting to get shelter, you see. There was a big ammunition locker with wing nuts, and one of them caught my jacket, my duffle coat, so I went round, but the coat brought me back. I kept sliding back. The Bofor's firing by this time, three feet above my head. I'm getting doused with burning cordite but it wasn't harmful. It was just bits.</p> <p>I saw the plane go past, lower down, and it couldn't get enough depression. The buffer shells were bursting behind it. It couldn't get down quick enough, because in these days you had to wind. They weren't all powered as they are nowadays.</p> <p>The German pilot was looking up at me, and I'm sure he thought, look at that stupid idiot up there. He should be under cover. But I couldn't. I was caught with a blooming wing nut on my jacket. I was deaf for two or three days after that, but it came back all right.</p> <p>The joke was aboard the ship, you can swear at Sparks if you like, and he'll not say anything because he'll say he won't hear you.</p> |
| 02:15:47 | <i>It's a fantastic account, it really is.</i> |
| 02:15:52 | End of Films |