



Copyright - Legasee under licence [2011]. Except as provided by the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted or published in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

For details please contact: info@legasee.org.uk

Thank you for downloading this transcript featuring **John Harrison**

Before you read it we'd like to make you aware of our copyright terms and conditions.

Copyright license

Legasee grants to you a worldwide non-exclusive royalty-free revocable license to:

- view this document and the material associated with this Veteran on a computer or mobile device;
- copy and store this document and the material associated with this Veteran on your computer and in your web browser cache memory; and
- print pages from this transcript for your own [personal and non-commercial] use.

Legasee does not grant you any other rights in relation to this website or the material on this website. In other words, all other rights are reserved.

For the avoidance of doubt, you must not adapt, edit, change, transform, publish, republish, distribute, redistribute, broadcast, rebroadcast or show or play in public this document or the material associated with this Veteran (in any form or media) without Legasee's prior written permission.

Enforcement of our copyright

Legasee takes the protection of its copyright very seriously.

If we discover that you have used our copyright materials in contravention of the Copyright Act 1968, we will bring legal proceedings against you seeking monetary damages and an injunction to stop you using those materials. You could also be ordered to pay legal costs.

If you become aware of any use of Legasee's copyright materials that contravenes or may contravene the Copyright Act 1968, please report this by email to info@legasee.org.uk by post to Legasee Ltd, 27 Government Row, Enfield Lock, Middlesex, EN3 6JN.

For more details visit our Terms & Conditions at: <http://www.legasee.org.uk/terms-and-conditions/>

Name: John Harrison
Regiment: The Royal Navy

Date Transcript: 11/03/2011
Transcribe By: David Davies

Time code	What is said
01:00:00	Start of Film 1
01:00:01	John Henry Harrison you did ask born 25/07/1914 they heard about it, and they started a war. I joined the Navy in 1937 they heard about it, started a war. I go out to Nigeria they hear about it and they start the riots. I'm going into EI???? And keeping very very quiet. How's that?
01:00:31	<i>Can you begin then by telling me why you decided to join the Navy?</i>
01:00:37	Yes... I'd always been interested in water things and the Navy had always attracted me, it seemed a good life and I was talking to an ex Navy chappy and he said" you want to join as an Ordnance Artificer" I said whys that he said" when you come into port nobody wants guns so you haven't got to do any duties, your free to go ashore" I thought that's good enough for me. So I joined as an Ordnance Artificer and then you do 13 months course on Whale Island and then if you pass out you go to a ship, if you don't pass out your given one more... nobody wants a fault on a ship with gunnery you'll blow the...
01:01:29	Anyway having passed out I was drafted to a cruiser, which had been mothballed and it had to be brought up to war time fighting efficiency and I did that, got recommendation and they said that there's a new ship coming in called Belfast, it wasn't even H.M.S then and I looked at this cruiser and I thought that's going to be a beautiful ship. Anyway I got drafted onto H.M.S Belfast as it became then and I reported to the Gunnery commander and said where's my duty,
01:02:17	He said" you're in charge of A turret. I said where's my station he said" if you look at a small hatch in-between the right hand and the center gun you go down there about eight foot and it's tortuous and twisty and you'll find all the mechanisms in there, that is your station and you'll be told where's there's any fault with the fighting efficiency of the ship of the turret and it's your duty to get there and repair it understood?" Sir... and that was that.
01:02:58	<i>John can I just ask you to back track a little bit. Can you tell me about your training, what it was like to train?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:03:04	Well you had to know sights, directors, all ammunition, from pistols, which you were trained in of course, up to 15in guns. And one of the tests they put in a sack Lewis Gun, Revolver and Pistol all in pieces. They tipped it on the floor and you had 5 minutes to put them all together. If you passed that you went on to the next stage and we had lectures every day and finally a passing out exam and if you passed out... well done and then you was drafted to a ship,
01:03:57	But when you first joined you were given what we call a test piece and that was a horrible piece of cast iron and what you had to do was to make that into a workable model and all you had was a file and a chisel and a lot of expertise and if you hadn't got a lot of expertise you couldn't do it and then you weren't joining the Navy, Because you had to know your stuff. If anything went wrong with a fighting ship it had to be repaired quickly. So you got to know what you are doing, and that basically was the training, but you had to know every ship, every item from the gunnery controls, sights, directors, fighting efficiency, all about every ship that you went on.
01:04:57	<i>How hard did you find that?</i>
01:05:01	Piece of cake! I was interested, I've always been interested in anything I don't know that's why I was into research, if I didn't know it, find it.
01:05:18	<i>So what were your first impressions on seeing Belfast?</i>
01:05:23	That's going to be a happy ship. It's funny you can have a happy ship; I've been in another ship, which was not a happy ship, I won't mention the name of it but there are feelings about a ship when you go on and this one as soon as I came on it, it felt homely, it felt nice, it felt right and it was.
01:05:44	<i>Why do you think that was?</i>
01:05:47	There's no explanation for that, it just is! I suppose it's like you get a car and you think well I like that one and you get another one like the same... not quite the same. I don't know why that is.
01:06:02	<i>So you were introduced to your turret, A turret can you tell me what that was like seeing that for the first time and how hard you knew you were going to have to work?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:06:10	Frightening for the simple reason, your first thought is how do I get down there if anything happens it's going to be a hell of a job getting out, and in the dark it was. The little illumination lights came on, but when you've got to come up one ladder, do a corkscrew up another ladder, push the hatch open, in the semi dark it a... and that's the first thought, how to I get back out of here? Apart from that it was good, nice turret.
	Start of Film 2
01:06:48	It was 1939 June when I joined it, it was just Belfast, and it was commissioned then in July and then we went out into the north sea for what they called a shakedown cruise. Where you test your guns, your speed, everything maneuvered, and about August something we were due to come back to Portsmouth, and it was a gorgeous day and they said "hands to bathe" and a... ah well dived over the side, and by god it was cold, full of jelly fish. Anyway we started to come back to Portsmouth, and then suddenly we turned north, and there was a rumor that war was about to be declared, and war was declared and we captured the Cap Norte, which was a German vessel under a Swedish flag, full of Nazi officials from the Argentine and we captured her and we took her back to Scapa Flow, and then we went straight up to the north of the Arctic to stop any ships coming from Germany out into the Atlantic.
01:08:37	<i>What was that like being a young lad onboard a ship and hearing that war had been declared?</i>
01:08:42	That's what we joined for, you just accepted it no good panicking about it. In other words if you don't like cooking keep out the kitchen. No it's a case that... that's what you joined for, and it wasn't a happy situation, but that was it.
01:09:03	And that water was extremely cold and you know you get a big wave about every seven wave, and I wanted to get up, and it was a bit rough, and I wanted to get up to A turret on the upper deck, save going underneath and I came to this big wave over and rushed, grabbed hold of the turret handle and another one came over, and I floated, but because my hand was frozen onto the handle I didn't get washed over the side. So I rapidly did this (indicating he pried his fingers free) and got back in, and that hand was frostbitten not a lot, but it saved my life, and that's how quick it is
01:09:55	<i>So you arrived in Scapa Flow tell me about that?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:09:58	Yes we came back from patrol in the Arctic Region, and we docked... we moored rather just forward of the Royal Oak, and I was dedicated Petty Officer of the patrol, and that meant you take six seaman ashore to the canteen, and your function is to scoop or collect any drunks when the canteen closes, to get them back to their own ships, and there was about ten legless sort of matlows, and we got them onto this drifter, they used drifters to go around to the various ships, and they were lolling about their singing away, and we went around the bows of one big ship, and a destroyer was tying up at the other side, and rammed, and put a big vee into the side of this drifter. The language from the Scottish skipper was worth hearing, and I've never seen ten legless matlows sober up, and scramble up the scramble nets, which were dropped over the side, followed by the Chief P.O. me.
01:11:24	And we got them back to their own ships. I got back onto the Belfast, and that was the night when the Royal Oak was torpedoed by the submarine. If we had been in that position (indicates ships position) we'd of got sunk. So we then left, we hadn't got any stores onboard, we'd only just come in, and went down to Loch Ewe, and stayed there, then went back on patrol, came back down to Rosyth, and we were going out there under the Forth Bridge when we got mined, and that was November the 22 nd 1939, and if she hadn't been all welded she'd of sunk.
01:12:21	<i>And tell me what it was like being out on patrol; what were you as a ship looking for, and defending against?</i>
01:12:27	We were just there carried around in a ship, while all the lookouts, and everybody else was busy seeing if there were any German ships about. We hadn't got radar in those days so it was a case of all lookout stuff, and that's how you passed your time keeping busy making certain your fighting efficiency was there, and that's how you passed your time. It was a bit boring if it hadn't been a bit rough, and wanting to know if somebody's going to shoot at you any minute, and submarines was the great danger they were... it passed the time.
	Start of Film 3
01:13:10	<i>John could you tell me about the day when your ship was hit, but the events leading up to that if you could tell us in some detail?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:13:20	We left Rosyth going out to the North Sea, and we didn't know what to expect in the North Sea, anything could of happened German aircraft, and there are three channels that you can come out of Rosyth underneath the Forth Bridge where the channels are in the river, and deep water for ships. Now there was a rumour that the submarine laid the magnetic mine in the channel, which we was going to use. The information could only of been got from the lighthouse keeper on May Island, this is the story, and he told the submarine, which channel we were going to use, and he laid the magnetic mine in that channel, and we were only three foot clearance of the bottom.
01:14:30	So there wasn't a lot of room between the bottom of the keel, and the bottom of the river for a two foot diameter magnetic mine, and I think they had that lighthouse keeper as a Fifth Columnist, in other words a spy, and the submarine just sort of laid the mine, and scarpered quickly. That is the rumour, otherwise how did they know, which channel to lay the mine in, somebody must have told them. There we are...
01:15:06	<i>Can you tell me about the day it was hit by the mine?</i>
01:15:10	Just a normal day everybody was standing by getting ready, but it was what we call stand easy, that's when you have half an hour to relax, and it was a gorgeous day, and I was just alone down in my turret, charging these air bottles otherwise I should have been on deck with all the others, and there was twenty one injures, one death, and the death was the painter who was down in his caboose, and all the acid bottles, and everything else broke, and scalded him, and he lasted about 2 days. Most of the other people, most of the other crew were all on the upper deck in the sunshine, and there was a lot of injures from the fractures of legs, and things, and apart from me down below everyone else was on the upper deck when it did that, (indicates the boat rocked severely) and most of the injuries were on the deck, because the whole thing went up.
01:16:14	<i>Can you tell me in as much detail as possible what happened then, and where you were, and how the ship was hit?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:16:22	Well only that I was down in my working chamber, which was down below, and a lot of noise from the compressors charging the air bottles, and there was just a little movement of the ship not a lot, and then suddenly lights went out, my head descended in my shoulders, it went very very still, very very quiet, and that's when I thought that the air bottles had blown up, and then the deck bounced about three times about a foot. I thought that's unusual, and I thought I'd better get out of here, and then in the semi darkness trying to get out through that little scuttle was a bit difficult, and as I say the water was pouring in, but that was from a drenching hose, that had been distorted, and when I got out on deck it was a bit pandamonic, people didn't know quite what to do, and the ship could have been sinking, but because it was all welded it stayed afloat,
01:17:34	and we were towed back into Rosyth, and put in a dock, and they started to let the water out, and it started to break up. So my next job was to examine the damage to my turret, and the damage in that turret was extensive, but because I was kept back to examine the damage, which in some... you don't realise there's an inch one inch clamps just to stop it moving up and down, and some of those were bent, which shows you the force of the magnetic mine, but because I was kept back for this examination I did not go with the rest of my crew to The Hood. That's why I go up to A turret every time I'm onboard to say thank you very much.
01:18:36	<i>Now John tell me a little bit more about what went through your mind and how you felt physically when the mine hit the ship?</i>
01:18:45	What's happened... that's it your mind goes blank, and then comes personnel survival, I got to save myself, I'm still alive I've got to save myself, what do I do, and you know that the only way out, you've rehearsed it many many times, and you do it, and that is self-preservation, to get out on deck because there is nothing you can do in the turret, that's finished. You have that feeling, the shock wave that's gone through that turret means there's a lot of damage done, and that was it. You don't think about these things.
01:19:32	<i>When you got out on deck it was chaotic, can you tell me what you saw?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:19:38	Only just a lot of water and destroyers round about in case they were needed, tugs were on their way out from Rosyth to tow is back in, and we just wallowed because the engines were no good. So they towed us back in, and its remarkable how little thought goes into anything else except what you got to do for your duty having done that survival, it's a mental process. I don't know, which comes first.
01:20:22	<i>And were you scared?</i>
01:20:24	No you ain't got time to be scared I mean... if you're scared you lose your concentration, and the worst thing you can do is lose your concentration, so no you don't get scared, you do afterwards.
01:20:41	<i>Can you tell me about afterwards how were you physically?</i>
01:20:46	I was eventually... I'll tell you eventually I started to lose my memory, but that was about a year and a half later. I was suffering from terrific headaches, and my spine wasn't too good, and I finished up in and out of hospitals, and I got invalided out at the end of the war, on a pension, which a Labour government came in, and took off me two years later because I didn't earn my living, and we won't go into too much of that, but no it's a case that it can be boring if you're not interested in your job because you got a lot of standing around wobbling up and down waiting for something to happen, and hoping it won't.
01:21:51	<i>And how do you feel you suffered physically compared to other people on the ship when they were hit by the mine?</i>
01:21:58	I was lucky... I'd only got a headache, and bad shoulders; little did I know the damage that had been done in my skull fortunately. No it is a strange life when you come to analyze it, what did I do... I sat around waiting for something to happen, second thoughts hope it doesn't because it could be dangerous, which later on another ship was, but that's another story.
01:22:33	<i>Tell me about what life after the mine on H.M.S Belfast. What happened next to you?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:22:39	I was kept back to examine the damage in that turret, and there was a space where the turret revolves, and you've got the fixed structure, and there was a lot of rollers in there, and I had to climb in there with a torch, and examine the rollers, and these clamps to see what damage had been done, and the damage was quite extensive. That turret weighs five hundred and seventy odd tons and it was blown up and straightened some of these out, (indicates the clamps, straightened) which shows you the force of that magnetic mine. They were terrific, and of course nobody knew then that it was a magnetic mine, that was discovered about two days later on Sheerness when they saw this thing laying there and said what's that, turned out to be a magnetic mine.
	Start of Film 4
01:23:37	<i>What happened to you next in your Navy career, where did you go after?</i>
01:23:41	I went down onto another destroyer, and then my memory started to go. Now I've always been a great disciplinarian; always ask permission. Now on the Belfast I came up one day, and there was a midshipman, that's a junior officer, was trying to open the breach, and I said to him what are you doing he said "I'm trying to open the breach chief" now you're not supposed to speak to an officer when your only a P.O. I said look in your Navy career when you want to do something always get permission... ask permission, and once you got permission you will be on the safe side navel wise. "Right chief" he said "will you show me about the turret". So I showed him the turret.
01:24:36	When the Belfast came up in 1971 I was invited to go down to see Ludovic Kennedy for an interview, and I went down there, I was introduced to Ludovic Kennedy, and a voice at the back said "hello Harrison I remember you" it was this midshipman he was then an admiral he said "it was the best advice you ever gave me" now in here, in your mind is a doctrine, and it appears I was told afterwards by some people I met ashore, the crew that I asked permission once to go for a swim, I was on the destroyer, to go for a swim, and permission was turned down, which was a good job because we were north of the Arctic Circle. I know nothing about this at all, but there's the discipline built in to you, and it saved your life.
01:25:42	<i>What was it like, what were your feelings on leaving the Navy?</i>
01:25:46	Deep regret... deep regret I enjoyed it really did despite what happened to me, I really did enjoy it, I was sorry to leave.

Time code	What is said
01:26:00	<i>Can you tell me where you went or, which ship you joined and tell me a bit about that after you left the Belfast?</i>
01:26:06	Yes... I went to the H.M.S Atherstone, which was a hunt class destroyer, and I was the ordnance artificer onboard there, and we went out to the North Sea, and we escorted a mine layer across to The Skagerrak to lay four hundred mines on this mine layer... The Skagerrak to stop The Scharnhorst from coming out unfortunately The Scharnhorst had gone out 24hours before that, which we didn't know about. Anyway the mine layer laid all these mines in The Skagerrak, and turned for home forty-two knots we could only do thirty-two so it left us, and we had an air escort they had little black crosses on their wings, and alright nothing happened we got back, then we went up north again,
01:27:15	and that's when my memory started to go, and that's when I was put onto a hospital ship, and sent down to Haslar Hospital, and normally from Whale Island to go to Haslar Hospital you'd go by ship, by boat it takes you straight to the harbour, but I was taken around by ambulance, and two very very nice matlows were there accompanying me, and went round to Haslar Hospital by road, and we got out the ambulance, and they came with me up to the ward, I said oh that's nice same ward. They booked me in, and when they turned around they were both armed, I was not in a very good state, and I was in there for a fortnight,
01:28:19	and then shipped, well drafted up to Glasgow in charge of a gun repair team, which was responsible for repairing all the guns on all the merchant ships, which called into the Clyde that's from The Queen Mary down to little skips, and it was a very interesting life. I had thirteen people, and we did some very good repairs on all these guns, and when the ships came back in we often got thanks for the fighting efficiency, and the Russian ships, which we repaired were very grateful and of course the Russians repaired the glass here, and all the Russian ships had doctors, all females. All doctors in Russia before the war were female, the men were the toughies and the female the doctors, and my god they were tough. Very nice, very friendly I'm very grateful.
01:29:38	<i>John have you ever, did you ever re-join The Belfast having left it?</i>
01:29:44	No... no she was virtually a wreck, towed round on barrels actually to Devonport, and no I never joined it again. It was completely re-crewed, none of the old crew... most of the old crew anyway went to The Hood, and of course that was that.

Time code	What is said
01:30:10	<i>What was it like for you John knowing you'd escaped joining The Hood like your other ships company had?</i>
01:30:17	If I remember rightly it was gratitude for being in the right place at the right time, nothing else you cannot forecast what is going to happen to you, you can only hope, and some of the raids that I've been in... bombing raids being ashore. It's very lucky, it's no good dwelling on oh if I've done so and so, if you done so and so you might have been killed, but you didn't do so and so, so you weren't killed. There's no logic, and this is when you asked me about me about what do you think of, your only thought is I've got to do my job, I've got to make certain if there needed there fighting efficiency, and that's what you thought. There's not a lot to think about at sea when you're being tossed up and down, not a lot.
01:31:26	End of Films