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Name: John Woodward
Regiment: The Royal Navy

Date transcript:
Transcribe by:

Time code	What is said
01:00:00	Start of Film 1
01:00:01	My name is John Douglas Woodward. I'm 89 years old, I was born on the 7th April 1924. [Sniffs] When in the service I had originally joined to be a signaller, and they found out I was colour blind. So I was automatically transferred to a, the a stewarding branch, which I didn't want but you had no choice you did what you were told. And I got transferred to minesweepers. And I was based on the Isle of Sheppey at Queenborough-- . Queensland. Queenborough Pier. And we had about 10 minesweepers there. We went out every couple days to sweep any mines that had been dropped by ... boats in the hope of sinking our supply ships.
01:00:57	<i>Why did you join the navy?</i>
01:00:59	Because I wanted to get in the fight, I didn't want to be left behind. At the time I was what they call, in the reserved occupation. I was an apprentice as an electrical engineer. And my Dad didn't want me to, to join up, he was in the last war. And he would've preferred me to learn a good, steady trade. But I wanted to go so as soon as I was [pause] 18 I went over from Maidstone, where our home was, I came over to Chatham to Pembroke Barracks and signed up. I said I was 19 but it didn't matter because they just accepted you. If you could breathe in and out and move your arms you were physically fit. I was told to go home and wait and I'd be contacted. And about a week later the envelope came, report to Chatham Barracks on such and such a day. I went right through the war without actually seeing the German. We had long range fights with them but we never actually saw a German.
01:02:13	<i>But John, you wanted to do your bit, but why did you not join the Army or the RAF?</i>
01:02:17	I'm not interested in either, and it's traditional in my family. My father was in the navy, so was my grandfather and an uncle. My grandfather was on Beatty's flagship, The Lion, at the Battle of Jutland, and he didn't come on deck for three days, he was in the Engineering branch. But that's the service I wanted to join so I did.
01:02:41	<i>And what do you remember of your training?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:02:44	It's rather confuse when you're young, you don't take things in so easily. But from Pembroke House--Pembroke Barracks, we were all marched down to, the a, further down the yard where we got fitted out. And at that time everyone, unless they were an officer, wore the same. Four and a ... rig, with bell-bottoms, the scarf, and the, and the a, the hat. Sent up to Skegness with another bunch to Butlins holiday camp, and that became HMS Royal Arthur. And I was to start training as a telegraphist, signaller and I been doing Morse code. Started on the Morse code for about a fortnight, then somebody said 'ooh, this lot haven't had a, a colour test, they'd better have it.' Most of them passed, but two others and me were all strongly colour blind, so you're out. If you send the wrong colours when you're signalling it could be a disaster. So that's when I was transferred onto minesweepers on the Stewarding branch.
01:04:14	Were you disappointed?
01:04:16	Yes. Nobody liked being on minesweepers, we all kept putting in for transfer to something more glamorous. Destroyers, submarines, MTB's, MGB's, but always got turned down. 'You're doing an important job, you will stay put,' and that was it.
01:04:35	How many people on one of these minesweepers? How--what was the ship--the boat like?
01:04:38	Five officers, and about 12 to 15 crew. That includes the, the engineers, or the Stoker branch as they call it, signalling, and, and those doing the actual mine detecting. When we first started and went out minesweeping, it was three days on, one day off. And we had two seamen standing in the bows with rifles. When they saw a mine that was floating by, they'd shoot at it, hit the holes and blow it up. But that was when they started the minesweeping campaign, and they, the Germans when they dropped them, had long weights on wires so they just floated below the surface to hit the ship. If one of those wires came loose the mine would bob onto the surface, and that's one of the things we looked for each time we went out. When the Germans occupied France, they course got right on the coastline, and they had big guns and the and they used to pop away at us every time we came out. And fortunately, we never got hit. There was one amusing anecdote: our commodore had been a senior captain before the war, and he retired of course, and he was brought back in and made commodore of the minesweeping fleet

Time code	What is said
01:06:39	He had his 12 minesweepers, and we used to go out and do the same thing every day. The Germans being very meticulous would come out, we'll say, Friday's and Tuesday's, not only the same day but the same time, to lay their mines and then dash back in. We went out the following morning each time to pick them up, and the skipper got a bit fed up with this, and he told the conference of his captains one day, he said 'next time we go sweeping, run your trawls out, but don't drop any wires.' Which is of course contrary to all naval instruction and you could have got a court martial if anything happened. But we went through the German minefield as they'd laid it, and we got away with it. So, the Germans came out again to replace the mines they thought we'd picked up, and they lost four of their own boats on their own mines. And I don't think they thought that was very sporting.
01:07:55	When we went out, I was due to report with six other stewards, we reported to the first lieutenant. We're damage control party. If the ship got hit, we had to clear the damage away, put out any fires and pull the wounded into the war room where the doctor was waiting to do what he could. But fortunately it never happened, but that was my official station.
	Start of Film 2
01:08:24	And what about bad weather and storms and stuff? Did you ever encounter any dangers?
01:08:27	Oh, we had some, yes. But we still went out, you just put on your ... and that was it. We had safety lines rigged fore and aft so you hold onto those, you wouldn't get washed overboard.
01:08:41	What was it like watching the planes taking--going over you and stuff? Did you see much activity in the air?
01:08:44	We went--Fortunately we never got attacked from the air. I don't think the, the Germans thought our little boats were worth wasting a bomb on. They wanted them for the capital cities or the airfields.
01:09:01	Were you involved in D-Day at all?

Time code	What is said
01:09:03	<p>Yes. Now, a week before D-Day, the base was shut down like an oyster. Nobody could go off-duty and no-one was allowed in for security reasons, obviously. You couldn't get any post, you couldn't make any phone calls because it was coming up, although officially, we didn't know that. And for about three months before D-Day, on Admiralty instructions we'd started night-sweeping as an alternative to the day shift, so the Germans would get used to the idea of us popping along the coast during the hours of darkness. They wouldn't think anything of it. So [pause] the early morning of D-Day, we went out at midnight, and we were sweeping right up to the line where the battleships were waiting to bombard the coast. We knew exactly where they were going to be stationed and we swept that most carefully, and then we--as they started coming out of the darkness from two o'clock in the morning and waiting, and we retired behind them. There wasn't anything else for us to do, we got sent back here to the, the Isle of Sheppey.</p>
01:10:10	<p>When the troops went ashore, we were a bit annoyed because we weren't doing anything, and then about eight or nine days later we got the orders to patrol the Dutch coast, on the ... and pick up all the mines which the Germans had so liberally round all the coast there. So that kept us busy for about three weeks, and we were stationed at a little town called Terneuzen, a very small port but there was a long jetty so we could moor alongside there. And in the evenings, late afternoon, you got shore leave until you were going off again next morning. And I've never forgotten the things we saw when we went ashore. The Germans had got out in a hurry, and their, their signs were everywhere, on the hotel lounge that had been an Officers' Mess, and the signs were still up. And they'd blew some of the bridges over the canals as they left, and the Dutch flooded some of the ... to stop their heavy traffic getting away. And I remember once, we went ashore, and we all carried the Navy raincoat draped over your arm, folded in a certain way, and the officer watching you very well with your things in the pockets: cigarettes, packet of biscuits, a tin of jam or whatever, which were not supposed to be taken off the ship, and we were giving it to the Dutch civilians because they were as starved as hell, and looked very ill. And on this occasion we got ashore, and I, I saw a very thin, haggard looking woman coming up the street, pushing her battered pram, and she got two little kids in there, about three, or a bit less I suppose, and one blanket cover them.</p>
01:12:59	<p>And I 'good day,' and she gave me a smile, she couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Dutch, but I took out what I had and I put it in her pram. You should've seen the look on her face, she must've thought it was Christmas come twice because what they didn't eat they could always trade for something else.</p>
	<p>Start of Film 3</p>

Time code	What is said
01:13:30	After we got rid of most of the mines off the Dutch coast, we had a week's leave due, well obviously we weren't coming back here for it, it would be on the Dutch coast. And I and another fellow, we got along to the main road, which was the Brussels road, leading into, into Belgium. We thumbed lifts from army lorries which were always going up and down, and we got into about three, three hours, no, a bit less, into Bruges, which was one of the most beautiful cities I've seen. It's got two cathedrals, an opera house and the town hall, round four sides of the main square, and the, one of the hotels had been taken over as a ... for the troops. Bed and breakfast. So we stayed there, and we enjoyed ourselves. And when we came back we got ordered back to this country, and we were still looking for mines which might have escaped detection, be going up and down, but there wasn't much urgency in it anymore. And I did put in an application to sit for leading steward but before that could take place, my discharge papers came through, and that was in the, early, early 1946
01:15:26	After the war?
01:15:27	Yeah. But unlike the Army or the Air Force, we got plenty of notice when it was coming. I know people in the Air Force, and they were given three days' notice and then they were out. But in the Navy we had time, you were told you would be demobbed in 3 months. Well that gives you time to start looking round for a civilian job, or somewhere to live if you're married with kids, so I think we had a better deal.
01:16:05	Can you explain--you, you talk about this minesweeping. Just explain what you were doing and what happens to these mines.
01:16:09	Well, they looked like yard zips from the main masts, stretched out either side about 50 feet. And from these ... are very sharp cutting wires, with weights on the end. And as you go to the water, the idea is to, your cutting wires to catch the mooring wires for a mine, and you cut it and the mine comes to the surface and you dispose of it.
01:16:35	How many mines would you find on an average day?
01:16:39	On an average day, [pause] possibly a dozen, possibly only two. It varied.
01:16:44	And the disposal would be a shot, would it? Or?
01:16:46	That's what it started with, yes. Then the Germans eventually, the acoustic mine, which wasn't ... it was just dropped in the Channel, hopefully in the path of oncoming ships. And it emitted a magnetic field from batteries that were inside, and every ship as it goes also makes a magnetic field, and when the two collide, the mine goes up. So we had to have what was called degaussing equipment, a special coil fitted right round the ship, allowing currents to pass through that anticlockwise, and that nullifies the effect of the electronic field. And you could go over mines and you'd be alright.

Time code	What is said
01:17:37	Could you find those mines?
01:17:18	We found them, yes.
01:17:19	How?
01:17:20	Sometimes the Germans got crass and they dropped some of these mines at night from low flying planes. And we got back, I wasn't there I was at, on a couple days leave and I went home to Maidstone, but I was told, our squadron came back from patrol, and the last ship in slid into its place on the jetty and promptly blew up, because there was a mine underneath been dropped by a plane. And the skipper at this last boat, as a result of being six feet from the jetty, he got his degaussing equipment switched off. [Pause] I think there was two survivors but who they were, I don't know.
01:18:30	But how would you find--I can understand how you could find a mine that was floating in the water, you cut it and it floats to the surface, how did you find those magnetic mines? Were they on the bottom, or?
01:18:33	They're on the bottom, yes.
01:18:34	How would you find that?
01:18:36	Well with, like a sonar device, it picks up the radiations from the mine and you can see exactly where it is, and then you can drop a depth charge on it. You set the depth charge for 20 feet or 30, whatever it is, and just pop them over to the side on a Y-gun.
	Start of Film 4
01:19:00	In Holland, when you got to Holland, you talked a little bit about what you saw. Are there any other memories of just the devastation?
01:19:03	When the Germans got out in a hurry they took everyone with them, alive or dead. And blew a couple of bridges and then retreated towards Belgium.
01:19:14	Did you feel like you were winning the war at that stage?
01:19:15	Yes. The great day had come, the invasion had started. And we were pushing in land from the beaches, we hadn't been shucked back off again and it was starting to, to bite.
01:19:33	When you were pulled out of D-Day, did you--were you, were you able to hear what was going on on D-Day? [Pause] After the battleships have arrived, you've come back to base. Did you--were you around long enough to hear about the guns going off?

Time code	What is said
01:19:38	The--When the main broadside started, yes. I think that was quarter to six, and eight miles of ships all opened up at the same time. We already got information from the underground, the resistant workers, where the German strongpoints were all along the cliff tops, heavy gun emplacements, bunkers for troops and so on. And they got continuous plastering, and they hadn't quite finished. It was a two hour bombardment, and half an hour before it stopped the boats were going ashore with the troops.
01:20:25	Did you hear it?
01:20:26	We were on the minesweepers behind them, we heard it alright. It was such a deafening crescendo of noise, there's nothing like it.
01:20:42	You weren't even near it?
01:20:43	No...
01:20:50	Do you remember VE Day?
01:20:55	Oh, that was again marvellous. I was awaiting demob, and of course we got rather more leave once peace was declared, and I got, I think it was a four day pass, to go home to Maidstone. And we came up on the train to Victoria and the place was just one seething mass of people. Every colour, every uniform, everything you could think of, everyone was singing, dancing, laughing with complete strangers because they let their hair down. And in front of Buckingham Palace, you couldn't get a shoehorn in, there were hundreds of thousands stretching back down the Mall, waiting for the King, Queen and Winston to come on the balcony. And the roar that went out must've gone on for about 10, 15 minutes non-stop.
01:22:09	How do you reflect on your Navy service now?
01:22:13	I'm glad, I'm glad I went. Means I and thousands of others don't have to read about history, we were making it, we were part of that history, and I think it's something to be proud of.
01:22:39	Are there any other stories you want to share?
01:22:40	I don't think there's any, no. As I say, minesweeping is a very dull occupation with occasional short periods of activity. But unlike destroyers or battleships, you, you're not engaged permanently with the opposite number.
01:23:00	Were there any occasions where you were engaged?
01:23:02	No. We were never attacked by planes, as I said, and we didn't see any German troops. The only contact we had was when their long range guns on the French coast tried to get us while we were minesweeping. But they, they didn't.

Time code	What is said
01:23:24	End of Films