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Name: William Sheppard  
Regiment: The Royal Navy

Date transcript: 05 July 2014  
Transcribe by: David Davies

Time code	What is said
01:00:00	Start of Film 1
	William Sheppard AB I served on HMS Onyx a fleet minesweeper from September 1943 to September 1949.
01:00:21	<b><i>William why did you want to be in the Navy over any of the other services?</i></b>
	Well when I was 14 I joined the Army Cadets and when I was 16 I joined the... cadets to do with the airforce and then when I was 17 ½ I joined the Navy because I liked the uniform and I'd seen them on the news when I went to the films.... Saying join the navy see the world... that sort of thing and that appealed to me so I joined the navy.
01:01:01	<b><i>How did you find that... you wanted to be in the navy how did you find the training and living up to the expectations of being a sailor?</i></b>
	oh I loved it I'm a Piscean so I think I've got something to do with water you know and I absolutely loved it and would of wanted to do 21 years but, my first... I got married a year before I came out and my life wouldn't have it. I had to stay onboard doing a duty one in four so she didn't like that so I used to give my jobs away... give someone my duty every day.
01:01:55	<b><i>Tell me a bit about you joined the Oynx tell me what was your feeling when you first saw it and tell me about that day?</i></b>
	Well I did training at HMS Collingwood and then we went to pick up the Onyx which was supposed to be around Southend. Then when we got there we was told she had gone to further up. It took us seven or eight days to get to Scapa Flow is where I picked up the ship and it was sort of like the joy of joining your first ship against each day being it had gone...
01:02:46	<b><i>What did you think when you finally got to Scapa and saw her and how many ships were there can you identify her easily? Did you know where you were going?</i></b>
	No I didn't know at all. We travelled up the east coast of England and got to Thurso and from there we got like fishing boat they used to have thirty or so blokes who would stand around the upper deck and be transported from one place to another and I think it was sort of like later in the day so we didn't see a lot of ships we just got on this fishing boat and was transported I think from Thurso I would say with about half an hour boat trip to the Onyx and it was dusk by then. So it was a bit muted really.

Time code	What is said
<b>01:03:59</b>	<b><i>Tired as well after all that travelling?</i></b>
	Yeah yeah mind you it's a long time ago 1943 so...
	<b>Start of Film 2</b>
<b>01:04:09</b>	<b><i>Describe your mess... tell me about your mess?</i></b>
	Oh right there is a long table there 8 four on each side and you had one day going to the galley and getting the grub and dishing it out and then washing up and then you was off for another 8 days but, my first job really was a POs mess man and I used to go to the galley get all the grub... there was about 6 POs Petty Officers so I used to get their grub dish it out, wash up, scrub the decks around and then it would be the next meal.
<b>01:05:02</b>	<b><i>How many people on the Onyx?</i></b>
	120 that's including officers and POs and Seaman 120 people...
<b>01:05:19</b>	<b><i>And what were the POs like to you?</i></b>
	Very good because I think I did my job well and so they were quite respectful to me and they used to give me a little tot of rum and I was never sea sick. I used to have three or four breakfasts because we used to do sixty foot waves and one of the dangerous jobs was it was all right going up and down sixty foot waves but, if you had a cross sea you were going weaving like that so you were going up and down and weaving so on the guard rails there was three guard rails all the way around which were inch and a half galvanized metal and with a bit of spray on there each of these three guard rails would be a foot of ice around them. So we had a rope tied around our waist and we used to chip off the ice to stop us tipping right over.
<b>01:06:33</b>	<b><i>What was the roll of the Oynx just talk a bit about what the ship did as a minesweeper?</i></b>
	Well it was an escort ship as well as a minesweeper so there is literature there that says I was on two particular convoys and it gives the name and number but, as far as I was concerned we was on these Russian convoys 6 months 8 days short of 6 months and like I say we were minesweeping some of the time but, some of the time we were actually escorting a convoy and we used to go up and down the convoy because as the convoy went as fast as the slowest ship which was 8 knots a couple of times we got dive bombed...
<b>01:07:39</b>	<b><i>Tell me about those days?</i></b>
	Well mu place of duty was the Oerlikon and we would close up to battle stations...

Time code	What is said
<b>01:08:00</b>	<b><i>Just talk about the time when you were under attack from the air?</i></b>
	Right so when we were being dive bombed we would swing around to face it and fire and these twin Oerlikon had about 9inch shells and every think It was 9 <sup>th</sup> one was a tracer so you could... you'd bring the gun around too fire at this plane and you could tell if you were too low or too high or too much to the left or right and you'd bring it on to the plane. I never shot any down but, I scared a few off I think.
	<b>Start of Film 3</b>
<b>01:08:54</b>	<b><i>What was it like to be on an Oerlikon when it was under... in that sort of situation?</i></b>
	Exciting because I was 17 ½ getting on for 18 so at that age it was very adventurous but, I used to think there was blokes about 22 married and I used to think they were wimps because they were... see I haven't thought of these sort of things for years and years and now everything is flooding in yes.... So what's the question?
<b>01:09:29</b>	<b><i>You were just talking about you were a young boy of 17 ½ firing these guns and these older boys were 22... 22 and were wimps because they were chicken or?</i></b>
	They were and what was rushing into my mind now there was one chap about 25 he had two kids and his wife had been killed in blitz in London and what he used to do every morning he used to unscrew the top off metal polish and have a little sip and do about two or three of them and so in the end he went a bit bonkers and he got invalided out of the navy yes so... he was in a right state.
<b>01:10:44</b>	<b><i>What was the general feeling like on the ship you know obviously you had casualties of war but, you know what was the atmosphere like on the Onyx?</i></b>
	It was very good camaraderie I think I was lucky that soon after I got on the ship I was made POs messman so I got privileges and excused a lot of simple duties.
<b>01:11:20</b>	<b><i>Can you tell me a bit about the Oynx as an operating minesweeper just you know how does it work... pretend I don't know anything?</i></b>
	There was three forms of minesweeping one was they called it a bucket load over the starboard bow and you used to pull electrical pulses which sounded like an engine of another ship and that would set of the acoustic mine and it would release itself from the chains its anchors and probably hit the ship that was following behind.
<b>01:12:16</b>	<b><i>There are three types of minesweeping duties?</i></b>

Time code	What is said
	So that was one type and another type was they'd over stern a thing called a kite which was about 6 foot by 6 foot by about 6 inches like a grill and from that there would be two hawsers with cutters on and two floats like torpedoes on the end which would be about fifty yards out each side of the boat or ship and the idea was the kite would keep the cable down the floats would have the cutters on and they'd cut the chain and then the mines would be just floating around the stern then either us or another ship would fire the Oerlikon and blow them up. The third one there was a great big ten or twelve foot round drum which would lower this cable which floated a stern and then that would activate the magnetic mines.
	<b>Start of Film 4</b>
<b>01:13:56</b>	<b><i>How close did you ever get to being hit yourself?</i></b>
	They used to muster up about seven seaman when I was an able seaman so we had Lee Enfield rifles and we used to line up on the foredeck and shoot at these mines that were floating you see mind you could hit the mine but, it wouldn't make any difference you had to hit a spike... you had to hit a spike around about half a mile away when the ship was going up and down and then mine was going up and down well you never did it.
<b>01:14:40</b>	<b><i>You never did it at all or you may have got one?</i></b>
	No never
<b>01:14:46</b>	<b><i>When you were in the Artic then when you were doing the convoys up there were you doing mines when you were coming into Polyarny and Murmansk and places like that... were they mined areas?</i></b>
	You see I thought up until I got that sweeper that I thought I was going back and forwards to Murmansk all the time but, apparently I wasn't I only did about 2 convoys in the six months but, you were on a ship young, you didn't have the access to the information so you could be anywhere now one particular time we come back from Murmansk and we called in Reykjavik Iceland and there was a very keen midshipman mustered about twenty of us out on the jetty which had about a foot of snow and we had leather sea boots on about two or three jumpers and duffle coats and we were doing star jumps and all sorts of exercises and to no surprise some seaman had frostbite their hands were frostbitten and they had leather mittens on and there was two or three had their feet frostbitten so the midshipman got a telling off that time.
<b>01:16:43</b>	<b><i>Did you ever go ashore in Murmansk?</i></b>
	No we always had to anchor outside and the merchant ships used to go in and unload aeroplanes tanks and ammunition and whatever.

Time code	What is said
<b>01:17:06</b>	<b><i>When you were on the convoys did you ever see any ships hit by U-boats?</i></b>
	Oh yeah there was one particular convoy there was a tanker that got set on fire and there was blokes jumping and running across the deck now this was night pitch black now we was probably half a mile away and these blokes were screaming, they were running along the deck jumping in the sea that was on fire as well so the oil had caught fire and these screams I mean I've forgot about them now but, for years and years probably fifty years I'd sometimes wake up at night with the sound of these blokes screaming you know and to see them and to hear them screaming as well and jumping into a sea on fire it lit the whole convoy up and the convoy only went at the speed of eight knots.
	<b>Start of Film 5</b>
<b>01:18:26</b>	<b><i>Does the minesweeper try and rescue these people?</i></b>
	No you weren't allowed to because if you actually stopped you were a candidate for being torpedoed as well especially being lit up you were a good target so you had to keep on the move so what we did we dropped depth charges so we'd drop one off the stern and fire out one port one starboard drop another one off astern so you'd have a diamond pattern of explosives to try and sink the submarine but, we never actually saw one sunk although there was a midget submarine that came twenty yards on are port side and I was on the Oerlikon anyway it came up and a voice said comrade comrade and I had my gun pointing right down his throat virtually and that's the closest I've been to a submarine really. Now I don't know where but, there was the Queen Mary was a four funneled ship and I think it had come up to probably sink it but, as it came up under fire we didn't fire at it but, we were ready for it but, they chickened out and shouted comrade comrade so obviously Queen Mary was the target but, I don't know why they didn't take advantage unless they see through their periscope too many of our ships and just given up you know.... That's the only thing I can think of there.
<b>01:20:35</b>	<b><i>Did you get him onboard your ship?</i></b>
	No we escorted it back to Harwich now you know I was talking about the minesweeping earlier on HMS Hydra which was the replica of our ship there was Hydra, Rattlesnake, Ready was the leader so the Hydra got the stern blown off as they were pulling in the minesweeping gear going out each side of the ship the mine blew the stern off the Hydra so there was a chief petty officer and seven ratings were killed immediately and it was half sunk.
<b>01:21:30</b>	<b><i>Were you near her when that happened?</i></b>



Time code	What is said
	Very near because what happened we were on one side of her and another ship was on the other side and we put hawsers on to hold her up and we took her back to Harwich that way.
	Start of Film 6
01:21:47	<b><i>And when you've finished the Artic then did you go down to Normandy?</i></b>
	Yes we swept a two mile wide channel across the English Channel and all the assault ships had to keep within this two mile now we anchored about two or three miles off Normandy and it was when I went to throw the gash overboard that I saw these bits of bodies and it was just like camouflaged uniforms which were quite submerged and you only saw a bit of them and no it wasn't nice because you saw things that you didn't believe and you never seen before because if you were in the army I mean people being killed next to you but, on a ship you were sort of immune it seemed that you were immune. Even though we were dive bombed there was scars on... it was part wooden deck part metal deck and there was marks where their shells or bullets had hit you know.
	Here is a funny story we were tied up to a jetty on one side on the other side there was a liner and then as we were looking over this liner down the gangway came about fifty German maidens in lines of two so there would be two two two two all down this long gangway plank and they would line up on the jetty around about I suppose eighteen to twenty five and they were in columns of three and they marched away down the jetty and then we asked who they were and what they did and apparently this liner used to go out to the ships and then a German sailor would get a cabin number and have one of these women you know... so yeah well we don't get anything like that in our navy and why not but, they were lovely girls from eighteen to twenty five they were really gorgeous and smart as well.
	I remember also going by coach to Bremen we got off the coach and everywhere there was rubble everywhere accept for one church spire and the roads were clear but, there was no buildings left standing and there was some Russian soldiers there was about four of us in a group and three or four Russians who saluted us and we were ordinary matlows and they tried to speak English but, we couldn't really understand them and they beckoned us to go down some steps... so there was rubble all the way around we went down these steps and there was some great big ten or twelve foot vats of wine and some of these Russians were lying in about six inches of wine on their backs with their mouths under the taps on these vats. There was quite a few of them and we was sort of treading on our toes not to get our feet wet and there was loads of bottles empty which we filled up from these vats there was probably half a dozen or probably more of these vats and they were all turned on with these Russian soldiers lying on their back soaking so that was quite adventurous.

Time code	What is said
01:27:12	<i>And how do you reflect on the role you played in the convoys and you know your sailing in the second world war now?</i>
	Vastly different I was 17 ½ to 18 then now I don't believe there should be war people killing each other you know sort of thing.
01:27:36	End of Films