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Name: Dennis Whitehead

Regiment:

Date transcript:

Transcribe by: Dennis Whitehead

Time code	What is said
01:00:00	Start of Film 1
01:00:01	Well I'm Dennis Whitehead, I was at AB. That's all. not admiral nothing like that and (laughs). Served on Russian convoys. Also went out to the Far East.
01:00:13	<b><i>Where are you from Dennis and what made you join the navy?</i></b>
01:00:16	I was born in Margate, and I joined the navy because I didn't want to be in the army. And it's as simple as that. I didn't want none of that marching and parade around stuff, so I joined the navy.
01:00:30	<b><i>And what year was that?</i></b>
01:00:32	1943.
01:00:34	<b><i>So what would you remember of the war on the South coast?</i></b>
01:00:39	Well, not a lot really, I was in the Home Guard. Not far from here, I used to patrol the cliff top to stop the Germans when they came. I was only sixteen of course but, there you go, and I decided to join the navy rather than any of the other forces 'cos I liked the sea and lived by the seaside and thoroughly enjoyed myself, once I got in.
01:01:05	<b><i>Do you remember the Battle of Britain?</i></b>
01:01:07	Vaguely, but I was evacuated in 1940 I think it was. '39 or '40 anyway I went to Staffordshire and came back in...'42. Yeah I didn't stay away long. I remember the air raids and the dog fights and but really when you were young and it's stupid, you don't really take a lot of notice, and of course you're indestructible, no one's going to kill you when you're sixteen and seventeen. Yeah.
01:01:45	<b><i>And what do you remember...oh can I just check, were you a Chatham rating?</i></b>
01:01:50	I was a Chatham rating, yes.
01:01:51	<b><i>So what was it like going from being a sort of Home Guard boy to becoming a navy person, what do you remember about that early transition?</i></b>

Time code	What is said
01:02:01	Well, I enjoyed all my time, even in the early days, and I was very lucky 'cos I got sent to Collingwood for my training. And they wanted a hut because they were calling up a whole group of policemen, and it was a lottery who got the leave and we got it. So I'd only been in the navy five minutes and I was home on Christmas leave which was very good, I enjoyed that.
01:02:29	<b><i>What was the training like?</i></b>
01:02:32	Well it was very brief, you know, you very soon became a sailor. I think I done three months basic training down at Portsmouth and then shortly after that I went to the Isle of Man to do radar training. I was gunnery control, radar gunnery control with my non-substantive rate, and very soon after that I got onto the Cassandra. Went up to Scapa Flow, can't remember exactly how many, didn't do many convoys, two I think. There was the second one we got torpedoed and, although the ship didn't sink, it was badly damaged. About a third of the ship was clean, blown clean off, with the death of sixty-two ratings, I think sixty-four eventually, I think two of the wounded died.
	<b>Start of Film 2</b>
01:03:36	<b><i>Before you get to that point, when you're talking about this radar gunnery training, just what exactly, what training are you doing, what is the technology you were using?</i></b>
01:03:45	Well it was the early days of radar, of course, but the part we played we were actually, the radar operator actually controlled the guns...you know you logged onto aircraft if they were coming in, fiddle about until you got everything the speed they were doing, direction they were going, and when they were close enough you just put your foot down on a lever and fired us over, and you were actually controlling the guns from the radar. The only thing the people were doing on the gun tow was putting the shells in. So, quite modern technology in those days that was. Very early radar.
01:04:26	<b><i>How accurate was it?</i></b>
01:04:28	Pretty good, yeah, pretty good. It's better than previously you know when everything was done manually.
01:04:37	<b><i>Do you remember was that quite a big thing for you to try and learn, I mean?</i></b>
01:04:42	No, not really, it's just a matter of getting things set up and turning the machine on. Took some time to turn it on, there's a sequence of switches to, you know, you had to follow. But once you, it's just a matter of watching and, it wasn't difficult, no, anybody [with] half a brain could do it. Obviously (laughs).

Time code	What is said
01:05:06	<b><i>And when did you then get your draft and how was that getting a draft, was that a moment you'd been waiting for?</i></b>
01:05:14	Well, it was a moment I knew had to come. I was in Chatham barracks when I got drafted. And I joined to navy with a good friend of mine Bernard Scott, who's now dead, God bless him, and we were called up for our medical together, we were called up into the navy together, we were drafted together to the first ship, and when we came back as survivors to Chatham, we were drafted together again to the next one which is very unusual.
	<b>Start of Film 3</b>
01:05:44	<b><i>What do you remember of, you know, heading off up to Scapa?</i></b>
01:05:50	Well, I don't really remember a great deal you just, you just got on and done your job you know.
01:05:55	<b><i>Do you remember what you felt when you saw Cassandra and where it was and how, was it a new ship?</i></b>
01:06:01	It was a brand new ship yes, Cassandra was a brand new ship destroyer. I was, when I first saw it I was very pleased with it, I was pleased to go on the destroyer. Work dogs, greyhounds of the sea as they call them, and... I don't remember a great deal, not vividly if you know what I mean. Just general terms I was quite happy, it was a canteen messing ship, never cooked anything in my life before, and although you didn't do the cooking you had to do all the preparation, you got everything ready, took it up they galley and they cooked it. And the first pudding I made for Sunday lunch sweet they thought it was a cake and baked it, but we still ate it, with a bit of custard (laughs).
01:06:50	<b><i>So what was your job on it, what were you doing?</i></b>
01:06:53	Well first and foremost in those days you were a seaman. That was your rank was a seaman, a naval seaman. My radar rank was non-substantive they called it, you know, it was your second job, but first and foremost you was a seaman. Kept the ship clean and yourself fed and comradeship was a great thing you know on the mess. I thoroughly enjoyed it, all the time. I didn't even notice any real problems when we got torpedoed, I just got on with my job.
01:07:28	<b><i>When you talk about, so everybody joined the ship at Scapa so it was a brand new crew?</i></b>

Time code	What is said
01:07:35	It was a brand new, well there was a, always with these vessels there's a basic sort of people go there first like engineers and the basic, a few most senior...well-trained seamen. And then the main ships' company all join together, at some period you all travel up in a train and march down to the ship and get sent to your messes and stole you away.
01:08:04	<b><i>How quickly do you sort of get a sense that you're becoming a unit, because obviously you're a disparate group aren't you?</i></b>
01:08:12	Yeah oh quite quickly, you become a unit because you work a ship up, you know, you don't just go from the dockyard to full duty, you go to a, forget where we was on the Clyde somewhere, and you do about a month of working the ship up and making sure everything's working fine, and training in the, you know, the job you do, gunnery practice and that sort of thing. It takes about a month, and you do come together very very quickly. Well I think we did.
01:08:48	<b><i>Who was your skipper?</i></b>
01:08:49	Can't remember his name. He was a lieutenant commander, so in the fleet we were half legion of a squadron but, I know I'm jumping ahead a wee bit perhaps, but he fell down a gang-way and broke his leg before the last convoy and so the first lieutenant actually took over command of the vessel, which made us the junior vessel of the squadron you know at that time. That's why we were at the rear of the squadron, and that's why we got torpedoed, because the skipper fell down the gang-way. Otherwise it would've been somebody else back there. But that's fate.
	<b>Start of Film 4</b>
01:09:33	<b><i>When do you, so you mention that you remember, you know, that there were a couple of convoys but when did you sort of lease gap them, when did you get a sense that you were on a, this was it, you were actually now an operational ship?</i></b>
01:09:46	Well, more or less as soon as you left Scapa the ship became on a cruising stations which was a...yeah all the time we were at sea we done one watch on, one watch off, so you're on duty for twelve hours a day virtually, and off for twelve. Slept if you could, didn't get much sleep, used to get early morning we always had a, you know, sound of the alarms, make sure everyone's awake and took up your battle stations. But you were really on convoy duty you were steamed in readiness, constantly, which was one on, one off and when you were not on convoy duty you got one on and two off, so you done four hours on and then eight off. But you knew that, you knew that you were at war, you knew that you were, what job you were doing.

Time code	What is said
01:10:50	<b><i>Just talk to me a bit about the role of the Cassandra as a destroyer within the convoy group, and do you remember any of the things you were doing, you were under attack etc.?</i></b>
01:11:00	No, we didn't suffer a great deal of attack, we well we very often stood, you know, we had, we very often had battle stations because there were submarines in the area, or aircraft coming in, but we were very lucky because by 1944 we were winning the war. We were winning the war at sea by then... we'd got the upper hand on them because of the advance in radar and depth charges, they'd pulled out depth charges that didn't just fly off the back, you fired them forward, hedgehog they were called I think. And we were winning the war then so we didn't have to put up with... the early convoys were constantly under attack. But we weren't too bad, and the last convoy we done was the last convoy, we had three lines we were taking back repatriated Russian prisoners. And I think it was about an eighteenth knot convoy, very fast, as opposed to usually about eight knots, you know. So we didn't really, I don't think we even got any alarms on that particular trip because we were so fast I think.
01:12:17	<b><i>And what do you remember of the bearance the first time you went in there, was it a night time convoy, was it winter, where you in the winter, or was it summer?</i></b>
01:12:25	The first convoy I done was summer, the one where we had our problems, that was a winter convoy, it was December.
01:12:32	<b><i>And what was it like to be in the bearance in the summer and experience that long daylight and see the big big part of it?</i></b>
01:12:42	It was the cold that was the main, main problems. Very cold. Remember that. Chipping the ice off and. But I've not really got a very good memory to be honest with you.
01:12:56	<b><i>Just in terms of the cold, I keep hearing this expression 'chipping the ice', just explain what it was you did and what it was like?</i></b>
01:13:06	Well you, half the deck got covered with ice, built up from the spray, and it had to be cleared, you know if you got too much ice on the upper deck you could become, it could become dangerous and top heavy. So you had to cut out with chipping hammers and various items and just chop the ice off and tipped it over the side.
01:13:27	<b><i>I mean, you know, this is in a big sea, how do you make sure you don't fall off the ship and so on?</i></b>
01:13:33	(Laughs) Well there was there were safety ropes, went from stern to fo'c'sle [forecastle] which you had a line you could clip on to the safety line so that you didn't get washed over the side. But er...
01:13:49	<b><i>Did you ever lose a man over?</i></b>



Time code	What is said
01:13:51	No, not to my knowledge we never lost anybody, one or two close calls I think but most people obeyed the rules and clipped themselves onto the rope and the safety rope. But yeah.
01:14:07	<b><i>Did you ever, where you ever out in massive seas?</i></b>
01:14:10	Yeah, but in massive seas you couldn't do much 'cos, yeah, we had some very bad seas yeah. I didn't, although I lived by the sea, I didn't realise just how rough the sea could be, massive. Sometimes it was a, although you were in convoy sometimes it was two or three days, never saw another ship, because of the state of the sea. But I enjoyed it still, didn't both me. Lucky, one of the lucky ones.
01:14:45	<b><i>Did you have good sea legs?</i></b>
01:14:47	Yeah, I felt sorry for people who were really ill. You know I know people, one particular seaman and from the time he left Scapa Flow to the time we got to Russia, never took his clothes off. Just slept on the upper deck, he done his duty but he was constantly sick. Should've been allowed to leave the navy really when you were like that.
	<b>Start of Film 5</b>
01:15:08	<b><i>So obviously the first convoy was a relatively uneventful, the second convoy wasn't?</i></b>
01:15:15	No, the second convoy was eventful, yeah.
01:15:18	<b><i>Yeah, and I mean, just, was there any sense that it was a different experience?</i></b>
01:15:23	Well no, not really, we were prepared for all eventualities on all convoys you know all was, regards to that, they were the same, 'cos you didn't know what was going come so you was always prepared for the worst shall we say.
01:15:42	<b><i>When you lost your commander the position of the Cassandra had changed, it was now at the back of the?</i></b>
01:15:47	It was.
01:15:48	<b><i>Was that a, was there a sense on board that that was a worse position to be?</i></b>
01:15:54	Well, not really 'cos, as I said before, when you were young, it's not gunna happen to you, you know, you're not gunna be killed it's someone else or, and so, although I'd rather been up the front, didn't make any difference to me, not really, just the position of the ship. And you're more vulnerable and at the stern of course because they tended to pick off ships that were landed at the back, and that was us.

Time code	What is said
01:16:23	<b><i>And what do you remember of this attack?</i></b>
01:16:26	(Coughs) Well, it was...nothing really, you know, except the explosion, you know, and a sense, certain sense of panic I s'pose, immediately. But very quickly you, when we realised we weren't going to sink 'cos the damage control people were very good, you were then so busy I mean, for a while we were bailing out with buckets from the lower decks, from the deck that was flooded, until they got pumps rigged up and all working. But you just got on with it.
01:17:03	<b><i>Where were you when it, where were you on board when it was hit?</i></b>
01:17:05	I was on duty, I was in the TS, the transmitting station, the heart of the ship, ship that controlled all the gunnery and, that was my station during cruising so, at least I was in the warm. Didn't have to go and stand up a bridge (laughs). But, there you go.
01:17:26	<b><i>And what was it like to be in there when the torpedo hit, can you remember?</i></b>
01:17:31	Not really you just, I suppose there was a, on the immediately when the explosion occurred, there must have been a certain sense of 'what the hell's that', d'you know, I s'pose fear. But quite, as I said earlier, quite quickly I became not afraid, I was too busy working and I... spent a lot of time on the quarter deck, watching the tow make sure it was kept, you know, not too tort and.
01:18:04	<b><i>What was it like to, I mean is it, are you are you thinking of your ship mates at this point or is it too busy?</i></b>
01:18:09	It's too busy. You're doing what you've gotta do and getting on with the well, carrying on with a conversation if you had time and that but. No I don't, I wasn't at all, I wasn't, as I say, I wasn't frightened, I wasn't worried, I knew that everything was under control and was hoping we'd get back and of course we did.
01:18:27	<b><i>And what was it like to see the front of the ship with no bow?</i></b>
01:18:31	(Laughs) Well, it was a bit scary to start with yeah 'cos, all the, more or less all the off duty crew went down 'cos that's where the mess decks were. They were asleep and...that was it. And the stoker's messes were aft so they were okay, but all the seamen that were killed were off-watch. So.
01:18:54	<b><i>And then, so after a certain amount of time you stabilised the situation on the ship, what happened next?</i></b>
01:19:03	Well you just, just went about your duties, get the ship clean, and had what food there was left (laughs) so there weren't a lot really. No cutlery and I had no, no no kit left at all, all my kit went down, only what I was stood up in you know. We went back into Russia.



Time code	What is said
01:19:24	<b><i>And who collected you, how did you, you didn't talk about this whole rescue operation 'cos you were rescued weren't you?</i></b>
01:19:30	We were rescued, we had a, a ship came back from the convoy and we were, although we were afloat and we could, but we could only go stern, and very slowly, about four knots, three four knots. Not enough to give you steerage way. But I think it was the next day we got tow rope across to...Corvette. And she was more or less was keeping us on course, because we weren't able to steer, she was pulling a little bit I s'pose we were doing about four or five knots perhaps, and she kept us on course, and you had to watch that tow all the time and, and carry on the rest of your duties when you were not on, I spent a lot of time on the quarter deck. But er.
01:20:20	<b><i>Was it a rope, or was it a wire?</i></b>
01:20:22	Wire. Well actually it's cable that... let's think, it certainly wasn't rope, it was wire, yeah.
01:20:31	<b><i>So the, the Cassandra is basically, got it's screws in reverse and is dragging itself slowly?</i></b>
01:20:38	That's right slowly, the stern yeah. (Coughs) And being kept on course and assisted by Corvette, and when we got close enough back to Russia the Russians sent out a sea-going tug that took over and took us into a, well Pollyanna we used to go into, which destroyers, all the destroyers went in there. The bigger ships couldn't get in, there wasn't enough draft for the bigger ships. It was just essentially a navy boat, navy boats, it was, reminded me of the old cowboy towns with the wooden side work walks and muddy roads and...wasn't much there no, not much entertainment.
01:21:22	<b><i>But you were actually able to go ashore?</i></b>
01:21:24	Oh we could go ashore yeah, we went ashore, yeah. I don't think we went ashore once we went back in a, we were very quickly...the return convoy, we went back as passengers on a frigate, well I say passengers, we kept watch, we done duty but...we were only there, I should think it was just a day or two before we got onto our the ship that brought us back to England. Going into Londonderry, across the Londonderry to Scotland and back down to Chatham barracks. Where we got re-kitted and sent on survivors leave. So.
01:22:02	<b><i>And just er, did you meet any of the Russians when you were out there?</i></b>

Time code	What is said
01:22:09	No, I wouldn't say I met any. There were some around, they weren't, well 'cos they didn't speak English and I didn't speak Russian and...I was a little bit disappointed when we back went back in after we were torpedoed, when we had to wait for, the RAF had a, a base up there with medical facilities and we had to wait for them to come and take our wounded away, the Russians were (shakes head) well, not very helpful. I can understand there's, they suffered a great deal and were taking the brunt of that flack at the time, but I wasn't very pleased with them, to be honest, didn't like it very much. They thought it was a great joke, when they saw us come in, they stood there went 'vroom voo' (hand gestures). Great stuff.
01:23:02	<i>Hmm.</i>
01:23:03	But there you go.
01:23:04	<i>And you, you know you say you, there was sixty-two, you know, went down with the ship?</i>
01:23:08	That's right.
01:23:09	<i>Were there any of these people you'd become friends with?</i>
01:23:11	Yes, so some of them were I knew very well, one, one of them was a very close friend of mine, on my next leave I intended to spend with him, you know, with his family, for some of it anyway. But he was lost, but there, that was the way things were in those days, just, unlucky. I guess.
01:23:32	<i>When, you know, I mean does, does an event like that shake you (coughs) at the time, I mean how do you react to something like that?</i>
01:23:41	Well, as I say I was, I'm amazed when I look back on it 'cos my memory's very faded after all this time. But I can't remember really being frightened, you know I didn't think God I'm gunna die or anything like that, I just got on with the jobs I was given, and I s'pose that's the reason we kept her afloat, 'cos everyone done the same.
01:24:05	<i>Was there a, was there any sort of service on board?</i>
01:24:10	What type of service do you mean?
01:24:13	<i>Well, for the people who died?</i>

Time code	What is said
01:24:14	No. No. There was no er, there was no bodies left to bury, they went down with the ship, they were all gone. There were some were, some wounded, few wounded, I think two of them eventually died, two of the wounded, but they all went down with the, there was no funerals, no burials to, we had to we, you know we picked up survivors and at times and...you were did have a funeral when you were, you were buried at sea of course have a service, but it didn't occur to us when we were torpedoed. I s'pose 'cos no one left to bury, had all been buried already.
	<b>Start of Film 6</b>
01:24:59	<b><i>You said you were, you went on survivor's leave?</i></b>
01:25:01	That's right.
01:25:02	<b><i>And you were back at Chatham barracks, what was Chatham barracks like?</i></b>
01:25:07	Crowded (laughs). It was alright. I didn't mind but I'm a very coarse eater, I eat anything. But it was very crowded, some of the sailors in those days were actually sent home instead of sent to barracks, if they lived fairly close, London, they went home and when there was a ship for them they were called back. But I actually stayed in the barracks, but being at living at Margate I came on leave to Margate, night leave. Back on the first train in the morning. But we were very soon drafted to another vessel.
01:25:46	<b><i>Which was what?</i></b>
01:25:49	The Manxman I went on. Minelaying cruiser, minelayer. Very fast. Forty-two knots. And we went out to the Far East, with effect to mine, lay mines out there, but...we had a bit of engine trouble going out, which had to be repaired, and by the time they'd got it mended the war had finished. I'm glad to say (laughs). And but I spent quite some time out there being, you know, with the mining decks which were empty, we could transport goods for the army and some personnel. I done quite a lot of work in the Pacific, although the war was finished. We went up to Japan, quite soon after I was in Hiroshima. Saw the destruction there. Went all round the Far East, China.
01:26:44	<b><i>What do you remember of Hiroshima?</i></b>
01:26:46	Just the, just the overall destruct, complete destruction. The main... big sturdy built buildings were made of concrete, brick, they were still standing, but there was nothing in sight, everything was destroyed, burnt. The most of the smaller buildings and, they were all gone.
01:27:12	<b><i>Did you manage to go ashore?</i></b>

Time code	What is said
01:27:14	Yes yeah we went (nodding) ashore. And I didn't get too close but...it finished the war, which saved lives in the long run.
01:27:26	<b><i>Do you know what you felt when you saw Hiroshima?</i></b>
01:27:31	Well, overwhelmed by the...destruction, yeah. Couldn't imagine a whole city being just raised to the ground really, amazing. But they respected us the Japanese, I know people have a moan about them and the way they treated the prisoners, but they had a different culture to us, they were, to be a prisoner was a disgrace, they would rather die. And most of them were, were like that, that that that they felt that...if you were a prisoner, you really weren't worth worrying about, I know they treated the prisoners badly but, they expected to be treated like that themselves if they got caught. 'Course they weren't, but. There you go, that.
01:28:19	<b><i>And how do you feel about the, you know, the war and the role that, you know, you as a sailor played in the war?</i></b>
01:28:25	Well. Since I've grown up I've realised how futile it all was, really. Especially the last of, well especially 'cos of the way that things are going at the moment it's just a waste of time. They're achieving nothing. As soon as they get out of Afghanistan it will go back to the way it was... but there you are. Can't do anything about that.
01:28:48	<b><i>But you, your time as a sailor was an enjoyable one?</i></b>
01:28:53	Oh yes, I enjoyed the navy. I really did.
01:28:55	<b><i>Do you think about the Cassandra much?</i></b>
01:28:58	Well, I do think I do think about it at the anniversary around Christmas time. 11th of December you see we were torpedo'd, and I do, I do think about it especially at Christmas, I always drink a tot to the boys. On the 11th. Always remember to do that.
01:29:17	End of Films