

**Frank:** Well, my name is Frank Wilson. I've been in the Navy. I was a Naval Seaman, but I was an air gunner. On the activity, we was employed on the flight deck. Of course, we had two jobs, you see, we had guns on the flight deck as well as in the aircraft.

**Interviewer:** Excellent, okay. Well, look, I mean before we get to the activity just where are you from and what do you remember?

**Frank:** Dronfield. Well, I mean virtually I went from, not at school, I started being an apprenticeship in Sheffield, but then, when the war came on, of course, I wanted to go in the Navy anyway, so I went to Cherry Street in Sheffield and signed on there as a boy Seaman.

**Interviewer:** What year was that?

**Frank:** Oh dear, about 1940 I would think.

**Interviewer:** Why did you want to be in the Navy if you're from Dronfield?

**Frank:** [laughs] I don't know, it's just something I wanted to do I suppose. I always fancied being in the Navy. In fact, I wanted to stop in after the war, but they was blowing everybody out. They just didn't want you.

**Interviewer:** All right. Okay, what do you remember of that transition then from being a boy in Dronfield to a Navy man?

**Frank:** My first training? My first training was at Collingwood. It had just opened then at that time and it was still in its infancy and it's still there to this day, Collingwood.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything that you can remember from your training?

**Frank:** No, not really. I think I enjoyed it to be truthful. I think we done about 10 weeks at Collingwood and then I went to Wellesley at Liverpool and that was me in Liverpool to a gunnery training school and first start as an anti-aircraft gunner.

**Interviewer:** Did you want to get into guns or did they give no choice?

**Frank:** Well, I don't think you got any choice really, you know? They put you where they felt like, I mean I had a friend, who has died now, he lived down the shore and he didn't want to be an electrician and he finished up as one. Of course, after the war, that were his trade for the rest of his life, but he didn't want it in the first place. He was on the activity as well, yes.

**Interviewer:** Were you at Cheddar waiting?

**Frank:** Huh?

**Interviewer:** Were you Cheddar--

**Frank:** No, Portsmouth.

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**Interviewer:** Did you have any sentiment towards being a [unintelligible 00:02:47] rating, did that bother you?

**Frank:** No, no, no. What do you mean the sentiment, in what way?

**Interviewer:** Well, you know the rivalry between the different port divisions. Were you aware of it?

**Frank:** Well, I think there was rivalry all of the time. Davenport goes and I finished up there when I came back from far East, but now we all mix together.

**Interviewer:** When did you get a draft then?

**Frank:** Where?

**Interviewer:** When? When and where?

**Frank:** When I done my 12 week training, straight away.

**Interviewer:** What do you remember of that?

**Frank:** I can remember we came up from Portsmouth to Chesterfield, stopped over in Chesterfield and then went on up to Dundee to peek the activity.

**Interviewer:** Did you know you were going on an aircraft carrier?

**Frank:** No, we thought it was a destroyer actually because this place where we were staying, it was just outside of Portsmouth. They'd closed the Portsmouth barracks down because we were getting badly bombed and it was about 10 mile out of Portsmouth, this place, and we were all initiates, you know? They posted a list on the board of ships and, of course, we never heard of activity because there was some destroyers and aircraft active and we thought it was one of them because, when we got over there, it's scary being--

Well, we were ashore for about three months, till commissioning time.

**Interviewer:** When did you first go aboard?

**Frank:** Well, we was going aboard everyday because we were in private digs. There's no accommodation on it at the time and plus we were in private digs. We used to go every morning. We didn't have to march up in. We just walked up in what different digs we were in and we were commissioning. At the time, I didn't realize that I was going to go on to what it was going to be because we were the first part of the crew, it went to. The rest came up in I think it was September, something like that.

**Interviewer:** Can you remember what it was like to see the activity when it was so new like that?

**Frank:** Couldn't believe it. Huge ship, that was. About 14,000 ton. We thought it was a destroyer. It was going to.

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**Interviewer:** Are there any stories that you can recall from that period when you were commissioning already? Is there anything that stand out, anything that you remember?

**Frank:** Not really, because everybody's busy. The gunners had to go around their guns and see. They were commissioning them.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean by commissioning? What are you doing?

**Frank:** Well, you're getting the ship ready for sea, which is a hell of a lot of work involved with this ammunition in your ships. Depth charges, we had all the depth charges to get done, torpedos for the planes. All of course food and everything. It was quite a big job to commission a ship.

**Interviewer:** Were there aircraft on her at this stage?

**Frank:** No, no, no. No we went out to sea to pick them up.

**Interviewer:** What was your gun position then?

**Frank:** I was on forward starboard. There were two laser guns, I think 24 sets of [unintelligible 00:06:34] Very heavily armed, and two 4 inch at the stern. The flat deck members, on them three up on the flat deck. You never manned a gun when you're flying, obviously, but when you got action stations, you were never flying. You couldn't have aircraft taking off while them Germans were coming over, could you?

Everybody had two jobs in those days.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember setting sail for the first time?

**Frank:** Yes. Well not really because the first time we set sail was when we was going on trials to see that she was sea worthy.

**Interviewer:** What were your sea legs like?

**Frank:** Well they weren't bad. Pretty good. I can't remember being sea sick at all. The skip, it was Captain Willoughby, he was an absolute gentleman.

**Interviewer:** And was he on board at the time of the commissioning?

**Frank:** No, he was there,. He was there before, He was coming down everyday from his digs, wherever he were. Of course all the different officers. I can remember one, Lieutenant Commander Marr, he was a navigating officer, and he was an absolute gentleman as well. He'd been on Canard liners, and after the war he went back to them, and he finished off his commodore. He was a grand chap.

**Interviewer:** When you say they're lovely people, were they talking with you?

**Frank:** Oh yes. You get some the officers, they won't talk to you, you know, to me. It was a different class of people, type of thing. He would come down. I can remember, we came back form first Russian trip, and old Willoughby came down and he said, "She's looking

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such a bloody mess, this ship. We're going to have to have it painted before we go out to war again." He came down hisself, put a pair of old gloves on and a pot of paint.

He was an absolute gentleman, he was. Everybody will tell you that, who was on activity. Yes, he was.

**Interviewer:** When did you go out and pick up the aircraft, and what was that like? Can you remember them coming on, first time?

**Frank:** I can remember them coming on, but only vaguely. Actually we went to the Clyde, sailed up to Clyde to pick the aircraft up.

**Interviewer:** Is the ship moving or stationary when they land?

**Frank:** Oh no, moving. Yes. As much speed as possible to get, so they create a wind across the decks. We had swordfish and **[unintelligible 00:09:33]** fighters. And they were grand little plane, they was. Easy to handle. Well we used to handle them on deck you see, and most of them was stuck on deck permanently, because there's only room for about four aircraft in the hangar. The rest was stuck on deck. We had special shields.

I know we used to have, when we were deck landing training, we used to leave- we got up at six in the morning and get back about eight at night every day for seven days. Not for five, but seven days. Doing flying training all the time. By the time we got out-- We use to go right in the middle of Clyde and they come from, I think **[unintelligible 00:10:21]** they call this place. These trainee pilots come and practice landing on it.

It was quite a **[unintelligible 00:10:28]** I suppose they're still there. It was very odd with that. When they said we were going out, Hector said, "Everybody get a chair." We were. After, we would venture off on winter night to service and doing that. **[unintelligible 00:10:49]** I mean you were getting planes landing on. They were crashing on.

**Interviewer:** What was the procedure for fires and stuff?

**Frank:** Fires?

**Interviewer:** Yes. Did you have a process if a plane crashed and burst into flames?

**Frank:** We got fire practice. I think majority of the time, if a plane did crash and caught into flame, these guys push it over to the side and get rid of it because it won't be any good.

**Interviewer:** Did you **[unintelligible 00:11:19]** the pilots?

**Frank:** Oh, yes. You got this crew that's out.

**Interviewer:** Did you meet the pilots? Did you get to **[crosstalk]**

**Frank:** Oh, yes. We met quite a few of them. In fact, there was one **[unintelligible 00:11:31]** Golden **[unintelligible 00:11:34]** his name. He was training to be a pilot. I saw him I think about two hours when he passed out. He went to a different carrier. Never saw him again after that.

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There were different people. It's hard to say really. Most of them we got in school, students. [unintelligible 00:12:07] landing on a carrier. It wasn't easy. On that mission, convoy, we'd sometimes go 30 degree. So went like that. They were taking off on them [unintelligible 00:12:21] I saw they all [unintelligible 00:12:24]

If a plane comes to land, you'd be landing that. When a plane comes to land, all of the sudden, if you go like that, of course, a plane, if you just bump it, land. It was Swordfish, they were all right in one way because what happened with them, if they did that, then the undercarriage collapsed, so they land flat on deck without their undercarriage. So the crew got out.

**Interviewer:** Was there wire to stop them?

**Frank:** The rest were wires. Oh, yes. It trusted that. There were four activity. We had seven big barriers to come up as well in front of the bridge right across. If a plane would stall ways, it went straight into [unintelligible 00:13:23] At least he didn't knock the plane over its side.

One way we're doing that, to make landing training, we were spending about 12 hour at doing it. Then we had to sail back into Greenock. Sometimes I get to nine o'clock at night before we go away. That's in six where I'd live. I can [unintelligible 00:13:50] when they said, "We finished. We're doing it now. We're in the action station. We're in active service." Everybody cheered. Thank God for that.

I mean it was the same engine room. They had the same problems. The ability of that engine-- The engine room staff was called T-1-2-4. T-1-2-4 actually [unintelligible 00:14:14]

Much of the seamen come into the Navy for six months. Of course, they were that short of engineering staff in the Navy. After six months, to put an X on [unintelligible 00:14:28] so they couldn't get out. They were better off than us financially because they're getting an extra Navy pay. Watching people like [unintelligible 00:14:39]

**Interviewer:** Just tell me, not your action station, the guns, but just tell me, what are you doing on the deck? Just talk me through it, sort of a day if you like when you were flying.

**Frank:** When you were flying?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Frank:** You would faced the planes up out to the hanger on what you could. You got them all ready. That was it really. Took off. We got nets down the side where you used to jump in and when they were taking off.

**Interviewer:** When you say you got them ready what do you mean? Because there's--

**Frank:** The wings were folded. They had to be-- wings folded up. You had to take-- they were wound up you know? You'd ??? wind the engine up on a Swordfish.

**Interviewer:** I get that, yes.

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**Frank:** Just like a car starting thing. You know you used to start the cars in the old days-- you used to wind the engine up like that on the Swordfish. When you got it really going and the engine turned over, it fired this cartridge. Pilot used to fire it and that finished it off. Off she went.

I don't know whether you got to know any names. I had a mate, Pat Oettle, his name was. He come from down Woking in Surrey. He walked into a propeller blade, but he were lucky. It knocked him out at road. They said if he'd been walking the other way it would have killed him, obviously. The plane just hit him. I don't whether the plane hit him, or whether wind did it, or whatever, but he were lucky.

**Interviewer:** What's it like on the deck? Just describe the movement. How many planes are being maneuvered at the same time and how many of you are doing that job?

**Frank:** There's a flight deck party up on there. You can see them. Everybody was occupied with doing something. Lots of [unintelligible 00:16:45], the rest of the wires had to be seen to. There's lots of jobs. Taking off weren't as bad as landing. When they landed, you had to get them in front of the barrier. There used to be a barrier thrown a bridge across and you wheeled the planes up and got them in front of the barrier so that the other aircraft could land without doing any damage.

**Interviewer:** How long did you get from a touchdown to moving a plane out of the way?

**Frank:** I can't remember. It weren't very long. I know we used to run with them. So it weren't very long. They used to circle round the ship and see-- because the batsman, then, would give them a signal.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever do any batting?

**Frank:** No. It was officers that done that. The chap we had doing that was-- I can always remember his name. We called him Temple West. He'd been on another carrier, which got badly bombed in Malta. He got transferred to this one. We had a one-legged pilot on as well. He'd lost his leg in an aircraft accident.

**Interviewer:** Did the batsmen ever get it wrong? Do you ever remember incidents?

**Frank:** Yes, I should imagine so. If the plane come in a bit too high, obviously it weren't going to land he had to wave them round.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever lose any over the side?

**Frank:** Yes. Because what happened after activity, when we fully commissioned because we'd got the biggest flight deck of any escort carrier. They used us as a training carrier for nearly six months. Up and down the Clyde. We had quite a few go over the side up there. In fact, they'll still be at the bottom of Clyde. Trainee pilots coming into land.

I don't know whether you know owt about it, or not, but there's one called the Dasher. It was an American built carrier. Blew up in the Clyde. There were 400 killed on it. We was in harbour at the time in Greenock, because that were our base. We was waiting to go out that day and they stopped us going. They said a ship's been torpedoed. That's all we heard, but



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it wasn't that. Even to this day they are still discounting what happened. Some of the survivors said all the time they were on that ship they could smell aviation fuel so it was a bad fuelling system. They always think that something blew it up.

Another thing somebody said was a bloke was smoking and that atmosphere and they threw match down and set it off, which sounded a bit daft. The people in **[unintelligible 00:19:52]** were opposite on the Clyde, they saw the lip blown up in the air and they say it went about 70, 80 foot up in the air. There was some blows on it before it come crashing down. It must've been the aviation fuel that'll blow. Even now, I don't really go every year now to where it is. We didn't. They wouldn't let us go because they said the sea-- We could see it from Greenock. We could see all the smoke and they said the sea was afire with aviation fuel. **[unintelligible 00:20:32]** so it's got **[unintelligible 00:20:33]** with blowing up.

If you ever get the chance, you'll get a book about HMS Dasher and it will tell you all about it. What's happened at the time, when that's happened, the Dasher blow up, of course, there's no escort carriers, so we had to go onto the Russian convoyed.

**Interviewer:** What do you remember of your first Russian convoyed?

**Frank:** I don't know really now. I don't know. Damn cold. It takes some remembering all them years. It was very cold. You didn't put **[unintelligible 00:21:18]** on the ship's side. Just stick to it. I think first trip, it was about 50 below, something like that. We went to this-- What we did, we escorted-- When the battleship, Royal Sovereign and this American one, I forget. I think it was Missouri and handed them over to the Russians. There were 12 submarines. I think it's 12. One of them got sunk by an RAF plane by Missouri.

**Interviewer:** Just tell me a bit about what the work was on say, an Artic convoy. What were you doing? What was your--

**Frank:** We was managing the guns all the time, except when we were flying because we had two jobs. Everybody had two jobs in them days.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember becoming under attack?

**Frank:** Oh, yes. Got attacked quite a few times. Yes. I do. It's hard to say. It's a long while ago. It's hard to remember what actually happened, but one thing that always sticks in my mind was we was coming back off one convoy, and HMS Bluebell, one of our escorts, we use to fuel them at this point. It blew up. We thought it was torpedo. It went down **[unintelligible 00:22:48]** Probably that, a fire accident somewhere.

I can also remember that because everybody went mad. We knew all the ships' company. We met them when they come aboard. They did all out, really all out **[unintelligible 00:23:12]** They got the shield **[unintelligible 00:23:14]** doing it and blew it up.

**Interviewer:** Wait. Did you see the Bluebell go down?

**Frank:** Yes. We all did. Everybody that were on that side, on the front side of the ship. Yes. Just "poof", it's just gone. She was one of our escorts. We also operated with **[unintelligible 00:23:40]** escort group onto what's his name's convoy? We did looked up **[unintelligible 00:23:47]** We were quite a busy ship because they were very scarce.

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A full-size carrier were useless on convoy work. These escorts were just right, this one we got. We only got about four. I don't know. Others were American-built things. Nobody liked them. They weren't very good. There was a wooden flight deck for starters, which is very bad.

**Interviewer:** Why was The Activity a good escort carrier?

**Frank:** She was well built. She got a long flight deck which was very good for taking off and landing. I seen a Swordfish take off of The Activity. Before it's got halfway down the deck, it's airborne, which you won't get on one of these American ones. She was a good ship. Very stable. Actually, it was built as a refrigerator ship originally. She weighed 14.000 tons. She was quite big, weren't she?

**Interviewer:** Just describe your living conditions and how you kept warm and what you wore?

**Frank:** What you put on, it stayed on. You never has a wash or anything. You just couldn't. Somebody would say, if you went up, [unintelligible 00:25:22] had a piddle it would freeze before it left your, you know. It was that bad. You never washed or anything for about five or six weeks. When you got back to Scapa Flow, you went into what's her name centre to get cleaned up. You never took your clothes off.

**Interviewer:** What about your mess. Describe your mess.

**Frank:** In what way? What do you mean?

**Interviewer:** Where you slept. Where you ate.

**Frank:** That's what I'm saying, where you ate and how much used to be [unintelligible 00:25:57] your mess tables, you know, in them days. Well, it was hard iron rations. That's all there was really. I mean, you used to run out of bread after about two days. They used to have these bloody rice cakes. I remember them damn things. Now a days they're a delicacy, aren't they? The thing about it was, when the work we done was Russian convoys we went straight out Far East, finished up in Ceylon.

**Interviewer:** Before we get there, did you get ashore in Russia?

**Frank:** Did I get what?

**Interviewer:** Did you get ashore in Russia?

**Frank:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** What do you remember of the Russians?

**Frank:** You see, it's hard to say. You didn't look like sailors. I'll put it that way. You were wearing such heavy clothing. You ain't got naval uniforms on or anything. You've got your big grey coat on. They could have been anybody. The Germans were that close to Murmansk. They didn't know who we were. They got a bit shy over it at first. We used to do what we could with them. We'd take all the [unintelligible 00:27:18] to them because they were starving. There was no doubt about it. Of course, none of them could speak English.



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Mostly women, anyway, because even women were working on dockside there. Most of the men had gone to war, hadn't they? Now, it's hard to describe, really, what they were like. You could understand them being scared of us, because we could have been anybody.

**Interviewer:** How did you feel at the time? Can you remember? Was their fear of death and stuff like that?

**Frank:** I don't think that entered your head, really. The fear of dying, or anything. I don't think that was on your mind at all. That's what I'm saying. I can't remember, really. I can't remember feeling scared or anything.

**Interviewer:** Did Captain Willoughby ever slow down and create a rescue for anything?

**Frank:** Well, he couldn't. We couldn't. No. We weren't allowed to, anyway because we were a sitting target all the time for the German aircraft. They knew what because we got fighters on who could send fighters off straightaway after the German aircraft and shoot them down. We did get rid of quite a few of them with tracker. You know, an aircraft carrier never stopped. It couldn't. It had to have an escort of about, I think we had about four [unintelligible 00:29:03] Class Corvettes, as our escorts. We had to. You daren't, you wouldn't have dared stopped for anything because that would have been it.

**Interviewer:** Where did the activity sit in the convoy?

**Frank:** It varied, usually in the middle. Usually sat in the middle. They were so precious, the aircraft carriers, in them days that they had to be guarded because with us having fighters on and also we had Swordfish they were armed with torpedoes or depth chargers, whichever. They were a big menace to the Germans. We had quite a few going out there. I know I got hit with a bullet ones, but I think it might have been from America, you never know. [chuckles]

**Interviewer:** What happened that day?

**Frank:** Well, the usual. Well, they used to come over, didn't they, planes, probably two or three times a day, you never knew, because they're only in Norway. It was very close. We had to have a good cover. The carriers, the escort carriers done a marvellous job, because they got the fighters to fight of and take off and chase them.

**Interviewer:** You got hit. You got a bullet.

**Frank:** I did.

**Interviewer:** What happened that day?

**Frank:** I don't know. I don't even know where it come from. It would be another raid, you see, wouldn't it? We was getting raids everyday all the way there and all the way back. It was just as easy to sink the ships coming back empty as it were full ones. There were no let up.

**Interviewer:** After the Artic, did you then go out and do Atlantic duties or was it the same sort of time?

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**Frank:** Well, we were doing Atlantic before Artic convoys. They were all mixed up and then we did some Mediterranean ones. I had a list somewhere. I should imagine we covered about 20 different convoys altogether. We worked with one called the Tracker. We worked together because Tracker was a camera ship, not us. Whatever pictures were taken were taken on there. We did Mediterranean, as well. Went down Med.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember what you were doing down there?

**Frank:** Well, we were escorting convoys again. Dropped them off at Malta and then we went straight on to Alexandria and then down. We didn't know where we were going at the time. We finished up going down the canal to Ceylon. We thought we were going back to the UK, back to Gibraltar. That wasn't the case. You never knew where you were going from one day to the next.

**Interviewer:** Was Willoughby still with you when you went through the canal?

**Frank:** Yes. We lost him just after. I can't remember exactly when it were, really what happened. He knows more about that, Frank, than me, because he was quartermaster and they got rid of him and this Captain North, or somebody, came on, entirely different fellow. Yes, we were going from freezing cold at north, went out the Far East and we got no tropical gear.

When we got into Columbo they got us fitted out with tropical gear. You know, shorts and tropical shirts et cetera. Up until then, we'd only got winter clothing. Funny thing about all this, about this convoy, we used to sail out of Greenock and the people in Greenock could tell you way you were going. How did they get to know? Does make you think, doesn't it, but hey did.

**Interviewer:** When you got to the Far East, do you remember rescuing the SS Peter Sylvester?

**Frank:** That was quite a while after. Yes. First of all, we thought it was a Japanese U-boat or whatever. We didn't know what it was. Then they happened to spot it and said it was a ship full of these sailors. Yes. American.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember what happened?

**Frank:** What, when we brought them on board? Yes, I do. They'd gone down to nothing. They'd lost about-- Well, they were 20 days in that boat. We took them to Fremantle. Then we went round to Sydney and then came back to Middle East and we got paid off.

**Interviewer:** What else did you do in the Far East?

**Frank:** We went up and down the Burma coast chasing bloody Japs.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever get kamikaze?

**Frank:** We didn't. No. We never got them. We tangled with a Japanese cruiser once. I got paid off out there. They got rid of the flight deck party completely. I joined the Barrick County-class cruiser.

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**Interviewer:** What was it like leaving the activity?

**Frank:** Leaving all your mates weren't you really? The older end on the flight deck there was a bloke called Sylvester Three Badgerman. He was getting over 60, because they kept him on, you see. They kept George Morrison. Old George. They kept him on. They kept quite a few older granddaughters with all this young ones, we went. War was getting well on by that time, especially in England. What they were doing, I think they were men over 40 I think, I'm not sure, which he hadn't repatriated, but younger were kept out, you see.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember the end of the war?

**Frank:** Yes, I was at sea at the time. I went to an activity. I was on the Barrick County-class cruiser. I went into Singapore. We went into Singapore on activity in there, and of course we got permission to on board it. George Morrison then got a party going for kids. It was Chinese kids who they've been starving, aren't they? The activity brought lots of prisoners of war back. Most of them, I don't know for sure. They said quite a lot died in Shulan [unintelligible 00:37:09] last year. Of course they were rounding all Japanese. Lots of Japanese were committing harakiri, and killing the sons, and doing whatever. Funny enough I went to merchant service. About 15 years after this, still found some Japanese soldiers out in jungle and [unintelligible 00:37:32] war or [unintelligible 00:37:34].

**Interviewer:** How do you reflect on the war now?

**Frank:** In what way though?

**Interviewer:** What's your sentiment towards it?

**Frank:** I don't know what to say really. It makes you wonder, did we do a good job or what? It's awful at times. Makes you wonder what I say the country in today. Makes you wonder why we did it.

**Interviewer:** I think I said we've probably reached out. Are there any other stories you've got that you think, "Oh, I must remember to tell him that."

**Frank:** What's that?

**Interviewer:** Any other stories?

**Frank:** About what though?

**Interviewer:** About your service on the activity.

**Frank:** No, not really. It's similar to say since I've been past it 70 years ago, isn't it? You mellow a bit, don't you, after that time.

[00:38:33] [END OF AUDIO]