BOB SHAW'S WAR

Transcript of an audio-taped interview between Wendy Grant and Bob Shaw in Tenerife, January 1991, transcribed by Chris Gibson and Pete Shaw, April 2001

Side 1

Wendy: First of all can you just tell me, if you can remember, just before the war, the beginning of the war, from a personal point of view, what were you doing?

Bob: I was 20 years old and on the 3 June 1939 I had signed up to do 6 months militia service as all young men of 20 were called on to do before war broke out, in preparation for war. On 3 September 1939 I was down at the local swimming pool, a very beautiful Sunday morning, lying at the side of the pool sunbathing, when somebody came at about 25 to 12 and said it has been announced that we are at war. So we rolled over and sunburned the other side.

Wendy: Just like that, so you didn't really take it very seriously?

Bob: Well, there was not much you could do anyway. You couldn't get up and suddenly say I've got this to do or I've got that to do, we just carried on, same as we do now of course.

Wendy: You were actually doing a job at that time you had not actually started to train?

Bob: No I was still in civil life, I hadn't been called up – I'd **signed** up to do the 6 month militia service but they called them up in.....people who were aged 20 on a certain date had to sign up, you see, and then they called them up I suppose they called the eldest ones up first. War broke out 1 September 1939 and I had not been called up then. So I knew I hadn't anything to do I knew I was going to be called up, they'd already got me down, y'know and I was called up on 15 September 1939.

Wendy: You didn't have long then. And then what happened?

Bob: Well I think I've told you this before, I wanted to go into the Royal Air Force. Before the war I had joined the Civil Air Guard.

Wendy: Did you have to report locally first of all to an office?

Bob: You had to go to a recruiting officer and I went to Cambridge from Peterborough. You'd see the recruiting officer there who asked all sorts of questions on what you wanted to do. And I told him I wanted to go into the Air Force but to cut a very long story short, at the end of it all, I finished up being pushed into the Infantry. Through some boy making a mistake up the office or making a mistake in sorting the papers out. (Pete edit notes: Dad said later that he felt it was tough because he'd been taking flying lessons in the CAG and had been due to take his first solo flight 1st Sept 1939, but all civil flying got cancelled just before – the recruiting officer probably had heard that story before).

Wendy: So you actually went into the Infantry which was a Regiment?

Bob: We joined what they called an ITC, I think it was No 7 ITC, which was No 7 Infantry Training Company or Corps, or something, which was at the barracks at Bury St Edmunds, which was the

home of the Suffolk Regiment. We were in the barracks there to do our initial training. First we did 8 weeks training, square bashing and learning about rifles and things like that.

Wendy: How many of you?

Bob: In our platoon there'd be about 30, but I don't know how many were called up on that same day 15 December, whether it was just our platoon or whether there were 3 or 4 platoons, I can't remember that, probably 3 or 4 platoons and there would be about 120 of us called up on that same day. We joined on 15 December and the next day we were given leave passes, and pay and ration cards and sent home for 5 days leave. Presumably the army wasn't ready for us. Then we came back on 21 December and then did this 8 weeks training.

Wendy: Was this all young men, was it?

Bob: As far as I can remember. There were 4 chaps from university in our platoon. There was another fellow from Ipswich a bit like a gypsy. As far as I can remember we were all aged 20.

Wendy: What happened to men who were called up who had a business?

Bob: Well there wouldn't have been many who owned businesses at age 20.

Wendy: But they did call them up, up to age 45.

Bob: Yes but that was later on as the war went on.

Wendy: Did they get compensation?

Bob: I don't know. Well, my eldest brother, he was in partnership in our business, and he was called up, went in the RAF but I don't know whether any compensation was paid. I mean they were providing them with their food and their clothing and board

Wendy: What happened if they had a wife and children?

Bob: Well they got paid. They were paid 14 shillings a week and if you were a married man you had 7 shillings of that and 7 shillings of it went to your wife.

Wendy: How much were cigarettes then?

Bob: No idea, about a shilling for 20.

Wendy: How much was a pint of beer?

Bob: Don't know - I didn't drink.

Wendy: How much did it cost to go to the pictures?

Bob: About sixpence or a shilling probably.

Wendy: So when you went back after you had had your 5 days leave what happened?

Bob: We did 8 weeks training then we moved into another company and we did 8 weeks sort of field training.

Wendy: What sort of guns did you use?

Bob: Just rifles, what they called Mark 3 Lee Enfield rifles which had been used in the 1st World War. Very good rifles.

Wendy: Did you use those rifles throughout?

Bob: No, later on we had a different type of rifle when we were in Africa.

Wendy: Then what happened?

Bob: After the sixteen weeks I was kept back there as an instructor. In the meantime, I'd been given one stripe. I was kept back as a junior instructor.

Wendy: Because you were very fit because you were already doing a lot of physical activity?

Bob: Not really, well, cycling, swimming, things like that, oh I was fit. At sometime or another I then got a second stripe. I can't remember when it was. I was a bit of a lad and misbehaved myself on two occasions and they finally took one of them away. I was still wanting to go into the RAF really and one day I saw a notice up on the orders there saying they wanted volunteers for the RAF, oh no volunteers for glider pilots. And I thought well if I go for that I could use it as a stepping stone probably, you know, fly a glider, so I put my name down for it. And so did about 300 other chaps in the depot, all wanting to get away.

You see after Dunkirk May/June 1940, we were very short of rations. A lot of the army was back from France and life was pretty rough in the barracks. Eighteen of us were picked to go and join the glider pilots, or so we thought. We finished up down in Dartmouth and found out it was nothing to do with glider pilots. The Officer said we understand you have all come to join the glider pilots but we are nothing to do with them here, but we are an organisation that is made up completely of volunteers. We need more volunteers and if you want to stay on here you will have a medical tomorrow and a 25 mile route march and if you get through those and you want to stay, we will take you on.

Wendy: Was this the preparation for forming the Commandos do you think?

Bob: Well, in the summer of 1940 they formed what they called Independent Companies, again of volunteers, to go to fight in Norway. I don't know how many Independent Companies there were but at least 8.

Wendy: What do you mean by independent?

Bob: They were not part of a battalion, brigade, army or anything, they were just independent little separate units and the idea was they would go wherever Whitehall wanted to send them, rather than be part of a big army unit. Most armies you've got platoons, so many platoons in a company, so many companies in a battalion, so many battalions in a brigade. That is how it was built up, then you get somebody in charge of a brigade or so many brigades in an army or divisions. Brigades went to divisions and then armies. But these were called Independent Companies and

they were formed of volunteers and the idea was they could send them where they liked. And they were formed to go to Norway and some of them did go to Norway and fought there and then of course the Germans threw us out of Norway and some of them got halfway there on boats and the campaign was called off and they turned round and came back.

Then they came down south – the ones that I know of – I don't whether some of us went somewhere else - came down to Paignton and Dartmouth and they reformed them then and called them Special Service Battalions. The particular one I was in was No 1 Special Service Battalion. Whether there were any more or not I don't know. There were 2 companies there. One was called A Company and that was in Dartmouth and B Company was in Paignton, and they were still all made up of volunteers. So they're the one we landed up with, you see. And I think out of the 18, I think about 15 of the chaps decided to stay - they said anything was better than barrack life.

We were told that they were living in civvie billets with civilians and be paid six shillings and eight pence per day extra to pay their landladies. But they only used to pay them twenty-five shillings a week, so there used to be a one pound one shilling and eightpence profit. But on the other hand you had got to get to your billets under your own steam, either walk there or catch a local bus or whatever you wanted, to get on parade and buy various things that you probably wouldn't have had to buy had you been in barrack life. And they liked it so much I think about 15 of them stayed on. Three went back, whether they were unfit or just didn't want to .....

Wendy: Didn't make their 25-mile route march?

Bob: Well, funnily enough, that next day we went on the 25 mile route march and because I had got one stripe they put me out in front 200 yards in front of the rest of them and said right you set the pace, you see, and there was me marching - am I going fast enough or am I going slow enough, you know. But luckily I was fit. Half way there, 12½ mile point, we stopped and had a break, and turned round and marched back. And that's how I joined A Company No. 1 Special Service Battalion. In the meantime, and I've told you this previously, when I went to the office and gave my pay book in and they took all my details down, I then discovered my own brother was in this unit. He had been in the Royal Artillery Territorials in Peterborough, called up 1st September, two days before war broke out.

Wendy: Was he older than you?

Bob: Yes, 3 ½ years. He volunteered to go to Norway, joined No 8 Independent Company, later came down there. I'd been wanting to go in the RAF, by mistake pushed into the Infantry, volunteered for the glider pilots and yet finished up in the same company as him. The Company there…I don't know how many there might be…..might be made up of 500 officers and men.

Wendy: How long were you there?

Bob: In Dartmouth until about the end of May 1940 (sic: Pete's note – Dad means May 1941). I joined them there in December 1940 but the chaps had moved there in November 1940, I think, came down from somewhere - they had been in Sedburgh in Yorkshire and Glasgow.

Wendy: Were the Commandos formed then?

Bob: Well there were various Commandos. There were 12 Army Commandos. I think No.3 Commando was the one that was actually formed first. Obviously it was all mapped out. No. 1 Commando will be commanded by Lt.Col Tom Trevor and No.2 by so and so 3,4,5. No. 3 actually got formed first and established and although ours was called No. 1 Commando, No 3 Commando was the first one to get cracking. And No. 4 Commando was formed in about Sept/Oct 1940, three or four months before. We were formed on 5th March 1941, I think we were going down to Dartmouth. (Henry Browne, MBE, says Major Tom Trevor was Dad's OC on A Co. No. 1 Special Service Batt. Lt.Col. Will Glendinning took over when the unit became No1 Commando, for over a year, and Tom Trevor became OC before North Africa).

Wendy: Then what happened?

Bob: We did a lot of training in down there and then moved up to Irvine in Ayrshire. We had marched into Irvine on June 6th 1941. We'd docked at Greenock or Gourock I think and then marched cross country, and stayed just one night at Loch Winnoch, bivouacked out, slept out, it was June time you see. And next day carried on marching into Irvine and again it was a very hot day and our advance party was there to meet us – they'd gone on in front and found billets. And we reported to Sergeant Majors and I they said right Shaw, you're at No. 82 Vance Street and they take you round to your houses, you see.

Wendy: Why did you get taken up to Scotland?

Bob: The whole – it was called a Special Service Brigade, made up of Special Service Battalions – and the whole lot moved up there. No. 1 Commando was in Irvine and Kilwinning, No. 2 Commando was in Ayr and No. 3 Commando was in Largs or Ardrossan I think, No. 4 Commando was at Troon, No.6 Commando was at Helensborough, Dumbarton on the Clyde. 7 and 8 were Middle East, they'd gone off somewhere.

Wendy: Was that because they thought that was the part of the coast that would get threatened first?

Bob: No, we went there for training. It was just a matter that they wanted the brigade together somewhere and they wanted them in civvie billets and that probably seemed to be an ideal place as anywhere. Whether the coastline there resembled the coastline they had planned for us to invade I don't know. We certainly did one training at Irvine on the River Irvine, which was very similar to a raid we would have carried out at Bayonne in the Bay of Biscay coast of France. And we did our training there and also went down the Isle of Wight to do some training down there. Hayling Island…er…..no. Two holiday camps at regular time, we moved into.

Wendy: When you finished your training they pushed you out abroad did they?

Bob: No the British Army was continually training. They were not fighting anywhere. After being thrown out of France they were all back in England. And the only fighting that went on was really in North Africa with the 8th Army and the rest of the British Army was back there so to keep an army fit and healthy, you've got to keep them training, doing something. They can't just sit there and read the paper, so we just carried on doing training, all different sorts of things.

Wendy: Until when?

Bob: Well I went to Glenc….I went on a course on rock climbing and got a good report and was selected to be an Instructor and then they sent….there was two officers and three NCO's – I

was an NCO. They then sent a troop up at a time, a troop consisted of 65 officers and men to have 4 weeks training on rock climbing and we used to give this troop their training. There would then be a break of 2 or 3 days and then another troop would come. I was doing that for 6 months, almost completely for six months.

Wendy: Did you get home on leave during that time?

Bob: Oh yes, we got leave. Then we had the Americans come into the war.

Wendy: When did they come into the war?

Bob: November 1941 – Pearl Harbour.

Wendy: Oh wasn't it 5th December 1941 we heard it on our (indistinct), do you remember?

Bob: Oh yes. We then set off to march up the Mull of Kintyre from Campbeltown to meet some American Rangers and have some exercise with them. We marched for 10 days and then I was taken off and sent with an Officer, Captain of 6 Troop, forget his name. Went on a Snow and Mountain Warfare Course in Glenfeshie, Scotland and whilst we were there I heard that the rest of the unit had been called off the march and were sent to Dundee. And we were in Dundee for a while, and then set sail for North Africa (on Troopship Leedstown via Belfast, says Henry Browne)..

Wendy: How long did that take in those days?

Bob: Well I don't know if it was that particular one but we'd sail halfway across the Atlantic as if we were going over to America in case anyone was watching and then during the night the convoy would turn around and come back.

Wendy: Did you have any risk of torpedoes?

Bob: Oh yes, that was the whole idea.

Wendy: And aeroplanes dropping bombs?

Bob: Not out in the Atlantic but later on when we did this raid on Bayonne, a bomber came out and had a go, missed us. So we landed in North Africa on 8th November 1942.

Wendy: Can you explain to me how North Africa came to be involved? It was so remote from Germany and what was going on in Europe. Was it a separate war or was it related?

Bob: Well Germany was expanding all the time. The British had always been in Egypt of course and the Sudan being British (indistinct) controlled. I don't know how that started there but coming over this side there was Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and they were French controlled and of course Hitler had marched into France and so he got troops in and took over you see - not many but they had control. And I think that the strategy was to attack Europe and Churchill was talking about going to the soft underbelly going through the South of France, Spain, Italy, Greece and they probably thought well to do that we've got to get control of the Mediterranean. And we can't do it very well as long as they control all the coast of Africa.

So there was the 8th Army fighting Rommel and his men, backwards and forwards as the battle went, and it was decided that we would land in Morocco and Algeria and that time not Tunisia. They were thinking of landing direct in Tunis but they cut that out and the Americans had come in so it was a combined force. In fact, in the British papers it was said it was an American force that had landed there, but the very first troops to land – in Algiers anyway which was the farthest easterly part of it where I landed.

We were supposed to be American troops but they were actually British Commandos that landed first. But because of the political side of it America had been pumping food into there being a neutral country and the British were in the French bad books because we had been sinking their Navy because we didn't want it to fall into German hands. And there had been a lot of bad feeling over that so we were disguised as Americans. We wore American helmets, we carried American Garand B4 rifles, automatic rifles and they wanted us to put the stars and stripes up but the boys said no. We'll have the helmets, we like them better than ours, we'll have your rifles – they are definitely better than ours, but we are not going to have the stars and stripes

We had to say we were Americans when we landed, but the French soon cottoned to us. I was talking to some civilians there about two days after we landed. They said you are not American, you've got a British uniform on. This all happened because we had come through England, and there wasn't enough American uniforms there so they'd given us British Army uniforms, you see. This is what one of them said: the Americans talk YA YA YA, mais les Anglais trés gentille. Mind you they probably said the same thing to the Americans. Of course, previous to us landing, there'd been people gone in landing from submarines, to meet the French there to try and get everything organised for when we landed. But the French were split, some had fought the allies and some said Germans are in control now I am not going to risk my neck. A lot of trouble there. Then (Admiral) Darlan got assassinated in Algiers (suicide, says Henry Browne)..

Wendy: Who was that?

Bob: One of the French, they sorted themselves out in the end when it was obvious to the French that we were in control.

Wendy: Then they changed over again, typical.

Bob: Some of them were very good but it is difficult. If you are in a country that is occupied by an enemy power, you hear of it in Iraq where these Iraqis are hiding British people in their houses although they have been told they will be shot. But they still do it and I think it is fantastically brave to do a thing like that because you never know when your next door neighbour is going to split on you. It's hard to conceal people without somebody knowing, rations and things like that. And it was the same with the French.

Wendy: Did you sleep in tents in North Africa?

Bob: Oh no, we had tents but we never slept in them except when we were right back at base.

Wendy: How long were you there?

Bob: We were the first troops to lead just before the final push into Tunis and Bizerta.

Wendy: And you were successful?

Bob: Oh yes but we were more or less the force that was acting as a doorstop. The 8th Army did all the hard work. They got right through the desert and had been going backwards and forwards as they were beaten back but gradually they were pushing the German Army round and we acted as a stopper in Tunisia. They came up the coast of Tunisia and they were trying to push us back too, but we just stood there you see. And in the end they all got in the bag and General Von Arnem was in charge and he was put in the bag with hundreds of thousands of German prisoners.

Wendy: Did you actually shoot people at that time? How old were you, you must have been 22 then.

Bob: 1942 I was 23.

Wendy: Were you actually called upon to kill people at that age?

Bob: Well you were in action doing various things. I can't recall actually shooting a man at close range. But we went on a small raid on the French coast once at night time and the boats came in gradually on the water there was sort of a searchlight going round and it shone right on the front of our boat. And we thought blimey they've seen us but it kept going round and I suppose sentries everywhere, if they've been doing this for years, and you don't do it very thoroughly, do you? But suddenly it stopped. Next thing machine guns opened up and you could see these tracer bullets hitting the front of the boat. Then the door went down and we dashed up the beach. There was a curtain of fire or appeared to be and it just looked as though we were running through it but it never hit anybody, it must have been too high.

Wendy: Was that the time when you thought you had got hit on the head?

Bob: No that was in an ambush in North Africa on 1st December 1942.

Wendy: And that was the Germans?

Bob: Oh yeah.

Wendy: And what were the actual local people doing?

Bob: Well they were Arabs, living in No Mans Land. The Arabs were obviously for the side whoever that was there in control, they'd no option. They would come round selling eggs and things like that from their mud huts. They were mud huts then and thatch, and we've been back since and of course they have all got polythene roofs on them now, big polythene sheeting with branches on it.

You couldn't trust the Arabs for obvious reasons. If we were there temporarily in control of their land they were not going to tell us a lot of things. They didn't even know if we were Germans in disguise and after we had gone the Germans would come back and slaughter them. In fact, which we did on one occasion, not slaughter them but we went into their area, when the Germans had gone through. We just went there and burnt their huts for them, and burnt down their huts and told them, if you help the Germans this is what is going to happen to you. I remember hearing some of the lads say they could hear the women shouting that the their huts

were on fire. They didn't shoot the Arabs, at all, but they said that they'd got to be taught a lesson and the Germans would do the same thing. You can't win I suppose.

Wendy: When you left Africa, where did you go then?

Bob: Back to England. We were pulled out because the British 8th Army which had done most of the work and the 1st Army which we were in were going to join forces and go into Tunis and the Americans were there and they said they would go into Bizerta. Well Bizerta was on the North Coast where we were, so they pulled us out of the line and put an American unit there then took us back to Algiers and we caught a boat to sail back to Liverpool. We came in, I think, and we landed about 2nd May.

End of Side 1
Side 2

Wendy: If you got married, did you get some leave, some special leave or not?

Bob: No, you arranged your marriage to fit in with the leave, you know.

Wendy: And what happened in compassionate leave, supposing something happened to your children, this happened to my uncle, his little boy got drowned and he came home on compassionate leave.

Bob: Well I suppose there was all levels of it, it depended where you were. Obviously, if you are fighting with the 8th Army in Africa and your kiddie got 'flu they're not going to let you come home on leave but if you're stationed 60 miles away from your home town and your father's died then the CO…..unless he was under higher orders not to let anyone go on leave….

Wendy: How much compassionate leave did people normally get?

Bob: It depended on the circumstances, I think. I mean sometimes sometimes a chap would get a letter from home and saying his missus was carrying on with a chap or something or other, and he'd desert from the barracks and the office might decide well it might be a good thing to let him go home and sort it out, you know.

Wendy: Or if I suppose his family got killed or bombed out back home, those sort of things must have been going on all the time?

Bob: But, as I say, it depended on the circumstances, where the soldier was and whether the troops were tied up in fighting.

Wendy: Did you have people desert? Do you ever remember anyone deserting?

Bob: Oh yes. Well they just went home. Their mother was ill or something. They thought…they were in our unit…..thought we were going abroad ……pulled out and went back home and joined back to their own Regiment, because we were made up of all different Regiments, volunteers - the Suffolk Regiment, the Guards, the Pioneers Corps, (indistinct) Corps, Pay Corps, all mixed up. And they, this is what I've heard, they were a bit worried, mother wasn't well and they went home because they thought the unit was going abroad, they asked to go back to their own unit, or a transfer, I don't know. But anyway, the way things happened, the unit they joined was sent abroad and we weren't. Actually they were two brothers and they were taken prisoner in Singapore and one of them died out there.

Wendy: So where were you when the War ended?

Bob: I was in Holland when it ended in Europe. In fact I was a weekend leave in Brussels, or Antwerp, at the time, I can't remember which, and the news came through it was all over. I was staying at the Atlantic, which was a leave hotel for officers and there were some Canadian officers there saying "Hell man, we're not going back now, we're staying here and having another 5 days". But me, always being conscientious, I daren't do that, the British Army's a bit different, I'd better get back.

And we went back, we were in a little village in the Islands off the Dutch coast. I've got photographs, the little village band came and played outside the house which was our Officer's Mess, you know. And they arranged a party for the kids and I've got photographs of the local ladies there with their pinafores on, black dresses and white pinafores. It would be interesting to go back there now, fifty years later, I suppose and they'd say oh look, there's old Maggie SoandSo.

Wendy: And how long, after the War ended before you got out?

Bob: About twelve months.

Wendy: Was that average?

Bob: Well, they had a what they call a demobilisation system, where everybody was given a group number and according to your length of service and your age. If you were an old man and you'd served a lot of time, you were out first. If you were a young man who had come late in the war, you served longer – so they were gradually demobilised. My group number was 28 and I came out in about May 1946.

Wendy: I had an uncle who went to Canada, I don't know why he was sent to Canada, but it was two years before he got home after the War ended. He was an aircraft engineer, so that's maybe that's why he got sent out there.

Bob: Was he a young man? Younger than me?

Wendy: He's dead now. No, he'd be about your age.

Bob: It wouldn't have been two years, he'd have to be on something special.

Wendy: He must have stayed on without telling anybody. Now when you came home, did you find it very strange, trying to adjust to living in civilian life again?

Bob: Well, I'd married in the meantime, I'd no home.

Wendy: Had you got a job?

Bob: Yes, I'd got a job to go back to. I was a pastry cook at the time.

Wendy: Oh were you? I never knew that.

Bob: Two years as a pastry cook. Well I started there as a labourer in the place. I was on the dole actually for a while. In 1936. At the end of 1936 I was working for…people that make gardens and things……landscape gardeners. And when the winter came, the work dropped off. I was a young lad, the last one to join, so I was the first one to be stood off.

Wendy: Is in the recession? 1930's it was the recession, wasn't it?

Bob: Well, I don't really know how much unemployment there was there. But I was just told you'll have to sign on at the Labour Exchange, and get some money there, and then when I want you, I'll call you back again. Anyway, I went to the Labour Exchange, in those days you had to go three times a week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and sign there before you got your money on Friday or whenever it was. And when you went there to sign, they'd look through a little reference card system "Oh got a job for you."

Wendy: You didn't have a choice?

Bob: Well, to me, that question never arose really, I was just to glad to go and work. And I must say this, every job I was sent on, even if it was labouring, I thoroughly enjoyed. There wasn't one job I didn't like. So I had a job two weeks on a paraffin lorry, going round the countryside carrying 5 gallon cans of paraffin down the farmyard, or another one I had a couple of weeks on the railway as a porter in the parcels department.

And the blokes were horrified there when they were out one day and some people brought a parcel in, and I weighed it all up and said do you want it to go company's risk or your own risk, worked it all out, collected the money. "God", he said, "You can't do that! You've got to work 10 years for British Rail before they trust you". I said, "Well there was nobody here".

Wendy: So you went back to being a pastry cook, did you?

Bob: While we were away, they'd been sending parcels out to their employees who were in the forces, you could have a parcel or you could have five bob a week put away for you. And I said well five bob a week because I'm always moving around. So I went back and by that time I'd got about £76, quite a lot of money in those days. So I went back there mainly to get the £76 I suppose, because I wasn't particularly interested in the pastry cook job – I enjoyed working there.

And I went to Perkins Diesels who make the diesel engines, because they were in Peterborough, and they were formed in 1932 and doing quite well. In wartime they'd been making the engines for air/sea rescue boats, generator engines for searchlights, and all sorts of things, so I went to see the Personnel Manager there and said any chance of getting a job with them? And he said well what do you know about engineering and I said I don't know anything. I said I've been in the Army for 6 ½ years and I'd never even learned a trade there, I was an Infantryman.

So he listened for a bit and then he said I think we can fix you up with a job as an Inspector. I looked at him and I thought he's pulling my leg here – as an Inspector? I know nothing about engineering. I said well, what do you mean, I don't know anything about it. How can I inspect? He said well when a chap's done an operation, machining a cylinder block or something like that, you check it to see whether it's done right. It's quite easy. For boring holes, he said, we give give you a thing like a dumb-bell, he says, got one end bigger than the other and if one end goes in and the other doesn't, it's OK. I said I think I could manage that, so I did that.

They put me in the machine shop. They had six different positions for Inspectors along the line and I did all of them in time. And in the end they took me out and kept as what they call a Slip Man, in case somebody didn't turn up or if something went wrong they couldn't pick up on the inspection line. I had my own little bench and clocks and things, and I enjoyed that, very much – I was doing that for 12 months. But I couldn't get on with the union attitude there – you mustn't work hard like that, they'll expect Jack to do the same on the other line. I said, for God's Sake, Britain's lost everything now, paying America for tanks and ships and things like that, we've lost all our possessions. For Christ sake, let's get our jackets off and get stuck in. Of course, I'd been Officer rank and that didn't go down too well. Well, the only people that will benefit will be the bosses, he said, you'll be sweating yourself to death.

At that time Rocky used to work for them too. She was the Secretary to the Service manager, a chap called McNair. And at lunch time we'd very often meet and we'd used to walk into the …….a few streets away in the town where our office was, Insurance Office, and we'd sit around the fireside with me father, eating a sandwich. And I think I approached him – are you looking round for a clerk?

Wendy: Did he have a prejudice against employing his own children?

Bob: No, I don't think so. He'd had two. The eldest boy, the one above Bill who'd been in the army with me, he'd employed him before the war and he's employed him again after the war for a while. But Bill got a bit fed up, living on a pound a week and his board, and he went off and did an Ordnance Survey course under the Government, and joined the Ordnance Survey people afterwards, got fed up with that and emigrated to Canada, where he still is. Well the only thing that upset him, he finally offered me a job and we agreed a salary, £6 a week. And I think my eldest brother who was in the business, he was a little bit annoyed because he was sort of a partner then and I don't think he'd been consulted.

But that would be August 1947. March 1948 my father died, and my eldest brother had no idea about running the accounts and things of a business and I had a little bit of experience, been to night school, book-keeping and all that sort of thing, so I took over the job of looking after all the book-keeping. And we stayed together for 40 years, and he's still there, still with the firm. He's done now 55 years with the firm. He's still there.

Wendy: Is he older than you?

Bob: Yes, he's 6 years older than me. He's 77.

Wendy: And he doesn't want to stop?

Bob: Gets him away from the Missus, I suppose.

Wendy: Can you tell me what a "Blighty" was exactly?

Bob: Well Blighty was the name for back home in England – take me back to dear old Blighty.

Wendy: But wasn't that something that happened when you were injured?

Bob: If you got a Blighty one, that means you were wounded, serious enough to be sent back home.

Wendy: And how did you usually get back then? Supposing you were in North Africa or something?

Bob: The Army saw to all that through the Hospitals and things like that.

Wendy: You'd go on the ship, you wouldn't be flown back.

Bob: I doubt you'd be flown.

Wendy: And what did the Red Cross do? What was their role?

Bob: Don't really know. Except the nursing. Other than that, higher up, politically, I don't know what they did. I suppose had access to the bedsides, to prison camps and that, but I never got involved with that so I don't really know.

Wendy: Oh yes, this time when you thought you'd got shot. How did you get involved in that?

Bob: Well it was on December the First, 1942. The First Army was unable to advance past a point called Green Hill. There were a lot of hills about like this here, but the road went through between them and this road was guarded by Rommel..

Wendy: And this is in North Africa?

Bob: In North Africa, in Tunisia, Green Hill. There was two more called Sugar Loaf Hill and Bald Hill. But the main point of resistance that the Germans were holding was this Green Hill. And we couldn't take it – we'd tried artillery and aircraft, bombing and all sorts of things, couldn't get past it. So I think the powers that be decided well 36 Infantry Brigade would make a push to get past it while we would be landed way up the coast by sea and we'd march 10 miles inland and cut the road where the reinforcements would come down with the Germans on, you see. Well things went wrong. We were landed hours later than we should have been, dawn, and the Arabs who live in the area, farmers and things, had seen us and I suppose the message goes from one hilltop to the other and by the time we got to this road the Germans were there waiting for us, all camouflaged and in the bushes, machine guns ready.

And as we came down this open field, with just one or two little bushes dotted around, they waited until we were within range and suddenly opened up, ambushed us you see, and it was the first time really we'd been in action. We were far too split up on a big front and everything goes haywire at a time like that and the first thing is you look for somewhere to get behind where the bullets won't hit you. Well where I was, and where most of the troops were, there wasn't anything. There were just these sort of bushes, so you'd go behind a bush because at least you can't be seen, that's something. But the Germans saw this happen, so everybody dived behind bushes, so then we couldn't put an attack in because there was a valley between us the first time they'd been in action (indistinct) and, during the morning……. Oh, the message was shouted round reform around the back of the hill. Now for some of the troops they could do that because they were amongst bushes about 10 feet or 12 feet high and they could move round without being seen, but where, I was, I was only in an open bit and there was only these bits of heather about this high. And so some of them moved back, but I stayed there all day and most of my Section did (indistinct). My machine-gunner had been shot when the first shots were fired…

Wendy: Actually killed?

Bob: Yes, well I heard him shouting out, you know, but there was nothing we could do. And during the day from time to time the Germans would put a burst in that bush, a burst in that bush, a burst there. And I remember lying behind this bit of heather and seeing the leaves…….oh as I'd gone down my helmet had rolled off and I was laying there trying to get flat as I could and I always remember feeling some obstruction underneath me, and very cautiously putting my hand underneath my stomach and pulling out a little pebble about that size. Well, it was uncomfortable, and I saw these leaves come off and felt this…..

Wendy: Bullets?

Bob: Well bullets I presume were whipping the leaves off the bush, and one just skimmed along the top of my head, and as I lay there with my pack on my back, I didn't find this out till afterwards, it had gone through my pack.

Wendy: So, during the night, did you reform, did you manage to get back?

Bob: When it became dark, I lay there all day from about 10 o' clock in the morning until about 6 at night. Oh, while I lay there I saw the blood dropping on my battledress sleeve. And I presume I went to sleep or I passed out, I don't know, I was certainly not with it, not conscious for some hours. And during that time I remember one of my chaps (indistinct) was shouting out "What's it like over there?" "Well, I'm just behind a little bush" "I think I'll come over and join you" I said "You bloody well won't". (Laughter)

Well I stayed there till it was dark and I was just getting ready to move off and then I heard whispering, that was all you could make out, you couldn't tell whether it was English or Germans. Well, I thought probably it was the Germans coming out to see what damage they could do and to pick up any weapons and things, and as I was on my own I thought ……I'm laying there. And I suppose what happened, I think afterwards it was probably two of my men decided to move off and seeing me lying there with blood all on my head "Sergeant Shaw's had it". In fact that was the message that got back to my brother in the end: "Your brother Bob's had his head blown off" or something or other and it upset him.

And so they finally moved off – I never knew whether they were British or German – and I waited a little while and then I moved off. And it was pitch dark, and I thought well we're alright, we've been trained how to find our way….I'd got to go west you see, towards our lines, which were about 30 miles away. So I thought well alright, in the Northern Hemisphere find the north star and you soon know where west is. I looked up there – not a star to be seen – cloudy night! Never mind, also in the Northern Hemisphere, moss always grows on the north east side of the trunks of trees.

Wendy: But no trees?

Bob: Well I was a moment until I could find a tree with a trunk big enough, cos there were a lot of bushes there. In the dark putting my hand round and there was bloody moss all the way round it. I'm on a loser here, I might be going the wrong way, cos in the dark you can get confused, you see. So I wandered along until I saw a right big bush and got right into the middle of it and lay down there. And then I thought well, it's been all this time and I haven't had any food, I rarely would carry rations, you see, I ought to have something to eat really. And in the dark I took me pack off, undid the straps, put my hand in and felt all this gooey mess, you see and I thought, it

must be half me brains….(Laughter) That's the thing you think of at the time. I didn't know a bullet had gone through the blooming thing. And it wasn't until the next morning, of course, daylight came, that I saw what it was, that I saw that the bullet had gone right through…

Wendy: And were you going in the right direction?

Bob: Well I don't know. I met an Arab there and spoke to him about soldiers, and had he seen some – yes, yes - and which were they going and he pointed. Of course I knew which way the sun was, so I knew my directions and he was pointing east, towards Tunis. It might be, but I'm not going that way, I'm going the other way. So I went walking along a track, hoping I was….well I knew basically it was the right direction but in mountainous areas, valleys, you never know whether you're going down the right valley or not. And then I noticed in the mud on the track the footprints of our Commando soled boots, our rubber-soled boots which at that time were unique. We were the first people to try them out – Vibram soled boots they called them, and later they were called Commando soles. And I saw they were pointing ahead so I thought some of our boys have gone this way. And I don't know whether I slept on my own that night, or whether it was during that day, but I then spotted a figure way ahead of me, on this same track going up the mountain, and even then I didn't know whether British or German, cos these American helmets looked like German ones from a distance.

But I gradually – I'd got my rifle with me anyway - and I gradually caught up and I saw it was one of ours. And then we slept out, we carried on walking during the day, at night-time we'd get up off the path and go into the bushes just in case there was any troops around. Slept there – it was so cold. Very cold at night. Well we had snow in Phillippeville when we came through on the train on the way up to the front in cattle trucks. We had open slats.

Wendy: You don't think of that, do you?

Bob: No, no – same as the desert, very cold

Wendy: Have you been back to Tunisia since?

Bob: Oh yes, I've been back 5 times.

Wendy: To the same place?

Bob: I've organised three trips. Five of us went each time – not always the same five. And then I've been back with Maggie Browne and Vic her husband, cos Vic Browne was in our Troop, when he was alive. And once just with Rocky I think. So we slept two nights, I said to him "I'm going to sleep in a building tonight, if I can" and we were walking along this road and we met an Arab with some cattle. We were asking him the way, "and this is where the path goes to my village and you want to be this way." And then he said "Well, why not come to my village and come and eat with me and sleep there? And I thought "just the job". So we went with him. And as we approached this village, he sort of shouts, got near to one of the huts, went inside, some women came out, scattered and then he came to us and said "this is your hut".

Wendy: He threw everybody out?

Bob: That's right. He lit a fire for us. He spoke French, you see. And then he said "Would you like pork, or chicken?". And I was trying to think what I've read in books about Arabs, you see you

must always be courteous to travellers and you must entertain them. Once you have done that, you can slit their throats and pinch their rifles.

Wendy: And then they are under an obligation to you, I suppose?

Bob: Er, so anyway, he went in there and I said "chicken", and he finally cooked some chickens for us and I asked him if he'd got any eggs – he said yes, I've got some eggs. Half an hour later these eggs hadn't arrived…Oh, in the meantime Arab men had come and sat in (or out) side of the hut in a circle watching us cook our food in the mess-tins. And one of the things we made was we used to have a tea mixture which was in tins, tea, sugar and milk powder all mixed in and you just boil some water and put that in and that made tea. After we'd drunk it we were left with the tea leaves and I was just going to fling them out, "hold on", off he went, comes back with a little dolly's teapot, put these tea leaves in – like gold to them…

Wendy: And they made tea?

Bob: After a while these eggs hadn't arrived, so I spoke to him and oh, he said, we haven't any here. I've sent my brother to the next village to get the eggs for you. Came down and we had some eggs and we'd got some over, so I left them in the mess tin, put the other part of the mess tin over it. Next morning when I got up, some of the eggs had gone. This Arab arrived and said good morning….oh the last thing he did when he left us was take his cloak off and offered it to us for warmth, you see. We said no, we didn't need it, we'd got gas capes and groundsheets. Next morning he arrived and said good morning and I said I'd lost some of me eggs. Oh? And he went outside and he came back "Mon chien, mon chien" and he took us outside. During the night the dog had walked in there very carefully, taken these eggs, gone outside and cracked 'em about thirty yards outside the hut and eaten them. There was all the eggshells.

Well then we were getting ready to move off when a camel train arrived, carrying charcoal. And I said lovely, we've had a good night's sleep, we've had a damn good meal, and warm. Now we're going to have a ride. And I asked this Arab where he was going – he said going to Tunis. We're going the other way – the German's are in Tunis. Again, we were just setting off and suddenly there was a rifle shot. I looked at this bloke and said here it comes now, Arab fashion. They've wined and dined us, been perfect hosts, now they're going to slit our throats or something. And then after a while this same Arab man came up, again laughing his head off. "Oh" he said "mon frère, mon frère". His brother came up, he'd been cleaning his rifle and he'd shot the end of his finger off. And they thought that was most amusing. And this bloke came up and he'd got some reeds wrapped around it. So I took them off him and I took half my army field dressing, everybody used to carry a field dressing, used half of that and bandaged his hand up. And there he was going round with that.

Wendy: Very proud.

Bob: Yeah. He'd just shot the end of his flipping finger off. And that's how they…..the Arab attitude to life is I suppose, it's not all that important.

Wendy: And presumably you got back safely?

Bob: Yeah. Finally after three days we were walking through a wood that had been burnt, just the charred trunks, and we suddenly saw troops ahead of us and again didn't know who they were. So we dobbed behind a tree trunk and got right down to ground level and just looked at that

height instead of head height, you see. Saw this patrol advancing. It was an American patrol looking for water. Finally shouted out we were British. Always had a white handkerchief ready, you know. And then soon after that we made contact with our own men. We still hadn't had any food, and during the night a bren carrier came up the rough track through the mountains with some food. And they were opening it and dishing out biscuits, something like that, and I always remember some of the men were saying, rough language and really swearing, "F the food – give us the

(tape ends)