

# Interview with Jack (Francis John) Hyde

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*Interviewers. Terry Pankhurst and Mike Martin.*

Jack, born in 1925, tells us about his early life in the village of Wheathampstead, his home and family, his early school days, his memories of the village and working life after leaving school. Jack's war experiences played a big part in his life, so much so that he went on to become a regular soldier. Called up in 1944, Jack tells us in some detail of his part in the D-Day landings, and his eventual membership of the German occupation force. He tells of his marriage in Gibraltar, family and working life back home in England. There are some very moving moments near the end when Jack recounts the details round the death of his wife.



**Terry.** Jack can we start by asking you about your childhood? Who were your parents?

**Jack.** Well my mother and father were Mrs. Susan Hyde and Mr. Jim Hyde. My father had various ..... After he came out of the Great War he had various jobs here in the village. But his family lived at Lamer Lodge. My grandfather and grandmother lived at Lamer lodge. As my grandfather was the gardener at Cherry Garrard's. Over here behind the house here, was originally the nursery, owned by the Wrights. My father I think, worked there after coming out of the army, and my mother who came from Staffordshire way came down here in service, also joined the land army, which was rather surprising in the great war and was on the farm down here. Ho what's the name of the lane, forgot it , by the Nelson, Sheepcote Lane. There was a farm down there, mother worked there so presumably that's how my mother and father met. And going on from there, my father then started to be employed as a gardener at the big house at Murphy's and in consequence he had a cottage at the bottom of Necton Road where I was born.

**Terry.** And when were you born?

**Jack.** First of the first 1926.

**Terry.** Were you the first child?

**Jack.** I had two elder brothers and there were seven of us in total. My eldest brother was Ronald James Hyde. Geoffrey Hyde was the second one, then was myself and then my brother David, then came my sister Jean, my sister Celia and my last brother Maurice.

When I was three we moved from Necton Road to Lamer Lane, the dairy it was, an old dairy. And we didn't leave there until 1942. The war had already been on for a number of years and then we moved to Astridge Farm Gustard Wood. My memories as a child, we used to play a lot out in the fields because in those days, wasn't that much to do apart from playing and helping around. We used to help with the house gardening with my dad and so no. but as youngsters we also, my brother and I, my elder brother and I did a paper round before we went to school. I also came up here to Wheathampstead Hill to help with a couple of old spinster ladies and a brother in a house up here on Wheathampstead Hill. And I used to go there every so often and fill all there coal scuttles up, with anthracite, coke etc. They'd put shoes out to be polished, I used to polish the shoes.

**Terry.** About how old would you have been at that time?

**Jack.** About 9 or 10 years old I would imagine.

**Terry.** Do you remember going to school in Wheathampstead?

**Jack.** Indeed I do yes. I started off in the junior school...The firm's premises we went to school there until 11 was it, I think we then went to St. Helen's school. Of course I left school at the age of 14 and went out to work. We used to walk from the dairy, no such thing as transport in those days. Very few vehicles around anyway. Coming down of course, was not the problem as it is now of course. The village has grown tremendously since I was a boy. We had a teacher, miss Young and I can't remember the name of the other lady in the junior school. And going up into St. Helen's school, there were 4 classes up there. Also there was an area..... a building there for the girls to learn cooking and soon sowing etc. etc. The boys, carpentry and metal work, which was a separate building and of course, Mr. Howsden was our headmaster. He used to have us out doing gardening as well because we used to grow vegetables for the girls to do there cooking with.

**Terry.** How did you get on with the more academic subjects, any memories?

**Jack.** No not really I wasn't very good with arithmetic, reading and writing reasonable so. No specifics because...if you wanted to go to grammar school or something of that nature, obviously I didn't do that.

**Terry.** You spoke about playing in the field, what other aspect of your play time do you remember? I guess the river was somewhere you would play in.

**Jack.** Yes we used to go down along the Meads as they called it. Of course there used to be cattle there as well. And it used to be quite deep there. And I can remember water rats used to be there when we were children, youngsters used to just ignore them. I mean the banks had water rats. Now you know they wouldn't consider it would they? But that's how it was. Then of course I didn't used to go there, but beyond the churchyard going towards Lea Valley there was another area there that was quite deep, behind Bury Farm.

**Terry.** Did you swim in the river?

**Jack.** I didn't, no. I still can't swim.

**Terry.** Did boys and girls play together, or were you pretty much on your own?

**Jack.** Mostly boys kept with boys, the girls played sort of netball. There was nothing to say you couldn't play together.

**Terry.** What did you do as a young boy in the evenings, was there any special recreational activity in the evenings?

**Jack** No not really. Being one of my hobbies was always doing.... You can see I've got one over there and I've got another one I've just completed on the table there, are jigsaws. We had radio, there wasn't television or anything of that nature. But we used to help father chop sticks and get coal in, all those sort of things throughout the evening. No I don't think there was any specific activity we used to have. I honestly can't remember, or possibly doing jigsaws or something of that nature.

**Terry.** What do you remember of the centre of the village when you were young?

**Jack.** Well, one of the things I think I mentioned once before was the height of the telegraph poles, if you've seen photographs of the village you'll see the telegraph poles way up above the roof tops of the houses and they came right the way down through the village and of course eventually they were put underground, but they were huge. There was, behind the mill, there was a great big fir, I can't think of the name of the tree, they were that high quite tall. That's one of the things. Of course I always remember before they pulled them down. Er the house there passed where the dentist is now used as a hairdressers now etc. etc. fish and chip shop, was not Alms Houses, what did they all them, workhouse, and there was always on old lady and the road ran down and there was one step, two step, three step, four steps and into the building and this old lady was always sitting as we walked to school, in black with a big old black hat on, sitting on the fourth , on the steps of the old building and actually they were pulled down, and my goodness me, what a dust at time cos it was mostly lathe and plaster, you know, pulled them down. That was in the mid 30s I imagine. There is a plaque up there say when it was. I remember that.

**Terry.** Can you tell us anything about the shops in the village?

**Jack.** Goodness me, yes, there was more shops than we've got now. I mean in the village itself if you came down from the station, you had the bakers shop, butchers shop, Simons, then of course , coming through the other side of the mill, there was a café called the

Spinning Wheel, and café which is now an Estate Agents, then there was a paper shop and tobacconist. Coming up on that side was Mrs. Collins where she used to sell all hardware and items etc and she had a petrol pump outside and then there was another café, fruit and veg, then a wool shop and the chemist. And then of course the bank, then up beyond the .... Into the churchyard, was a gents and boys outfitters and then on the other side of the road coming from the Bull pub you had Mr. Wren the Wheelwright. There was a painter decorators, Westwoods, Stapletons quite a big grocers shop there. Rose, the fruit and veg, Mr. Chennells, further up near where the bus stop is now. That's an Estate Agents again. That also use to also be the Post Office at the back there and also Mr. Chennells son Frank had a dairy behind there. Then coming up beyond that was another baker's shop, Garretts Bakers and a shoe shop. In Church Street, there use to be another butchers shop, Mr. Ball, butchers, along Marford road, just by corner of Necton Road was Bans Grocers shop. Along Church Street also was the Walnut Tree Pub, and she and her husband also ran a little tobacconist with an obviously sweet for the children going to school.

If you go back along the Lower Luton Road there was a shop at the bottom of Folly Fields. Can remember the name of, also another butchers shop, Gales, which was er Gustard Wood was a little tiny shop up there, at the top of Gustard Wood. Goodness me, I've forgotten. So there were quite a number of shops around.

**Mike.** You mentioned Chennells. In some of the old photographs of the High Street, outside there was a couple of trees right on the pavement. Do you remember them?

**Jack.** Yes I got some photographs of the village early, early times you know. No they were not there. As a matter of fact there was a lamppost there which I know very well from walking into it (*laughs*). This was early part of the war. If I can go from there. I worked for Mr. Collins at the time. The antique shop and Mrs. Collins sent me down the village to do an errand and the chemist had a bull terrier and some army chaps had been put into the big house at the Garden House, it's no longer there and they had a dog and there two dogs started fighting. I was turning round looking back, walking backwards, turning round and faced front and walked straight into the lamppost (*laughs*).

**Mike.** Were you badly hurt?

**Jack.** I've got a scar on my eyebrow. Yes. Mrs. Collins did it up for me (*laughs*). That's about it as regards the shops.

**Terry.** Did the church play any part in your life?

**Jack.** Used to go to Sunday School. Mind you, that used to be held in the Church Hall which is no longer there.

**Terry.** Where was the Church Hall?

**Jack.** Opposite the entrance into Rectory Gardens, to the left of that before you go to those pair of cottages there. There was a corrugated building, they were corrugated sheeting, the exterior. Used to have the youth club there as well. And used to sing in the Church Choir in St. Peters. That's at Gustard Wood. That was later of course.

**Terry.** The small church at Gustard Wood doesn't seem to be used very much . Was it more popular then?

**Jack.** It was used every Sunday. Mr. Lee, who was the station master was the choirmaster and organist and lay preaching as well, as well I recall. It wasn't a very big church but had a congregation every weekend, Sunday.

**Terry.** Now you had a station in the village. How did that impact on people's lives.

**Jack.** Greatly, you know because the trains use to run in and quite a number of people use to go up to work in the City by using it. Often you used to, of course , have to change at Hatfield, get the quicker faster trains up through to Kings Cross but quite a number of people used it. And of course, it was used by coal merchants cos the station yard. We had three or four coal merchants in the station yard, Murphy's use to use it for dispatching their chemicals, drums and so on. And cattle were brought in there, course the farmers sometimes had cattle delivered there. So it was quite busy really. And as a youngster my brother and I used to go up there to meet the train early morning and get the newspapers to bring them down to Mr. Pearce's shop and sort them out before delivering them.

**Terry.** How about trips out yourself.

**Jack.** Oh. I don't think I ever went more than about twice to the seaside. Possibly Southend once. Clacton, maybe. By train, Yes.

**Terry.** So you left school at 14, can you tell us about how your working life started.

**Jack.** Well I started. Oh that was another shop. Of course, which I didn't mention. In East Lane was Woodly's Shop, grocers and part green grocers. I worked there when I left school, for a while. And, I didn't know for what reason, why I left, I can't recall. But I didn't stay there very long and then I went to work for Mr. Collins for quite sometime and just before I got called up into the army, I was working in this little garage behind Balls, the butchers Shop. There was only just the one man, myself. And my job..... I was, ... one of my jobs was decoking engines. In those days engines had to be decoked. They don't need it now any more but that's how it use to be.

**Mike.** Where was the butchers?

**Jack.** Along Church Street.

**Mike.** Along Church Street.?

**Jack.** There's a bow fronted one there, well that was the butchers shop. And behind that in that yard, of course there was a slaughter house and this garage.

**Mike.** And the Woodley's was in East Lane.

**Jack.** East Lane, yes, which is now private property.

**Mike.** By the garage ?

**Jack.** Yes, next door to the garage. Before you get to the telephone that's there, that wasn't there of course.

**Terry.** Can you tell us a bit more about the Collins. Which of the Collins people owned it at that time.

**Jack.** Owned the antique shop, Charlie.

**Terry.** Charlie Collins?

**Jack.** Yes Sam's father. Sam Collins father. Yes. And of course he had a brother, can't recall ever knowing him so he must have passed away quite early. Mrs. Collins had the hardware shop down the village. She was related.

**Terry.** What did you do for Charlie Collins?

**Jack.** Well one of the jobs I do recall, because he has a number of showrooms in the village. Not just the antique shop there. And one of my jobs was going round dusting and cleaning all the furniture and so no regularly. And I used to go out with him to move furniture and so on. In fact I recall going to London on one occasion and we brought some furniture down from a big house there and moved it along to some people towards Enfield way. Evidently we left some bedroom furniture in the top which belonged to the servants. We went back to get it and it had been bombed and completely destroyed. So we were very fortunate I think. Yes, and I used to help, also cleaning off the furniture when Mr. Collins used to get old chest of draws and old things like that, paint all over it. I used to have the job of cleaning off with wire wool, and I can't remember what they called it. It burned your hands if you weren't careful. If you didn't watch it was quite strong. Having done that Mr. Collins then would come along and have it repaired by old Jack Humphries who was a damned good carpenter, marvelous carpenter. He would repair it and Mr. Collins would polish it up. Put it in the antique shop.

**Terry.** Were you learning any aspects of the trade?

**Jack .** A bit of carpentry, I mean I did take up carpentry for a little while in the army. My son took up carpentry, he had his own business as a carpenter, did an apprenticeship. but I never learned an awful lot about it. I learned how to clean obviously what you should do and shouldn't do with this furniture. But nothing in particular. I don't think I had any vocation that I could have considered to be worthwhile.

**Terry.** What did you do for the Woodleys?

**Jack.** I used to go out with the son, Billy Woodley, delivering greengrocery because he had a little van. He was a very big man well over 20 stone. He and his father used to go to Luton to collect green grocery. And when I was waiting to go in and start work, he would arrive back and all he had left in his hands was the two spindles of the steering wheel. He

evidently pulled up quick or hit something. Pulled up quick and his tummy had broken the steering wheel. He was a huge man.

**Terry.** You didn't learn to drive yourself?

**Jack.** No. No., not until I was in the army.

**Terry.** Do your later teenage years bring back any memories? Any different memories of the village?

**Jack.** Not particularly no. I mean bar the Boys Scouts. I used to be in the Boys Scouts. They used to be at the end of Rose Lane. Miss Robins was the Scout mistress, and I became a patrol leader. I remember going to the Abbey carrying the banner and forget to lower it going into the church, going into the Abbey. But not particularly, no.

**Terry.** Is that the Miss Robins from the Upton Robins family?

**Jack.** Miss Robins, yes. I think it was, yes. She lived at the end of Rose Lane.. And her chauffeur and gardener had the bungalow coming up from there.

**Terry.** Do you remember doing anything out of the ordinary as a Boys Scout?

**Jack.** Not really.

**Terry.** Did you go to camp?

**Jack.** No, no, we didn't go to camps, we learned cookery and things like that. No we never did go off to a camp. The most we ever did was attend parades, nothing more than that.

**Terry.** So we've got to your teenage years.

**Mike.** Can I ask a couple of questions? Living in the days before the Health Service, was there much sickness in the children in the village?

**Jack.** We had a nurse and one doctor. Doctor Smallwood, a very unfortunate man because he had two sons and they were both killed during the war years. He was our only doctor. The nurse used to live up at the ..... house up on the corner opposite what was the station yard, and of course the doctor eventually..... when doctor Smallwood finished, the other doctors moved up there as well. He had his practice here on Wheathampstead Hill. As your coming up the Hill, there's a side road runs up to Four Limes, his house has a mill... beg pardon, a well, whatsisname outside.

**Mike.** Dolphins?

**Jack.** Not Dolphins, no, lower down, the next one further down there. And he used to.... There was also a doctor at Kimpton used to help out Doctor Probin. But basically.... I think Doctor Smallwood was a very nice man because, such families as mine where you had a lot of children and so on, very difficult to earn a living and be able to manage. And he would

not take monies unless it was absolutely necessary. Sorry Mrs. Hyde don't worry I'll get it from those who have got it. So he was a wonderful man really

**Mike.** Do you remember the sickness the children were.....

**Jack.** Diphtheria. Mainly all had chicken pox and so on. But my brother had Diphtheria. We had to seal the room and everything with it.... But.... I think really I suffered badly from chilblains as a youngster. As regards to illness I think most young people were fitter than they are today. Because of spending more time playing outdoors than sitting in front of television etc. That's my opinion anyway.

**Mike.** One final thing, your father was a gardener did he have much of a garden himself?

**Jack.** Oh yes when we lived up at the dairy we did. He had an allotment down here originally when we lived down the Marford Road - down Necton Road. But when we moved up to the dairy we had quite a big garden there, with two fruit trees two apple trees.

**Mike.** So there was somewhere for you to play as well?

**Jack.** Yes, I used to help in the garden actually, help to dig in the garden and so on.

**Terry.** So we have passed your teenage years. Were you courting at that time?

**Jack.** No. Used to go to dances at the school. And had the young ladies, but we never.... I was never close to any of them.

**Terry.** So what's the next thing in your life you would remember?

**Jack.** Called up, conscription in the army at 18.

**Terry.** What year were you conscripted?

**Jack.** 1944 early 1944.

**Terry.** So the war had gone on for several years. Do you remember much about the was years before you were called up and how it impacted on the village.

**Jack.** Well apart from the fact that we used to get bombs dropping here, there and everywhere. Because the Germans obviously came overlooking for Luton and if they couldn't find it they use to drop them and get rid of them so the village had a number of bombs dropped. One in the churchyard, one where Offa's Way is now. There was incendiaries dropped down Lea Valley. Quite a big bomb dropped at Gustard Wood close to where we were living at the time, at the dairy, in the field up there beyond that. There was a big landmine went off near Ayot St. Lawrence. Few bombs here and there. And on one occasion I recall lots of shells and so on from fighter aircraft probably having a go at bombers and all., these empty shells and cases were lying down in the High Street in the village. But apart from that you could tell when the German aircraft were about. You knew by the sound of the



engines when they were German or not. But we were never terribly concerned with it, I don't think.

**Terry.** Did the war cause shortages to your family that you remember? Was food hard to get?

**Jack.** Well, we, I imagine, we were probably a lot better off than people living in the towns and cities because we could get rabbits by catching them and well, your own vegetables, of course and this sort of thing but we still had rations like sugar etc etc. Ration books they as a matter of fact. When we went to collect my ration book they had got me down as a girl because my name is Francis probably. Proper is Francis. And instead of Francis John they'd got me down as Francis Joan. I always remember Mother saying about that but I don't think we were really too worried about food because we used to get a lot of it ourselves. Whereas people in the towns and cities, obviously, couldn't do that.

**Terry.** Did it change your way of looking at things? Did you, for example, have chickens and things like that?

**Jack** Yes, my mother, being an ex-landgirl, kept chickens all the while. She used to rear baby chicks in front of the fire. Go out and buy these baby chicks, about 6 months before Christmas, usually and then she use to rear them and we'd have some for our Christmas and she use to sell the others on to people who wanted chicken. Yes, that was a regular thing, but, of course, we were use to animals. My father had a pony, which he use to roll the big lawns behind Murphys, which has disappeared, most of it now. They were croquet lawns there and he had a great big roller, the pony had pads on it's feet so that it didn't sink into the lawns and he use to pull the roller and of course having that pony up in the barns behind us up at the dairy, we use to go out in the pony and trap at weekends, because there wasn't much traffic about, well in those days, of course.

**Terry.** The croquet lawn, was that private?

**Jack.** Yes, it was part of the big house, yes, there were two lawns there, one had a marvelous, very beautifully manicured trellis work with roses growing up, three quarters of the way round it. Yes, it was very pretty.

**Terry.** That was Wheathampstead House, was it?

**Jack.** Yes.

**Mike.** Who owned it?

**Jack.** Murphy. Mr. Murphy lived there with the housekeeper.

**Terry** You mentioned being called up in 1944, what happened then when you were called up?

**Jack.** I'd never been down the village much. Still being very young I was called up, In those days, at that time there was the possibility of going down the mines if your number

came up. This I tried to avoid by trying to volunteer for the Airforce but they wouldn't take me. But fortunately my number didn't come out and I'm so pleased about that. I'd rather be on the front line than down a mine. So would a number of other and they never got any recognition for it. Quite a number, of course died through it but I was called up and went to Newcastle to Gosworth Park which was a racecourse, top of Newcastle, Gosworth Park, and did my initial training there. Didn't get any leave or anything and then they asked me what I wanted to do, and said I'd like to join either the Hertfordshire Regiment or the Royal Army Service Corps. And they put me in the Royal Engineers. I went to Irvine in Ayrshire and did my sapper training there which consisted of mines and bridging and so on. And then I got posted down to Bicester in Oxfordshire where a firm was building barracks and presumably because my pay book said "garage hand" my job there was greasing up the tippers that came off the site. And I didn't like that one little bit and up on the notice board came asking for volunteers for the airbourne. And my father said "never volunteer for anything". I volunteered for it and went down to Bullford in Wiltshire and had a medical. You had to be A1 plus they called it. And I passed the medical, went before the CO of the unit I was going to go into. If I stayed, he said, if I wished I could go back to my unit or I could stay with them whichever I wished to do. And I decided to stay with them. I don't think I ever really regretted it. We were Airlander Brigade, Gliders. We were the sapper brigade of the Airlanders brigade, sapper squadron in the Airlander brigade. And again I think I was very fortunate in as much as I joined then actually. This was just after D-day, and they'd been out there on D-day. quite a number of them and they landed and so I assume reinforcements really. And again we did our training, we use to fly off to Netherhaven aerodrome for training. We got pulled up by tugs and away we'd go then they use to release the tow rope and we'd come down and make a landing on the soft part of the airfield. But when it came to actually going into action I was fortunate not to do so, because we went over as a matter of fact, I looked it up the other day and the 24<sup>th</sup> December, Christmas eve, we traveled from South coast across to Ostend and was in convoy going down to Ardennes, battle of the Bulge, as they called it. But unfortunately on that night, we got bombed, our convoy was bombed, not because of our own stupidity but an American lorry went by our convoy with full headlight on and lit our convoy up with a German plane over the top. He dropped two down which landed on the other side of the road to where we were traveling, blew up a gas main. And I recall I was sitting to the rear of the lorry and had intended jumping out and dashing, cos we did know what happened and ran into this part of a big building and suddenly realized I hadn't got my rifle and went back for it. I remember doing that. We were very fortunate because, I think the bomb further on caused a couple of casualties but it was annoying because we had dimmer lights on the front, no rear lights, the back axle of the vehicle was painted white, the back axle differential there was little white marks on there which indicated where, how far ahead the vehicle was. The driver would travel on that. It wasn't the fact that we had lit our convoy at all, it was this lorry that had lit it up. Also trams had obviously been there because the tram lines came down and they were flashing away on the side, on the road, you know, and still live. But fortunately we got through that but it delayed us getting down to the Ardennes by a day. It was a bit frightening because we didn't know what had happened. In many respects we were perhaps fortunate that he didn't come back with machine guns and have a go with those. I've no idea what aircraft it was, we never heard it. Certainly this gas main went off with a heck of a wallop and flames shooting out about 10 to 12 feet high. And that was my beginning of getting involved in war activity. Then we spent time down in the .....matter of fact on the television the other night it said that.... And what a terrible cold winter that was. In actual fact I still think that a terribly cold winter I've ever known. It really

was cold. And we moved down there and one of the first jobs we had was to build a bridge, Baily bridge, and we maintained it for a couple of days. Other days we also did some other work, culverts and things, that the Germans had blown up. And I was round the building of this bridge cos I was on the transoms which were used to keep the two sides separate and also for the floor, road panels to be dropped into. And by golly they were heavy. And all you had was a wooden bar through the transom one on each side on each side at the front and 2 at each side at the back running then through panels and setting them in and gradually the bridge gets pushed out. The front of it is just, nothing on it, just a skeleton front which is tilted slightly so as it comes and hits the rollers on the other side which have already been carried over by..... One... on the front er.....and once they drop that down of course you have to keep building on the back to keep the balance. And it was hard work. Then we maintained that bridge for a while and to enable us to tighten it up we used to have blowlamps to thaw it out before we could tighten the bolts up. It was blessed cold. And we had one or two rather strange happenings at night time over there. One I can recall simply was one morning our NCO called us out and we went down this slope and on our right was some heavy mortars and we know we were not too far away from the front line and we got down the bottom and the German had blown a culvert and it was our job to repair it and lieutenant said "no idea where the enemy is so we better put some people out" and I was number 2 on the bren with a chap called Iveson and they took us down about 150 200 yards down, set us up with this bren gun on the top of the hedgerow there over the other side of the road were no woods just fields with snow and hedgerows running through and we were there for a while and all of a sudden we looked up and there were some white clad chaps coming down the field and you could only tell they were coming down because every now and then the snow had fallen off of the bushes. They silhouetted them and it was a patrol and we didn't know if it was German or if it was British. So I said to, I used to call him Swede because he came from Suffolk, I'd better go back and tell the officer cos I'd no idea. So I ran back as best I could on the blessed icy road and told him. He said "I'd better put somebody else out on the other side then". Which he obviously did and sent me back and we were there a little while longer and this still amazed me because I heard the rumble of what sounded like a tank and we couldn't see it because there was a house blocking our view on our left and I said "I Don't know what this is going to be. Cos it could have been German could have been anybody round the corner. Believe it or not once a bren gun carrier with just a driver and the chap on the gun and in front of him were two chaps wielding Mine detectors and we had walked along this road and everything going so slowly, then behind that was a three ton lorry full of soldiers. But they never looked at us, didn't look at us, now I still say if we'd been German we couldn't half have caused some problems. Never even blinked, never even looked at us, went straight by and I believe because in a short while we moved out so I imagine they were taking over from the airborne chaps. As a matter of fact some of our Para shoot regiment got a bit of a pasting there. They lost 40 odd officers and men. Canadian Para shoots. At a place called Buer?? They were buried there. Well actually they dug them up again and they took them to a military burial ground. But they were killed in an 8 months scrap in the opposite side of the valley to where we were. But later we pulled out and went back to near Ghent in Belgium. Still snow on the ground I remember it quite vividly. I was number two on the bren which was my job to carry the stately spool, barrel etc. and I dropped it, lost it in the snow. My sergeant wasn't very pleased. Anyway we went back to this big building near Ghent. We spent a morning in Ghent one day and went up in lorries and had a look round Ghent. And then we moved out to Holland. Up into Holland and there again quite extraordinary thin happened. On one of the jobs we got was to ... Germans had blown the railway line up, going down to Venoile and they had blown all the

rails and they decided because the roads were bad anyway, we would make a road of it. And we went up there on this first day, started to undo all the bolts etc on the railway line and so on. Just beyond us on the corner was a German minefield, but we ignored that cos it wasn't on the railway line. So we've busy there and along came an old boy on a horse and cart and our lance sergeant said to him "Sounds as if you are from Lancashire". He was an English squaddy from the Great War. Moved out there and he wanted some of the sleepers. We thought that was quite hilarious because our sergeant was trying his best to talk to him in Dutch. Anyway that was the first odd thing that happened. The following day we were there and this motorcyclist pulled up, an RAF chap, he said he'd been pulled up by people thinking he was German because he had the blue uniform with the eagle, whatever it was on the side and they thought he was a German. Anyway he managed to get through to us. He said to us, was Corporal Blog around. Well he was our full corporal, he lived at Watford actually and we said, yes. Can you tell me where? Down the line with the officers but you can go down and see him. I said "do you know him?" and he said "I'm his father". And he's with the Typhoon station which had moved into Haarlem. And he'd managed to find out where we were and came up to see him. Stayed with us the night and then went back to his unit. That was an extraordinary thing. Bt then the third thing that happened we were there possibly the same day or the following day and along came three vehicles with, small vehicles with Royal Engineers and they had dogs. They took all the dogs out of all three vehicles, took down all the fencing where this mine field was, then put the dogs on leads and lead them into the mine field and the dog could smell the mines. The chaps with the lead would, when the dogs put its paws down, he would put a primmer down, yes there was a mine there. Put a "cone" down. And every time the dog found it they'd give it a little snippet of something. And on they'd go and they cleared the whole minefield with these dogs and I've never seen anything quite like it. Instead of using detectors. But they were "Teller" mines and the Germans had used a new method of preparing them so that if you tried to undo it would, blow up as well. So the only answer was, obviously somebody found out to his demise, was to blow them up or get rid of them somewhere. Blow them up was the answer. And this officer, a sergeant, set them up in a ditch, a few yards apart in heaps and, I can't remember how many there were, but they set a fuse on the first heap, came back and got down in the ditch and it blow the lot up. They'd put them too close and there was a house there and it took part of the roof right off of this house. We hadn't seen anybody in this house but a man and woman came running out of it quick. I thought it was unbelievable. The whole lot went up 100, what 200 yards away. It blow me straight on the back and he could remember hearing a buzz, the noise like shrapnel you know, there must have been bits of it flying around. But it knocked me straight on my back. That was the oddest thing that happened on that occasion. Goodness me.

**Mike.** When you were guarding the hedges with the bren gun and were looking across to the men that were coming towards you. Two things, whereabouts did you say that was?

**Jack.** Down in the Ardennes. It was a main road ran through, I think it was a main road but it was right through the valley, and, of cause, the Ardennes were further to our south, as a matter of fact, some of them were moving out when we first moved in and, I think they were trying to blow up this little bridge, we told them to leave it.

**Mike.** And did you ever find out find out whether those men you saw in white were Germans or.....

**Jack.** No never did. We repaired this culvert and we moved out. And the chaps with the mortars were still there. So we never saw any of our enemy at all. They were obviously dug in further down the other side of the road. But we find some funny happenings. I can recall, somewhere in Germany, I'm not exactly sure where it was, but we got into this lorry of ours. We weren't told where we were going. Just a lorry load of us and were traveling along, this road and in front of us, houses on either side in front was a railway line on a very high embankment and a railway bridge over the road and as we were traveling along these people putting white sheets out of their windows. Never took much notice. And suddenly round the corner the right hand side came a little scout car with this officer sitting up on this scout car and stopped our lorry. Our lorry pulled up. What the so and so hell do you think your're doing here? I don't know what our NCO said to him but he said "you'd better go back cos there's been no body though here at all. You're the first people that have gone through. This is why they were putting these blessed white sheets up. And God knows what we would have found if we'd gone under that railway bridge. But he couldn't believe it. He said were only coming up to see if we can shape them up and find where they are. You'd better go back. Odd very odd, thing that happen. And we were never told what it was all in aid of. Why we were going there in the first place. Very odd.

**Terry.** Perhaps you were going there to shake them up as well.

**Jack.** They'd have probably shook us if we'd got under that railway bridge but who knows. But there were so very many funny things happened. I mean, we had an occasion we were called down again, just a platoon of us, going down, and it looked like you were going down to an estate, with metal railings and cottages on both sides and at the bottom their was a great big high, Obviously by the river there, what had been a mill obviously. And as we got down our lieutenant said "hang about I'll see what this is all in aid of". And there were some military blokes laying in a ditch. Now that that ought to have told us. Didn't it. I got near this one here and he said "wouldn't stand up there too long, mate. There's a sniper about". And these chaps had gone looking for this sniper up in this mill. Unbelievable I, I mean I..... "Stand there lads". "Wait there lads". Anyway whatever it was there was nothing to do because they thought the river needed a bridge. It didn't. It was more like going on a level crossing, a water crossing. Well we're coming back up the hill and all of a sudden aerial bursts and it seem to be following us up the hill. And we ran like hell. And there was a pillbox, a German pillbox, at the top of this hill, I was the last one in and they all shouted "careful, careful". When I went in I went right up to my ankles in,.... I think the Germans had used it as a toilet. Talk about smell and I don't know how I got rid of it but (laugh). Anyway we got away with that one. But it seemed wherever we went we got aerial bursts and snipers. We went into a little town to do a bridge. Only a very small bridge, as it turned out. But when we got there this big armoured had gone right through up to its axles through the bridge. Obviously the weight would have done it. It was buried so we couldn't do anything and as we were waiting for our officers to find out where we were going and where we were due to go to go. There were some military men walking through. Not our infantry, other infantry, and lots of people trying to get back home, I presume, because these people had been brought from other countries to work. Quite a lot of people about, suddenly a sniper opened up and again a sniper, you see, and this officer standing on the armoured car. "If you see the so and so shoot him". We were all in the biggest ditches we could find. But the next thing we got is, aerial bursts. So whether these snipers had some communication with the artillery, you don't know.

But that was twice that happened to us. But we never got any injuries there fortunately. But some funny things happened.

**Terry.** As the war went on what happened then?

**Jack.** Well we moved right through Germany. Hardly stopped really. We were much more fortunate, than the infantry, of course. But we used to sleep in barns and sheds and things and we arrived at the Elbe and the Germans hadn't tried to defend it at all. We crossed over and when we got over the other side, the infantry were obviously way out in front of us and we came across a prisoner of war camp and realized the Germans had moved out and the gates were open and the chaps were all out and, I remember one trying to catch a chicken on the other side in a garden. And there was a German train, Red Cross train, and it had been ordered to stop across the crossing to stop us going through. So our Brigadier was in front of us and he went ... he ordered this German senior officer, whoever was in charge, doctor whatever he was. He said "right everybody off. Off the train, injured no matter what". So those who could carry, carried the injured ones on stretchers and those who could walk, walked. Kicked them all off the train and sent them into town. And there was a Sherman tank in front of us. And they went and uncoupled the train and pushed with the Sherman tank. Pushed it out of the way so that we went through. But he made all those Germans get out because of doing that. And finally we arrived and met the Russians. I didn't personally but we were at the top of the hill going to a place called Bismarck. And our people met the Russians and they wanted to come through us because they'd been ordered and this is one of the reasons why we did it so quickly, to stop the Germans going into, not the Russians going into Denmark. And this Russian officer had been told that he must go through and our Brigadier told him in no uncertain terms that he couldn't. And so they decided to have one half of the town and him in the other half. So all the Germans were giving themselves up to us rather than give themselves up to the Russians. So there were Germans all over the place and I remember a great huge crowd of them being marched through with an officer in front of them very smartly dressed with all his Jack boots and everything and we were going up these farm buildings and one of our jobs was go round sorting these German prisoners out and moving them on. And this again is one of the funniest things, Couldn't believe it, there were about 5 sitting on the bank, one morning when we walked out, bank by the side of the road and normally we would say there were Russians coming and they'd be up and away, you know. And so we go along "Ruskie's Coming" and the third one along said "Doggone it, bud, give us a chance". He was American. I said "you talk like an American". "Well I am American" and evidently he told me and the rest of us that he and his brother had emigrated to America and their mother was taken ill before the war. They came back to see her and his brother went back to America and stayed, and because he stayed he got called up in the German Army. And so although he was a Naturalized.... been to America as an American he was as a German soldier. And he'd been in the middle east and up through Italy and he assumed that his brother was an American in the American army cos he's just a little bit younger. "He said what can I do?" I said "the best thing you can do is get yourself taken into a prisoner of war camp. Don't rush it but ask to see the Commanding officer and explain your situation. I hope that they sort it out for you". But I said I can't advise you any further than that". So they stood up and walked away and off he went. Again extraordinary, isn't it? And it took us completely by surprise. So how they got on together I don't know these Germans because they obviously realized he was different to them. So, yes, we sent off a lot of them and I can only assume they moved our prisoners of war out and moved those Germans into that prison

camp. I don't know quite what happened. I mean within a few days we were flying back home. We flew back from Linberg in Dakotas. A whole division but Americans came and picked up all of them except for our squadron. We came back in three Dakotas and our pilot was a Canadian. And the Americans took the division straight back to the UK but we flew to Brussels and picked up Sterling bombers from Brussels and flew back in Stirlings and on the way down through Germany this pilot said. "Do you want to have a look at the mess they made over the Rhine". And you never see so many bomb holes, not bomb holes, beg your pardon, shell holes because they put up a huge barrage before the airborne went over and he took us down pretty low to have a look at it. It was quite a sight. 1h 01m59s

And we landed at Brussels, got into this Sterling and evidently it had trouble with one of the engines. It wouldn't come up to, ... they had to get it up to a certain, ... before they allowed them to take off. And so we got taken off and these chaps, this crew were very annoyed because if they got back from the UK they go on leave. They wouldn't let them go. We went on to other Stirlings. We flew back somewhere in Essex. I can't remember what airfield. Then they had lorries back to Bulphan, and came straight home on leave. We were covered in soot and so on cos some stupid idiot had at the airfield, there was an ammunition dump on the side of the airfield, someone had lit a fire and it spread into the undergrowth and everybody had been putting out the flames half the night. A right old state. But I remember coming through, God knows where it was, it was quite a new estate and people were having bonfires and celebrating VJ day. And cause we had German flags all over our lorries and asking us to give them the flags and then gave us cake and stuff. I remember that quite well. Came home on leave. Got called back, and went to Norway. Our squadron flying out to Norway, again in Stirling bombers and landed at Stavanger and moved down to Oslo, outside Oslo, and eventually we didn't do an awful lot for the first fortnight we were there. But our squadron moved down to, or, I beg your pardon, not the whole squad a platoon or two went down to a place called Moss, down the Oslo fiord, and supervised the Germans picking up their minefields. We were in the camp with the Germans and they had a guard on the camp not us. Odd isn't it? But he didn't have a rifle or anything but he was on the gate. Think that was right weird. And we used to go off in lorries driven by them. We used to sit in the back of the lorries with our rifles, some days, while they were picking up their minefield. But they had a very good method of doing it because our system of laying mines was just to take one point but they took a bearing with every mine that they laid. So that they knew exactly where they were. That was our job finally. We came back home and having got back they disbanded the gliders and I got posted to a Combined Services Unit in Scotland. I had my own. And I got there. It was on a golf course, up there in Ayrshire way, somewhere. I can't remember which one it was. But I got sent on leave because this Combined Service Unit was obviously going somewhere. When I came back whatever was going to happen didn't happen and I got posted to a depot in Halifax and they gave me the choice of going to the Gold Coast or Gibraltar. And I decided on Gibraltar. That was a 3 year station, but the Gold Coast was 18 months. But I preferred, I didn't want the Gold Coast is terribly hot so I went to Gibraltar. Then, of course I met my wife, so it enabled me to ..... I was due for demob in 46 I signed on 5 or 7 engagement to enable me to get married out there. I was married out there. I managed to fiddle a posting back there for another 3 years out there. I had six years out there. But that again, there was a lot of luck in that because I was a Corporal at the time. I asked to see the CO and he said, it was winter 49, and said my wife can't stand this weather and he said "what you're really letting me know, you want to get back to Gibraltar" and I said "yes Sir" "well" he said you take a trade test, an carpenters trade test. I'll get you back. And coming back off leave, got back in the guard room, "Corporal, CO wants to see you in

the morning” and I said “I’m awfully sorry, Sir, looks like I failed my test and I won’t be going. “Yes you will” he said, you’re going get yourself some rations from the cookhouse and get the orderly to make you out your travel warrants etc. Go down to Chatham. Went down to Chatham, use to go on parade every morning about 8.0 clock, couldn’t find anybody going to Gib and suddenly I walked past a little barrack and there was about 6 engineers there. I said “I haven’t seen you on parade” “Oh no we’re Engineer services. We don’t go on parade. Where you going? Gibraltar, thank goodness. And I took them up to Liverpool and on to a ship and to Gibraltar . and managed to get another three years out there. My wife eventually came out. My daughter was born there. Came back in 51,52 . 25 it must have been because my daughter was a year old when we moved here. So 52 because she was born in 51 so she was 2 years old when we moved here in 53.

**Terry.** Backtrack a little bit. Tell me your wife’s name.

**Jack.** Yolanda YOLANDA. Her maiden name was LALAMAM which was said to have originated from German ALLAMAN with the two L’s but I don’t know how true that is. Because, obviously, her grandparents before that were all Spanish.. Her grandmother lived in Marlina. That’s over the border. When the Civil War started my wife was over there with her Grandmother. And her father had to dash over the border and got her back because of the troubles. She was evacuated here to the UK. That’s another story that nobody knows about. I’ve got a book about it actually. They evacuated all the women and children and young boys from Gibraltar because they were afraid that the Germans would talk Franco into allowing them to go through Spain which he didn’t do fortunately. But they brought them all to the UK. Took 17 days to come by boat, believe it or not. But originally they went to North Africa and, where was it anyway , it was one of the North African ports and at that time we started to blow up the French Fleet, didn’t we? Because they wouldn’t surrender and in consequence the Gibraltarians were told to get out. Couldn’t stay there and again, fortunately or whatever some Liberty ships had pulled in with French soldiers who’d refused to fight for the Free French. They unloaded these French soldiers and put the Gibraltarian, women and children, on these boats and terrible it must have been, there were no cabins only holds and the French soldiers.... It was terrible my wife said. And most of them slept on deck going back to Gibraltar and they wouldn’t let them get back off. But the local men had a right Hoo-Haa with the Governor and so on. Eventually they took them off on the agreement they would get back on. And they tidied the ships up and put facilities for toilets etc. And each family had a little partition, curtained off partition in the holds. And they never told them where they were going and they brought them to the UK in Wales, Swansea. And it took 17 days and had one escort vessel. Anyway, having done so they had to be..... they’d run out of water basically, hardly any left, they had to be disinfected or whatever they call it, change their clothes and everything because they were in such a mess. Got them on trains and where did they bring them? Into London. My wife was just off the Bayswater Road and she use to have to go down the Underground every night. Bayswater Underground station every night because of the bombing. Eventually they moved them out late 44 and she went up Scotland near Paisley. And eventually came home to Gib. in 45. So she hadn’t been back long before she lost her father and her sister died in London. It wasn’t a very good period for her. And of course we met and as I say, married out there. She was Catholic and I was Protestant but they didn’t object to my getting married. I didn’t want to get married in a Catholic church and we married in the Kings Chapel next to the Governor’s residence there. And none of the family objected.



And unfortunately I lost her four years ago and my son three years ago. So that's not been a very good period of time. But there you are.

I considered myself to be very fit. I mean we use to have a lot of sports and so on in the army out there and we were pretty fit in the Airborne because we use to do footslogging across Salisbury Plain on 12 mile runs or walks where you carried all your equipment and also a Bren gun which was passed down the platoon as you went marching along and every so often you'd get the order to trot and then straight back to marching and so on. I considered myself really fit, And I don't think that had any adverse effect. In fact I think it probably was better for me. The only thing I ever had in the army, I had boils on the back of my leg when I was in Gibraltar. I mean there were occasions when chaps had problems, obviously but in the main I think we were pretty fit. Had to be otherwise you were out. No, as I say, sometimes I think what would have happened if I'd not volunteered for the airborne and that but I didn't regret it because they were a really good bunch of blokes. We use to look after one another. And there was never any problems. But I mean I was only 18 at the time and I still got my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday down in the Ardennes. Don't remember it. But yes.

**Terry.** What did you do when you came back home eventually?

**Jack.** I came back still in the army and got posted to Worcester at the barracks just outside Worcester and we had an intake of new recruits coming in. One of my jobs was to go and meet them, recruits down at the station and bring them in. Use to get all sorts of remarks passed. I was a sergeant then and I remember one of them saying "Hay guv where's the nearest Boozer". I said "you'll get nearest boozier. My rank is sergeant you'll call me that. Now get on the lorry". This sort of thing you know. We took them in and they had initial training there and I got injured playing football. I played in goal. Got injured playing football and I got put in Sergeant's mess caterer? And my R.S.M. ? We didn't get on very well together at all. In fact, the first day I went there he was in with Sergeant Major, R.S.M., I beg your pardon, and I went round, didn't knock on his door and walked in. Cos I got so use to walking in with my old R.S.M and he said, "didn't hear you knock, Sergeant". I said "oh yes I did sir". And he said "you come to my office in future, knock louder". "What's your name"? From then on we didn't get on too well but he did come to me when I decided to leave because I got my peace ascending rank 6 weeks before I left. Cos I was "war sub-rank up till then. And he came to me and he said "I'm going on leave Sergeant". And he said I hear your leaving" I said "yes Sir", "oh" he said "I'm sorry to see you go, but I won't see, you'll be gone before I get back" shook hands with me. As I say we'd never got on too well together from the first day. But then, I say, I decided to move and my brother at that time, my eldest brother was a postman here who'd been an apprentice jockey before the war. Was a apprentice when the war broke out and he went into the RAF but he decided to go into the Post Office and said to me "why don't you do the same because you've got a steady job, no problems, you know". And he said "you know how to behave and not get yourself into trouble being in the army and that" he said. And of course in those days, they use to take ex-service personnel. It wasn't until immigration occurred and they started to have to take in various people and that, others walks of life that they started taking in people other than servicemen. Cos every man you spoke to had been in the navy, air force or the army. And I did 33 years there finished up as a supervisor in St. Albans, cos the main office moved to Watford. And realized our post code here is AL which is St. Albans but we would have been Watford had the coding been done earlier . because it was intended that we would become the Head Office

but the foundations and so no at the Beaconsfield Road Post Office wouldn't take all the mechanized machinery, and so they built one at Watford and so Radlett and Boreham Wood Which was part of our deliveries office, Radlett and Boreham Wood and so on, they became WD and we still remained AL. That's how the two districts<Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, all AL you see.

**Terry.** After your many years away from the village were there noticeable changes to the village when you got back?

**Jack.** Yes. Not so much in building but people. You know people that you've known no longer there. I mean - I have difficulty in remembering names but there were quite a number of people who were suddenly, older people you know who were no longer there. And families had moved out and so on. And then of course, we had the growth. Lea Valley was built. Houses along Marford Road were built in the 30's. Gustard Wood, Blackmore End was beginning to get built up and then, of course, when these, were built in the early 50's and in fact they were still building Saxon Road when we moved in and then, of course there was a lot more building going on. Built this estate behind, built Wick Avenue and Butterfield Road and all of that. That was just fields. Tremendous amount of growth really for the village. And, I say, the one up Codicote Road, that use to be dump for Murphys, I'm surprised they ever put houses there, to be honest with you. Garrard Way, where you live was built. In fact Garrard Way when that was built we had the opportunity to buy property there but I couldn't get a mortgage because my Post Office pay was so poor. They wouldn't take into consideration my wife's earnings or my overtime, just my basic wage, and the Civil Service Building Society in London, up near Scotland Yard, said "No sorry can't even offer you", and I wasn't able to buy it. I couldn't raise enough money. They were then just about £4,000 quid, I think at that time. And our friends at number one they moved down there, Mrs. Humphries. Can't remember the number she lives in. She lost her husband, Percy, died 2 or 3 years ago. But they but they moved from number one down there and brought one, but he never went into the forces. I don't know whether it was medical or what. But we were never able to until Mrs. Thatcher gave us the opportunity of buying them and even then I had a job. And if it wasn't for the fact of my son in law being an accountant, sat with me one night and told me how much better off I'd be if we did manage to. And I did manage to get a complete buy without putting a deposit, just a mortgage. And he said to me "within 3 years I would be paying less in mortgage than I would be in rent, and he was quite right

**Terry.** Was that here?

**Jack** This house, yes we bought it and it's been a godsend really. I know I've maintained it looking after it myself, obviously. But then again, my son, being a carpenter was also a great help to me. My daughter was born here and my son was born in City hospital because my wife had rhesus negative blood and she had to go into hospital to have the children. I mean, when my daughter was born in Gibraltar they told me, the medical staff there said I wouldn't advise having more than two children.

**Mike.** I was going to ask. Not really connected with that , is whether in your time here in the village, whether there were any entertainments, like dances or

**Jack.** They had dances at the village school.

**Mike.** Cinema, anything like that?

**Jack.** No nothing of that nature. I mean down the Memorial Hall, Sammy Collins would show the old village films, you know things like that. No nothing of that sort. We had dances of course but no not a great deal went on at all really regarding entertainment. My brother was in the British Legion, Ron and he was one of the first to go out collecting money to build the Memorial Hall. Strangely enough he moved to Kimpton and when that Memorial Hall burnt down he again went out and started collecting for that. also he ran the Kimpton May Day Festival for years.

**Mike.** Did people make their own entertainment to some extent?

**Jack.** Oh yes. I think they did. Yes but I mean in the old days, you see housewives were housewives. They didn't go out to work and you made do and mend. I mean father used to mend our shoes. My mother used to do all the knitting and sewing, washing etc. which used to take a lot longer and with no fire, you had to go and light. and as a matter of fact my brother and I used to lay the fire ready for my mother ready for when she used to come down when we used to do the paper round and, you know, there was all the cooking and so on. With 7 children must have been quite a burden. Lot of work. My dad used to work quite hard. He used to look after all the greenhouses down at Murphy's even during the holiday period. Stoke them up and decoke, what was it, get the clinker out and so on. It was all coke then.

**Mike.** Did they have a very big workforce at Murphy's just to look after...

**Jack.** There were about 4 gardeners and there was a butler and my uncle and aunt used to work there. He used to drive a van and my aunt used to do work up in the big house. Mr. Saywood was the butler, he lived in the bungalow which is up beyond, I think it was privately owned, now I think, I'm not sure, that was the butler's bungalow there.