

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with Richard Lowry West (RW) • Royal Air Force

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 05.11.2005

K: So, if I could begin by asking your name?

RW: Richard Lowry West, after L S Lowry. I think I'm related to him but I can't prove it. I think that's where the Lowry comes from.

K: That's very interesting. And when were you born Richard?

RW: 1922.

K: And where were you born?

RW: Well, I'll give you what I tell everybody. I was born in Eire, but I've never lived there. Now figure that one out! I was born in Ireland as it was then and it became Eire in the August as I was born in the April, so...

K: And what did your parents do?

RW: My father, most of his life, he was a shop manager and in the later stages he got a job at Euxton, the big munition works. He finished up his life there. My mother, when my father was out of work during the thirties, worked as a cleaner at Townleys hospital, so that's the only work she ever did.

K: So when did you move to Bolton?

RW: 1931, I think it was. I think I was eight when I came to Bolton.

K: Is that when he worked at Euxton?

RW: No, at that stage he was a shop manager somewhere on Bradshawgate. He was a shop manager for quite a while and then it was in the late Thirties... there was a lot of unemployment then, he was out of work and then he got a job at Euxton and that's how he changed. It was just through losing work when there was a terrific unemployment in the thirties.

K: So where did you live in Bolton then?

RW: Woodfield Street, just down the road.

K: And where did you go to school?

RW: Well, St Bartholomew's School for the first few months, but then I went to the County Grammar - the Municipal Secondary School as it was called then.

K: And when did you leave?

RW: '37.

K: And where did you start work?

RW: At the Town Hall, in the Treasurer's Department. And I worked all my working career there.

K: Was it difficult to get a job in the Town Hall then?

RW: Yes, they used to have an exam about every three years, and I forget the numbers now, but it was something like three hundred people would apply for a job, and there would be about thirty jobs required in different departments of the Corporation and it was reckoned to be good catch if you could get one of those jobs (laughs.)

K: The Town Hall would be being extended at that time, wouldn't it?

RW: It had just been extended when I started, I went into the new part, but it certainly was within twelve months and I think about six months from when it was extended. The completion was '37 and I started in October '37, so I was into the new building when I started.

K: And do you remember the day War was declared?

RW: Yes, I remember we heard it, at something like about eleven o'clock in the morning. I had said for a long time, we'd never have War, because I didn't think Germany would... They could rule the world with their knowledge of science and technology and finance and everything. They were *the* leading country in the world at the time. And I said, there's no point in going to War, I was completely wrong in that. And I remember the day that we went to War... It was a bit of a shock for me, because I'd been so adamant that Germany wouldn't go to War. I don't know what day of the week...

K: Sunday.

RW: Sunday, yes I was going to say I thought it was a Sunday. And I think we were in the middle of a meeting when it was declared. I know what it was, somebody lived in the flat above the hall, he hadn't come into service he stopped to listen to the radio because we were expecting this, and he came in, in the middle of the meeting, announced that the War had started.

K: Which meeting?

RW: Salvation Army evening service. We call it a meeting at the Salvation Army.

K: Oh, I see.

RW: The evening service, and he came in and interrupted it and told us.

K: Did that make much difference at work at the Town Hall?

RW: Well, it did make a difference, because immediately the War started, they started losing people who were called up. I think we'd a reserved occupation in the Town Hall for people over a certain age, 28, I think it was, so we hadn't lost very many people. Some places had lost them before the War, you know, they'd been called up before the War started, a few months before. We started to lose them once the War started, and basically we didn't get them replaced, so it was fewer people doing more work. One of the things I remember about that, when I joined up, I was replaced by a woman, and that was the first woman that came into the borough treasurer's department! (laughs) They'd had one or two old men, retired, ex-members of the department in to help with the people going but, they started getting women, the first one that came in replaced me.

K: Did you enlist or were you called up?

RW: Well, I enlisted, because I remembered the effect of the First World War, all those who were commissioned, got jobs way beyond their capacity when they came back. And I thought well if I'm going away for the War, I'm going to do the same again, but that was my big mistake. So, I joined up, for two things, so that I could choose where I went and so that I could be in a position so I could get a commission, so that I could become one of the elite when I came back. But I didn't know that the Treasurer's deputy and my immediate boss there, thought that all those who'd gone to War had been skiving, and we'd left them at home to do all the work, and they were very upset about being left there. I mean, no question- when King George tells you to go and you go. I was in the wages office, the chappie in charge of the wages office, the deputy treasurer and the treasurer were all anti-war and thought we'd all be skiving, so you know, it wasn't like the First World War. I got no benefit out of my commission.

K: So did you choose which service you wanted to go in?

RW: Oh yes.

K: And which one was that?

RW: The RAF.

K: Where did you enlist then?

RW: I went to Padgate to do it. I was talking about watching the bombing over Manchester... There were two or three nights when it was a hectic bombing. She was watching from her bedroom window of Lady Holden's house, I was watching it from Padgate. I was half-way between Manchester and Liverpool, and they bombed both Manchester and Liverpool and we'd an absolute bird's eye view of this, either side of us.

K: What date did you join?

RW: I was eighteen, in 1940, and I volunteered as soon as I was eighteen, but, they'd a rush of people and they didn't actually call me up for another six months. It was towards the end of that year.

K: What was your basic training? Where was that?

RW: Training took place in England, up to the Initial Training Wing, in other words the first ... you did your ground work, and then the first flying training was done in England.

K: So you were training to be a pilot?

RW: Yes, pilot/navigator, it depended on your aptitude. You became either a pilot or a navigator. As a matter of fact I became both of them!

K: So you weren't put off by the sort of casualties that were taking place?

RW: No, no, it's a funny thing. You believe yourself that other people may be killed but you won't be. (laughs) It may sound like a good story, but I never felt fear when I was flying at all, of any kind. The bigger the risk I was taking, the more cool and calmer and clear thinking I became. It was

an incredible feeling. I don't know why it should be so, and I don't think many people were like that, but, certainly I became very clear thinking when the chips were down, so to speak and no panic. And I think that's one of the things that saved me, because a lot of people panic when they get into trouble.

K: So where did you do all your training?

RW: Most of it was done in Canada, and then I flew back from Canada and... well I'd done one OTU in Canada for coastal command but, when I came back they put me on another OTU for torpedo dropping and...

K: What does OTU mean?

RW: Operation Training Unit, in other words; you do the things you do on operations and you actually in fact, do one or two what are technically called operations, because they are, shall we say, easy operations. By the word 'operation' it means an action against ... dingo something against the enemy. Like, even if you never saw him, you were... Coastal Command, you were going looking for things you know. And one of my operational flights I spotted a submarine ahead of a convoy of ships coming into the Northwest Passage, between Ireland and Scotland, you know. And he was waiting for them, to get in amongst them and I spotted him, and so it was like, as though I was out on an operational trip. I'd been sent out to find this convoy and keep out of range of it, so that they didn't shoot me down (laughs) because some of them were gun-happy, you know, they'd shoot anybody that came near them (laughs) So, I was shadowing it in and I shadowed it in from in front of it, so that's what I mean by operational training.

K: What planes were you flying?

RW: Good questions... I flew seventeen different types of plane (laughs) and if you count different marks it would go up to about forty or fifty, because you have different marks in the same aircraft, where they have different size wings or different size engines, or completely different kinds of engines. So, it's like flying a new plane when you get in one of those, you know. But I flew seventeen different types.

K: And after you'd finished your training, where were you posted to?

RW: I was posted to Coastal Command basically, but somehow I got over to Transport Command, and most of my jobs were either ferrying planes, carrying passengers, or anything that Transport Command did. I was in Ireland for a while and then in Scotland. I think in my whole career I only had six weeks in England, all the rest, if you count Scotland and Ireland, it was all out of England. The last three years I spent in India.

K: Right, so it was a variety of flying missions really then?

RW: I flew from England to India and back. I did the long trip four times and it was quite interesting. One particularly... I never know whether to be ashamed of myself or pleased with myself, because, we'd come home from India in early December and we were told that because we'd had no leave in the almost two years that I'd been out in India, I could stay over the New Year, at home, on leave. And a Wing Commander, who was one rank higher than me, wanted to get back to India quickly, so he found out we were going back after, but he ordered us to come back and we had to go out to India before Christmas, to leave home. To say I was mightily annoyed was an understatement. So what we did, coming back... If you think it was freezing in England when we went back before Christmas, and the temperature drops three degrees for every thousand feet, and we came back at twenty thousand feet, deliberately I went up there, so we were something like ninety degrees of frost, or something like that, and this Wing Commander and his mate wanted to get back quickly, so we decided we'd get back quickly. And we flew up at that height and we left them in the back of the thing, which had no heat on. The cockpit had heating and if they'd have been nice to us they'd have been up in the cockpit but we put them in the back. And I often wondered how they ever survived the trip, because we did it in 35 hours 35 minutes, something like that, it was the third record flight for the trip. We just had an hour on the ground when we needed to re-fuel and then off we went. And there were two pilots of us, so we could take it in turns to (laughs) be in charge and I often wonder how they survived, because they'd have about seventy degrees of frost in the back of that aircraft, and for 30 odd hours, in that temperature isn't very good for anybody. (laughs)

K: You didn't check on them at the end?

RW: No, I just let them get out of the... I couldn't care less about them. I wonder whether I was right or wrong, you know? Whether I should have taken more care of them. I mean, you can imagine, I hadn't been home for two years and they took me away at Christmas time from my family, which to me, well it was diabolical, you know, it was unforgivable (laughs) but they ... they suffered for it!

K: So where were you based in India?

RW: Most of the time I was based in Karachi, but I had spells at Jodhpur and Allahabad but I was in Transport Command, so literally I was moving around. Wherever I was based, I was moving around all the time. I used to go circular trips round India, there and back across India. Some of it were ferrying an aircraft to a place and I'd have to hitchhike back, others were pure transport, you know, where you are carrying freight or passengers and you brought your aircraft back with you. It was a mixture of everything, in India, Burma, and Ceylon.

K: So did you ever see enemy action while you were flying?

RW: No, I say no. I three times came in contact with the enemy. I always say I'd what I call a satisfactory War, I didn't want to kill anybody... I, how can you say, I could easily be a conscientious objector, but I felt I had to go, but I was never in the position where I *had* to kill anybody. But I could say, honestly, I took as many risks as anybody did in the services. It was sort of very satisfactory in a way. I did my part, took the risks that were going, but I never had to drop a bomb on anybody or shoot anybody down, which to me was a satisfactory War.

K: What rank were you?

RW: I finished up as Squadron Leader.

K: Very good. Obviously flew solo sometimes, didn't you? Ferrying?

RW: Oh yes, I did something that I don't think very many people did. I flew a single engine aircraft, twin engine, three engine and four engine aircraft, but there weren't many could do that because we had no three engine aircraft. The Germans had one, and after the War, the Free French Air Force got the aircraft from the Germans, and they got this three engine aircraft. Anyway, so I've flown, one, two and three and four engine aircraft, which I think, well, it's almost unique. It can't be unique there must be other people, but it was unusual.

K: A lot of different kinds of aircraft...

RW: Yes, well, every aircraft's different, you see, and you have to be very careful, because although there's six basic controls, the throttle, the flaps, the pitch... there's six basic ones and then there's all different ones depending on what the aircraft's used for. Well, you've got to know them because if you're flying in darkness, if you're flying in bad weather, or if you're watching, when you're taking off and landing, you've got to know where everything is and be able to do it automatically. And when you're changing aircraft from day to day, it's quite a problem, but every time I changed an aircraft, I'd sit in the aircraft for half an hour, an hour before I took it up, and keep finding all the controls until I'd got every one of them automatically and knew where each individual one was without looking at it. And I would never fly one... and I think that's one of the things that kept me alive.

K: Were some of the aircraft that you were ferrying in need of repair? Were you collecting ones that had been repaired or..?

RW: Some of them were new ones, some of the were repaired ones, and I found out afterwards, one of the Liberators that I flew it had something like six thousand and eight bullet holes in it, repaired (laughs) it had been in action, and sort of been beaten up completely. I didn't know until after I'd flown it that it had this history. But, I mean, they were old and new, depended what needed doing.

K: Did you ever fly anything that wasn't really airworthy?

RW: I've flown them when, really and truly, I shouldn't have flown them because they're not fit to fly. But there's was a common expression on the go, in the Air Force particularly, if you didn't want to do anything, "Don't you know there's a War on?" - the War being on, you had to do anything that you were told to do, whether you thought it was risky or not! And it was a thing I got thrown at me many a time, because I was a cautious type. I liked to know what the aircraft was like and I used to check them thoroughly, both through visual inspection and also by running the engine and working all the things. But I was always getting told "Don't you know there's a War on?" (laughs) if I objected to anything!

K: Weren't you flying a plane once, that you turned back?

RW: Yes, on the Atlantic crossing. When I'd finished my training in Canada, they decided, rather than send aircrew back by boat and risk a whole boatload of 2000 aircrew being sunk, was would have, well, it would have lost us the War to lose so many aircrew at one go. They decided to fly them back and then you only lost one at a time (laughs) or a few of them. So I flew back from Canada. Well, I got nearly half way and my engine went, and I asked the navigator where I was and I was twenty minutes off the point of no return. The point of no return, when you get there, if you're short of it, you go back, if you're past it, you go on. Because you've not much allowance,

you're stretching it, going across the Atlantic with petrol limits. And I was twenty minutes off the point of no return when one engine went, and so I turned back, when I established where I was, and we got back. And the aircraft was over laden, that was one of the problems, completely over laden, and I could only get up to thirteen thousand, and I wasn't happy with that because that was where the frost was, and that's where you've a chance of your engine going. And it did go, but it didn't go like normal frost - suddenly stop, it just started going. I shut it down and turned back and the more I thought about it. Well it's something to do with the frost, and I couldn't keep my height because, it should have flown on one engine, but it had been completely overloaded, I should never have flown it in that state. But again, they told me there was a War on and I had to do it and I didn't question them closely what they were putting on, they said they were putting six bags of mail on, but what they didn't tell me was, six bags of mail that had all metal spare parts for aircraft! They wanted them over there, but they loaded me up so much, that I was completely overloaded!

K: So you got into some bother did you?

RW: Oh, yeah. Actually the engine started to freeze up, I know now what happened, but it started to go and so I turned back and I couldn't keep my height, and I was going down, and if I kept doing that I was going to go in the sea, two or three hundred miles short of land. And I'd been thinking of it very carefully, I knew it was to do with icing, but I couldn't see why or how. So I decided I'd get down to three thousand feet and I'd be well in the warm air and any de-icing it should have been cleared by now, and if it wasn't - well, I'd be in the drink. My supposition was right when I'd got to three thousand feet, it started, and I got back. When I got back I was threatened with court-martial. They said I'd come back to avoid going to England! I said "No I didn't. I came back because the engine went on it" and I was quite rude to the bloke. He was a senior officer, but I said "Before you start saying anything about what I did, I want to take the aircraft up and see if I can simulate what happened there." And most of the ferry pilots were civilians at that time and I went up with a senior civilian pilot to see what would happen, and when we got up to thirteen thousand feet, and the temperature and humidity were the same as it had been when my engine went - my engine cut out. I was never so pleased to hear an engine cut out (laughs) and the bloke who'd accused me of cowardice never apologized to me. He never saw me, he kept out of my sight, and I've never forgiven him for that. I wished I'd kept his name, but I put him out of my mind as not being somebody I'd wanted to know, you know. Because to be called a coward is the ultimate thing, you know?

K: Because, obviously you'd want to go back to England wouldn't you?

RW: Oh, I wanted to go back - Doris was there and I wanted to see her. And I wanted to get home, I hadn't seen my family for nearly two years, I mean, I was desperate to get back, and I went back and... I never got an apology from this fellow who accused me of cowardice.

K: So you didn't get back to Bolton much?

RW: No, I got back to Bolton after the Canadian trip, but within six months I was off to India, and I didn't come back 'til 1946, you know, long after the War had finished, so I didn't have much time in England at all.

K: So what did you know about what was happening in Bolton? You got letters?

RW: Well Doris used to tell me, whether she told me the whole truth, and anything but the truth, I don't know, she could tell you that. (laughs) But I saw what it was like, I was in Bolton, 18 in April, six months after the War started and then it took me six months before I was called up. I enlisted straightaway but there was a big waiting list before they called you up and it was the end of the year before I went up. So I had, shall we say, 15 months of Wartime in Bolton. I was in Ireland and Scotland most of the time after that and then I came back to England for about a few months and I went back to Bolton once or twice in that and then I went out to India, so I rarely saw Bolton, you know, once I joined up.

K: Were you ever in Bolton when there were air raids?

RW: Oh yes, most of the air raids that came near Bolton, and I think all the bombs had dropped. There weren't many bombs dropped on Bolton. There were just a few, I think they were all done at the early part of the War, while I was still at home.

K: Mmm, 1941.

RW: Yes, you know, I think I saw all that part of it in Bolton.

K: Were there any other Bolton people that you met in your service?

RW: Well, yes, it's interesting. I never actually met anybody, but I was stationed in one place in Jodhpur in India, and one day - I don't know why I did it, but I went in the office and I was

looking through all the names of the people. I don't know now why I was looking for, but I found about 20 people from Bolton on that station. Now I never met any of them. Nobody ever said they came from Bolton, and I didn't ask, but there were 20 of them on that station in India and I only found that out from the records. It amazed me there were so many and I hadn't met one of them. As I moved around a lot, I never got to know people very well, so I couldn't recognise any of them by their name.

K: I was just wondering... Obviously, you said you had a satisfactory War, but what about casualties, among your fellow servicemen in... where you were stationed, were there many of those?

RW: Basically, by the time I'd finished my training, 50% of those I'd started with had gone. I had a lengthy training, longer than most people, so that increases the number, but it gives you some idea of the fall-out rate. Most of the casualties were not on operations. Of the crews killed, something like, it was something like, one in ten or two in ten that got killed on operations as such, you know, against the enemy, because basically, none of the crews were experienced. None of them *really* were competent pilots, because they hadn't *time* to become competent pilots, they were dead before they had the experience so there was a big loss of crews in non-combat activity. I can't remember the actual figures, but it's a tremendous number that went out of combat activity, because they just didn't know how to fly. I was in five and a half years. I reckoned after five years I was a competent pilot, all the rest of the time, the aircraft flew *me*. After five years I flew the *aircraft* (laughs) if you can take what I'm getting at!

K: What was your Squadron called..?

RW: I was on Transport Command. I never had a unit, like, you know, they have associations for different Squadrons and different regiments and things like that. There was nothing that I could fit into, because I sort of bobbed here, there and everywhere and never got attached to any Squadron or anything. It was just, I don't know how to describe it. I never got near a Squadron or any fixed unit, I was just flying on transport, ferrying, and moving between one and the other. So I've never had any, sort of unit I could join (laughs) Not that I'd time to join it, but, I don't think I would have done in any case, but... And you got everything you could eat when you were out of England, you know, like in India, there was no shortage of food there, so I didn't really suffer much, except the first part before I joined up. Once I joined up, you know, with extra rations for aircrew and then out in India, no rationing at all, I missed most of the stuff.

K: You were shocked when you went back to Bolton weren't you?

RW: Oh yes, well. I saw Doris, her cousin Doris, another cousin and a friend walking towards me. I'd gone to meet them, Doris in town, from school and she'd gone out with three of her colleagues and they told me that they walked into town. And I went up Trinity Street to go up Newport Street so that I could intercept her and I saw these four people coming down Trinity Street and I didn't recognize them at first, but there was something bothering me about them. I couldn't work it out. And in the end, I decided they were suffering from starvation, just like I'd seen in India. It was exactly the same thing. I mean, I was in, in 1943 when the big famine, it was a very big famine, where everybody was starving and dying. You'd see people, if you went to the big cities like Calcutta, there were people lying on the pavement by their houses and shops and on the gutter-side and a lot of them were dead or dying and it was traumatic really to see that. And then when I came home and saw Doris and her relatives, I couldn't believe what I was seeing at first, but it was starvation. And they say there was no starvation in England during the War. Well there was. If you had access to a farm, or access to a shop that sold food, you could get all kinds of things on the black market. If like Doris and her cousin, they'd no mother at home to shop for them, they couldn't shop because they were working when the stuff was in the shop. You know, it would come in the shop mid-morning, but within an hour of what they'd got would be gone, you know, so they definitely were starving. So nobody had enough by present day standards, but some had enough to keep themselves well, but...

K: You said before the War, you used to keep poultry, didn't you?

RW: Yes.

K: What happened to those when you were away?

RW: I had to sell them. When I joined up, I knew it was going to be while before I was called up, because they couldn't cope with the numbers volunteering and you had to wait until they could find something for you. So I knew it was going to be a long time and I over-estimated and got caught short. I got a week's notice, and I had to sell them in that week, and in point of fact, one of the other fellows, there were a number of pens there, there were about six or eight of us at the place with poultry, I sold about six sheds and about three hundred birds for £20. Now even

in that day it was a ridiculous price, because could I have sold them, I could have got, well, five times that amount easily, but with it being a forced sale I had to take the only offer I could get. Nobody wanted them because they couldn't get food for them, see?

K: And where did you keep them? Where was the place?

RW: The back of Parkfield Road, what we used to call the tip. You know where the cricket ground is? Well that used to be a big tip, and there was a brick kiln there. They used to make bricks, they filled it in now, and it's got the cricket field on it, but the pens were all round the outside of it, you know? From the back fence, there was just about a foot wide walk, where people could walk round the thing, and you could look right down into this...

K: Before the War, you were in the Cadets, is that right?

RW: No, no, after the War started.

K: After the War started, sorry.

RW: And when I decided I was going in the RAF, they suggested I went in the Cadets.

K: Whereabouts was that?

RW: It was in Christ Church School, it was at the bottom of Deane Road. Christ Church was on one side and the day school was on the other side, and it was in the school.

K: And what did you learn there?

RW: Well, I learnt practically everything, because when I was called up, a pilot had to do Morse signalling of ten words a minute, so that he could use... You didn't normally have to use one, your wireless operator would do that. And you had to do sending and receiving and you had to do aircraft recognition, knew all the English and the German and Italian aircraft. And I learnt all these at the cadets, so when I got in the forces, I was way ahead of everybody. You know, I'd got my basic training done before I'd got in the thing, at the Cadets, which was very helpful. It gave me a good advantage. I could do about sixteen or eighteen words a minute, which was all a wireless operator had to do!

K: How many were in the Cadets?

RW: There were a lot of Cadets, in other words young lads, that were under age for the forces. That was the primary purpose for them, but when the War came, they had a class for those about to join the RAF and it varied because they kept going off, but I don't think there was more than about ten or twelve at any time in the pre-entry Cadets.

K: Do you know what happened to any of those?

RW: I never met anybody from Bolton at all, I was never anywhere long enough to get to know people. And I must have been bumping into people from Bolton all over the place without knowing about it. Because you don't say 'Hello, I'm from Bolton' (laughs) you just get to know them by the rank and whatever they are.

K: I believe you were in the Home Guard before you enlisted

RW: Yes, Anthony Eden, I think, made the announcement at about quarter to nine on May 8th. My brother and I got up, they said to apply to the police station, we were down there by about ten to nine. They hadn't heard the notice that they were supposed to be doing it, so they said come back in the morning. Now, it always annoys me - Bob and my number were 120 and 121, because by the time we came back in the morning other people had got in front of us. Our numbers should have been one and two, because we were the first there (laughs) It always annoyed me! We were the first to go down there, before they even knew it had happened. And we joined up, of course, straightaway, and we had a headquarters at Walker's Institute.

K: So you were at Great Lever really?

RW: Yes, but our post was on Raikes Clough, that's what it was called, you now, Raikes Clough. The other side of Manchester Road, you can walk through to Darcy Lever. Well, we had a hut, just part way down the hill, on a ledge. And we used to cover all that to more or less down to where the racing track was, up to, what's the road that goes down, just before Moses Gate? Goes down to Darcy Lever? Raikes Lane - We had that area, between there and Darcy Lever to cover and we used to go round. We started off with a pitchfork, as our only weapon, then we got one rifle, and, by golly, you used to squabble who had the right to hold the rifle (laughs). And then, eventually, and this always amazes me, they issued us all with a rifle and five rounds of ammunition and we took it home with us! So in effect we had to cover all that area there, from the racing track to Raikes Lane and down to Darcy Lever. And we used to patrol it and we eventually got our own rifles and we brought it home, five rounds of ammunition, left it at home.

You know, any thief could have got it! I don't know whether they lost any, I didn't lose mine, but...

K: How many nights did you train?

RW: Well, it seems daft to say it... I went to night school two nights a week, I was in the Salvation Army band and we had one night's practice a week there, I did all kinds of things, but I used to go on duty at least two nights a week, sometimes three nights a week and we'd patrol that area. We never found any Germans! It used to be known as lovers walk down there, you used to disturb courting couples, you went round, it was most embarrassing, every time you turned a corner, tucked way out of sight, a couple were there! (laughs) It was an interesting place to do it, but we never saw any Germans. Every time an aircraft came over and we only had the pitchfork and one rifle, we used to fight to get it, you know, so we could be on the receiving end, when they floated down, but nobody ever floated down.

K: It was to look for parachutists, wasn't it at first?

RW: Yes.

K: Did you have a uniform?

RW: Eventually, yes. At first, we had a band on your arm with LDV - Local Defence Volunteers and then it became the Home Guard, it became HG. And then we eventually got a uniform, the same as the ordinary soldiers had.

K: Were you attached to any regiment?

RW: Well, we had a company, and we were attached to the Lancashire Fusiliers. One of the sections of it was the Home Guard, they had the ones with the proper soldiers, you know, but we were in the Lancashire Fusiliers.

K: And did you have any, sort of, exercises? You did training and patrolling, but did you have exercises?

RW: Well, not so much exercises... We did quite a bit of shooting on the firing range, both up at Holcombe and there was one at Drill Hall on Silverwell Street. We did firing on the ranges in both those places and I don't think they were bothered much about drilling... We did do a bit but it were very fragmentary

K: Who was in charge, of your..?

RW: He was a little fellow. I can see him, but I forget his name, he lived somewhere on Green Lane at the time. And, because they were all local people to this area, that was in our unit. But he never had much to do with us. He was nominally in charge. I've somewhere got a picture of us marching down Walker Avenue, the whole lot of them, and he was in the front.

K: Anything else about Home Guard? I mean what were your other members? They'd be all ages wouldn't they?

RW: Oh yes, they were a mixture of youngsters and elderly people, because the middle lot were in the forces. The eighteen to thirties had been compulsorily called up. There weren't many of those. But they were all the younger ones and the older ones in the Home Guard.

K: And sometimes they used to have exercises, like when they would pretend to capture Farnworth Town Hall for instance. Were you involved in any of that?

RW: Yes, we did have exercises, but they were mostly on our own territory, you know, in other words, from here down into Raikes Clough, and to Darcy Lever. Well, it was mostly open country then. I went down to Silverwell Street and did some training, and I don't know whether you know it, on Moor Lane, there's the road that goes to the park on the left, if you come down Moor Lane, towards the high level, there's a road that goes towards the park, but then there's another little road, that goes up and round and joins that road again. Well, in the mill there, there was a place where we did some training there.

K: You had to resign when you enlisted then presumably?

RW: Yes, yes, had to formally resign yes.

K: Hand your uniform back?

RW: Oh yes, and the rifle. (laughs) ...were given another uniform and rifle when I got there, but of course, it was the Air Force not the Army.

K: Did you ever parade outside the Town Hall or anything, or in town?

RW: No, I don't remember... I can remember once, I don't know why, but we were marching down Walker Avenue. I don't know where we came from and I don't know where we went to. But

mostly it was just entirely you went on night duty and we had a bit of training down at Silverwell Street, but the training was mainly handling the rifle, you know? What to do with it, but it was very rudimentary.

K: What are your memories of VE Day?

RW: On VE Day, I arrived back at my base in Karachi, India, after delivering a Liberator to Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. An urgent message awaited me to say that the CO wanted to see me and that I was not to go off the station. On reporting to the boss I was told I was on stand by all tomorrow as it had been announced that the War in Europe would be over then, and most of the camp would be celebrating. I think 'drowning their sorrows' would be a better way of describing the actions on the 8th. A lot of the aircrew had been recently given advance notice that they were being posted to Liberator Squadrons to go on what would be suicide bombing missions to Japan to try and end our side of the War. However, for whatever reason, on the 8th May most of the aircrew were incapacitated by reason of consuming too much liquid nectar. Out in the Sind Desert there was only one way of celebrating or drowning your sorrows and it had an alcoholic base. As a life-long teetotaler I was probably the only completely sober person on the station and apart from emergencies, no flying was done. However, it was necessary to fly three aircraft that day. I flew all three. I did something I've never done before, I flew three different types of aircraft in one day. Needless to say, I inspected those aircraft with a microscope before I flew them, because in the first time in my experience some of the ground crew were less than at their best. (laughs) So that's VE Day!

K: What were your feelings about VE Day and the end of the War?

RW: Well, as much as anything, my feeling at VE Day was annoyance, because everybody said the War was over, and our War in India was just starting with Japan! So I was annoyed that people... literally, all the news from England was that the War's over now, and it wasn't, it was beginning, you know. And what was even more sad was the people in India just recently got postings to Squadrons to go and fight the Japanese, even those that had been away from the front in Burma. So we were all in a mind that we had survived the War in Europe and we were going to get killed on the last day of our War over there, so we weren't in a happy mood on VE Day. VJ Day was a different business, I mean, it was a question of how soon could we get home. At that time, I was offered a Squadron Leader's position if I signed on for three years. And I said 'No, I'm going home', so they said, 'If we reduce it to two years will you sign on?' I said 'No, I'm going home' 'If we reduce it to one year, will you sign on?' I said 'No, I'm going home' (laughs) very consistent. Anyway in the end they made me a Squadron Leader and I'll call their bluff well and truly, because, when they made me a Squadron Leader they gave me a choice of three different places I could go to. They wanted three Squadron Leaders and of course, at the end of the War, I was one of the most experienced people left at the Air Force, you know, because I was alive - most of them were dead, my competitors. So I had a choice of three, one was in the Cocos Islands, right in the middle of the Indian Ocean, between India and Australia, one was up in the Northwest Frontier and the third one was in Jodhpur. The route back to England from Calcutta was through Delhi, Jodhpur, Karachi, through the Middle East and across to England, so I chose the Jodhpur one, because I knew if I got in the other two places I'd never get home again. They'd get their three years out of me, simply by ignoring me. But I thought on the Jodhpur one, I'm on the route home, so I'll be able to wangle something when my time comes, and it came just about when I was due to be released, they had an aircraft that wanted taking to England, and being CO there, I volunteered myself and I'd no objectors, because they couldn't object, (laughs) I was CO there, and I trotted off home and got home in good time, so it worked out well. That was the basis of it.

K: Did you say you got married during the War? Could I just ask you about that? Where did you marry?

RW: Well, this is an interesting one we both went as Salvation Army, there, but the, the officer there - most of them never bothered - but the officer there wouldn't let you get married unless you were in Salvation Army uniform. And Doris didn't wear Salvation Army uniform, I did, so it wasn't a problem for me, but it was for Doris. So he said he couldn't marry us in the church but he offered to marry us somewhere else. So we got married by a Salvation Army officer in Rose Hill Church, which must be the first time a Salvation Army officer's carried out a marriage in there and probably will be the last time. They changed the officers at the Salvation Army and his successor couldn't understand why he'd refused to marry us. You see, he'd a totally different view.

K: And what year was that?

RW: '43.

K: And how long were you home for?

RW: Two days, I had a two day honeymoon. (laughs)

K: Where did you go?

RW: We went to Blackpool, wasn't it? Yes, we had two days in Blackpool, and it rained and the wind blew all the time. Delightful honeymoon weather!

K: Did you have a reception?

RW: Yes.

(Doris West: We went to Salvation Army in Great Moor Street, set up a banquet in there, we went...)

Because it was Wartime, we were only allowed to have fifty people there, and we got into a lot of trouble, because we made what was a wrong decision. Because we had such a big family, and we needed about one hundred and fifty or a hundred and eighty, something like that, we had to leave some of the family out. But we decided we'd take one from each family. Well, this didn't half... you know, you get a wife and don't let her husband go with her, you know, it would never happen there, you know, but to get enough people in, in the fifty, we had a problem and it did cause a lot of aggro' because those who didn't get there and thought they should have done... (laughs)

K: They probably never forgive you.

RW: Most of them are dead now, so... But they didn't forgive me for it and we didn't really know what to do, but we decided to get more families in, you know, get twice as many families in, then you're getting somebody as a representative, but it meant that you were leaving the spouse of that person out and they didn't like it!

K: Obviously you had to save up some rations for this reception, wouldn't you?

RW: Yes, everybody in the family must have saved up to do it. There wasn't a lot of food there, but there'd been a lot of saving up to provide the reception, you know, it was nothing like a reception you'd have nowadays. It was quite good for the time. People seemed to save some up, or, I hesitate to say it, but I'm sure some of them must have come off the black market (laughs) But I didn't ask any questions about where it came... I was only home for two days, I didn't have much time to...

K: And when did you come back again?

RW: Well, I had a few days embarkation leave. It was the tale of my life, in that I got a fortnight's embarkation leave, which you should have got when you left the country. But they called me back after about two or three days, so I was back home for a few days, I don't know the exact number, before I went out to India and then I wasn't... I came home once in the middle of that.

K: And then not until the end?

RW: No.

K: Well, perhaps just one last question then, did you find it difficult to adjust back to life back in Bolton in local government, when you'd been flying?

RW: Yeah. It was very difficult, because, you see, in effect, I'd left, I was CO of the station, I'd command of, well over a thousand people on my station and I was in charge of it. I was still flying. I wouldn't take the job unless I could keep flying. Normally, you get grounded when you get a job like that, but this eventually finished up at this place and I made it quite clear that... what I expected of it, I wanted to do it my way and go home when I, it was my turn. I was in charge of the place, so I could do what I wanted! Everybody had to put their medals on, were told once a month that they had to wear their medals, but I never wore mine, because there was nobody to tell me (laughs) that I had to wear them, so I didn't. But it was interesting.

K: So how long before you felt that you'd adjusted back to life in the Town Hall?

RW: Well, it was a long time, because, you see it was a different thing. I went back there and I was a minnow in the, you know, I was at the back of the stream, everybody else was ahead of me, knew more than me. And I don't know, but I think there may have been a bit of resentment that I'd come back and trying to, sort of, work myself back to where I was when I left. And they thought they'd been there and they deserved it, but, I mean, you can argue which way you want, but it was a big change to come back and go to doing that sort of thing. From a position where I was my own boss, and I called the shots and did everything and according to my way of doing it, to go back and be a little underdog and do what you were told. It was a cultural shock to go back, but there you are, it was part of life.

K: Did you miss flying?

RW: Oh yes... You see, one of the things that I've always said, the aircraft flew me for five years, the last six months I flew *it*. And then one day, after having risked my life for five years learning to fly, I never flew again... It seems like such a tremendous waste of money. I did work it out at the time. I reckon to get that training, even in those days, it cost something like about a million pounds. You know, for petrol, fuel and wages and keeping the aircraft in the air, and one day I stop it and it and all that's wasted. It seemed...

K: Could you have been a commercial pilot?

RW: Oh, I could have done, yes, quite easily, but Doris wanted me home and I'd got one child then, and I wanted to come home. But they wanted me to stay on, because, obviously, I flew all different kinds of aircraft and I have counted up, but of the civilian aircraft that were flying at that time - there were something like seventeen different types - I'd flown about thirteen of them in the Air Force, so I could have transferred fully competent onto any of these aircraft and, you know, it seemed a waste to lose it, but there was no way. I'd have been three years in England, three years abroad, three years in England, three years... Well that's no way of bringing children up. So I decided I had to give it up, but I was a bit reluctant.

K: Difficult decision.

RW: It's a difficult one, because five years, it took me to become qualified. I took a lot of risks in doing it and you know, many a time, I got near to going. So it's a pity when you waste that sort of thing, but it was the only thing to do.

ENDS