

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Brian Bishop

July 10, 2012

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PREFACE

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Brian Bishop

July 10, 2012

Interview: Brian Bishop (BB). POW at E715 Auschwitz.

Date: 10 July 2012

Interviewer: Duncan Little (DL)

Camera time code start: 04(h):43(m):45(s)

Transcript timecode start: 00(h):00(m):00(s)

[DL] - Duncan Little

[BB] – Brian Bishop

[00:00:00]

[DL] Uh great, at any point if you want us to stop, we can stop okay? Um, and er, we can take a break if you want to take a break alright, okay?

[Clap]: 00(h):00(m):14(s)

[DL] If I could just start off by taking your name – if you could say who you are please

[BB] Brian Bishop.

[DL] Okay, and how do we spell both your first and second name please?

[BB] B, R, I, A, N, B, I, S, H, O, P

[DL] Okay, so when were you actually born?

[BB] In bed with me mum.

[DL] But in terms of the actual date, when, when were you born?

[BB] 30th October 1920.

[DL] Okay, and whereabouts were you born, and what was your family background?

[BB] Born in er Portslade in Sussex.

[DL] And your family background – were you an only child or did you have other children...

[BB] No I was the first child, and what...my parents weren't married.

[DL] And what did your parents do, and what do you remember of your childhood?

[BB] My father was in the ... [MUMBLES] ... I don't know if he was in the Army at the time, or in the RAF, but it was one of the services. He did, erm, 12 years in the Army, 1907 to 1920, 1919, when the war finished, and er, got out the Army, couldn't get a job, and they were advertising for people for the RAF as it was then, and erm, so he joined the RAF for six years, and then I came along.

[DL] And what was your training – what did you do, an apprenticeship or ...

[MUMBLING]

[DL] ... when you left school, what did you go on...

[BB] I left school at 14, I was, my headmaster wanted me to go on to er higher education, but er, only my parents couldn't afford the ... or my clothing, so I failed at the examinations [MUMBLES]. And then, er, my headmaster then he was upset about all of this, got me a job in the erm, paper, in the erm the office, the paper mill.

[DL] And whereabouts were you when, when war broke out? What was...

[BB] I was in the Army, up at Catterick.

[DL] So how did you join the Army – when, when did you join the Army?

[BB] In...in February 1939.

[DL] So...

[BB] ...in London.

[DL] And what made you join the Army at that point?

[BB] I wanted to do my service, and my father did.

[DL] And war broke out, and were you already being trained at that point?

[BB] I'd done my basic training, and, and hadn't quite finished my trade training, and er, but then, they moved it over to look after the service men being called up, and we er, we became the police for the service men, if you could think of anything so daft, the rookies, telling the sergeants what to do, and [MUMBLES], that's the way it was.

[DL] And your memories of, er, war breaking out?

[BB] Er, only, er we was in a, er camp, just up from our barracks as we were kicked out of our barracks to let the service men, and by then they were calling up the civilians as well, they'd taken over the barracks, we got, we got moved into what was called the Gann, the Gann, it was called, and er, I think it was er, somebody got a newspaper, there, there, they come down and told us all that the, war declared that morning.

[DL] And when war was, had been declared, um, where, where, where were you sent?

[BB] [MUMBLES]

[DL] Where were you sent?

[BB] I wasn't sent anywhere, I was, I stayed there, for a little while, and I was going out to, er, things in, I was on draft to go out, things in China, but of course that had to be cancelled and er, they, they suddenly roped up quite a few of us and decided that the 50th erm, 50th division, the territorial division ... [MUMBLES] ...a lot of skilled labour, I got drafted into the 50th div.

[DL] And where were they deployed?

[BB] Well, as far as I was concerned, I, at Darlington, we moved, so, about 16 miles I think it was.

[DL] And from Darlington, where, where were you sent from there?

[00:05:00]

[BB] Well, well, from Darlington, we moved down to erm, Oxfordshire, where we did er war training, and when in, in the case of myself, was driving and that, cause er,

the 50th div was going, were going to be the division that, when er, when all the other troops were in the trenches, the 50th div was in the background, if there was a gap anywhere, we'd rush round with our cars and fill it in, which of course didn't happen, but erm, that's where, I learnt to drive, and then in er, January, erm, January 40, we'd been there, two, two or three months I suppose, and we went to erm, we went to France.

[DL] And what happened in, in France?

[BB] Well we was, we was stationed in the, one of the local town halls for a while, and then they started erm, moving some of us up the (mumbles), then we gradually crept up the country, wise, stage by stage, until we reached um, a suburb of Lyon. Then, er, I mean, nothing, er, nothing much happened then, I can't remember actually, we actually moved up into Belgium and er, we weren't up there long, we came back, and we spend most of our time in blooming Greece. And then, er, they moved us back again, and er, May the 26th I think it was in 1940, the, erm, the order came beyond, that all surplus personnel to head for the, to head for Dunkirk. And er that's what they did, all the electricians and things like that, but er anyway... I stayed and from there I moved up into a place called Abbey Kirk, into Belgium for a few days, and then they said, erm, about six days I suppose it was, and er, they told me erm I could go home as well. So we had to walk down to the er, the beach, and er there wasn't a soul anywhere, then, and all we got when we got the was some blokes living in the, in the sand dunes waiting for a boat to come in, and they erm, and after that all we got was stratling from the Germans, going all the way up and down the beach – stratling. And er, I had um, er, erm, er, a left-hand quarter master, and he said er there's no good staying here he said, there's no boats they don't look like they're coming, and they just walked down into Dunkirk. So I said right, there was about eight of us, trundling after him and er, [MUMBLES] I never noticed anyone got injured or anything, but by the time we got down to the road, the road just outside Dunkirk, there was only me and another fella I didn't know left, and I don't know why, but I had blood all over my shirt as well, but where I got that from I don't know but it wasn't mine. And then, so we walked down into Dunkirk, initially towards the mall, the mall, er you know stretching out to the sea, and there was I think about three breaks in the mall, and we thought of course that's been hit, it, and as we got nearer there was not boats along there either, and so, er, the chap with me said let's walk on further past the, there, and we'll see if we can erm, get a boat, somewhere in the fishing area, or something like that. So I said "okay", but as we got near to the bottom of the...a big boy shouted out "Ay, you two, come here", and we walked down to some naval officer, wanted us, and when we walked over where he was, was all got stretchers, with wounded on them, and he said "pick up one and take it up to the boat." And I said right, so, I couldn't very well argue with him so I thought don't know where the boat is, unless they, it's going to come in later, so we'd, we went up there and of course we had to lift it over these gaps, they'd put gangplanks across the gaps in the mall, and of course we were tired by then, and we had a hell of a job to the lift the bloke up and carry him along, and he was unconscious, and we got over the other side and I'd had enough by then and told him, the other chap that needed to erm,

have a rest, so we, about six of them at the side of the malls, so we sat there and, a little while, some of them come down the mall then, another Naval officer, must have been a doctor or something, and he said, wanted to know what we were doing, having a rest, and he said right, went to look at the fellow and said well you can't take him with you, he's dead. And he said, "just tip him out on the sea, and go back to get another one."

[00:10:30]

[BB] So that's what we did, went back, got another one, and, and we ended up carrying him all the way up the mall, and we were getting near to the top of the mall, and we could hear voices. And er, we wondered, where, this is all in the book by the way, what I'm telling you...

[DL] I know, it is all in the book, but I think it's important for, for the archives, that you explain the background as to, as to how you ended up at E715 Auschwitz, so what you're doing is explaining a bit about Dunkirk, and from Dunkirk, where you go from there...

[BB] Well we got further up, and we could hear these voices, and we got up then, and we could then see the boat, and the boat wasn't on our side of the mall, it was hidden in all the rubbish on the other side of the mall, and it was erm, a paddle steamer. The erm, O God, the, I've gone and forgotten its name, I've been on it after the war as well, and er, so we... [COUGH]. Er, a naval bloke came over to there and said 'give me one hand', and we lifted him on board. And that's what we did, and first in, the other bloke standing there, I turned around, I was going to leave and said 'hey where you two going?' – 'going back to get another one', and he said, 'no' he said, 'we're leaving shortly and we're not coming back'. And he said come aboard, and he made us come aboard, so that's what we did. Certainly it was getting dusk, the paddle started going, we pulled off and er, apart from the fact we nearly tried to turn the boat over on the way, that thunderstorm, and we ended up in Dover the following morning, just about dawn.

[DL] So you were one of the last, the last members to be evacuated from Dunkirk...

[BB] [MUMBLES] ...small boat so can find any that come out. My [MUMBLES] didn't come out for another week after me, but [MUMBLES] he was further down the coast

[DL] And then, when you came back to this country, how long was it before you were redeployed to er, to Africa? When you went to Africa, when did you go to North Africa?

[BB] Er, well, we got that, that was erm, June, I was, some, June the first was the day I left Dunkirk, so it was then June the second that I arrived in Dover, and then er, we erm, we, we were loaded onto trains which take, took us through, I forget the name of the place, to big fields outside Aldershot, and er I was there about three days and I was in Aldershot, and that picture there, I had that taken, and er, then er, I, they sorted us all out there, and they sent me out to, up to erm Cheshire, Tatton Park in Cheshire.

[DL] And from Cheshire, how long was it before you were sent to North Africa?

[BB] Oh, what day, we moved in on, moved down to Somerset [MUMBLES], and [PAUSES], we worked down in Somerset with the erm, I got the job going out and visiting planes that had crashed and that, but that's another story, and er, in the end we went down to Swansea with our cars and everything, and dumped everything in Swansea, and came back by train, and a couple days after we moved up to Gourrock in Scotland, and erm got on a boat called the [PAUSES]...

[00:15:00]

[BB] ...oh I've thought of the name of the, erm... *The Medway Queen* was the erm, what I came out of France in, oh the *Costa Rica* is what it was called, the *SS Costa Rica*. And we got on there, and we er, didn't know where we were going, and we thought after a few days travelling, we were erm travelling to Canada. But we went, but halfway to Canada, then we turned South, went South and went into erm, Freetown at Sierra Leone, exactly the same as er, er, Dennis Avey did. Only difference between him and me, er, he left there and went round and restocked at...

[DL] When would you say you arrived at Sierra Leone, when would you say you arrived into Freetown, what date?

[BB] Erm, three weeks after we left Scotland, so must be about the second week in the New Year.

[DL] Of 1941?

[BB] Yep

[DL] And, you then started to fight against Rommel, and you were captured. Can you explain how that happened?

[BB] No, no... The... 41...I got, we went up to Suez, and I spent some time erm, course we had no, that's right, we had no erm, no transport. All the transport we left at home at Swansea, and we thought well the transport be there waiting for us, but as it goes they hadn't even left England, they had nine weeks to erm Egypt, and they er, so we hung about there, and they said it was er place called, er, pardon me, before we started this conversation I could remember them all. And erm, [PAUSES], and most of us had dysentery and things like that, and they said we were there in the acclimatization period to get used to the er, the climate in Egypt. And then we got moved up to Mersa Matruh, where we stayed for some time, just getting out on recces and things like that, and I think I spent most of my time in the sea, I think I spent most of my time in the Mediterranean swimming, and then they moved us up there to the, the border with erm, Libya. And then moved into Libya, and went round Libya, and came back again and erm, then they erm, said that erm, [COUGH] Tobruk was occupied then and we were going down, we went in the, for the relief of Tobruk, which I think was November the 12th, 41, and we went from then down to, chasing the Germans all the way down past **Durno**, and down to Bengasi, and erm, and [MUMBLES], O God, I can't forget the name again, and er... Anyway, the er, the Germans had got a bit organised by the time we got there, and we got pushed all the way back to er, more or less back to Tobruk, and er, a place

called Beryl's Sevl, and we got surrounded by the erm, the Germans, and eventually we ran out of ammunition, and of course got captured.

[DL] So you were captured by Rommel, and, very briefly describe what happened when you were captured.

[BB] I was still with my truck but when we saw the truck, erm, when there was too much ammunition flying about, I rushed down and got in a trench, and there was a couple of blokes in there with machine guns, and the one at the far end got hit, dropped some grenades or something in the trench.

[00:20:00]

So the fella, who I didn't know of course, said 'I'll go up and use that, cause it's got a Lewis gun', he said 'you use this as a Brent gun, you've used a Brent gun before?' I said yeah. So I used the Brent gun, and I can't even remember the Brent gun emptying, but something knocked me over. Anyway the next thing I saw was a boy shouting '*Rells, Rells*', and I looked up and I, standing on the edge of the trench was a blooming great big German, from my height he looked about ten feet tall, and with a hand grenade, with one of those hand grenades in his hand, waving it at me. So I crawled out there, and over the other side, about a hundred yards away you can see where all the, the infantry blokes were, so I went up there and joined them. We stayed there for some hours, and the, er [COUGH, MUMBLES], the German interpreter came along and er, and shouted out in very broad Yorkshire, 'anybody here from Yorkshire?', and I looked behind the bloke, and most of the chaps were East Yorks. And they all looked [MUMBLES], he says 'he can't be a German, he speaks broad Yorkshire', and he really was, and he came there, but nobody would answer. And, but somebody further down obviously did, and we eventually found out in the end that he, he'd been brought up in England and erm, when, his mother had married a German soon after the First World War, and moved to Germany with him, and after, when he was still a baby anyway, she left her husband and brought him back to England, and of course he was brought up in England. And just before the war started, the erm, his father died, his father left him everything in his will, so he had to go to Germany to erm, deal with that, and once he'd finished he went to get a visa to get back to England, and they wouldn't give him one. They said 'no, you're German, you'll go in the German Army', and of course all he wanted to do was get cash rich and come back home [LAUGHS]

[DL] And at this point, did you see Rommel at this point?

[BB] Only in the distance...

[DL] ...only in the distance

[BB] He took, he pulled up in his car, stood up in the car and that's all we knew, and then this interpreter came down and told me what he was saying, and he was apologising for us, cause he said the Italians morale is very low cause they've got no prisoners, so he's handing over all the prisoners he had there to the Italians. So that, and so that's what happened – they put us in lorries and carted us all down to the coast, and dumped them on the Italians

[DL] And you were then sent to an Italian Prisoner of War camp, er briefly what were conditions like for you at the Italian Prisoner of War camp?

[BB] Well, er, despite what everyone's been saying they weren't bad, the main thing that was bad about them was the lice [MUMBLES, COUGHS]. I mean you go through your trousers and you could kill four or five hundred lice eggs in one go. And what we used to get, I don't know where we got them from but we got some Italian cigarettes and that's all we used them for, for lighting them, and going all the way down the seam and killing all the eggs. You had to do it every day.

[DL] And what...

[BB] The only trouble with that, our camp, in sections, I was in the top section and we had an RSM there who thought he was still in the blooming Army and tried to make us do [MUMBLES], and things like that, bloody nuisance actually.

[DL] And sanitary conditions – what were the sanitary conditions like there?

[BB] O they were alright, by account yeah

[DL] And then you were moved to a separate Italian camp, or did you stay in...

[BB] No, I was always in trouble in one way or another, and I presume the only reason I got it... And they moved quite a lot, I was up to another camp PG52, which is up north in, north of Italy, and I stayed there, and that was a good camp.

[00:25:02]

And very little lice in there too, because they had, er they used some of the senior soldiers to go round and search people's clothing to see if you got any lice. And if you had lice you got moved into a separate barrack until you got cleared of them.

[DL] And in terms of the sanitary conditions, was there a camp you were in whereby there was literally a bar over a trench, and that was effectively your toilet facility?

[BB] Yes when we, when I first moved to Auschwitz

[DL] Okay, so you then moved to a German...

[BB] I don't even think it was a bar at first, I think it was a rope

[DL] So you moved to...from Italy, to a German POW camp, and er you heard about the working party. So what made you want to join a working party and what then happened?

[BB] Well, got moved up to, we all got dumped in the main er, British Camp, God gone and forgotten that as well

[DL] Stalag VIIIB?

[BB] No, anyway, and only been there a little while, and they all had separate compounds, and the only ones we saw were the Canadians – the Canadians were in a big compound on top end, and there was a road they could travel up and down, and they had a lot of freedom, and er, I don't know where most of the blokes on my

camp was, I would say I was there more or less on my own, everybody seemed to have disappeared, got somewhere, and a bloke come along and started talking to him who's been in the camp for some time and erm, I was on about being hungry and that which I was, and he said 'why don't you get on the working party?'. He said 'you get better fed on a working party', and er yeah, how do I do that, and he said 'well, they come round every so often asking for volunteers for working party.' I said 'okay', so he said 'what you want to do is promote, promote yourself before you go'. I said 'I can't do that, I got no stripes', well I don't know how he got about it but he got stripes and everything for me, and I promote myself to a corporal. And er, he came about soon after and said there's a bloke at the gate taking names for working party, so I went down there and he said, the bloke said 'can you speak in, er, German', I said 'no', he said 'okay I'll put you down as an interpreter then', I thought that's a bit daft, so I went back, collected my things, and we all got paraded in there, put on cattle trucks and of course carted off – we didn't know where we were going. I thought we was – he told me about people who'd gone and worked on farms and things like that, and how well fed they were and I thought I'll have a bit of that, and also, a better chance of getting away too

[DL] So these were the cattle trucks to er, to Auschwitz that you were on?

[BB] Yeah

[DL] What were conditions like on the cattle trucks?

[BB] We were cramped in there, but no worse, not as bad as the ones that we travelled in, that we travelled up from Italy to erm, Austria. They were worse because the erm, the guards on the cattle trucks – of course there's no toilets or anything – they'd give us one of these old tin baths, to use as a toilet for everything, and of course after at least twenty in my truck, that was in the middle of the floor, and by the time we'd er got up to the Brenner Pass, it was full, and of course it used to splash over, all over the place. We were all a stinking mess, and you couldn't get rid of it so... First time we got, they stopped, come to complain, they opened the door and you couldn't even lift it to take it push out the door, had to tip it out the side. Anyway, that was er, that was bad enough...and er

[DL] And how much water, how much food, and how long did this journey actually last for?

[BB] Oh blimey...

[00:30:00]

[BB] ...can hardly remember now it was er, couple of days I suppose, didn't take any longer, and we ended up in a camp, er, just outside Munich [COUGH], which was only a transit camp, the camp there that was all British Officers, there was our camp, and the camp on the other side of us that was all erm, all Russians, and they were, and trying to talk to them was fun, but... And then they, they shipped us off to erm, Stalag VIIIB, that's what I was trying to think of in the first place. And then it was Stalag VIIIB, and I met this fella who erm, got me on the working party...

[DL] ...On the working party. And the, the journey which you then went on, which we were talking about, where you had the overflowing of the bath and the problems there, that journey to Auschwitz which you say lasted a couple of...

[BB] ...We had no, we didn't have any tubs or anything, that was coming up from Italy to...

[DL] Into Germany? Into Austria?

[BB] Into Austria

[DL] Okay so you go from Austria across to, to Poland at this point?

[BB] No, we went to Germany, to Stalag VIIIB

[DL] And from Stalag VIIIB across to Auschwitz?

[BB] Yep

[DL] And how long did that journey last for?

[BB] Can't remember, it didn't take long, might have been a day, or a day and a half, I must have slept on the journey surely

[DL] And again the conditions on that particular cattle truck?

[BB] Oh that was alright

[DL] And whenabouts was this? Do you remember the year, the month?

[BB] The year and the month for what?

[DL] Er, for when you arrived at Auschwitz

[BB] Yes, erm, October, 43

[DL] Okay, and what were, what was your reaction upon arrival at Auschwitz? What did you see?

[BB] Of course we didn't know what was going on there, only thing we saw, the top, the railway line ended, didn't end, but where we got unloaded, the top of the I G Farben industry factory and of course we had to go and walk all the way down the side and round [MUMBLES], then about another mile down to the camp. And er, walking down the side there, we could see the people there behind the wire with their pyjamas on, and we didn't know they were Jews or anything, and one lot we saw was carrying a great big long, like a telegraph pole, and about ten people on it, two big fellas, one on each end, and little fellas down there, they were just hanging on. And of course everyone started taking the mickey out of them, saying it was funny to be stupid to have the two big fellas on the end, they were actually carrying the pole, but then afterwards of course we realised they were Jews, or told they were Jews, and afterwards when we went to work in the factory, course we obviously knew they were Jews.

[DL] And how long did it take for yourself and your fellow POWs to actually realise what was going on and what was happening to the Jews at Auschwitz?

[BB] Well I was, can't remember, trying to remember the first day I arrived in there cause [COUGH, MUMBLES] put on a working team of about six of us, and erm, one of the chaps decided he was in charge, er a Welshman, started bossing us about, and started on this hole we had to dig. I said 'if you want a hole dug, you can dig it your blooming self'. I just cleared off. I gave, I thought, complained, I don't know what happened to our guard, and I went behind the factory, and later on I came back and see how they were getting on, but I never did any digging.

[DL] But in terms of how long it took you to discover what was happening to the Jews?

[BB] Well that's when I found out, when I went for a walk round the factory

[DL] So what did you see?

[BB] I didn't think really anything, I just thought you know Jews working, I didn't see anyone being cruel then, but later on of course, I saw some of the Capos were so vicious and... [COUGH]

[00:35:06]

[BB] ...and that, you very rarely saw any German soldiers, it was mainly the erm Jewish Capos who were causing most of the trouble

[DL] And what, what did you see when they were causing the trouble? What did you witness?

[BB] I, if one of them come over and spoke to me or something there, and the Capo saw him, he'd come rushing over with a club or something and give them a good old clubbing. And I, I couldn't speak whatever language they were speaking, so he was obviously telling the bloke that he wanted to speak to the British soldiers. And it was some time later when we actually managed to get into odd buildings I looked up that had been put empty, that what they do, that one or two of the Jews might get in there. Or in one case, I went to go in a place where there, a couple of Greek Jews, who were carpenters, who were building things for the Germans. And I managed to get into where they were, and talking to them, but again, you couldn't say much, most of it by sign language, but even after I'd been there a long time, most of the languages we spoke what they called plat-Deutsch, again [MUMBLES]

[DL] And what were the state of the Jews you saw in the factory? When you first walked around the factory, what did you see, what were they wearing, their condition, their complexion, their health?

[BB] They looked, they didn't look too bad cause all the bad ones, obviously all the bad ones had gone to the crematorium, but I always remember when [COUGH], a new lot arrived, and there was a Jew there, must have been six foot six, and he weighed thirty stone at least, and everybody said at the time 'cor, ain't he lucky, how being so fat'. We saw him again six, could be six months time after that, and he was there, he was still there fit as a fiddle, gone down to eighteen stone or something.

[DL] In terms of the general condition of, of people who were slave labourers in the factory, what was their general condition, their demeanour, er the way in which they walked, erm...

[BB] Most of them weren't too bad, cause as I said they wouldn't have them down there, but any time they didn't want them there of course, shoved them off [MUMBLES] or got clunked. One time when, I don't know what happened but, I don't know where the Germans were, but there was quite a lot of them went berserk, tried to climb the wire, and the Germans just shot them down, that was up the other end of the camp, about half a mile away I suppose.

[DL] Did you see that?

[BB] No, I heard the gunshots; I didn't know what it was for

[DL] And what atrocities did you witness when you were at E715 Auschwitz?

[BB] [MUMBLES] None really, it was all treatment of the Jews. The worst part as far as I was concerned was when the crematoriums were working cause of the wind was in that direction, the smell of the crematoriums, that was erm, sickly and unbelievable [COUGHS]

[DL] You talk about the ill treatment of the Jews, what sort of ill treatment did you see when you were there?

[BB] Mainly that...the...er...Capos, the Germans never needed to bother them much. Everything was left to the Capos, most of the Capos were...

[00:40:00]

[BB] ...very unpleasant, and er wouldn't talk to us, and er, and the only times, once when – and this story is about in three different books, told by three different people [MUMBLES, LAUGHS], I got to know, very slightly, er, two French Jews, who came from, both of them lawyers, they came from Toulouse. One could speak just a little bit of English maybe understand, but it was difficult, and erm, I think the second, the second day I actually spoke to them, he came in and he had, under his uniform, his jacket he had a, an old, torn jersey, and all this bits missing in the front of here, and I remember at the barracks, I had a piece of knitted material about that size, and I thought that would do then fine, it'll fit nicely over there. I tried to explain to him when I saw him the next day, what it was for, and they were pleased to have it, and I said 'if you know anyone who can knit, you can strip it all down and knit it all up'. But anyway, the following morning, his brother came in on his own, and er, I asked him where his brother was, he said – I don't know what he said but I found out afterwards – he was telling me he was in a box about two foot square, about two foot high, and they had to spend the day in there. The Capo, he'd put it through the Germans when they got back that they'd got this bit of material, [MUMBLES], and er, I thought well I'll see him the following day when I come back, but unfortunately that day I'd got moved onto another job and I never saw them again.

[DL] And in terms of the gas chambers themselves, how did you know when people were sent to the gas chambers? Did the Jews tell you – and if so how did they let you know?

[BB] The main gas chambers were of course about two miles away, and the main crematorium part, cause I'd never seen it, never known it had existed, it wasn't till the BBC took me there years later that I went actually round it, but we weren't allowed to go that part there, but er...

[DL] I think what I'm asking you, in the book you recalled you would sometimes ask where so-and-so was, and there would be a response that the Jews would then give you to explain that the individuals had been sent to the gas chambers.

[BB] That's right.

[DL] What, how did they actually tell you if...

[BB] [MUMBLES], ask where they were, and we used to say without a soap and towel, and they used to nod their heads, course when they went to the gas chamber, they thought they were going for a shower, which they were but it wasn't the right kind of shower.

[DL] And in terms of conditions for yourself at E715 Auschwitz, what were conditions like for yourselves?

[BB] Fairly good, I was, and we had our own sick bay, and er, and I, I only spent once in the sick bay, I had er, something, something wrong with my stomach, I can't remember what it was all, now, and er, that was when we got bombed and er, erm, thirty eight people got killed. Course the doctor came round, asked me if I was fit to do something, he said, "good," he said "we got to open up the other part of the sick bay, which wasn't in use, find some beds and that, for the wounded [MUMBLES], and I spent the day at, sorting the wounded out.

[DL] And that was the bombing raid of 1944?

[BB] August 44 yeah

[DL] August 1944, and what was the reaction of the British POWs after the bombing raid had happened?

[00:45:01]

[BB] [MUMBLES], well if there was any reaction, I think there was a bit of argument about whether it was the Americans or the British had bombed us, but I think it was the Americans, but er. Cause they, I don't know, we was, we always knew when our factory was going to be bombed, cause of the limits that the planes could fly, they couldn't go any, there was nowhere to go, erm, and they erm, used to come over and bomb, bomb, bomb the factory, and very rarely hit the factory, they hit the woods round the factory. The first time we got erm, we got bombed, erm, I was erm I bloody well can't remember what I was doing, there was a big pipe there, around about six foot, really big pipe, you could just about stand up in it and erm, I thought I'd be safer in there so I went into the pipe when they were bombing and the pipe moved once or

twice as it vibrated so to speak and er when I came out couldn't find any bombing, they had bombed all the factory, all the woods and had missed the factory completely. So after that, if there was any bombing then I would just stay in the factory, by then they built some shelters in the factory for the Germans to go in but we used to sneak in as well but we got turned back once or twice by the Germans who said it was for them and not for us (laughs).

[DL] And how close was E715 Auschwitz and how close were you to the actual concentration camp?

[BB] About three miles. There was a local work camp which was about two to three hundred yards on the other side of the field next to us.

[DL] And the work camp, did you ever witness any abuses happening there, in terms of...

[BB] I never heard anything, the only noise we ever got there was when they marched off to work in the morning, they used to have a band playing. So, when they left to come to work and they used to be at work by the time we had got out of our camp and gone but they had to come past the entrance to our camp to get into the factory.

[DL] So, what time would that be, normally in the morning?

[BB] Dawn

[DL] Dawn. And on one occasion, you did mention to me about makeshift gallows which you saw?

[BB] Oh, yes, in the field, between the erm, there was one with about four (pauses) yeah, one was empty I think, there were four blokes hanging there and er I don't know who they were, they look like civilians.

[DL] So, were they Jews or were they...

[BB] I don't know. They didn't have any, they didn't have their name on to tell you what they are.

[DL] How many hours did, in your estimation, did the concentration camp victims actually work for in IG Farben? Did they receive any breaks, what was their treatment like in your estimation?

[BB] What, the Jews?

[DL] Yes.

[BB] Well, again, they used to disappear around about lunchtime and, of course, when we started there we got er big erm canisters full of soup and the first one I opened, it stank so much that I just couldn't err drink or eat it. You see like erm brown cabbage leaf and things like that floating about in it. And er the first lot we got we just tipped out and sent the cans back and, of course, we found it very, talking to, somebody was talking to the Jews and they said the Jews would drink it. From then

on we got our cans and we didn't take it to the Jews we just left it so that the Jews could find them, they could come and take a look and the Jews had them.

[00:49:57]

[DL] Brian, I'm just going to check. Was there any sound issues with that, Chris? (Camera: Yes, he was just covering up the mic). Okay, if you could just repeat the story you just told me with the cans with the soup because there may have been a sound issue with that. So, what did you do with the cans with the soup?

[BB] Well, we opened them and we just couldn't, well, we couldn't, they just absolutely stank (coughs) and erm so somebody said they had given theirs to the Jews so that's what we did. We left them in a place where the Jews could find them and we would go back later and get the empty ones so we knew they had them and we used to do that every day then because we weren't going to do it. We were told once that somebody had been up near the cookhouse where they made it and they'd seen erm one of the Jew girls who worked up the cookhouse had opened up one of the cans and had peed in it and er, and er, I said to the bloke who had told me, do you know which can it was because it would taste better than ones we had.

[DL] Did you believe that as a story?

[BB] No (laughs) I don't know if he saw it or not but I thought it would be funny if he had.

[DL] Because that strikes me as being a very black sense of humour, was there a black sense of humour, if you can describe it as humour?

[BB] Well, I don't think any of us had senses of humour actually.

[DL] Why, why do you say that?

[BB] I don't know. There wasn't much you could be funny about, could you? You'd say a lot of things that were stupid rather than laughable.

[DL] And would that, the story which you've just chosen there, would you class that as one of those stupid stories which...

[BB] I don't know, it was just what the bloke said to me and that's what my answer was so I never gave any thought then, or since, whether it was stupid or funny because I don't think it's stupid and that was it.

[DL] How did the British try to help the Jews, I appreciate you've just spoken about the soup you would leave for them but were there other areas where you tried to help the Jews by providing cigarettes or any other sort of support.

[BB] Well, the cigarettes, we needed them ourselves and of course we had only got them in our parcels and erm we always wanted them for trading so I have no idea where Avey said he had got all of the cigarettes from to give to that Jewish Capo, well, I just don't believe it.

[DL] And the Red Cross parcels which you would receive, how frequently would you receive them and what difference did they make?

[BB] Well, that varied a lot. Sometimes we got one a week and sometimes we got one between two and, in Italy, it was worse. I think one time we got one between eight but the idea of one between eight with only about ten items in the box (laughs).

[DL] And did you use the Red Cross parcels to then barter for additional food in the factory?

[BB] Mainly in the factory, yeah. Things I used to trade in was like in chocolate so I'd say to people there, tins of something for a bar of chocolate and then I'd take the chocolate down the factory and barter that.

[DL] That would be bartering with civilian employees.

[BB] With civilians, yeah, Germans and Poles. Mainly Poles (coughs)

[DL] And civilians, they were from nearby villages?

[BB] I presume they were, I don't know where they come from but they could be very helpful in some ways and I bought things off them and traded with them when I could. Language troubles were always the trouble cause er most of them when they spoke to you spoke....

[00:55:01]

[BB] in a mixture of plat-Deutsch, which was a mixture of German and Polish. I suppose they got used to it over the years of using it and we couldn't understand.

[DL] How many civilians were employed in the actual factory?

[BB] Cor, blimey, I've got no idea. Couple of hundred, perhaps.

[DL] And the food which you obtained at IG Farben, how did you smuggle that back into your camp?

[BB] With difficulty. Well, the main things I used to bring back were either bread or eggs. Eggs, I managed to get elastic bands from somewhere, and I used to put the eggs down in my socks, near my ankles, with elastic bands holding them in place around my ankles and I could get five or six eggs in each leg, assuming I could buy that many legs, I could only normally buy one or two and bread. Of course I was pretty slim and the loaves were long and tapered at the ends and I used to have one each side of my stomach and to get about I used to hold them tight as I had a flat stomach, not what I've got now, and the only thing that used to amuse me was I used to think what people would think of the bottom end – what it tasted like! But nobody complained so.

[DL] In terms of the makeshift radio in the camp, were you aware of the British having made a makeshift radio?

[BB] Well, I think, I don't think there was one in our camp. I think there was one in the E715 camp and I know there was one in the top camp in Italy. There was one in there as well.

[DL] Sorry, to clarify that, you're saying that there wasn't a radio at E715 or that there was?

[BB] Well, I don't know of one in my camp but in the other camp, down the road, somebody told me that there was one. (Coughs)

[DL] Obviously you're saying there was a difference between the camp you were in and the other camp in terms of the actual name. The naming of the camps. So, one being E715 and the other which...

[BB] Well, they both had the same name because when I was in the other camp it was E715 because I've still got letters which I've got at home. Well, which I've got here which has got E715 on. Then when I moved up the other camp, they still come through as E715.

[DL] The weather which you experienced when you were over in Poland, in Auschwitz, there was intense cold during the winter months.

[BB] Yeah, it was.

[DL] How did you cope and how did the British try to help the Jews who were working in the factory in the intense cold.

[BB] Well, nobody tried to help. What we did down in the factory is erm to get some of these old oil drums and we dug holes in the side and then scouted every bit of wood we could and then after a time, unfortunately, everybody's trousers down here had gone rotten and of course they'd bend their knee and it'll all split and of course we had a room in the camp where blokes were repairing trousers all day and then you'd take your trousers in there and get them repaired and then you'd walk around with patches on the knees of your trousers.

[DL] We've already touched on the soup which the Nazis supplied. Did the Nazis supply any other type of food to you?

[BB] Yeah. The erm, a cheese that was er was tasted awful and er what else did we used to get? You'd get some bread, oh no, that was when we were in Austria they came up with some loaves of bread only small, grey, and the date on them was 1938 with letters on the side and we'd be given one of them each and we'd cut them up...

[01:00:00]

...to make sandwiches or something and they were absolutely sodden and we'd toast the bread to dry it out and, no, what was the darn stuff, no, I've forgotten.

[DL] You didn't play football as some of the others did

[BB] No, no football in our camp, no room in our camp, in camp 1 or what you call 711 because on the side of the field sloped up there and they played football up there and it wasn't until I was talking to Doug Bond, years after the war, that I even knew that they had played football down there and that Charlie Coward had got English football jerseys to play in. That was all knew to me. You know, twenty to thirty years after the war.

[DL] You didn't play football then. But you did go running. There was a running track there?

[BB] Yes, that was the same place they went round the field. When I was first there, it must have been before Christmas and er somebody suggested we just run around and they reckon four times round the field was a mile and I reckon I ran around it twice or something and then packed up but one bloke went around 17 times (laughs).

[DL] How else did you spend your time when you weren't at IG Farben? So how else did you spend your time – what sort of things did you do at E715 Auschwitz?

[BB] Well, we had er a bridge club in our hut. Well, it depends whose about and who's there to play but if we had enough players to play then we'd play bridge.

[DL] You ended up in the POWs' hospital during your imprisonment at E715 Auschwitz – why did you end up there and what were conditions like there?

[BB] Very good. We had a doctor, I know his name, it's on all my papers but I can't remember what his name is now. But he was in the South African army but he was an Englishman.

[DL] You say conditions were "very good," the documents show that there were issues surrounding conditions within the hospital itself and certainly in terms of the Nazis coming round to ensure that those who they deemed fit to work would then go to the factory to work. Did you find that in your experience?

[BB] Well, what, we had a sick list every morning with how many he was allowed to have on his sick list. But if his sick list didn't meet the quantity he was allowed then one or two blokes who weren't sick used to join the list to make the number up. But, er, I never did that anyway.

[DL] What actually happened at the start of 1945 as the Russians approached?

[BB] Well, we could hear the guns in the distance and someone said it was fifty miles away and what distance it was I don't know but we were, all the Jews were being moved out and going by us and goodness knows where they were going and eventually we all got rounded up and made a big column and I, well, er, you got our route, I gave you the route of where our column was, I kept the places all there where we stopped at.

[01:05:00]

[DL] And the Jews when they walked past you. How continuous was this line?

[BB] Oh goodness knows how many there was or where they were coming from.

[DL] But was it a continuous column of people that were walking past you for hours or days?

[BB] Oh, no, I think they were smaller groups than that. They went past us for 15 to 20 minutes I suppose and that'll be it and then later another load would go past and they might be bigger or smaller. We never took much notice other than to wonder

how the hell they were going to manage. And, of course, when we left, we went the same route as they did for a part and, of course, all along the sides there was bodies lying everywhere and obviously they had just died and been thrown up onto the bank or whatever. I mean we never stopped to look to see if they were dead, we just presumed they were dead. I'd be surprised if they weren't anyway but we were so cold and we all ended up with frostbit (coughs) and I got frostbite in my feet and lost my toenails on my right foot and my right foot still isn't right. The toenail doesn't grow properly.

[DL] And what was the feeling among your fellow POWs from E715 Auschwitz when you were sent on this march, what was the collective feeling at that point?

[BB] I think the collective feeling at that point was to get away from the Russians because we heard rumours that Russians had, some POWs had got down there to the Russians and all the Russians had done is shot them. Now whether that was true or not we didn't know but from everything we heard about the Russians then it most likely was but I met some Russians once inside the camp and I don't know what they were doing there and they obviously were (coughs) prisoners but they seemed to be able to wonder around where they liked, the same as a lot of the women Russians. They were able to wonder around wherever they like. In fact, I didn't get to know to speak to but (mumbles) one of them was the strongest women I had ever seen. In fact, someone told me that in the Russian Army she was a gun loader on one of the big guns.

[DL] What evidence did you see along the way that the Jews were taking the same route that you were taking?

[BB] Only about the first couple of days and I don't know where they went but we went off in a different direction.

[DL] And how many bodies do you estimate in those first few days?

[BB] Oh, I have no idea. It must have been in the hundreds anyway.

[DL] And were there any preparations made for this march at all? In terms of..

[BB] No, we just grabbed our stuff. Of course the trouble was, we had to move out as the Russians had bombed our camp and had dropped Molotov cocktails on it and my building that I lived in got burnt to the ground and even then you could smell the oil in our clothes where it had splattered all over the place and of course then they rounded us up the next morning and marched us off and that was it.

[DL] How did you actually survive during the long march? You spoke about getting colic at one point.

[BB] Oh, yes, well, that was my fault. Entirely my fault. Bloody stupid.

[DL] Could you explain what happened?

[BB] Well, we stopped at this sugar beet factory and we couldn't find anything to eat and there was nothing there....

[01:10:00]

[BB] often you would get to these places and find bags of potatoes or something especially if you stopped at a farm but this place there was nothing but sugar beet so somebody reckoned you could cook sugar beet which was fairly common and so we found this big metal things (mumbles), what are they called?

[DL] Pots? Large metal pots?

[BB] Big round things, use them in cookers as well, big tub in the top, they've got a name but I can't remember what they're called. Anyway, we got one of these and used to use them with potatoes and boil them and somebody would, half the time, potatoes would have gone to mash and a bloke would be that cold that he would use two hands to plough in and put them into the tub that you'd feed out of. This time though we had the sugar beat and I was dishing it out and er everybody was happy and when we got down to the very bottom we only got some juice and that down the bottom and everybody had gone to sleep so I thought, we ain't going to waste that, so I found something and drunk the lot. I felt alright. Then the following morning we all marched off and the more we marched the more pain I got and then I couldn't stand it any longer and I was curled up as a ball in the grass when the doctor came along and I couldn't straighten myself out so they forced me out straight and they got two of their biggest blokes to walk beside me and they couldn't hold me up so they told my hands to the back of the horse and cart that the Germans used for and I was forced to walk that way for hours and I can't really remember much about it I suppose and in the end I seemed to be walking normally and I was allowed to go. Everybody was passing me and I was lagging behind and I was ended up and everybody had gone and I ended up walking down the road on my own and ended up in some little village and the only thing I remember about the village was two roads around you and you'd got a green down the middle so you had two roads and I had to go to the lavvy and so I dropped my trousers in the middle of the road and I never done so much in my life, it was great big piles of the blinking sugar beat. And then the civilians came out and I could hear blokes chattering and I went down into a building and a bloke upstairs said, "Hey, I've saved a place for you!" So I climbed up to where he was and the following day I was alright. I don't know what would have happened in the doctor hadn't made me, I suppose I would have just laid there and died.

[DL] What was the atmosphere with the guards like on this march?

[BB] Oh, that was good. One time when I was walking along there and I was frozen, suddenly, this guy come along there and he had a big handful of snow. I didn't know what he was going to do, I don't think he noticed, he just smacked me in the face with it. I thought, "What the bloody hell did he do that for?" And one of the chaps said, "Your nose had gone white," he said. So he was being helpful.

[DL] What happened to the horse with the horse and cart?

[BB] That got into such a state of health they killed it. I've heard loads of different stories about it. I'm sure that a couple of chaps who used to work in the butchery went behind a barn and cut its throat....

[01:15:00]

[BB] but I read other stories that said it was shot but I never saw it happen and I never heard any shots so anyway when it came round the following day we got some soup which wasn't that bad but I don't know where all the heart, lungs and other bits went or who got them.

[DL] How many miles a day did you roughly travel and did the weather conditions actually improve for yourselves?

[BB] Weather changed day by day but it wasn't so bad when it got a bit warmer. But it is difficult now to remember.

[DL] When were you finally freed by Allied soldiers.

[BB] We got down into Bavaria and we were staying in a big barn (laughs) which was quite nice grand, but I and another chap managed to get up into the loft and it was full of clothing and we, I've still got the jacket somewhere, anyway, when we got back to England it was all taken away from us and we were there some day and we saw this small little tank coming across the field towards us and it was the Americans and all the chaps wanted to know was if they had some sweets on the tank so they gave us some sweets and cleared off again. Later the doctor told us to stay where we are and not to try to head for home as quite a few fellows I think did and quite a few said, oh, I'm not going to stay here and started to head for home but I stayed there and then of course the Americans come around with their Dakotas and flew us down to France.

[DL] When was that? The month.

[BB] After the war finished.

[DL] So was that April or May 1945?

[BB] That would have been April 1945

[DL] April 1945 and the march started in January.

[BB] End of April as I got home on May the 12th

[DL] When you arrived home how did people react towards you, did you ever tell people that you had been to E715 Auschwitz?

[BB] No, the er, they knew I had been a POW there but I never bragged about that. I don't think there was anything to be proud about at all and the following day after I got home we had a big bonfire in the road and that was it.

[DL] Did you suffer from any psychiatric problems based on what you had seen whilst you were at Auschwitz?

[BB] Well, I must have done because I had my six weeks leave and I had to report back to a camp at Haywards Heath and there they had to bring us up to date on drillings and such and they had young lads there who had been in the army for six months telling us all how to fire a bren gun and how to dismantle a bren gun and, of

course, we weren't interested, we knew how to do it, we'd done it enough times before but we did it but we didn't do it fast enough or at least that's what the young NCOs said, mumbles, I remember one time when we had to through all hand grenades into a big net and I threw all mine in, six in, and okay the bloke after me, caught the edge and fell out. He got failed.

[01:20:00]

[DL] The psychiatric issues which you experienced after the war, what actually happened when you were discharged from the army? Were you medically discharged from the army?

[BB] I was medically discharged.

[DL] And why were you medically discharged?

[BB] I can explain that to you when I was at this place and in days off we would go down to Brighton for the day and get a train back from Brighton was at half past nine at night and, of course, we had never been ready to come home by then so we'd find out the first train out in the morning, sleep on that, go back the following day. Anyway, someone reported me anyway and someone said the trickcyclist wanted to see me so anyway I thought what the bloody hell is a trickcyclist? I never bloody well heard of one. So, of course, I went along there because it was a psychiatrist I had to see and he was a big fat Jew he was. He must have weighed about twenty stone, sitting there, and he asked me how I felt and things like that, and I said, I feel fine and as far as I'm concerned there's nothing wrong with me and he said I'm going to send you to hospital for a month to get yourself sorted out and I said alright and sent me then to Southern hospital in Dartford, Kent, the asylum was next door and anyone who didn't get better went over the wall and into the asylum. There I did everything wrong that I should have done, of course I didn't realise it, so I would go to see what a job was then wait until nobody was looking and clear off and then walk around the woods.

[DL] You describe your psychiatrist as a big fat Jew quote unquote – why do you say that? What makes you say that?

[BB] Well, I'm surprised to see him there he was so bulky.

[DL] But, how did you know he was Jewish?

[BB] He had a Jewish face, he looked Jewish, he might not have been Jewish then. I thought he was. Sounded like a Jew.

[DL] Did you ever actually go back to Auschwitz?

[BB] Yes, I went back to Auschwitz with the BBC didn't I?

[DL] When was that when you went back to Auschwitz?

[BB] Well, you know that better than I do. Six years ago?

[DL] It was round about six years ago. When you went back to Auschwitz with the BBC what was your feelings when you were there? How did you feel when you were there?

[BB] I had no feelings when I was there. I had an enjoyable three days and visiting, of course, I went around all the parts of the crematorium and all part of the complex which I knew existed but I had never seen before, of course it would have been, weren't there as public viewers so we got there at seven o'clock in the morning and of course we went round and saw everything – just the three of us and as the trippers were coming at nine o'clock, we cleared off.

[DL] Do you feel that you have ever been haunted by what you saw when you were at Auschwitz?

[BB] No. I don't think so.

[DL] Yet you would have witnessed atrocities in the factory itself you would have seen, as you said earlier about the people hanging from the gallows, you would have heard about the gas chambers, you would have smelt the crematoria, were you ever haunted by that?

[BB] No. It was not as bad as seeing your mate lying in a field, shot up with all his guts falling out in his hands. To me, that is far worse than seeing some Jew who died through exhaustion or something. Now that does upset me, still does, but things like that never bothered me at all. I lost too many friends. That's what annoys me with the modern things....

[01:25:00]

[BB] Everyone who dies abroad gets brought back to England in a coffin. All we did with them was dig a hole in the sand, say 'Good luck, mate' and fill them in again. Often as not, of course it being sand, couldn't find a bit of stick to mark where they are, unless they've gone down there with a machine to mark the bodies then they're still lying there now. Things like that really annoy me and when you read about the way people are treated, when we came home, no-one cared if you were alive or dead now they're all made a fuss of.

[DL] Did anyone care about your experiences at E715 Auschwitz?

[BB] No. Nobody knew I had been there until something had cropped up and the only people I spoke to were the chaps I knew who I used to write to and in hospital they told me, I had been in hospital for two months, which I didn't want as I wanted to do more time than my father did and when I left there I went to say goodbye to the staff nurse and she wished me good luck and said that when I went in there I was the most ill mannered pig she had ever met in her life and I looked at her in amazement and wondered in what way was I ill mannered? I didn't ask her I was just so flabbergasted at what she said so I think there must have been something wrong with me and I didn't know what it was.

[DL] Finally what did you go on to do for the rest of your life?

[BB] When I was discharged from the army they asked if I wanted to go on a course and I went to South West Essex Technical college for six months to learn about electronics and from there I did every job imaginable for electronics until I retired even up manager level, I was a manager when I retired at 65.

[DL] When did you retire?

[BB] 65

[DL] What year, do you remember?

[BB] 1985

[DL] Is there anything you want to add, Brian?

[BB] No, I've said too much already.

[01:25:00]

ENDS