

Morecambe Bay Partnership is a charity working for people, nature & heritage in Morecambe Bay and to keep Morecambe Bay special

Defending the Docks Project:

A small collection of oral history recordings, capturing WWII memories in and around Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, January 2023

Cumbria County Council, The Factory,
Castle Mills, Aynam Road, Kendal, LA9 7DE
Tel: 015397 34888

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

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INTERVIEW NO: 04
 INTERVIEWEE NAME/S: Denys Vaughan
 YEAR OF BIRTH: 1930
 INTERVIEWER/S: Jenn Bell
 DATE OF INTERVIEW: Tuesday 21 February 2023
 LOCATION: Grange-Over-Sands
 SUMMARISER: Jenn Bell

0.00 – 3.52	Denys Woodhouse Vaughan. Born 1930 in Didsbury, Manchester. Spent first 6 months living in the home of grandfather's sister, who was a professional opera singer. Breastfed. They came to live in mother's family home – 44 Old Roose, Barrow-in-Furness, with grandfather Francis Woodhouse and grandmother Ethel. Grandfather travelled then eventually worked in Barrow shipyard as a driller.
3.52 – 5.24	Uncle Ivan, mother's younger brother, a travelling accountant, born 1912. Denys worshipped his uncle. Denys' mother called Phyllis Amelia Woodhouse, born 1910.
5.24 – 7.45	Mother Phyllis was unmarried when she had Dennis and catholic families were expected to have the child adopted but Phyllis refused. His biological father (confirmed through DNA) was called Christopher Fagan and lived round the corner from the Woodhouse family home, on the same estate. He said his biological father never acknowledged him and he instantly took a disliking to him. <i>He mentions 'dolichocephalic' – an abnormality of skull shape</i>
7.45 – 9.25	Denys thinks his conception was an accident at a Christmas party. A nonsense cover story was cooked up. His mother Phyllis was sent off to have the baby in Didsbury.
9.25 – 11.54	Stepfather was John Vaughan, a courageous man. Phyllis and John had 3 more children.
11.54 – 16.55	Jobs were hard to come by at this time, so John got a job as an estate joiner in Stevenage and Phyllis got a job as a housekeeper. Denys as a little boy visited the

	old lady of the house despite his mother telling him not to – but he thinks she may have had an infectious disease. He rebelled as a child and tells a story of trying to run away from Stevenage trying to get back home to Barrow. He was rescued by a neighbour and taken back to the house. They returned back to Barrow in 1932.
16.55 – 20.05	Stepfather John's family lived in a big house on The Strand near The Docks in Barrow in a multiple occupancy house. There was a Mrs Jones with 2 daughters. Denys and family lived in two rooms of the house, and stayed there for the duration of the war. Denys learned a lot from Nana Vaughan, John's mother. Nana Vaughan's husband was the boss and did not cross her husband. He worked on the sailings ships but lost his job and became a drunk – they moved from Maryport in 1912 when there were jobs advertised at the shipyard.
20.05 – 22.30	Stepfather John worked as a joiner in the shipyard but he wanted to join the merchant navy, even though his medical history would have meant he didn't have to fight, but he wanted to fight. Denys' mother was 'lost' in the war, constantly worried and anxious about him on the U Boats, and dreaded a telegram coming. <i>Denys mentions his sister was mad with him for joining the navy – he likely means she was mad with him in hindsight of all that happened.</i>
22.30 – 24.00	Denys talks about the declaration of war by Neville Chamberlin – with local policeman Burt Tyson and one of his mates Edgar Moss.
24.00 – 26.40	Street lights went out across the town, gas cut off, partially blacked out cars, buses and bike head lights. Erection of a shelter. Smell of smoke and tea leaves
26.40 – 31.58	Construction of Walney airfield. Air gunnery school. Denys talks about some of the contraptions, turrets and aircrafts he remembers. The Miles Magister / Hurricane aircrafts. A whole squadron killed – the defiant hit the deck at Yarlside mines. An obscene site, bits of body. Denys saw this with 'the lads' – the group of boys he used to hang around with.
31.58 – 33.46	Ernie Atkinson was Denys' best mate. He lists some of the boys in the gang. The gang were from the same street or nearby would hang out together. The air crash site was very upsetting.
33.46 – 43.21	Story about a barrage balloon. A pit was dug out which filled with water and dead wildlife, which then became the concrete slab. The balloon arrived with an abundance of wire. Corporal Phillips was in charge, a friendly guy called Charlie and a bit of a comedian John Tidy who was always doing daft things. A mess, manned telephone and table – Denys used to hang around the site delivering messages for the servicemen (RAF). He was asked to find the number of one of these balloons. During one of these trips, Denys believed what he saw was an "extra-terrestrial fireball" at the time – likely to be a meteorite.
43.21 – 44.27	Story about a barrage balloon going up in flames during a thunderstorm.
44.27 – 53.00	Air raids. <i>Think this was at Priors Path house</i> - Parachute bomb fell under a hedge and blew a neighbour's hen house to pieces – their windows were smashed, front door ended up the stairs and roof gone. And bombed Rose cottage nearby. They had to move out, to no 10 The Strand. Bomb damage at other houses. Grandmother Ethel wouldn't share the air raid shelter so she would take the family to hide in the lavatory. Uncle Ivan broke his arm in that blast. Priors Path residence became uninhabitable so they were evacuated immediately to The Strand house.
53.00 – 54.25	The unexploded bombs drove Denys' mother 'stark raving bonkers' – she would put the kids in the pram and walk with Denys into the countryside to Cooper's hay barn in a village called Leece.
54.25 – 60.02	<i>Where was Priors path?</i> About a mile from town centre of Barrow – Abbotsmead.

	Denys' stepfather left his joiner job at the shipyard to join the merchant navy. Denys talks about some of his stepfather's journeys. He was desperate to go to sea but because of his health he spent periods of time in and out of hospital – double hernia and the problems with his arm – and spent periods of time at home and out at sea. He was very lucky in that he did make it home eventually after the war.
60.02 – 62.18	Stepfather did have spells of time off back at home – In 1942-3 he was asked to make coffins for all the dead bodies as the mortuary couldn't keep us. One of the coffins he made was for his old boss Archie. When he went back to war he started working on tankers which Denys thought was a bit safer.
62.18 - 64.33	Denys says his mother aged 20 years during the war, smoking incessantly. Denys became the boss within the family home, felt under pressure, he 'clouted' (hit) his younger siblings and says his mental health suffered during that time.
64.33 – 66.50	Denys shares what he remembers about the smokescreens. His friend Ernie lived across the road from where one was lit on Friar's lane.
66.50 – 69.25	With the lads they would pinch whatever they could get. Yarlside tennis courts were turned into allotments – they would collect planks from this area to make a hut/headquarters for the gang. They would steal wire netting to make a hen run and wood to make a hen cabin.
69.25 – 74.18	Denys' half siblings were called Jean, Jack & Ronnie. He remembers a teacher at the school on Cambridge Street called Miss Mackintosh who encouraged Denys back to school when he was bunking off. During this time he was collecting shrapnel and bits for his treasure box. He remembers a strict headmistress. Talks about his mates, not being very academic.
74.18 – 76.12	Denys was not evacuated, but a lot of the lads in his gang were. None of his family was evacuated.
76.12 – 83.50	Story about a gang of lads stealing ammunition from the stores on Walney airfield in about 1942. Denys was given some of it by this gang. The stolen goods appeared at the grammar school. And the police got involved. One of the lads Ian Sinkinson was arrested – he then appeared about a year later in uniform! He finished off as a commissioned officer. Denys remembers firing a Sten gun with a lad called Stubbs. They got away with it.
83.50 – 85.22	Denys recalls extracting cordite from a bullet and chewing it, and it would give you a high. Then he would pull the pieces of cordite out and light them and it would create a bang – he thought it was great fun!

[End of tape]