

Wales and National Service Collection

Mervyn Rees (1935-)

Saundersfoot

National Service RAF (1957-59)

Date of Interview: 29.4.26

Location of Interview: Saundersfoot

Interviewer: Hugh Morgan

Camera: Neil Davies

Introduction

Born in Dorrington, Wiltshire in June 1935, Mervyn Rees lived in Wiltshire, Surrey and Hampshire throughout his childhood. He was a wartime evacuee and recalls the Luftwaffe using Salisbury Cathedral as a navigational reference point as they flew onto to targets elsewhere. He also recalls witnessing a line stitched along the ground close to him which had resulted by machine gun bullets fired from a low-flying German aircraft.

In fact, Mervyn's experience was certainly not unique for several wartime children interviewed for the Age Cymru Dyfed's West Wales Veterans Archive, recall similar experiences, where the Luftwaffe turned their machine guns onto children, women pushing babies in prams and other civilians, on streets in villages and towns and in the countryside. Films and books tell us about the indiscriminate strafing in the summer of 1940 by the Luftwaffe of civilians fleeing the advancing German armies along packed roads in France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Yet it is not so well known that in southern and south-west England and south Wales civilians seen out in streets, in fields, were also treated as targets of opportunity to be machine gunned by the German Air Force. What a frightening time in which to live!

At 21yrs after being conscripted for National Service in 1957 and then kitted out, Mervyn was posted to Blackpool (possibly RAF Squires Gate), for basic training. Whilst today Mervyn is a little hazy of exact times and places, back then with his natural ability for as he says, "taking things apart and putting them back together", the RAF spotted his talent and put it to good use, initially in an armoury working with weapons. Mervyn was the posted to No 71 MU (maintenance unit) at RAF Bicester where he was involved in the recovery of crashed aircraft, including transporting Hawker Hunters for repair.

A momentous period in Mervyn's life came when he and other RAF National Servicemen boarded a civil airliner, dressed in civilian clothes alongside members of the public. Landing in Canada, the National Servicemen were then transported in stages by the RAF to Christmas Island, one of several of coral atolls, in the Indian Ocean.

There, the RAF were engaged on Operation Grapple, the UK's top-secret series of atomic and hydrogen bomb tests, the bombs being dropped from Vickers Valiant bombers and from hydrogen balloons. Mervyn was on Christmas Island in 1958 when Britain's largest-ever nuclear detonation took place.

Mervyn speaks eloquently about his time on Christmas Island and especially of his participation as a human guinea pig, remarkably, being exposed on no less than 5 occasions in the British Hydrogen (H-Bomb) test programme. He recounts witnessing a blinding light as the bombs exploded, seeing the veins and skeleton of his hands with which he had shielded his eyes. Standard practice for these RAF human guinea pigs was to be sent back home to the UK after just one test. However, Mervyn's engineering ability meant that he was ordered to remain on the island – for *'a year and one day'* during which time he witnessed a further 4 H-Bomb tests.

Unsurprisingly after being eventually demobbed in 1959, Mervyn went back initially engineering and construction but before long, his past on Christmas Island began to catch up with him. This led to debilitating spinal and related illnesses requiring surgery and long stays in hospital, ultimately restricting him to the use of a wheelchair.

Mervyn knew that continuing with physically demanding occupations would be beyond him, at least for a while, for he had first to learn to walk again, undergoing intensive rehabilitation. Changing career direction, Mervyn trained as a health psychotherapist in Manchester, and as he describes it, made a living delivering 'talking therapies' in the NHS, but also in the application of muscle therapies.

But then his mobility becoming stronger, Mervyn hankered for a return to more manual occupations, though as a sideline continued with his work as a health professional including assignments abroad. One day walking through Sarajevo (the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina) he was forced onto a bus by British military and taken to a large hall, and at the head of it and on the stage were senior political and military figures. He and others had been brought into be witness to the signing of some form of declaration or agreement. Mervyn recalls treating victims of the terrible Bosnian war and also witnessing snipers opening up on civilians in Sarajevo.

Later in his career, Mervyn became a registered motor manufacturer, designing and making his own make of sportscar "Dragonfly; but also a housebuilder, and built his own house in Saundersfoot, with wonderful harbour and sea views.

Today in 2026, and looking back to 70years ago, Mervyn feels that National Service should definitely be brought back. He says 'it *makes you a real, whole person*'.