

Veterans' Voices

Charles Horne

Transcription & Glossary

My name is Charles Horne. I was born in November 1925 in Prestonpans, but my people originate from Port Seton actually.

Head of the Family: 44 secs

I did okay at the school, I had French and Latin for three years, that was a big help at the fishing. But whenever I was 14, I was the eldest of eight children and my dad had a berth for me. Whenever I was on one of my uncle's boats, whenever I was 14 to help to support the rest of the family.

He actually, my father, sailed the trawlers and do ten to 14-day trips. So, I was the head of the family when he was away.

When my mother was pregnant and that, I used to have to run in the middle of the night, to get the doctor or the midwife. I'd get a shake, run Charlie and get the midwife!

Herring: 1 min 25 secs

I went to sea in a fishing boat called the Thorntree and eh, I sailed as cook, which wasn't a very good job, because, I was violently seasick, and eh, they all smoked thick black tobacco you know, the five of the crew smoked black tobacco and spitting on the stove, which used to trail down the ribs and that way and the smell. So that made me violently sick. I was sick for ages but there was one good thing that came from that, I've never smoked.

But what, the routine, food, was boiled herring in the morning which was like cardboard to eat, actually, wet cardboard. And we usually had a bit of soup with a bit a' mutton or something at lunchtime and teatime of course, fried herring, at teatime, a change! So that was what every day, that's what we did. So we were lucky because we had herring to eat course the people ashore didn't have that you know and then we had an extra ration with the seaman's ration book.

So, we were fairly well fed compared to the rest of the population, you know. And every week we left one of the extra fishing booklets ashore for one of the wives to take advantage of.

The Engine Room: 2 min 42 secs

When I was sixteen the chap that looked after the engine, he packed in. Previous to that, I was on what they call the half share, I got half of what the men got. My uncle said to me, "if you look after the engine laddie" he says, "you'll get a full share." Which I did, eh, I could stop and start it, you know and that was about all, and oil it and I got a full share when I was sixteen.



So, looking after the engine, became, stood me in quite good stead when I joined the Navy because eh having eh been at sea for four years which I had been and eh, and having looked after the engine, I didn't get a choice of career they just bunged me as an engine room stoker. But I was a first-class stoker due to having been at sea before. Which meant I got twelve and sixpence a week. Had I been an ordinary stoker I would have only got ten bob, ten shillings.

I went to join up when I was seventeen and a half. I went up to George Street and I saw the petty officer and he says to me, "away go home laddie you'll be getting your papers shortly!" he said and I did, get them not long after that so that's how I got into the Navy, and, eh, I was quite enjoying the fishing when I left, actually and my mother and my dad didn't want me to leave the fishing. My mother was getting wages from me, you see, it was helping to provide for the rest of the family. And she was starting to lose that you see but what I did do when I got my wages in the Navy, which was 12 and sixpence I sent ten shillings a week home to my mother and she drew that every week as a form of a pension and I kept two and sixpence.

And I flogged my duty-free cigarettes so that gave me a bob or two extra. We used to get 200 cigarettes duty free every week.

Into Uniform: 4 min 34 secs

I joined the Navy just in January 1944. Well I joined the ship in Birkenhead. I actually spent about a month in the barracks previous to that and I was glad to get from the barracks to a ship you know because I didn't like the barracks at all but you had to do that originally so they could eh instil some form of obedience in you I suppose.

D-Day 5 min 2 secs

I was on a minesweeper, an MMS motor minesweeper 291. We left Birkenhead and went down to Plymouth, which was more or less occupied by hundreds of American ships. That's where the main American crowd came from and all leave was stopped two weeks before D-Day. You didn't get ashore and any letters that you wrote were eh, looked at by the officers before they were posted. And eh, so, that gave us a good indication that we were going to France you know. And eh, we left on the third actually. And we dodged all night in the channel, it was a bad night, everybody was sick, seasick.

And the next night was a wee bit better. And then of course then the D-Day landings came along. The ship I was in was a shallow draft ship, which meant we were meant to go close in, in front of the landing craft you know. So, eh I was at Omaha Beach head really. A lot of people have said how were you at Omaha when you were in the British Navy?

Well the British minesweepers, the British shallow draft minesweepers swept in front of both American landings. We swept in and cut mines adrift. Two ships behind us, the other two minesweepers, they were disposing of the mines and another two ships were laying buoys to mark the passage, the safe passage, and then the landing craft went in. That's what we did at D day, under fire of course, although we got fairly well in before they started to fire upon us.

We lost a ship, the 229 to a, I think it was a mine she struck actually, she blew, she blew her bow off I think, she went down in about a couple, three minutes, she sunk very quickly. As we were shaving these mines, I was in the engine room and if one went off close to the boat, I always used to stand quite near the ladders going down to the room and my mate he'd be standing at the other end, there were steps down at that end and whenever a mine went off, it close to the vessel I was up that ladder, up to the deck. It was very, it could be quite nerve wracking I suppose at the time, at that particular time. But of course, it was pandemonium on D-Day at Omaha. When you looked round about you there were hundreds of ships you know, all that gunfire you knew it was important ok. But at Omaha they got an awful battering at Omaha.

It was a bad landing I think and there was nobody picking up bodies at all for two or three days. And I think eh that was just put aside till things got settled a wee bit but there were loads of Americans eh, dead Americans around just off the beach you know. And the Americans floated in a funny manner, sort of, sort of back up. They had a life belt which contained two little cylinders of air. We had a lifebelt which we blew up like a balloon. Or we had a jacket like an ordinary cork life jacket. Americans had a compressed air thing when they, when they burst these little canisters the air went through and blew up their actual lifebelt so they floated with that lifebelt, they floated with back up you know, that's how they actually floated.

Better Days 8 min 28 secs

The one time I enjoyed myself in the Navy was at Ostend cause we got to shore every second night and eh we used to go to the dancing there ken and that was good, we met some girls and it was good aye.

And on VE Day they had a sort of parade through the street and I was a member of the parade and we were assaulted by all these girls who took my silk away and they stole my hat and everything that was loose they pulled at.

So that was, I enjoyed, I enjoyed my stay and that I think it was the only time I enjoyed being in the Navy actually.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Trawler – a trawler is type of fishing boat. It operates by actively dragging its nets through the water behind it.

Midwife – a midwife is someone who helps a pregnant woman and their baby before, during and after birth. In the 1920s and 30s when Charles was young, midwives were often called when the family couldn't afford to pay for a doctor.

Seaman's ration book – During rationing, people were registered to specific shops to get their allowances of food and restricted items. However, seamen were at sea and could not easily return to the same shop each week. So, each seaman was issued with a special ration book that was authorised by the captain or master of the boat or ship they were on. Each port had a number of shops that were registered to supply seamen's rations and sailors were expected to pick up rations ashore and bring them back on board for the cook to prepare.

Full share – fishermen were paid a percentage of the profits their boat earned from a catch, known as the crew share. Once the cost of fuel, food, and other expenses had been deducted from the sale of the fish, the captain took his share (about 40%) and the remainder was divided amongst the rest of the crew. To begin with Charles only got a half share, i.e. half of what the each of other crew members earned probably because his job was less skilled and didn't involve as much physical work as the rest of the crew.

First class stoker - Stokers were responsible for transporting and shovelling coal to the furnaces on ships. The lowest rank was Stoker 2nd Class, then Stoker 1st Class, then Petty Officer Stoker, then Chief Petty Officer Stoker.

Petty Officer – In the Royal Navy, crewmen who are not officers are called **ratings**. There are several ranks of ratings: Able Seaman, Leading Rate, Petty Officer, Chief Petty Officer, Warrant Officer 2nd Class, Warrant Officer 1st Class

Duty free – items that are duty free have not been taxed and are therefore cheaper than they would normally be. During WWII most people smoked and non-smokers, like Charles, could take advantage of this by selling or bartering their own unwanted cigarette rations.

Barracks – a large building or buildings that are used to house soldiers.

Minesweeper – a minesweeper is a small naval ship that is used to keep waterways clear of mines so that other ships can move about safely. The MMS minesweepers were made of wood to prevent them triggering magnetic influence mines, that could be detonated just by coming close to metallic hulls.

D-Day – On 6 June 1944, D-Day, the Allied Forces landed on the Normandy beaches in order to invade northern France and push back the invading German forces.

Shallow draft ship – a ship with a shallow draft sits high in the water and so is able to get into shallow waters without being grounded. The disadvantage of a shallow draft is that it makes a ship less stable in stormy conditions.

Omaha Beach – this was the code name for part of the coast that the Allied Forces landed on during the D-Day landings. For the purposes of the invasion, a 50 mile stretch of coast was divided into five sectors: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. American forces were assigned to land on Omaha and Utah beaches

Mines - A naval mine is an underwater explosive device that explodes when it is close to a ship or submarine, causing the vessel to be damaged or destroyed. It is a very effective and cheap weapon and/or means of defence.

Lifebelt – a life belt is a piece of safety equipment that a person wears to keep them afloat in water. There are many different kinds of life jacket. The most effective are those that keep the face of an unconscious casualty out of the water.

Ostend – Ostend is a city on the coast of Belgium.

Link to interview: <http://learning.poppyscotland.org.uk/veday75/vv-charleshorne/>