

Veterans Voices – Background Notes to Charles Horne’s interview

All of the interviews in the Poppy Scotland’s VE Day Veterans Voices collection cover a wide range of interesting topics from what life was like between the wars to experiences in WWI through to VE Day and coming home. The following notes provide some additional background information about some of the topics raised in Charles Horne’s interview <http://learning.poppyscotland.org.uk/veday75/vv-charleshorne/> as well as links to further information and related videos.

Charles Horne was born in Prestonpans, which is a small fishing town east of Edinburgh. His family originally came from Port Seton, which is another small fishing village, just two miles east of Prestonpans.

Prestonpans is famous for the Battle of Prestonpans that took place on 21 September 1745. It was the first important battle in the second Jacobite Rising and was significant because the Jacobite army defeated the English forces. This victory encouraged the Jacobites to continue to fight for the Stuart cause.

Head of the Family (44 secs)

Charles talks about being the ‘Head of the family’. In the 1920s and 30s men and sons in a family were expected to work hard and earn a living for their families, while mothers and daughters stayed at home and looked after the children. In truth this didn’t always happen. Women and girls also went out to work. In some industries such as jute, women rather than men worked in the factories while the men stayed at home with the children. Regardless of who the main wage earner was, males of a family were always expected to be in charge. Eldest sons would be given responsibility for the family when their father and older siblings were absent.

Charles explains that he went to work on one of his uncle’s trawler boats as soon as he was 14 years old so that he could help to support his family. After the First World War, the law regarding child employment was changed. Children now had to stay in school until they were at least 14 years old rather than 12 or 13 years of age. This change in the law was very unpopular with poorer families who relied upon the wages of their children.

Herring (1 min 25 secs)

Herring fishing

At the start of the 20th century fishing for herring was big business, with much of the catch being sent to Germany, Eastern Europe and Russia. Thousands of small fishing boats trawled the North coast of Scotland from Orkney and Shetland in spring and summer and then down to the East Anglian coast and Yarmouth in the Autumn. It was a hard and dangerous life.

The fishing fleets were followed from port to port by the herring lassies (also known as herring girls or fisher lassies.) These women came from all over Scotland to gut and pack the herring. It was hard work, with long hours and low pay and involved working out of doors in all weathers. The herring lassies had a reputation for being

very hardworking, reliable and fun-loving. The money they earned was sent home to support their families.

- Scottish Fisher Girls (1920) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpWEv9rCDmM>
- The Herring Girls <https://www.virtualheb.co.uk/herring-girls-stornoway-western-isles/>
- The Fisherrow Fishwives <https://www.johngraycentre.org/people/east-lothian-folk/the-fisherrow-fishwives>

After WWI, the herring industry began to decline because the market for herring dropped as a result of high inflation in Germany. In 1929, pioneering documentary filmmaker John Grierson made *Drifters*, a silent documentary about the herring fishing industry. This would be the first time the British public could see what the life of the trawlermen was like.

- *Drifters* (1929) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUOiTNnNFvI>

In 1934 Grierson made a second more experimental film about the trawlers coming from Granton in Edinburgh to the fishing grounds in the North Sea.

- Granton Trawler 1934 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypHc95ac8b4>

The herring industry died out after WWII. Trawlers concentrated on catching other kinds of fish. The processing of the fish was done onboard by the boat crews rather than on the dockside. The herring lassies were no longer needed.

- Trawling 1940 -1949 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5AbsV3eBm0>

Rationing

When WWII began Britain was not self-sufficient in food production. It imported a lot of its food and feed for animals. This made the country very vulnerable. German fleets attacked supply ships bound for Britain in a concerted and sustained effort to starve the nation. In order to deal with the developing food shortages, the Ministry of Food introduced a system of rationing.

In September 1939, petrol was the first item to be rationed. In January 1940, bacon, butter and sugar began to be rationed. Gradually, meat, tea, jam, biscuits, breakfast cereals, cheese, eggs, lard, milk, canned and dried fruit became rationed although not all at once. By August 1942, almost all foods were included except for fruit, vegetables, fish, whale meat and bread. Although not rationed, supplies of fruit, vegetables and fish were very limited.

Fish was not rationed but it was expensive. Supplies were low because of a reduction in the boat numbers partly because crewmen being called up or joining up for the war effort and partly because of the Royal Navy requisitioned many drifters, trawlers and whaling boats into naval service. There was also the real

danger of being at sea in war time so the cost of the fish also had to reflect the hazards involved for the crews.

- The Great Fishermen of Britain - Feeding the Nation During WWII and Braving Mines and U-Boats <https://hubpages.com/education/The-great-fishermen-of-Britain-Feeding-the-nation-during-WW2>

To be able to buy rationed items each person had a ration book with coupons. They had to be registered at specific shops. The shopkeeper was provided with enough food for their registered customers. When buying any items, the customer would have to give the ration book to the shopkeeper and they would cancel the relevant coupons.

Non-food rationed items included clothing, soap, coal, timber, paper as well as items such as razorblades, pots and pans, alarm clocks and babies' bottles.

People in the military and Merchant navy had a higher ration allowance than civilians. However, people with specific health conditions were given additional food allowances and people working in key industries such as agriculture, railways and forestry were allowed an additional cheese ration.

Rationing continued after the war and was eventually stopped in 1954.

- Seaman's Ration book <https://talesfromthesupplydepot.blog/2019/02/26/seamans-ration-book/>
- What You Need To Know About Rationing In The Second World War <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-rationing-in-the-second-world-war>
- WWII Rationing Worksheets <https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/ww2-rationing-worksheets-11050720>

The Engine Room (2 min 42 secs)

Money

Charles talks about his pay in shillings and pence. In Britain before 1971, a pound was divided into 20 shillings or 240 pennies as follows:

2 farthings = 1 halfpenny (also known as a ha'penny, 1/2d)

2 half pence = 1 penny (1d)

3 pence = thruppence (3d)

6 pence = sixpence (also known as a tanner) (6d)

12 pence = 1 shilling (a bob) (1s)

2 shillings = 1 florin (also known as a 'two bob bit') (2s)

2 shillings and sixpence = 1 half crown (2s 6d)

5 shillings = 1 Crown (5s)

1 pound = 20 shillings (£)

1 guinea = one pound and one shilling or 21 shillings

On the 15 February 1971, the British currency was decimalised. It was much simpler. One pound was divided into 100 pennies.

When Charles joined up his pay, as a first-class stoker, was 12 shillings and sixpence. That would be the equivalent of £24.59 in today's money. It doesn't sound like much but remember everything was much cheaper in 1940 than it is today.

Getting your papers

By the time Charles tried to volunteer for the Navy, he was already an experienced trawlerman and the Royal Navy were keen to recruit fisherman with more than one year's experience at sea, especially to work on minesweepers. However, at 17 and a half years old, Charles was too young. He was told to go home and that he would "get his papers soon". To 'get your papers' meant that you were 'called up' or conscripted into the one of the military forces.

In 1938, the British government began to prepare for war. The Emergency Powers (Defence Act) in August 1938, allowed the government to start recruiting and training volunteers as Air Raid Wardens and reservists for the military. Around half a million people volunteered. However, many more people would be needed for the military when the conflict began. So, when it became clear that Hitler wanted to go to war, the government began to give six months military training to all British men aged between 20 and 21 who were fit and able.

As the threat of war increased so did the need to recruit more men. The government introduced the National Service (Armed Forces) Act which made all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 41 available for conscription (i.e. compulsory enlistment for military service). Single men were called up before married men.

Men were registered by age group, beginning with those aged 20 to 23, who had to register on 21 October 1939. It took until June 1941 to register 40-year-olds. By the end of 1939 more than 1.5 million men had been conscripted to join the British armed forces. Of those, just over 1.1 million went to the British Army and the rest were split between the Royal Navy and the RAF.

By 1942 all male British citizens between 18 and 51 years old and all females 20 to 30 years old resident in Britain were liable to be called up, with some exemptions:

- British subjects from outside Britain and the [Isle of Man](#) who had lived in the country for less than two years
- Police, medical and prison workers
- Northern Ireland
- Students
- Persons employed by the government of any country of the British Empire except the UK

- Clergy any denomination
- Those who were blind or had mental disorders
- Married women
- Women who had one or more children 14 years old or younger living with them. This included their own children, legitimate or illegitimate, stepchildren, and adopted children, as long as the child was adopted before 18 December 1941.

Many men were not released from military service once the war was over and conscription continued. Some releases did begin in June 1945, in particular all women and those men in trades. However, it took until 1949 before all those who were conscripted during the war were able to return to civilian life.

National Service, as peacetime conscription, was enacted through the National Service Act 1948. From 1 January 1949, healthy males 17 to 21 years old were expected to serve in the armed forces for 18 months, and remain on the reserve list for four years.

Call-ups formally ended on 31 December 1960, and the last National Servicemen left the armed forces in May 1963.

- The Story of Conscription <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XR0rVLPuZY>

D-Day (5 mins 2 secs)

On the 6 June 1944 Allied Forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, on the northern coast of France. The Normandy Landings were the first part of Operation Overlord, a massive, co-ordinated invasion of northern France by the Allies in order to establish a stronghold from which to push the Germans back. The amphibious phase of the invasion was codenamed Operation Neptune or D-Day. It was the biggest seaborne invasion in history.

Planning for the invasion began in 1943. A 50 mile stretch of coast in Normandy was identified as being suitable for landing over a million British, Canadian, American, Polish and French troops all under overall British command. The coast was divided into five sectors: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. American forces were assigned to land on Omaha and Utah beaches, the Canadians on Juno Beach and the British on Gold and Sword beaches.

The invasion fleet, was drawn from eight different navies, and comprised 6,939 vessels under the overall command of British Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay. Getting The timing of when to start was essential to getting troops successfully to the beaches. This was determined by the tides, the phase of the moon, the time of day and the weather. Incoming spring tides were desirable so that landing craft could get close to the beaches and minimise the time that the troops were exposed to enemy fire. A full moon was necessary so that aircraft pilots would be able to see their targets and provide air cover for the troops. There were only a

few days each month when conditions would be suitable. The 5th of June 1944 was originally chosen but, on the 4th June, it became clear that weather would not be suitable. High winds and heavy seas meant that landing craft with their flat bottoms and shallow drafts would not be able to land. Moreover, low cloud would make it impossible for aircraft to provide support. So, the invasion date was changed to 6th June. The weather was still not ideal but with so many troops and ships gathered and ready to go, it was thought to be impractical to postpone for another fortnight.

In his interview Charles notes that his minesweeper had already set out on the 3rd June and that for the next two nights they were in the English Channel. The size and shallow draft of his ship would have meant that they would have been tossed about in the stormy seas far more than the bigger warships. No wonder everyone was seasick!

Minesweepers would have been sent out early because they crucial to the success of the whole invasion. The Normandy coast was protected by long lines of naval mines and routes through them had to be cleared so that all the vessels of the Allied Forces could get through as quickly and safely as possible.

Naval Mines and minesweeping

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. Mines are laid in areas of water either to protect or create safety zones for friendly vessels or to prevent or reduce the movement of enemy vessels.

There are three main types of naval mine – contact, remote and influence mines.

Contact mines have to be touched by a vessel before they can detonate. They are very cheap to produce and very effective so they are still in use today.

Most common are the **moored contact mines**, that float on or under the surface of the water and are anchored to the bottom by a steel cable, which stops them from drifting away.

Drifting contact mines were occasionally used in WWI and WWII but they were a danger to both allied and enemy vessels since their whereabouts were generally unknown and they were much more difficult to remove. Drifting mines were actually banned after WWI for this reason.

Remotely controlled mines are detonated by a signal. They are used to protect or block important shipping routes and harbours and worked in conjunction with coastal artillery and hydrophones.

Influence mines – these mines can be detonated just by a ship or submarine getting close to them. The fuses on these mines can be detonated when they detect magnetic, acoustics and/or pressure changes in the water around them.

In WWII mines were laid in a number of different ways including from submarines, converted merchant ships, aircraft, divers, combat boats and from shore.

Minesweeping

Locating and destroying mines is called minesweeping. There are two methods of minesweeping. A **contact sweep** involves dragging a wire through the water between one ship and a buoy or between two ships in order to cut the mooring cable of a floating mine. When the mines are cut free and at a distance from the minesweeper, they are usually shot and so detonated safely.

A **distance sweep** mimics the magnetic and acoustic signals of a ship to detonate the mine.

Minesweeping was a dangerous business. Not only was there the chance of a mine exploding and damaging the ship, the process of sweeping was slow and precise and made the ship and its crew vulnerable to enemy fire.

- Minesweeping WWII <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9r1-RHk5vM>
- Facing Danger with Men Of The Minesweeping Flotilla (1940) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lt2L5sb6hkQ>

Charles' ship was helping to clear the way for the American troops to land at Omaha beach. They worked with five other ships to clear the mines.

- D-Day: 3 Clear the Mines <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLBUljMw83o>

Naval mines remained a threat even after the war ended, and minesweeping crews were still active long after VJ Day, removing both friendly and enemy mines from the seas and oceans to make them safe again.

Omaha Beach

Omaha Beach was an 8 km section of the coast that was to be taken by the US Army troops with sea transport, mine sweeping and naval bombardment to be carried out by the US Navy and Coast Guard, with support from British, Canadian and Free French Navies. Of all the beaches, Omaha was the most heavily defended and fortified. The above and behind the beach were trenches, minefields, barbed wire, nests of machine guns, artillery batteries, pillboxes and concrete emplacements and battalions of German and Italian soldiers. Unfortunately, the level of defence was much more than expected and this combined with poor weather and rough seas meant that the Allied attack did not go as planned.

Firstly, the German defences were supposed to be destroyed by air and naval bombardments before any landing took place. However low cloud meant that this key part of the plan could not happen.

Rough seas meant that landing craft were swamped with water and many of the soldiers were violently seasick. Tanks were sunk before even getting to shore and

many of the crews were lost through drowning and enemy fire. Strong currents and winds meant that land craft were blown off course and troops and equipment ended up in the wrong places. Some were grounded on sandbars some distance from the shore. Those soldiers had to disembark and wade 50 – 100m through neck deep water to get to the beach. By the time they got there, their kit was soaked through and very heavy. It made running up the beach out of the range of the German artillery, impossible.

One of the key defences of the troops was supposed to be the continued naval bombardment of the German strongholds. However, some of the initial bombardments had set light to the grassland in the area and the smoke made it difficult, not only for the land craft to see where they were going but also for the Naval ships to be sure of their targets. The bombardment from the battleships and cruisers was reduced for fear of hitting troops on the beach.

The combination of all these factors led to large numbers of casualties, the loss of vital equipment and troops ending up in the wrong places, under heavy fire from the Germans and few commanding officers to organise and lead them out of the situation. Incoming landing craft were set alight, pounded with mortars and artillery. Wounded men drowned as the tide came in and overwhelmed them.

It is not known exactly how many men died or were wounded on Omaha Beach that day. Sources vary from 2000 to 5000 killed, wounded and missing. Losses of equipment and supplies were very high. Despite it all the troops did manage to incur losses on the Germans and to gain a small foothold on Omaha Beach.

Over the next few days, the troops fought back the remaining German battalions and eventually secured the beachhead. Thereafter the area was used to land supplies, vehicles, soldiers and equipment and to evacuate the wounded, as the Allied Forces fought back the Germans in Europe.

The losses on Omaha Beach were much higher than on the other beaches which weren't so heavily defended. D-Day would eventually lead to the liberation of German-occupied France and later Western Europe.

- Omaha Beach, D-Day (June 6, 1944)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3P11ENBZyc>
- The Brits Who Stormed Omaha Beach, D-Day 1944
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UZU79tAzMU>