

Interviewer:

So this is Terry Ford interviewing Reginald Bengé about Reginald Bengé on the 6th of November, 2023 at South Shield's Local History Group, South Shields. So if Reginald, you just want to tell us about your father.

Reginald:

Started off in the Merchant Navy and he was home on leave obviously the war had started and me grandmother got a knock the next day and the policeman was there, Report, and he was gone. That was it, he was in the Royal Navy after that. He was in the Royal Navy Auxiliary. That's how quick it was and of course then they went down to Lowestoft. Which mostly were trawler men cause they were trawlers. There was no mine sweepers then' so they used trawlers with a sweep, cut the mines and then had to sink them rifle fire or blow them up with rifle fire that's the only way they would get rid of them. And of course that branch ended up with a silver badge on their arm. The only part of the Royal Navy that had it and it was for mine disposal mine sweeping it became the mine disposal eventually I suppose that's how it started off but started off cutting mines. He was in Norway on a ship called Aston Villa and it got bombed. So they had to scuttle the ship and they came back on a Norwegian ship called the Ranen. There's a book called Trawlers Go to War told the stories in there. But it's wrong because it says they were Royal Marines and the photo tells you they're not, that's the Ranen and they are Irish guards. So the book was wrong, obviously people's memories get a little bit faded over time, but the photo proves who they are. And he just did his time in the Navy. He ended up a petty officer. That's how he came out. He ended up on a corvette and he came out as a petty officer. But he never went back to sea that was it, as far as my mother was concerned.

Interviewer:

So what did he do after the war?

Reginald:

He went into the docks. The docks, came into the docks like a lot of them did. And as I say, there was some funny stories about when he was away and me mother wrote him a letter, if you don't come back and marry me this time, I'm marrying somebody else. Stop the war please I want to get married. Oh! she was a funny one my mam.

Pam:

It was because of the banns, wasn't it?

Reginald:

She kept putting the banns in and he was kept getting called back. Even when he was on leave he got called back. They were all over the world these people. Anywhere there was mines, they were there. They used all sorts of ships. If you ever get a chance to read the book Trawlers Go To War, read it, because it tells you everything about it. And there was a hell of a lot of them killed, obviously, because cutting mines that way. If it got caught in the trawl it blew the ship.

Pam:

And they were always under fire with the bombing, obviously the Germans didn't want them to be cutting the mines, you know.

Interviewer:

So which areas did he work in? You mentioned Norway,

Reginald:

He ended up at D-Day. That would've been, well that's towards the end. He ended up at D-Day. We were on, me and my wife, were on Jersey a few years ago. And then in the side of this paper shop had a big glass thing and it told you exactly how many mine sweepers there was. There was hundreds. There were hundreds on D-Day. Well there was about 6 or 8,000 ships. So that tells you how big it was, but I didn't really understand until I read this. How many was there? It was massive. It was a massive operation.

Interviewer:

So what, do you know what he was doing on D-Day?

Reginald:

He was a steward. But they were all trained in, well they all had to take their turns, try to sink the mines. They all were trained to use rifles and they were trained to use everything. I mean, small ships, you had to do everything.

Interviewer:

So would that be in here, his record of what say in 1944. Would that be there or not? I'm just trying to think if ...

Reginald:

Probably that would be the record of ships he was on.

Note Taker:

There's no one name. They don't put on, they don't put the ship on. All right.

Reginald:

The ships are in there. All the ships are wrote down on the other side.

Interviewer:

Alright, so it is 1944, which is there. So you that one there. So Marshall Sault.

Note Taker:

SAULT, Marshall Sault one of Napoleon's mates!

Pam:

He was in Rio de Janeiro as well at one point, wasn't he? That

Reginald:

That was before the war.

Interviewer:

So he's actually, he started 1939, yeah and he finishes in 1946.

Note Taker:

Yeah it's one of these untold stories that there's thousands of men and what they had to do as well was that they'd sweep an area, have to go back and do it again and again and again, again because they never knew.

Reginald:

Yeah, they kept dropping mines all the time or laying them.

Note Taker:

So one of the costs of mining was actually just having the disruption it caused, you couldn't send anything through there. You have to try and sweep channels.

Reginald:

Channel, mainly the channel because they used to bomb the ships and the channel and tried to sink them. But on that one, The Ranen, when they brought The Ranen back they actually captured an E-boat, that's what the guy standing holding the flag is. The story is they got dressed up as women. Well you take it as it comes, and of course and the E-boat must have come alongside because it was a Norwegian ship but they must have took it over.

Pam:

My dad actually told we that story, didn't he? That some of them had head squares on and they were dressed as women.

Reginald:

They had a wave to the planes, German planes, because we didn't have any planes. There was none of our planes there. It was all their planes

Interviewer:

Excellent. Right, that's lovely. Well thank you very much.