

**Clarence Roy Vere “Ben” Bennett** was born at 161, South East Road, Sholing, Southampton on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1925. He was interviewed for the Nuffield Theatre’s “Out of the Shadows” project in 2018 with his niece, Maureen Prince also joining in.

He recalled, “My father died when I was eight ... I’m trying to think what year it was. Me mother brought me up. I had two brothers, two sisters. One brother got killed during the War on the “British Liberty”, a tanker.



*Images – The British Liberty and a British Tanker Co mug from the wreckage of The British Liberty*

I just grew up, went to Sholing School and eventually left. Oh, I had chest t roubles and lost a lot of me schooling. They called it TB didn’t they in those days and I lost about two years of me school training. And then eventually left school and then me brother-in-law got me into AST, what was Air Service Training as an odd-job nipper. I was only 14... My brother-in-law John, but we always called him Jack [laughs]. John Batchelor, he lived in Bitterne, White’s Road...18, White’s Road. Yeah, he was an upholsterer (And he made parachutes.)

“Eventually we moved out to Titchfield where mines were dropped on us and we ... the bungalow we were living in was sliced in half...Took the top of the cottage right off. We were in a garage in Titchfield Hill but we wasn’t there long and we moved back to Hamble.”

“... we got not bombed out, mined out, they dropped mines. One mine dropped one side of the thatched cottage which made a hole in the ground and you could have dropped about six double decker buses in there with no trouble. It was soft ground and the other one landed with a parachute on a fir tree and we had to walk under it because there was fence each side for fields and we had to walk under the blooming mine.

Maureen, Ben’s niece, added, “This was at Posbrook Farm, Titchfield. It’s now ...a housing development and ... there’s a line of trees and that’s where the cottage was,” and Ben commented, “That’s why we had to come back.”

Research shows that Ben’s “garage in Titchfield Hill” was the Priory Garage (still in business under the same name on the A27 just outside Titchfield) and was clearly being used to make or, more likely, repair a variety of Spitfire parts.



Ben added, “I went from school to Hamble and ‘cos of the bombing, they were frightened that if they bombed Hamble, everything would be lost so they (AST Hamble) decided to move different sections to different places. We were moved to Titchfield Hill. We wasn’t there long, I said, before the Germans dropped mines, not bombs, mines, on us.”

## The bombing of Woolston

Ben also remembers witnessing the bombing of the Supermarine factories in September 1940.

“Yes, I actually seen the bombing of the factory. I don’t know what I was doing there. Actually, I was on Peartree Green. You could look down (from) Peartree Green, right down the River Itchen. Whether it’s built on there or not I don’t know but I can tell you what actually happened. I was on Peartree Green and I was looking down the Itchen and I noticed some spots coming up. Right at the other end. They come up Southampton Water, the bombers, and they turned up the Itchen. When I see ’em, they were just spots and they were getting closer and you realised they were bombers. They came up in formation, they followed the Itchen up, they were not attacked by any (anti)-aircraft guns, they were not attacked by any fighters. Whether they were attacked by fighters after they’d bombed Supermarine I don’t know, but the formation of bombers stayed as a Squadron. They didn’t move, they kept in formation all the time. They bombed Supermarine in formation and then they flew away, and I don’t know what happened, whether they were attacked by anti-aircraft or fighters I don’t know. All I know was seeing them come up the River and bomb Supermarine.”

Asked whether he was frightened Ben replied, “No, I was a kiddy, you don’t not really feel frightened when you’re ... Not really unless something lands right alongside you, you know, you don’t realise what’s happening. I was only 14 at the time.

*Did you take shelter?*

Clarence: No, I just stood there and just watched it happen.

*Amazingly brave at 14.*

Clarence: Well you’re not brave, you just don’t realise ... you’re only a nipper at the time, you think “what’s going on?” you know... I know it was a lovely sunny day. We had a lovely hot summer that year, 1940.

## Ben’s work at AST

After getting bombed out of the cottage in Titchfield, Ben moved back into Southampton and his mother’s house in South East Road.

He said, “I went back to the aerodrome, to AST, Air Service Training, and then I started out learning to be a sheet metal worker. I suppose I done about two years learning, and then they approached me, the Management and they said, “We think you’re prepared to do the sheet metal working on your own.” ‘Course you’ve got a mate, so I said, “Yes” and so I went on to there and I worked on to there until 1944.

“To Hamble, we had to cycle there and back. You know, push bike, you know. I can’t remember the time we started, I suppose about 7 o’clock or half past seven I should imagine and worked up to 5 o’clock.

“I was skinning, what we called skinning. A sheet metal worker, Spitfire wings. Now, Spitfire wings, if you want to know, were riveted on top and the plates underneath was pop riveted ‘cos they couldn’t get to hold her up see? The bottom of the Spitfire wings were pop riveted. At the first part, they had four machine guns and the machine guns, when they went into action, had a cover on them, a felt was the name. So that when they fired, they slowed up a bit because they broke the felt for the air. They eventually went on to have two cannons, one on each wing so therefore we had to then make domes because the cannon protruded below the wing, so we had to make a dome to cover that up.



Images – Spitfire Mk1 showing red felt covering guns on wing and Spitfire wing with cannons and blister

Asked if he was working from drawings her replied, "No, there were no drawings as far as we was concerned. The Spitfire wings ... one end in the hanger they fitted, they renewed the ribs, for that was nothing to do with me, and then they shifted to us and we what you called skinned them.

"I learnt the trade through ... I think he was Welsh. He was a Communist and he learnt me with the trade and he presented me with a hammer and sickle badge, and I took it home and my mother created bloomin' hell 'cos I took this badge home [laughs].... mother wouldn't let me keep it [laughs].

"..., but he taught me well and then I was asked to go sheet metal working myself, which I did. 'Course I was supplied with a Mate, as you drill. I drilled a hole right through me finger down there once [laughs].

"Some metal was already on there and sometimes there was none at all and you had to do its plates, and you'd drill 'em in and fold them up and 'course you got to mark off for the doors to fit in for the machine guns. Then you'd take that off and then you'd do the other side which was under the plane. Then you would take that off when you had finished it and, put it one side and then put the top of the wing back on and then it was riveted up. That was the Riveter's, a hold it up job, so they put the little rivets in and 'brrrrr', 'brrrrr' and when they'd finished that, then we would put back the bottom of the wings and they were pop riveted. And they went on for four machine guns and then afterwards they used cannon and of course you had to make domes because the cannon protruded lower than the wing, so you had to have to a dome over the bottom of the cannon.

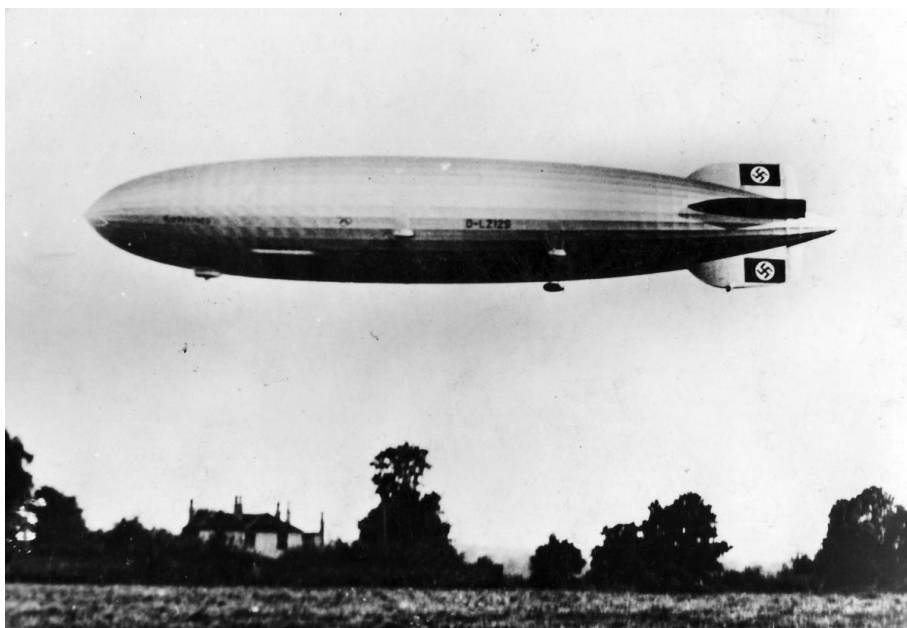
The hangar, one side of it was all women working on spares, cleaning them or I suppose repairing them or anything. This sort of factory was the wings. They were brought in and if the ribs were damaged they were repaired and then they were brought to us and then, what we called skinned them, sheet metal work. And that was 'B' hanger.

"Ginger Alford was the foreman, my brother-in-law, he was in another part on top of the aerodrome and I think what happened, all the damaged planes come in by lorry, repaired, and I think women flew them from Hamble Aerodrome to where they had to go. I think they were women (ATA) pilots who used to come and collect them up and take them to the aerodromes where they had to go.

### **Zeppelins over Southampton**

There are well documented accounts of German airships overflying Southampton and Portsmouth in the years before the war. Ben remembers one such occasion and also the visits by German flying boats catapulted from German transatlantic liners while still in the Western Approaches and bringing the mail to their post room which was on the ground floor of the Supermarine building.

"I wouldn't like to say what year it was, could have been 1937, I wouldn't swear on the dates, but I was on Weston



Shore because my brother had a business down there and I saw a Zeppelin come over Southampton Docks, fly down towards the Isle of Wight and away. Now, it was obvious that that Zeppelin must have taken photos in any case, and that was it. It just seemed to fly over and away, so where he flew or where he come from ... well, I expect he came from Germany, he may have flown over Portsmouth, I don't know, but I know he flew over Southampton. He flew over the Dock area and that was that. I would say that was about 1937 I should think.

*Image courtesy of Bournemouth Daily Echo – Hindenburg over Bournemouth*





Image – German airship over Northam Southampton in 1938

“...and the German mail used to come in there and ...They knew exactly where the factory was. There was no ...they knew where the factory was.”



Image – German Seaplane crew rowing mail ashore

The flights of the airships were raised in the Commons as a national security threat. Photos taken from the airships were referred to as ‘Hitler’s holiday snaps’ and it is quite likely that the German mail pilots who anchored their seaplanes in the Itchen returned a few years later ... in Luftwaffe bombers.



Bournemouth Daily Echo report on the Hindenburg





# IG DEVELOPMENTS.

...y—Not So Dull.



...the reproach that Bournemouth's Sunday provided a miniature aquatic gala. A man is engaged in a polite form of miller ammunition.

## Hindenburg Flies Over Bournemouth.

### SUNDAY EVENING'S GREAT THRILL.

#### GIANT AIRSHIP RETURNS TO GERMANY:

**T**HE Hindenburg flew over Bournemouth last night when returning home to Germany from her latest record-breaking flight across the Atlantic.

She later passed over Southampton, where her appearance caused great excitement among people in dockland.

A Dorset correspondent writes: "At 7.30 the airship was seen coming from the northerly direction of Combe Bissett, over the Blandford-Salisbury road.

"She kept to the east of the town at apparently an altitude of not more than 1,000 feet.

"Hundreds of motorists pulled up to watch it. From vantage points people saw the airship going southwards over Ashley Wood Golf Links and Verwood, where she disappeared in a south-easterly direction.

"Just before eight o'clock, people between Ferndown, Wimborne and Ringwood—where there is always heavy traffic on Sundays—saw the Hindenburg.

"Fine views were obtained from Wimborne Minster and other parts of the town."

#### GRACEFUL CRAFT.

Later in the evening the Hindenburg was seen over Bournemouth.

A Redhill resident told the "Echo" he saw her coming from a north-easterly direction at a good height.

"She passed over the town and looked extremely graceful," he said.

Hundreds of people saw her later over Sandbanks. The sun caused her tail to glister and her identification marks were easily discernible.

The airship was seen inland by Poole people at about 7.30. She aroused great interest among residents and holiday-makers, and field glasses were trained on her from various parts of the borough.

#### "LIKE A SILVER CIGAR."

A motorist—one of many picnickers in the New Forest—states: "We were driving home, and hearing the sound of engines, looked up at Linford and saw the Hindenburg, like a silver cigar, above a clearing.

"The children in the car were quite scared; they had never seen anything like it before."

#### OVER SOUTHAMPTON DOCKS.

Thousands of eyes were lifted skywards at Southampton when the approach of the airship was noised abroad.

She seemed to come from overland, having apparently turned somewhat as she was skirting the English Channel.

Her coming caused great excitement in dockland.

The Canadian Pacific liner Montrose had arrived from Montreal

about 7 p.m., and when the airship appeared, work was temporarily brought to a standstill.

Passengers and workmen, officials and visitors shared in the enjoyment of the wonderful sight as the Zeppelin passed slowly and gracefully over the town and docks before sailing down Southampton Water in the direction of Portsmouth.

#### WATCHED FOR HALF-AN-HOUR.

##### A Fine Sight at Osmington.

The Hindenburg was seen from the White Horse, at Osmington, near Weymouth, yesterday. One of the people who saw her was Mr. W. Burt, president of the Weymouth Chamber of Commerce, who was at Osmington in connection with a tea given to the Boy Scouts engaged in cleaning the White Horse.

Mr. Burt told the "Echo": "I was with Mr. T. H. Escott and Scoutmaster Hodder, on the top of the hill, when Mr. Hodder drew our attention to the airship. We had a fine sight of her with the sun shining on her silvery envelope."

Mr. Hodder expressed the opinion that the airship was over Shaftesbury, or somewhere near there. She was travelling in an easterly direction. Then her course was changed and she appeared to be going southwards, and after a short while went back on her original course.

"We watched her for half-an-hour until she was just a speck in the sky."

#### U.S.A. TO GERMANY IN 45½ HOURS.

##### Hindenburg's New Record.

BERLIN, Monday (Reuter).

The Zeppelin Hindenburg arrived back at Frankfurt from America to-day at 1.20 a.m. (British summer time), having established a world record for the return journey in 45 hours 39 minutes.

The journey to Lakehurst took her 49 hours 54 minutes.

The total time for the journey to and from Lakehurst was 3 days 19 hours 51 minutes, including two days at Lakehurst.

She returns to Lakehurst on Friday next and is fully booked up with passengers.

## S. MID-EUROPEAN TANGLE,

### Austro-German Talks Fail.

#### TENSION REMAINS.

##### Hapsburg Restoration Opposed by Nazis.

VIENNA, Monday (Reuter). It is understood that the negotiations about an Austro-German reconciliation, which have been going on between Dr. von Schuschnigg, the Austrian Chancellor, and Herr von Papen, the German Minister to Vienna, during the past week, have ended in failure.

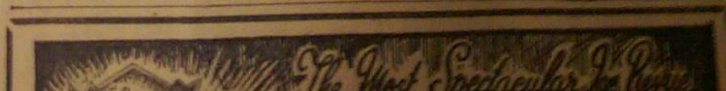
German circles here are anxiously trying to conceal the news, which comes from well-informed quarters. No relaxation of the existing tension between the two countries is therefore to be expected.

#### INSUPERABLE POINTS.

The failure is understood to be due to two questions, where differences of opinion proved unsurpassable: (1) The Germans demanded that the Austrian Nazis should be permitted to express their opinions

#### WEATHER FORECAST.

Weather will be mainly fair in the north, cloudy with occasional rain in the Midlands and South-West, and with local rain in the South-East. Temperature will be rather





## Ben shortly after his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday

Ben spoke with Spitfire Makers chair, Alan Matlock, when he came to our Spitfire Makers launch event in the Shirley Parish Hall in February 2020.



“I showed Ben the jar of mixed Spitfire rivets that I had been given by George Fuller, a young lad growing up in Hook near Warsash during WW2 who would be allowed to pick up the dropped rivets from the floor of Solent Court Barns, Chilling Lane, where Spitfire wings were being repaired. Like the Priory Garage in Titchfield where Ben went to work, the Barns were most probably an outpost of AST in Hamble.

“With great enthusiasm, Ben told me all about the different rivets that were used in the production of the Spitfire: the ones of different lengths for attaching the wing and fuselage panels, the heat-resistant ones that were used closer to the engine.”

Sadly, both Ben and George died in 2020.