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Mr H. A. Coe on 14.11.1985.

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Transcript of tape recorded by:-

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1 Lynton Road, Hythe, Kent. Date: 14.11.1985

(Typed verbatim from recording tape – October 2002)

Hythe in World War I

My name is Coe, I was born in Hythe in 1904. I have lived in Hythe all my life so I can claim to be one of those entitled to speak perhaps over my long life. It is connected largely with the First World War.

Hythe is in a peculiar position geographically. I suppose it could be said that this particular area between Dover and Dungeness has been at all times the most vulnerable place in our country so far as overseas attack is concerned. Of course in 1914 when we were obliged, and I want to emphasise this, obliged, to go to war with Germany for the first time. In both world wars we were the only country that went to war with Germany without first being attacked. We had done so to honour neutrality obligations in the first world war in respect of Belgium and in the second in respect of Poland. Harking back to the first, the Germans had to go round the Maginot line to attack France and to do it they went through Belgium, hence the reason for us coming in. They were an immense force in the Kaiser's time. They were always a militarist nation but they were all powerful on this occasion and we, being what we have always been, slow to do anything, were not prepared for such an onslaught as ensued. This particular area, Dover with its castle and its garrison, and below its warships, because it was a naval dockyard in those days. You come around to Shorncliffe, a garrison, a permanent garrison. You come along to Hythe, the school of Musketry; they were originally the barracks built for the Royal Engineers from [?] barracks at Chatham, who used to fly balloons, gas-filled balloons, on the Reachfields at Hythe some years before the first world war broke out. Then they were instrumental in the work that entailed building the Martello towers and digging the Royal Military Canal. The School of Musketry buildings were built for their habitation and when they had finished it was taken over as a training centre for the guns of those days, the rifle, the original rifles, - the machine gun even was not thought of at that time. It was ideally placed because of the vast shingle area stretching from Hythe to Rye, (Dungeness had no power station of course, in those days, it was just shingle and the sea) and at Lydd itself at the extreme end, there was a garrison, an artillery garrison. They had a gunnery range there and as time went on in the war, the very first tanks were invented and used there, and two Hythe men, prominent men, were involved in those tanks and their training – Major F. W. Butler MC and a Mr. Allnatt who settled in Hythe afterwards, and bought, incidentally, Sir Henry Lucy's house at Hythe, he lived there. Anyway, this gunnery range was quite an expansive affair and you may recall that it gave its name to a new kind of shell explosive, Lyddite. Then we come around, we follow the line of the hills and the Royal Military Canal and we get towards Hythe – from Dymchurch to Hythe there is a vast shingle area adjoining the coastline. That was inaugurated as a gunnery range for small arms, rifles, revolvers etc. in connection with the School of Musketry. You come along the north side, again to Shorncliffe and still the troops that are at Shorncliffe, (not for much longer I think) but those that have been there over the years have always used the Hythe Rifle range for their war practice and so far as I know, they still do. So you see Hythe was not only located in a very important place, it was an important place, literally a garrison town. It was a

shame really that the School of Musketry eventually became The Small Arms School because it embraced so many modern weapons and when it was destroyed, and I think that correctly words it, destroyed, outside the main gates they placed a tablet on a plinth in which it says that 63,000 non-commissioned officers received their training at that establishment and on those ranges. And when I was a lad it was a joy on Sunday mornings to watch their church parades. They had a band and every conceivable dress was within their ranks because they came from every conceivable part of the Empire and they used to march to St. Leonard's Church, except those who requested to go to other churches and it was something really glorious – the town used to just turn out to see the spectacle – it is something I have never forgotten and never shall. So that makes us a garrison town in itself.

When we were obliged to enter the war on the grounds that I have stated, we were fully unprepared for the modern type of war that ensued. By that time the Germans had literally dug in and they had masses of fully trained men available in the rear which they constantly could feed and change, whereas we, as usual, fully unprepared to have what we could scramble together, and when one thinks back how miraculous it was to think that men and boys, yes, literally boys enlisted quite voluntarily to go across that channel from the safety of this country to be slaughtered in literally their millions, it was a tragic state of affairs, but we were obliged to do it and carried out that obligation. And Hythe in its prominence, again literally saw all these things happening.

And then troops from the colonies started to come into this country to receive a lot of training and be posted overseas as required, and they were required in ever increasing numbers. They were largely Canadians that came about then and eventually they built camps, hutted camps, stretching from the present Sandling Junction to and from St. Martin's Plain at Cheriton. There were literally hundreds of thousands that passed through there. One particular place I remember ever so well as a boy, near Sandling Station, Jellicoe Club, it was a gift from one of the Mercer Companies of London. It was erected and named after Admiral Jellicoe who had fought and won the battle of Jutland, which was a great event that helped the war immensely. I also remember when I was at school in those days how the youngest VC ever, 16 years old, Jack Cornwall - he was decorated and he was killed. We had a photograph of him in the school which we dared not pass without saluting. Jack Cornwall, VC, 16 years of age! These Canadian troops were not in these hutments for long, and incidentally, prior to them going into these hutments they were literally forcibly billeted in all the empty houses and with families, except where there was no man in the house, in places like Folkestone, Cheriton and Hythe. And when they were required to move they marched to Folkestone. Now the area, the whole of the Leas, including hotels and all the boarding houses, and every house right back to Sandgate Road, was known as a rest camp and it was surrounded by a 12 foot corrugated iron fence with barbed wire on the top. And these Canadian troops were just herded into there to await the next tide for the boats to pull into Folkestone Harbour to transport them to France. You may recall the Road of Remembrance, so named because of what it says, in remembrance of those troops who went down the hill and so many never came back. And this went on and we were literally losing the war through being sheerly outnumbered. We couldn't replace quick enough. And literally boys were joining up and everybody of the prescribed ages was forcibly given a uniform and a rifle and put in the first line of trenches, dying by their thousands.

Again, it was a miracle that we came through it, but we did and then, the war changed in one respect only that has changed everything in warfare up to this very day, the invention of a flying machine. In Hythe churchyard is the grave of Captain Patrick Hamilton of the Second Worcester Regiment, seconded to the Royal Flying Corps, killed on September 6th 1912, two years before this war of which I am speaking about, broke out. That grave is within sight of the house where his family lived, Manor House, next door to the vicarage just below Hythe St. Leonard's Church. How do I know that fact so well? Because I attended his funeral, in the deputation of school children. It was full military honours, trumpeters, firing over the grave, something that was impressed in my mind to such an extent that in this last war I made it my simple little business to keep his grave tidy, always within mind of the occasion that brought about his death.

Then what was happening – airfields were needed as aeroplanes were made and improved. Again, we were surrounded with them, Hawkinge, Lympne and then there were two built, one where Nicholls works and lakes are, by the Grand Redoubt between Hythe and Dymchurch (that was occupied eventually by the American Air Force who came over), the other was what is now St. Mary's holiday camp between Dymchurch and New Romney. And some of the buildings that are there now being used in that holiday camp are the original buildings of that aerodrome that was built there. I recall, in connection with the one at Nicholls, or Nicholls site, the bricks in the construction of that were delivered to Hythe railway station, right on the top of the hill and the Royal Engineers with their old fashioned traction engines, with trucks behind, were used to convey these bricks to that site, and the manual work was done by a Chinese labour corps that was brought to this country for the express purpose of doing the dirty, hard manual jobs, and they had a camp at the bottom of Caesar's camp, in Folkestone. And I recall seeing as a lad two truck loads of these bricks run away down the slope from Hythe station and turn over at the bottom of that first hill, killing six of these Chinese labourers who were sitting on top of the bricks. I saw it all turn over, a ghastly sight as ever there was. Anyway, they did construct these airfields and in the course of time these aeroplanes were a joy to watch so far as us boys were concerned.

And then, a wonderful invention was taking place. On the Roughs, which is also War Department property, was erected and is still there, two huge concrete saucers, literally saucers, built into the Roughs hillside. There is also one at Brookland but it was never used to the extent that these two were, and they were known as an acoustical station, and that conveyed nothing to us. For what it actually was, was the beginning of radial transference of sound and it proved successful in time and it developed so that aircraft flying across the channel, their engine sounds and other things eventually, would hit these saucers and rebound, and they found a way of catching them as they rebounded, making records of them. And of course, the Germans, in their great will to overcome any difficulties found eventually the way under them, was flying at sea level. Now this didn't happen until later on in time, but it just again shows the importance of Hythe as a place which literally time and time again saved this country from the invaders, from the Romans, the Huns and the Saxons and all of them. Anyway, these aircraft gradually got better and better, there were biplanes or even triplanes at that time, and they used Hythe rifle range as a target area. I remember we boys used to come out of school and stand open-mouthed and watch these literally string with wood aircraft diving up and down firing at targets on

the ground. Knowing what we do now, as things transpired, it still is a wonderful memory. Well then, of course, the Germans were literally winning the war as far as the trench warfare was concerned because we hadn't got the numbers to keep up with them, but the aeroplane made all that difference. Together with the artillery, they were able to swamp to such good effect, that the artillery didn't have to sight a target they were able to use the information directed to them, and that made a great deal of difference.

Anyway, as things transpired, the Germans also took to the air as it were. Their first means of attack were what they had even before that war, the Zeppelins, huge airships, very vulnerable of course, but nevertheless at the beginning of time they were horrible things. I recall they used to come across the channel sometimes, even with lights on, and they used to bomb the - well they were a military target I don't doubt - bomb the hutments that I have spoken of. The first lot was at Otterpool Lane, near what is now Lympne airport. They killed an awful lot of Canadian troops there too and they used to come across and they used to go back, and it wasn't until a year afterwards that the first one was shot down at Potters Bar by a man named Wallingford. Now Wallingford, who became the pilot gunner as it were of this aircraft, was qualified at the old School of Musketry. He got the VC for it.

And from then on things seemed to turn, for our - well, I won't say good, but we were not losing so much. Anyway, the troops kept going across, and then another item of warfare came into prominence, a most drastic one, the U-boat, and it was sinking our ships, and by then the Americans were sending ships and everything over and we were losing at an alarming rate, and how could we overcome that? They had to come, or they were coming through from Hamburg through the Straits of Dover into the Atlantic. So what happened again in our vicinity, they built a steel net from the coast of France to the coast of this country, near where we are in Hythe. And that steel net stretched right to the bottom, it had two gateways through which ships had to go, one one way and one the other, and always on guard there were destroyers from the Dover Patrol, and that net was held up by tens of thousands of glass balls in nets. You can perhaps find one now and again in an antique shop and you would want the earth to pay for it. We used to smash them by the thousands on the beach when they used to wash up, broken off the chains. Anyway, at Capel they brought into being dirigibles, which were known locally as Queen Bees, and they used to patrol up and down the channel and especially near these gateways, and the slightest sign of a U-boat and the destroyers would depth-charge - there must be dozens lying out there. Now [Ick] junction where those airships - incidentally I saw one land on ground in Hythe which is now built over where Cinque Ports Avenue area is. It used to be known as Horton's Field. I remember one of those airships landing there. Now why did they land there? Well, the Imperial Hotel and all the seafront houses were requisitioned by the War Department and the Imperial Hotel was used by the ever growing Royal Firing Corps and they used the golf course as a machine gun range and they brought the machine gun up to almost its present standard, and were so clever that they even made it possible for aircraft to fire their guns through moving propellers without touching them, and that was a scientific achievement, it gave us a great advantage.

Flying ?

The very first women's army corps, I'm sure, was started in Hythe, the W.A.A.C.S. The Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. They were billeted in the houses adjacent to the Imperial Hotel, known as Beaconsfield Terrace. And the end house in

Beaconsfield Terrace was named, (and the name remained on it for years and years afterwards) the Daimler Dawson Home. It was in effect a female hospital. Daimler Dawson was the chief of the Women's Army Corps and responsible direct to parliament for them. Now that's history!

In the area which is largely built over, adjoining Twiss Road, through to the Cricket Ground – there are allotments there and also fields, grazing fields – a detachment of the Royal Naval Air Service which were centred at Chatham, were brought here and they were occupied in tents, in these fields, and we boys were puzzled about it all and used to watch points like this, wanted to know what they were for, why they were here. One of the remarkable facts about them were, they had the very first armoured vehicles which were literally like water tanks on wheels, solid tyred wheels, with a gun mounted on them and they stood along the south bank of the canal adjacent to their tented camp. Also they had dozens of motor cycles which instead of a sidecar they had a shield with a machine gun on it. Now I saw the reason for them being there. They were training with the Flying Corps on the golf course, but in addition to that there were a number of balloon bases formed around the coast and one was at Hythe, and that's why they were there. It was at the top of St. Leonard's Road, adjacent to the fisherman's boats and the lifeboat house. And what it was, in actual fact, was about a mile or a mile and a half out in the bay was a huge buoy anchored and there was a hawser from that to the shore that could be wound in and out, and attached to that hawser was one of these round balloons with a little basket on it, and it had a crew in it who used to sit up there all the time required, several miles out over the sea, spotting with telescopes and binoculars, in conjunction with the Queen Bee airships. That's a remarkable thing. And some of the houses that are there were built from some of the properties that belonged to that station. And another remarkable feature that the Royal Flying Corps in the Imperial and the Royal Naval Air Service in the adjacent field became, I am sure we were one of the first places to have it, the Royal Air Force.

Along the parade all the existing property of those days was all under requisition to the government and one place in particular, I was very interested in, and that was Moyle Tower. Moyle Tower has had a chequered career. It was built in 1880 for a family named Porter a very wealthy family who had a full staff of servants, coach and horses and several gardeners. Why did they have several gardeners? Because their garden, their property, extended from South Road to Tower Gardens, - there were no houses there. That was the private garden of the Porter family. I remember it so well because the Hythe Military Band used to play in there on Sunday evenings and the public were allowed in, and it gave us boys great pleasure because we were able to listen to the band and to chase round the gardens to scrump apples. Anyway, the Moyle Tower was taken over to house troops as all the houses were, - invasion was imminent, even then – and the very first battalion of the Kent Cyclists was formed there. A number of Hythe boys became members of it. They had bicycles with rifles strapped to them, grey bicycles they were, with rifles strapped to the frame and they used to ride in proper drill formation. The overflow,- there were quite a lot of them,- were billeted in Douglas House, which is the end house in Douglas Avenue right opposite to what is now the nursing home, children's nursing home I think it is. And in the car park there stood in the First World War, the Mercer's hut. That was provided by the Honorary Company of Mercer's in London as a YMCA establishment for the troops in the First World War. I used to go in there for two reasons really, I

knew the steward who was a disabled soldier and he taught me how to play billiards – they had a billiard hall in there – and I became quite proficient at that. Once a week I could go there and have a real hot bath in a real bath a thing that I had hardly ever seen, let alone bathed in! But for fourpence, you got a bath, you got a towel, you got a flannel, you got a bar of soap, for fourpence. I used to go there once a week for that the same as a lot of other boys did. To come back to Moyle Tower, now the Kent Cyclists, went (after a certain training) they were sent to India and I recall once Hythe lad, Potter by name, lived next door but one to us in Chapel Street. He went to India – he didn't come home. He has a sister, who is still alive in Hythe, Mrs. Nash, who until recently at any rate, ran a paper shop in Park Road. He had two sisters, Sybil, the other one, who married a Canadian soldier in the First World War and went back to Canada with him afterwards. The father, he was a painter on the brewery building staff.

Anyway, we go along the seafront and there is one interesting feature not connected with the war but I'd like to include it. Number 52 Marine Parade was the home of the Earl of Brassey, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports from 1904 to 1914. I remember it so well because as a boy, together with others, we used to stand open mouthed and watch them come to Hythe in their gleaming white and brass yacht which anchored in the bay, and they were rowed ashore with their crew in white ducks, and they used to spend the summer months at 52 Marine Parade, the house was then called "The Lookout" it couldn't have had a better name. I also remember on the front door was a binnacle.

And, we come along to the Imperial again and of course everything was closed along there, you weren't allowed to go any further because of the machine gun range. But I was so interested because as a lad, when war broke out, I used to scamper from school down to the golf course, caddying for a few coppers which meant the difference to my mother between having something for tea or not, very often. I remember one little occasion I was running down there one evening, along the canal bank, down through the garden of the Imperial to the golf club house, when I saw something sparkle in the grass and I pounced on it, and it was a silver half crown. I did no more, I turned round, chased back home, along The Avenue, to Chapel Street puffing away. My mother said "What on earth is the matter, are there no golfers about?" I said, "no, no, it doesn't matter about them" and I put this half a crown on the table and my mother broke down and cried, and so did I. A half a crown, it was almost a week's wages. Anyway, I did my little bit of caddying and then in 1916 it was requisitioned and we were all told to keep away, except the professional, Ephraim Meopham, by name, who lived in Ormonde Road. They put him in uniform, made him a sergeant in the Flying Corps, a purple grey uniform as I recall it, ? and he used to look after the greens so that officers could continue to play golf there. And he had two assistants, one Bert Godden, he went into the service and got frostbite in his feet in the trenches, and was no good from then on. The other was a younger boy, an adopted son, named Bert Roe, and under sponsorship, he was sent to America - I never heard of him again. Anyway, when the war ended, he asked me if I would like to be his assistant and I became his assistant, making golf clubs, painting balls, mowing the greens, doing anything that was required to be done in those days – 7/6d a week. It was great!

And right the way along the Princes Parade, as we know it, it was just shattered through neglect. All the ground from the railway to the seafront belonged to the

school near St. Saviour's is. And we boys in our ordinary school, hated the boys of Seabrook Lodge School, who were sons of privileged people who paid for them to be educated there. They were always dressed better, they always seemed to be able to play games better, but what they couldn't do, they couldn't fight better! And we used to teach them on all occasions, how to fight. And on this particular day we were both schools out there in force and was there a battle! And I remember so well the Canadian troops, no end of them out there, enjoying the afternoon, they formed a huge circle and us boys were in the middle, fighting each other, and they were throwing coins in to us. Upon reflection, though, it was a dreadful thing to do, to try to honour a country's suffering in the war by fighting each other. But there it was, this was the sort of thing that did happen in those days.

Occasionally we used to get these aircraft come across and frighten the lives out of us, until once, May 25th 1917, funnily enough, the day after Empire Day. I had come out of school after playing about as we usually used to. I crossed over the Duke's Head bridge into Chapel Street and there stood Arthur Wootton with his taxi. Now the Wootton family they were builders in South Road. There were two sons, Gordon and the younger one, Arthur. Mr. Wootton senior bought one of the original T-Ford's as a taxi. There was only one other like it in the town at the time and that was owned and run by a man named Sharp who had a garage in Park Road. Arthur was in charge of this taxi simply because his older brother had been called up, (he was only about 17) and sent to France in the Army, straight away, and was killed straightaway. And Arthur took over the taxi, and of course there was money to be made in those early days, no taxis and plenty of people wanting to get about quickly. Anyway, I stood there talking to him, half past six, Friday evening, beautiful clear evening, and all of a sudden, boom, boom, boom, and we looked up and there, right across the sky from north to south, 16 glistening aircraft. We learned afterwards that they were Gothas – German bombers – and they were going across the sky in the sunlight and it looked a beautiful picture, but how horrible it turned out to be. They were dropping bombs haphazardly anywhere, and this was the occasion when the worst attack of Folkestone was made. One bomb in Tontine Street alone killing outright 98 people, many more dying in consequence of it, Friday evening, half past six, shopping time! Outside the Brewery Tap, next door to ? Bros, the greengrocery store, big open fronted place. Anyway, these bombs were coming down in Hythe, one fell in the churchyard 10 feet away from the grave of the airman whose grave I described earlier. At that time, the Vergar was making his way to the vestry door, hurriedly, but he didn't quite make it. A shell splinter killed him. Daniel ?Luff was his name, and I could take you to that spot, show you stones all around with chips that the bomb splinters cut out - 1917 and it's ironical that the churchyard at Hythe is the only one in the country that was bombed in both World Wars. The other one destroyed a beautiful stained glass window at the eastern end. I saw that drop. Incidentally, again, that was on a Friday. There was a bomb dropped in Ormonde Road, killing a Nurse Hamilton, and exactly where that bomb dropped another dropped in the Second World War destroying four houses, causing no casualties. In May 1917 at the end of what is now Lynton Road and Elizabeth Gardens, one dropped right up against the wall around the big house where the Day family lived. They were comparatively small bombs compared with the ones of later times but they used to create a big hole – the bomb splinters were much treasured by us boys and I remember getting into this hole, it was all hot, getting these splinters out. My hands became smothered in what we knew as TNT, I don't know the actual name that stands for but my hands got covered in it and I was

for weeks scrubbing them off with Vim trying to remove it.. Several bombs dropped in varying places ending up by killing 23 Canadian troops on Shorncliffe Camp. They were assembled in formation and the bomb dropped right in the middle of them. They were comparatively small bombs dropped from a great height – we got no opposition to it – the few guns that we possessed at that time were largely being used by naval personnel; there were some at Capel I remember, literally guarding the airships there. That was the worst air attack that England had suffered up until then and certainly the largest daylight one, because they just went across the sky as though they were on an afternoon's excursion. These bombs just rained down, everywhere. Although there were other raids after that date, there was nothing that happened to compare with that. But we did have other incidents that made us wonder whether we were still going to be here in the morning or not. Although there were barricades along the seashore, there were certain times when Germans had got ashore by one means or another but they were caught and they were largely executed, and we just remained in the front line seeing for ourselves what was always likely to happen, never dreaming that it would happen again so shortly after it did, with such intensity as human brains could manufacture.