

James Woodward, aged 93, was called up in 1940 and served in the Royal Artillery. After the war he married a local girl, and set up home in Adisham. Here he talks about his experiences as one of the team responsible for the very large gun, known as the 'Boche-buster', which was hidden in the railway tunnel at Bishopsbourne, and was to be used to destroy German landing craft in the event of an attempt at invasion.

I was called up in 1940 and I had to report to Rhyl. It was a holiday camp, Sunnyville I think it was called. Within a month I was taught how to drive a motorcar and motorcycles and then after that we became signallers in the Signal Department. We all had to learn the Morse code straightaway. That was why at night we got these little torches that you could press and they flashed and we used to practice the morse code on the roof and your friend would come back, he wouldn't speak, he would answer 'roger' and all the rest of it and that is the way we taught each other.

Anyway, we had to 'Pass Out'. I forget where they sent us now, I think it was London, and then eventually we were sent to Catterick and about this time Hitler was just beginning to plan his invasion. The panic was on, so we got on the Barracks Square at Catterick, they split us up into what we were and we were about 100 men. They said fall out the gunners fall out the various MT's, fall out the signalmen, well the signalmen were separated and we were just a little bunch and the sergeant major came along and said "any clerks amongst you fellows". Nobody spoke. He said, "Can any of you type? I said, "I can with one finger." So he said, "Would you like a job", and I said "what is it?" and he said, "We want a battery clerk". So straightaway I became a battery clerk and he said, "we haven't got a typewriter, you will have to write out long hand". All of it in long hand for the British Army, that was the panic they were in. "We haven't got a room you can go in, we haven't got a typewriter, but we will give you a stripe to start off". So the first day in the Army I got a stripe, which was pretty good but everything was a bit muzzy, as you can imagine, and in a bit of a panic.

We got on the train in Catterick and gradually worked our way down. We came down and landed up here in Bishopsbourne and it was cold, January I think. Anyway we got to Bishopsbourne and we got the 8 men to a wagon sorted out, and me, I got the Booking Office. I got the best place honestly, and I got a bed, I got a fire, I got everything. Look the house is still there and that is where I operated, and I kept the job and I shared this room with Major Boyle and he, when he retired, went to Africa. There was a big dam they made and he was responsible for it. He died some time ago, I saw it in the newspaper. He was a nice old boy. He would stop the war if a little mouse ran across, he was quite a naturalist. He was a very God-fearing man, a good man and well he was the boss, and I had a room and I was his clerk, it was fantastic. Later on, you know, I could have been sent anywhere because the signallers were being sent abroad and we heard afterwards that they were getting bumped off, so you should never volunteer should you.

It was a fantastic gun, it started off at Catterick. It was the biggest in the British Army. We had people coming down from the War Office and they wanted to take pictures. They came in the office and said, "Would you like to be on the gun, I'm going to take a picture of it". Well, they didn't know what they were talking about but it was different and I have a picture with me standing on the gun with some of the other boys and you can see the gun and everything".

Interviewer – So how was it pulled out of a tunnel?

It had a diesel engine and we had engineers attached and they did all of that. It weighed about 230 tonnes, so it needed a bit of shifting. When we first arrived in Kent it was freezing and we went (oh it wasn't diesel at that time it must have been an ordinary one until we got diesel because it was able to give us hot water for shaving.

So how many years were you there?

I think about two. We fired over Barham and it broke all the windows. So before we fired anymore we had to send a squad of men out saying "open your doors", "open your windows". There was a piece on top of the carriage, and this piece was changed from being a 12 inch (served in the first World War). In fact King George V was supposed to have fired one round into the Germans. But they took this carriage and replaced it with an 18 inch, that is a big gun, it's fantastic. That is the hole in the middle, 18 inches, and it was calibrated if you like, which was the first time they had done this. They didn't know if it was going to blow or anything. So there were all these important people from the War Office and it fired, and they were scared it might only fire about three rounds and it was so big it might rip the inside of the piece out and all these were being worked out because old Churchill started this you know. He came down and I have got a picture of him with the gun.

So really the idea behind the gun was in case of invasion? To hit the German invasion fleet as it came along?

Absolutely. Part of the job of the gunners was to go to Dover, and leading up to Shakespeare Cliff they had to dig a trench so the Germans couldn't see them. It was quite clear you see, we could see them and they could see us. So they dug this trench, poor chaps, right to the very top and they got a decent look out and then our job, well we had to wire it back all the way so there was always radio.

So they were forward observation to see what was happening? When it was practice fire they could tell you where the splash went up.

I wasn't interested. My job was being in the office carrying out my duties there but because I had gone back to signalling, part of my job what going up and checking the wire because they were shelling all the time and quite often the line would be blown up and I had to go and make sure the continuation because they said that if the officers were at the OP they didn't like radio, it was terrible, it was crackly. The theory was that if you could get through and speak to it, the man wouldn't panic. If the commanding officer could speak to the observation officer he could settle him down because you didn't know what it was going to be like, whether it was a machine gun or what. So we had to run a wire, that was definite, and then you could pull the wire and talk to the chap and that was that. Several shots were fired, calibrating it as you can imagine, they thought you would only get three shots out of this gun and it didn't work out like that.

Was it better than they imagined?

We fired one or two to calibrate it and had all sorts of people down fixing things, to find the speed of the shell and all that. It was a really experimental job to begin with and they decided it was alright.

So you did about 2 years at Bishopsbourne and within the Army you moved on elsewhere?

I will tell you about that in a minute. I am getting better at remembering you know.

Mr Woodward would you mind saying what your age is?

I am 92 at the moment and in a month I will be 93.

In all how many soldiers were involved at Bishopbourne?

Roughly 100.

So where did they billet? You were in the booking office so comfy.

They had to sleep in trucks.

Did they in trucks – a lot of trucks?

They had bunks, I think about 6. Almost 8 to a truck. They lived in them. My signallers had one. We had those lamps to see what they were doing, you know those pump up lamps, and we were all issued with them. I was alright! I said to the boys would you like me to fix you up with electricity and they said oh yes, so I showed them how to do it. We had big batteries, huge things, and when connected gave you light but I had arranged that when they stopped they always tapped into the mains because we were number one, what we said went. This was a very dodgy area in the war (tell you about that later) and so they built a station in our area but anyone could have come on it, but we got over that. Now what was I saying

You said 100 men?

Yes, that entailed cooks, signallers, gunners.

Did you have any leave during that time at all, and people were able to get away for a short time?

Oh yes, I remember taking some of the shell bits home to my original house where I lived and the shell bits were like that, and I took several you couldn't carry that many, and I put that somewhere in that house. Well I never went back to that house so goodness knows what happened to them. Anyway where were we?

We were talking about leave and you were able to get back to your home

And then they found they could fire the gun. It was alright to fire it. A thing in passing, the Germans sent three warships down the channel, Gneisenau, Prince Eugen and one other, Scharnhorst and we could have hit it but the order came through 'no' we couldn't fire, because we were using it as a means of stopping the Germans. If we fired they would know exactly what it could do.

That's interesting because I think, didn't they send up rather flimsy aeroplanes to try and hit those ships instead?

I can't remember the detail because when I said we couldn't fire them, well it was just another incident. Things were happening all the time. When I was training the trucks rolled up and the men rolled out and they said, "We are from Dunkirk".

Oh so they joined your unit?

No they were just dumped. There were so many, thousands of them were rescued. I should say put them, not dumped them, wherever they could and we got a contingent of them. We just looked after them and then they disappeared. Now going back, we covered just a part of the Channel, and so to cover all of the other bit they built a railway at Barham (Kingston), a spur if you like, and it curved round and it enabled us to back down there and cover the bulge in England that way.

So there wasn't just an arc in the Channel there, you could actually cover more?

No, we could cover South East England right round. Because they might have come in that way.

What was the maximum range?

We never really established it because one or twice we fired in the Channel and nothing happened, it didn't go off. We were only messing about at first, well not me the boys were and then finally again it didn't go off. So, again, the boys came down and measured and got slide rules out. They got hold of these shells (they didn't say anything to me, I was just a boy finding out) and they changed the shape of the shells. You know the conventional shells, well these they spring lined them and they put a fuse in the base, and when fired up the Channel it worked. You see, it was a new thing altogether.

The Germans didn't know but they wanted to know more about it because there were some funny stories going about as to what this gun could do, so that is why we didn't shoot at the three battleships. I was alright picking up this information in the office, I was in a grand position really. I was there for about two years.