

Transcript of 80-year-old Mr. John Walton of Bilston, West Midlands in conversation with Dr. John Goodyear (University of Birmingham / Kulturgenossenschaft Globe e.G.) on Wednesday 6 June 2018, 11:00am (British Summer Time)

A: Interviewer: Dr. John Goodyear (37, DOB: 06.09.1980)
B: Globe patron: Mr. John Walton (80, DOB: 19.03.1938), former Gunner in the 44th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment RA (44 HAA)

John Walton was born on 19 March 1938 in Bradley near Bilston (then Staffordshire, now West Midlands). He left school at the age of fifteen, as did most of the population at the time, and went to work. Living in the industrial heartlands of Britain, known as the Black Country, John spent his formative years working in an iron foundry. At the age of 19, he was called up to do his compulsory National Service in the autumn of 1956. Conscription, as it was known, required “all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 30” to do eighteen months’ military service. Gradually phased out in 1957, John Walton would have been one of the last in a long line who were conscripted into the army for their National Service since its peacetime inception in 1947.

John’s first stop on his National Service was the small Shropshire village of Gabowen on the English-Welsh border near Oswestry. It was here where he did his military training before being move to Woolwich barracks in London. In early 1957, he was attached to the 44th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment RA (44 HAA) and sent to the Crerar Barracks (German: *Donnerschwee-Kaserne*) in Oldenburg. Regimental returns show that the 44 HAA was stationed in Oldenburg from the end of 1951 until the handover of the barracks to the *Bundeswehr* on 28 February 1958. Arriving in Oldenburg in early 1957, he would spend almost a year in Oldenburg before being transferred briefly to Lippstadt and then back to Woolwich. In late 1957, John returned back to civilian life in the Black Country to work in manufacturing, but found transition back into civilian life somewhat challenging.

In this twenty-minute conversation held at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in June 2018, John looked back fondly to his time as a Gunner (No.: 23340081) in the 44th HAA. The conversation covered his arrival in Germany, his coincidental encounter with old classmates, his passion for playing football in the regimental team, his contact with some select locals in Oldenburg, including Frau Kniep and Fralein Holschuh as well as his time at the Globe Cinema and Theatre. Though he did not use the cinema as often as he could have, he did recall two films he watched there: *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *The Tommy Steele Story* (1957), even inviting a German lady to accompany him on one occasion, but she did not show up as she broke her leg in a skiing accident.

A: Hello and welcome! I am here in the Wolverhampton Art Gallery, joined today by John Walton, the eighty-year-old former soldier who served in Oldenburg. And we are going to find out a little bit about his time before he joined up with his National Service and then his time in Germany. Hello, John!

B: Hello!

A: So, John. Could you just tell us a little a bit about before you joined the Services? What were you doing as, as a young man?

B: Oh, just normal working, same as everybody else, like, you know. You finished school at fifteen, and err ... I worked at the Phoenix Glassworks in Bilston; and that eventually closed, like. And then I worked for the Council after: Walsall Council.

A: And you finished school at 15, did you go straight into the army or did you have any time ...?

B: Oh no, no! I worked for three, four years before I went into the army, you know. And I went into the army at almost 20. I was almost 20, I believe when I went in the army.

A: So this was something that was right across the country for young people like yourself, like young men like yourself? You had to join up.

B: Yes, yes, of course you did, yes. National Service was compulsory.

A: How did you join up, then, John? What did you have to do to ...?

B&A: Well, your papers come through, you know, from the War Office, I suppose. *Chuckle.* Yes! And you had to go and join up. But during the time I was in the army, it was err, they stopped it, you know; the National Service was discontinued. A lot of my friends didn't go in, you know, yeah.

A: Once you joined up the army, did you have to serve in some barracks locally or did you go straight abroad?

B: Well, you go for training.

A: OK.

B: Went to training; and went to Oswestry, you know. I'm trying to think of the small station where: Gabowen.

A: Gabowen, yes.

B: Gabowen, that was the one place that we went to first of all; and then to Oswestry.

A&B: What did you do – to train – at Gabowen?

B: Just, just, you learn to march; learn to use your rifle and drill, you know, all that sort of thing. Nothing much really, apart from yourself getting used to being in the army.

A: What year was that, John? When did you start?

B: 1956.

A: So, in 1956, you joined up, you went to Gabowen, did the training and then what happened after the training?

B: I went to erm Woolwich. I went to Woolwich first of all, then from Woolwich went to Oldenburg.

A: Yes? So, you went from Woolwich to Oldenburg. Did you have any stops in between?

B: No, no, no.

A: OK, so they sent you straight to erm Oldenburg. How did you get to Germany, can you remember?

B: Mmmm ... a boat.

A: OK.

B&A: Oh, yes. By boat, yes. So. To the Hook of Holland, yes, then off to Germany, then train obviously to Oldenburg.

A: When you got to Oldenburg, what were your first impressions, John? What did you see?

B&A: Well, it was night time; it was dark. Yes. And all of these loonies were hanging out of the window, shouting at us.

A: *Laughter.* What, in German or in English?

B&A: No, they were English soldiers ... ah in the camp.

A: Yes.

B: They took us to the camp, like, you know. They took us up to the rooms where we were going to stay, like, you know. And, like I say, almost immediately, I met two guys that I'd been to school with.

A: Really?

B: Yes.

A: Can you remember their names?

B&A: Yes, yes, it's erm ... Harry Chapman, yes, and Wilf Amos.

A: So, they were both ...

B: ... and I still see them now.

A: They are still alive?

B: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: Oh excellent.

B: The one is. The one is. I see him in Roseville. Yes, he goes shopping in Roseville.

A: Yes. And how old is he?

B: He has got to be the same age as me.

A: So, what's his name again?

B: 80.

A: So, he is eighty. And his name?

B: Wilf Amos

A: Wilf Amos. So, eighty-year-old Wilf Amos. You went to school with him. Yes. And unknown to you, you got to Oldenburg and he was there.

B: Yes, he was in the camp. Yes.

A: Fantastic. So, the three of you.

B: Taking the mick out of us. *Laughter*. We had only just got there, you know. He had done about almost two years, and he had signed on for three years, like, you know.

A: So, right ... how did you find it, John, when you first got there to Oldenburg. What were your first impressions of the town?

B: Oh, I thought it was great.

A: Yeah?

B: Oh, I thought it was fabulous. Yeah.

A: Why?

B: Do you know it? Do you know Oldenburg?

A: Yes. I know it very well.

B&A: Yes, obviously. Yes. Going up to the camp to the level crossings in the town. Yeah! The station there like and the Schlossgarten. Yeah. In the town. Yeah. Yeah, Like I say, we saw old Frau Kniep, Mrs. Kniep.

A: Who was Mrs. Kniep?

B&A: She kept the photography shop. Uh-huh. In the town, Right. And she used to invite the, some of the soldiers there, like you know, possibly Sunday afternoon. And sometimes, not always, but maybe have a cup of tea with her, like, you know. And she had lost sons during the war.

A: Oh, had she?

B: Oh, yes.

A: How did you get on with Mrs. Kniep? Did you speak to her in English or in German?

B: She spoke English.

A: Did she? How did she learn English?

B: I haven't got the foggiest. I don't know.

A: No idea?

B: No, I don't know. I don't know, 'cause she'd be. What would she be then, if I was twenty? She would be ..., getting towards sixty, I would have thought, you know.

A: John, can you remember where this photography shop was? Was it near the Schlossgarten?

B: It wasn't far from where the WVS was.

A: What is the WVS?

B&A: It's the Women's Royal Voluntary Service, hmhm, you know. In the town, like. And it was somewhere for the soldiers to go. And you could get a cup of tea, a cup of coffee, and that. I don't think there is any alcohol served there at all. Right. At the time.

And ..., it is hard to remember what was in the middle, in the middle of the town. The WRVS was there; the Schlossgarten, which was great, going around there. The girls swimming in the River – *laughter* – throwing the turfs at them, like, you know. I went out with a girl there for about eight months.

A: Can you remember her name?

B: Hmm, yes, Michelle-Heidi Holschuh

A: OK! And, erm, did you get along very well with Frau Holschuh or Fraulein Holschuh?

B: Oh yes, yeah.

A: Yes?

B: Yes, in actual fact, she arranged for me to have a local leave with some relatives of hers.

A: Really?

B: Yeah, yes.

A: Uh-huh

B: An old guy who had been in the forces, you know; and I stayed with them for about four or five days. Because you are allowed a local leave, if you'd got somewhere to go, you know; and I had, by that time, moved to Lippstadt, so I caught the train from Lippstadt back to Oldenburg and stayed with them for five days, like, you know. Great times.

A: Looking at your life on the camp barracks now: you said that you were in Donnerschwee and err this camp. What do you remember of the camp exactly?

B: Hmm.

A: Its buildings? And the architecture?

B&A: Buildings were great. **Yes?** Ahh, we'd been in bloody old wooden huts over here, like, you know, **hmm** and err, the buildings were great. They were great long building, three high, and when you came out, the swimming pool, or whatever it was, for the fire maybe, I was thinking, it would be for fire, you know, was right outside the camp, yeah. *Inaudible*. And, like I say, I played football for the regiment, played centre-half for the regiment, and that was just outside the camp, on a left turn there, I believe it was; and the football field was not far from there. Just a short walk.

A: How was it living on the camp? Was it, err, was it very draconian? Did you have to **hmm**?

B: Oh no, no, no.

A: **No? Very relaxed?**

B&A: No, no, no. Training camps: they are a waste of bloody time, to be quite honest. But when you go there, to the service camp, it's great. **Yeah?** Yeah. While I was there, you know, - *cough* - while I was there at Woolwich, the Queen came to Woolwich for a visit. Now, the food in the army was bloody awful, you know, when the Queen came to Woolwich, afterwards, there were tin trays as big as that - *stretches out arms* - with beef, lamb, pork, everything. And it went right through the army, so the food was great, where it had been, I talked to, I go out with a guy now, and he is nearly ninety, you know, and he said: the bloody food when he was in [in the army] was awful, like, you know. But it did change while I was in there [in the army]; and it was super.

A&B: **Thinking about you in the army and having to buy stuff because you need to buy food and other things ... Not food ... to survive.**

B: Not food.

A: **No?**

B: No.

A: **Did you not have to ... did you not have to spend any money?**

B: No, no, no, no.

A: **So, everything was covered for you?**

B: Yes.

A: **So, what was the food like in Oldenburg on site in Donnerschwee? Can you remember the kind of food you had?**

B: In the camp or on ...?

A: **Yes.**

B&A: Oh yes, it was great. **Yes?** It was the same there, like, you know, and it went through the whole army after. **Right**. The whole army changed, like, and everybody had got this stuff laid out. **Yeah**. Where before, it had been take it or leave it, you know, bloody potato mash. Slap, slap, slap, slap. In actual fact, we had one one day, and we all, we all revolted a little bit, you know.

A: This in Oldenburg?

B: Yeah, yeah. And they had got this mash in this tub, like, you know. And we said: no, that's it, we're not. And we were all on the table, banging the tables, like. The RSM come in. Got his swagger stick there in the handle there, which, you can imagine what it was like. It'd hit the floor, spread all across the bloody floor. *Laughter*. I remember it now, so well.

A: Thinking of entertainment, so, there was something called ENSA [Entertainments National Service Association].

B: ENSA.

A: Yes.

B&A: Yes, well that had been in since ... Yes, but I don't remember that. I don't remember the ENSA people being in the camp, *oh, that's interesting*, unless they were in. Because apparently, there is one of these cinemas, isn't there, in all the camps in Germany.

A&B: Yes, there were; there were quite a number of them. I have looked and there were about 66 – yeah – right across in the British sector. Erm. But that was just for the Army. And then, the Air Force, they had Astras. Oh yeah, yeah. So, given the fact that you were in army, you would have had more contact with something called the Globe. Can you remember the Globe in Oldenburg?

B: The Globe. The Globe Theatre? Yes, the Globe, well, cinema, I thought it was called.

A: The Globe Cinema, yes. So, ...

B&A: Like I said, I didn't use it much. Maybe, at the most, five times. *Right*. I remember the two films that I did see, like, you know.

A: And what were they?

B: It was Bridge on the River Kwai and the other one was a Tommy Steele thing, but I don't remember what that was called, because the young lady who I was taking to the pictures didn't turn up. *Laughter*.

A: Was this a German woman?

B: Yes.

A: Ha, so you let the German woman come into the ...

B: Ah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Nobody knew any different, did they? *Laughter*. But she did not turn up: she broke her leg.

A: Did she really? *Laughter*. What a shame.

B: She had been skiing, like, you know. She had broken her leg.

A: OK! What year would this have been? What year?

B: Fifty-seven

A: 1957. So, erm taking this erm nice lady; unfortunately, she did not turn up ... to see this film in the cinema ...

B: I thought she'd kick me out.

A: *Laughter*. Thinking back to the Globe Theatre: what were your impressions of it? Can you remember the building, can you remember ...?

B: I can't in actual fact. This is what I thought when I was writing that down. I can't really remember much about it, you know, apart from the film, you know.

A: Did it look quite English from what you can remember?

B: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, hmm.

A: And how many troops exactly would have been on the camp that might have gone to the theatre? Was it completely full of soldiers?

B: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: So, you are talking about 400 people.

B: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, cough, yeah, especially that film as well [Bridge on the River Kwai], some of the officers were in there and standing along the side, you know, and some of the comments they were getting from one or two of the lads, like, you know. *Chuckle.*

A: Did you smoke in the theatre, in the cinema, in the theatre? Can you remember?

B&A: In actual fact, I did smo... oh, I can't remember that. I can't remember. I didn't smoke very much anyhow. I played loads and loads of sport. **Right.** I didn't smoke very much until I came out, you know. **Right,** OK then. 'Cause don't forget, that erm ... players, senior service, put a shilling for twenty.

A: What does that mean?

B: Five pence. Five pence. Five ... shilling. Err ... twenty pence, like you know. Oh. 'cause from the NAAFI. Oh. They were much more expensive here in England, like you know. So, they were much more expensive here in England, like, you know.

A: So, they might have been subsidised - Oh yes - by the government.

B: Oh yes, absolutely, of course, they were, yeah.

A: For those people listening to this, who don't know what the NAAFI is, could you explain what that is?

B: It is the Navy, Army and Air Force Institute.

A: Hmhm. And what did they do?

B: Oh, everything, I suppose. They ran canteens and all that sort of thing you know. That was about it to be quite honest. It was there, like, you know. I remember what the shock was: was German beer.

A: Rea...

B: I thought it was awful!

A: Really? German beer was awful?

B: Yeah, yeah.

A: Why is that?

B: Well, the old mild and bitter, you had in England, like you know, you went out, like, don't forget, it was mostly lager. Lager, to me, I had never heard of lager. I never knew was lager was, like, you know. And err ... I didn't think much of it until late... I didn't drink much when I was in the army, like. Better off for it to be quite honest.

A: When you were in the camp, John, can you remember obviously your regiment, which was ...? What was that?

B: Forty-fourth Heavy ACAC [44th Heavy Anti-Aircraft (HAA) Regiment]

A: So, the 44th Heavy ACAC Were there any other regiments on site or was it just your regiment?

B: No, just our regiment ... apart from erm a REME unit.

A: And what's that?

B: Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

A: Oh

B&A: They were there for the maintenance of the, your equipment. Right. The guns and all that sort of thing, like, you know.

A&B: You were presumably kitted out. You had all the weapons that you needed. Oh yes. Did you have lots of big trucks?

B: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. The, er, cough, like I said, you had 56 pounders; they were big guns, these were, you know. because the others were only 25 pounders.

A: When you were there, John, did you obviously use these trucks to go out on patrol. Were there patrols around town? Did you have to do this or not?

B: No, no, no, not really. No, not patrols like that. All we did – what we called – were firing camps. Went out with the guns, like, I say, was it Kiel or Lübeck? One of the others. Firing over the sea.

A: Yeah, probably would have been Kiel.

B: Yes, Kiel. And we were at a camp with the, the Americans. Hm hm. And they had got to small planes towing a sock. They used to shoot the bloody things down there.

A: Really?

B: Shoot them. *Chuckle.* Yes

A: If you look back at your time in Oldenburg, John, what are your memories, err ... your impressions of it sitting here today as an 80-year-old?

B&A: Fabulous. Yes? Absolutely loved it. Yes. Absolutely loved it. Loved it. Yeah.

A: Why did you love it? Can you ... are there certain things that jump out at you? Other than ...

B: The whole life there, like I said. I played football for the regiment. That was one thing. Everyone was going down to breakfast early and the football team went down about nine o'clock or half-past nine, in your tracksuit and, great. Great.

A: Who did ...?

B: The whole camp, the whole place itself was, like I say, it was a rural area. As you, you, you know, like, you know. And err as again, somewhere like Lippstadt, you know, I didn't like it at all.

A: How long, in total, John, were you there then in Oldenburg? So, you arrived there, was it in 1955 or 56?

B&A: Fifty ... err. I joined the army in 56 in September and got there in January, I believe. **So the following year?** I was only there ... I was only there for just over a year.

A: **So, when did you then get moved to Lippstadt?**

B: That following Christmas. Christmas, I believe it was.

A: **The Christmas of 57?**

B: Yes.

A: **OK. And then they moved you to Lippstadt and then afterwards, they presumably moved you back to England.**

B: Yes, Woolwich. Yes, back there to ... in civilian clothes. And there's a guy who had been in there [in the army] for twenty years, with one stripe, like, who tried to make you march around the camp, like you, in civies. *Chuckle.*

A: **If you have to think back to erm the relationship between the soldiers and the German people locally, how was that in the 1950s because there aren't many people who can talk about this now?**

B&A: No. Erm. Never really meeting an awful lot of German civilian people, like, you know. Err, but the people I met, like, they were great. Like I say, taking for example, that Frau Kniep. Wonderful. **Yeah, yeah.** Really, really nice.

A&B: **There was a British institute there, run by the army that was near the Schlossgarten, where people would go and do, that was, learning and sports.**

B: The WRVS, that was.

A: **How often did you go there, John?**

B: Not very often.

A: **Why not?**

B: Bloody table tennis

A: *Laughter*

B: *Laughter*

A: **That was all that was there, was it?**

B: Table tennis and ... what was ... what was the other one?

A: **Squash or something ...**

B: Oh, no, no, no, squash I would have been playing. I'd have been playing squash. I have got it on there somewhere, like, you know. Table tennis and ... I can't think now.

A&B: **Were there any gramophone records that you could lend out? Did you sort of listen to gramophones whilst you were on the camp or was that ... no, no ... something you didn't do?**

B: No, no, no. I don't remember anybody having any unless it being a radio or something, may have had a radio like to play. But I don't remember anybody playing records, no. No, no.

A: **Can you remember any special sounds on the camp that you will always remember?**

B: Any?

A&B: Special sounds? Because it was quite rural, so things like guns going off or – oh, no, no - special trucks.

B: No, no. Absolutely not. No, no.

A: No? So, very calm.

B: Oh, yeah, yeah. It was great. Yes, yeah, yes.

A: And very well organised, you were saying earlier.

B: Oh, yes, yes, it was, yes, yes. I thought it was a fabulous place to be quite honest, it was. Yes.

A: Fantastic.

B: I wouldn't have missed that for the world. You know, some people say: 'Hold on ... I went in the army. Oh god, I didn't like the army'. I liked it.

A: Yes?

B: I liked it.

A&B: Once you finished, John, in the army and you returned back to England, back to civvy life, as you say. How was it for you: this transition from ... awful ... army life?

B: Awful. Bloody awful.

A: Why was that?

B: I don't know. I fell out with my girlfriend.

A: Which one? The German one or the ...?

B: No, no, no. Ah, *laughter*. I'd got a girlfriend here before I ... and over silly things we fell out like. And I came back to her and I just couldn't settle, just couldn't settle, like, you know. You were expected to do things, certain things and I don't know ... No, I didn't like it at all.

A: How long do you think it took you to get used to normal life? Was it a period of five years? Ten years?

B&A: Maybe two years. Two years. Maybe two years, yes.

A: That is quite a long time for a young person, isn't it?

B: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yes. I was still playing football. We have got many of the old lads, like, friends, I used to play with, like. I played football up until I was thirty-five.

A: Really?

B: Yes, yes. Good side. We had got a good side in the amateur league, like, you know.

A: What side what this? What was the name of the team?

B: Bradley.

A: Bradley?

B: Yes, Bradley. Bilston Bradley is a small place, just on the edge of Bilston, between there and Tipton.

A: Yes, I know Tipton. Yeah, yeah. OK.

Y Yes, yes, between there and Tipton. We had quite a good side, like, I say, you know. We won quite a few. Never played, never lost ... I played in a few cup finals and all that thing, and never lost one.

A: Really?

B: No, no, no.

A: God, that's an amazing achievement, John

B&A: But the medals and things I had, *yes*, I think that they are hanging up in a carrier bag in the garage at the moment.

A: Really? Talking of medals, John: did you get awarded any sort of medal or decoration for your time in Oldenburg – no – or this was just National Service?

B: Just National Service, just National Service yeah.

A: OK! What did you do then afterwards professionally, so you were doing a lot of football, but in your professional life?

B: It was only amateur football, like, that I played in. No, I just went to work. I can't remember where I went to work when I came out the ... I went to work in an iron foundry; there wasn't much work about then at the time, you know. I went to work in an iron foundry. Bloody awful that was.

A: Really?

B&A: Yes. What a job that was. Then I went to work for Tarmac, *Ahh ...* Tarmac Construction. *Yes*. You know the problem like there has been now, with this, they have gone bust.

A: Yes

B: What do they call it now?

A: Into receivership?

B: Yes, it is not Tarmac now. It is just going into err ... don't know ... Carillion.

A&B: *Oh, aww, OK.* Carillion *This is a local company.*

B: Carillion. Well, it is only just down the road. The Tarmac depot where I started work at there, you know, that was the only depot they'd got at the time. And we used to do all the plant, all the construction plant, and send it to all the different depots until they all opened a depot in different parts of the country. You know, and it went from there to ..., and it got tied in with the Americans, and everybody, like you know. Yeah. We did some big jobs there, like, you know. My friend went to the dams in Peru. All that sort of thing, you know, like all those sort of jobs.

A: *Amazing. And err, when did you go into retirement, John?*

B: *Chuckle.* I worked until I was 69.

A: *Ah, that is quite late, isn't it?*

B: Yeah, well, yeah, in actual fact, this depot I was in, in Broad Street in Ettingshall, another company took it over. And they'd got two supervisors, two foremen, two of this, two of the other, so I was made redundant. I did OK. Fifty odd grand off 'em, like, you know.

A: Oh OK.

B: And err ... I then went to work for Walsall Council.

A: *After ... when you were 69?*

B&A: I finished at 69, when I was 60. *Oh, I see, OK, yeah.* I was made redundant, like, you know. I went to Walsall Council looking after the kids' play areas. All round Walsall. Bloody fabulous, mate! *Yes?* Absolutely

amazing. Feeding the birds and the ... **brilliant**, meeting all the young ladies taking their dogs for a walk, and ... *laughter*

A: **Excellent.**

B: And then I found out I have got this, believe me, I have got small scars and I've got a heart bypass, like, you know. A new knee!? And err ...

A: **So, you have been all repaired up?**

B: Yeah

A: **Excellent, John. Well, thank you very much!**

B: You are very welcome.

Photos



© John Walton

John Walton in late 1956, taken outside wooden barrack hut at Rhyl Training Camp, Wales



© John Walton

John Walton (sitting fourth from left) with the 44 HAA during active training at a Firing Camp in Germany



© John Walton

John Walton (2nd from right) with soldiers of the 44th HAA in front of the Guard House at Crerar Barracks (German: Donnerschwee-Kaserne) in Oldenburg in 1957