Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

TRANSCRIPT OF A TAPED INTERVIEW
"THE ORGANISATION OF FINCHLEY FOR WAR"
BETWEEN R. M. FRANKLIN, FINCHLEY TOWN CLERK 1939-1945 AND PERCY REBOUL
INTERVIEW CONDUCTED ON 17 JANUARY 1981

PR: The date is the 17th January 1981 and this afternoon I'm talking to Mr. R. M. Franklin, at one time Town Clerk of Finchley at his home at 29 Oakfields Road, Harpenden:-

PR: Mr. Franklin, as Town Clerk of Finchley you must have been more aware than most about the tensions that were building up prior to the '39-'49 war. What were your memories of those days?

RMF: Well, long before the war started I had agreed with the then Town Clerk that I would look after Civil Defence.

PR: What year would that be?

RMF: About 1937-38

PR: So there was a general awareness that things were going to happen?

RMF: Oh definitely, yes and we were recruiting people for the ARP services, particularly wardens who were, in one way the most important because they were the people on the ground who had to report to what became the ARP Control Centre, of any bombs that were dropped which we called incidents. We always referred to them as incidents.

PR: But was there a master plan of Civil Defence because I know that there was great fear about air raids with the experience in Spain and so on. Led people to believe that London would be flattened.

RMF: That's right and that's why we had these ARP wardens. We recruited as many as we could. Not very many in those days. We held practices at the entrance to the Victoria Recreation Ground. By that time we had established temporary ARP headquarters at the basement of Avenue House.

PR: Was that the control centre?

RMF: Yes. It eventually became the control centre for the whole of Finchley

PR: How did you recruit people?

RMF: Well by advertising in the local press and statements being made by the Chairman of the Civil Defence Committee that we needed these and the general impression that something ought to be done and obviously the Council were the people to do it and if they wrote into us then we hold of them and

said "Look here, try and recruit some of your friends" and so on and so forth and it built itself up a lot in that way

PR: Was it a voluntary position?

RMF: At that time it was a purely voluntary organisation, yes.

PR: And about how many recruits did you start to get?

RMF: Oh, I suppose by 19….. let's see, the war started in September '39….. At the beginning of '39 we had, I suppose, about 100 wardens for the whole of the Borough.

PR: You also mentioned training. Did you have training manuals?

RMF: Oh yes. We had a manual distributed by the government which was passed out the wardens so that they could understand what they had to do.

PR: Covering what sort of subjects?

RMF: Reporting, mainly reporting what had happened. Mainly a bomb had dropped; so many casualties; it looks as if somebody was going to be killed or how many houses damaged and so on, or roads blocked or railways blocked and that sort of thing. That's the sort of thing they had to watch out for because they were the people outside on the ground on whom we relied, the control centre, for all information that was happening outside.

PR: Yes, the Control Centre, you were saying, was at Avenue House in the basement. And how did you link? Presumably there were a number of other centres dotted around the borough?

RMF: Oh yes. ARP posts. Those are the brick-built things which we built and dotted about the borough. Not everywhere because in some cases they were probably in private houses which had some good shelter or something like that but basically we preferred to have the specially built ARP wardens' posts which didn't prevent a direct hit, of course, but protected them from blast and that sort of thing.

PR: How were they linked to headquarters?

RMF: All by telephone, direct telephone.

PR: Were there any back-up messenger services in case a line was destroyed?

RMF: Well they would go to the nearest ARP wardens' post in that case or possibly use a public telephone but we never had any trouble as far as that was concerned with any breakdown in communications between the wardens' posts and ourselves. We could always ring them back too, do you see?

PR: Quite, but presumably the wardens' posts, and I remember those so well – they were built to a specification I believe?

RMF: Yes they were, to a government specification.

PR: Any idea how much they cost to build?

RMF: That is a tall order. Probably £150- £200 in those days. One has to think back

PR: Would that have come off the rates?

RMF: No, we probably had government grants towards that. You see it was all part of the main government defence plan. I think we would probably have got it through the Middlesex County Council, a grant from them who, of course, as far as Middlesex was concerned, were the overall Civil Defence Authority for all the boroughs and districts in Middlesex and we had to report to them every day during the war whether we had had any bombs dropped in case (a) we wanted help, or (b) they wanted to know what the general position was so that they could inform Regional Headquarters, London Regional Headquarters as to what the position was.

PR: I understand that you had posts located at strategic places reporting into the central HQ at Avenue House all the incidents and so on, and then the HQ reported to Middlesex County Council which would be where?

RMF: They were in Westminster

PR: You would say how many bombs had dropped, casualties and so on. Did you have special forms for confirming?

RMF: No, it was just all done by telephone because the next day you would have another lot you see., so you couldn't spend the time on filling in forms and that sort of thing, not in the real bombing period from September 1940 till May the next year

PR So the organisation, in a sense, was on a county structure, rather like the administration of local government

RMF: Yes, very similar, very similar. And of course we had our own rescue parties which came under the Borough Engineer & Surveyor. He was directly responsible.

PR: I want to talk to you about that because, if I can get to it this way, how many wardens were there in each post?

RMF: There would by anything up to, I would say, 10 to a dozen but then of course they would have to serve (*inaudible)* because it was pretty well a 24 hour period.

PR: By this time they were being paid?

RMF: Oh yes.

PR: Do you know how much they were being paid?

RMF: Offhand I would think about £3 or £4 a week. It wasn't too bad in those days. Not all of them because some of them were volunteers. There were people with money who didn't expect to be paid but basically one would say 90% of them would be paid.

PR: And were they, again, grouped into smaller areas?

RMF: No. They would have a specific area allocated to them.

PR: What, the post would?

RMF: The post would. They would have a specific area and they would travel that area as necessary reporting to their own headquarters who, in turn, would report to us. They would report to their own wardens' post. A bomb drops, say, over there. A chap rushes up from the wardens' post, finds out what the damage is, comes back to his wardens' post, rings us up and tells us what's happened and then, depending on the circumstances, we would send out a rescue party from the Engineer's Department by direct control from the Control Centre to the Central Depot where the rescue parties were kept and one or two of them would go off to this area where the warden would be waiting for them to show them what had happened. We would also ring the Fire Officer in case of a fire and he would send a fire engine with mostly men to the spot if there were a fire involved.

PR: I begin to see now that the warden was essentially reporting an incident, assessing what had happened, he then phones you and its up to you to say. These rescue parties, how were they equipped? What sort of people were they?

RMF: They were mainly council workmen who deal with repairs and housebuilding and so on for the council

PR: Did they have any special equipment? Cranes?

RMF: Oh yes, well of course they'd have some in any case in the depot. We had, I think, 5 or 6 rescue parties, each with their lorry and whatnot. They were organised in squads for this purpose but not for their ordinary, everyday work purposes. For the rescue side they were organised in parties with a leader of course.

PR So they were doubling up with their council work as well? Which took priority?

RMF We obviously if it had been a daylight raid they would have to carry on as rescue parties.

PR: What was a rescue party expected to do?

RMF: They were expected, if the building was badly damaged, they were expected to try and get the people out who were buried underneath. They did their best with such equipment as they'd got and fortunately, as far as we were concerned in Finchley, I don't think there was a single case where they needed cranes to get people out.

PR: Did they have special training?

RMF: Oh yes. They were trained for it but then, after all, they were builders. Many of them were builders and chaps who were used to dealing with buildings. There were people who came round to repair the council offices if anything went wrong with the windows or roofs had fallen down so they were all used to dealing with buildings.

PR: So in addition, then, to the rescue parties the other services that you've mentioned were fire. If there was fire you would call up the NFS?

RMF: No, no. It was our own fire brigade at that time at the junction of the North Circular Road and Squires Lane. We had our own fire authority.

PR: This was in addition to the regular fire service?

RMF: No, this was the regular fire service.

PR: I'm going from my own memory here. They were rather like the Green Goddess vans. They weren't the scarlet fire engines?

RMF: Oh yes, they were the ordinary fire engine. They had volunteers who wanted to serve in the fire service as well who would be enrolled and allocated to a particular fire engine or squad which might be likely to be called out.

PR: What was the Auxiliary Fire Service then?

RMF: That was it. You're thinking in present day terms of the National Fire Service. In those days there was not a National Fire Service. Every council ran its own fire brigade where it could.

PR: So it was presumably vastly augmented

RMF: Oh yes. It was augmented definitely. It was a number of volunteers who wanted to serve and we used to, as far as the wardens were concerned, even before the bombing started the wardens used to practice putting out fires with a stirrup pump down in the fire station. That's where they used to train for that particular job.

PR: I have memories of even private cars, I think, scudding around the streets towing mobile pumps.

RMF: I don't recollect that but it could have been

PR: And then one had these emergency water tanks.

RMF: Oh yes. Some of those were dotted about but as far as we were concerned we were very fortunate. We had very little damage so we really actually didn't need these things. What we did, very often, was we were called in by the County Council to help Inner London who had had a bad time. Like Finsbury Park and wherever it was we would get a call. London Region would ring Middlesex, Middlesex would ring Finchley or Hendon or what have you, saying there was trouble and would we send a rescue party or two rescue parties or a couple of fire engines down to so and so and we would send them off by phoning from the ARP centre to the fire brigade or the central depot where the rescue parties were.

PR: Now what about the hospital and the first aide side of this?

RMF: Well most the wardens were trained in dealing with slight casualties. Anything more than a slight casualty would obviously go off to the hospital and be taken by ambulance.

PR: Would they have been directed from the central headquarters?

RMF: Yes, from us. We would notify them and as a matter of fact, if I recollect rightly, we had ambulances at our fire station as well so that they could, if necessary, be sent off to the particular incident and then take the casualty off to whatever hospital would be available. They might go to the Friern Barnet hospital or that might be full and they'd be sent off somewhere else. That would be up to them.

PR: But were hospitals like the fire service, talking in pre-war terms? The council had a responsibility for them?

RMF: Not the council for hospitals, no. It depended on the size of the council. Take Birmingham. Birmingham probably ran their own hospital but wouldn't have in an area like Middlesex. I believe there was a special hospital department in Middlesex dealing with all the hospitals in Middlesex. We weren't big enough, in effect, to look after hospitals, although we had a hospital in Finchley. There's a Finchley Memorial Hospital, for instance. If necessary we would ring them up directly if we thought there were likely to be casualties and see whether they could cope and if they couldn't then we would send them off.

PR: Can we just go back to the tension? I'm anxious to establish where the initiative for war preparations came from. You, as Town Clerk, were right at the apex.

RMF: Well it was coming from the government to the County Council and down to us. We got a copy of all the circulars which were coming out of government departments.

PR: Were there masses of them?

RMF: Oh yes, oh yes. We had to read and digest them.

PR: This was on top of all your other work?

RMF: Oh yes. All the council work went on at the same time. That's why I had agreed with the Town Clerk that I would look after Civil Defence Control and also food. I was also Food Control Officer while he would look after the rest of the council business which carried on as normal. People had to be looked after, rates collected and all that sort of thing.

PR: So you were really at the apex of this organisation. A terrifying responsibility. Were you aware of it at the time?

RMF: Well one took it in one's stride. This was the sort of thing one expected and I knew I was going to be the Civil Defence Controller, the Town Clerk actually retired in April 1939 before the war broke out. I was then deputy and solicitor. He wasn't a solicitor. I was a solicitor so I was responsible for all the legal work which meant, of course, interpreting Acts of Parliament and all that sort of thing affecting ARP, Food Control or what have you. And, as a matter of interest, in September 1938 we'd been ordered to issue gas masks. We trained how to fit them and so on and I was just going off to golf on Saturday morning when suddenly a phone message came through from the County Council that gas masks were to be issued immediately so I rang up the Town Clerk who was at Worthing and he said he would be back on Monday so I rang up the Chairman of the General Purposes Committee who was looking after Civil Defence at the time. He came along to my office and we said we should get busy with this so we notified the Chief Warden and he notified all the wardens

and I went to all the cinemas in Finchley that night in the interval about 8 o'clock and announced that we were going to start issuing gas masks at 8 o'clock the next morning in all the schools. I got terrific cheers from the audience.

PR: As part of the preparation does this mean you'd been stockpiling gas masks.

RMF: Yes, they were already available. Most of them would probably have been at the Central Depot, where the rescue parties were, where all the Surveyor's workmen are and all the lorries, at Squires Lane. Either there or at Avenue House but I'm pretty sure there. They were distributed round the schools immediately. As soon as we got the warning I rang the Surveyor and he arranged for them to go round to the various schools ready for distribution next morning at 8 o'clock.

PR: But you couldn't possibly have covered all the population

RMF: On that Sunday we distributed about 30,000 gas masks out of a population of between 60,000 and 70,000. Another interesting point was that while some of the wardens were actually fitting gas masks other wardens were training volunteers who volunteered how to fit them so they could help. That's how we got that big figure in that day.

PR: This all does presuppose to me that you knew exactly the number of men, women, children and babies because there were different types.

RMF: The Medical Officer could always guide us as to the various ratios but one had to take a chance on that sort of thing and if they ran short they would ring us up at ARP headquarters and we would send some more, say kiddies gas masks to St. Mary's School or up to Whetstone or what have you.

PR: And if they couldn't get them that particular day….?

RMF: So far as that was concerned, this is another story concerning the then Town Clerk. He came back on the Monday. He didn't see me. He called in all the other Chief Officers and he went off to lunch. In the meantime I drafted a public notice which was going to be put round all the shops saying that we would then get some gas masks again starting on the Tuesday or the Wednesday. I rang him up at his home. I said "Mr. Bartlett we've got so many more thousand gas masks to issue. We must get on with it. Your name is going at the bottom of the advertisement. Can I read it out to you?" He said "I'm not coming back any more. I've seen Alderman Pike (who was then the Mayor). You're going to be Acting Town Clerk tonight. I'm going on sick leave for 6 months" and at the end of that 6 months he resigned completely and I was made Town Clerk. So, anyway, we issued all these advertisements round to the shops and everywhere and started distributing for the rest of the week.

PR: Would you happen to remember the day of that? Was it before the outbreak of war?

RMF: Oh yes, yes. Before the outbreak of war. By 1939, you see, we were really expecting anything.

PR: So the distribution was in '39?

RMF: No, ’38, late ’38. By that time, generally speaking, all the national press were saying “what’s being done for getting on with this and so on and so forth”. That’s why we had to do it.

PR: Do you happen to know who made the gas masks?

RMF: No.

PR: It fascinated me. Such a colossal job supplying everyone. Being all of natural rubber it must have been enormous.

RMF: They were all government issue and paid for. As far as we were concerned the County Council would authorise us to have so many thousand according to our population. But it was wonderful to see these people on that first Sunday. They were so delighted to have them. To get 30,000 issued in one day is pretty good going.

PR: There was great fear of gas, wasn’t there?

RMF: There was. Similar to that of today – a great fear of gas so people did turn up. I suppose people I’d spoken to in the cinemas. The cinemas were full. I suppose I’d reached more than a thousand people straight away.

PR: Were you nervous when you went into the cinemas?

RMF: No, not at all.

PR: I’m just trying to imagine my reactions if suddenly the film was stopped and the lights went up….

RMF: No, it was done in the interval. They always had an interview, you see, and I managed to get round to 3 or 4 cinemas just at the right time and made the announcement.

PR: The other great work of organisation must have been one of Identity Cards. Was that one of your responsibilities?

When were those issued?

RMF: Those were issued fairly early on because they had to have them for food control. Then, of course, in June, possibly after Dunkirk, the issued a new set of Identity Cards and we had to withdraw all the others. People had to hand them back and be issued with new ones. I’ll tell you one of the appalling blunders that happened on that. Just in the middle of the scare of the invasion the Senior Chief Inspector at Golders Green rang me up and said could he come and see me. He came to see me and threw one of the old Identity Cards on my desk. He said “That was picked up on the North Circular Road this morning and taken into Southgate Police Station by somebody that had some common sense”. I rang up my chap I’d put in charge of issuing these things and said “What about this blank Identity Card in the North Circular Road? I told you they had all got to be destroyed”. He said “Yes, I gave them to my clerk to get them destroyed and he gave them to the caretaker to burn them and then along came the wardens and said they wanted some stuff to practice their stirrup pumps on and he gave them all these bloody Identity Cards.” They were packed in bundles of 50, you see. They set fire to them and along came the wind…… And the next thing that happened (this appeared on a Thursday or Friday) there was a question in Parliament the next day about this

and it was also raised at the council meeting. I explained to the council what had happened and then the Registrar General rang me up and said would I go up and see him. So I did and I explained. "Well", he said "I'm glad to hear that but of course it's your responsibility. I can't help that. We were afraid there might be something wrong with our organisation". A similar sort of thing had happened up in Yorkshire. I was one of the worst moments I've ever had.

PR: Where were the cards stored?

RMF: As far as I was concerned they were stored in the basement of Avenue House under lock and key

PR: And when people registered each one had a number?

RMF: Yes. We had to tie up with Food Control.

PR: You couldn't in fact get your rations without producing an ID card.

RMF: Yes, I'm pretty sure of that. After all, they had to show something otherwise people could get two or three ration books so they had to have some form of identity and if I recollect rightly it was that they had to produce their Identity Card.

PR: What we haven't touched upon yet is the police. Were they, again, being supplemented by reserves?

RMF: Yes, definitely. They didn't come under us – they were the Metropolitan Police area.

PR: You had regular contact with them. They were part of the Civil Defence.

RMF: Yes. If there were a bad incident they would come along and help and keep people away. There were curious people who'd got nothing else to do. There always are people like that who stand and gawp.

PR: I'd like to ask you if you remember what you were doing when war broke out. It's such a traumatic date and time.
What were you doing when the famous broadcast…. Were you listening to the famous Chamberlain broadcast?

RMF: I'm sure I was

PR: That surprises me

RMF: My wife ticks me off. She tells me I keep forgetting things and I do. After all, I'm 76 years of age so it's not surprising, having been retired 15 years, that I can't remember all the details.

PR: I was just wondering what was your reaction? I mean, more than most people you'd been heavily involved in preparations. You must have thought "The balloon must go up now". Was it with a sense of relief, do you think, when it actually went up?

RMF: Well, I suppose in one way it was because we knew that people were just going to get down to it. As far as we were concerned, myself and my brother Chief Officers, the nonsense was over and now it was the real thing. This is the way we looked at it.

PR: But of course there was a tremendous spirit at the time. People were fed up with this Hitler weren't they?

RMF: Oh, they were. They were waiting for something to be done. That's why I got those cheers at the cinemas. It was one of the biggest surprises I've ever had.

PR: That's a fascinating example of public response.

SIDE TWO:

RMF: ……. there was no question about it and that was the first thing. We'd had exercises before then – the wardens at the entrance to Victoria Recreation Ground, you know, with probably 20 or 30 people standing around gawping while they practiced messages that a bomb dropped the other side of Victoria Park. Along came a warden, rushing, and he rings up Avenue House, the control centre. About half an hour later a rescue party arrives. But there was no great enthusiasm as far as actually taking part. The public were definitely expecting tangible things to be done. In September '39 that was it. As far as we were concerned it was the thing.

PR: What about the blackout practice? Had you been responsible for that?

RMF: No, No. That was a police matter.

PR: How did they communicate?

RMF: Through (?ads) and wireless and that sort of thing and of course if a warden spotted a window with a light showing he would go round and bang on the door and say "Look here, you've got a light showing". If they didn't take any notice then he'd ring up the police.

PR: There was also the question of street lighting and vehicle lighting, public transport…

RMF: Street lighting was cut out entirely.

PR: From Day 1?

RMF: Yes, from what I remember

PR: I can just about remember the funny masks that you had to put over the head

RMF: Yes, they were all the responsibility of the police. I couldn't help you on that, although I had to get mine but I don't remember where I got them from

PR: Associated with all this was the question of protecting yourself against glass splinters. They were extraordinarily crisscrossed with brown paper. Was that all done in time?

RMF: Well, I wouldn't say done in time but people began to realise, particularly after Dunkirk, that they'd got to do something about that sort of thing and a lot of

them did it themselves with any advice they wanted from the local ARP warden or, if he didn't know, he'd probably get in touch with us and we'd probably arrange for one of the Borough Surveyor's men to go down and see and help to do what was necessary.

PR: What about the famous Anderson shelter? Did the council have anything to do with that. How was that organised?

RMF: As I recollect those were issued to us by the County Council from the government. I think we put some up but we also dug a lot of trench shelters. Slip trenches, well down with cover over.

PR: Whereabouts were these?

RMF: Oh, dotted about the place. We had one at Brook Farm behind the wardens' post and, in fact, it's very interesting to know that when the (this is another personal experience) bombing of London was very bad the dockers and their families were all living in Epping Forest but the dockers were going back to London to work in the daytime and at night they came out to the forest and I got a message one evening, I should think it must have been at the end of September or early October 1940, from the County Council to say could I hold a meeting that evening at 8 o'clock at which representatives of the Ministry of Health, the County Council would be there, because the government were very concerned about these dockers and their wives living out in Epping Forest, some with tents, some with no shelter at all.

PR: They did this on their own initiative, then?

RMF: Yes, they went out there on their own initiative. London was being bombed terribly in those days. The RAF were hardly in existence. It wasn't their fault. And they were just literally bombing the docks right, left and centre. Of course the Thames was always a guideline for them. So they were camping out there and we agreed that we would take up to 5,000 within the next week or two and I had authority, as all Town Clerks and Clerks did, to requisition houses, empty houses or those where the people had fled to the country at the beginning of the war and all we did was simply go along and bang a notice on the door that this house had been requisitioned and we put these people in. I used to go round in the evenings now and again when the bombing was on or about to be on, say about 9o'clock at night, and I remember going down into the public shelter at Brook Farm Estate where there were 5 or 6 dockers and their wives and they were marvellous chaps, absolutely marvellous to talk to and they were so grateful for all that was being done for them.

PR: It really is a formidable task of organisation, something like that but on the other hand, as you say, you had enormous powers

RMF: Oh, yes, we had enormous powers to do it and we simply did it, you see. Mind you, we had a bit of trouble after the war trying to get them back. The people wanted them back and we couldn't put the people who were in them…

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PR: They stayed in them, a lot of them, did they?

RMF: Oh yes. I had one case where a bank manager had to be at his bank in Finchley and he'd been bombed out twice. Had lost his house twice and we had to rehouse him twice and these people who'd fled at the beginning of the war naturally wanted their house back but we weren't going to turn these

people out who'd been bombed out twice while they'd been living down in the West Country or wherever without any risk worth talking about and these are the sort of problems we had to face after the war. But this is what we did and I should say we accommodated anything up to…….we took over about 7,000 houses in all before the war had finished. And another interesting point is this. I had agreed to take over the food control and we'd had a coded message from the Ministry of Food which was obviously to tell us when to start issuing ration cards and it was on the night of one of our council meetings in September 1939. A lot happened at the same time. There was the issue of the gas masks and I hadn't had time to look through the council minutes and the Town Clerk said he wasn't coming back from sick leave so it meant I had to take the meeting. I asked the council to adjourn because about half an hour before that in had come the telephone code from the Ministry of Food which, when I went down the safe and opened the interpretation of it, I found that it was issue ration books immediately. So I asked the council to adjourn for half an hour, which they very kindly did and then we resumed at 8 o'clock and carried on.

PR: You had all the ration books in your house?

RMF: No. I forget where we had them now. They were probably in the council offices opposite St. Mary's.

PR: But presumably you must have had a master plan because the mind boggles at the organisation of rationing and points systems and registering the shops.

RMF: Well I had arranged for a librarian to take over the real detailed work. He had all the circulars that I had copies of so he knew what to do. Nevertheless, I had to keep an eye on him and was responsible for anything that went wrong. He was established over the gas company's offices in Regents Park Road just opposite King Edward Hall.

PR: Do you happen to remember his name?

RMF: Smith, Seymour Smith. I think he's dead.

PR: So you got the coded message and the plan swung into action?

RMF: Swung into action and from that moment onwards……..

PR: How did you communicate that to the public?

RMF: I should imagine the press got hold of it in any case. There would be a national campaign. They wouldn't leave it to one Town Clerk to make the announcement. There would have been a general announcement next morning.

PR Did it go smoothly?

RMF: Oh yes. It went very smoothly. I expect there were some problems but I didn't deal with them personally. Seymour Smith handled any problems there were and of course we recruited staff immediately for it specially.

PR: When did full rationing start?

RMF: If I recollect rightly it started in that September soon after 1938. No. It would be April 1939.

PR: So before the war started, in fact?

RMF: Oh yes. Ration books were then being supplied but I don't think rationing started until a bit later

PR: And was the same true for petrol and key strategical products?

RMF: Yes, we were issued with coupons. If you had a car you had to apply for petrol coupons. I know I had to apply for coupons to run my car.

PR: But your general feeling is that on the whole it went reasonably well? People were co-operating?

RMF: Oh they were, definitely. They had to because once the actual bombing started and people were being killed then it was brought home to them but what amazed me was the number of people who stayed in Finchley and still going to their offices in the City of West End and would come back in the evening without knowing whether their house would be there or their families would and in fact one of the first bombs we had dropped in Percy Road at North Finchley and it dropped directly on the house which was occupied by the chauffeur of a friend of mine. It killed him and his wife and four children and his eldest daughter had been working in the City and she arrived home about 7 o'clock at night to find all her family killed.

PR: In a way this is a silly question but what was the reaction when that sort of thing happened? Was it a hardening of attitude, I mean apart from grief and anger?

RMF: Well, generally speaking it was. If I may come back again to show that, we had the council meeting in September 1940 when bombing had started. We always met on the last Monday in the month at 7.30 in the evening and the committees did in the previous evenings and one of the members got up and said "We should show the Germans we're not afraid of them and we should continue the meetings at 7.30 in the evenings". So I got up and said I didn't mind attending council meetings but they couldn't expect my staff to come and risk their lives but of course they wanted to and one of the older members got up and said "This is sheer nonsense. What good is it going to do the war effort if we're bombed. In fact it would give the Germans great pleasure to know they had wiped out the Finchley Council. I move that in future we meet at Avenue House at 2.30 on Saturday afternoon and the committees likewise". And a month later on the very night we should have had a council meeting in October a bomb dropped on the end of St. Mary's chancel and wiped out the chancel and blew my offices inside out. We never occupied them again. I moved my offices then to Hertford Lodge which had been a girls' school next door to Avenue House. Those were my own offices. The Borough Treasurer went into King Edward Hall and those were the only two departments in that building and the council meetings met after that always at Avenue House right until 1965 when they were merged into the London Borough of Barnet.

PR: How big a part did the Council itself play in the decision-making in war time?

RMF: We had a Civil Defence Committee to which I reported every month.

PR: Who comprised that?

RMF: Members of the Council, elected members of the Council and they had their appointed Chairman who, in this case, became one of my deputy controllers. Although I had to evacuate my family because my youngest child was born in September and there were incendiary bombs dropping all round the house and I thought I can't look after my job as Controller and everything else if I was worrying about my family so I sent them down to Norfolk and I went to live at Avenue House for the rest of the war. I had two Deputy Controllers for the ARP which, of course, covered all the services, Rescue and so on, they were all, in effect, under our control.

PR: Are either of those alive today, do you know?

RMF: Yes, one of them is. I don't know where he is now. He was my Deputy Town Clerk, A. V. Williams. I expect he's retired now. The other one was Councillor *(Grobell?)*. He was Chairman of the Civil Defence Committee who is dead now. He lived in Holly Park.

PR: So there was you and two deputies and this Civil Defence Committee?

RMF: That's right, yes. They were under us in the actual ARP control room itself of course I had an ARP Officer who was responsible for the actual running of the centre. And the Chief Warden also left his own house. He was a Colonel Beach. I think he's dead now. He was a volunteer as Chief Warden and responsible for the organisation of the Warden Service throughout Finchley and Whetstone. He still came under me, of course, but he ran the Warden Service.

PR: Did he have a number of lieutenants under him?

RMF: Oh yes, two or three

PR: Do you happen to remember what their names were?

RMF: No, I don't

PR: There was a Commander someone wasn't there?

RMF: Ah, Commander Spennings. He was my ARP officer.

PR: There was another Commander. They were obviously ex-military naval types from the First World War

RMF: Yes, he may have done. I just can't remember all the people Beach had under him. He was always chopping and changing. He was a typical ex-army colonel but he was a very nice chap. I liked him very much.

PR: What sort of things did the committee discuss then?

RMF: Any reports of damage, any action that ought to be taken, whether new shelters should be built here and there and everywhere, whether there should be more wardens' posts and all that sort of thing. The general run of everything that was happening in Civil Defence. But they wouldn't deal with food control, they would only deal with ARP. We had a separate food control committee.

PR: Yes, that's another aspect we haven't talked about – the public shelters, the air raid shelters. What happened there? Did you have special requisitioning powers? Whereabouts were they?

RMF: Well they were mainly put in open spaces because Finchley was very fortunate in having a large number of open spaces and therefore we were able to put them in there without any trouble.

PR: Were they built by the Council?

RMF: Built by the council

PR: Who also, presumably, did any temporary repair to things damaged by blast?

RMF: Oh yes, definitely

PR: So they were quite busy

RMF: Oh yes. Although, of course, we were very fortunate in that we only had four which would now be termed major bombs really, which really caused serious damage and loss of life. The first one was Percy Road which I told you about. The next one was one dropped opposite the council offices. It shocked the caretaker and his wife but that was all, fortunately. The next one was down in the Hampstead Garden Suburb where it was a direct hit on a house and the man and his wife and daughter were killed. That was towards the end of the bombing and then later on in the war we got the V1s and V2s and we had a V2 dropped in Abbots Gardens and killed three or four people and blinded one lady but caused a lot of damage. That dropped, I recollect, about teatime one day. I can't remember when now. That was after they'd been going well. I always said the V2, the Germans dropped them in a line across north London and until we got ours one had dropped over in, I think, Tottenham and another one had dropped over the other side, Wood Green. I always said they had five in a sort of direct line.

PR: Unless you have heard of a V1 you can't believe the panic that they caused. Of course there were a number of those.

RMF: Yes. We were lucky we missed those. We often heard them.

PR: Living in Whetstone we certainly had one in Oakleigh Road and there was one that dropped on The Standard, you may remember, in fact two dropped in the Standard Telephone Company. Was that outside your area?

RMF: Yes, all outside

PR: This is a question of demarcation. But those were very bad, I understand. One dropped virtually on the same.. within a few yards, the following day. I can certainly remember it giving rise to speculation as to how these things were guided. The factory had escaped bombing by camouflage and so on and then suddenly ….. all sorts of radio controlled …. Science fiction….. Of course we speak with hindsight. So in fact Finchley and Whetstone was extremely lucky?

RMF: Very lucky. Well we've got to remember we had a large amount of open space – Brook Farm, the Victoria Recreation Ground, we've the whole of the Glebe Land on the other side of the Great North Road, we had the northern

part of Hampstead Garden Suburb which hadn't been developed, we had all the Brookside Walk all the way down and round, that was all partly open space. The Glebe Land was a very big one and in addition to that, of course, there was really nothing in Finchley which would attract attention from up above. We had no space of water, you see. This is another thing which guided the Germans. I remember this from the First World War. I come from Lincolnshire (I'm a Yellowbelly like the Prime Minister) and my father and mother, when I was about 10, used to go down to the Wash and while my father was fishing on one side I used to go out and follow the tide out into the Wash and I've seen Zeppelins in 1915-16 coming to the entrance to the Wash, hold up, back a bit and wait for dusk before they came inland. Of course, that was their line for the Midlands.

PR: Quite, as it was indeed for the Second World War. So, in a sense, we were lucky although we did, indeed, have our own battery of guns at Sweets Nurseries at Whetstone.

RMF: They were, I think, in Friern Barnet. The boundary runs down Friern Barnet Lane. I think they were just outside.

PR: I wonder who I could talk to about that

RMF: Well you can get a map of Finchley. If you send me a map I could mark in where the ……. I can mark in where some of them were. I can't mark in all the ARP posts.

PR: Where would all the official records of the war be kept?

RMR: Lord knows where they've gone now we're merged into the London Borough of Barnet. I suppose the Minutes must exist somewhere but heavens knows where now.

PR: There were some at Hendon Town Hall. That's where they should be.

RMF: That's where they should be, under the Town Clerk's section. I retired in September '65 but in April there was a merge of five authorities, that was Hendon, Finchley, Friern Barnet, Barnet and….I can't remember. I had to do another 6 months to get my 40 years service in and so they made me a Consultant Town Clerk for about 6 months and then I went on to the international side of local government after that for another 10 years and then finished with that in '75.

PR: What do you feel, looking back, were the major problems during the '39-'45 war as far as you were concerned?

RMF: I had such a very good council, I had a wonderful band of officers that really I hadn't a lot to worry about.

PR: That's not just a cliché with you people. Alderman Pike said the same thing. Everybody pulling in the same direction. A common object of winning the war.

RMF: And, as a matter of office routine, as far as I was concerned, see, although I was Town Clerk I was not No.1. I was what was then called Primus Interpares. Nowadays they're called Chief Executive and they are the No.1 without any

doubt but as Primus Interpares one had to exercise one's authority if it came to the point and I always held a meeting, even during the war, probably once every fortnight with all the Chief Officers to discuss any of their problems because six brains could do a lot better than one. So I could have the Librarian who was also Recruitment Officer; the Treasurer responsible for all the financial arrangements for ARP; the Electrical Engineer because we had our own electricity undertaking; the Fire Officer and the Borough Engineer & Surveyor. We all used to meet regularly and talk about all our problems.

PR: So the Chief Officers, in fact, had this dual function. They were carrying on as normal as best they could…..

RMF: Precisely, yes

PR: So everyone had a wartime job

RMF: Definitely so. And that, in effect, of course, took priority over all the council business. We still had committee meetings though, as I said, every Saturday afternoon.

PR: What were the sort of complaints that you …… did you used to get complaints or nasty observations in the press about anything? A favourite target was bureaucracy wasn't it?

RMF: No, not in those days. As a matter of fact we got on very well with the local press. Maybe we were fairly good at our job but never had any difficulty with the press at all.
As a matter of fact I had a very good relationship with the press because I could always ring up the editor and tell him things privately and say "Look here, off the record this is the position now it's up to you but don't quote me or realise if you do print anything that you may be causing more trouble than it's worth".

PR: But one could imagine a number of things that one could co-operate with the editor in furthering the objects of……..

RMF: Oh yes. Definitely so and that's why we had a very good relationship with *The Finchley Press* in those days. We had a very good reporter too.

PR: Did you have any troops requisitioned on you in Finchley. I happen to know Friern Barnet did. There were various units. I'm not quite sure. Particularly building up to the pre-invasion of Europe.

RMF: There might have been individual personnel put in the houses in Finchley but I don't recollect any particular place. I don't even think anybody was put in the football pavilion.

PR: Did you have any dealing with the military at all?

RMF: Not a lot

PR: No barrage balloons?

RMF: No, no.

PR: Of course one thing we mustn't forget is the dear old Home Guard.

RMF: Oh yes, yes. Well, of course, they were a separate organisation.
PR: Did you have any responsibility for those?

RMF: No, none at all. They came under the Army but through Colonel Beach, fortunately, and the colonel of the Middlesex Regiment with whom we were very friendly who was at Mill Hill, we had no trouble at all. I think there was always a bit of jealousy between the Home Guard and the ARP service.

PR: Indeed, as is so well brought out in *Dad's Army*

RMF: Yes it was that sort of thing but it was never out in the open or caused any trouble

PR: But there were units in Finchley, weren't there?

RMF: Of the Home Guard? I think so, yes. I'm pretty sure there must have been. But, as I say, as I had nothing to do with them personally, supervision or anything like that…. no. Not like the police, of course, who were on one's doorstep all the time.

PR: Do you have any outstanding personal memories of that time or any particular incidents that you remember. I can understand the trauma of the identity cards but is there anything else like that that you remember?

RMF: No, I don't think there is other than what I've told you like the council meetings and whether we should continue to meet in the evenings or not. One thing I was going to say is that if we had met on that following Monday I shouldn't be talking to you today.

PR: I take your point on that. It's extraordinary.

RMF: We had a dais in the old council chamber opposite the church where the Deputy Mayor, The Mayor and I sat in high-backed leather chairs and after this bomb dropped there was *(inaudible)* through The Mayor's chair and my chair at just our head height. So neither of us would be here.

PR What was your reaction to that, apart from relief?

RMF: Well, a bit of a shock. I've never forgotten it.

PR: I can imagine. You really had a lucky escape.

RMF: Definitely.

PR: Your preamble to that was an interesting one because I have a certain amount of sympathy with the man who stood up and said "we're not going to be kicked around" because this presumably is one of the few ways that you could do anything. It must be terribly frustrating to have to take it.

RMF: Yes, but we'd got so much to do which had to be done and it wasn't going to do the public any good if we were going to be wiped out.
PR: I'd have like to have seen his face.

RMF: He took it very well, actually. He admitted he was probably wrong.

Transcribed by Patricia Cleland

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