

The Royal College of Physicians and Oxford Brookes University Medical Sciences  
Video Archive MSVA 053

**Dr Denis Burkitt in interview with Dr Max Blythe**  
**Oxford, 10 December 1990**

**Interview One**

MB Dr Burkitt, I'd like to review with you your early years and that means going right back to your home in Ireland, to mother and father. Perhaps you would talk about that home, that Ireland, and that mother and father.

DB Well, I'm fortunate in that I can look back on almost no unhappy situations in my childhood. I mean the memories of my childhood are pretty well all happy. Looking at children today, we lived very simply; we were satisfied with very simple things, whereas people today want all sorts of expensive gadgets. We lived out in the country. We had to make our own electric light, we had to pump our own water and as a consequence...I remember I was never allowed to put enough water in the bath to cover my legs, and that left a kind, almost a phobia with me. I even feel a little bit guilty sometimes in the Hilton Hotel if I put enough water in the bath to cover my legs. Now, my mother - I can never remember my mother speaking unkindly or crossly to anybody. She was a very loving, very gentle, very understanding person whom we had total confidence in. My father, I was also very fond of. He'd probably be a little bit harder to talk to. My mother would have been entirely driven by intuition, as my wife would probably be. My father was highly intellectual, but on the other hand a very humble man. He never, I think, perhaps appreciated how highly intellectual he was. But my mother was a more gentle character. My father was able to argue with people: my mother couldn't argue with anybody but she knew what she stood for.

MB Were your mother's, Gwendoline's, skills in homemaking?

DB Absolutely. In those days ladies didn't go out to work. I mean, my mother never went out to work. And I don't ever remember seeing my father in the kitchen. I mean, I suppose he may have done, but in those days we had a maid and a cook to do the work in the kitchen. But my father would repair everything; he was a handyman. He would have no idea, an aesthetic idea, of beauty. I mean my mother would appreciate beautiful furniture or old furniture. My father's main thought would be that it was strong and he would tend to mend a Chippendale chair which was loose with some enormous iron bracket or something to make it steady. He wouldn't mind what it looked like and I think I'm a little bit like that. Olive provides all the beauty in our home. I'm a little bit of a handyman. I can put up a cupboard or a shelf or mend things, but she provides all the beauty. I would have no idea for the colour of a carpet or the colour of curtains, or where to hang the pictures or what colour went with what colour.

MB But this do it yourself approach of yours began with father?

DB I got from my father, I would think so. My father taught me to use tools and that partly led me into surgery, but I still enjoy using tools. We were brought up very much in the country. We weren't in any way dependent on artificially made amusements, sort of you know leisure centres or anything. Our fun was country walks, camping on the islands of the lake.

MB That's Loch Erne

DB Yes. We didn't enjoy parties. My brother and I were fairly self-sufficient just going out on our bicycles. But we led a simple life. And I suppose I was a slow starter from the point of view of education to some extent because, I think, when I was about eleven I was only just about reading comics. I was a slow starter in reading and things. And we had our early education from a governess. See we lived a way out in the country. We went to school when we were something like seven or eight, but to begin with, we were taught at home. But it was a country simple home. I never remember going into a restaurant for a meal perhaps until I was almost in my late teens. If we went out anywhere we'd bring a kettle, we'd gather sticks, we'd make a fire, we'd heat the kettle, we wouldn't have a thermos flask, we'd just boil the tea. So compared to youngsters today it was simple but happy circumstances. My father had been brought up in very considerable poverty. His father came from good ancestry but my grandfather on my father's side deliberately left the Anglican Church, which in those days was a strata above non-conformists from the point of view of not only income, of prestige and everything, and he for conscience reasons left the Anglican Church and became a Presbyterian minister. He trained in Canada and he took a more or less itinerant job in an utterly poverty stricken area of western Ireland. I can remember he had a corrugated iron church. So his income was very meagre and my father and his family had to look after every penny to try and keep going at all. But they all managed to educate themselves just with hard work and I suppose intelligence. One of them became senior engineer of the Punjab; one of them became the resident, which almost corresponded to governor, of part of South India; one of them became the first qualified surgeon in East Africa; one of them became an anthropologist in Guatemala. So they made their way. But as a result I know that all my life I have been too careful in the expenditure of money. It was built into me that to waste money and to waste time were both sinful. And throughout life - my wife will tell you - throughout life, we have tended to go to third-rate pensions rather than expensive hotels. So I get quite a kick now, as quite often happens, when we are both invited to America and put up in some sort of four star hotel and we just sign the bill and there's no sense of guilt because I'm not paying any of the money.

MB Denis, two things out of that; you've mentioned, you've brought your brother into the story. Robin, we will name him. He had an important part in your early life.

DB Robin and I were always, and still are, very close to each other. He was of the two of us, no doubt, the most promising. He was better at work, he beat me at most things, he was better at games, but as life progressed I seem to have been given so many more opportunities than he has. He's had problems and he ....we both turned out as surgeons but he ought to have got the kudos rather than I. But I was given

marvellous opportunities, which I never looked for. But he is magnificent and I have enormous regard for my brother.

MB Where is he now?

DB He's outside Slough in Buckinghamshire, retired with his family and has got grandchildren as I have.

MB Also in that part of the early story, you mentioned a surgeon in Africa, an uncle.

DB Yes my father's...the brother next down the line to my father in age, Roland. He started off in the bank after his rather tough upbringing and he then managed to do medicine, became a qualified surgeon, went out to Assam to a tea plantation for a time and then went to East Africa, I think, partly at the instigation of one of my mother's brothers, Bob Hill. He was working in East Africa but he became somewhat of a legend. You'll find him mentioned in Elspeth Huxley's books and things. He was a man of the highest moral principles, living in the community with, as we know from *Out of Africa*, fairly lax morals. But he had no hesitation in ticking the governor or anybody else off, if he did anything which he thought wasn't quite dead above board. He was a man of great principles. We were all a bit afraid of him when we were boys. But he was a competent surgeon and I think he was the first qualified surgeon in East Africa. But of course there are all kinds of exaggerated tales told about him now in books of history, because tales tell in the growing or grow in the telling rather.

MB He took your tonsils out and Robin's.

DB I remember one afternoon - I suppose I was about seven or eight - he asked me to open my mouth and he put his finger down my throat, and from that cursory examination he decided that I'd be better without my tonsils. And then he put his finger down my brother's throat and he decided he'd be better without his tonsils. So he told my poor mother next morning to cover up the settee and things in the drawing room with a sheet, and we were told - it was awful dishonesty - that we were going for a long journey and therefore we had to sleep in and not get up too early, which was a cheat. And we were both brought down; he gave the anaesthetic. There was no nurse, no anaesthetist, only himself. He gave us the anaesthetic; used the awful instrument they used to have for guillotining tonsils in those days and took part of our tonsils out. The operator never took them all out. Having done many tonsils myself since, I look back in horror at the risk of haemorrhage or anything else that might happen, and there would have been no facilities for getting out of the problem at all. So that was my first personal experience of surgery.

MB Right. One of the other things that came out of our early discussion today was this Christian background to the home, which is fairly strong. How did this influence you as a boy? Did you take this on?

DB As a boy - I'm very glad looking back - my father used to read to us from the Bible after breakfast every morning and then he'd lead the family in prayer before we started the day. And he, I think it was he, largely persuaded me to learn certain

passages of scripture by heart and I'm very glad to this day that I did so, because you can only learn by heart when you're young. Now, all the passages of scripture that I learnt by heart and still know are in the old King James version, though it must be twenty five to thirty years since I myself used the King James version in my reading of scripture. I've used more modern versions ever since. But I am grateful for that upbringing. It's something that's gone out. Also, you see we were brought up to a custom when grace was said before meals and it had a profound effect on us. Though I must say that it didn't go very deep because we were brought up as regular church goers in the Church of Ireland, but I think when I went up to university if somebody had asked me what my faith was, I might not have said it in these words but I think basically it would have been that if you get baptised and confirmed and go to church and go to communion, and lead a fairly decent life, you've got about a sixty:forty chance of getting to heaven in the end. I think that would have been about the thing. It wasn't till I was at university that I met people who'd made a commitment in their Christian life and had a sense of joy and assurance and something positive and meaningful. So although we were exposed to it, it hadn't sunk in very deeply. But I'm quite certain seeds were planted and I think things - spiritual experiences - are usually processes rather than crises. I mean after all we all talk about St Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, but quite obviously when he saw the manner in which Stephen behaved when he was being murdered, a seed was planted in his heart, because God said to him afterwards, 'You're fighting against the bricks.' So there must have been bricks in his heart and I think that the seed was planted and on the road to Damascus it broke through the soil because you don't see the planted seed for quite a long time. And I think seeds were planted in my life when I was young but to some extent some of them broke through the soil when I was a young man.

MB Denis I want to go back to those fairly young years because right at the beginning you said you can't remember a really bad thought about those early days. There was one time when you went first to the preparatory school, to Porotoro Royal School, I think that you lost the sight of an eye. That must have been a pretty horrendous time.

DB It wasn't nearly as horrendous I think for me as it was for my dear mother. As far as I can remember, we were all throwing stones at each other at school and one stone hit me in the glasses and it broke my glasses and some glass got into my eye. A great worry for my family. And I was whipped off to hospital in Belfast where I spent quite several weeks. My mother stayed with me. I think I had three operations on my eye and then they decided they'd better take it out because in those days before antibiotics and so on there was a risk if you had one eye infected, that it might infect the other and then you'd be blind. And so I lost my eye. Now, I didn't think of it as an enormous tragedy myself. I think my mother thought of it more so. And it didn't really hamper me. I mean there was a time I wondered whether it would affect my surgery and so on but it didn't, not noticeably. So I'm grateful that I have had good sight in the eye I have got and that I didn't get both eyes infected and go blind. So it was a bad time for my dear mother but I didn't appreciate how bad it was. In fact, I remember the compensation. My father gave me a little steam engine worked by a little paraffin lamp and I thought that was a fairly good compensation almost you see for losing the eye.

MB Your father again - I just wanted to take you back. He is declared in some texts ...in fact, you were showing me a book that introduced him to a group of scientists said to be the ten most distinguished Irish scientists of the century or of the nineteenth and twentieth century. He had this interest in natural history that...

DB Very much interested in natural history, particularly in birds. And I wish looking back that I had copied him in it. He used to trap the birds. I can remember watching him work. He used what we called the meat safe, a kind of a sieve you put over the joint after the Sunday lunch to keep the flies off, and you put it outside the house in a cold place. And he would prop this up with a stick and put some bread crumbs underneath and then tie a bit of thread. And he would hide under a bush and when the bird came in and pecked at the breadcrumbs, he would pull at the stick and the thing would fall down. And then he'd ring the bird with different combinations of rings in his leg. He had to use mathematical combinations because he was colour blind, so he couldn't use different colours. And then when his birds were found in different parts, you see they told him. I think he was the first person who studied actually the distribution territories of robins, and he showed that each pair of birds had its own particular territory. And he would watch the birds to see and define what the territory actually was. And I have often thought since, that my father's maps of birds are not unlike the way I mapped cancer half a century later. These go back to the nineteen twenties. Yes, these are the original maps.

MB I think he wrote about robin territory.

DB He wrote a lot and in fact what amazed us was that we never thought of what he was doing as anything of particular interest. He did it very quietly; he wasn't the kind of man who joined a lot of clubs and things. They made him a member of the British Ornithological Union. The only time I ever remember him going away to lecture was to Oxford. But after he died, Professor Lack<sup>1</sup> at Oxford was asked to name, I think it was the seven people who had done most for British ornithology and we were quite surprised to find that my dear father was chosen as one of the seven. But he never pushed himself at all; he was just a quiet man. Now here is a piece out of the local paper when he was called the birdman of Erne.

MB Remarkable and what a career. This study of robins went on for many years. A great work of dedication.

DB He also later on, he studied rooks and other birds, warblers and things. I still have his binoculars. But he just loved watching birds. There was one occasion I remember - he used to stand so still with his bald head watching animals and birds - one time an owl came along and mistook him for a post and perched on his head.

MB He was also a pretty good engineer.

DB He was a very good engineer. And he was a very good mathematician because my dear mother kept certain things and we still have some of them, but she kept the telegram and I still have it that was sent ...I am not sure whether it was sent to her or

---

<sup>1</sup> David Lack FRS (1910-1973), Director, Edward Gray Institute of Field Ornithology, Oxford.

both. In those days it was a competitive exam amongst young engineers to try and get what you call a county surveyor's job in charge of all the roads in the country. And then the person who was first on the list got the first choice of the counties available. And I remember the words of the telegram, it just said 'Burkitt easily first. Steadman second'. And so he had the first choice and he chose County Fermanagh, where I was born and brought up.

MB Where he built a lot of roads.

DB That's right. And I think, but I maybe wrong, I think he was the first man to bring tarmacadam on roads in Ireland.

MB Denis, I want to go to back to school days now. We've had the early part and you didn't stay at Porotora after the accident.

DB No I didn't.

MB You went elsewhere. You went to Wales, I think.

DB I imagine my mother made that decision rather than my father. How she learned about the school I don't know. My brother and I were sent I think to a very good new small prep school near Holyhead in Holy Island with a total school number - the pupils in the school - of twenty two so they can't have had many classes. I can only remember there being the headmaster and one other master. And I spent I suppose three years there between the ages of eleven and fourteen.

MB What was the school called Denis.

DB (?) House [Tre-Arddur Bay]. They went in for a fairly tough outdoor life. You see we wore short trousers the whole year round. We wore white sweaters and trousers the whole year round and we were not allowed indoors other than during school. We were meant to stay out in the cold even if there was frost and even in the middle of the winter we had to start every morning with a cold bath. Well, I don't remember thinking that we were badly done by. I think that I learnt a lot. We were with a small crowd and I was never intellectually outstanding. The only thing I remember getting a prize for at school was photography, which became an enormous asset to me later on in my research life because I was able to illustrate my own publications and then to illustrate my own lectures and so on. And also to recall, when I was doing cancer chemotherapy, I was able to record accurately what was going on and so on. So photography was always a hobby and it started when I was young. I had a camera that cost eleven shillings; a No. 2 Brownie and that lasted me until ...when I lost my eye when I was eleven a fairly wealthy uncle gave me a 1A Kodak. Now that was way up the scale I think it was about one pound fifty or something enormous you see. And I used that until a year after I qualified. In fact, I brought it out to Africa with me and gave it to an African friend. After my first house job I saved up money and I, for the enormous expenditure of five pounds, I bought a Zeiss Icon and I carried that with me all through my five years in the Army and all through when I come to later my trip out to Manturia and back. Out to Uganda, I used it in my first tour in Uganda and I still have it.

MB When you finished the experience in Wales, this rather strict outdoor education - it sounds rather severe - you went to the more comfortable climes of Dean Close in Cheltenham. Was that an interesting period of life?

DB Well, I don't know that I ever really enjoyed school. I never excelled in anything in school. I think I was reasonably happy. I spent four years there. It was very restricted compared to school life now. I never once remember during my four years there being allowed to go into a shop or to go down town, unless you were going with somebody. It was strict but I am sure I learnt a lot.

MB Did any members of staff influence you particularly, that you can look back on?

DB Yes. I remember a man called Horsefield, with a huge moustache, who influenced me because he was a man of very high principles. He was one of the school chaplains. The headmaster didn't impress me very much. I hardly even ever met him. It is a very good school now. I have been asked back many times since to lecture to the biology students and to preach in the chapel at Dean Close. I look upon the school now as an excellent school, much better than when I was there half a century ago or more.

MB Denis we are going to take you along now to the next step, to university, to Trinity College Dublin and the decision to do an engineering degree.

DB Well, I went up to university - now let's face this - with very little sense of identity, very little sense of direction, very little sense of purpose and very shy, very shy indeed. And I did engineering I suppose because my father was an engineer. I couldn't have said I was strongly committed to it. But looking back, I think I was amongst the least promising guys in my freshman year. Now what interests me is, I went up to college in '29; exactly fifty years later the university gave me the highest honour, the honorary fellowship, I think, that only one other living doctor has. Now the thing is why should the least promising chap in the year get this. And to me the important thing is that I got a sense of direction. And the tendency today is to think that if a chap has a high IQ he is going to do marvellous things in the world. A high IQ might be useful, but without a sense of direction, without stickability, without reliability, without getting on with your colleagues, an IQ by itself can lead nowhere. And it was during my first year in college that I got a specific meaningful and Christian commitment. And praying about my future I just felt more and more that I should be a doctor. All I can say is that it bore in on me and it was a great problem. I remember the great problem telling my parents because they had laid out so much money to put me through the engineering school, and I had spent a year and I did not know how to find an opportunity to tell them. I remember going out for a long drive with my father and mother, he was laying out some new roads, and I felt that somewhere on the drive I would be able to tell them. And I got home and I hadn't picked up courage. I just blurted it out during supper, 'I feel I want to give up engineering and take up medicine.' And they accepted it; it was a bit of a shock to them but they totally accepted it.

MB A particular shock to father.

DB Yes, I think so, but he never objected. Now, once I got a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, a sense of identity, from then on I began to run near the top of my class. My IQ wasn't altered, but I knew where I was going and I really enjoyed my time in university. My time at school ...it was all right, but I really enjoyed my years at university. I made deep friends for the first time. I felt a sense of purpose and I felt that I was going somewhere and I enjoyed my work. I worked hard and I suppose I did fairly well.

MB Denis you talked about the Christian impact in that first year. That was the Room 40 effect in a way?

DB Yes, it was, yes.

MB Can we just mention that because that was a really big fulcrum moment.

DB It was. There was a group of deeply committed Christians who used to meet together once a week and try to bring others in and get well known outside speakers and so on. I remember after a cross-country run a fellow student asked me if I would like to come along, and I said 'Okay'. Either then or at a subsequent time, I can't remember, another student asked me where I stood from the point of view of my Christian faith. I didn't really know how to answer. I had never met anybody who had any concrete feelings about it and that set me...well, I assume I weighed in with these chaps for the next five years. Now the interesting thing is - I am going to jump ahead for the moment. Earlier this year I was asked to be one of the speakers at the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of my old teaching hospital. I think I was the only former student who was asked to speak. There were certain other speakers. And at that time No 40 had been converted into the guest accommodation and as an honorary fellow I am entitled to free accommodation. I had never taken it up, but I took it up on that occasion. So you can imagine living again over fifty years later in No 40...well, the memories came flooding back.

MB It must have been a tremendous time. This gave you the transition, this room 40 transition, gave you a very practical view of Christianity.

DB Yes. It made me much more narrow in my views than I would be now. There were all kinds of things that I cut out of my life, which I would do quite happily now. But looking back, when you are young I think it is a good thing to stand up and be counted for something. I mean youngsters tend to go to extremes whether they are politically or religiously or whatever. So that I stood up to be counted. And there were lots of things then that I wouldn't do now. I mean I have grown I hope. But I am very grateful that I was given a sense at least of the need to stand up and be counted and to let people know which side of the fence you are on. And it held me good for most of my life because when I got out to Africa and got involved in research work. I suppose the reason why more good - I think I am not biased in saying this - I think more good medical research came out of our university, in medical school at Makerere, than any other in tropical Africa. And I think that was largely because we got on with each other as colleagues. You see, looking back at the medical school, the



people who'd gone out not just to do a career or to make money, but because of a sense of Christian commitment: there was our dean, there was also our professor of anatomy, our professor of medicine, our professor gynaecology, our professor of paediatrics and so on. We had people who were committed to a job over and above what they made out of it. And I well remember going to the airport at Entebbe to meet the professor of surgery from Ibadan in West Africa. I said to him, 'Will, what in the world has brought you all the way across Africa to see us?' And he said, 'We are told that you guys get on with each other. None of us do, and I've come over here to find out how you do it.' Now I think personal relationships are far more important in any project, research or otherwise, than individual geniuses who can stand out like a sore thumb because they don't get on with their colleagues. So right through life I owe an enormous amount to my colleagues and those who influenced me and supported me and helped me.

MB So out of Christian commitment came an enormous amount of fellowship.

DB That's right it did.

MB Denis, I am going back to Trinity, which is obviously very important to you; those years in qualifying in medicine, obviously very different to medical school nowadays.

DB Oh my word, yes.

MB Do you have a few memories of Trinity in those days?

DB Oh yes, because you see none of the residential blocks had a toilet in them. You had to walk across the square at night to get to a toilet. You might have a chamber in your room or something. The only water laid on was a standpipe outside the door. We lived I suppose ...whilst I was there they built baths, there had never been baths before. I mean once a week or once a fortnight you paid so much and you went in and had a bath. But you see I have often in recent years stayed in residential accommodation at scientific conferences, Oxford and elsewhere - there was one here connected with Burkitt's lymphoma only last year - and of course the accommodation is marvellous compared to what we had. But we didn't mind, because you only complained if you had known something much better. You see the first house we had in Africa, we only had a bucket as a toilet, and for the bath the water was just carried in an old petrol drum and poured in, and no electric light and so on. But we didn't mind; everyone else was the same. And it is very easy in life to go up, much harder to go down. So it was, I suppose, rough in many ways and there was much more discipline than there is now. We weren't allowed into the evening meal without wearing gowns and of course the idea of attending a lecture without a tie would have been absolutely taboo. But you see things have changed. I think students are much brighter now. They are trained much better. I think that doctors come out college with a far better training. But the total university population when I was there was twelve hundred; it is probably now about six thousand. And there were only two women in our year out of almost a hundred students, whereas now there would be about fifty per cent. So a lot of things have changed. But I was taught badly looking back. We were far too inbred; every professor was an old Trinity man. There was no

cross-fertilisation. We were taught badly and I think I qualified really very ignorant. I expected to know everything when I qualified but of course I didn't. I look back with nothing but gratitude to my time at Trinity, the formative years of my life and I enjoyed it in every way.

MB Were there any particular figures who influenced you? I mean, you went into surgery. I was going to ask you about the transition and the decision to go into surgery.

DB I really went into surgery after I graduated. I felt, and perhaps I feel now that when you are a student your aim ought to be to be a good doctor, not begin from your first year to be a neurosurgeon. So I didn't actually switch on to surgery, it may have been at the back of my mind, but it really was after I qualified. From the point of view of particular people ...I mean we had a very good and very famous professor of anatomy called Andy Frank Dixon. Now we had another teacher of anatomy called C P Martin, who had a shell injury in the First World War, he used to wear a hat. I visited St John's Newfoundland about two or three years ago and stayed with his son, who is now a consultant physician at St John's. Now it is interesting that he, his father, C P Martin, was one of the people who founded - we were talking about No 40 - and it was started by people who, mostly, who had been through the First World War. There was C P Martin, then there was a fellow called Patrick Dixon, who was the son of our professor of anatomy, who eventually went out as a missionary to the Congo and died out there, and two or three others. And it is nice now later on to come and visit another generation in those families.

MB Terrific.

DB You qualified easily?

DB Yes. I was second in my year in my hospital exams. I think I was perhaps third over all, something like. I mean I was somewhere near the top in any case.

MB And then you started to do house jobs and move around a bit.

DB Well, I knew I would have to do house jobs and I was offered one in Chester by an old Trinity man and I accepted it. I remember going over for an interview. I enormously enjoyed that six months in Chester. I realised how little I knew. I remember well, I thought now when I am alone on casualty and supposing somebody comes in having taken some poison, I should know all the antidotes for different poisons and I wrote them down on a card to be ready. I have never had to use one since. I realised how little I knew. I used to think when I was a final year student I would know everything when I qualified. But I learnt a lot and it was exciting. I mean, I began to do my first bit of surgery and so on. I mean I did job after job until I did my fellowship and then went full time into surgery.

MB Right. And eventually you arrived in Plymouth, which was going to have an important influence.

DB I qualified in '35 after doing jobs in general surgery and ear nose and throats and another one in general surgery. I went up and did the Edinburgh FRCS [Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons], which I was fortunate in getting first shot. And then not knowing what to do I went as a ship's surgeon for five months. I went to Manchuria and back with almost nothing to do, but with time to think, time to read, time to ponder and so on. And then I went down to Plymouth which I enormously enjoyed. The war broke out...

MB You were a resident house officer?

DB I was then ...a job that doesn't exist now called resident surgical officer. Now what it meant ...now you see there was no NHS. So all the surgeons did their hospital work free in exchange for what they got in private work. Somebody had to be there to do the emergency work at night because the consultants didn't really want to do it. So you were thrown in at the deep end to do all the emergencies with very little training; you had had some. And as far as I can remember I think I was always on duty. I don't remember having hours on and off because I was the only RSO [resident surgical officer] for the hospital. And I was able to go away for a few hours from time to time, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was exciting, I loved the work and it was there that I first met my dear wife, Olive.

MB Tell me about Olive please. I have met Olive but I would love you to talk some more about this meeting.

DB Well, we met in Plymouth but we didn't get to know each other well. In those days an RSO would never have been allowed to go out with a nurse.

MB Olive had come to study nursing?

DB Yes. I first met her when she first had to have her arm seen to that had gone septic from a vaccination. And I used to have to have a sort of sick parade for the nurses as the RSO. It didn't hit me. I got to know her a little bit and it wasn't until after I left Plymouth and went to do another RSO job in Barnsley with rather more responsibility that we began to get close to each other. And most of our courting was done by post. And when I was in the army on forty eight hours leave - I would get forty eight hours leave and I would go down to Plymouth and spend time with Olive. It was a difficult time because of the war. Occasionally, then she would be able to come up and spend a few days somewhere I was posted. I would stay in a local hotel. And then we were eventually married on forty hours leave when I was one of the army surgeons at the huge army hospital at Netley, one of the biggest army hospitals in the world

MB Was this in 1941?

DB No, '41 I joined the army. But we didn't actually get engaged I suppose until early '43 - I used to go down to Olive - but we eventually got engaged I think in February '43.

MB Denis I am trying to get a few dates sorted at this point, can I, because the war actually started in '39, when you were in Plymouth?

DB I was in Plymouth then.

MB Right.

DB I went up to Barnsley a year later. You see after six months in Plymouth, my job came to an end and I applied for another six months and wasn't sure what to do, but I felt it was the right thing to do. And it was the second six months at Plymouth that I met Olive. Then I had to leave Plymouth and I went up to Barnsley again as an RSO. I remember particularly, I was at Barnsley when Sheffield was blitzed because I was able to see from my window in Barnsley. I forget Sheffield was something like fifteen miles away. But when I saw the glow of the burning city and of course a big step took place then, because it was then that I felt in answer to thought, prayer and reading, I felt that I shouldn't just aim for a comfortable, cushy consultant job at home, that I ought to go where the need was greater. I suppose I felt rather like if you see ten people carrying a log and there are nine on one end and one on the other, and you want to go and lend a hand, you go and join the one. And so I felt very clearly at the time that I should apply for work overseas and I applied to the Colonial Office and gave them my qualifications and my background and so on. And I felt in all conscience I should be open and frank and let them know that my Christian commitment had a good deal to do with my application. Now, strangely I think this put them off. It shouldn't have done because if they only had looked at the records they would find that most of the best people they had ever had have been people who had gone out with a sense of vocation. So they turned me down on the excuse that because I had lost an eye I wouldn't be able to see anything. Now what has always given me great joy ever since is that when I did eventually get out to Africa, God enabled me to see things that everybody else had missed. I was very glad they turned me down, eventually. I was disappointed at the time.

MB What was the date of being turned down Denis?

DB It was in 1941.

MB Right.

DB And I can remember I was really desolate. I can still remember because I made a note of it. Two of the readings I read in my bible at that time - just at that time I read about Moses and the children of Israel coming to the Red Sea and the way was completely blocked in front of them, and God said to Moses, 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward.' And how could they go forward; they had the Red Sea in front of them. And I felt I was going to go forward even though the Colonial Office had said 'No'. Then I read another verse at that time saying 'Be of good cheer I have caused this to happen'. So I was pleased that something would come out of it. The war had been on at that time and I felt then the right thing for me to do was to volunteer for the RAMC [Royal Army Medical Corps]. Earlier on if you remember there was a bit of a phoney war to begin with and they had enough doctors. So I volunteered for the RAMC and I was taken in, category A, although I had lost an eye.

I mean I had a good eye and I was fit. So I joined the army in '41. I was writing to Olive at that time and I was sent for a long time, over a year, to the coast of Norfolk with the field ambulance in case there should be an invasion on the East Coast. I had nothing medical to do at all. It was a bit boring. I used to go for route marches and I mean...

MB Was the transition to the army an easy one?

DB Yes, it wasn't too difficult. Fortunately, since I had my surgical qualification, when civilian surgeons from different parts of the country went on leave, I was used as a locum and I remember going to Addenbrookes in Cambridge. I remember going to Essex and this was all a nice relief from army work because it gave me some surgery at least. I mean after being in the field ambulance for I suppose a year or more, I began to be sent to military hospitals. You see when I went to Netley I was in a surgical unit and I was full time doing surgery, but in the field ambulance I was doing nothing. It was when at Netley that we arranged, Olive and I, that we would get married. Looking back, no member of my family was able to attend the wedding because they lived in Ireland and they couldn't get across the channel. Somebody who had been a house surgeon with me at Barnsley was my best man and I really had very few friends even at the wedding. After the wedding there where no taxis or cars. We had to go away, we went by bus, we couldn't get a seat, we had to strap hang and the bus stopped two miles short of where we had booked a hotel for the night, so we had to walk the last two miles and carry our luggage. And when we got there we found they had forgotten about our booking, but they managed to get a bit of food, some cold ham or something like that. We were very much in love so we were happy. And we had two days walking around the countryside picking honeysuckle, which we pressed and I think still have. Then not long after, we arranged then...I was due leave and Olive was going to come to Ireland with me. She had never met my parents; my parents had never met her. And the very morning that I was due to go on leave with Olive, I got my posting to go overseas. Now we had our few weeks together. Olive fell in love with my parents and they fell in love her and we had no problems at all. We had about three weeks just sort of rushing around and tripping around the west of Ireland, where I used to be as a boy.

MB That must have been a terrific visit. A terrific family rapport.

DB Yes, a lovely time. Then I went back to England and I knew I was under orders to go overseas, but you never knew when it was going to happen. Every time I met Olive, I might have a kind of suspicion that we wouldn't be meeting. When I last met her at Reading, where she was staying with her parents at the time, I had a kind of a hunch that we wouldn't meet again. You weren't allowed to tell anybody in those days. I can remember saying goodbye to her at Reading station, not realising that in the years and decades to come, again and again and again we would say goodbye at Reading station, because later on when we came back from Africa, we lived only a few miles from Reading. But I soon got my orders for overseas and although I was the officer in charge of the draft I didn't know where we were going to; we might have been going to the Pole or we might have been going to South Africa, we hadn't a clue, you never knew. You just accepted it in those days. And we got onto a troopship at Glasgow and we were issued with pith helmets, so I assumed we weren't going to the

Pole. Now, we didn't know then that we were separating for two and half years. You always hope it was going to be next week or the week after during the war, but we did actually spend the first two and half years of our married life separated. We were able to correspond of course, but we almost joined up again two and half years later as relative strangers. Olive would say that too, I think. But it would have been far, far harder to have that separation later on because when a man and women grow into each other, separation is much harder than when you are only loosely linked in, even though you may have happened to be married. Of course, I came back then and I had a far more interesting war. She was bombed; she was bombed in Plymouth and she had a hard time in many ways. I had so much interest and excitement seeing different parts of the world. I mean there was all sorts of excitement to it. But she really had a more traumatic time than I had, and she hoped - I think she told you when you met her a few weeks ago - she hoped that the army sending me overseas would get out of my system the feeling I was being called to work overseas. And I know it was a disappointment to her when I just felt that I just had to go back and work amongst under-privileged people, in Uganda. I was working in Kenya in a military hospital...

MB Denis I am going to just halt there because we are going to have to go on to another tape in a moment.

DB Oh yes, great. How do you know that?

MB Because I get signals.

DB I see.

MB I hope that has been fascinating, because it was for me.