

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILLIAM J. V. PITCHER

Royal Army, England, World War II & Korean War

1996

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Pitcher, William J. V., (1918-2005). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

William Pitcher, a native of England and a twenty-two year career member of the Royal Army, discusses his varied service roles and combat itinerary before, during, and after World War II and the Korean War. Pitcher entered the British Army at age eighteen and discusses his first post at Meerut, India where the British troops were to keep order. He describes having stones thrown at them during an annual march through the town, military life consisting of parades and inspections, and combat on the Afghan border where, as a medic, he was responsible for seeing the wounded sent back to headquarters using camel, pony, or donkey. Pitcher then volunteered for Special Service in British Somalia and served in the African campaigns of World War II against the Italians. He recalls being aboard ship after evacuating Somalia, only to have the ship catch fire forcing them to port in Sudan. Pitcher relates his itinerary as the British began recapturing the Western Desert region and, following the fall of the Kufra Oasis, Pitcher was reassigned to the Middle East where he again relates his itinerary until he was injured and subsequently sent back to Britain after a hospital stay in Tehran. Assigned to various Royal Marine Commando units, Pitcher relates how he returned to India to fight the Japanese in Burma along the coast until reassignment to the European Theater in 1945 where he saw action in Holland, France and Germany including crossing of the Rhine River in March. Pitcher comments on changes in the British Army that occurred with the onset of World War II including weaponry, officer-enlisted relations, and the leadership of Churchill. However, he also describes how the sudden influx in troops did not influence the Far East troops who were mostly seasoned veterans. He remembers covering with a tarp and listening to the short wave radio where he learned about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, listened to Vera singing on Friday nights, and kept in touch with England and Churchill's speeches. Pitcher opines that the British did not receive the credit they deserved during World War II, citing their role in Burma against the Japanese. After war's end, Pitcher was reassigned to Hong Kong until the outbreak of the Korean War. He outlines his itinerary in the Far East during that time. Pitcher then volunteered for a year-long deployment in Korea where he describes the interactions between British and American troops before leaving service in 1957 and immigrating to the U.S. where he married his wife in Madison, Wisconsin.

Biographical Sketch:

William J. V. Pitcher (1918-2005), a native of England, was a member of the British Army from 1933 to 1957 where he saw service throughout Europe, the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia, which included combat service in World War II and the Korean War. Shortly after his retirement from the military, he married Betty Jean Bass of Madison, Wisconsin and the two moved to Quebec, Canada where he was employed by the Iron Ore Company of Canada before returning to Madison in 1962 where he later operated Pitcher's Pub. He was given honorary membership in the American Ranger Association and he was a member of the British Legion and the Royal Marines Commando Association.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996

Transcribed by Karen Emery, 1996 and T. J. Weinaug, 2008.

Transcribed Interview:

Mark: --transcriber and then we'll just start in with some questions. Okay. Today's date is March the 22nd, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. William Pitcher of the Madison area in Wisconsin, a veteran of the British Commandos during the World War II period and before and after; a long military career. Thanks for taking some time to talk to me this morning. I suppose we should start at the top, as they say. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the military.

Pitcher: I was born in Hammersmith, London, England.

Mark: Now, where is that in London?

Pitcher: In London, it's in the west end.

Mark: West end. Okay.

Pitcher: I was born in London on the 19th of November, 1918.

Mark: Right as World War I was ending then.

Pitcher: Just a week after it finished. And my parents moved to the suburbs in London, to Lawton, before I could, well, it's the place I can remember. I went to school in the only castle school until I was the age of nine. When I was—a wrestling scholarship and sent me to Bancroft School, one of the minor public schools around at Woodford Rose which I attended from 1929 until 1934.

Mark: It was in 1934 that you entered the military.

Pitcher: Correct, sir.

Mark: Why don't you describe the circumstances of your going into the military. Why did you go into the military?

Pitcher: Well, the reason I went into the military, it's quite a story. My mother died in 1925 when I was about six years old and my father was left with two boys and a girl to bring up. A younger brother died. My father brought my sister up on his own. I sat the school levey examination when I was 15 at Bancroft. I could have gone on to school but I'd rather, I had other ideas. It was quite a posh school and I was just an older working pupil so I, I had seen a friend of mine who'd been in the, he'd joined the rifle brigade, and he was on leave so I

took it in my head, and I went and tried to join the Navy first. They wouldn't accept me because I was almost 18 and I had to get special permission. So I went into the Army and fit into it. I was 18. My father was pretty mad about this. He told me, "Well, you've made your bed, you lie in it now." So when I was 15 I reported to the depot and I did the six months training with men. I was the, no, I wasn't the youngest in the squad. There was one other young fellow about two weeks younger, a Scotsman. Age ranged in the squad from about 15 to 36 or 37. And the different categories of people in the squad were from schoolboys or drop-outs as I, and professional boxers, and road car drivers, race car drivers, to accountants. There was a monk in our squad. This was the makeup of the squad. We were together for six months and then we were posted to our various units. Where we went through the ordinary military training and what went on, you know, in those days. But in January 1937 I was posted to India. I arrived in India in February. It was three weeks on a ship going out. It was an old-fashioned troop ship where you just slept in a hammock. You fed on the lower deck. You had bench tables and you fetched your food. We also got beer. We allowed British troops to get beer. You had to pay for it, of course. We arrived in Bombay. Then we took the train to Delhi and on to Meerut. The first station I took was at Meerut where the mutiny started in 1854.

Mark: Um, okay. Go ahead.

Pitcher: In fact, the clock of the church is still stuck, or was at the time, stuck to the time the mutiny started.

Mark: Um, so, I'm not terribly familiar with this particular incident going on here. What was your mission when you were there?

Pitcher: Mission?

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: Just to be sort of security troops. We were in India. At that time we had all of India. We saw Pakistan and Bangladesh rule India. We had about 50,000 British troops there and, of course, quite a big Indian army, officered by British officers.

Mark: Alright.

Pitcher: And then we had the Gurkhas mercenaries down from Nepal with quite a number of regulars, and in 19, and the job was to keep order in India, which we didn't do very much of. Once a year we'd march to the local town and march through with fixed bayonets and colors flying but no rounds at all. Of course, you had stones thrown at you. Nothing bad happened at all. Actually,

the only person due commission was a magistrate and we had no rounds [no ammunition] anyway.

Mark: I see. Well, that's what I was going to ask, how much actual combat was going on.

Pitcher: Nothing at all.

Mark: So what was your day-to-day duties there?

Pitcher: Well, day-to-day duties you had to rally out about 6:00, you had a parade, just an early morning parade, then you had training or descriptions. If you were in an infantry battalion you do the sort of rifle drill and all the rest of it. Then usually in the summertime they try to get most of the training over by lunchtime so you could rest in the afternoon when it got hot, especially in the summer. Then in the evening you had daws and all that sort of thing. And then in, oh, obviously there was the trouble on the northwest front here.

Mark: Yes.

Pitcher: So in 1936-37 I was sent to the northwest front with the Tokoh Brigade. That was the Indian brigade, consisted of the 71st [unintelligible] Regiment, the 74th Local Regiment, the 78th Royal Sea Regiment, and the 1st 17th Dovers. Our brigadier was Colonel Marty Lyons of the Local Regiment. And from there we went to Razmak. Well, Razmak is about the forward base not counting, in the Waziristan area. This was not in the area of the Khyber Pass. This was west of that.

Mark: Now this is present day Pakistan.

Pitcher: Pardon.

Mark: This is present day Pakistan?

Pitcher: Yes, it's Pakistan today.

Mark: Yes.

Pitcher: And we were right on the Afghan border. And, of course, it was quite a game for the Afghans and the Waziras to come and attack the British at night. They shoot at night. And when we went on column, any column going through, we had to go out and picket the roads. We did quite a few expeditions at this time. It was the biggest campaign since the 2nd or 3rd Afghan War. That was the biggest campaign British troops had been in since 1st World War. We had quite a lot of casualties. We had a few British regiments with us. We had the

Northhamshire Regiment, we had the Argonne Settlers for awhile. We lost so many men that they were taken out. We used patrol the road from towards Banuu up to Razmak, which was quite a way. There was two camps on the way. Salima [?], we'd stay one night, and I forget the other one now. And then going the other way towards, what's the place where the, oh, I can't remember it. Anyways, we got to Tarwaste [?]and Towan [?] and the [unintelligible] was in charge of the rebels at that time. You may have read about him.

Mark: No, I don't.

Pitcher: He was quite a character out there. And this carried on, I was up there for about a year. For this we were rewarded, we had quite a lot of casualties in our brigade.

Mark: Right. Now, at this time you were a medic.

Pitcher: That's correct.

Mark: So when the people were injured, this would involve you then.

Pitcher: Oh, sure.

Mark: So in a combat operation, as a medic, describe your own personal experiences. I mean, what was the sort of medical chain going back.

Pitcher: Well, we, I would go with the infantry battalions, attached to the 74th Ghurkas a lot of the time. And anyone was injured I had to go and help get them out. We had certain transport to get them out. We'd do the ordinary job and be under fire and like that but just, the only job there is, is to fetch them back. There was big stretchers we had then, the big wooden ones. They were not the fancy things we got later on in the command, the fancy ones, we had the whole shebang. And we also had, one time I was in charge of the transport for the short armors. They sent me back to take over. I had in my command, I was a private soldier by the way, 18-years-old, and the cavalry man in charge was sick so the Irish colonel, Colonel Rahn, put me in charge of the transport. And I had 24 pack-mules, I had 12 riding mules, 12 riding ponies, 12 charges for the officers, and I also had 12 camels. These were all looked after by sizes, mostly they were by tons. The job was to get them, I was responsible for getting shoe, toe shoeing, you couldn't do any real shoeing out on the front. Toe shoeing and getting the stuff up. And we used to go out on pickets. We did layback picket. We'd have a certain amount of transport there. And then if it was a long haul that day, we might have to go forward to double the length of the column and go on the front again and advance and help again

there. Anybody that was wounded got to be sent back to HQ by camel or the ponies or the donkeys. That was the way we carried them out.

Mark: Yeah, it sounds rather Spartan. What sort of medical supplies did you have? And how able were you to treat these people effectively?

Pitcher: Well, we had the only first aid kit in the thingamajigers. In the HQ they had complete operation outfits and surgeons. We held them until such time as we could get stuff out and get them back to HQ. Sometimes if people were badly wounded, they'd stay for maybe four or five days before we got on the road to get them out. Well, not real roads. Gravel roads, gravel track.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: We did have support from aircraft on a big do. We had... what was it? The British Air Force used at that time. And some Bristol fighters they still used, from the 1st World War. And, of course, you didn't often see the enemy. The enemy were out in the hills, we were all up in the hills but they were up higher in the rocks. It's amazing, sometimes we had a real pitch battle with them. We'd have, I remember one day we had the 6-inch Howitzers out there, we had a battery of 4-5s, then we had the old packets. You remember Kiplings screw guns? Well, we, each brigade had a battery of, a regiment of scew guns of the old 13-pounds, and we had, they all carried the 8-muels. Take them to pieces, put them together as screw guns. We'd have those. And it's amazing. We didn't get very many casualties from the enemy but from the battalions, but we had quite alot ourselves. Some days we'd have maybe 20, 10 killed, 20 wounded, some days more. But it was quite an experience.

Mark: Yeah. What sort of weapons were they using?

Pitcher: Pardon.

Mark: What sort of weapons ...

Pitcher: Oh, they just used rifles.

Mark: Yeah. I didn't think they had anything terribly sophisticated.

Pitcher: They used .303. Well, you have to use good stuff against them, they were such a smart people. We used to have some with us. I've got photos in here. Merwins, with their stuff. They were all pretty good, all smart people. And they had a lot of rifles, British rifles of course. And they also made some of their own. They copied them and made their own.

Mark: Um, now if we can go back to sort of garrison life for awhile. I suspect it was rather different than being in the American Army. I want to discuss two topics. The first one is discipline in the British Army. How strict was discipline in terms of just daily life?

Pitcher: Oh, daily life, it was typical Army discipline. We had parades and we had to be smart [properly attired], we had parade every week. We had to go to church. That was always a thing in the British Army, the church. Church parade was something big on Sunday. I can remember days when we go to church and we'd have the colonel's inspection especially before we left and the whole band would be there. The band would play in church. They play the hymns. And sometimes the, usually an Army padre, he'd be up there with all his 1st World War medals and if we didn't put enough money in the kit, he'd sort of complain a little. And then we'd march, we'd come out, we'd have military routine of getting into line again, then we'd march past the colonel and take the salute on a Sunday. Besides the CO's parade of the week. And you had guard duty of course. All the rifles were kept in the barrack rooms. They were all locked together. They were all locked up so they couldn't be stolen. They were kept in the center of the barrack room.

Mark: As a young soldier, what's your relationship to the NCOs? How do you treat them and how did they treat you?

Pitcher: Oh, the NCOs, once you got their tongue learnt things were fair. We had to call them by rank. They were always, except for the, you get one or two too hot but the majority of them were quite the same as yourself. In other words, you did your share and helped out and did your work, it was all it took.

Mark: Now, I'd imagine there is much more distance between the enlisted man and the officer in the British Army. Would that be a fair statement?

Pitcher: Sometimes, not always. You got officers, at times who would, especially later on but during the war and afterwards they were, you drink with them and everything. That was all gone by the board, especially in commandos. That was the goal completely.

Mark: But before World War II there was a little more of a distance.

Pitcher: Oh, sure. There was discipline but it wasn't that hard. You had to do what you're told and you had your things laid out for you and you had to keep your kit [uniform] clean and you had your inspections. Of course, you had a lot of schooling as well. The British Army was always very, very particular about sending people to school. In fact, you couldn't proficiency rates until you got your second class rate education. This was very important. You very, very seldom saw a man who couldn't compete in education with most people.

Mark: Right. So, you were in India until ...

Pitcher: I was in India until June or somewhere, 1940.

Mark: And you went to Somalia after that.

Pitcher: Well, first of all I volunteered, they just started a special service unit and I volunteered for special service. Well, there was none in India, of course. So next thing I know I'm on a boat. There were 20 of us and we were sent to British Somalia then. We had no NCOs. There was quite a muck up in a way. We went with the 71st Battalion, they were on the same boat as us. It was the Jahangir, went out of Bombay. We landed at Berbera. By this time we got there, the Italians were pushing everybody out. There was only the British Somaliland and the Black Watch [Scottish regiment] there. They were the only regiments there. And one Indian regiment. And we were chased right out. So from there we went back to Aden. After a few weeks in Aden we went up to the Middle East.

Mark: Sudan.

Pitcher: Well, yes. I was on the City of Rubay. But when we broke convoy half way up the Red Sea I was sitting on the forward hold and all of a sudden it was getting pretty hot, so I pulled one of the ship's officers over and I said, "By the way, what's wrong with this darn ship? This is hot in this hold here." He checked out, the ship was on fire. They put new [unintelligible] in Johannesburg then we had armored cars down in the hold so we ran for the port Sudan. The hole, of course, the flames went up a ton of feet in the air. Anyway, we got to the Sudan, in the end, and I was down in Khartoum. While we were down there, the Western Desert, we walked from there up into Kufra, but before that I went up to Terin with a special unit which we took Terin, of course. Then I came back and the major came to me and he said, well, he promoted me to sergeant and sent me up with a section to Kufra with the Longbane Desert group. There was a B Company, the Argonne some of the highlanders, behind us, and we had a company of French colonials up from the Chad. We were operating about 200 or 300 miles behind the lines up onto the Tippery Road. We went up through Lemir (sp??) and that to Kufra, then we got north on our way to Zurba (sp??), and zigging up to the top there. But that was, we didn't do any much fighting. It was more or less reccie (reconnaissance) work we were doing. But that was all by sun compass. You couldn't, there was no other way you could do it. Of course, Kufra was quite a big oasis and we captured the fort from the Italians, and then we sort of hung out. Then we patrolled from there. But in 19, it would be 1941 or '42? '41 it must have been, 1941 I left there. No, no, it was 1942. We left there and I joined the unit at, in Cairo and went up through Palestine, Damascus, the

Golan Heights, went up over the Golan Heights to Damascus, then we went down to Beirut. I never went but they was going up into Turkey reccie (reconnaissance) patrols, on submarines. They went up on the Thunderbolt and all those. I never got up there. From there, we stayed there a few months, then we went across to Baghdad from Damascus by road, by track, there was no road. And then up into Persia. Christmas '42 I was in Kermasah, the oil town up there, they're all oil towns, where they get the oil. Then we moved up to Kun. I damaged my knee trying to jump, jumping it was at the time, and I was sent up to hospital in Tehran. From Tehran, in January 1943, I went home, after six years overseas. Arrived in Britain, took three months to get home around the Cape, and by the time I'd arrived in Britain, they formed me up. They disbanded the 1st Royal Marine Division and then formed the Marine Commandos. Oh, you had 40-41, then formed 42-48 out of the 1st Marine Division. And I was posted to 42 Commando, 42 Royal Marine Commando. At that time, they were still called special service troops. They never become the name Commando, changed the Brigade to Commando Brigade until December '44. I joined the 42. Went up to Ashland Carry, the Commando school with them. From there we proceeded out to go to Burma. This would be approximately October '43 on HMT Ranchu. The Ranchu was a ship. In the Mediterranean we were bombed by the German Air Force and we were, the Ria del Pacifica with five commandos in '44. They went on to India. We had to put in allocs (allowcations) to get refitted because we had the front of the ship knocked off. From there we carried on to India, which was in the Jungle of Belga, training. Then because they were [unintelligible]. From there I did several raids on the Burmese coast. We'd go in and take prisoners. It was pretty slow. Forty-five and 44 were sent up to Coxesbasa(?), not too far from [unintelligible]. Did quite a bit of fighting, infantry casualties there. So I was a bit disgruntled with this being as I'd been overseas for six years before and this was, nothing was happening, and I got home where I joined 41 Commando Royal Marines, Royal Marine Commando, and went to Vulcrane (?). It wasn't even two from the time, I went to Vulcrane (?), on November 1, 1944, we landed at West Cappala (?) on the coast of Vulcrane (?) and joined up with the 4 Commando from Flushing and the Canadians. We came up the shelf. From there we went up to the Vols and I took part in several raids for prisoners over the Vols. We brought some landing craft up there, landing craft and, oh, those pedal boats. From there I went to, I was at Sotogunbush (?) then, from there I went up to the Zantan (?) and joined 46th Commando Royal Marines before they crossed the Rhine. We did the spirit of the Rhine, 46. From there we stayed there a couple of days until the 1st, I think it was the 82nd Airborne directly across in front of us, and the 1st British Airborne Division. From there we went right up through Germany and we did the spearhead of every river. Had over the Vienna where the [unintelligible] were forced, Rhine, Vienna, and finally the Elbe. When the war finished we were up in Insalfairmon (?) in the Baltics.

Mark: That's a remarkable amount of moving around and different theaters that you were in. I want to go back and just sort of see if we can't discuss some of these a little more in detail. I noticed, for example, that as you're describing your time overseas in the Indian Ocean area there, that you didn't remark on when World War II began.

Pitcher: Oh, ...

Mark: So I'm interested in a private soldier's view of events in Europe when you're in India or Sudan or wherever you happened to have been at that particular time.

Pitcher: Well, there's two things I want to tell you about. One, I was in India, of course in '39 when it started.

Mark: Right.

Pitcher: And everybody there, mostly, were pretty much regular soldiers, were pretty disgusted and had to stay. I was one of the lucky ones that got out of it. Well, one of the most remarkable things I can remember about it all was on December the 8, 1941, we were at Kufra Oasis at the time and this old Italian fort, we always kept a little mess together when we could, and we had no lighting but we were issued a rum ration every day. So we'd get this rum and put it in the thing, put a bit of lint in and light it. Well, we had a short wave radio. I can still remember, we got the news that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Sergeant Major McLeod turned to me and he said, "Well, Bill, what do you think is going to happen now?" I said, "I tell you what, we can be assured of getting home." I can still remember that very clearly. So that was one thing I can remember. And that was when the Americans came into the war.

Mark: Yeah. Now, as a young soldier did you see World War II approaching? I mean, the march in the Rhineland and that sorts of things. I mean, you're more attune to military affairs than someone else your age. I'm just wondering how young soldiers at the time viewed events and ...

Pitcher: We could see it coming. There's no doubt about it. After the Saar effort and marching into all the, you must remember, the time when I joined and up to near to the war time, the regular British Army was only about 200,000 men.

Mark: Right.

Pitcher: And they did start a couple, 'cause I was in Britain at the time, they did start conscripting the companies before the war actually started, which is a bit late of course. But we could see it coming. That was pretty definite we could. Of

course, most of the fellas wanted to get home or get somewhere where they could do something better than sitting on their backsides in India. And, of course, none of us, the troops did go. The 1st Indian Division, the 5th India Division. They were made up of British and Indian troops, of course. They were moved up to the Middle East. I was lucky I volunteered for something different and I got it.

Mark: Yeah. So, once the war started, how did the Army change? I mean, as you mentioned, it got bigger for example. What sort of impact did that have on you? Or did you even notice any?

Pitcher: Well, you didn't notice in India because at that time in India, not many more came to India that time. They didn't start getting to India. They didn't have enough to reinforce them. The trouble was that the older people stayed and they were the backbone of the Burma army. When they went, there were soldiers with 10 and 12 years in. I wasn't there when it first started. I had left then and I came back again later on. But most of the [unintelligible] were old soldiers. They were the cream, well, the cream of the men were getting older. But they did a fine job of working when you think that their all fellas had been kept in India when the war started mostly because they were older units and they went into Burma, did better than most of the younger people ever do.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: But I was really, by that time when I came back I was with a crack outfit. It didn't affect us too much.

Mark: But as time went on, did you, for example, get different weapons, better weapons, or things that perhaps were more hastily put together. I mean, as the war progressed, I would imagine you would have noticed some sort of changes in personnel or something.

Pitcher: Well, when the Commandos first formed, of course, they never had many automatic weapons ...

Mark: Right.

Pitcher: ... outside the brain (?) gun. And we did get a lot of 45 Tommy guns from the United States with the round magazine on them but they were only shoot at for special jobs. You couldn't, didn't have enough to try, to use them all the time. Then the Sten came out, of course. That was a cheap thing, made for about \$1.50 but it was good for close work. When we came home, went out to the Far East, we did have the new Thompson sub-machine gun, and we had a Garand rifle which I didn't think was as good as our 303 to be honest with you. That was the set-up there. Then because we got the Sten Mark 5 which

was with the wood butt and the whole shebang. It was 9-milimeters, you could carry it around, you could shoot the darn thing well. When we went out to the Far East, we had the Colt 45 and that was changed later on to the 9-milimeter Browning which was a much better weapon. The British were never really keen on the Colt 45.

Mark: Yeah. I suppose that kind of leads in to what sort of equipment you carried in combat operations and what sorts of things you found most useful, what sorts of things did you and the other troops not find terribly useful. We've talked about some of the weapons. Any other sorts of equipment issues?

Pitcher: Well, of course, the Boise (??) anti-tank rifle was out of date before the 2nd World War started. I can still remember though when we were at Tesini down in Adria, the Italian cavalry charged us and we were pushed back amongst the artillery and you had one officer leading it, an older gentleman, gray hair. As he came forward, the fellow next to me, he hit him square with that darn anti-tank rifle _____. But that was just one thing that happened. The Italians used cavalry in Adria.

Mark: I mean horse cavalry?

Pitcher: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: We had, our artillery was good. Our 25-pounder, I think, was one of the best short guns in the whole war. That was just before the war. But, of course, when war was declared I was in Jouncy (?) with this unit. The artillery there had horses still. The 25th Field Regiment had horses. And I can still remember when they brought these new quads out to pull the guns with, and they called a "quad." It was like, it was a box thing with four-wheel drive. And it was much superior, of course, to the horses because it was less work. There was a lot of work for a fellow with horses in those days. Every gun had three drivers and six or seven gunners and the gunners were responsible for looking after guns. They did help with the equipment as well. But the drivers had to groom the horses and take them out for exercise twice a day, then they had to clean all the equipment, all the harness. The gunners used to help do that, of course. When they got the quads it was much easier and they could train more on shooting and firing.

Mark: I suppose, I've got some questions about leadership. Now, Winston Churchill, sort of an icon but you served, you know, you were in the military during the whole Munich phase and then ...

Pitcher: Oh, sure.

Mark: ... and then when Churchill came in, so I was wondering if you could perhaps contrast, you know, again from a soldier's point of view, the Prime Ministership and how things changed, or didn't change.

Pitcher: Before the war British soldier wasn't allowed to vote. We had no vote at all pre-war.

Mark: Oh, I didn't know that.

Pitcher: The first time I voted it was after the war.

Mark: Huh.

Pitcher: But, oh, we couldn't have done very much in the time of Munich because we never had anything to do it with. We could never have gone to war with the time of Munich. There was no way possible with 50,000 regular Army serving in India, others in Egypt, others in Hong Kong, it was a bit of a mess. We had troops everywhere.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: Two hundred thousand regular soldiers you couldn't very well take on the German Army that time. No way.

Mark: Much has been made of Churchill's inspirational qualities. Was that something that you noticed at the time? Or were you too busy fighting to really ...

Pitcher: No, no. We used to be in touch. We were very lucky. All the war, even the worst of times, we had a good short wave radio system. In fact, I can remember it was at desert, we'd, in the nighttime, on Saturday nights when Vera Lynn come on we'd get the radio off the truck and we'd cover ourselves up with tarp and turn it on. And we'd listen to Vera sing to the troops on a Friday night, on the radio. Of course, Winston Churchill did get a lot of praise. Where he deserved it, I don't know. Maybe if he hadn't taken the job, somebody else would, I would have thought. I've always thought that. But towards the end of the war Churchill never had much to say. He was quashed out by Stalin and Roosevelt, he never had much to say on anything.

Mark: Right.

Pitcher: In fact, I still think that the British troops never got enough, didn't get the credit they deserved – for lots of things they did.

Mark: Like the contribution to ...

Pitcher: The whole war. America was getting a lot more. Being an American citizen now I can see a lot more of it. But they did not get the credit they deserved. You never the see, the largest battle front against the Japanese on ground was in Burma.

Mark: Uh hum.

Pitcher: And you mention all the islands. We don't hear very much mention about Infar (?) and all these, and Tinkenou (?) when they dropped the, when Wingate went in there with the paratroops. You don't hear much about that at all. I mean, a lot of friends told me who were, I'm a life member of the Ranger [unintelligible] Association, so I meet lots of them. In fact, next month we've got a meeting in town here. It's a long story, the whole shooting, the whole lot.

Mark: Yeah. Now, you've gone through the long list of different places you went, and battles, and that sort of thing. Are there any that stick out in your mind in terms of combat experiences, any that were most, the most harrowing? The most distinctive? That sort of thing.

Pitcher: Well, I think, we had a small battle one time. It lasted 2, 3 days. We crossed the Alah—I can still remember to this day—we crossed the Alah River and we got held up two days by, they brought a Marine battalion down from Hamburg and some other units as well. And we weren't very big, the Commando Brigade wasn't very big. The most we had in the brigade I suppose was 1,200 men. At full strength the Commando was about 400. By the time we got up to, half way through Germany, we were pretty much down to rock bottom. We had some rough times there. I can remember one day we were out and we got through the first positions and then I looked around and they shot a friend of mine. I was so amazed they got out of the hole, these Germans, they shooting from behind. But it was all handled quite calmly amongst the rest of—the Sergeant Major was there—and the whole thing went off pretty good. That's a soldier's job I think.

Mark: Yeah. I was going to ask you which adversaries you found most effective, least effective, in terms of their combat capabilities.

Pitcher: Well, I ...

Mark: Or could you make such a generalization even?

Pitcher: Well, I don't think I could—well, it depends, you bet. We met Italians, some of the Italians were good. You'd meet some Royal Grenadiers or the, what's

the other outfit? It was an armed regiment, regular troops. All the others just sent out there. And I think of the same, when we crossed the Razor, we ran into the Hitler Youth. They were pretty, they weren't very good soldiers but they were pretty rough to handle.

Mark: Huh, interesting. So, as you mentioned, when the war ended you were in Germany.

Pitcher: Yes.

Mark: What happened to you after the war ended? You stayed in the Army.

Pitcher: Yes. Well, after the war ended I came, a week after the Germans packed up, we came back to England, and then the Brigade, the 45 Commando, and the rest of us were ready to go out to the Far East.

Mark: That's what I was wondering.

Pitcher: 3rd Brigade was already out. The Royal Brigade was still there and so they called us out. Then we trained around camp. We did all sorts of speed marches and everything. And then they refitted one of those midget aircraft carriers. They had those small aircraft carriers. Well, it carried about 15 planes. They converted it to a radio ship. So HMS Rajah had, we had landing craft on each side, and all the stuff, all the transport on the top deck. We all slept on the hangar deck. They put bunks in, which was new for British troops traveling, to have bunks. And we traveled out and on the way, of course, the Singapore packed up and Lord Louis came aboard and tell us we were going to Hong Kong. The Commando Brigade was the first troops in Hong Kong after the war. We had Japanese prisoners, some of them were there. I looked after some up in Kowloon Bay. I stayed there, the Army, in '47 actually the Army Commandos were disbanded and they just kept the Marine Commando Brigade. This caused a lot of bad feelings in the Army. They thought the Army Commandos were going to stay forever. But, of course, the Marines, it was their job and when the war was over they weren't prepared to take it up so the Army did it for the first two or three years of war. And then the only commandos left now are the Marines except for a couple of special artillery regiment and some support groups like the ordinance and that. They were all Army people. And we got artillery, a lot of artillery men. But otherwise they're all Marines now. But, of course, I was with the Marines for three years, over three years. When I came home from Hong Kong in '47 and they sent me on a dispensing course, a pharmacy course, which I took, and then I went back out again to Hong Kong — oh, no, first of all they sent me for a year to Vienna. I was in Vienna for a year. I was a boxer in the Army for a time. Played a little Rugby for the Army as well. But I came home from there, thought I was going to Palestine but instead they sent me back out to

Hong Kong when the Communists came down to the boarder and chased the Chinese Army through. Well, we didn't have any trouble from the Commies at that time, but there was more trouble from the Nationalist troops going through. And the American fleet if I know rightly, shipped them up to northern China and, 'cause most of them went to Tai, which is now Taiwan, Formosa.

Mark: Taiwan, yeah.

Pitcher: Well, I stayed there. And then Korea started of course. I volunteered to go to Korea and they wouldn't let us go — they sent some from Hong Kong, but they wouldn't send us up there. They had to get a brigade from England and I think one regiment from Hong Kong. They sent me home and when I got home I volunteered again and they sent me straight out to Korea. I was in Korea for the end of it, just the end of the war, I got the end of that. So I stayed there for one year. In '54 was it? I left, the end of '54, I left Japan and went down to Milan for the trouble in Milan.

Mark: Right.

Pitcher: And I was moved up into Taiping, from Singapore I went up towards the Thailand boarder. Up there they had a special unit parading around and mucking about up there.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: But I didn't do very much up there. I was just there. So from there I retired. They wanted me to sign. I retired.

Mark: I see. I've got a couple of questions about the post World War II period. There were two sort of large movements going on at the time. One, of course, was the Cold War. And from the British perspective, the second would be the sort of de-colonization. I'm wondering if these two things had any impact on life in the Army, from your perspective.

Pitcher: Oh, sure. Suddenly all the overseas stations went, except for, you went to India in the old days, you were there for five, six, seven, maybe eight or nine years. You were there. And if you signed on for maybe, you signed on some of the right colors of foreign reserve, you'd do an extra year, so you do eight regular years. 'Cause I was in for good, I was there for the whole, from the start of.

Mark: Yeah. Now in terms of your relationship to the natives I guess you would say, I mean, did that change in the pre-war and post-war period? I mean, for

example, were the people on Malaysia a little more hostile towards you than the people in India had been before the war?

Pitcher: No, we were still in charge then.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: No, they weren't hostile at all. I think that the British treatment of Malaya was one of the most cleverest, diplomatic things I've ever seen. The way they got, and I still feel that if the Americans used some of the same system in Vietnam, they wouldn't have had all the trouble there. I think the, trying to bash them all up — we had a lot of Indian fellows who served in the, during the trouble, during the war, and they fought against the Japanese all the war.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: And they still were left later on. I think the trouble was that, you see, the fellow in charge in Malaya, he was a Communist at the time and he got decorated by the British, fought against the Japanese and got decorated by the British. I think the same thing happened in Vietnam, didn't it?

Mark: Uh huh.

Pitcher: Ho Chi Minh was sort of decorated by the Americans for fighting against the Japanese.

Mark: Right. Certainly he had support during the war, right.

Pitcher: It's the same with us. Well, I think we treated them in the right way. In fact, today Malaya is still part of the Cold War and also Borneo is part of it. When the trouble was big in [unintelligible], they sent very few troops to Borneo to hold it but they held it. There's a very good book out about it. I forget what it's called now but it's a book on the SAS (British Special Air Service). But I wasn't there so I don't know much about it. I was just in Malaya. But I came home in '56 to retire.

Mark: Yeah. Now, in terms of the Cold War, I mean, this was a time when the United States rose to world domination at this time. Before the war, perhaps that role was much more British. I'm interested in how, perhaps, playing a secondary role in world politics and then the Cold War, if that had any impact on the British Army, especially from the enlisted man's perspective, such as your own. Korea, for example, was largely an American command and you're fighting under the American command I would assume. Or UN, which I suppose was dominated by the Americans.

Pitcher: You didn't notice it that much.

Mark: You didn't?

Pitcher: No, 'cause we had quite a big cover off division there. We had three brigades. We had Australians, New Zealanders, we had India field armaments. Most of the troops were British, from England, but British anyway. One Canadian brigade, 25th. And we had one regiment, I think we had one regiment or two that were Australians if I'm right. But mostly it was all from England, Britain.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: And we were treated well. We were treated very well. I can't remember anything against, towards, I had lots of friends amongst the Americans, as a matter fact. I used to go, when the fighting was over, I was running with the American Marine Air Wing. They were down at, down near Parmanjou (?), not Parmanjou (?), the other place, was that [interrupted]. I used to go down there. They used to do me with baseball stuff and footballs. I'd go down there for a night and they'd come back for me. And on my left flank, on the engine, we had the 1st Marine Division. Hello?

Mark: Yes.

Pitcher: We had the 1st Marine Division on our flank. And I used to have a rugby pitch and they used to come down and try and play American football with us. Well, I think after a couple of hands of that we frightened them out of that game did quite well. We had a lot of fun. They used to drink in my mess and everything else.

Mark: Uh. So in 1956 you left the service.

Pitcher: '57 I left.

Mark: '57. For what reason?

Pitcher: I had 22 years in.

Mark: And so that was just, it was time to get out I take it.

Pitcher: Well, they wanted me to do 30. They called me, the colonel, I can remember the colonel coming in before I left Malaya to discuss, and Colonel Creighton, he said to me, "Mr. Pitcher, I hear you're going to retire." I said, "Yes." He says, "You think you're doing the right thing?" I said, "Yes, I sir I am." So he gave me a day to think it over and I says, "Okay." So I was on the way home.

I flew, it was the first time I'd ever been flown home, when I flew home from Singapore to Britain.

Mark: And so what did you want to do with the rest of your life then, basically?

Pitcher: Well, I didn't know what I wanted to do. When I, I got a job working in an atomic plant up in northern Scotland. I had another job offered to work in the mint. I said, "No, it's not for me." So when I went down to the Canadian house there and I got an immigrant visa for Canada and I also got a visa for the United States, visitor's visa. I'd been writing to a young lady over here for a long, long time and she'd been in the American Army, the 2nd World War, and I came to Madison here, and I married my wife here. But I couldn't get a job here first of all. So before I settled down anywhere I got a job in northern Canada.

Mark: I see.

Pitcher: And I worked up in northern Labrador for about five years.

Mark: That is northern Canada. What were you doing up there?

Pitcher: I was working for a mining company, the iron ore Company in Canada.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: But I was the accommodation officer and I was in charge of all the laundry, the sports, and all 3,000 men in bunk houses and visitors. I came back here in November and got married in Madison to my wife today.

Mark: So you left Britain in which year?

Pitcher: 1957.

Mark: So it was very, very soon after you left the military.

Pitcher: I'm just looking now. I've got my book in front of me. I hadn't finished then. I must have left before I served my time.

Mark: I was going to, you know, I work for the Department of Veterans Affairs here, so in these interviews I like to ask some questions about sort of post-war readjustment benefits and that sort of thing. Being English you would have some, perhaps, different experiences but you didn't have much contact with any sort of social welfare type of readjustment program in England at all did you?

Pitcher: No, sir. I did, I had three months leave before I retired to look for a job. I did go to Soldiers and Sailors place in London but they didn't offer me very much. In fact, I've still got the card they gave me in 1957 here. But I came over here and I couldn't get a job in Madison.

Mark: Why not? Was it just a bad time?

Pitcher: It was a bad time. And also they didn't want any foreigners.

Mark: I see.

Pitcher: So I got a job in northern Canada with the iron ore company. My wife came back up with me in November. We stayed up in northern Canada for, until '61. Then I, it was one of the best things I could ever have done because the mine manager was an American caught up in the Canadian Air Force during the war, but he ran it just like the service and he got me just about knocked into civilian life pretty well.

Mark: Yeah.

Pitcher: And then I came back down here. I tried real estate first. I had a real estate license. I had relatives here who'd had a broker license in town. But I wasn't very much good at that so I got another job in Milwaukee. Then I came back and I got a pool hall, a pool hall in town and I ran that for four or five years.

Mark: Which is Pitcher's Pub, I take it?

Pitcher: No, that was later on. That was when I first got, I had the Cue. The first Cue pool, the only one in Madison. In 1963 I opened it. I ran that until '67 then I went back to Canada, went to northern Canada, Labrador, with Ices Canadian Bechtel, Bechtel Engineering Company. I did the same job for them as I did for the iron ore company but they were building a big hydro-electric dam at Churchill Falls. I stayed there a year. Then I came back here and I got into the Pitcher's Pub business and I run that for 22, I had that for 22 years.

Mark: Hm. Which pretty much brings us to today I guess.

Pitcher: Yeah. Oh, you got a list of all the decorations, of the medals I got. I got no decorations.

Mark: Excuse me?

Pitcher: I've got the, did I tell you the medals I have?

Mark: Yeah, you listed them here.

Pitcher: Yeah, I've got the Indian General Service Medal with the Northwest Frontier, '39/45 Star, the Africa Star, the Burma Star, France and Germany Star, and the General Service Medal, Defense Medal, General Service Medal to cross Malaya, and I've got the [unintelligible] Special Service Medal with Korea. But it was a good life. I can't deny it was something that I wouldn't give up all over.

Mark: Yeah. No, it sounds like it was quite an experience.

Pitcher: I saw the world for free. Maybe I'd have done better if I'd have stayed in school but that's too late to say when you're 77.

Mark: I suppose it's never too late to go back to school. I don't know.

Pitcher: Well, I went to school, I was getting schooling in Canada and even down here I was getting it. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, retired colonel in the American Air Force and I went to the MATC and had the first courses in computer stuff. You've got to do something.

Mark: It was very interesting speaking with you this morning.

Pitcher: Well, thank you very much, sir. I enjoyed talking to you.

Mark: Is there anything else you'd like to add or anything?

Pitcher: I don't think so. I've got all sorts of things but I've done what I've tried to do but I didn't succeed in doing very many of them. To me life is, sport has been a great thing. I've been a lot of sport. I've played rugby for the Army, I've played ringer once in Malaya, I boxed for the Army. I boxed the last year before the '48 Olympics so I've had a good life. I can't complain.

Mark: No, it sounded very interesting. So, thanks for talking to me this morning.

Pitcher: Thank you very much, sir.

Mark: I appreciate it.

[End of Interview]