

After Hiroshima
Interview transcript

Interviewee: Keith Quilter (KQ)

Interviewer: Victoria Sowerby (VS)

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Interview with Keith Quilter starts:

[First part of interview lost. Keith Quilter, now aged 93, was a British naval pilot during the Second World War, stationed in the Pacific after VE Day, during July and August 1945....]

VS: So you, you're in the Philippines, you are supporting the US Navy, erm, and er...

KQ: Neutralising Japanese aerodromes to stop them flying replacement Kamikazes, erm who were aiming, who were doing these vast attacks on the.. I think, anchored US fleet off Okinawa, from which they were supporting the marines who were ashore fighting, er, fighting the Japs. During that time, well eventually during that time, the Japs realised we were there too and er, we started receiving Kamikaze attacks ourselves... and the ship I was on, HMS Formidable was hit twice. And in fact each of our carriers was hit at least once. But then we found, and so did the Americans realise, that er, we could take it far better than their carriers because we had steel armour plated flight decks, whereas they had wooden decks; which were far more pleasant to fly off, er and didn't get all hot in the tropical sun and make the whole ship like an oven. But if they were hit by a kamikaze (coughs), they usually went through the flight deck and burst in the hangar deck and put the ship out of action.

VS: Erm, and so your ship was hit by a kamikaze?

KQ: Twice, yes.

VS: And were you on board at the time?

KQ: I was on board but didn't actually see them. The first time I was down in the er, in my cabin, erm putting my flying gear on because I was due off on a mission shortly after that particular time. The second time...well, I better go back a bit. That first kamikaze we had occurred just after we'd flown a strike off. And we had more aircraft than we could get in the hangar so we had a what we call a permanent deck park which was surplus aircraft which had to be stacked right at the rear end of the deck, the aft end when a strike was taking off. So all of the aircraft were frontward were taking off. The ones, the spare ones at the back would start up at the same time so when the other aircraft had taken off, they would then taxi to the very forward end, the front end of the ship, thus leaving the rear end clear if anybody needed to make an emergency landing. and it was whilst they were taxiing up that the kamikaze hit, and the noise of their engines drowned out the "take cover" warnings on the tannoy system. And so more people were, were either killed or injured than might otherwise have been, but we learned a lesson from that, erm to avoid a similar thing happening again, er, (3.06), a big red flag was rigged on a, a long pole, which could be waved off the side of the island if a similar occurrence happened. Which indeed it did. And I was sitting in my aircraft with my engine running erm, because my flight then was, was in instant readiness to take off, to try and intercept any that broke through the, the combat air patrol, when the red flag was waved.

So I switched off the engine, undid my straps, leapt out, and got down about three decks before it actually hit. So yes I was on board but not an eyewitness

VS: *Yes.*

KQ: of either.

VS: *Yes. er, I mean, it might seem a ridiculous question given what you've just said but what was the, your attitude er and more generally your colleagues' attitude towards the Japanese themselves?*

KQ: Well as far as the kamikaze chaps were concerned we just couldn't understand them, er, just seemed plum crazy. Our general attitude was very anti because erm, a lot of us, including myself had been trained in America and they came into the war because of the er, the erm attack on Pearl Harbour. Without the declaration of war, so they were very, very anti. And we'd rather acquired the same anti feeling. In fact the Americans always, during those days, they'd always say "remember Pearl Harbour!" And erm, we were doing a lot of practise deck landings on a clear strip away from Brunswick, whilst working up, called Bar Harbour and we got so fed up of these practice deck landings that we used to say "Remember Bar Harbour!" (laughs)

VS: *But did you, did you feel that there was erm, was your attitude towards the Japanese different from that towards the Nazis? Were they seen as a common enemy or did you feel there was a difference?*

KQ: No there was a great difference. erm, I know there were... one always worried if one was shot down in Europe, that you might fall in to the midst of an SS troop or something, but generally speaking, one knew, it wouldn't be a holiday camp but you'd be treated according to the Geneva Convention as a Prisoner of War and end up in a Prisoner of War Camp. We also knew in, in the Japan theatre, that we were just as likely to have our heads chopped off. In fact, we were told never to get captured with a weapon on us **(5.48)**. SO in fact when I had to ditch, erm only three weeks before the end of the war, in a Japanese harbour, when I saw this submarine coming in, I thought the fact it had come right into the harbour entrance it must be a Japanese ship..and immediately threw my revolver over the side of a dinghy cos I didn't want to be caught with that on board.

VS: *Why would that make a difference? Having a weapon?*

KQ: Well because they said, the Japanese were just as likely to take it and and shoot you with it or if it was a knife, cut your throat with it.

VS: *Right. Erm, so you are erm, you crash land in July.*

KQ: 28th July 45.

VS: *Erm, actually, going, going back a bit, you're flying sorties...*

KQ: Over the Sakashimas...

VS: Yes, erm and you just if you could for the tape just go back over the warning that you had about Hiroshima...

KQ: Oh yes.. well I haven't moved on from Sakashimas on the tape have I?

VS: Well no.. if you want to...

KQ: Well eventually erm, it came to an end, the Americans had acquired Okinawa. We went back for a short while, right the way back to Sydney...to patch up the er, kamikaze damage, get some replacement pilots and aircraft and then went back way up again. And having proved ourselves erm, during Iceberg, this time joined up as an additional task group as we were called with the main American fleet. So we were just one combined fleet. And then we were flying sweeps erm, the fleet was ranging all up and down the er, Eastern seaboard of mainland Japan and we were flying sweeps right over the mainland of Japan...primarily neutralising aerodromes er but occasionally doing attacks on other military targets. I mean for instance one on the shores of the inland sea just sort of north west of Shikoku we attacked an aerodrome only about...I dunno, 25 miles from Hiroshima. **(8.23)** And we had VERY strict instructions that on no account were we to go anywhere near and certainly not drop any bombs or strafe anything erm in the location of Hiroshima. And we wondered why. We assumed then that perhaps there was an Allied Prisoner of War Camp there. erm, it was only a few weeks later, er when we heard the news of the first atom bomb being dropped and that it was on Hiroshima that er, we realised that the reason probably was, that they didn't want our little 500lb bombs to er distort the effect of this enormous atomic bomb, which was obviously already ready by then and indeed Hiroshima had been chosen as the first possible target **(9.12)**

VS: erm, so coming on to that erm, where, when you, when you heard that the bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, where, where exactly were you?

KQ: Oh by that time I had ditched, I'd been shot down and ditched, I'd been picked up by an American submarine, the USS Scabbardfish, was on board her and erm I'd always, done a bit of sort of DJing, not that we had that term for it in those days. At home, at people's weddings and odd parties and things and indeed on Formidable, my cabin mate and I used to run a record request programme, erm, and then when I got aboard the submarine in their little ward-room, up on one wall was quite an interesting sort of radio. And I asked the skipper if I could twiddle around with it. And he gave me permission to use it any time I liked, provided I wore earphones and didn't have the loudspeakers on. ANd it was whilst listening to that.. I used to listen to Tokyo Rose and the American Forces Network broadcast as well and er pick up the latest news... And it was whilst on there I heard the news of the erm, the atom bomb on Hiroshima. And called out to the chaps in the ward-room "We've dropped an atomic bomb!" And they all said "oh rubbish, what are you listening to?", you know, superman or something. And er, so I put the loudspeakers on and that was how the, the news reached the submarine. And erm, then we started listening. And we had the speakers on. And subsequent broadcasts were telling us all about what an atomic bomb is, er the fact that there's stuff called fall-out and radioactivity that would be washed down the rivers etc etc ((11.09) and indeed we began to... I think partly erm jokingly, wonder whether the submarine would start to glow in the dark or something.

VS: What was, what was the general er feeling about, about having, having dropped it?

KQ: ENORMOUS relief. Enormous relief. Erm, having been involved there face to face with the Japs and and learnt their attitude to never giving in and their er sheer cruelty to any prisoners....erm, and we knew because the submarine used to act as lifeguard for the US Army Air Force when they were doing their fire bombing raids when the fleet had withdrawn to refuel....we knew they were being punished very heavily with all this bombing and yet they just would not give in... and we were also aware that the reason for our sweeps over the mainland was to try and neutralise any resistance...because there was a planned invasion during about October and there would be terrible, terrible casualties both the Allies, mostly Americans but with British support as well and indeed Japanese erm, resistance would be that there would be thousands of Japanese killed too. SO it was enormous relief. We didn't at that time know the full details of the effect of the atomic bomb. It was just enormous relief that after SIX years, which it was for we Brits... only about three or four for the Americans, erm, the war was finally over. **(13.00)**

VS: And you knew as soon as you heard about Hiroshima, you knew that that was going to be the end of it?

KQ: Well we assumed it was... in fact they didn't give in until about two weeks later, after the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, erm and we were still getting the news... and we'd heard about Nagasaki, I was still in the submarine at this time...we'd come off duty, we'd rendezvoused with another sister ship and taken aboard all her catch of of downed aviators because we were going back to base and it would leave them less cluttered. and erm, can't remember how long it took but their base was in Sipan in the Marianas I think, the group, and just as we were coming into Sipan harbour and picking up the harbour pilot we had the news over the radio, the Japs had finally surrendered. And erm to be honest I don't remember the rest of that day! The, the US Navy is a dry navy, they don't have bars or drinks... tots of rum of anything of that sort but I don't know where it came from, the medical chest or somewhere... we were very soon drinking. Went ashore. All elated and relieved; the war was over. erm.. I was billeted in some US Navy place and everybody was just, you know, drinking, with you know, with sheer relief. It's no wonder I don't remember the rest of that day really! (laughs).

VS: And er, so generally, everyone's attitude to the dropping of the first bomb was exactly the same, there wasn't anyone who was saying "hang on, chaps, this doesn't seem..."

KQ: No, well we didn't know all the details I mean it was just an enormous bomb...erm which nobody could resist.

VS: Yeah. yeah. And then the second...when Nagasaki was dropped, did you, did, was that, did that feel any different?

KQ: Erm...well we were further away when we got the news. We were very disappointed they hadn't surrendered after the first one and I think we began to think well, how much, how much more did we have to do to make them pack it in? **(15.18)**. After, after the war when I'd got back...we began to hear more about it and began to see pictures of the devastation caused at Hiroshima....Incidentally we always called it Hi-ro-Sheema in those days. Hir-RO-shima seems to have come along much later. erm, I was asking somebody who spoke Japanese, I said which is, which is the right way? It, it wasn't a Japanese person or somebody that could speak the language and they said it is Hiro-sheema.

VS: *Hiro-sheema?*

KQ: Yes.

VS: *Ok. So it wasn't until you got back that you had any awareness that it was more than just a huge..*

KQ: No.i.It was a long time before one actually saw photographs of what was left of Hiroshima. erm, but then I had mixed feelings and to this day I don't have one and only one clear view. YOu can look at it one way and think well, terrible thing erm it is and humans shouldn't do this to other humans....but if you're fighting people like the Japanese and you've been face to face with them and known when you get shot down you're more than likely to be tortured and perhaps have your head chopped off, erm what on earth can you do to stop them fighting? (16.48) erm and I also believe that erm, if it hadn't been for the atom bombs erm... we'd...I believe, almost certainly...had a Third World War between the West and Russia.

VS: *So you think it...it proved a deterrent?*

KQ: I do..squte definitely so...possibly even to this day. I know we've had smaller wars but erm...you know if you go back before...it wouldn't have been a Cold War, it would've been a hot war. it would've been an atomic war I think.

VS: *Had, had, had we not seen the effects in Japan?*

KQ: Yes. But...and the other thing, I mean we'd had these enormous erm raids that we did...I remember some in Norway, where the Germans were getting pretty close to developing and atom bomb themselves. Fairly well known, I can't remember its actual name now but a plant in Norway where they were making heavy water which was contributing to the...manufacture of an atom bomb erm...so yeah.

VS: *So, and...*

KQ: I have some dear friends here in Wittersham... well actually they've retired and now live in a next door village but that's by the by...who were very strong supporters of CND movement, went on all the marches and so on and so forth but we just have to agree to differ

(18.23)

VS: *so that, that's very interesting. Did you erm, so you, you were friendly with them at the time?*

KQ: no, no. Only since I've been here.

VS: *Oh ok. And what er, what, what do they...how do you kind of...relate to each other...?*

KQ: Well they are a bit younger than me and they just look at it from an academic point of view. And if you look at it just like that and you've never actually fought directly with the Japanese in the conditions which prevailed in those days...you're totally unaware of this enormous feeling of relief...you know I hope we never have to...I hope nobody ever uses another one but erm..on THAT occasion and in THOSE circumstances I don't think there was

any real option. The, the other interesting thing that's affected me quite a lot and I'll have a job to try to remember his name, is it erm, Cheshire?

VS: Leonard Cheshire?

KQ: Leonard Cheshire. Who...He was, he was a very leading RAF bomber pilot. I think he started...oh I'm not sure about that...but he was in the Air Force before the war and he was in the early bombing raids where we were not very successful...er, went on to Lancasters...development of the tall boys and things like that. Anyway, he was attached to the US er Air Corps...and went as an observer on the Nagasaki bomb, After the war he became very well known for the Cheshire Homes and he was a...he was a very um, convinced Christian. Erm and he discusses it, and came to the same conclusion very similar to mine...erm...why I often quote him as, as a...sort of an ally...because not many people have the same view as me...er about the use of the two atomic bombs in that war.

VS: that it was entirely justifiable?

KQ: Yes. **(20.32)**

VS: I think, I don't think you're alone in, in that. erm but do you, well, interestingly, do you feel that your opinion is at odds with the...

KQ: The majority?

VS: Yes.

KQ: Yes I do. **(20.46)**

VS: of people of your generation or younger or...?

KQ: (Laughs) don't come across many people of my generation...er, no it's just a general feeling I have that erm, I'm a bit alone with that view.

VS: Erm, when you got back to Britain after the war, did you, erm, did you, did you feel that, if it was ever, if it ever came up, did you feel that already people thought it shouldn't have been used?

KQ: I don't think it was immediately after the war, it was after a period of time when publicity was eventually given to the pictures of Hiroshima and how it was totally wiped out. I mean I'd lived, because I was reserved occupation in the early part of the war I'd lived through erm the Blitz on London and erm, although my father's firm had evacuated, or Dad had been and our, we were not living in our home in London...we used to come back and check it and erm, some landmines had been dropped in the near vicinity and quite a lot of damage to the house but I walked round to where these landmines had dropped and they seemed terrible. and the amount of damage they did seemed enormous. But of course again, nothing compared with an atom bomb.

VS: Mmm. And...

KQ: But the other thing is I don't think it's generally known, not only do not many people know, although I hope with this recent book that's been published, er, more people may learn about the fact we were out there. I don't, none of us I think consider we were anything terribly special, not like the Battle of Britain or the Bomber Boys who were going out night after night after night with their terrible attrition rate and still had to go, erm but it would just be nice to know that people realised there was such a thing. We came back, eventually got back to the UK, nobody had ever heard of us. (22.45), erm and to this day very few people have heard about the British Pacific Fleet.

VS: *And when you got back, erm during the...so you're, you're back in Britain, did you feel about the atomic threat was... did you feel..I think from what you've said that the atomic threat was less because of Hiroshima..kind of during the 1950s, I'm thinking perhaps Korea or.... the Cold War?*

KQ: Well, yes. Erm, I think it was an effective deterrent. Having seen what it, what devastation atomic warfare could cause with just two bombs which were ever used in anger, er the deterrence for both the East and the West was pretty effective. It's a job to put one back into the mindset one had, now after all these years but erm, we did have a very serious threat from Russia for many years after the war erm, after all we kept a big army in Germany for many years didn't we? erm, and I think it would've become a hot war, not just a Cold War and may have escalated into even atomic warfare because people, I think even more recently out in Ukraine, erm Putin has half hinted to using atomic shells er so called tactical atomic weapons erm it's all, it it... that's another story, we've almost got a replay, I often think we've got a replay of 1938, out in Ukraine now, all this business of "well they're Russian speaking" and it reminds one of Hitler talking about the Sudetenland and so on, and so forth. erm, hopefully the threat of atomic bombs will stop it heating up any more than it already has.

VS: *I know, it's terrifying. erm., so you finally went back to Japan, 67 years later.*

KQ: Yes.

VS: *How did you, how did you feel?*

KQ: well, I'd had no great ambition to go back (25.30), over the years but erm, as one got older and older and was left on my own, my wife had died, I did hear about the erm, erm, big lottery scheme for veterans to go back to where they had been involved in battle and er, found that they would cover one, even to go as far as Japan. erm, I didn't however feel like going on my own but once erm this chap I met started researching a book and I mentioned to him, he said "that would be good, couldn't we go together?". So he in fact came with me erm as my minder and obviously it helped him to do some research and see the er, the actual scenes of some of those battles. erm... and erm I thought right at the beginning once I decided to go I, I wouldn't want to go just to the spot where I ditched; whilst there I ought to go to erm, to erm Yokohama to see the British War Cemetery there where my particular friend er, during those days had been shot down alongside me and he's, he's got a grave in the cemetery at Yokohama. And also to Hammy Grey who was awarded a posthumous VC, erm for sinking a Japanese destroyer in the very last days of the war and who I knew had had a memorial erected to him by the Japanese. Believed to be, as far as I know, the only memorial on Japanese mainland soil, erected by them to a former enemy. So we, we did in fact visit, first of all Tokyo, where I laid a wreath on my friend Wally Strudwick's grave erm and we went up to and erm, unfortunately we didn't have another wreath to lay on the old site of Hammy

Grey's memorial. It had been demolished by the, the er, quite a bad earthquake which set off the tsunami which caused the damage at erm, where was it...Yokoshima? er, but nevertheless we went to its old site and, and put some flowers there and er, said a little word or two...er to Hammy. Er and finally, right at the end went down to the spot called Owasi, where I ditched. And er, I, I char...in advance I'd chartered a fishing boat, fairly big chap, to explore all round, it's quite a big harbour with side, side branches to it...erm (28.29) and I explored all round the bits I remembered aaand. it was at a point where I call..I was up on the flying bridge and my, my friends in the party were down on the main deck and I called out "well as far as I can remember it was about here I ditched" and my stepson Richard, who is a pilot, was on the main deck with his head into the wheelhouse looking at the sonar. And he reckons within a few seconds of my saying, "it was about here" that he saw some sort of blip on the sea bed which might, perhaps...I don't know whether he, he saw it or saw what he was hoping to see..

VS: Yeah.

KQ:... but nevertheless he took a photograph of the screen with the co-ordinates and erm as a sequel to all that, he and some of his colleagues who are keen, er divers, are going out there this September to see if they can locate it and take some photographs of it. Mind you it's 40metres deep at that point.

VS: Erm and while you were there how was your er reception, from from, the Japanese people?

KQ: Oh it was fine. We didn't know quite what to expect but they were extremely helpful, very polite erm and there was one amusing incident. We had three nights in Owasi which is only a small fishing town really.. it's not a big city. There was only one hotel erm...which was adequate.. (laughs). But they didn't...actually we'd rather found this even in Tokyo, that you do erm, breakfast in the hotel but they don't seem to do dinner...we were usually out lunchtime anyway. But er in, in Owasi you had to go to these funny little sort of pub-cum-restaurants which don't really look like a restaurant. They're almost like going in the front room of a private house. Anyway the last one on our last evening there, was I think the best one we found. The, the chap behind the bar, who did the cooking or, or serving up drinks, he had one of these Japanese bands round his head and was much younger than some of the others... I thought hmm, you could be a kamikaze pilot! Anyway he had a little English and he could tell we were either English or American or something. And he'd said something to the effect, when we first got in there: "you, you are here on holiday?" or something like that and we said, "well, sort of". er, anyway, after we'd had a few drinks, and eaten, I needed to pop out to the loo and I said to Richard, my stepson, "if you're gonna get some more drinks, see how he reacts if you tell him the history of why we are REALLY here". And when I came out from, from the loo, the chap had disappeared. I said, "what, what's happened?". He said "oh, he got all excited, he's disappeared upstairs to fetch something". And it turned out he was quite a keen amateur historian; he brought down a scrapbook with the newspaper sheets...or cuttings.. or whatever, of OUR raid. And he was so excited that, you know, I was actually one of the people...it was the only raid they had in that place.

VS: How amazing!

KQ: And they didn't know, they'd shot two of us down! (laughs). Yeah.

VS: Oh I bet he enjoyed that night!

KQ: Yeah I bet he did. They were trying to persuade me to go back this September but I'm just not...If I go what am I going to do? I'll just be a goofer sitting on the deck while they're diving and this that and the other. And I don't think I can do it but erm, if I went, and I hope Richard will remember. Will is thinking of possibly joining them.. that they go back to that...particular er..

VS: *Yes, yes. So you, you didn't have, as I know many people did after the war, you know, didn't want a Japanese car or...*

KQ: No.

VS: *You had no issues.*

KQ: Well you know can you blame erm chaps who'd been Prisoners of...

VS: *No, no. but it was, I mean it was quite, erm, as I understand it, I mean my husband's grandmother never got in a Japanese car, ever...*

KQ: No, no.

VS: *...for that reason. But you didn't, you didn't have any thoughts..?*

KQ: No I wasn't terribly keen on Japanese...I mean, I don't know whether he mentioned it in his book or not.. There was one... I went back to Dehavilands after the war and we'd come on a bit... we'd built the comet and we were trying to sell them all round the world before we had this...disintegration problem with it...erm, that's being the first to build jets that can fly up at high altitude and suffer a lot from expansion and compression of the erm cabin...erm and we were trying to sell them to the Japs and I remember driving in one day and over the admin building where my office was, was this Japanese flag and I felt FURIOUS... I hadn't, I hadn't got over it then but I have now (33.29), yeah I'm fine now...

VS: *Just...so long ago?*

KQ: Yes, well, no I can remember some of the incidents that, you know I suffered. I'd sort of, one or two narrow escapes, but I don't have this feeling about the Japanese people as a people.... I did then... But how can you blame chaps who'd suffered in the Prisoner of War camps?

VS: *No. You can't at all.*

KQ: This book I was telling you about earlier, erm, "Flyboys". Because the, the main object of the book was to look into what happened to, I think it was 9 US Navy air crew who were captured on an island called...well an island near Iwo Jima...erm. It...he knew what he was going to publish would be so horrific it would make people anti-Japanese again so he'd he'd taken and this is my guess....he took the trouble not only to remind the American public of some of the pretty grim things Americans had done to other people in the past, including the er, Native Americans... erm, but also the Philipinos, which I'd never heard of...But in addition he took a lot of trouble to go into the history of Japan and how it slowly came out of this enclosed er attitude they have and how they developed the mindset that they did, erm

which they still held erm in the Second World War...Included in which...he goes into quite a lot of detail on what terrible treatment they gave their own erm, private soldiers...They treated them in more or less the same way that they in turn treated our chaps who, who were captured.

VS: *Mmmm*

KQ: er, but they, that's gone. They've changed their attitude now. Er, I hope.

VS: *Seem to have done.*

KQ: Yes.

VS: *Now just, going back briefly, to the, to the 1960s. CND. You didn't know anybody who was involved in it at the time?*

KQ: I came across some but I didn't....they were not personal friends.

VS: *No. What did, what did you think, when you did come across...?*

KQ: I thought they were just er, wrongminded. **(35.58)**. I thought "it's all very well for you, you weren't there, you were not actually fighting the Japs, you didn't... you probably don't understand...what it took to make them..pack it in.

VS: *SO you just thought that they were mistaken?*

KQ: Yes.

VS: *Yeah.*

KQ: I mean, I I I can follow their logic I just don't... I don't follow that line personally.

VS: *And do you think that was a generational thing, do you think the people who were protesting were..*

KQ: well I have some friends now, I didn't know them in those days...who still hold the same view. They just say "well it's quite wrong. You should never do that to anybody".... We should never drop ordinary bombs on people either really. Erm I mean I'm not a, I'm not a natural born killer...er, although I wanted to get into some action, I thought "don't really want to go out killing people", but I wanted to get in the action. I've always liked the sea and the air so I tried, I think Will mentions this in his book, I tried to erm, get into the Air Sea Rescue, which was a branch of the Air Force. And in fact I went to the RAF recruitment office and asked if I could er, volunteer to be an Air Sea Rescue crew. And the erm flight sergeant, or whoever he was in their office said "we want two things young man" he said "one, if you could, it wouldn't release you from being a reserved occupation, you can only get out of that by volunteering to fly and two if you wanna join the Air Force, the Air Force decides what job we'll give you. You can't volunteer from scratch to be crew on an Air Sea Rescue craft. But er, I thought it was just the job then, high speed boats, and I had only fired at an aeroplanes as it attacks us, in defence. But there we are.

VS: They weren't having any of it?

KQ: no.

VS: well I think that's everything that I need to er, need to know. So thank you very much.