

**Michael George Interview  
After Hiroshima Project**

Interviewee: Michael George (Born 01/06/1927)

Interviewer: Ruth Dewa

Ruth: Er, could I, could we start with your full name and your date of birth, please?

Michael: Michael George. Michael Clee George. First of th- first of the sixth, nineteen twenty seven.

Ruth: Lovely, thank you very much. And, to put a bit of context around your story, could you let me know what you were doing towards the end of the Second World War?

Michael: Um, well I was on, um, an RAFA Walls Fleet Auxiliary stores ship... ten thousand tonnes... and I dropped the bigger stores ship we followed the fleet around and stored them up and I was like a floating supermarket. As the ships wanted **(1:00)**, um, different items- items, um, supplies, they sent, um, an order through to us and we would assemble the order, put it on, on th- on the flat um, bottom boat, a barge, and then, take it to the ship that required it. Um... the, the- being a supply ship, we supplied cigarettes and all sorts of goods that the- that the ship actually wanted. Um, ours was um, well they could've been tinned-tinned fruit er, like I said, cigarettes, writing paper, anything that the- that the- the sailors wanted.

Michael's wife: That was forty six.

Michael: ...This was in nineteen forty six, being on the stores ship **(2:00)**.

Ruth: Lovl-

Michael: And er- How am I- How am I doing?

Ruth: Yes, that's lovely, thank you very much. Erm, could you let me know about what you were doing, um... in the kind of summer of forty five?

Michael: Summer of forty five; I was in, um, New York City on VJ Day. Erm... a-actually, on the, in the Brooklyn Navy yard, in New York City and VJ Day came along and they went mad, of course it was their war, being American. Um... we managed to find, I went- went ashore with friends and ev- there were stars and stripes everywhere and everybody was going mad and we happened to find a little **(3:00)** union flag in th- where the hundreds, well, thousands of people and we made it towards this little flag and it belonged to a British RAF airman, um, and he was on his own, so we said well come and join us with our shore party and um, well um, yeah, we had a bit of a party. But we managed to keep the flag, and we tied it to a broom strip-er stick and um, stuck it out of the window of our accommodation, of which we were on the third floor and the then, within ten minutes the, um, Naval police being American, came up and said you can't have the- this flag out of our window as you should have the er- the stars and stripes **(4:00)**. And they, they confiscated it. So, that was all that happened with er- with me on VJ day, in um, August nineteen forty six

Ruth: And-

Michael: er, forty five, beg your pardon. Nineteen forty five, VJ day.

Ruth: And erm, what was your business in New York at the time?

Michael: Sorry?

Ruth: Er, what were you doing in New York at the time?

Michael: Looking for a ship. We- we left um, Southampton on um, on the st- on erm, a liner, with um, lots of Canadian airmen being taken back to Canada and er, our orig- original idea was to bring er, erm, ships back to the UK but of course the war ca- the war finished and er they didn't know what to do with us **(5:00)**. So we er, we left New York or Brooklyn Navy Yard and went up to Montreal and there we were in army barracks for sixth months and then they said well, there's a ship in Vancouver. Um, jump on a- on a train and we were five nights and four days on a train from Montreal, all across Canada to um, Vancouver which is on the, as you know, the North West Coast. When we got into Vancouver they said oh "the ship's not ready yet, you'll have to go into the YMCA and wait for the ship." And we waited for three months on th- in the YMCA doing nothing. Waiting for the ship to arrive and we were on the docks in um **(6:00)**, near Westminster which is British Columbia just outside Vancouver and on the docks there, um, the- the goods for the ship were being delivered by lorries and our job was to unload them, check them off and put them in to- in to- in to- in to store, waiting for the ship to arrive. And the ship had eventually arrived in- at Christmas um, forty six, and um, in the, we went from, where are we? Hang on, I need to just think. We went from British Columbia down to um... Los Angeles, San Pedro and when we were there we walked in and hitchhiked into Hollywood, had a look around there, went back to the ship, and the- then we went down to Sydney, **(7:00)** Australia. And then, from there where- this is where we started following the fleet... And from, from Australia in Sydney, we went to um, Hong Kong. And then from Hong Kong to... er, Tokyo Yokohama and um from there we went into Kure, which is um, um quite a big harbour not far from, erm... Tokyo Yo- Yokohama. And in Kure Harbour, we were d- this was in Easter nineteen forty six and we were, we wanted to go ashore and stretch our legs and the ship's captain said well take the **(8:00)** ship- one of the ships motor lifeboats and go exploring round the island in the harbour, which we did and this is when we came across Hiroshima. And nobody told us anything about it- we in fact we knew nothing about it, we- we were completely in the dark and um, when we walked into Hiroshima it was just like cliffs of ruins- How am I doing, alright?

Ruth: Yes, lovely, very interesting, thank you very much.

Michael: Um, it's in- it's just like a London um, bomb site and it was still burning. And we thought it was left from the burning of the- of the bomb in forty five, but we were wrong we found out it was the chemi- c- cremations of the er, of the survivors. They were **(9:00)** they were still burning them but then they were walking around, the only building that was left was the- we found out after that it was the- the town hall. And it was um a domed-roof building and then we found out since then that they turned it into atomic bomb museum in um, in Hiroshima but nobody tells about radioactivity. Um, it was an- if it was known they kept it very, very quiet. And the only thing that upset us was the shadows. There were shadows, of a mother, pushing her baby along in a pram, and... it, along came the bomb, then gone the kingdom come **(10:00)** but the shadows were burnt into the ground, and that's- the shadows of buildings and and people and well everything. Everything was destroyed but the, the shadows were left. Burnt into the er, into the surface. But th- that was the only thing that really upset us. But the only thing that we kept as a souvenir which was silly to do, we found a bottle and it could have been a beer bottle, a milk bottle or a... a glass bottle, but instead of expanding, it imploded. And we took these bottles as souvenirs and took them back to our ship and I st- I stood mine in my wardrobe but I found out afterwards that the- the steward as you cleared **(11:00)** the um the cabin and um, he thought the bottle was rubbish and threw it over board. So we lost our- we lost our souvenir.

Ruth: Oh what a shame.

Michael: So that's the- that's the whole story of Hiroshima... As I say, we knew nothing about it at the time we were completely in the dark, in fact the, the er, the Americans or the er, the so called experts and they- if they knew about that radioactivity in those days they didn't um, they didn't tell us about it and nobody er, nobody er, warned us. But, one of your friends or somebody asked me d- did we chat to people? Well there weren't any people about-

Michael's wife: No, that was the BBC.

Michael: Oh that was the BBC that were asking me. And they er, **(12:00)** this chap he said well did we chat to, to the residents- well no because there weren't any. There was nobody to chat to. They said did we take any photographs? Well of course we didn't because in those days during the war, you couldn't buy films. I had a camera, but there were no- no film for it, you couldn't buy, y-you couldn't ob-obtain films anywhere because the RAF, um, confiscated them all following flying- taking photographs of them, of them, over in Germany. So we didn't we, n-no photographs and no chit chat.

Ruth: Okay, er just a er- w-when you said you were in the dark about Hiroshima um, wh-what was your understanding about what had actually happened and what the atomic bomb was?

Michael: Well we were told when we were there- I don't know, one of our colleagues or one of the **(13:00)** officers where they dropped a bomb and then they told us all about it... That's all we knew... Then um, when we got back to the ship we looked up our- our atlas at all and where we were in Kure harbour and how long it was to Hiroshima and that's how we found out about it.

Ruth: And w-were you surprised by the... the level of the devastation that you found?

Michael: Well there was nothing there- except for this one building with the dome roof- the dome roof. That was the only thing that was left as far as we were concerned- I mean I'm going back er, forty year- er seventy years and um, my memory's not so good as it used to be...

Ruth: N-not at all, thank you. Er, w-when you were in America, when you said that you were in th-in the Brooklyn dock yards and on VJ day... Er-

Michael: Yes

Ruth: How did, if at all, did the Americans opinion **(14:00)** of the Japanese differ to the British opinion of the Japanese?

Michael: Erm, they didn't really, they just um, it was just a huge party as far the VJ was concerned. And then we didn't- we were confined um, in our own little um, build- um... er... on the first floor and we were just chatting amongst ourselves. I mean the, the only Americans we saw were the- we saw them all obviously um, having um, street parties and going mad but um, there were no need to talk to 'em. 'Cause they got no time for us. They were- they were tiddled and um, too much um, interest to- to get the end of the war- They hadn't got any time for a British sailor **(15:00)**, or British um, Naval- Naval personnel. We weren't in um, Naval uni- we were in Navy uniform but not, a bell bottoms... We were in um, like a serge suit, waist shirt, black tie and cap.

Michael's wife: Petty officer.

Michael: But erm... A- a- a- a- er... (sigh)...

Michael's wife: Acting Petty officer.

Michael: A- acting Petty Officer,

Ruth: Mhmm.

Michael: We were. So we weren't in bell bottoms er, they didn't know w- what we er- or who we er were.

Ruth: Okay... And how long did you- was it just one day that you spent- spent in Hiroshima?

Michael: Yes... Yes just the one- w- well a half day, just um, zooming about. W- we- we were in this um, ships motor lifeboat and w- we tied up and went ashore and just went **(16:00)** walkies...

Ruth: And can you tell me a little bit more about the cremations of the survivors erm, just kind of how- how that played up...

Michael: Well, we didn't- we- it was burning and we thought it was the- the result, it was- it was only four months after they dropped the bomb and we thought it was still burning. But it wasn't. It was the, the um cremation of the p- of the survivors that er were either in s- such a bad way, they either died or they'd um, had r- really bad burns...

Ruth: And- and you say that there weren't any local residents around, they were- they were kind of keeping to themselves...

Michael: If there was, we didn't see any... I don't remember...

Michael's wife: Devastating...

Michael: It is devastation I- like I said you can see all the photographs- I don't know how old they are but um, you should've seen **(17:00)** photographs of th- th- the London blitz and um, just um, just a shambles of- of um... buildings that were there um, just bricks and- and mortar...

Ruth: So how-

Michael: That's all it-

Ruth: Sorry...

Michael: That's a- all all there was there. It was just a- a- I... a bomb site in other words and i- in in this instance it was an atomic bomb site not an ordinary bomb site.

Ruth: Um, were there visible differences or was it just i- in magnitude?

Michael: ... Just the burnt- burnt out shell that was a city....

Ruth: Thank you. And how long did it take you to get back to England after you were in Hiroshima?

Michael: Um, well we went back to Hong Kong and then followed the fleet around... **(18:00)** Well we were based mainly in Hong Kong...

Michael's wife: But how long before you got back?

Michael: Erm... About another twelve months after- after staying in Hong Kong and we were anchored there in the Huyen(?) Hong Kong Harbour, Kowloon Harbour and erm... It was about twelve months before we came back into- back to England. But I c- (coughs) Excuse me, I'm losing my voice (coughs). Um we c- I came back as a passenger on a- on a- er, naval ship, HMS Pheasant which was a- a- a destroyer.

Michael's wife: When?

Michael: ... It was um... I was eighteen **(19:00)** years old and I came back- when I was what? Twenty- twenty-one... Does that tell you anything?

Ruth: Yes it does, thank you very much. Erm, and when you got back to the UK, erm... How did the kind of British public's understanding of the atomic bomb how- was it different or similar to yours and do y- do your- do y- sorry?

Michael: They didn't mention it at all. We didn't think it was at all unusual in those days.

Michael's wife: It was just a big bomb.

Michael: It was just a- I- it just happened and that was it. We didn't um pursue it at all. In fact um, my- my ship mate that lives near- I live in Wimborne, in Dorset and my ship mate lives just outside Southampton... So we er, we correspond about once a month but don't er, we just don't talk about umm, well- Hiroshima **(20:00)** in particular, it's just g- general chit chat...

Ruth: Yeah. Okay. Erm, and er- w- did you think that the British people were s- sympathetic towards the Japanese or were they just g- glad that the war had- was ended?

Michael: Well... the... the war in Germany had finished, VE day had gone, and as far as the British were concerned the war was over and let's get back to normal... As far as we can, but without er- without rationing. You see the war finished in what was it? Forty five- er, nineteen forty five and we were still bread rations in ninety fifty... So that was five years. And then all the people don't realise this. They think the war was over and the- the Germans and the Japanese had gone their own se- sweet way and er **(21:00)** we- we were doing the same...

Ruth: Yeah, and, um... Were you aware of the nuclear disarmament movement that was forming in reaction to the atomic bombs?

Michael: No. No, we weren't.

Ruth: ... And s-

Michael: Until i- it happened, we knew- how obviously we knew why we- the Americans dropped the bomb to- to finish the war in Japan... And er, we knew this of course and we were very thankful that the war in general on the whole world was finished. But that's all we were concerned about.

Ruth: An- and when was it you started to learn about radiation an- and the negative effects that it has?

Michael: Erm, I didn't, until I erm, **(22:00)** had to go into hospital to have an x-ray and I said to the er, radio erm, operator there, oh will I glow in the dark after my x-ray? And they said why? I said well I was in

Hiroshima four months after they dropped the bomb and they said oh, no, th- that won't make any difference, you'll be alright.

Someone in the background: That was year-

Michael: And that was years and years ago... So, I mean it's um, it's gone and forgotten...

Ruth: Yeah- But I mean wh- t- to ask if you were glow in the dark, y- you m- you presumably had some sort of knowledge that radiation was possible?

Michael: It was the- It was a joke really just to say "will I glow in the dark? Will I be radioactive?" Because that was the only thing that um, w-we knew about 'em. Nobody knew about radioactivity or anything like that... **(23:00)**

Ruth: I see, so- so you understood that it was a- a term but not necessarily what it- what- what the effects were of it?

Michael: It didn't effect us whatsoever. I'm eighty eight now, and I'm still- I mean apart from just last year breaking my hip and I can't walk about so easily, apart from that I'm alright... and my- my colleague has said that er, he's the same. H- he's eighty eight er- I'm only three months older than him and er, he's perfectly okay and he w- w- he was with me in Hiroshima so we got nothing to worry about.

Ruth: Mmm. A- and so your friend that you were talking about that lives in Southampton was he, er- er- erm, with you during the war- with you in Hiroshima then?

Michael: Yes.

Ruth: Um-

Michael: He was on the same ship as me and we- we- what I told you, he **(24:00)** was with me at the same time.

Ruth: And did you have- do you think you had a shared experience? Erm... i.e. you kind of, you felt the same, you were- you were both er- disturbed by the shadows that you saw but everything else was kind of taken in your stride...

Michael: We were emotionally distressed, with what we found... W- w- and mainly the- th- the um, the shadows was the main thing.

Ruth: And h- have you ev-

Michael's wife: We didn't have any counselling in those days.

Michael: Yer. My wife just said we didn't have any counselling in those days.

Ruth: Yeah...

Michael: If they- if we had have done there would have been like a swarm of bees I would have thought...

Michael's wife: You just get over it.

Michael: Yes.

Ruth: Mmm. And was it- was it something that you discussed between yourselves afterwards...

Michael: N- no- no-

Ruth: To try and make sense of it...

Michael: **(25:00)** N- no particular thing we were j- we were just, do you remember when we walked through Hiroshima and that was all.

Ruth: Mmm. And have you- have you ever been back to japan since then?

Michael: No, no...

Ruth: Th-

Michael: I came- came out of the navy... Erm... It was just after the war and erm, arrived at Portsmouth. Erm, they sentenced a lot of the Royal Marine Barracks and then they got our demob suits in a cardboard box...

Michael's wife: And what year's that then?

Michael: Nineteen ninety four you said... And as far as we were concerned the whole lot was gone and forgotten. And we just got on with our- our general lives. I- I went back to the- I'd left when I was called- well not called up, I volunteered because I wasn't going to go down the **(26:00)** coalmines. They were sending us what they called, Bevin boys. Bevin was a member of parliament and he was c- making sure that um, the young boys uh- uh- eighteen and over, um, were not going into the services, the army, navy or air force, they were being shoved down the coal mines to er, dig them coal- And I wasn't going to do that and I volunteered for the navy.

Ruth: Mmm.

Michael: And that's- that's the whole story.