

# John Turner (newsreel cameraman) 1915 -

by [admin](#) — last modified Apr 18, 2008 03:54 PM

1930s - Gaumont British newsreel cameraman 1940s - War correspondent - Naval correspondent, HMS Valient, HMAS Australia. Sinking of HMS Barham (filmed by Turner). In India with Mountbatten around period of independence and Punjab riots. 1950s - 1951 Royal Tour of Canada. Royal rota cameraman, filming the Royal Family, and the Coronation. 1960s - Production manager Pathe, then documentary producer

## BECTU History Project - Interview No. 421

[Copyright [BECTU](#)]

Transcription Date: TBC

Interview Date: 1997-10-09

Interviewer: Alan Lawson

Interviewee: John Turner

JOHN TURNER, news cameraman

Tape 1, Side 1

**Alan Lawson:** First, John, when and where were you born?

**John Turner:** I was born in Hampstead actually, yes, I'm a Londoner I'm glad to say. My father was a son of a fairly well to do merchant family but he contracted TB early in his life and died at 33 when I was eight. Because of that, because of his illness, we moved down to the Isle of Wight where there was a TB hospital, but he died down there. And as a result of that something went wrong with his money and that sort of thing and we were not too well off. But he was a big Mason actually, and I went to the Masonic school in Bushey, which was a great asset to me. I was there until I was sixteen. They were very autocratic there as far as jobs went and the head master said, you know, "Oh, you'll presumably go into a bank or something like that." So, I hadn't a clue what to do but I had an uncle in the film business and he said he could get me a job. And so I told this head master that I was going into the film business and he was absolutely astounded. And at that time the film business didn't have a particularly good name! And anyway, that's what happened.

**Alan Lawson:** About what year are we there then?

**John Turner:** We're going to 1931.

**Alan Lawson:** Oh yes, the bad period too in films.

**John Turner:** Yes, economically bad so I was very glad to be able to get a job. I went to 76 Wardour Street, Ideal Films. I knew nothing about the film business except I used to look at all the trade papers. At that time they were very colourful, and that interested me in films. In Ideal films I was office boy to start with and graduated up a bit to farm out posters and stills to run cinemas and that sort of thing. Made lots of mistakes, obviously, sent the wrong posters and things like that, but anyway. There I was for quite a long while and I had some quite nice colleagues there who were a bit erratic in their behaviour, but they were very nice. We used to get people like old Prince Monolulu coming up there for the stills from 'The Sport of Kings' and all that sort of thing. Well, then it amalgamated with WNF, then there was another amalgamation with Gaumont. I survived all those, and finished up in Film House with Gaumont on the fifth floor, but publicity wasn't my forte at all actually. I used to have a lot of fun up there with Sheila Ostrer, the boss's daughter, and people like that. Castleton Knight was then an assistant, I think, to the managing director and he used to come up quite often and play around with his girlfriend up there.

**Alan Lawson:** But wasn't Castleton Knight in fact in charge of publicity at that time?

**John Turner:** Yeah, I think he probably was actually. But I mean, it wasn't my scene at all actually. I mean they had some marvellous people there with artists and people like that who used to come in and be broke in a day. They used to get quite big money for those days, they made all these big posters, you know, you used to see in those days, and people used to do all these designs and things. But as I say, not for me. Anyway, in 1936 I heard of a vacancy on the newsreel so I applied for it, actually, and I got it. I didn't know the first thing about camera work or anything or what was involved in it. Anyway, I descended from the fifth floor into the basement where the newsreel was accommodated...

**Alan Lawson:** ...that's Gaumont News?

**John Turner:** Gaumont News, yes. And there I was, the chief 'humper' in those days, humping gear for various cameramen. The first job I went out was with Jimmy Humphries who was a very pleasant man but we went to the zoo to film an okapi which had just come over here, it was some weird animal, a bit like a zebra. And I didn't know until some years afterwards he was there to try me out to see whether I could drink or not! He was quite a drinker himself. After the job we went to a nearby pub. Anyway I managed to satisfy him and I was one of the boys after that! That really - you know, during that period there was the abdication and the coronation of King George VI and during that period I was just an assistant, I went with a cameraman, George Golding who was an expert on long focus lenses. Gaumont had just acquired a 40 inch lens at that time and it was really something, and I had to follow focus on this when we were doing anything, quite a responsible job.

**Alan Lawson:** You hung the camera on the end of the lens didn't you?

**John Turner:** Yes, the camera was mounted on the lens, yes.

**Alan Lawson:** What camera were you using then on that type of thing?

**John Turner:** Goodness knows actually. I've forgotten quite honestly, it was a sound camera anyway but ...

**Alan Lawson:** I know...

**John Turner:** I hardly ever used a sound camera.

**Alan Lawson:** No

**John Turner:** I mean, I knew the mechanics of it of course, but - I've forgotten what it was actually.

**Alan Lawson:** It wouldn't have been a De Waugh was it?

**John Turner:** No, it wasn't a Waugh, it was a well-known camera.

**Alan Lawson:** Well - the Bell? No, it wouldn't have been a Bell, No - Mitchell?

**John Turner:** I can't remember what we used actually, terrible isn't it? Anyway, one of the big jobs we had was at Lincoln when they used to run the Lincoln race at Lincoln, and we had a rostrum down halfway round the course. And this particular Lincoln, halfway round one of the horses tripped and all fell down. A hell of a lot fell over right in front of our camera with the 40-inch lens. I was following focus from the start because we were going to do the whole race, and that was a terrible moment in my life wondering whether the thing would be in focus or not because it was a very quick change, you know, if you know how fast horses go. Anyway, so we wondered whether we'd got a scoop or not. In those days too we used to follow the Lincoln with the National, and used to go from Lincoln across to...

**Alan Lawson:** ...Aintree

**John Turner:** ...Aintree in a race train, they used to run a race train then, the local railway. Had a fabulous journey actually, with everybody on board, all the tipsters, the bookies, jockeys, everybody was on board that train. Everybody, when the race meeting finished, made a scramble for that. We had to pack up all our gear, but we used to be able to bribe the train people to keep us a table. People used to come along and hide under the table when the ticket people came along, some of these tipsters and people. And it wasn't until we got to Liverpool that we found that our stuff was all right at Lincoln. So that was quite a big event in my life at that time.

**Alan Lawson:** Was this the time that - had they the exclusive rights thing still going on?

**John Turner:** Yes, all during that period, almost up to the war actually. You used to go to cricket matches, and you'd hear all the stories of balloons and things. I mean it's well documented. My first job on its own was I was sent up to Appleby in Westmoreland to do the discovery of - Bauxite was discovered in the hills up there. When I got there nobody knew a thing about it. I didn't, I was on my own and had no idea what to do. Anyway, I was staying in a pub, and the pub owner knew of this thing and told me where I might be able to find it,

somewhere up in the hills. But when I got there, I mean I got a taxi driver and got somewhere near, and then I had to hump all miles up a hill, and found nothing actually, except somebody who knew something about it but nothing had happened at that time. So I didn't know what to do, I thought well I can't go back without a story, so I made a pretty-pretty story of the scenery and all that sort of thing which went down very well because, you know, it was one of those stories you could keep, and use when you hadn't got much. So that was my first effort which wasn't a very good one really, but it taught me quite a few things about being, you know,

**Alan Lawson:** ...independent

**John Turner:** ...independent, yes. What happened after that? Well besides the build up towards the war, we used to do all these sorts of things like shelters being built up, sandbags and all that kind of thing, all pre-war. And then I went down to Heston when Chamberlain came back with his piece of paper. That was a real scramble. I was then supporting the sound camera and in the thick of it. But that was also a good lesson to me, how to cope with crowds. I had a small pair of steps with me fortunately, which I managed to get over the big people. I learnt the importance of elevation on these jobs. And we used to find that - Went to Downing Street quite often actually, and I used to take a pair of steps with me and let all the press photographers and everybody else - because at that time it was a free for all, I mean you could get - you didn't back - Downing Street wasn't blocked off or anything like that and usually dozens and dozens of people there, cameras of all sorts. With my pair of steps I was able to get above everything. So again, one learnt independence and initiative if you like!

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, "Let them get on with it"!

**John Turner:** Let them get on with it, I'm all right. Because I mean, I did a few jobs before I'd learned that, in the thick of it. Trying to hold our cine camera with press photographers pushing all over the place was no joke. So, we come really to the war, I think.

**Alan Lawson:** At the beginning of the war nobody knew exactly what to do and it was before people were appointed to the navy. I don't know how early cameramen were appointed to the army, fairly early I think.

**John Turner:** I'm not sure. Not at first I don't think.

**Alan Lawson:** Anyway, I was sent to Chatham and Southend and Scarborough, to try and get enemy planes being brought down. It was a pretty hopeless job actually; I used to sit up overlooking Chatham harbour on a hill and be reported regularly by residents as a spy![laughs] You know, people used to come up and wonder what I was doing up there. Same with Southend and Scarborough. But I mean you never saw a thing. I mean or if there was somebody there it was so high you couldn't do anything about it. A reconnaissance plane might be over or something like that. Anyway, early 1940 they decided to appoint cameramen into the navy and three of us were appointed: Cave Chinn, Oswald of Universal, and myself, and we were sent up to Scapa. The navy at that time had no idea about publicity; we weren't allowed to wear cap badges or brass buttons, and we looked like three chauffeurs actually! We arrived at Dunluce castle at the depot ship up there and we were told then that there were three ships; one was The

Repulse, one was The Valiant, and one was The Destroyer. So, we said that we would draw lots who goes where. Cave Chinn drew The Destroyer which he was very pleased with, because he thought it would go out sea more. Oswald drew The Repulse and I drew the Valiant. Which I was very pleased about in later years.

**John Turner:** Yes, quite!

**Alan Lawson:** So we were sent across to these various ships and when I arrived at The Valiant the officer of the day there obviously hadn't read the signal that was coming and thought I was a Wesleyan priest! Peculiar thing - obviously he didn't see all the gear and that sort of thing. So I was introduced to the two padres in the wardroom where we got half canned actually! That was the start of my naval career! Anyway, he soon found out what was what, and I had quite a few gins with these people as I said, and I asked to go and see the captain who was a marvellous chap, Rawlings his name was, and he gave me quite a few more gins. Anyway, I got on very well on the ship indeed, they were a marvellous bunch of people, and soon after joining the ship we went out to sea with the Ark Royal and various other ships to have a go at Norway. On the way - the Germans at that time were saying that they had sunk the Ark Royal - and during our journey over we got an air raid, and a hell of a lot of bombs fell all round the Ark Royal and made marvellous pictures, because at that time nobody had seen that sort of thing, and I was able to get some really good pictures of that actually. So, I had with me - on the ship was a naval Lieutenant Commander who was in charge of the photography and he had a rating or Petty Officer who had a camera similar to mine, but he didn't know how to use it really and he was using long focus lenses, 12 inch lenses, in his hand. So I said, "For goodness sake don't do that." But he was following these aircraft like this, you know. So I thought, "God that could never be used." Anyway, he wouldn't take any notice of me and I left, and the commander said, "Oh, we know what to do", you know, so I said, "Well, get on with it", you know. I then built up quite a story, all the guns and everything else, you know, to make a good story of this first sea battle really, of a sort. We went across towards Trondheim; we were firing fifteen-inch guns so I didn't see anything actually, but it was useful for stuff to get the guns firing, to go in with this other story. And when I got back we sent all this back to London, and Castleton Knight was then in charge of the newsreel and he sent back a full copy of this edited version with all the bombs falling and everything else, and the guns firing to the ship. And on the same day unfortunately, the other stuff that this other chap had taken arrived back in the ship as well, from Portsmouth where they had their stuff done, and so the commander said, "Oh, well we'll have a film showing in Scapa" - show mine and show his. It was terribly embarrassing actually because of all this stuff. The Lieutenant Commander never lived that down and he didn't like me from then onwards. But, that really was a very good start to a naval career, we did various other jobs but never saw anything quite like that again up there. Oswald in The Repulse started up a development and printing corporation - they hardly ever went to sea - doing very well as far as I understood, and Cave Chinn found he couldn't operate very often on The Destroyer...

**John Turner:** ...because of the roll?

**Alan Lawson:** You get the roll and you get the sea coming over, particularly in the North Sea. So he left and went back, I don't know where he went to actually after that. Anyway, I stayed up there for quite a few months and then I began to get a bit fed up because I wasn't getting very

much so I asked, through the captain, I asked the admiral up there, if I could be moved into a cruiser or something like that. So, after some while I was told yes I could but it was in Liverpool. I was to join in HMAS Australia. I was to go down there at once, very, very quickly, across to the mainland by train to Liverpool and join the ship. So I got all my gear together, got on a train, got as far as Bootle - a terrible journey. There was a terrific air raid going on in Liverpool when I arrived there, fire bombs and everything else all around the dock. I was stuck in Bootle and the train wouldn't go any further, I got out on the platform in the dark. I didn't know what to do actually; I thought where am I supposed to go from here? Anyway, I managed to find a telephone and I had a signal from the Commander-in-Chief fortunately saying [indecipherable] and by some fluke or other, I can't remember how I managed it, I got through to the naval headquarters in Liverpool and told them that I was stranded in Bootle and could they do something about it? I read them the signal, which seemed to do the work. Anyway, some hours later a Naval truck arrived at Bootle station and took me down to ... he said there was a massive air raid going on in Liverpool and we arrived there and he got me to the docks and said, "We'll have to dump you here, I've got to go back" and he dumped me and the ship that I was supposed to join, HMS Australia, was in dry dock. So I thought, "This is marvellous! I've been rushed down here and here was the ship in dry dock!" Anyway, I managed to get aboard and they were fighting fire bombs and things on board. Anyway, I managed to get on board and tell them the story and show them the signal, and they were a very nice bunch of chaps again, and they said, "Oh well, you'd better come aboard, we're coming out of dock tomorrow actually and coming up to Greenock." So I thought, "I don't know why the hell I've been sent here." Anyway, that's what happened and I had a very uncomfortable night on board until they left the dock and we went up to Greenock. I was there for quite some while, the ship having just come out of dock had to go through some sea trials.

**John Turner:** Yes, Ailsa Craig [?]

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, anyway, there was nothing I could except wait there and see what else I could do. There was a chap from the Admiralty there who was going out to Alexandria to take over the naval dockyard there and he was a civilian. Very nice chap indeed, I got great friends with him. He told me that the ship was going to go to Alexandria; I mean they hadn't told me on the ship, but he told me. So I thought well this is worth waiting then in that case. It was going to go round the Cape because you couldn't go through the Med at that time and then up the east coast of Africa to Suez. Where he was going to get off and go on up to Alexandria, so he said it would be a good trip. We were taking a convoy round as well. Anyway, we started off and I filmed a few shots of convoys, things like that, which were then becoming a bit commonplace as far as film went. [laughs] We got down as far as Freetown and I was then told, "Transfer to The Barham," which was in Freetown, because it was going to Dakar and de Gaulle will be on The Barham and they're going to try to get the French ships out of Dakar. So I was on The Barham there and I filmed de Gaulle, and that made quite a good story. I got to Dakar and that was a fiasco, de Gaulle was pumping out messages there and they were firing back shells and things at us. The Resolution was in the harbour and got torpedoed, which was how I happened to know later on what a torpedo sounded like. Anyway, it made quite a good story in a way with de Gaulle there. Then we went back to Freetown, The Australia had come along, but I'd gone to The Barham because of de Gaulle, and I rejoined The Australia in Freetown and so went on round the Cape to Durban. And then the ship was told there was a raider in the Indian Ocean and we'd have

to go out and find it and try to chase it and look for it. So we went all around the Indian Ocean, never saw a sausage. We finished up in Colombo, in Ceylon as it was then, and so the story went on. The raider was still around, we left Colombo, then I was told that we were going to Fremantle in Perth. We went to Fremantle in Perth, then I was told that we were going round to Sydney and that the ship was to have an overhaul there for a month. So I couldn't at this time tell the office where I was, I wasn't allowed to. This was quite a saga. So I spent a month in Sydney having a very good time, because the war hadn't touched Sydney. Then we went over eventually to Wellington to pick up all the big ships like the New Amsterdam, all the big foreign liners like the Queen Mary, to take them as troop ships back to England. Then I was told that The Australia was still with the home fleet officially, and was going to be moved over to the Australian fleet, and I was no longer with the home fleet. So I said, "Well I must send a message to the Admiralty somehow. What am I supposed to do? You now, do I come home or what?" Anyway, I got no messages, and we got to Colombo again and I said to the captain, "Well I think I'd better get off here and see if I can sort it out from ashore." So eventually I got a message to come home via Suez and I was then put aboard The Aquitania, which was a troop ship with all Australians in, and it was going to Suez. Then I had to de-ship there and get another ship back to England from there. I got to Suez - I learnt the Australian two-up game or whatever it was on the way! I was transferred to a ship, The Empress of Japan. There was the drunken skipper on board there who wouldn't allow any water on board and the ship wasn't allowed to sail. Then I was told to get off and stay in Suez while things were sorted out. And eventually I was nearly a month in Suez not knowing what to do, until I got a message from the Admiralty to go to Alexandria, where I was being accredited to the Mediterranean fleet. [laughs] That's how I got to the Med, and it took me about three more months to get there! Then I mean, it became a series of Malta convoys and all that kind of thing. I worked from shore but they had rather a dim naval liaison officer there, he used to ... When any of the ships were going to sea he used to let us, whoever we were in there, to join a ship. I used to go mostly in the Euryalus, which was a cruiser, and that was a fantastic ship, we did a lot of air raids and things like that on the mortar convoys and I was able to get quite a lot of good material, the battles of Sirte and all that sort of thing where we met the Italian fleet. It was quite an exciting time. Until it came to the terrible journey in November when Barham was sunk. I mean that story is well known, there is no need for me to say that really. I covered that. I got on The Valiant and I sent them back because I happened to know the commander and I was just fishing around for something to do. Because the naval commander wasn't very much alive to what the ships were doing at that time, he didn't seem to be anyway, so one got that fantastic picture.

**Alan Lawson:** How often were you able to get your stuff back?

**John Turner:** It all went to Cairo for processing.

**Alan Lawson:** I see.

**John Turner:** They sent it back to London. I don't know how often it went back actually. Anyway, I stayed in Alexandria for quite a while after that on various sorties and things. I got over to Malta eventually when that was released. I went up to Sicily for the landings there in landing crafts. I went on to Salerno, then I got a recall so I flew back via Lisbon to England and came back for D-Day.

**Alan Lawson:** You say the stuff was processed in Cairo, did you get reasonable reports on your material?

**John Turner:** No I didn't.

**Alan Lawson:** Really? God.

**John Turner:** No I only assumed if I didn't get a report it was all right. I didn't know about The Barham for ages afterwards. Of course they suppressed it obviously.

**Alan Lawson:** Sure. I'm just wondering if you get any kind of a neg report or anything?

**John Turner:** No.

**Alan Lawson:** Nothing? Heavens above!

**John Turner:** No, I never heard a sausage. I think the army people did.

**Alan Lawson:** Oh yes, we used to report back.

**John Turner:** But of course we were cut off really. I did do a trip up the desert during a slackish period where there was an AP photographer, Weston Haynes a fantastic chap. We went up to Benghazi, following the army up there. I didn't know much about...I was trying to do sort of naval liaison stuff. Mad drivers used to drive off the road where there were mines and all that. Horrible journey. When we got to Benghazi this photographer had malaria and we had stay, and we found a room to stay, it was all bashed to pieces anyway, the place. We found a room that was absolutely covered in mosquitoes and it brought on his malaria. I got very worried about him, he was very sick. I managed to find an army doctor and he said, "Oh well, we'd better get him back to Cairo by hospital plane", or some plane they had there. So on the way back, because he went up in the air he recovered. He did a terrible thing when he got to Cairo on this plane, he got off the plane and walked away, didn't know what had happened to him. Hell of a row about it of course! So I then had all his gear and I had to find my way back to Cairo and to Alex. With all this gear I managed to hitch a ride with some army people who were going back picking up spies in various coastal places all along the coast, which was very interesting. It didn't make anything in pictures but it was very interesting journey; eating practically raw chickens and horrible things like that! Anyway, that was my experience of the army then, so I was very glad to get back to the navy. That was before I went Malta. Anyway I got back to England for D-Day. In between, one did quite a lot of stuff in London when air raids were going on. Things like when Selfridges was bombed, well, next-door to Selfridges was bombed and things like that. All sorts of that kind of story, which was rather novel after the navy. In fact I preferred the navy! Finally I was allocated to SHAEF and to go down to Portsmouth and join a destroyer there for D-Day called Voyager, I got on board and I was briefed where we were going, and then for some reason the ship let one off the ship to have a run around in Portsmouth which was a terrible thing to do because I knew all the secrets! Somebody saw me walking around there and asked me what I was doing, a naval policeman, so I said I'd just come off the ship and he said, "Well, you'd better get back there quickly otherwise you'll be arrested." Fortunately nobody found out. We went over on D-Day

and I saw nothing at all, not a thing. I heard a few bangs in the distance, we were off the coast in Normandy but we saw nothing at all, not a thing, not a ship.[laughs] I got back and absolutely nothing. That was my D-Day. We came back to Portsmouth and I de-shipped there, it was a waste of time being on the ship. I came back to London and did more air raid and things. Then I was told there was a special assignment. I went to Dover where Anthony Kimmins - I don't know if you know him?

**Alan Lawson:** Oh yes.

**John Turner:** He said, "We've got a special job for you." He wouldn't tell me what it was. He said we were going to - I think it was Antwerp we went to. We went to Belgium anyway, and there I was, in the middle of the night taken to a landing craft with Royal Marine commandoes on board. I thought, "I don't like the look of this!" I found out we were going to Walcheren. That was quite a do actually with these Royal Marines, we were in these landing craft and it was a terrible battle, there were ships being blown out of the water all around the place. The landing craft got hit, one of the engines. But we managed to get ashore, or beach the thing, but we couldn't get off again. I got quite a bit of stuff there. Fortunately a sort of a bulldozer kind of a thing on the beach saw that we were in trouble and gave us a push off. Otherwise I think I would have been a goner actually. The beach was being shelled; fired at by everybody. Hell of a lot of losses there. But I think we eventually took it. It was really quite a dramatic episode so I was very glad to get back in a ship; we had to lie down most of the time going in because of all these things flying overhead. Anyway, that was that and ...what happened then? Then I was in London for a while and then they decided to send me out to South East Asia and the only way of getting out there was by ship, you couldn't fly out then. So I went on a Dutch ship through the Med, which was free then, down through Suez along past India out to Ceylon and up to Candy to join Mountbatten's outfit up there. Then I was seconded to various ships but didn't see very much, so I asked Mountbatten through his staff there if I could have a go in Burma, while I was out there. I said there's not much doing here, Rangoon was still occupied, the navy was going to have a go at it, so I thought well if I go with the army I might get there first.[laughs] So they agreed to let me go and do that so I was flown up to Calcutta and I went across on a Dakota to Meiktila in Burma, but with a mad Canadian pilot who overloaded the plane to hell and we couldn't get down and had to crash-land the plane there. All I remember about that was that an army colonel had his own lavatory seat fitting and he ended up with it around his neck. That was how I started down there. Now Tozer,

**Alan Lawson:** Alec Tozer?

JT: Alec Tozer was with the army there ... I met him after a while and he drank all my water for me. I was absolutely green about the army really! I had a very unpleasant journey all the way down through all the jungles and things, thinking I was going to be stabbed in the back at night and that sort of thing, one's imagination ran riot with one. Anyway, I didn't get very much in the way, because Tozer would have gotten more or less whatever was going there. I got to Rangoon to find the navy had got there first; I was just wasting my time! Anyway, it was a good experience. The war was coming to an end then with the Japs I think...I'm not sure whether the atom bomb had been dropped then or not...

**Alan Lawson:** ...oh, it must have been

JT: ...it must have been, yes. Anyway, I went to Singapore and Mountbatten was there on The Sussex to take the Japs' surrender there, and their swords and things. So, as I was going up onto The Sussex the gangway came off The Sussex and I fell in the sea, quite an amazing and dramatic thing, - I was obviously meant to stay alive! Fortunately I had just handed my camera to the chap on the deck before the gangway slipped off. It tipped over and threw me in between the ship and the dockyard. I was very lucky actually.

**Alan Lawson:** Bloody dangerous too!

**John Turner:** I managed to get aboard and dried out and I got that ceremony on board with Mountbatten and that more or less finished my war experiences. So we came back then to resume operations in England.

**Alan Lawson:** Civilian life.

**John Turner:** Civilian life. So what did one do then?

**Alan Lawson:** During this period, I can't remember the exact year, I went over to Ireland - the first time I'd ever flown in a small plane - from Croydon airport, to do a chap who'd flown across the Atlantic in an home made machine, Corrigan. Don't know whether you'd remember it.

**John Turner:** Oh yes.

**Alan Lawson:** He landed in Ireland and went up to Dublin with this plane and I went across in this little hired plane of ours, open cockpits and all that sort of thing, you know. It was quite an exciting journey for me. Did my stuff there. Got embroiled with a local man over there with Gaumont, called Shakespeare, who was a very heavy drinker of Guinness, and got me rolled! I got quite steamed up with Guinness, so the next morning I thought I'd better get back. I'd forgotten to ring to the office, which was a duty actually, and with a terrible hangover I said to the pilot, "I'd better get this film back to London actually. We'd better go." We took off, he wasn't feeling too well either actually, and when we got over Croydon there was thick fog and we had to circle and circle. I was feeling awful. When I got down to Croydon I rang the office and they said, "Where are you?" So I said, "Well, I'm at Croydon" and they said, "You're supposed to be in Dublin. You didn't ring us last night and we want you to do some more stuff there!" I nearly got the sack for that.

**John Turner:** Were you still with Gaumont?

**Alan Lawson:** Still with Gaumont, yes. Yes, I was Gaumont for quite a long time after that. So that was one of my stories during the next period. I was doing them all the usual kind of thing like cricket matches and that kind of thing. As I said, I am a bit of a loner generally and I was usually doing stuff on my own, or something of that kind. Then came 1947 where India came up, and there was quite a big to-do before that as to how to cover that. Newsrooms weren't really keen to cover it from England at first, but Castleton Knight insisted that it should be covered by

on rota business. Anyway, everybody agreed in the end, and I was allocated to do it. So I went over there on August 10th for the transfer of power, which was on August 15th. I was accredited to Mountbatten, his staff and to him. I thought, "My God, I've got a story here! The transfer of power which we ought to have the whole staff to do." It was a major story, on my own! It worked out well and I managed to get some quite good stuff actually. I had a Paramount camera man, Prakash, who became my assistant and he helped me quite a lot in locations and things and getting to know Delhi, I mean I had to do all this in five days. That was a great help. But anyway, between us we got a good story. Then of course, following that, the massive horrors started in Punjab, all these terrible massacres and things.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2] [Tape 2, Side 2]

**John Turner:** I was briefed by Alan Campbell-Johnson, who was Mountbatten's press secretary, as to where things might be going on. Anyway I went up to the Punjab and I saw some terrible...  
[Pause - break in recording]

**Alan Lawson:** You were saying about going up to the Punjab.

**John Turner:** Yes, all the terrible massacres and things were going on and people, Sikhs, getting on trains and slaughtering everybody on, all the Hindus or Muslims, whichever side they happened to be on. This went on, I got quite a lot of material there I don't even know what happened to it, I never saw any of it. Whether it was suppressed or not I don't know.

**Alan Lawson:** I think it probably was suppressed.

**John Turner:** I think it probably was, but anyway. I went up to Lahore by plane because I was told there was going to be a lot of stuff going on in Pakistan, as it was then, [sic] and if I could get to Lahore I would probably be worth my while going up there. I got there and I found I hadn't got any transport at all. I thought, "Well, how the hell am I going to get around now?" Anyway, it's one of those fluky things; I was staying in a hotel there, rather run down at the time, and there were two Hindu people talking rather loudly, and they wanted to get back to India. They were scared stiff. They had an old Plymouth motor car and didn't dare drive down because people were being waylaid on the way and slaughtered. They didn't know what the hell to do. I overheard this, them talking about it. So I said to them, "If you let me have your Plymouth, I'll get you a flight back to Delhi." I didn't know how I was going to do it; I thought I'll manage to persuade somebody to do it. They agreed, actually. I said, "When I've finished with it I'll be able to drive back to Delhi and you can have your car back if you give me your address and where your going to be." Anyway, the long and the short of it was that that happened. They managed to get a flight back and I had this Plymouth, but then I had no petrol. I got hold of some army people who were very good and they let me have some petrol. They said, "Well there's a big do we think is going to happen, it might be a massacre, it might be anything. Somewhere up in Pakistan, about 200 miles away from Lahore. We'll give you enough petrol to get there and back." So I started off, and it was quite wet actually, and this old Plymouth wasn't a terribly good car. About 50 miles on, or something like that, the roads were pretty tricky. I suddenly went down to the hubs and I thought, "I've had it, I'll never get out now." There was nothing I could do; I couldn't drive the car any more because it was just stuck. And then by another of these

miracles that seem to happen to me, a lot of people suddenly appeared. I thought, "Oh God, I'm going to be done in", you know, although they weren't killing British people or anything like that, but it didn't look very hopeful. All these people started to advance to me, they were friendly, they lifted the car out of the ... thing... and put me on the road again, and the car started again. It was absolutely fantastic. On they way up then I passed a column of people coming down the road. Just before that I'd seen a people on the hill top looking. I didn't like the look of that at all, I thought, "They're waiting for something." I think they were waiting for this column of refugees really who were trying to get back to India. Anyway there was nothing I could do about it, I couldn't make myself understood. So I drove on and I got up to ... I forget the name of the place ... anyway, there was nothing going on there at all, there wasn't anything happening. So all I could do was come back again. On the way back I saw all this lot slaughtered on the way, slaughtered where I thought they'd been. I couldn't warn them, but even if I had have done they would still have been caught. So, that went on for quite a while. I used to go round to various places, Bombay, Jaipur, and all that sort of thing, with Mountabatten, saying goodbye to our Maharajas and the army units. All over the place in India, which was fascinating actually. We used to have these great big processions in Jaipur with elephants and things. They put on a big show for Mountbatten, although it was a sort of goodbye show. He was very helpful, he used to ring me up sometimes and say, "There's something going on", you know, personally. He was up in Assam on day and he said, "I'm sending a car". I was up in Calcutta then. He said, "I'm sending a car down for you and come up here there's a good colourful...not procession but ...show happening up here." It was worth filming he thought. He was very conscious of good films.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, yes,

**John Turner:** They came, and I'd had rather a night out in Calcutta when he rang me up, he rang me up at about twelve o'clock at night actually. How he found out where I was I don't know. I had this terrible journey, with windy roads all the way up, feeling like death. It was a good story admittedly. One went on in India like that until it came to January of 1948 when I filmed Gandhi breaking a fast, which was his last one I think, on January 12th, eating a banana. And then, as I think I said the other day, I ran out of film. I had all this film waiting in Karachi, ten thousand feet there which I couldn't get out, because they wouldn't release it unless I went out there personally. And they wanted a bribe, you know, a baksheesh. That was the only way you could get it out. There was an MGM cameraman, Lennox, in Karachi, but he couldn't get it out, I had to go there personally. So, I was preparing to go to Ceylon as it was then, it was going to become independent on February 4th. I thought, "Well, I'll go to Karachi on the way down, pick up the film, and go down then." Up to that point, until I ran out of film, I used to go to Gandhi's prayer meetings with a BBC man and an AP photographer. We used to, the three of us, go there every evening. Because there were sort of feelings that something was going to happen, you know, there was this sort of thing in the air about it. Anyway, once I'd run out of film, there wasn't much point going there any more. The AP photographer got a bit fed up and he went to film a Maharaja up in Burundi, I think it was, somewhere around there. Anyway, he just left the BBC man and when Gandhi was assassinated on 30th January... As I said, I was in a movie when that happened, in Delhi. They suddenly stopped the film and announced that this terrible thing had happened and I thought, "My God, I've got no film. What am I going to do?" Then they announced that the funeral was going to be the next day. I mean, sometimes, you know, these

things last for a week or so. I thought, "Oh my God, I'm really in a hole." Anyway, I managed to find Prakash again and with his help I went all round Delhi and I got all sorts of pieces of film, from 50 feet to 150 feet. I didn't know what the film was like. I managed to get roughly about 2000 feet in small pieces. I had six, no four magazines for the Newman so I had this loaded up with the longest pieces I could and I had to keep on changing these in the heat, in the changing bag.

**Alan Lawson:** Awful, I know it.

**John Turner:** Yes, and that was a terrible time from the point of view of a cameraman. Fortunately, the funeral procession lasted five hours, or four and a half hours, from Birla House to the burning ghat so it gave me time to do stuff on the way, and change film and all that sort of thing; to do some stuff at Birla House and then do a bit on the way, and then get on a bit and do a bit more, and then leave it, and then go down to the burning ghat. There I got, as I told you earlier on, the value of elevation. I got down there and all these hundreds of thousands of people all down there; all the VIPs: Mountbatten, Pandit Nehru, and all the rest of them sitting round near to the funeral pyre and no elevation! I thought, "What am I going to do?" I knew what would happen; as soon as Gandhi arrived it would be chaos. Then I spotted a photographer whom I knew sitting on top of a pole about eight feet high. He had this pole stuck in the ground and a platform on the top that was about the size of a table top. He was setting up there so I said, pleading with him, I said, "Any chance of coming up there with you?". He was a marvellous bloke actually, because it was a very unsteady platform. Anyway, he said yes, and I managed to scramble up there with the help of people.

We sat on this rickety old thing. I had a couple of magazines and my camera. I had to leave the rest down below, praying that it would be all right. There we sat, and when the funeral ...when Gandhi ... arrived, it did as I said, everything went pandemonium. Mountbatten disappeared in the crowds, so did Pandit Nehru, and everything went completely berserk. Mounted police kept all round us, knocking the post and I thought, "We're going to fall off any minute." Anyway, it worked out all right in the end. They put him on the pyre, lit it, and one was able to get the pictures one got, thanks to that photographer. I never saw him again actually. I didn't know where he worked, but after he left - he left soon after to get rid of his pictures as quickly as he could - and I never saw him again. Strange. Well after that I went to Karachi, picked up my film and went down to Ceylon for their independence celebrations. I did that on my own again because there weren't any other cameramen there. Then I went back to England by sea.

**Alan Lawson:** Lovely trip.

**John Turner:** Lovely trip. What happened then? 1947... 48 that was...yes I came ... let me see if I've got a note here. Switch him off for a minute.

[Pause - break in recording]

**Alan Lawson:** I did various independences, I can't remember the dates now - Tanganyika, or Tanzania as it was, Kenya. I was sent out to do each of those.

**John Turner:** Rota?

**Alan Lawson:** No it wasn't rota actually, it was for Gaumont. Then ... they came up with the Royal Rota. Things started to come up with... Graham Thompson had blotted his copy book. They were looking for another cameraman and they didn't want to appoint a permanent one at that time. I think it was about 1951, something like that, this came up. They wanted to have a Royal cameraman, but not on a permanent basis. You could move from company to company, as Graham Thompson did, but they probably changed the cameraman. The Palace didn't think it was a very good idea and Castleton Knight, who was very 'go-ahead', decided to do the royal tour of Canada, with Princess Elizabeth, before she was Queen, and the Duke of Edinburgh. They were going to go from Newfoundland right across Canada in the royal train, to Vancouver. He thought he'd do this, it wasn't a rota job, he'd do this for Gaumont British. I was going to do this on my own, again. I thought, "My God! What an assignment!" I was then in touch with Colville at Buckingham Palace and Colville agreed that I could travel on the royal train because he'd got to know me a bit then, doing other royal stories. And so I was allowed to travel on the royal train. Arrangements were made with all the cinema managers across the country wherever the royal train stopped to pick up my negatives and send the back to England. We had a fantastic operation where this stuff was back in Canada almost the next day...

**John Turner:** ...back in the UK?

**Alan Lawson:** ... back in the UK and back in Canada, processed overnight and had it back in Canada.

**John Turner:** Oh I see! Oh blimey, I say!

**Alan Lawson:** In fact, we got a big write up in the 'Daily Mirror' about it. Anyway, I travelled across there with them and managed to do a few shots of the Queen, or Princess Elizabeth as she was then, driving the train, and Calgary, all the stampedes there. Marvellous trip actually. All through the Rockies to Vancouver. Wherever they went, I went. When they went off the train at each stop, Winnipeg and all those places. Then I came back to England ... and it probably stemmed from that, Colville told the Newsroom Association as it was then, that the Queen wanted me as the royal cameraman. 1952, I think that was. She said she wanted a permanent cameraman. Whether it was the Queen or whether it was Colville or not I don't know but...it probably was the Queen because one got to know her quite well really. They had a bit of an argument about it, the Association, anyway eventually it happened. I was made the permanent royal cameraman. I've still got my Buckingham Palace pass actually! I didn't have a lot to do at first, I did very little on the Coronation. I was on the route actually, I didn't have anything to do in the Abbey at all because that wasn't really my job, I mean, it was a sound job and, as I said, more or less hand camera work all the time. Anyway, I was up the Duke of Norfolk's ... is it the Duke of Norfolk's? The column in The Mall anyway.

**John Turner:** One of the Dukes anyway!

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, I just did general views of the Coronation and processions. Then came the trip round the world where the Queen... no before that she was. ... No it wasn't, that was before

she was Queen; I went out to Kenya because she was going to go round the world in the Gothic, and she went to Kenya when the King died. I was in Kenya then, in the Gothic, ready for this trip and then the King died and of course she came back to England and we had to come back as well. I thought, "Well, that's the end of that trip." Anyway, it came about again in 1953. I was then accredited to the palace permanently and I went and joined the Gothic, went over to Panama where the Queen joined it - she flew over there - and went round the world with her. We went to Fiji and Tonga and New Zealand and Australia and everywhere that she went on that trip. Same as the flight of the White Heron that Movietone were talking about. I was doing the same thing actually only in a more comfortable way! I had dinner with the Queen on the ship and it was a marvellous trip. When that was over then one did all these various royal stories trips to Nigeria and wherever she went I went, all over England and all over Scotland. I was part of their royal entourage. That was the way things were doing in those days. Up until the BBC had their own man, I was doing it for the BBC as well, which made complications of course because they wanted to put it out before the newsreels. Anyway, we came to a working arrangement on that. So it went on. All the different stories up until 1962. This was my last big royal story where I went over to South America with the Duke of Edinburgh, in his plane, which I think was the Heron or something. Anyway, we went all round to every country in South America which was again a fantastic trip, again on my own, although Path did send another cameraman to do odd places over there, but generally speaking I had to cover the whole ...

**John Turner:** But this time you were answerable to whom then, to the newsreels? The associations?

**Alan Lawson:** Newsreels associations. Or the British Newsreels Association Services Ltd. They had to form a special company to do this. And it was still rota. When I came back from that, Gaumont had closed and the Newsreel Association was only left with Path and Movietone I think, and they didn't want to go on with the Association any more, so I was left high and dry. They said, "Well, you can go to Path", so I went to Path and Cummins...

**John Turner:** That was what, 1963?

**Alan Lawson:** 1962 actually, the end of 1962 it was.

**John Turner:** Was it Tommy Cummins

**Alan Lawson:** Tommy Cummins, yes. He didn't like me very much actually, because I was very well in with Colville and he wanted to be in with Colville. This is off the record really! I was much better in with Colville than he was. Because I used to go weekly down to the Palace for briefings, what was going to happen and their future arrangements and all that sort of thing, have a drink with Colville and all the rest of it. You know, he used to go occasionally but he didn't have that sort of 'in' and he didn't like me for that. He didn't really play ball with me at Path at all, and I was, more or less, left in a "I know what to do" job, in their publicity department. Back to publicity. I thought, "This is no future for me." Anyway, I sat it out and eventually Cummins went. In 1962 I was awarded the MVO for my stint at the Palace and that didn't please Cummins either actually. Anyway, I stuck it out and Cummins eventually went and Terry Ashwood took over from Cummins, as the editor, and I got on very well with him.

**John Turner:** Oh yes, well he was born and bred in the business wasn't he?

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, he was at Path all the time. He was very much a friend of Howard Thomas who was...

**John Turner:** ...the boss

**Alan Lawson:** Yes. They got on very well together for various reasons! He got appointed to the editorship of the thing and Cummins went. He made me the production manager of Path because I had the knowledge obviously. The first big job I had there was Winston Churchill's funeral. Arrangements had been going on for years actually as to what the procedures were going to be and everything else. As he was getting a bit weaker and that sort of thing, it was obviously going to be coming soon-ish. It was 1965 I think when it did happen. So I had all the arrangements to do, all the arrangements in the Abbey and all the lighting. We used to light for TV as well at that time, or basically light for them because we were doing colour and they weren't.

**John Turner:** Tell me, how many cameramen did you have under your umbrella then?

**Alan Lawson:** About six I think. Yes there was - I can't remember all their names now - there was Baynes and Whittaker.

**John Turner:** I don't remember Whittaker, but Baynes I remember. He was Army film originally you know.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, that's right. Anyway, there was six of them ... Ken Goddard, do you know him? Anyway, all decent chaps, I got on quite well with them. I had all this business to do with Churchill's funeral, the first really big job I had as a production manager. Of course, it was a big job. I had to make all the arrangements for the route, all the filming on the route and all that sort of thing. We had to employ quite a lot of extra cameramen for the job. And these were the sort of jobs I was doing in India on my own! Something else happened before that. There was the Harrow train crash, but that was in 1952. That was a horrifying job to do too, but that was before there was royal rota.

**John Turner:** I'll pause shall I?

**Alan Lawson:** I'm not sure of the date of this, but it was the first time we filmed in the House of Commons and we did the state opening of Parliament. Well we'd done that before but we were doing this, but preceding it... when they were going out of the House of Commons...

**John Turner:** ...into the Lords

**Alan Lawson:** ...to go into the Lords. And of course there was a terrific thing there about lighting and so on. Anyway, I had to do the lighting for that, and television didn't want so much light, television was there as well, but we were doing it in colour. Anyway we managed to get away with it, but there was quite a rumpus about... The MPs complained a lot about the lighting. Anyway, we did that. I think that was before 1965, I can't remember.

**John Turner:** What were you on, what stock was it? Eastman Colour?

**Alan Lawson:** Mmm. Yes. Then came the world cup in 1960, and Aberfan, which was another awful job to do. By then I was made news editor. Gracie Field, who was the news editor, I don't know whether you knew of her, she was news editor of Path at that time?

**John Turner:** Yes.

**Alan Lawson:** Ashwood didn't get on very well with her anyway. She got the push, or 'retired early.' I was made the news editor and production manager. Up came the world cup so I had to make all the arrangements there. We were the liaison company for Movietone and any other outfit that was filming there.

**John Turner:** Visnews?

**Alan Lawson:** Visnews, yes.

**John Turner:** Anyway, all the passes and things were sent to us and for distribution. Well, I was living in Eastbourne then and these came at the very last minute, and I had to sort them all out for them to pick up the next day so I thought, they came more or less in the evening, so I thought, "Well, I can't stay here, I'll take them home, sort them out at home", which I did. I put them in my briefcase. I was coming up by train, and I put the briefcase on the rack above me so that I could keep an eye on it. I sat with them at my back so that there was nothing behind me. A chap came down and sat next to me. He got out at East Croydon. When I got out at Victoria, I found my briefcase had gone and his was there! All the passes were in it and they were going to collect them at ten o'clock that morning. I thought, "My God, what am I going to say?" I opened his briefcase. All there was in his briefcase was sandwiches. There was no address or anything like that. Of course there was masses of addresses and stuff in my briefcase from Path. He was, fortunately, a good chap who wanted his sandwiches, he worked in Holborn and rang up to say that he'd got this case, because he'd got Path's thing in my briefcase, and could he have his sandwiches, could I collect the case. Just gone back in time. That was a terrible time. One of the worst episodes as a news editor I've ever had, I think! Well then...one did all the various jobs that one did as a news editor, you know, sorting out the stories out and so on, until 1969, when Prince Charles was invested at Caernarfon. I went down there and did all the arrangements for all that. That was a big job, with the Queen there and so on. That really was the end of the newsreel things, because in 1970 Path closed. I don't know, I think it was a great mistake to close Path at that time, they had a very successful documentary side, a very successful commercial side, television and things like that, making commercials. But the chap who took over that side of the business obviously didn't like the newsreels, but newsreel was making money then, it wasn't losing money. Anyway he decided to close it and I was one of the ones who got the axe. Well, in fact everybody got it except Terry Ashwood, I think. He was offered a job at Pinewood with the library I think it was, which he didn't want to do and eventually gave it up. Which was very stupid of him actually, because he had to retire early then. I was then left high and dry sort of not knowing what the hell to do and I wasn't of an age to retire.

**Alan Lawson:** Did you get redundancy money?

**John Turner:** I got redundancy money but it was very poor because I hadn't been at Path very long. One got something like about a thousand pounds, something ridiculous you know, absolute peanuts. I didn't try and make up anything, or anything like that, so I didn't know what to do. I had a lot of contacts through being a news editor of course, so I thought, I think I'll have a go at making documentaries if I can find some premises in London which is not exorbitant. I didn't really know what to do actually. I used to go to a little caf at Greek Street, a little Italian caf. I used to know quite a lot of people there and I was telling a man, "I wish to god I could find somewhere in London to start up a little business." So he said, "I know exactly where you could go in Denmark Street." He said, "I have a friend who has a room in one of the Denmark Street buildings there, opposite KPM" he said, "... which you're welcome to have at ten pounds a week" or something silly anyway. So I thought, well, I didn't know where I was going to get ten pounds a week at that time, even out of that thousand pounds. So I thought, well, the only other thing to do - it's no good trying to make documentaries off the cuff - I must do it with sponsorship.

Terry Ashwood then decided not to stay at Pinewood and I was quite friendly with him, and he said, "Well, I know a lot of people who might sponsor films." He had been editor in chief. Between us we managed to conjure up several people to start it off. I got the bank to give me a loan, my bank which I'd been with since 1931, not much in it but it was...

**Alan Lawson:** ...it was an account

**John Turner:** It was a good thing to start on anyway. They were in Wardour Street at that time. They're now in Soho Square. We started up and it started to do quite well we got quite a lot of jobs.

**Alan Lawson:** What were you called, what did you call yourselves?

**John Turner:** John Turner Enterprises Ltd. I made it into a limited company. I used the accountant that one used at the Newsreel Association as my accountant, so that he knew all about me, and he was pretty decent to start with, you know, on honest terms. I made a subsidiary of the company called Tribute Films Productions. I got to know quite a lot of people; we made films for Lloyds Bank, Sun Life, quite a lot of things like that before they got their own outfits going.

**Alan Lawson:** Very good accounts.

**John Turner:** Very good accounts. So that gave one a good backing to write to other people. One got lists of names of companies and I used to write to them all and say what one had done, and the background, and... I used to use some of the Path cameramen, you see, to do these films because they were all out of work, they were all freelance then. And so that was very handy because knowing all those, I knew how much I could pay them and the rest of it. Through one of my acquaintances I got to know Ann Todd.

**Alan Lawson:** Oh yes,

**John Turner:** She was making documentaries and she said, "Would you like to make a film for me?" So I said, "Yes, of course." She said, "Well, I haven't got any money, but I'm trying to get

sponsorship." Anyway, she was very good at that kind of thing: she used to go to countries, she'd do different countries, and she'd go to somewhere like, well, she went to Persia, as it was then, and got sponsorship then to make a film in Persia. She'd get about 50,000 quid or something like that, which is quite a lot of money at those times. Various countries, and Jordan... I made I think three or four films for her, anyway, I didn't do Persia, she'd already done that when I came into her orbit. She was in great financial trouble herself I helped her, sort it out for her, which made me more well in with her. I did quite a lot of films with her. Eventually we didn't get on too well because I had ideas and she had ideas and they didn't always gel! Although I usually won because I knew more about films than she did. She was no fool, but when it came to editing, and music, and all that kind of thing.... Anyway, I had an editor who was extremely good as I said. I knew all that kind of thing from my stint at Path. I made about four films for her I think. I made films for Pan Am, as they were then before they went bust, in Hong Kong, Lebanon, and Japan. This was all good stuff to have behind me, to tell people. I went on until the 1980s for ten years and then the place I was in got taken over by somebody, and they wanted me out from there because ... very old building. KPM had a hand in how I got the office I think, I paid them the rent. Anyway, they had to relinquish their lease on the place so I had to give it up. And of course at that time I couldn't find another office that I could cope with, not in London, so I thought, well, the only thing that I can do is to retire.

**Alan Lawson:** So in the 80s you retired?

**John Turner:** Yes, I retired in '81, I think it was.

[End of Tape 1 Side 2] [Tape 2, Side 3]

**Alan Lawson:** So John, you've now retired - but I want to go back, I'd like to talk about some of the old personalities that you would have met, some of the cameramen. You haven't talked about the Cotters. Did you know any of the Cotters at all?

**John Turner:** I knew them.

**Alan Lawson:** Did you know Terry, the sound man?

**John Turner:** Yes, he was a joker. [laughs]

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, that's right, very much so. Very much a joker.

**John Turner:** I didn't know him well at all. I didn't know Jack Cotter well, I mean I was on friendly terms with them, but not to say I was pally with them.

**Alan Lawson:** Jack...and his son went to ITN didn't he? John, that's right

**John Turner:** That's right. Paul Wyand I knew quite well actually.

**Alan Lawson:** Now, Jimmy Gemmell...?

**John Turner:** Well, I knew him, but I didn't know him if you know what I mean. I didn't have much to do with him. Jock Gemmell, knew him.

**Alan Lawson:** Oh, Jock Gemmell, yes. Did you know Alf Tunwell?

**John Turner:** I do know Alf Tunwell, yes. I didn't know him well either.

**Alan Lawson:** He was Paramount, wasn't he?

**John Turner:** Yes, Paramount. Jimmy Gemmell was Paramount wasn't he? Jock Gemmell was Path.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, that's right, Jock. Yes.

**John Turner:** He and I used to across to the pub opposite the Path building in Berwick Street, I think it was.

**Alan Lawson:** They had a building there?

**John Turner:** Yes, well, they had an exit there; the entrance was in Oxford Street. Yes they had a building there. That was before I joined Path of course.

**Alan Lawson:** On the sound side, the sound recordists at Path, do you remember who they were at all?

**John Turner:** No...

**Alan Lawson:** Well there was Reg Sutton; wasn't he Path?

**John Turner:** No, he was Movietone.

**Alan Lawson:** He was Movietone, aha!

**John Turner:** No, god, who was on sound? Without looking it up I can't tell you, no.

**Alan Lawson:** Some of the Gaumont crew, Peter Cannon. Do you remember Peter Cannon?

**John Turner:** Yes, Peter Cannon I was very friendly with, we used to have a good noggin together; I used to go to his home sometimes.

**Alan Lawson:** He was a very serious man, Peter.

**John Turner:** Yes, he was very serious, a very quiet man.

**Alan Lawson:** Very, very quiet.

**John Turner:** He felt the cold terribly.

**Alan Lawson:** Really?

**John Turner:** Yes, he was always shivering and he was always on top of a truck with a sound camera.

**Alan Lawson:** And Cave Chinn?

**John Turner:** No, Cave Chinn was Paramount, so I knew him only on the way up to Scapa actually. I was the only one who came across him.

**Alan Lawson:** I used to meet him at ACT meetings actually.

**John Turner:** I don't know where he went to after Scapa actually.

**Alan Lawson:** No, I don't know. I'm trying to think of the other ones I knew. Oh yes, there was the man who always used to do close-ups with a 25 mill lens. Maurice Ford. Get in front of all the other cameramen. This is where your steps came in handy!

**John Turner:** A real menace, yes. He was a very lively man. Yes. I quite liked him actually although he wasn't a very nice chap.

**Alan Lawson:** No he wasn't, he was really mean.

**John Turner:** Yes, really mean. And as you say, he used to always do this business of suddenly appearing with a one-inch lens in front of everybody.

**Alan Lawson:** And Frank Bassill you said you didn't know...

**John Turner:** I knew Frank Bassill, but not well. George Golding, I don't know whether you...?

**Alan Lawson:** No, I never met him.

**John Turner:** He was the chap with the long focus lenses. He died early unfortunately, he got peritonitis when he was quite young, at Gaumont. Morley, did you know Morley?

**Alan Lawson:** No.

**John Turner:** Hal Morley, he was a Gaumont man. Who was else there?

**Alan Lawson:** Carrington Brookes, or Brookes-Carrington, I always forget which way round it went, he was a very early one, a real old timer. I think you might just have caught him perhaps, at the beginning?

**John Turner:** No. There was a chap that was in a film at SCOOT[?]with Ken Gordon and ...Knight, was it? Knighton? I've forgotten his name now. Time goes on!

**Alan Lawson:** Yes it does! Now, on equipment, you said that you couldn't remember some of the early cameras that you used. But basically, what were you on? Newman's were you?

**John Turner:** Yes, we but went on to Cameflexes later on, but I always came back to the Newman. Cameflex was always a good camera actually, and as you know there was the nice quick change of the magazine and so on.

**Alan Lawson:** They were inclined to scratch a bit though.

**John Turner:** Yes. And noisy.

**Alan Lawson:** Mmm. You never got on to Arri's? [Arriflex]

**John Turner:** No, I did occasionally, they were a good camera but I was basically a Newman man all my career.

**Alan Lawson:** Lovely camera actually, the Newman.

**John Turner:** Yes, and so reliable, when you think one went through with the whole war, I think I had one spring go during the whole war.

**Alan Lawson:** Of course I was involved when they tried to make Newman's do mass production with them and they failed actually. Instead of those beautiful hand made magazines they had mouldings done.

**John Turner:** Not the same.

**Alan Lawson:** No, not the same. Not the same.

**John Turner:** I liked the Hills, they were nice people actually, weren't they?

**Alan Lawson:** Oh yes, delightful people. In fact, I think it was George Hill who always said the Newman was made with a knife and fork.

**John Turner:** Yes, he was right. I used to go down to their place and watch them make...

**Alan Lawson:** In Salisbury Road?

**John Turner:** Salisbury Road, yes.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, it's not there any more! I think it's the Whittington Hospital. It just isn't there, it just doesn't exist, Salisbury Road!

**John Turner:** No.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, I've been there many, many times.

**John Turner:** To see these old pieces of camera.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, dear old man Newman, he was a sweetie. Remember him showing me how he made sprockets. He took a piece of paper and a bit of string and made arcs all the way round it. He said, "There, that's how we do it, and then we cut it up." [laughs]

**John Turner:** Of course they had a turret on the camera eventually.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, that's right.

**John Turner:** I had a turret on my camera eventually, particularly when I was doing royal rota, because you needed it then obviously and one couldn't keep changing lenses.

**Alan Lawson:** Did you have the look-through one?

**John Turner:** Yes, eventually.

**Alan Lawson:** But it was a bit tough on the eye,

**John Turner:** It was amazing really how one ever managed without that, you know, through the old viewfinder, how one didn't cut heads off all the time!

**Alan Lawson:** One learnt an enormous amount on parallax actually.

**John Turner:** Absolutely.

**Alan Lawson:** If the man's nose is right on the edge of frame, it's all right, he's dead centre.

**John Turner:** Yes it was amazing really.

**Alan Lawson:** Looking back over your whole career, which is your high spot, do you think?

**John Turner:** Oh god...I don't know, there are so many little ones actually. Things like, I had a reasonable head for heights and just after the war I was told to go up to the top of St Paul's. They had put the cross back up there, I didn't know what was involved and I had a steeplejack with me. We went up as far as you could go inside, and we got out onto the area outside, and one had to go around the dome and there was nothing. I am all right on heights when there's even that much... you know, a parapet, but without it I didn't like it at all. One had to worm one's way around this thing pressing against the dome, four corners actually, to get to a ladder to get up to...so that one could see the cross, you know. The steeplejacks were doing that of course. I had a steeplejack with me who carried my camera for me. I couldn't have done it otherwise. But I think

that was one of the worst jobs I've ever had to do actually. It wasn't so much going up as coming down again actually, because you're beginning to look down.

**Alan Lawson:** I remember going up one of those great tall smokestacks, and I found that as long as I'd got the camera in my hand I could do anything. You take the camera away and I wouldn't be seen dead on the first rung.

**John Turner:** I couldn't have carried a camera round those things, I couldn't have done it actually.

**Alan Lawson:** A Newman too, an Eyemo maybe!

**John Turner:** Yes. We used an Eyemo sometimes, a good little camera actually. But fortunately the steeplejack was very good. He could see I was a bit nervous, obviously. Anyway, he stood behind me on the ladder when I was filming. I don't know whether the film was shaky or not, it should have been! Anyway, we managed to get it. And another similar height thing, where I nearly lost my nerve, was in the Victory at Portsmouth. They used to do ceremonies on the deck there and we were doing something down there. I wanted to get a general view, and the only way I could get a general view there was from the crow's nest. And up to the crows nest, as you probably know, there's a rope ladder. I made the mistake of putting the camera over my shoulder to go up to do this. Well, I got up and as I gradually got up, the ladder kept going away from me and so the camera, which was in my case, was pulling me back. I really started to get nervous about it because it was very, very tiring indeed and as one got nearer the crow's nest I thought, "Well, I don't know whether I'm going to make this actually." There was a sailor up in the crow's nest, and then I saw that the ladder was glued to the crow's nest on the top and you had to get your feet on that to get in to the crow's nest and I thought, "I can't do this, not with the camera." Anyway, the sailor leaned over and got hold of the strap of the camera fortunately and got it off me. I don't know how he released it actually from my arm, or how I got into the crow's nest, but it took me a long time before I got the general view! It wasn't so bad going down. He lowered the camera down, I should have had it pulled up anyway. It was a daft thing to do, but I didn't realise what a rope ladder was like at that time. I did later on in ships and so on. That was before the war I think. But as far as highlights goes, I suppose you could say that trip round the world was really with the Queen. You don't often dine with the Queen.

**Alan Lawson:** No!

**John Turner:** India was a fantastic place, I mean it was a highlight definitely, I mean because one saw so much of India really with Mountbatten, it wasn't just Delhi, or just the atrocities.

**Alan Lawson:** They impact actually.

**John Turner:** I mean there was Hyderabad meeting and meeting these Maharajas and people, living a fantastic life at that time, before they had to hand it all over. I suppose career-wise being made a news editor was quite an achievement for a cameraman.

**Alan Lawson:** You still think the cameraman is fairly important?

**John Turner:** I think so, yes. I think I would rather have been a cameraman really, although not these days. It must be absolute hell now because a) you haven't got the independence you had in those days, I mean, when you were on a job it was up to you what you got, really. Nowadays there are producers and all sorts of people aren't there, I mean with television, you're told what to film really.

**Alan Lawson:** That's another thing I wanted to ask you about, because, you know, I sometimes went on jobs in the newsreel capacity, and I hated it because I was never able to do what a newsreel cameraman could do, you know, he had a start, a middle and an end. I never knew where the middle was often, so I'd miss the end. What do you think about that?

**John Turner:** Well, we had a cameramen, we had a cameraman called Prentice...

**Alan Lawson:** Oh, Adam Prentice?

**John Turner:** Adam Prentice, you remember him?

**Alan Lawson:** Yes!

**John Turner:** Extremely nice chap that I was very friendly with. I don't like to say anything against him really ...but he wasn't a good cameraman actually, not really. He was adequate but he wasn't what I would put as a top-notch cameraman, but he was extremely good technically. When I say he wasn't a good cameraman, not a good newsreel cameraman. He was a good filming cameraman. He always tended on jobs to go for the scenic and the locations really, and miss the story.

**Alan Lawson:** Overshoot, in fact. I mean I always overshoot, always.

**John Turner:** Well yes, he did overshoot I suppose, but he would take a lot of material which was nothing to do with the story and really miss the point of the story, so when he got back you would say, "Well, where's the story?"

**Alan Lawson:** Where you to a certain extent rationed as to the amount of film you could use on a story at all?

**John Turner:** No.

**Alan Lawson:** So the story was worthwhile?

**John Turner:** No, I was never rationed, ever. Well I mean you obviously kept it down as much as you could. Sometimes one was rationed with the amount that you could carry. But no, I was never rationed. I don't think anybody was.

**Alan Lawson:** But when you started making documentaries that's an entirely different...

**John Turner:** Oh yes, you've got to figure out how much film you're using.

**Alan Lawson:** Well not only that, but you're working to a script. It's written down. I could do that.[laughs]

**John Turner:** I used to do all that, scripts and you know, when I was making documentaries. Except for the Ann Todd ones where she did most of the scripting there, and I would put it into a sort of film situation. Then of course I used to do all the costing of these things, so that one knew exactly how much film one could use. We very rarely went over the top on those things, we were very, very strict about it.

**Alan Lawson:** Well yes, it's money, it's a lot of money. And the processing's a lot of money. When you were making the documentaries did you go to 16, or were you on 35?

**John Turner:** 16.

**Alan Lawson:** On 16, yes. On straight 16?

**John Turner:** Straight 16, yes.

**Alan Lawson:** Not super 16 or anything like that?

**John Turner:** No. One thing I forgot to say, while I was on my own, at the end of that period, before I lost the office, about a year before, Path's library closed, their sound library. And Ken Nunn, I don't know whether you knew him or not?

**Alan Lawson:** No. I never met him, but his is a name I remember.

**John Turner:** He was with Path, and he was in charge of their sound library. And he had that library when they closed. I knew him quite well, I didn't like him but I knew him quite well, and I said, "You can set up in my office", I had two rooms, "And bring the library over there." And I ran that library for a year and a half, that sound library. Ken Nunn knew where everything was in that library. I gradually picked it up because he used to go home early. He'd go home at about four o'clock, and somebody would ring up for a sound effect and I had to find the damn thing and put it on the tape; to take it off our tape onto another tape and get it put onto whatever they wanted it put on to. Somewhere round here in Wardour Street. That was quite an experience actually, but I had to give that up and it went over to KPM eventually, when I had to close the office. It was rather a pity really, because I could have kept going otherwise for quite a few more years.

**Alan Lawson:** Was there much call for that kind of thing?

**John Turner:** There was at that time. If you listen to radio now, some of these things they're doing, what are they called? 'On These Days' or something? A hell of a lot of Path stuff in that.

**Alan Lawson:** 'On This Day', yes

**John Turner:** A lot of stuff they've lifted from newsreels, but there's also a lot of sound effects. Strange actually. That library I think went down to Pinewood eventually.

**Alan Lawson:** Well, that's where they are now, yes. Fascinating.

**John Turner:** If it hadn't been for the office closing I'd probably still be there.[laughs]

**Alan Lawson:** If you could start again would you change horses do you think?

**John Turner:** What, start another job do you mean?

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, would you have preferred really to have done something different now, having seen quite a range of the business; was there anything you would rather have done all the time?

**John Turner:** What, in the film business?

**Alan Lawson:** Yes, well, or...

**John Turner:** Not really, because I don't think I would have ever had the experiences I've had, all round the world I mean, one's been to 57 different countries in my newsreel career, and I certainly wouldn't have done that in any other job. If I'd done what my headmaster wanted me to do I'd have gone into a bank or a building society or somewhere and I would probably have been better off actually, money wise. I don't know about nowadays.[laughs]

**Alan Lawson:** You would probably have been a member of the Athaeneum Club.

**John Turner:** Or had a better pension.

**Alan Lawson:** Oh, probably, yes.

**John Turner:** The film business wasn't very good on money, not until Path closed unfortunately, everything went up in 1970. One just left at the wrong time. All the salaries and everything just went up like mad didn't it, in the early 70s.

**Alan Lawson:** Yes. I mean, it was quite crazy what ...

**John Turner:** When I left I mean, the salaries were a pittance compared with what they became then. No, they just closed at the wrong time actually. If it had been another five years one would have been much better off both pension wise and money wise. Altogether.

**Alan Lawson:** Well, thank you John.

**John Turner:** I don't think there would be anything else that would interest you.

**Alan Lawson:** Well, thanks very much, that's plenty. Thank you.

End of Interview.