

# Norman Fisher (newsreel cameraman)

## 18/7/1917 - 20/11/2001

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Biographical information to follow in due course.

### BECTU History Project - Interview No. 101

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Interviewer: Roy Fowler

Interviewee: Norman Fisher

Tape 1, Side 1

**Roy Fowler:** Copyright of the following recording is vested in the ACTT History Project, copyright 1989. The date is the 25th September 1989 and the interview is with Norman Fisher by Roy Fowler. We're at ACTT head office. Norman, good morning. The first question is usually when and where you were born?

**Norman Fisher:** I was born in 1917, July 18th, at Ecclestone in Lancashire

**Roy Fowler:** And some idea of your family background, any connection with show business, as it's called?

**Norman Fisher:** No, my father was a doctor, my mother was a nurse. She was Scottish and he was English.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. And your early aptitudes and interests. What kind of schooling did you have?

**Norman Fisher:** Well I went first to the Edinburgh Academy and at the age of 12 I went to Arundel School and I left Arundel School in 1933, 1934, just at the end of the year. And I'd always been keen on photography and wanted to get into films and had one or two useful contacts, because the necessary way to get into the film business was whom you knew. Anyway I started off in Kay Film Labs at Finsbury Park.

**Roy Fowler:** How had you made your contacts, your film contacts which you used to get a job?

**Norman Fisher:** Well I had a rich aunt who knew Sir Gordon Craig, as a matter of fact, and through his influence, he then was managing director of Movietone, through his influence I had my first job. It was always considered that one started off in the labs. So I did a spell in the labs.

**Roy Fowler:** What did they say to you/ Did they say, you have a certain amount of time in which to make a success?

**Norman Fisher:** No., no, no, no.

**Roy Fowler:** And you were obviously very happy to get into the business to break in?

**Norman Fisher:** Indeed. Kay Laboratories at that time were setting up a sensitometry department and sensitometry was rather a new thing then. I was in that most of the time, in Kays in fact all of the time. And I did about a year in Kays. And then got a job at the new GPO Film Unit at Blackheath.

**Roy Fowler:** Before we leave Kays, may I ask what your starting pay was?

**Norman Fisher:** That's rather difficult to remember; it can't have been awfully much more than three pounds a week.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh as much as that, it was a lot for the time and for a young trainee, someone just starting out?

**Norman Fisher:** It was something about that, it was between two and three pounds a week.

**Roy Fowler:** Could you survive on that in London or did you have help from your parents?

**Norman Fisher:** No, my mother who was a widow then, she came down and set up in house here, so I was still living at home then. And at Muswell Hill. So that was handy for Kays in Finsbury Park.

**Roy Fowler:** Indeed yes. How did the job with the GPO Film Unit come about?

**Norman Fisher:** Once again I had an introduction to John Grierson through Sir Gordon Craig, again, and I was taken on as assistant sound, incidentally, the studio manager then at Blackheath was Ralph Bond, and there were a lot of well-known people there, oh, Cavalcanti, Harry Watt, Arthur Coldstream, many others who became well-known in the documentary field. So I was assistant on sound. The GPO had just started using sound and we had a primitive Visatone outfit which was all fitted into a nice red post office van. It was rather crude, it was before the Noiseless Visatone was brought in but it worked anyway. So one of the first films I worked on was Night Mail and so anyway I did about a year with the GPO Film Unit.

**Roy Fowler:** Can we not just leave it that quickly? Can we go into details a little more?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes surely.

**Roy Fowler:** I suppose we ought to talk about the individuals themselves as you remember them. Shall we go through them one by one, starting with Grierson, you were then what, eighteen. nineteen. How did Grierson strike a nineteen year old?

**Norman Fisher:** In fact I saw very little of him because his office was up here in this area and he wasn't often down at Blackheath. I used to see him occasionally. I was a boy around the place, I used to do ... not on the higher level stuff.

**Roy Fowler:** He had no time for a junior?

**Norman Fisher:** Difficult to say. No, I wouldn't say he hadn't any time for juniors at all.

**Roy Fowler:** Was he an abrupt, brusque man?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh very, yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** A dour Scots?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes I could say that.

**Roy Fowler:** So no very specific memories of Grierson at that time?

**Norman Fisher:** Not as a personality, no. It's quite a long way back.

**Roy Fowler:** But he was very much the boss of the unit?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh very much so yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Who was below him in the operating arrangements?

**Norman Fisher:** Now that I really can't remember. Sorry but I can't.

**Roy Fowler:** Cavalcanti was what, a producer? Director?

**Norman Fisher:** Director. It was all a very loose sort of organisation really and everybody was doing everything and apart from the technical staff everybody was doing their own thing more or less.

**Roy Fowler:** Well the people who stand out in your memory most clearly, had Humphrey Jennings arrived yet?

**Norman Fisher:** Humphrey Jennings had been and gone, I never encountered him at all.

**Roy Fowler:** Stewart McAllister?

**Norman Fisher:** No, he may well have been there later.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you find yourself very much compartmentalised on sound, you said everybody was doing everything else, but nevertheless I imagine sound must have taken most of your time?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, well we had a sound unit of two, there was a recordist plus me.

**Roy Fowler:** Who was the recordist?

**Norman Fisher:** Ted Pauly. And we had two cameramen on the staff called Jonah Jones and Chick Fowle and we had a studio carpenter-come- handyman and everything else, so you could say we had, oh we had one permanent editor, so we had a total staff of about six or seven.

**Roy Fowler:** The studio itself was it an old church or what was it?

**Norman Fisher:** No, it was an old art school as a matter of fact. I think Augustus John used to inhabit it at one time. And it was converted as a ... into a studio. It was small but adequate for what we needed, you know.

**Roy Fowler:** Minimally equipped. Or did you have enough equipment for purposes?

**Norman Fisher:** We had a certain amount of permanent lighting, of course, and we had an electrician as well. So anyway, anything else that was required it was brought in from outside. Of course the budgets were terribly tight so you could not afford awfully much in the way of set building. I mean for instance the biggest set which was ever built there in my time was the sorting office of the mail train. We built a set of that. It wasn't feasible to film actually on the mail train itself for a number of reasons but, so we built a set in the studio. That was about the biggest one I ever remember we had ... and I ...

**Roy Fowler:** Was there any location sound on Night Mail?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes, we did a fair amount. You know the night mail on its way, we had the sound truck on a flat bed truck tacked onto the end of the train, it wasn't a comfortable ride at all ... but anyway.

**Roy Fowler:** Sounds rather dangerous to me!

**Norman Fisher:** There were odd bits of sync shooting. Sync shooting was always a bit of a problem because we couldn't run to a proper studio camera, we had a Debie inside a home made blimp, it wasn't very quiet either but it worked. And the Visatone sound wasn't the greatest, as I said it wasn't the noiseless Visatone so it was a bit scratchy but anyways it did its stuff. And for the music and background sound effects we had Benjamin Britten as a matter of fact, who with W. H. Auden were having a look around films at the time and he did the background music for Night Mail, ♦this is the night mail crossing the border, bringing the cheque and the postal order♦, that sort of thing and we had a small music set up and an iron bedstead for making the noise on the rails and this sort of thing.

**Roy Fowler:** This was done at Blackheath on the soundstage. And music recording too? Did they do that there?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes we did that there, yeah.

**Roy Fowler:** How many in the orchestra, do you recall roughly?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh about four.

**Roy Fowler:** Is that all?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** It would be interesting to have your memories of Britten and Auden at that time.

**Norman Fisher:** I had very little to do with them at that time, they weren't permanently there, they just sort of swanned about on occasions.

**Roy Fowler:** The commentary, if I can call it that which Auden wrote, did he bring it in complete or was it to some extent put together during the recording session?

**Norman Fisher:** Difficult to say. I suppose he must have written it in advance and altered it as it went along.

**Roy Fowler:** Were you recording to picture?

**Norman Fisher:** No, some of this was done elsewhere. The final recording it was done some place else. We couldn't do the mixing ourselves.

**Roy Fowler:** I was wondering basically whether to some extent the picture was adjusted to the words or whether somehow the words fit that well with the cut?

**Norman Fisher:** The words were put to the picture. Eventually it all got together like that. But the picture was the starting point and Auden, he matched the words to the screen. And as I said the final re-recording was done elsewhere, we simply didn't have the facilities at Blackheath before that.

**Roy Fowler:** Do you remember how long the shoot was? How long you were attached to the picture? Or was it fairly relaxed?

**Norman Fisher:** It was spread out over quite a period, I think from beginning to end it was spread out for about a year because other things were going on as well. You see we had Len Lye then and he was doing his little jingles with hand drawn image for the Post Office, sixpenny telegram, these were things which lasted about a minute, but Len Lye had evolved this technique of hand painting on blank stock and when run intermittently you got little abstract figures

dancing around and these were usually matched to a standard piece of music, a jinglely sort of thing.

**Roy Fowler:** Library music? Or specially composed?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Library. Did you have anything to do with working on those Len Lye films?

**Norman Fisher:** Not really, he did them all on his own anyway, it was all handwork. No. But what else can I tell you ...

**Roy Fowler:** Let me ask you one question about Night Mail again, was there a sense that it was an important film, a break through film, a film out of the ordinary?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, it was the first time a documentary had been made with synchronised sound. It was a sort of a milestone, instead of simply just a commentary, and for its time it was considered advanced.

**Roy Fowler:** Harry Watt, how do you remember him?

**Norman Fisher:** Tough, irascible.

**Roy Fowler:** Talented? Or not? Talented or a promoter?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, indeed, certainly. Because no one person directed Night Mail really, different people were doing bits of it. I mean you'd get Cavalcanti on one bit and Harry Watt on another and Arthur Coldstream would have a finger in it somewhere.

**Roy Fowler:** Was there one major influence, do you think, on shaping the film?

**Norman Fisher:** I would say it was very much Harry Watt's film, and we also had... sorry name's gone ... we also had Stuart Legg, now he had a share in that, in fact every body had a share in Night Mail.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. What were Harry Watt's strengths would you say? Did he shoot off the cuff, was he able to plan the shoot? It was scripted?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes, he worked to script. It is very difficult to be specific about these individuals because I only met them on the odd occasion.

**Roy Fowler:** I understand. The way they struck a young person at that time would be interesting. Cavalcanti, we haven't really talked about him.

**Norman Fisher:** Excitable. Liable to, if we were recording in the studio, he was liable to suddenly blow his top for some reason or other under the microphone. Which is, we didn't have

the gain turned down in the sound truck, it blew the galvanometer on the recorder, so we always had to be careful when Cavalcanti was around that if there was no actual sound on at the time to keep the gain down, because any stress on the galvanometer, it blew the mirror off, and the mirror was about a sixteenth of an inch square and it took a lot of finding and sticking on again. It was a very crude system. really.

**Roy Fowler:** That was a problem with most of the early sound systems, wasn't it? A number of people have talked about that happening at Elstree, BIP, there was always a problem with blowing the galvanometer. Calvalcanti, also had a short fuse, was he over it very quickly? Was he a pleasant man to work with?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Again I would like to ask what you perceived to be his strengths, because I know you were watching people to learn from them?

**Norman Fisher:** It's very difficult to say ... I'm sorry I'm just trying to think of the word...

**Roy Fowler:** Right so your memories are really rather hazy after this length of time?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, acquaintances were brief, and people came and went. I was very much involved in the sound bit and really I didn't have a lot of association with people such as Cavalcanti, I mean just the odd bit here and there, but you never worked continuously long enough to form any real opinion about them. It was just, you know, a matter of doing the job.

**Roy Fowler:** Let me ask another question about Night Mail itself, or the shoot, the recording van tied onto the train on the flat bed, did you take it all the way to Scotland and back?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** How many trips did they have to make?

**Norman Fisher:** We made only one really and this was to get the sound inside the sorting vans. From the camera side it wasn't practical to light the interiors of the sorting vans, that was the reason, and as I said, we built the set in the studio at Blackheath.

**Roy Fowler:** Where were you on that train trip, were you in the little sound truck or in the train?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** You were in the sound truck?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, switching on and off, we had an intercom through, yes it was rather a bumpy ride.

**Roy Fowler:** It sounds quite adventurous for its time in terms of recording.

**Norman Fisher:** I suppose it would be. The whole thing was, of course our Visatone equipment in the truck couldn't be removed, it wasn't a portable outfit at all, so it had to come in its van. A sort of huge rack amplifier and everything was fixed.

**Roy Fowler:** That must have been a terrible problem for your galvanometer in the truck, how was it cushioned?

**Norman Fisher:** It stood up to it all right. I sort of, I seem to recollect we must have put sponge rubber underneath the recording camera just to soften the vibration a bit. Anyway with the van on it's tyres, this absorbed quite a lot of the vibration so we didn't have that problem.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you ever record with the truck moving? I don't mean on the train, I mean other times, could you take mobile recordings?

**Norman Fisher:** I don't think we ever did, not in my time anyway.

**Roy Fowler:** Now then. were there any other films you worked on at the GPO?

**Norman Fisher:** Not really, all sorts of odd bits and pieces of things, other films that had been half completed and needed a bit of commentary on. I can't be terribly specific about any of them. Night Mail occupied most of the time I was there. I was only there nine months or so.

**Roy Fowler:** Clearly an interesting time and place to be, indeed.

**Norman Fisher:** Yes indeed it was.

**Roy Fowler:** Was Ralph busily organising people into a union?

**Norman Fisher:** No, I was never asked to join anyway, not then.

**Roy Fowler:** We'll come onto the union later, I wondered if since Ralph was there whether he was already militantly organising people?

**Norman Fisher:** Not to my recollection.

**Roy Fowler:** How did your career progress? You again, through Sir Gordon Craig, went to where?

**Norman Fisher:** I'd always wanted to get onto camera and Movietone, Sir Gordon was managing director of Movietone, and Movietone was expanding a lot. He said well come, and I left GPO and joined Movietone up at Soho Square here. And I was a sort of, general at the start, I was a sort of general 'hey you' and tea-maker and camera cleaner. I was getting my hands on the camera at last. I'd only been there six weeks when I got my first assignment simply because nobody else was in the office and there had been an accident at Sheppey Bridge. Something had run into it or something like that, and the news editor came rushing down and said any cameramen about and I said no, only me. He said well can you use a camera, I said I think I can.

I grabbed a Newman Sinclair and went down to Sheppey and it was the very first story I did. And it was quite successful, so from there on I was on camera.

**Roy Fowler:** How much experience had you had with the Newman Sinclair, operating it?

**Norman Fisher:** Just fiddling around with it, there were plenty around and I used to clean and polish them and run them through and this sort of stuff. So I hadn't any trouble in using a camera at all. Ultimately, of course I went over to sound camera. We had then in Movietone, we had five sound units. Camera ... of course using the Movietone AEO-light system which was incorporated in the camera so you had a crew of a cameraman and a soundman and your own car adapted to carry all this with a strengthened roof with camera clamps on it. You've probably seen pictures of it.

**Roy Fowler:** This is the one ... such as there is at the Museum of the Moving Image?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, are you talking about the REO?

**Roy Fowler:** Yes.

**Norman Fisher:** Well now Movietone when it started had five of these REOs which were shipped over from America, complete with all the equipment. And they also had American crews as well who were ultimately replaced with British crews. Anyway we used the REOs for quite a time, they were clumsy, awkward things.

**Roy Fowler:** The vehicles you mean?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes. So eventually we replaced them with adapted saloon cars, Talbots mostly, and there was still one REO left when I went to Movietone and it was never really used except in emergency. It wasn't a pleasant vehicle to drive at all, really on British roads. They were left-hand drives.

**Roy Fowler:** So really they had less of an influence than legend has it. They were used less. How long a period of time were they used?

**Norman Fisher:** Let me see, Movietone started here in 1929 and I joined it 1936 and there was only one of the REOs that was left.

**Roy Fowler:** Had they come over in 1929? they dated back to then?

**Norman Fisher:** Actually Movietone started in America in 1928 and in 1929 they extended into Europe, into London and Paris and Rome.

**Roy Fowler:** We've made again a sizeable jump from your being on camera to your going back to sound, shall we fill in the time when you were on camera? On picture camera?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh no, I was on picture camera, the whole time from day one.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh I see I misunderstood.

**Norman Fisher:** I said it was a combined system and the cameraman didn't have to worry about sound.

**Roy Fowler:** A single system?

**Norman Fisher:** A single system, yes, you had your soundtrack alongside the picture on the negative and you had a soundman who was controlling the thing at the microphone end of it. But as far as the cameraman was concerned it was there and you just, it was quite an effective system because it was extremely compact as far as the camera end was concerned. It was just a matter of inserting a glow tube in the back of the camera and this of course was the De Forest patent, the AEO-light, which Movietone had acquired and it made sound newsreels possible. And when other newsreels started up such as Gaumont, Paramount, Pathe, they had much more clumsy equipment. Pathe had Visatone recording on a separate recorder instead of in the camera. The recorder of course was running in sync but it was a rather cumbersome system. The beauty of the Movietone system was that you didn't have to bother about sync at all, you simply switched your camera on and you got your picture and sound simultaneously on the film.

**Roy Fowler:** So it made it much quicker to work I suppose?

**Norman Fisher:** Very much so.

**Roy Fowler:** Did it make more complications in the editing stage, it required very simple basic editing I guess did it not?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes the soundtrack was in the camera was about 12 frames behind the picture so in the editing system you had to take the original soundtrack off the negative and match it up to sync, you could make a combined print from that. As I said it was a very efficient system and the sound quality was good.

**Roy Fowler:** Well let's talk about the newsreels as you remember them from then on. How long a time were you with Fox Movietone?

**Norman Fisher:** All in all from 1936 to 1978. The war was in the middle but I was a newsreel war correspondent so I was still with Movietone.

**Roy Fowler:** Norman I wonder what the best way is of covering this period? Just coming forward in time as you remember things?

**Norman Fisher:** OK.

**Roy Fowler:** I suppose then the first question would be could you give us an idea how newsreels were made in the mid-thirties, the requirements placed upon the various crew members and what happened to their material when they got back to London.

**Norman Fisher:** The set up was you had a chief editor and then you had a news editor whose job it was to decide what would be covered and a production manager who organised the necessary crews and handed out assignments.

**Roy Fowler:** How many crews were there when you joined?

**Norman Fisher:** We had in cameramen, we had about ten at that point, some of them were freelancers who used to wait around in case there was a job. Permanent staff, we had four on sound camera and we had three who only shot silent material, often in support of the sound unit. Because you needed on a lot of jobs, you had to have a silent camera as well for the cutaway shots. On the big jobs such as the Cup Final of course every one was on that, or the Grand National, you'd have everybody out on that. The Grand National was something different because being spread out over such a large area with a lot of jumps, it was the one occasion all the newsreels got together, each taking a section of the circuit and sharing the material. But otherwise, everybody, there was a certain amount of competition of course.

**Roy Fowler:** We'll come onto that in time, just to get the structure. [background noise] That threw me ... It's all based in Soho Square. You reported to Soho Square and waited for an assignment, is that the idea,

**Norman Fisher:** Or if you'd had an assignment handed out the previous day you simply went straight there by whatever means. Movietone actually was rather fragmented. Actually, it started in Newman Street, it was the head office, we had a garage and workshop up at Fitzroy Square and we had a library some place else, we had a bit of it in D'Arblay Street, bits and pieces all over the place. And then eventually we moved from Newman Street to head office in Soho Square with theatre and editing and offices, and we also had a bit in Great Russell Street as well which was the accounts. So really we were split up all over the place. And it really wasn't until eventually in 1961 when we moved to Denham that we got everything under one roof, including the library. The library at that point was fragmented over about six different places, Perivale and D'Arblay Street and the rest of it, but we got a specially built building which Rank built for us and the library was at last altogether in one piece.

**Roy Fowler:** Where would you report to yourself, where did the cameramen hang out?

**Norman Fisher:** Well in the office, first of all in Newman Street and then in Soho Square.

**Roy Fowler:** Where you kept more or less busy all the time or was there a certain amount of waiting around for assignments?

**Norman Fisher:** There was a large amount of waiting around. I would say one would average in the course of a week about three or four assignments.

**Roy Fowler:** Were cameramen known for what, either their specialisation or versatility, were you expected to cover anything and everything?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes indeed, you were a jack-of-all-trades then.

**Roy Fowler:** OK, lets take a typical assignment then. You would be at Soho Square and you would be told to proceed on a job, did you have paper work? Did they actually hand you a thing to say this is your assignment or was it all verbal briefing?

**Norman Fisher:** It was all written out, giving you all the necessary information and contacts and times and so on. And you were briefed as much as possible but it was very much over to you. The attitude was well you're the guy out the front, go out and do it your way. Some cameramen were better on certain jobs than others were. When it came to say football, cameraman A would be possibly better than cameraman B because he was more enthusiastic about it.

**Roy Fowler:** What were the bread and butter stories, if any. Was football one? That was a weekly assignment presumably?

**Norman Fisher:** We used to talk about the four Fs, fashion, football and furry friends, you were always doing something in the zoo. So, these were the four Fs. We did a lot of fashion stuff, a tremendous amount of football. This was important for distribution purposes because exhibitors reckoned football was the stuff that brought the public in and in certain areas it was, so you were often going off to do the local football matches which was simply to please the one particular exhibitor, which was rather expensive. In the end we had to stop doing that sort of thing, it was getting too costly to send a crew out simply to do one match for one, for a one-off show.

**Roy Fowler:** You mean only that cinema would play that particular story? Just in that reel or would it go into all the reels?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes. It was a flyer in a single copy. Anyway, if it kept them happy you did it for goodwill's sake. But football and sport in general was very much the staple thing. And ... can you hang on a minute [ends abruptly]

**Roy Fowler:** ... Recording ... we're on side two now. So we broke off and we're in the thirties; you've said you don't remember that much about them but let's dig and see what we can find out. They talk about the newsreel wars, now was that something you remember from the thirties or not?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes, the competition bit. The real, if you can call it a war, the competition on the ground and skulduggery and the rest of it had largely ceased at the time I joined it, Movietone, that was earlier on ...

**Roy Fowler:** ... from when? The early thirties or the twenties?

**Norman Fisher:** The early thirties. One sort of thing that would happen is one company would get the exclusive rights to some sporting event such as the Cup Final, and the others would try to get in on it and that was when some of the mayhem went on. You know, sort of, the pirate cameramen might find a rather large individual alongside them who'd ease them out of the way or make it generally unpleasant.

**Roy Fowler:** Was there actual violence or just the threat of it?

**Norman Fisher:** No real violence at all.

**Roy Fowler:** People got leaned on?

**Norman Fisher:** But all sorts of other things went on. If somebody had the exclusive on say a test match, the others were capable of turning up with mirrors to shine in their lenses or put up balloons in front of cameras, you know, that sort of thing.

**Roy Fowler:** Did they set out to sabotage equipment, nasty tricks?

**Norman Fisher:** You may find a cable cut or something. But no a lot of that has been exaggerated. It had certainly stopped when I joined. Except of course on the ground you always tried to get the better stuff than the other guy, the idea of sabotaging equipment and stuff, that had stopped.

**Roy Fowler:** Were people, was a cameraman from Movietone, could he be friendly with somebody from Paramount or Gaumont British?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh indeed.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, you were all buddies together?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, we did meet in the pub afterwards and have a pint or two. But on the job one tended to be competitive because if somebody had got something which you didn't there was apt to be questions asked in the viewing theatre.

**Roy Fowler:** Of course. But it was friendly rivalry although it was quiet rivalry?

**Norman Fisher:** It was friendly rivalry, you could say that, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Right okay. In these early days of yours is there any one particular story or group of stories that stands out in your memory from before the war? One that gave you great pride for example? Or that put you in danger?

**Norman Fisher:** Mostly routine stuff. I don't think before the war I ever got anything which could be called a scoop by any means. On the other hand I don't think anybody else did. A scoop was simply a matter of luck and being in the right place at the right time when nobody else was. But these were relatively rare.

**Roy Fowler:** Gordon Craig, he was a personal friend or a family friend or was he very much your boss?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh he was very much the boss, he just happened to have a connection with my family that's all.

**Roy Fowler:** There's a story that he was the wrong Gordon Craig in terms of the knighthood, that it was intended for the theatrical designer, but because of his Tory party affiliations there was confusion and he was knighted. Is that something you can bear out?

**Norman Fisher:** No I couldn't frankly. Yes, he certainly had associations with the Tory Party, in fact we used to do a fair amount of filming for the Conservatives, they had a films division and we used to do a lot of work for that, through Sir Gordon of course.

**Roy Fowler:** And also it was Joseph Ball, was it not, at Tory Central Office? Did you have any dealings with him?

**Norman Fisher:** I remember the name.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you work on any of those political stories?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes.

**Roy Fowler:** People like what, Chamberlain ... and Baldwin had gone by then hadn't he?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes. One of the things I did get was Chamberlain's return from Hitler in 1939.

**Roy Fowler:** You were ... was it Northolt or Croydon?

**Norman Fisher:** Hendon.

**Roy Fowler:** Hendon, that's right, yes.

**Norman Fisher:** It was Hendon then. And he waved his little bit of paper ...

**Roy Fowler:** You filmed that did you? Did you?

**Norman Fisher:** As a matter of fact it's running at the moment in the MOMI [editor's note: Museum of the Moving Image], the newsreel exhibit there, with the REO van and there's a screen with the thing. Well that's running all the time that stuff, typical sort of newsreel stories of that sort of period.

**Roy Fowler:** That shot must be the most used in the history of motion pictures, certainly in this country, so tell us the story of how you got it.

**Norman Fisher:** Well we had two Movietone cameras there. And I was up at the top on the control tower for the arrival and we had our other camera on the ground, in the usual jam, because all the newsreels were there. And our camera jammed so it was over to me on long focus lens to get this piece of paper bit. All the other newsreels had it of course, this was not really a scoop because everybody was there.

**Roy Fowler:** But there is one specific piece of film that seems to be the one that's always used and was that Movietone or was that one of the others?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes that was mine actually, that's the one which always seems to come up.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. It's almost symbolic and emblematic. That's very interesting indeed.

**Norman Fisher:** No we ... After the war we did quite a lot of Conservative Party films, mostly shot at Brighton Studios in fact, with actors and the rest of it.

**Roy Fowler:** Well we'll come to that. It's interesting the political connection between Movietone and the Conservative Party. Do you think there was any political bias to the reel, the newsreel as it was put out?

**Norman Fisher:** No, I would say certainly not. You have to be careful over that one. But remember you see, part of the ownership of Movietone was the Daily Mail, they had the forty nine percent, and 20th Century Fox had the fifty-one. They had the controlling interest. But the Daily Mail had the other bit, so through Daily Mail, of course, that was where the Conservative influence was.

**Roy Fowler:** Craig had come from where? Had he been a newspaperman?

**Norman Fisher:** No. He'd had various film companies of his own; most of which seemed to pack up one way or another. But I'm very vague on his background in fact. But we also had Sir Gerald Sanger who was a close friend of Lord Rothermere, and ... so you can see there was quite a, sort of, Conservative flavour to the whole thing, but this I will say - it never showed in the reel, we had to be scrupulously accurate on this. Obviously we'd do say, a Conservative Party conference ♦ the annual conference, but we'd also do a Labour Party conference and a Liberal conference, each one was given the exactly the same amount of footage. It was measured to the frame, so that ... it was a straightforward reporting. Alright you'd have Churchill doing the key speech at the Tory Conference and so on and so forth, or Atlee, they all got the same footage.

**Roy Fowler:** I was going to ask you - do you have any recollections of politicians of the time off-camera, because on camera they're treated extremely well, are they not? There's no aggressive interviewing at all. Do you have any memories of Chamberlain ad-libbing anything or dropping his guard in any respect?

**Norman Fisher:** Not really, as you say the interviews with politicians then were not done on a question and answer basis at all, it was just ♦ Would you care to say a few words sir? ♦ And sir did his few words. But there was no challenging or questioning. This was understood.

**Roy Fowler:** And this continued quite a long while.

**Norman Fisher:** You did the doorstep stuff at No 10 and somebody would have a mike and would say ♦ Would you care to say a few words sir? ♦ and if he said no you knew then that was that.

**Roy Fowler:** One last area to talk about before we come onto the war years, was it a good living?

**Norman Fisher:** It wasn't the ... at that time newsreel people tended to be slightly better off than their equivalents in feature studios, leaving out of course, key people, such as lighting cameramen who'd be on a contract or something like that, but it was a steady job. And it didn't pay the greatest but you were better off very often than people in other areas in the film business.

**Roy Fowler:** Who were laid off continually?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, exactly, were laid off. That was one thing about it, that it was a permanent job.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you have a desire to switch over in to features or were you dedicated to newsreel?

**Norman Fisher:** Not really but subsequently I got all the shortened documentary film work, so I was less concerned with newsreel. But this was later on.

**Roy Fowler:** After the war? Let me ask you, do you remember the sort of money you made before the war?

**Norman Fisher:** I think my salary as a cameraman in 1939 would be about £15 a week.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh that wasn't at all bad for the time? Were there modest fiddles to expenses? I stress modest.

**Norman Fisher:** Well one sometimes stretched them a little.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, so that was an augmentation of income to some extent.

**Norman Fisher:** To a very very small extent. There's no, sort of, real dishonesty about it. One just might have an extra taxi or something to make up for something else.

**Roy Fowler:** Regarded as perks presumably?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, yes it was really.

**Roy Fowler:** It might be interesting to ask you the pressures on the newsreel leading up to the war, because what £38 or £39 were rather intense years in many ways weren't they? The comings and goings and preparations for war, do you have a memory of these months?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes. One really wasn't thinking in terms of war in 1937 or £38, one was becoming aware of the possibility of it about 1939, but as a prosperous period for the newsreels, I mean, the cinemas were going full blast and the newsreels were selling and it was a popular feature in cinema programmes. The ... of course, during the war the newsreels had quite an

important part, lots of us were overseas, but all the material in the war was pooled anyway but of course, it was still, newsreel was still an important part of any cinema show, particularly in the war.

**Roy Fowler:** Well let's come to the outbreak of war. What was the immediate effect on you and the newsreels? Or upon Movietone?

**Norman Fisher:** Well we then came under the Ministry of Information.

**Roy Fowler:** The cinemas closed immediately so what effect did that have?

**Norman Fisher:** The cinemas reopened again, yes, there was no instant devastation, you had this period of the 'phony' war and you know the cinemas were doing quite well then.

**Roy Fowler:** So people even then weren't laid off?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh no no. Quite a number of newsreel personnel such as myself, of course, were made war correspondents and shipped overseas.

**Roy Fowler:** Had there been planning for war by the newsreels do you know? Or by the Ministry of Information, were there plans already prepared?

**Norman Fisher:** Not as far as I know.

**Roy Fowler:** How did it affect you? What happened when war broke out?

**Norman Fisher:** Well, I was almost immediately signed up as a war correspondent and went over to the BEF [British Expeditionary Force] in France.

**Roy Fowler:** Were you then in the service or not?

**Norman Fisher:** No, the war correspondent had a sort of ambiguous situation. He wasn't actually in the armed forces. He was still a civilian but in uniform and given an honorary rank without any executive power. I mean you'd have an honorary rank of captain but you had no executive authority. And you were in fact a civilian in uniform.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you get any training at all as a war correspondent or was it just a straightforward continuation?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes you simply did what you'd always been doing and it was very... you worked in conjunction with the service PR Units. The RAF had its public relations unit and so had the army. The navy somehow never had it to the same extent and it was a bit haphazard with the navy. You worked in conjunction with the service PR set ups and it was over to you really to say what you wanted to do and for them to say whether it was possible or not and if it was a supply of transport and if necessary a conducting officer, but it was largely left over to the cameraman to say what he wanted to do and where he wanted to go.

**Roy Fowler:** Did your pooling start immediately?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. And you were assigned to the BEF?

**Norman Fisher:** My first assignment in fact was with, what was then known as the Advanced Air Striking Force which was based at Rheims, and I did a few months then, and we had another cameraman with the BEF HQ at Arras. He went sick and I took over his job, I left the airforce and went over to the army instead. And it was all a period of scratching to find something to shoot. I mean it was the phoney war in other words and there wasn't much, there was no action to film, so you went around finding various units and trying to rake something up. Doing exercises and this sort of thing. It was quite hard graft finding enough material as a matter of fact. And then of course, well, May 10th 1940, up went the balloon and of course our feet hardly touched the ground after that.

**Roy Fowler:** Were you still in France on May 10th ?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, I was in Paris as a matter of fact and had to make a dash back to Arras. From there on well we sort of advanced until we had to come back in a very great hurry. We got quite a lot of material but it was all chaos and it was difficult really to get at what was going on because nobody really knew. But, so anyway as far as the Movietone crew, which was myself and Martin Gray were concerned we eventually had to evacuate from, not Dunkirk, Boulogne, taking with us what equipment we could carry which wasn't very much and we had to leave the vehicle. So back to here. And shortly after that I was back here for really only a few weeks and then was shipped out to the Middle East to join the navy as a correspondent, the Eastern Med fleet at Alexandria, and so I was a naval war correspondent from there on. One of the things you could do as a war correspondent, you could interchange your services, you could do a bit of navy and a bit of army and any RAF stuff as well. But most of the RAF stuff was, well when it came to operational, the flying was done by the service film units. The RAF Film Unit was based at Pinewood and they did most of the operational stuff from there.

**Roy Fowler:** Well again, let's talk about your war, the kind of stuff that you were doing. Incidentally have you been interviewed by the Imperial War Museum?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, I got quite a lengthy one.

**Roy Fowler:** I should imagine yes a lot of the detail then is recorded there. What were the salient aspects of your war activity?

**Norman Fisher:** I'll just refer to this for a moment.

**Roy Fowler:** Now these are diaries from the time, are they, that you carried with you?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh no, I've made these up later on, since. I did keep diaries at the time but not in this form. This is a sort of assembly of everything. [searches through diaries] Yes, war:

October; travelled to France; accredited war correspondent at RAF Advanced Air Striking Force at RAF HQ at Rheims. No further record after that. 1940 with Advanced Air Striking Force, France; snow scenes; aeroplanes in the snow standing still; Captain Balfour inspects RAF; visit Rheims airfield; Winston Churchill visits RAF; arrival AOC&C Air Marshall Barrett; left for Metz; visited Maginot line near Metz; returned Rheims; return of leaflet raid over Vienna and Prague which was one of the first RAF operations dropping leaflets over Vienna and Prague. And they landed back at Rheims. I think they were ... what was the long aeroplane? Anyway it doesn't matter ...

**Roy Fowler:** Now what sort of period are we talking about this coverage?

**Norman Fisher:** January 15th 1940. Left for BEF HQ at Arras, that's when I changed over to the army. And Paris oh yes Paris. January 24th patrol demonstration; 28th presentation of colours to Royal Ulster Rifles, and so on, and so forth; 30th First militia fighting unit in France, I don't know what that was actually; contacted Indian unit - oh yes, you could scrape up something with Indians doing Indian dancing or something like that. You see all of this is very dull stuff.

**Roy Fowler:** So things like this were staged for the camera were they?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes oh yes, all these units were very happy to have you, it relieved the boredom a bit.

**Roy Fowler:** As you say, it was the phoney war.

**Norman Fisher:** Arranged church parade with Royal Irish Fusiliers ...

**Roy Fowler:** Now how much of this would have been used eventually do you think back home?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh quite a lot because it was considered as good for morale, if mum could see her boy in ... you know, with the army all fit and well, that sort of thing.

**Roy Fowler:** How did the pool work? You sent stuff back, did everyone have access to that? Because the individual reels were still making their own reels up? There wasn't one newsreel during the war.

**Norman Fisher:** No, except I think there was a Ministry of Information reel, but the thing was whoever shot the material, whether it was for newsreel, Army Film Unit, RAF, Navy, it all went in the pool and subject to censorship everybody shared it. And of course, the film was coming from many sources. We were getting film from France. And of course one did get hold of a certain amount of enemy material as well, that used to arrive somehow or another. But everything went in a pool and was subjected to censorship. And if passed everybody had it. There was no such thing as one newsreel company simply having exclusive material.

**Roy Fowler:** Now, that would be on the war footage, but they obviously at home were covering their individual stories. I imagine here that wasn't all pooled was it?

**Norman Fisher:** Now I wouldn't be sure on this, I would think not if it didn't involve any armed forces.

**Roy Fowler:** Dear god .... excuse me ... I'm sorry [tape recording interrupted] ... So, again, I've lost track because of all those interruptions. Yeah we were talking about the home front.

**Norman Fisher:** Yes now, I must say, for practically the next three years I had no contact with the home front at all. I was abroad continually.

**Roy Fowler:** Were you?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** No leave or very brief spells back here?

**Norman Fisher:** I think in three years I had one brief spell back here. But I ... one thing was that that if you came back and stayed back too long of course you got a call-up card. You were still a civilian, you see.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes of course you were very liable for that weren't you?

**Norman Fisher:** So really to keep going on the job I simply had to stay away and that applied with most of us, we ...

**Roy Fowler:** Were you in to fairly hairy situations? Was it a dangerous life? Were you shooting combat footage?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh there were some nasty moments but ... see I'm still here in 1940.

**Roy Fowler:** Well I won't burden you with going through all the stuff you've done for the Imperial War Museum because if they've covered it then obviously it's a matter of record. So we don't need to go into in great detail. What I'd love to get is your overview, your impressions of the period operating in that capacity.

**Norman Fisher:** Yes well yes, it was a matter of deciding what you wanted to do and get the facilities for doing it through the various service PR set-ups. And the navy, my next assignment was naval war correspondent and this was rather a sticky one. All you could do really in the case of the East Med Fleet was to go out with the Fleet every time it put to sea, and see what you could get. There was a certain amount of, I wouldn't say resistance ashore, but a lack of enthusiasm to give you the facilities. But once aboard a ship, they couldn't have been better, they'd give everything they could possibly do for you. And so one went out and hoped to get something. Alright you got a certain amount of air attack, but when it came to naval engagements they ... one of the problems the navy had was making contact with the Italians who weren't exactly enthusiastic about coming out at all, and generally speaking had faster ships so they could move back a bit.

**Roy Fowler:** I think that was very sensible of them.

**Norman Fisher:** Another difficult thing with the navy that operated at this end was they had a curious censorship policy on film and photography that so many things that they considered could not be shown because of security. And if you photographed a warship at sea it gave away outline, camouflage, armament, radar and so on and so forth, so it was censurable. So it was rather daft going to sea with the navy and not showing a ship, you see. Well actually it wasn't that bad, but this is rather the way it started off, but you could not show the damage to HM ships, so if you'd got a jolly good shot of a bomb exploding on a ship it was automatically censurable because it showed the damage. And the navy in its wisdom destroyed everything that was censurable instead of putting it into cold storage for the record. In all the time I spent with the navy, because I had two spells of that in 1940-41 and then in 43 I shot a fair amount of film, some of it quite spectacular and there's hardly a foot of that remains now.

**Roy Fowler:** That's sad, very sad.

**Norman Fisher:** What they ... yes, I mean when it came to action stuff, there's very little remains I know in the Movietone Library, because I've checked there, of anything I shot.

**Roy Fowler:** You mean it was destroyed at the time or has been lost since?

**Norman Fisher:** A bit of each actually. The navy destroyed a lot of stuff. And subsequently when Movietone Library was in a bit of a chaos being split up over about six different places, I think a certain amount of material vanished then. If you remember after the war CBS was making the series Victory at Sea.

**Roy Fowler:** It was NBC actually, I remember it.

**Norman Fisher:** Oh it was NBC, I'm sorry. Yes NBC. And they were scrapping every source to get naval material. And of course here as well, and at that point we could hardly supply anything from Movietone and it seemed, this seemed to apply everywhere. They could just not get hold of enough naval material, barring a few Malta convoy things. Now I knew pretty much everything I had shot with the navy and listed all this stuff but we could not lay hands on it at all. What had happened I know not.

**Roy Fowler:** Well that's a tragedy.

**Norman Fisher:** With a split up library such as we had then, there's a tendency for things to disappear out of the back door, you know.

**Roy Fowler:** Collectors? Or other libraries? Or people just taking what they'd taken? It's a bit difficult to know why people would want to disappear with it?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh somebody would want a bit of something for some purpose or other...

**Roy Fowler:** A bit depressing ....

**Norman Fisher:** Have you got it, it would be handed out and not checked and not listed. I'm not saying a lot of that went on at all, but I know a lot of stuff that they thought they had from the records simply wasn't there.

**Roy Fowler:** What was the equipment that you were using especially on board ship? What did you take with you?

**Norman Fisher:** I used to have a Newman Sinclair and an Eymo, sort of standard equipment. I mean you had to have stuff which you could handle yourself. And I think I had the heaviest Newman Sinclair ever built. It was built like a battleship, of course, as all the Newman Sinclairs were but I had one of the only three four-lens turret Sinclairs which Sinclair built. And there were only three. I had one of them and it was heavier than any other one. And Harry Rignold in the Army Film Unit had the other one and I don't know who had the third one. But anyway, I lived with this thing for about three years. It was very efficient, very reliable.

**Roy Fowler:** If it had to be serviced what, were you capable of servicing it yourself? Or where would it be taken?

**Norman Fisher:** Well if it needed any servicing, as a matter of fact it never did in three years, apart from a bit of oiling and so on and so forth it never gave any trouble. But being with the navy of course, had there had been any serious trouble, I think the navy could have handled that in one of the service depot ships. But the Eymo was handy. It was a 100ft Eymo, was handy in tight spots where the Newman might have been a bit hefty to deal with in the ...

**Roy Fowler:** What were some of the principal stories you covered, theatres of war or specific actions?

**Norman Fisher:** Well of course starting with the BEF, it was just a matter of grabbing what you could, air attack and that sort of thing. And then subsequently with the navy, well in the early stages it was just a matter of getting your bombardment and the odd air attack, nothing specific, it was just a matter of grab ... it wasn't a complete story in other words.

**Roy Fowler:** What were the theatres of war that you served in?

**Norman Fisher:** France, the Middle East, Singapore. Ceylon for a bit but that could hardly then be called a theatre of war, I mean it was on a war basis but the only thing that happened in my time in Ceylon, and it was before I'd even arrived there from Australia, the Japanese bombed Trincomalee and Colombo. They had a fleet in the Bay of Bengal. There were carriers and they carried out a bomb attack on Trincomalee and Colombo and that was the extent of the action. Of course, in Singapore, as the soon as the balloon went ... I was there before Pearl Harbour of course, when the Japanese came in and attacked Malaya at the same time. So we got what we could starting, you know, up in Malaysia and retreating once again to Singapore picking up what we could. The Army Film Unit was there as well. Bryan Langley was in charge of that then, so we were together quite a bit on that, but eventually, of course, we had to quit and ... The Japanese at that point had reached [the] Johor [Strait] and were lining up to attack Singapore. And so we really had to get out at that point and go over to Java as it then was. And I didn't do

terribly much there, a lot of nice scenery, and one was dealing with the Dutch, of course, then. And then finally, of course we then had to get out and Australia was the only place we could go then. It all sounds awfully unspectacular but it was just a matter of picking up bits and pieces all the time. You couldn't say you'd done any specific action, you'd been present probably at an action, but it wasn't that sort of war, really. So I got a certain amount of stuff in Singapore but that again was mostly air attack and troops in retreat. But Australia, of course, well nothing was happening there except the Americans were beginning to arrive in. And Movietone had a set up in Sydney, we had our own office there. And then back over to Ceylon because it looked as if Ceylon might be eventually invaded so I went over there and it wasn't invaded so I had a jolly nice six months there. Once again scratching round for all sorts of material to make up something, something at least to send back. Then I subsequently went back again to the Middle East, to Alexandria and joined the navy once again. At this point, of course, the Germans had invaded Greece and were landing on Crete and the navy was sent up from Alexandria to give what air support it could for our troops' evacuation from Crete. And ... [ends abruptly]

**Roy Fowler:** Side three. Can we just overlap that Norman, you were saying about the invasion of Crete and the material you were able to get.

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, the navy was sent out and got what air support it could for the evacuation of our troops from Crete and we had a fairly large force. There was one carrier, Formidable, on which I was aboard, and we had several cruisers and the usual destroyers. But the Germans at that point had concentrated a large part of their airforce in Southern Greece, including as we found out later on, one of their crack dive bomber squadrons, the Goering Squadron. And of course they came at us like all hell and this made some really good stuff. Ships were hit, and actually in one day we lost a cruiser and two destroyers, in one day. One of the destroyers was the Kelly with Mountbatten on board, the famous In Which We Serve one, and so anyway all this was good spectacular stuff. We on the Formidable were hit about four times and had casualties and lost all our aircraft which had flown off and couldn't land on again because the flight deck had been damaged too badly. So we lost our aircraft, they had to ditch.

**Roy Fowler:** Were you the only cameraman covering this?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Does that material survive or was it also heavily censored and destroyed?

**Norman Fisher:** It must have been heavily censored because it doesn't exist any more. I should think in the three days I must have shot a couple of thousand feet and all of it good stuff. But apparently it no longer exists and it's certainly not in the Movietone Library, I don't know if it's in the Imperial War Museum Archive but I don't think it is.

**Roy Fowler:** What would have happened to that raw stock that you'd exposed, who then took it over, did the navy take it over?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, you handed it over to navy PR in Alexandria and they arranged for it to be flown back.

**Roy Fowler:** Still unprocessed?

**Norman Fisher:** Unprocessed. Yes it was processed here. And you could in fact fly stuff back via Gibraltar. Of course, I never heard anything more after I'd shipped it off. But there's every reason to believe that that sort of material and a lot of other stuff that I shot for the navy, and other cameramen, doesn't survive any more.

**Roy Fowler:** An interesting point then for researchers listening to this tape to try and find out what happened to that stuff. Where and when and under whose authority it disappeared. There's not a lot of point in going into the war time detail if you've covered it with the Imperial War Museum because they've got a marvellous archive there, so we know that will be preserved.

**Norman Fisher:** I know I did four cassettes for them. I'm just trying to think who it was, I'm sorry his name's gone for the moment. Doesn't matter. Anyway they've got it and I've got a copy of it.

**Roy Fowler:** An estimable oral history resource that. So bring us forward in time to what the next major watershed when - was it peace? Or was there still anything to cover in the war which you haven't covered for the war museum?

**Norman Fisher:** Well my next major assignment was off to Palestine as it then was.

**Roy Fowler:** During the war still?

**Norman Fisher:** No, the war was over.

**Roy Fowler:** This is post-war. Right. How did the war end for you, you were still with the navy?

**Norman Fisher:** Now what was doing? Well, just a minute, I have to think back here .....

**Roy Fowler:** You'd remained a civilian throughout? yes?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes. Now when did I get back here ... I can turn it up I think ...

**Roy Fowler:** OK I'll stop. [tape stops]

**Norman Fisher:** [tape resumes] I finally returned to the UK on the 17th April 1945.

**Roy Fowler:** From where? From the Med?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, from the Mediterranean, I returned on the HMS Renown to the UK via Gibraltar and after that I was no longer a war correspondent. Peace had broken out. The next assignment was ... at this time, Spyros Skouras was president of Twentieth Century Fox and was heavily involved in Greek war relief, following of course the occupation of Greece and the civil war and the rest of it. So I was assigned to Spyros Skouras for a trip to Greece to see how the

relief work was going. That took up, about, the better part of three weeks, no about a month, yes, about a month travelling around in Greece with Spyros Skouras.

**Roy Fowler:** What was Spyros Skouras like?

**Norman Fisher:** He was great fun, apart from his English which was ... fractured. Spyros was great. It was rather interesting that in the course of this trip we visited a village called Skourorion which was inhabited entirely by Skourases, almost all his family were there. They were in a pretty sorry state after the occupation. VE Day, German surrender in Europe. Now I was away when that happened, in Greece, I wasn't in on VE Day here. I'm sorry I'm waffling here ... I don't quite know where to go from here.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. rather than get involved in that kind of detail ... when did the newsreel revert to any kind of peace time structure, how long did the pool material continue for example?

**Norman Fisher:** I wouldn't be sure about that, it seemed to revert almost immediately to the normal newsreel.

**Roy Fowler:** I have a feeling. I don't know if this is so, but the chances are that the newsreels did to a very large extent retain their identity during the war, it was only the censurable material and the war footage that was pooled. I think probably they were covering the domestic front individually, wouldn't you say?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, I should say so, and they always appeared on the screen with their own label.

**Roy Fowler:** Very much so. Did you notice any differences coming back after an absence of five years?

**Norman Fisher:** Well yes, all in all it would be about four years, getting on for about five years with two breaks in between, I had two brief breaks back in the UK. After have done this Spyros Skouras bit, of course, I was then shipped to Palestine and things were obviously brewing up there. Each company had its own cameraman there. As a matter of fact I arrived in Jerusalem the day after they blew up the King David Hotel.

**Roy Fowler:** Would you have been in the King David, staying there?

**Norman Fisher:** I wouldn't have been staying in it, but all the press always used to gather in the bar in the basement every day to swap beers and stories and everything else and it was into that bar, it was the Stern gang which did this. Captain Begin was in charge then. And they suddenly arrived dressed as Arabs, offloaded milk churns from a truck, dragged them into the bar and said get out of here which every body did, but it was too late to give any sort of alarm. Now as a matter of fact, it turned out afterwards, no it was the Ergon, not the Stern gang, They had in fact, you see one wing of the King David was Army Headquarters. And they did phone up and say we advise that you evacuate the building and nobody took it seriously and they stayed in the building and of course the casualties were quite heavy and the whole of the wing came down.

And ... so at least other cameramen, there were three, one from Pathe, old Ken Gordon as a matter of fact, and a guy from the then short-lived Metro News, and Jimmy Gemmell from Paramount, so there were four of us all in all there. Oh and Ronnie Noble from Universal, five. And everybody it so happened that day had dispersed and gone off to do other things and nobody was on the spot when the King David had gone up. And I'd been hung up in Cairo and only arrived the day after and had a lot to shoot then, all the aftermath and the dragging out the bodies and the rest of it. That was my starting point in Palestine.

**Roy Fowler:** How long were you stationed there?

**Norman Fisher:** About five months if I remember rightly and most of the stuff we were doing, we were getting a number of these illegal immigrant ships which were coming in and this always made good material and you could scratch up odd stories here and there. But the main thing was dealing with the immigrant ships. Yes, I was there about five months and then somebody else took over and I came back home then.

**Roy Fowler:** Do you count it as a dangerous assignment?

**Norman Fisher:** Compared to war time, no not really.

**Roy Fowler:** Has the shape of the newsreels changed or is it very much the way it used to be?

**Norman Fisher:** You're talking about this period?

**Roy Fowler:** Yes in now what, the late forties, just after the war.

**Norman Fisher:** No pretty much the same formula.

**Roy Fowler:** We have a new government now, a Labour Government. Did you have any coverage to make of them? I suppose inevitably.

**Norman Fisher:** We did all the usual stuff which goes with an election, speeches and so on and so forth.

**Roy Fowler:** What about equipment, has that changed at all or is it still the old pre-war stuff?

**Norman Fisher:** It's pretty much the same old stuff, except that at Movietone we got two new all combined system sound cameras from America and went over to Western Electric sound instead of the old AEO-light. The Wall camera was equipped with Westrex sound. Better quality and more portable as far as the amplifier was concerned. I've got a picture of it somewhere there.

**Roy Fowler:** It was still very cumbersome?

**Norman Fisher:** It was heavy but no heavier than a standard Mitchell camera, not blimped of course. Although we subsequently did, when we were involved in a lot of studio shooting, we got hold of a Mitchell blimp and we found we could fit the Wall camera quite happily into that. It

was the same shape and format. So we used to use it with a blimp in the studio, still with the advantage of combined system sound.

**Roy Fowler:** Did Movietone have its own studio?

**Norman Fisher:** Not then no. We used to have a small studio way, way back in Newman Street which was used for interviews. It was sound proofed and it had a glass window and you put your camera behind the glass window. The cameras were, of course, rather noisy then, you could shoot an interview in the studio from behind the glass alright without having any camera noise.

**Roy Fowler:** So it's still very much the old peacetime routine for you, did you stay that way or did you branch out into new areas?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, we went to quite an extent into doing shorts for cinema distribution. Certain number for the Conservative Party for propaganda purposes and Twentieth Century Fox wanted shorts as well so we were doing quite a large amount of shorts and documentaries. As a matter of fact I was doing the bulk of this, I really wasn't doing much newsreel stuff at all.

**Roy Fowler:** Now were these studio based or again ocaation orientated?

**Norman Fisher:** Both. For a studio we used Brighton Studios, they were quite well equipped.

**Roy Fowler:** You'd become a lighting cameraman by now?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, and Brighton had other advantages. If you wanted exteriors you had everything all round there.

**Roy Fowler:** I'm trying to think of the man who owned Brighton Studios, I can't think of his name?

**Norman Fisher:** Ah yes, I'm sorry I've forgotten it as well.

**Roy Fowler:** I imagine that was the connection because he was a very active Tory was he not?

**Norman Fisher:** Not to my recollection, our only reason for using Brighton was that it was very cheap and convenient for London. We could get actors down any time. I don't remember that whoever owned the studio had any sort of Conservative leanings. Yes, now a guy called Tommy Tomlinson, I think it was, had bought the studio from its original owner and he was going to make his own films there. Well he started off, I think it was Tommy Tomlinson, he was going to make his own films there, and he started off on one and ran out of money half way through and I don't think he ever finished it. He was only too happy to lease the studios. So we got a very good deal there. I think we got that studio with the facilities including a resident carpenter and electrician, etc for something under £40 a day.

**Roy Fowler:** That isn't the name, it's obviously a subsequent owner that I was thinking of whom I worked with. I used the studio myself a few times, but that was later, much later. What then developed for you, this went on for how long, the short subjects and Conservative Party films?

**Norman Fisher:** I was mainly doing that sort of stuff for the rest of my time with Movietone. It was obviously interspersed with a certain amount of newsreel stuff. If we were going to cover the Grand National we needed everybody, in between shorts we were back on the newsreel again.

**Roy Fowler:** What were the short subjects, were they operating under some kind of general title or where they purely random subjects?

**Norman Fisher:** They were random subjects. For instance we made a short for BOAC as it then was which went out under the title of Sudden Summer. It involved ... it was a sort of travelogue of four countries served by BOAC, this is what it amounted, and there was sequence in each country, that sort of thing.

**Roy Fowler:** And it got a theatrical release?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes. Yes. For Fox we did a, we had Peter Hampton then as a director/scriptwriter and we did a series of shorts, some with a sporting angle to them, and they ... a sort of general interest two-reelers and comedy shorts. These went out all over the place. We did one or two ... we did a series of comedy shorts at Brighton called Life with Hardwicks who, which is quite ... These caught on and they went all round the world. They were pretty crude but we had a good director on there. A guy called Peter Whale, who you may know. He handled most of these. The Fox ones often had a sporting angle to them. Come Farnborough Air Show, for instance, we made a complete short on that, and many others beside. I can turn them all up, they're all here, but anyway. So, shorts were taking up a lot of the effort and of course the newsreel revenue was falling off and tv was making itself felt.

**Roy Fowler:** We're talking now of the fifties still, or are we into the sixties?

**Norman Fisher:** Fifties going into the sixties and ultimately into the seventies. As you appreciate the cinema audiences were falling off. Exhibitors were no longer very keen to have a newsreel at all, with tv running its own daily news, and so the revenue from the newsreel was falling. In fact it was running at a loss and being largely supported by the shorts and other things. Commercial films and things like that were paying for what was left of the newsreels.

**Roy Fowler:** Had there been cut backs? Had people been laid off??

**Norman Fisher:** No that came a bit later. Well I was made redundant in 1978, but really I'd run my course then. I mean I would have retired at 65 anyway. I was given a handshake and retired at 61. So ... but after that I was still working for Movietone on a freelance basis so it was an easy sort of let down. And then the final shutdown of Movietone was 1979 when the whole operation was dropped and they simply retained the library which is still there and doing well at Denham. So Movietone now really only exists as a library.

**Roy Fowler:** Were you a cameraman throughout that period or were you directing to some extent towards the end on those short subjects you were working on? Or was there a director assigned as well?

**Norman Fisher:** yes, yes, usually a director on the shorts, but of course, I mean in the newsreel and on certain other projects you had to act as director cameraman really, you had to do the two.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you ever have a wish to be a director as such?

**Norman Fisher:** No not really, I liked camera work.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, about Movietone, were they in your estimation good employers? You were with them for a long long time. What, over thirty years, thirty-two years.

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes, yes, yeah.

**Roy Fowler:** So you enjoyed working for them? It wasn't just a job?

**Norman Fisher:** No, no.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you regard their reel as the ranking one, is that the one you admired most, did you have much of a chance to see the opposition?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes, well I mean we used to run each other's reels. The whole thing, the whole of the newsreel business started to fall apart in the fifties and the first to go was Paramount. They were under direct American control and they were simply shut down at a week's notice, regardless of any ACTT agreements or anything like that. They just said chop. Then Universal joined up with Gaumont British and eventually they went. And next to go was Pathe, leaving Movietone on its own. It was generally predicted that Movietone would be one of the first to go. In fact we weren't, we were the last. Pathe were rather sore about that.

**Roy Fowler:** What, in general terms, happened to all the newsreel persons who were let go when the newsreels closed down? Did they get other jobs or leave the business?

**Norman Fisher:** Some of them got jobs in television or simply went over to freelancing.

**Roy Fowler:** Was it a difficult time for them do you think?

**Norman Fisher:** No, I don't think so, there was so much television stuff and some of them, all right, own equipment and set up on a freelance basis. And some of them did pretty well.

**Roy Fowler:** Was I, I made a mistake a moment ago, I said thirty years, it was forty years of course.

**Norman Fisher:** Forty one actually.

**Roy Fowler:** Forty one. This then is a silly question, I presume if you'd wanted to do anything else you would have within those forty years have made some effort to do it. You were happy with your work?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes indeed. At one stage I was wondering if it would be any better in the BBC but, anyway, so much short filming work was coming along I dropped that one. Just as well I did because the BBC ultimately has shut down its film unit at Ealing there. It's was depending rather more on contracting in.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you marry and have a family?

**Norman Fisher:** I married but we had no family.

**Roy Fowler:** I wondered the extent that peripatetic life would have affected family life, even married life. Was it a burden on the marriage, the absences?

**Norman Fisher:** No, no no I don't think it ever was. My wife was very understanding. Also she was teaching then and so she was well occupied if I was away. I mean you know ...

**Roy Fowler:** Was that a fairly general thing or would other of your colleagues have had a different story to tell, other newsreel cameramen?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh I think so. I know of one or two instances where family life was rather difficult, Daddy was away for too long. Some wives were more understanding than others. I was lucky.

**Roy Fowler:** Was it a good life on the road, was it uproarious, lots of activity of one kind or another besides work?

**Norman Fisher:** Not really. Apart from the odd pub session, a lot of us met up, the same job, that sort of thing.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you live well, was it a matter of good hotels and good restaurants? Or was it a very basic life?

**Norman Fisher:** Well one didn't go for the tops, that wasn't on. But you had reasonable hotel allowances, meal allowances and the ... yes it was quite a good life. There was a lot of ... monotony of doing the same sort of things all the time, it was often a question of not another football match, that sort of thing.

**Roy Fowler:** Also checking in and out of hotels I would have thought became boring.

**Norman Fisher:** You see you didn't on newsreels spend a lot of time away so it was rather a matter of one or two night stands or something like that depending on the job.

**Roy Fowler:** I had your stay in Palestine away and also long absence during the war.

**Norman Fisher:** Oh yes, well I moved round all sorts of hotels then. In the case of Palestine I wasn't staying in the King David which was the only decent hotel anyway. There were certain other ones but nothing very spectacular.

**Roy Fowler:** What about ACT, your connection with that. When did you join the union and under what conditions, under what circumstances?

**Norman Fisher:** I joined ACT in 1937 I think, the newsreel section was being formed then, much to the disapproval of certain employers in the business.

**Roy Fowler:** Were they out to sabotage the organisation?

**Norman Fisher:** Well, there was a lot of tooth sucking over it and one boss actually did, who shall be nameless, actually posted a notice to the effect that the management would view with displeasure any employees joining a union and a sort of slight hint that your job might be on the line. This caused fury as you can imagine and so everybody joined ACT. I mean even the waverers.

**Roy Fowler:** Really? That's a good result, reaction.

**Norman Fisher:** There were one or two good boys in Movietone who sort of thought their interest might not be well served by joining ACT but by and large, I think, we had pretty well a one hundred percent shop there.

**Roy Fowler:** Did ACT come onto the scene because people had been exploited before or had they been fairly treated and fairly paid?

**Norman Fisher:** Well, there was a lot of disparity in pay. It was obvious that some sort of working agreement had to be worked out, that there had to be minimum rates. Some paid better than others, Movietone was amongst the better paying and Universal were probably at the bottom of the list. So anyway, all the urge was there to form a newsreel section. There were sort of candlelit sessions in cellars in Greek Street to discuss all this. So anyway of course the result was that the Newsreel Association was formed to sort of deal with this. The companies all got together to form the Newsreel Association, and the resulting agreement with ACT was discussed with them as a body.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, who was organising from the ACT end? Was it George Elvin?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes it was George Elvin. He was the front man on the discussions which went on. So eventually we got an agreement with minimum rates and other conditions. As well I joined about the end of 1937 or something like that.

**Roy Fowler:** You must have a low number, a low union number?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes 7031. Of course, it lapsed a bit in the war so of course the thing was started again after the war and fresh cards were issued but I still have my old number 7031. I

retired in ♦78, at least you see I was still working as a freelancer for Movietone after ♦78. But when I finally turned in the camera, I said alright I'm fully paid up now. After Movietone shut down I really didn't do any more freelancing which was in ♦79.

**Roy Fowler:** I wonder what areas we've not touched upon at all or not developed fully. Is there anything that occurs to you that we might go into in a little more detail.

**Norman Fisher:** Yes apart from individual jobs, I can't really think of anything that's more or less the story.

**Roy Fowler:** Well are there any individual jobs you would like to talk about?

**Norman Fisher:** Well ...

**Roy Fowler:** Ones that were very important to you, in one way or another?

**Norman Fisher:** Well we had, just taken at random we had quite an interesting one which was commissioned. This was not commissioned to Movietone, it was to another company. We supplied the personnel. It was a special film for Princess Ashraf, who was the sister of the Shah of Iran and she wanted her own personal film made on lines of the work she was doing on behalf of women's status. And she was actually doing a fair amount in Iran, running all sorts of things. So anyway we spent a bit of time on that, in fact we did it in two sections and had two goes. We did manage to get it finished before the Shah got chucked out but it was very interesting to do, in fact.

**Roy Fowler:** You shot a lot of it in Tehran, in Iran itself, did you?

**Norman Fisher:** All of it was shot in Iran.

**Roy Fowler:** All of it, yes, right. Were you privy, part of the imperial life there? Did you see the scale on which they lived?

**Norman Fisher:** Well we didn't do anything with the Shah himself, but we did a lot of Ashraf in her place. She had quite a modest, I mean I wouldn't call it a palace, it was just a very nice large house in the north of Tehran, surrounded by about a battalion of troops. But she was quite easy to get along ... We did a lot of talk to camera stuff with her. She was interviewed by Lord Chalfont as a matter of fact on these occasions who was an old friend of the Shah's and he acted as interviewer on these. And we shot them all in her place. But you could sense what was coming. There was a lot of ... We were dependent for camera equipment and lighting on the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts which ran their own film set up. Had a very good studio actually and first class equipment, but we used to get a certain amount of tooth sucking from the crews they sent along. You could feel they weren't happy at all about this effort.

**Roy Fowler:** What was it that they weren't happy about, the system in Iran?

**Norman Fisher:** The working of, yes, the working for the regime.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, right. It wasn't the fact that the film was about women's liberation in Iranian terms?

**Norman Fisher:** Oh no no no no. It was the fact that they were doing it for a member of the regime which is not, which was becoming increasingly unpopular. In the end we didn't get much co-operation from them at all, because when we went out a second time we had to take our camera equipment and lighting from here. It cost the earth to fly it all out but on the other hand, I mean, Ashraf didn't mind what it cost at all, as you might expect.

**Roy Fowler:** Let's break.

**Roy Fowler:** Right we're on side four. So that was the grand life obviously, Iran in the last days of the Shah.

**Norman Fisher:** It was a very interesting film to do because it wasn't a country one would normally have travelled in anyhow and it was quite spectacular in places and ...

**Roy Fowler:** Was it a film intended for internal consumption in Iran?

**Norman Fisher:** No no.

**Roy Fowler:** No? For other countries?

**Norman Fisher:** It was purely for her own amusement. And in her place she had a magnificent viewing theatre with the latest equipment in it, you know. They could run Panavision and all the rest of it, all the latest stuff. No, it was just for her own, I don't know if she had any ideas of letting it out or simply just to show her friends. We shall never know what happened to it.

**Roy Fowler:** You don't know if any copies survived?

**Norman Fisher:** No, no no. I think the original negative went back to Tehran before the balloon went up, as I said an interesting film to do.

**Roy Fowler:** Anything else which especially sticks in your memory from this period?

**Norman Fisher:** What else have we done? I'm sorry I would have to refer to this, just to, just for a second ...

**Roy Fowler:** Right. I'll push the pause button ...

**Roy Fowler:** You were saying, I asked you if you intended writing about your career?

**Norman Fisher:** No, I think not, because it's already been done as far as cinema newsreels were concerned and of course compared with what's being done on the television now, in factual recording, it really was very tame stuff, by and large.

**Roy Fowler:** Cumbersome, laborious, but then of course technology has changed and satellites have transformed the world in so many ways, especially this area.

**Norman Fisher:** Yes. You see the same old jobs keep coming up, [referring to journal] the state opening of Parliament, hardy old annual that was. Preparations for royal wedding, that was quite spectacular because that doesn't happen all that often. oh no, the Coronation was way way back in 1953, that was a big job and a sort of once only really, that was back in 1950, no was ♦63 or ♦53?

**Roy Fowler:** The Coronation? 1953.

**Norman Fisher:** It was ♦53, that's right. I'm sorry ... I wish I had instant recall. Here we are, June 2nd 1953, Coronation of Elizabeth II.

**Roy Fowler:** Was that a pooled effort?

**Norman Fisher:** No, it wasn't. Pathe, well, Gaumont, Castleon Knight was clever and as soon as King George VI had died, he phoned up Technicolor and said I want every camera unit you've got. And they said oh is this for the funeral of the king? And he said no, it's not, it's for the Coronation of the Queen. I mean he thought that far ahead and he got every Technicolor unit which was available in Europe at the time. There were never very many available in Europe at the time. And he managed to raise, I think about ten, some of which were taken off feature production for the occasion. And so anyway, Eastmancolor was just beginning to come in then and Eastmancolor negative was in very short supply. Pathe managed to corner most of it. We decided to settle for Gevacolor which turned out to be not a very good ideas, because Kay Laboratories was setting up to process Gevacolor and they really hadn't got it working well at the time of the Coronation. And we had a few disasters in the lab and, of course, the quality of it then wasn't as good as Eastmancolor. After all Kodak's had had cross patent agreements with Technicolor to hold back Eastmancolor until Technicolor were ready to get out of the market with their three-strip system, and from there on, as you know of course, all Technicolor was shot on Eastman negative and processed by Technicolor. They were using Eastman negative having abandoned the three-strip system, which was terribly cumbersome, very good, to make the three colour separations in Technicolor labs. So of course the old three-strip camera was redundant. Some of them were converted over to 70mm for single strip for Todd A-O and wide screen systems. There's one sitting in the South Ken Science Museum and I think there's one in MOMI, one or two are dotted around.

**Roy Fowler:** Technicolor have one without the blimp, they don't even have a blimp. At least I believe that's true and Sammy's have one which may be the MOMI one and Bradford has one.

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, well that's where most of them ended up. So anyway that was the Coronation. It certainly made, well I have to say that Gaumont and C-K, scored hands down on that one. It came out as a complete film. It was called A Queen is Crowned I think. And of course you know that old 3-strip Technicolor, the quality was really superb in spite of the fact that the equipment was so cumbersome. If you're using it on features then that was no problem. So, I seem to be doing a short here called The Road to the Isles. That was a series of travelogues

which Movietone did in different areas of the country. The Road to the Isles were about Skye and the Islands.

RE: These ended up as two-reel films, going out as part of a programme with a Fox feature?

**Norman Fisher:** Yes, all these were done in black and white as a matter of fact, this would be 1952. We hadn't really gone into colour in a big way then. Subsequently, of course, at the very end we were putting out one newsreel a week in colour but it was a short one and it really wasn't so much a newsreel as a short. What was defeating things to the very end was the cost of the lab work was getting more and more expensive. And really the whole operation was uneconomic newsreel wise. But we'd gone over completely to colour then. Well, apart from scraping up a few more jobs.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, no there's no point in doing that. I wondered if anything had especially stuck in your mind?

**Norman Fisher:** I can't think of anything else.

**Roy Fowler:** Right then, are we at the conclusion?

**Norman Fisher:** Well unless there is anything else I can answer.

**Roy Fowler:** I think we've touched on everything that comes to my mind. I could ask you to look back over the newsreel years and say what you think about them?

**Norman Fisher:** Well as far as I personally was concerned they were happy years. One had one's ups and downs and an incredible amount of boredom as well. If there wasn't awfully much around, of course, you were sitting around, no really I can't say more than that.

**Roy Fowler:** OK right, well, I have to thank you then for your time, your effort and for your memories.

**Norman Fisher:** It's a pleasure ... well I hope you got something out of it.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh yes, without a doubt.

**Norman Fisher:** I hate the sound of my own voice on tape, I really can't bring myself to run it.

**Roy Fowler:** I think most ... it's like the difference between one's image in a mirror and one's image on a photograph, they are two quite separate things I think, and the voice one hears is quite different from that one hears playing back. Yes, I think most of us do that.

**Norman Fisher:** yes, yes, I actually dragged out one of the War Museum tapes yesterday just to refresh my memory as to what I sounded like and shut it off half way through.

**Roy Fowler:** Well I hope you won't do that with these. Good, thank you very much Norman.

**Norman Fisher:** OK, well I hope it's been useful

**Roy Fowler:** It has, good, thank you.