Alf Tunwell (newsreel cameraman)

by admin — last modified Aug 16, 2008 11:16 PM

BIOGRAPHY: Alf Tunwell entered the film industry as an office boy at the Warwick Trading Company before moving into their camera department. His first experience as a cameraman came in 1912 when he had the opportunity to film the Grand National at Aintree. In 1913 Tunwell took a at job at the Pathe Freres laboratory, before joining GB Samuelson at Worton Hall Studios. He returned to newsreel photography in 1929 at the newly formed British Movietone News, and during WWII he joined the Canadian Army where he trained cameramen. Tunwell took a job as chief cameraman at Metro News after the war. SUMMARY: In this short and fascinating interview with Ralph Bond, Tunwell offers a fascinating insight into the life of a newsreel cameraman. Specialising particularly in sports filming, he explains how good cameraman must be able to sense when to start the film rolling in anticipation of a goal or a wicket as it was impossible to shoot the play from start to finish. He also offers interesting details about equipment and working culture, and remains optimistic about the future of newsreel in cinema programs, stating his belief that it would always exist.

BECTU History Project - Interview No. 113

Transcription Date: 2001-11-09
Interview Date: 1963-10-31

Interviewer: Ralph Bond
Interviewee: Alf Tunwell

Tape 1, Side 1

Ralph Bond: This is a recorded tape interview with Alf Tunwell. ACTT member of very long standing, and pioneer in the newsreel section of the British film industry. Alf, during your, almost a lifetime in this industry, and particularly in newsreels, you must have seen an enormous number of changes. I wondered how you started in the business. How did you get your first job, what brought you into it?

Alf Tunwell: Well, of course I started in this business not on the technical side, I started as an office boy. Just filing, copying letters, in an office of the Warwick Trading Company, which of course was a film production company. I got tired of filing and running round posting letters, so every minute I could spare I popped up into the dark rooms to see just what went on.

Ralph Bond: Where was this?

Alf Tunwell: This was in Charing Cross Road. Er, of course that building today is not there, and er below us of course was the stables which belonged to Crosse and Blackwell. Well of course I

gained a certain amount of knowledge from the dark rooms, which only gave me a great craving to get up there permanent. But um, however the Warwick Trading Company belonged to er, a man named Ellis[?] and Bill Barker [NB. William George Barker]. Er, of course Bill Barker, very well known in the business. And they disagreed, and consequently was split up partnership. Barker moved to No.1 Soho Square and also retained the Ealing Studios. Well Ealing Studios then was, you might say, just a greenhouse. Two rough outside buildings, only used as dressing rooms. There was an old house which was used as a sort of office and dressing rooms. And um, I eventually went round to join Bill Barker who had called his company then, Barker Motion Photography, 1 Soho Square.

Ralph Bond: Next door to this building.

Alf Tunwell: Very next door to where I'm sitting now.

Ralph Bond: Yes, yes.

Alf Tunwell: And um, of course I went in there for a very short period as still the office boy. They seemed to know me as nothing else. But of course I didn't remain the office boy very long, I eventually got into the dark room permanently. And there I was winding film on frames, developing in hand rock cans and pretty rough it was. And in my spare time old Barker used to train us boys, and we were really only boys, to hand crank cameras. Ready for any great news event which would come along. And we used to spend our lunch times just going up onto the top floor with an old Moy camera and turning the handle and timing it with a watch to get the correct speed. Er, no automatics, no springs to wind up, just hand crank all the time. And of course must be on a tripod. Well my first great chance as I called it then, was in 1912, when he said I could go to the Grand National at Aintree. Well I remember that very well, great excitement for me, even to stay away from home one night. And er, we went up and was put into a position and checked by Bill Barker himself and Jack Smith who was his manager. They set our cameras up and all we had to do was to turn that handle and at the right speed, so that the horses came home at a reasonable pace.

Ralph Bond: [Laughs]

Alf Tunwell: Of course the great thing with Barker in those days was to bill that Grand National to be shown the same night, and this he did. No aeroplanes to bring the film back. No, it had to come back by rail, processed in Soho Square, a copy rushed off, rushed round to the Empire, Leicester Square, and put onto that screen before the final curtain came down. Today we can't do that.

Ralph Bond: No, why? Why can't we do it?

Alf Tunwell: We've got the aeroplanes, we've got all the technicians, but we have not speeded up newsreels. And that is one of the reasons why television today is just putting them out of business.

Ralph Bond: Alf, um, bringing the film back by train and then rushing it round, I presume by bicycle to the Empire Leicester Square, I heard that someone thought up the bright idea, I wonder if it was Barker, of actually developing the film on the train to save time. Is that true?

Alf Tunwell: Yes, that's perfectly true. He only did it one year [laughs] and um, he got rigged up, two vans, onto the train leaving Liverpool, made them into dark rooms, and developed the negative on the way back in tanks. There was one big snag. We couldn't get rid of the dust.

Ralph Bond: Oh.

Alf Tunwell: And um, we had a drying drum on there, and we could not rid of the dust, and so consequently I'm afraid he only did that one year. We never, we didn't print on that train, the time we got into Euston, that negative was dry. And could rush round, be rushed round to Soho Square and printed, cut of course before and titles were already made, so they'd only got to be stuck on. And of course there were quite a few titles because there was no commentary to bother about. But anyway, it was a great achievement, for that year, for those years, to get onto the screen the same night as what it was [sic] taken. And the Grand National usually starts at around 3.15 or 3.30 in the afternoon at Aintree, and you'd to get from Aintree to Liverpool Lime Street Station, into Euston, Euston to Soho Square, process and to the Empire Leicester Square. I think it was a very great achievement. And if newsreels had only gone along those lines, I think they would have been in a better position today than what they are.

Ralph Bond: After this exciting experience of your first newsreel job on the Grand National, what sort of work did you do after that? Did you continue in newsreels, or do other things?

Alf Tunwell: Well I... I applied for a job with Pathe Freres, in their laboratory. And I've got rather an interesting letter with me here, it's only a couple of lines, I'll just read it to you. It's dated 10th May 1913. "Dear Sir, We have taken your demand of 9th instant in consideration. And we are ready to give you a start at one pound a week. Yours sincerely, Pathe Freres Cinema Limited, Gazette Department." So I of course duly went along, took up my position in the laboratory, and I was in the printing room. Well there I remained for a period, and then I was persuaded to go down to Worton Hall, Isleworth to join G.B. Samuelson. The cameraman down there at the time was Walter Buckston, who also worked for Pathe as a cameraman during my period, and got to know me. I started at Worton Hall, Isleworth, in the dark room, on my own, just developing negative. Walter was in the studio, which was another glasshouse, very small, and the main house, the old house, Worton Hall itself was just used as props and dressing rooms, and offices. And Walter was turning on the camera, George Pearson was producing, and the title of the film was 'John Halifax, Gentleman'.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: I was in the dark room, just developing the negative, in the same old fashioned way, rocking dishes and hand frames there, taking 150 ft at a time, that was the length of a scene. Well I carried on there for a while and one day Walter Buxton was ill and couldn't attend the studio. And on that particular day, George Pearson had, I suppose, about 20 or 30 crowds there, supers. And of course in those days 20 or 30 was quite a lot, and although they were not getting

much money in those days, I think 5 shillings, or 7 and 6 was the limit, they had to work pretty hard for it and some of them came quite a distance. However, I was persuaded by George Pearson to go into the studio and turn this camera. And it was still turning, the old Debrie. And, in order that he could release his few supers, and save a bit of money, together with George Pearson, who helped me with the lighting, we shot the scene. Now of course that was my first real start in studio work. And then of course the war, and I joined up into the army in 1916. And after the war was over I went back to Samuelson. And went straight back onto the camera. And carried on with a few productions, all silent, and worked for some quite good producers.

Ralph Bond: And er, it wasn't until 1929 was it, that you finally went back and into the newsreel business where you've been ever since?

Alf Tunwell: Yes, in 1929, British Movietone News started in this country. They were the first sound newsreel. And I fell into that job in rather a strange way. I was very friendly with a man named Tommy Scales, who's a very well known man in the newsreel game. He also was at Pathe's when I was in the dark room. And I walked into him on one occasion in Wardour Street, and he said that he had just come back from the States, where he'd been over, looking at this new sound system, which Movietone were proposed putting on in this country. He said of course he'd left Pathe and was joining British Movietone News. British Movietone News consisted of Harmsworth and of course Fox 20th Century. Well, at the beginning of the foundation of that reel, a number of Americans came over to teach us how to use sound. And he said to me, he said "We're making a trial run on Sunday, of.. at Westminster... I've a stand," he said, "at Westminster Hospital." Which of course in those days was right facing the west door of the Abbey. And the King, that was er, the old King, was going there as a thanksgiving service... to attend a thanksgiving service after one of his illnesses. I'm referring of course to King George V. Ah, he said, "If you care to come along on Sunday, I'll show you how this sound camera works." I was pleased to do it. As a matter of fact I wasn't do anything at the time. I was out of work, and I was very anxious to know something about sound. I went along to this on Sunday morning and stood at the bottom of this stand, where Scales was on the top and a number of Americans were running up and down ladders, putting him right on things and explaining things to him. And eventually the platform on the top came clear. And Scales beckoned me to go up. Up I went. He started to explain to me just how a sound camera worked - it was an old Bell and Howell camera with an "AO" light, as they termed it, going in the back which was really making light on the side of the film. Up came an American, Ben Miggins[?] by name, who said, "When are you coming along to see Trueman Tally[?]?" And Trueman Tally[?] was the big noise from America who was starting off this newsreel. I said, "I'll come along any time you like." He said, "Well you'd better come along tomorrow (being Monday morning) at 10 o'clock. Come to 13 Berners Street." That was Fox's office in those days. Scales looked most surprised that such a thing should happen, as I don't think he had any idea of me getting a job with them when he invited me up there! But of course along I went on the Monday morning, saw Trueman Tally[?], and he signed me up there and then for a 10 year contract. I've never had a contract so long in my life. Of course, their idea was, that once they taught you, as they thought they were teaching you something, they were going to hold you. And, mark you, in that ten years my salary went up at various periods, so it wasn't a bad thing.

Ralph Bond: How many other newsreels were there at that time, apart from Movietone?

Alf Tunwell: Oh there were...do you want me to name them?

Ralph Bond: Well it would be useful.

Alf Tunwell: Well there was er, British Movietone News, there was Pathe Gazette, there was Universal News, there was Gaumont News, there was Paramount News and Topical Budget were either just in or just out, I'm not quite sure. They were just going out, fading out, or they were still in, I won't be certain of that fact.

Ralph Bond: But Movietone was the first sound newsreel here, and then I suppose the others had to follow suit in due course did they?

Alf Tunwell: Well Movietone made their first sound newsreel on the Derby in 1929. The next sound reel to start off was Gaumont and they made their first sound newsreel on the Armistice Day of 1929. And then of course, Paramount and eventually, after a very long period, quite a long period, Pathe decided to go sound. But their editor, who was Henry Sanders, he was very dubious about sound, he thought it was just a wonder, and would fade away.

Ralph Bond: A lot of other people thought that too!

Alf Tunwell: He couldn't see sound lasting. And he was very, very slow in coming forward. But the day, I always remember one incident he, the day they put out their first sound edition, he was very proud of the fact, and he walked into a certain public house one day and said, "Well boys, have you seen the first Pathe sound newsreel?" And one little fellow piped up, "Yes." And he said, "Where did you see it?" He said, "In the chamber of horrors at Madame Tussaud's." [Laughs]

Ralph Bond: The existence of five separate newsreels at that time Alf must have led to very strenuous competition between the reels to get exclusive stories. I imagine this must have given rise to quite a bit of excitement at times?

Alf Tunwell: Oh yes, in those days of course, although there was a fair number of newsreels, there was no Newsreel Association. And er, one of the objects of the Newsreel Association was to stop the various newsreel companies from over bidding each other, and therefore throwing the price up colossal for exclusive rights. Er, anyway at the beginning you see, the biggest bidder got the exclusive rights. Consequently was the other companies had to go out and what we termed "pinch". We er, of course usually got inferior positions, but at the same time, we covered a story. Very difficult at times, we got thrown out of places, we'd go back again and disguise ourselves. But of course the early days, as I've told you before, we had to use tripods. And that wasn't very easy to go into a football ground, or a racecourse and start trying to pinch pictures with a camera and tripod. I can quote you, for instance, the Grand National, was a great pinching job.

Ralph Bond: Oh yes, tell is about that.

Alf Tunwell: You see the Grand National was bought by one of the companies and er, when Movietone bought it, of course they shared it with Gaumont. That meant that the Paramount and

the other companies would be pinching. On one occasion I remember having to pinch from a barge, that went down the canal.

[Break in recording]

Alf Tunwell: I mean of course the canal which runs down the side of the Aintree racecourse. Everybody knows, for instance, the canal turn, that is of course, the end of the canal where you first approach the racecourse. Now I had to shoot from a barge and um, at, this barge was loaded with straw. I had a tripod, and camera, and just as we approached the canal turn, it was so timed when the horses were coming down, the barge moved along. I was got up from my hole in the middle of the straw, put on the top of the straw with tripod and camera screwed on, and cranked away with the horses coming down, round the canal turn, and down on the various jumps alongside the canal. That of course was a great success because, it wasn't easy, as I've told you before, to get actually on to a course with a tripod.

Ralph Bond: Not if you haven't got the rights!

Alf Tunwell: Not if you hadn't got the rights. If you'd got the rights of course stands were built for you.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: And, er, all facilities there. Er, you had 'nae bother', but without er, to get in, and you wouldn't get a ticket to get in with a camera and tripod. You'd be out. So you dared not take the tripod on the course.

Ralph Bond: Were there any serious incidents in this pinching business?

Alf Tunwell: Oh yes, we had some very near things. Along that canal also, further along, there are a number of houses, and the back gardens there back onto the racecourse, very close to some good jumps. And er, as Pathe, the rights were held by Gaumont on this occasion, Pathe built a very tall stand, a very good stand, which gave them elevation, in one of these gardens, which was not racecourse property. Castleton Knight, who was looking after the Gaumont interests, could see the damage that this camera, one camera was going to do. He was going to cover quite a few jumps from the height of it. So he got a crowd of thugs at the bottom of this stand and shook it. And just shook the thing until the man on the top, who was John Gemmell, had a very narrow escape of being shook right off! [RB laughs] That is how keen they were to maintain their rights. They'd paid for it, and of course, I suppose they wanted er, them to themselves. On another occasion, er well I think this time there was trouble, the jockeys complained just prior to the, the horses coming around, smoke bombs were lit, and there the smoke was blowing into the lens of the fellows that were pinching.

Ralph Bond: The rival cameramen.

Alf Tunwell: The rival cameramen you see. But of course, wind is all over the place, and some of the jockeys were having it blown in their faces. And there was a bit of trouble with the

stewards over his smoke jacks[?]. But er, I don't think that happened after that, I don't think I ever saw any smoke bombs lit.

Ralph Bond: It was obviously an extremely hazardous occupation in those days.

Alf Tunwell: Oh yes.

Ralph Bond: I believe there was some considerable excitement at one of the Cup Finals wasn't there?

Alf Tunwell: Oh yes at the Cup Final, well I myself, er, on this particular year Paramount bought the rights of the Cup Final. And we had an agent around Shepherds Bush way somewhere who er, was able to get us good tickets, very good tickets. And we bought quite a number from him, which had given us excellent positions. And er, we at one time had a man named Jim Wright working with British Movietone News, and he knew all about where we got our Cup Final tickets. In fact I think he did a lot towards getting it. Well he left and went to Paramount, so consequently was, he knew this individual, and he went along to this individual and he got all the numbers of all our tickets. So that immediately we occupied our seat or our stand in our block, whatever it was, there was a man to pull us out. I remember distinctly I went in with a little Debrie camera under my coat...

Ralph Bond: You got, you got the hand, you'd got the automatic cameras by then...

Alf Tunwell: ...yes, by then we had the spring-wound camera. The camera took 100 ft. And we always had a chap with us, in the next seat, so we could pass him the film, into his pocket. And he would get it away at half-time. Well on this occasion the two of us went along and we took our seats, and my job was to do the kick-off, I was right in the centre - centre line. And just as the teams came out Mr Wright stood at the end of the row and said, "Come along Alf, out!" Nothing I could do, go out. I hadn't exposed anything. However we were taken to the offices and there, there was quite a number of us all bundled in. Of course they knew where to find us. They knew the seats we were sitting in, it wasn't difficult. So of course an official there insisted that we pulled all our film off the spool. Wouldn't take our word that it wasn't exposed, he just insisted that it was pulled out. So consequently, well in a very few minutes, we had a room stacked full of film all over the ground. And then I said to him, "Now all we want to do now is to strike a match" it was all inflammable stuff you know, and the whole of those stands would have gone up. By God, frightened the life out of them, frightened the life out of them. Because a thing like that they'd never thought of. And a very serious thing it would have been.

Ralph Bond: Indeed yes. Um, I've also heard from some of your colleagues that there were some pretty exciting incidents at one the Test matches, involving someone even put up balloons didn't they? What was that?

Alf Tunwell: Yes, that was at Nottingham Test. Trent Bridge. Um, it was a very important Test match, and um, again, the rights were bought, I think on this occasion by Gaumont, or Pathe, I'm not quite certain. However, there was the opposition, the pinching started from windows outside the ground, and er, they got a balloon, the Gaumont people, got a balloon, and anchored it down

inside the ground. But to obscure the view of the cameras from the windows. Well, when the second day's play started, a man went along from the Paramount company as a matter of fact, and cut the wires of the balloon, and the balloon went sailing away, stopped the play - all the players standing there watching the great balloon go sailing off. And across the crowd they got their pictures from the window.

Ralph Bond: This was all part of the job of course, but er, did these sort of incidents lead to bad feeling between you chaps who were the actual newsreel cameraman, or did you all get together after it was over and have a pint, or what?

Alf Tunwell: Oooh no, there was no ill feeling at all. If you were away on a job er, you naturally, it wouldn't be policy to stay in the same hotel, that wouldn't be fair, so you stayed in another hotel. But in the evening you might go round, you'd know where they were...

Ralph Bond: Yes

AT ...and have a friendly chat and a jolly good laugh.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: If it was a job in town, you'd come back from the job and one of our main places of refreshment in those days was 'The Ship' in Wardour Street...

Ralph Bond: ...still is I believe...

Alf Tunwell: ...ah yes, we still gather there, quite a number of us, and er, we used to all get in there, and the fella with the rights would say, if he'd kicked you out, he'd say "Well what could I do? I saw you, I had to do it!" and you'd say, "That's all right old boy, it's all right, all fair, you did your job."

Ralph Bond: No hard feelings.

Alf Tunwell: And if you got away with it, you'd go in and say to him, "Well, I managed to beat you this time boy, you didn't find me did you?" So it was all good fun amongst the chaps.

Ralph Bond: Very nice. Alf I believe you were one of the first newsreel cameramen to join the union and to try to get your colleagues organised in the union. But, probably because they were all individualists, it wasn't too easy at first was it?

Alf Tunwell: No, they were, they were very dubious about the whole thing. You must understand that some years previous they had, we'd had a secretary chappy who was supposed to be going to form a union. And we used to meet each week and pay this man one shilling each. Well that man went off with our money and we heard no more, and he did us no good. So consequently was, when we come along again after the ACT had been formed, and endeavoured to get members, we find it a bit difficult. They can't get out of their heads the fact that they'd tried once and was bitten. But eventually of course, it was unfortunate for me I suppose, a spot of

bother occurred with, between Sir Ernest Gordon Craig and myself, and mark you, I'm still with British Movietone News then, having done 13 years service. And the war was on and it was in the early, very early part of 1943 or could be the end of '42, when Malta convoys were considered to be quite a dangerous affair to be put on. Er, I was a war correspondent with British Movietone News, and it fell to my lot, Sir Gordon Craig informed me one day that I would have join a Malta convoy. In those days our insurance was 2000 pounds, if killed. We had been approaching, before now, we had been approaching the masters to get 5000, and we put it on the lines that er, what the service officers would get, captains rank and above, and, but no, particularly Sir Gordon Craig was very adamant about it and refused to budge. So of course when he came to me and said, "Now you're going on a Malta convoy Alf. I want you to be ready by the end of the week," I said, "Yes that's fine," I said, "but what about this insurance?" "Oh" he said, "yes 2000", I said, "No, not good enough." And he still was very adamant and wouldn't go any further with it. So consequently was, on the end of the week, he sent for me and gave me one month's money in lieu of notice and was very firm about the fact that I had broken my contract. Well this I had not done. I had not refused an assignment. I had said I was quite willing to go, providing my wife was taken care of should anything happen to me, and I considered 5000 pound was a fair amount of money to leave her.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: No, he wouldn't pay more than two. So he handed me my four weeks money and said that I was very lucky to even get that. He thought the directors had been most kind to me, and that was the end of it. I left that office, not losing my temper, although I felt very annoyed! As I went out the door I said, "You will hear more about this." And I went straight across then to the ACT, put my cards on the table to George Elvin, who took up the case on my behalf. Eventually, it took three months, but eventually the case was heard by an arbitrator.

Ralph Bond: Who was the arbitrator?

Alf Tunwell: Sir Charles Doughty.

Ralph Bond: Oh yes, yes.

Alf Tunwell: And he was very fair, in fact he was a friend of Sir Gordon Craig's, which, when Craig first entered the room, I felt I'd lost the case before we'd started, they were so friendly - discussed fishing. But he went through the case and he gave Sir Gordon Craig several opportunities to take me back, bearing in mind we were fighting for reinstatement because I couldn't claim a lot of damage because I had been working. Immediately I had severed connection with, with er...

RB...Movietone...

Alf Tunwell: ...Movietone, the Canadian Army approached me, to see if I would join them, go into the Army with them as a cameraman. Also, Sidney Box approached me, and I went and worked for Sidney Box, and was working with Sidney Box right up to the time when the arbitration case was heard. It took a matter of three months for that case to be heard, which of

course, some other workers' disputes would have had strikes and goodness knows what. But however, we were patient and it was duly heard. And I'm very pleased to say we won the case. [NB. See Kinematograph Weekly, 13th May 1943, p. 44. LN.]

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: After Sir Charles Doughty giving Sir Gordon Craig several great opportunities to reinstate me, Craig still being firm about it, that he would not do so, and yet he had said I was a good cameraman and he'd send me all over the world. But he would not take me back, so in the end of course Sir Charles Doughty said, "Well, you must take him back." And we fixed a date for me to go back. I went back into that building on a Monday morning, of course the other chaps were glad to see me, they'd all put it up to the fact that ACT had done some good. For all insurances had been increased to 5000 pounds. So they then realised that the ACT was worth joining. And then onwards, our newsreel section of the ACT became strong.

Ralph Bond: In the event Alf, I believe you did join the Canadian Army. Can you tell me some of your experiences with them?

Alf Tunwell: Yes. I joined the Canadian Army June 1943. Er, a lot of people seemed very surprised that a Britisher should be able to get into the Canadian Army. Well it was rather fortunate for me that when I was with British Movietone News, the Canadian Army, having no film equipment or film men in their Army, decided that they'd want some coverage done of their various manoeuvres and exercises in this country. So whenever they wanted anything done, they used to send along to Movietone for a man to go down and cover it. And it was my luck I suppose to be the man who used to cover most of the Canadian Army jobs. Consequent of it was, I got well known to the Canadians. General McNorton[?], who was in charge of the forces, he was frightfully keen on forming a film unit because he felt that the Canadians were doing such a good job that at home, in Canada, they should know what they were doing. Also, he felt that one section of Canadians should know what the other section is doing. So he wanted to have film units put all round with the troops. Well we had no men to call on in the Canadian Army. [indecipherable - break in recording] I feel I should add that when I had my trouble with Sir Gordon Craig at Movietone, General McNorton[?] of the Canadian Army got to hear about it, and he got in touch with me and suggested that I should come into the Canadian Army. I went along, saw the various people at Canada House and they said they would have to get Ottawa's consent, but they felt it would be quite all right with General McNorton's[?] backing, and that I would have the rank to start off with as a lieutenant. Well I went for a medical exam, which of course er, was very necessary for the Army, and I passed A1. Well the consent coming through from Ottawa was rather slow, but eventually it did come through. By that time of course, it was pretty well three months since I'd had my medical exam, so they said, "Oh you've got to have another one, in case you've developed something." So down I go for another one. And er, I passed again A1, so that was good. Well of course they had no cameras there, no nothing, and er eventually General McNorton[?] got notices posted throughout the Canadian Army units, for keen amateurs, as they had no professionals - they were too close to America, they weren't film-minded at all. And of course we had a crowd of people all very anxious to get into the film unit, the Canadian Film Unit, from the various other fighting units. However, we sorted them out and sifted them out and they all had to go to a school which the British Army were running at

Pinewood Studios. And we used to out them through this school, it usually took six weeks for a man to be trained with an Eyemo. Eyemos were the only things really for the field. They only took 100 ft but they were very portable and not very heavy for chaps to carry. We got cases of Eyemos sent over and during the war period, from the time I went in, that being from 1943 onwards 'til the end of the war, we did train 250 men at Pinewood, to use cameras.

Ralph Bond: Yes, yes.

Alf Tunwell: And er, not only the... the finish of their course, when they'd been out and we'd made tests and all of their material that they'd shot, they used to have to do a dope sheet course. That was to write out the story they'd taken. And one of the things we used to put them on, I used to put them into Leicester Square, theatre land and film land, and tell them to write a story on the various theatres. And believe me, I learned more about those theatres in Leicester Square than I ever knew before, for they'd probe into every detail.

Ralph Bond: [laughs] Yes. Very good training. Did you, when the war was over, did you take a discharge, or did you stay on for a bit?

Alf Tunwell: When the war finished of course they said to me I could either go back to Canada and take my discharge, or I could take it in this country. Well, I stayed with the Army for about six months after the war and then I was offered rather a good job with MGM. They were starting up their newsreel called Metro News and they offered me quite a good position as Chief Cameraman. I felt that, as much as I would have liked to have gone to Canada, I thought it wouldn't be good policy. I thought that by the time I'd have come back I'd have lost that good job. So I decided to take my discharge in this country. I took my discharge in this country, and joined MGM in Tower Street, Great Tower Street, with an American chappy named Montagu, a very charming man, and stayed with them until they were forced to fold up on account of the restrictions, still holding then, on raw stock.

Ralph Bond: Mmm. And now - you're doing what?

Alf Tunwell: Well now of course, I'm er, well I'm with the same company really. We call ourselves Hearst-Metrotone News.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: Which is really 50/50 MGM and the Hearst newspapers. It's an American concern, I look after their interests in this country, I see that they are serviced with their newsreel material. And I would like to add that they are today the only theatrical newsreel in America. Every other newsreel, including the great Fox, have gone out of business.

Ralph Bond: Yes, but I'd like to ask you a question in that Alf. Is there any future, either here or in America, for the newsreel as we know it in the cinemas do you think?

Alf Tunwell: Well, as...a newsreel as hard news - no. But a newsreel going out under the title of a newsreel, which really and truly isn't a newsreel, it's more a pictorial. They, with the circuits

such as Pathe, owning all those theatres, they consider their newsreel part of a programme. Therefore, as I can see it, it will always exist.

Ralph Bond: Of course there are only two left now, here.

Alf Tunwell: In this country there's Movietone still going, but they are having to supply independents, because they have no circuit to go on.

Ralph Bond: Right.

Alf Tunwell: You see, Gaumont are running their own reel, which is not a newsreel, called 'Look at Life'.

Ralph Bond: Yes, well that's a magazine.

Alf Tunwell: It's a magazine. And nine times out of ten, the stories covered by Pathe in their newsreel, are magazine stories. They are not 'hard news' as we term it.

Ralph Bond: Has the introduction of colour, do you think, recently given a fillip to the newsreel?

Alf Tunwell: Er, yes, well they had to do something you see. They had to do something to make a change, to try and be different from the old type. So they've gone into colour. But it is still not a commercial proposition, at the price the independents pay for a newsreel today, they must losing money in producing it for them.

Ralph Bond: Despite the fact that they now get a cut of the Eady money.

Alf Tunwell: Despite that fact. That has helped of course let me tell you, Eady money has helped them considerably.

Ralph Bond: Oh, must have done.

Alf Tunwell: But we've only the two newsreels, as you think.

Ralph Bond: I have one theory, I'd like to know whether you'd agree with me or not. I think that the decline of newsreel over recent years may be to some extent the fault of the reels themselves, because they seem always to have been very restricted in the stories they covered. I'm sure at one time, at least 60 percent, or more, of the events in any newsreel, whether it was once a week or twice a week, were always devoted to the activities of the Royal Family and sporting events. Do you feel that this was so, that the reels could have been more ambitious in the field of coverage?

Alf Tunwell: Well, I think they could have been more ambitious in the field. You mentioned the Royal Family, of course there's a great following of the Royal Family in this country, and I think perhaps the reels felt that was the right and proper thing to cover every movement that they did. Sport, there is a great following for sport, er particularly for locals. They, the newsreels at one

time, they did used to do what we term 'local matches'. For instance they'd do Manchester and Everton, and they would only give... [break in recording]

Tape 1, Side 2

Alf Tunwell: ... that to the Manchester and Liverpool exhibitors.

Ralph Bond: I see.

Alf Tunwell: They would call them 'locals'. Whereas, down south, if there's a Spurs and Arsenal match, they would cover that and they would service the south with that, you see they'd split them up. Bit I'm afraid today they do not do it. But one of the great things against the newsreels today is that any story taken after 12 o'clock on Friday, will not be shown until the following Thursday.

Ralph Bond: By which time it's dead.

Alf Tunwell: It's an historical event, it's not news.

Ralph Bond: Quite.

Alf Tunwell: You see, they will say of course it's laboratories, but I don't know, I feel sure that if they paved the way, they could get a Friday story out on a Monday edition.

Ralph Bond: Well that brings us back to your opening remarks of getting the Grand National on the screen the same night. And they never do this now.

Alf Tunwell: We're going back aren't we?

Ralph Bond: We are, instead of forward.

Alf Tunwell: Our aeroplanes, our fast aeroplanes mean nothing to the newsreel business do they?

Ralph Bond: What significant changes have there been in the equipment you use in newsreels Alf? Both camera and sound, there must have been a tremendous... tremendous difference now from the old days.

Alf Tunwell: Oh yes, there's been rapid strides. I er, mark you, today everything's made, in my opinion, so much easier for the cameraman. You see, in the olden days, when as I told you we had tripods, we were limited to amount of film in our magazines. Er, we were limited in every way - focus, and every detail and having to hand crank was so, so shocking, it handicapped you considerably. Now today's equipment, you either have a motor, electrically driven, or spring. And not a lot of spring now, although the Eyemo and the small 100 ft jobs are mainly spring. But they're still very good. And instead of having one lens on the front, they're all fitted with turret lenses, which of curse you swing round, you set your, you set your lenses before you start,

knowing fully well, having an idea of what you're going to do, you start off with a wide angle, you jump to a four inch then you jump to a six inch, you've got it all ready for you like that.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: It's so quick. Er, you have the big sound cameras. Well now those cameras, I'm talking of 35mm now, those cameras will take 1000ft. So you've got a box on the top with 1000ft.

Ralph Bond: Is that a combined camera with sound?

Alf Tunwell: That is a combined camera with sound.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: That is combined, not image and sound separate. They're all in one

Ralph Bond: Are they used frequently now in newsreel work?

Alf Tunwell: Yes, well they're the speediest. You see, when you've... admitted that in processing you must lose something, you're either going to lose your image to say, give you good quality sound, or one or the other. But, in newsreels, it doesn't really matter so much as that. I mean to say, so long as you've got a good picture, sharp, and your sound you can well understand, well that is what you want.

Ralph Bond: And what about microphones and ...

Alf Tunwell: Microphones are most simple now. In the old days, in the early days of sound, there we used to drag around a great stand with a microphone on the top, it couldn't be moved. The chappy that's giving you the interview, if it was an interview, had to stand at the same position all the time, otherwise he would be...you wouldn't hear him. But today, oh no. You put a little mike round a fella's neck, he can walk all over the place but he's still got the mike with him.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: And as long as you've got enough lead, you're all right too.

Ralph Bond: Yes. So from the, from your point of view, the physical aspect of the job is much simpler.

Alf Tunwell: Much. You, your focus, well, it's all set for you.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: How often do you see a man looking through ground glass focusing? He's usually turning his length, whether it's 5ft, 10ft, 20ft, 50ft, or infinity. That's the way he's working. And he's got a speedometer, which tells him his correct speed that he's running.

Ralph Bond: Yes. There's on, there's one final question I'd like to ask you Alf, as you're here, and it's always puzzled me: you go to see a newsreel, let us say of a cricket match, say the Test match, or of the Cup Final. And by some miracle the newsreel man will always seem to get the shot when a fellow is bowled out, or the fellow who scores the all-important goal at the football match. I can't believe that you shoot the whole of the Test Match and the whole of, or you may shoot the whole of the Cup Final, but certainly not the whole of the Test Match. What magic is it that seems to enable the cameraman to know that at that particular moment somebody's going to bowl a batsman out - how is it done?

Alf Tunwell: Well [laughs], it's more luck really you know. Let's face it, as you rightly say, you couldn't shoot a Test Match from beginning to end, you couldn't possibly do it.

Ralph Bond: No.

Alf Tunwell: Um, but you have a certain instinct. There's a certain instinct about it, when a man is getting a little nervy, or the ball he had before he was a bit dodgy on, you know. And then you switch on. And it is surprising, I will agree with you, it is surprising how it comes off. And it's an extraordinary thing. As far as a football match, a goal is concerned, well, that is a little bit different because you have several men on the ground there, and you have one at each goal. And every time it gets a dangerous position, you shoot.

Ralph Bond: Yes, yes, you can see the movement.

Alf Tunwell: You can see that it's working up to a goal.

Ralph Bond: Yes. But in a cricket match you couldn't possibly...

Alf Tunwell: ...Cricket match is a very difficult situation, er, with a still photographer it's easy, because he can shoot it after the wicket's gone. As the ball hits the stumps, he can go 'click' with his shutter and he's got the wicket keeper like that.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: Fraction of a second. Even do it after it's gone. A still photographer, he can, he just sits looking at the stumps all day, all day, and as soon as it's gone, he goes 'click'... [RB laughs] ...and he's got it! That's as simple as it is for him. But the cine no, you've got to have the ball leaving the bowler's arm.

Ralph Bond: Yes, yes.

Alf Tunwell: Which is not so easy. But you're right, it's, I think they've been very fortunate, newsreels, in getting it. Of course with television it's very different, they're on all day.

Ralph Bond: Yes.

Alf Tunwell: And so at night-time, when they push it over in a cut version, all they've to do is to clip out the interesting bits such as wickets going.

Ralph Bond: Yes. Well I think this does prove that the newsreel boys are really highly-skilled specialists.

Alf Tunwell: It's a job on its own. It's definitely a job on it's own, the newsreel man's job is on its own. And it's the same as a studio chappy's job, he er, the newsreel man couldn't do that, neither could a studio boy, come out and ask him to go and cover a football match or a tennis match, he'd be at sea.

Ralph Bond: Thank you very much Alf.

Alf Tunwell: Thank you.

Ralph Bond: This tape recorded interview with Alf Tunwell was made at 2 Soho Square, on Thursday, October 31st, nineteen-hundred and sixty-three. The interviewer was Ralph Bond.

Alf Tunwell Newsreel Cameraman

1910s - Barker's Film Studios, Worton Hall Studios
1929-1940s - Movietone News
(1943 - Dispute with Sir Gordon Craig over insurance for Newsreel Cameramen)
1940s - Training Army Cameramen. MGM news

Alf Tunwell - queries
Ben Miggins (Movietone)
Trueman Tally (Movietone)
General McNorton (in charge of Canadian Forces)