

The National Trust

Oral history transcript

Interviewee	Lawrence Holmes
Date of birth	9 May 1935
Name of parents	Ernest Holmes and Rhoda Holmes (née England)
Interviewer	Nick Stokes
Subject	The Royal Observer Corps in Cornwall Nuclear observation posts, operations rooms (control room) and special duties unit
Location of recording	The National Trust, Cornwall Regional Office, Lanhydrock, Bodmin, Cornwall
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Date of transcription	10, 17 and 31 January 2012
Transcriber	Caroline Allanson

Disk and track number	Disc 1 / Track 1
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Start time min:sec	Finish time min:sec	Description
00:08	00:28	Family background: Born on 9 th May 1935. Mother Rhoda Holmes (née England), father Ernest Holmes.
00:40	02:30	Explanation of how he became a member of the Royal Observer Corps (ROC): Lawrence started work in 1951 at Blidworth Colliery in Nottinghamshire as an apprentice mining surveyor in the survey office. The plan tables in the office held not mine plans but silhouettes of airplanes. The Chief mining surveyor was an airplane spotter and a member of the ROC. Lawrence joined the ROC in 1953.
02:30	05:40	Description of first ROC posting: Joined Farnsfield Post in Nottinghamshire. Role was spotting and reporting aircraft to base in Coventry. Went on exercise 5-6 times /year. Every week 2 hour training meeting at Blidworth. There was a team of 10 observers. Lawrence became an expert in aircraft recognition.
05:40	10:34	How the ROC were tested on their recognition skills: photos of airplanes, master testing each year
10:46	11:55	The role of the ROC - was to report any aircraft flying in vicinity of the post and report to the group headquarters. Description of the area covered by the group headquarters.

11:56	17:00	Using eyes and ears to seek and identify aircraft, reporting detail of sighting to group headquarters
17:02	18:30	Plotting aircraft at night
18:31	19:55	Cold nights cooking full fry-ups on the coal stove, esprit de corps.
19:56	21:30	Post-1955 atomic testing was taking place. The UK Warning and Monitoring Organisation (UKWMO) was set up, they wanted a field force to monitor the effects of nuclear weapons going off and radioactive fall out, they selected ROC for the work. With advent of improved radar etc visual spotting was limited and becoming redundant. So ROC took on a different role.
21:31	23:12	The nuclear role was regarded by some in the ROC as retrograde step. Exercises with both aircraft and nuclear elements were held, at first - 80% aircraft / 20% nuclear, then 50% / 50%. By 1962/3 80% nuclear / 20% aircraft. By 1965 the aircraft role abandoned and monitoring was totally nuclear.
23:13	32:40	In 1965 MOD decided ROC should be given protected accommodation with underground nuclear shelter and an operations room (Control). Farnsfield Control was placed at the side of the above ground Post. There was a monitoring room and equipment room. The monitoring room held the monitoring equipment for the bomb bursts. On the surface was equipment for measuring the intensity of the light burst. After reporting details of an attack there was no way for the field operators to know effects of burst, levels of radiation etc so ROC had to wait to find the level of radiation, where fall-out had gone, or would go, so the population could be warned.
32:41	34:43	1968/69 Lawrence became Chief Officer in charge of the Post at Farnsfield.

Disk and track number	Disc 1 / Track 2
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00:13	04:41	ROC in WW2 was mix of full and spare time observers (volunteers), full time manned post through the day and the spare timers in the evening and weekends. ROC re-formed in 1947 and was mostly spare timers. There was no war so 1947-1955 role was to pick up low level intruders not being picked up by radar.
04:50	07:47	Observers had to commit to minimum of 2 hours training per week. There were also 6-8 exercises per year plus dinner and meetings. Post itself unmanned except on exercise or meeting at this time all observers were expected to attend. Chief Observer responsible for ensuring post was manned for duration of exercise
07:48	09:31	National Coal Board (NCB) good employers gave time off to allow ROC but normally training would be during evening or at weekends. Not all employers were as accommodating.

09:32	13:18	NCB was contracting and prospects for promotion poor. Lawrence moved to Cornwall and became the Chief Mining Surveyor for Pendarvis Mine. He joined the ROC in Truro working in the control room as tape centre supervisor.
13:19	16:40	After a year in Cornwall Lawrence became Duty Controller in charge of Ops Room until 1973 when the Truro Ops room was closed. Reporting phone lines were routed to Exeter.
16:41	18:39	Lawrence transferred to Madron Post.
18:40	19:39	Lawrence moved home from Camborne to Ladock. Lawrence moved to Mitchell Post situated at Carnon Cross becoming leading observer and then chief observer. Lawrence was not keen on the post and decided to resign from the ROC.

Disk and track number	Disc 2 / Track 3
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00:08	01:07	In 1975 Truro Ops room re-opened as Special Duties Unit. Lawrence left Mitchell post and returned to Truro to run the Special Duties Unit.
01:20	06:29	Special Duties Units (of which there were approximately 20 set up throughout the UK) were highly secret, the unit was giving regional and national nuclear display service of all information received and generated by the ROC. The Units were also called Nuclear Reporting Cells. The posts were never manned for real. The closest the ROC came to reporting for real was in the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962 when the possibility of conflict was looming. From 1965-1991 it was considered there was only one enemy – the USSR.
06:30	09:16	Throughout the 1970s and 80s the ROC continued its work. With weekly meetings and training exercises. In order to practice and train as many posts as possible up to 120 bombs would be dropped on every exercise, therefore a nightmare to plot.
09:17	15:57	In the late 1980s a Government committee was set up to look at civil defence. With the advent of Atomic Weapons Detection and Estimation of Yield (AWDREY) there was little need for the ROC but AWDREY couldn't plot nuclear fallout so the ROC was still employed for this. In 1991 the Government stood down the ROC with the exception of the Special Duties Units but their role was changed to include chemical and biological warfare. On 31 st Dec 1995 ROC ceased to exist.
15:58	21:27	In 1986 the Royal Observer Corp Association (ROCA) was set up for former members of the ROC. In 1991 ROCA formed a group in Truro. Lawrence became Chairman in 1993. Truro ROCA decided to preserve the past and purchase a former Post. Their bid to purchase a former post at Penryn failed. National Trust agreed to lease Veyan Post on Nare Head to Truro ROCA at a peppercorn rent. In 1994 Truro ROCA set about refurbishing the Post with a

		nationwide search for former nuclear equipment. The Post was opened to the public in 1996.
21:28	23:41	Reminiscences of American touring/walking groups and other visitors to the Post.
23:42	25:06	Over 1,500 visitors to the Post, a tour lasts about an hour and a half and includes all the history of the Post and the ROC. In 2006 Truro ROCA terminated their lease and the Post is now held in partnership with the National Trust.
25:07	32:50	History of Veryan Post. First Post to open in Cornwall opened in 1940. Aircraft sightings were originally reported to the police. Stood down on 12 th May 1945. Re-activated 1 st January 1947 continuing in aircraft role and then nuclear role. Description of building of underground nuclear post, opened in 1963.

Disk and track number	Disc 2 / Track 4
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00:26	03:55	Description of Farnsfield Juliet 2 underground post.
03:56	05:07	Information regarding Master or Radio Posts
05:08	06:16	Description of Veryan Post
06:17	08:19	Inventory of items general to all Posts, eg. batteries, water containers, tommy cookers, generator etc.
08:20	09:35	Further description of Radio Posts; radio sets and pneumatic radio aerials
09:36	16:20	Further description of underground equipment; individual dosimeters recording radioactive discharge, Radiac Survey Meters and their use to investigate fall-out fronts.
16:30	25:50	Description of typical exercise ("war game").
25:51	26:59	Photographic or bromide papers
27:00	29:42	Further description of process after having reported details of a bomb in an exercise. If fall-out arrived at the Post further readings would be reported until levels of intensity fell. Explanation of the "seven-tenths rule"

Disk and track number	Disc 3 / Track 5
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00:10	03:38	In a Control there were 3 crews of 30 people. Two groups: Observer Corps and Warning Team. Warning Team directly employed by UKWMO. Group Controller in charge of Warning Team, this team (scientists) studied more minutely the data and their prime role was to forecast fall-out.
04:10	05:35	Description of scenarios: large bombs vs. small, dropped on cities vs. smaller targets
05:45	07:40	Frustrations with exercises (see also disc 2/ track 3, 06:30-09:16)
07:41	09:30	In the early to mid-80s there was a revolution in methods of communication. Punched tape gave way to the teleprinter,

		and the Post Office Message Switching System which was a computerised switching system that improved and sped up the flow of data.
09:31	11:59	Example of data "code" for a bomb burst message and fall-out message.
12:00	13:06	Description of the transparent / Perspex displays in Control and how they were used.
13:12	19:00	Plotting readings on log charts in every post, initial prediction displays, fall-out plumes, fall-out predictions, DR7 maps, seven-tenths rule (see also disc 2 / track 4, 27:00-29:42),
19:20	22:52	Communication methods at Veryan Post. Teletalk loudspeaker/telephone, always on when post was on exercise so could hear all and contact all neighbouring posts.

Disk and track number	Disc 3 / Track 6
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00:03	07:15	Conditions in the Post overnight on exercise. Use of facilities in the post.
07:16	11:38	Food rations (K-rations) in the post would only be available in times of war not when on exercise. Readyng the crew.
13:00	15:59	Procedure for manning Post in an emergency / Fandango exercise.
16:05	21:00	Preparedness for actual nuclear attack, effect on the ROC volunteers families.
21:01	24:05	Family support and volunteer recruitment.
24:06	27:53	Volunteer description of role in the ROC and need for secrecy. Requirement to sign the official Secrets Act.

Disk and track number	Disc 4 / Track 7
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00:05	03:03	Personal thoughts on surviving a nuclear attack.
03:05	03:50	Availability of medical supplies relating to nuclear attack at the post.
03:51	05:00	Personal thoughts on constructing private nuclear facilities for the family home.
05:01	11:30	Message of last resort from Prime Minister. Use of BBC to disseminate public information in event of nuclear attack. Personal thoughts on survival phase after nuclear attack, the importance of defence.
11:31	16:21	Reaction of local community to ROC at their Post.
16:25	18:45	Vandalism of Posts by organisations such as CND.
19:00	20:15	Vandalism at Truro Control.
20:26	21:33	Use of radioactive isotopes in the 1960s and 1970s
21:35	26:28	Confirmation of equipment shown in images: ground zero indicator - pinhole camera made of painted metal, dosimeter and charger, light proof satchel and photographic paper showing trail of the sun, bomb power indicator baffle (seen at the surface), ionisation chamber and fallout indicator with

		LED display mounted into desk and also a portable one, teletalk or loud-speaker telephone c. 1979/1980, chemical toilet, crate for siren.
26:31	31:58	Early Warning Systems. It was role of UKWMO to issue attack warnings, there were 25,000 warning points (at Posts, Police Stations, Post Offices, Coastguard stations etc.) throughout Britain. All warning points had a Carrier/Receiver. Onset of attack was transmitted to warning points they would then activate the sirens. "Attack warning red" warned of a pending air attack. The approach of fallout was marked by electronically fired maroon. There could be either National or regional warnings.

Disk and track number	Disc 4 / Track 8
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00:05	04:00	The role of women in the ROC. Traditionally male dominated up until the start of WW2. In April 1941 women were enrolled into the Corps despite protests from some Posts! The women were predominantly employed as plotters. In all other respects women were treated the same as the men. Many women went on to become NCOs and Officers although there was never a female Commandant for Cornwall and Devon.
04:01	05:00	Women at Verryan Post. Kathleen Connor joined Verryan Post in WW2 later becoming Chief Observer. She was awarded the BEM (British Empire Medal, now discontinued) in the late 1940s.
05:45	08:50	Women had constituted approximately 25% of the ROC. After WW2 many of the young wartime members did not rejoin in 1947 when the ROC re-formed. Women did join but there was a greater age range. Retirement was mandatory at the age of 65 years on the Posts and 60 in the Control. Some Posts refused to have females.
08:55	15:07	Socialising in the ROC was encouraged to create strong teams. Weekly training meetings at local level and group meetings might culminate with a dinner, this helped with the bonding.
15:08	16:10	Awards in recognition of merit in the ROC.
16:11	18:13	The Master Test (nuclear) proficiency test taken once a year sitting a 3 hour written paper. A spitfire badge was the mark of a master observer. No proficiency test required once an officer.
18:14	19:59	ROC pay. Members were paid a meeting allowance. In 1991 this was around £3 which included a mileage element. Officers were paid an annual grant of around £400 plus mileage.
20:00	23:13	Long Service Medal - given after 12 years service. Lawrence received Long Service Medal and 2 clasps. Awarded Lord Lieutenant's Certificate in 1980s and the MBE in 1994. Truro Team gained the most awards of any other in the UK.
23:40	29:41	Final reminiscences: cartoons of ROC life by Sessions

		<p>depicting “real” people, two pieces of music about the ROC a march called Sky Watch was a special commission and a song called Sentinels of Britain. Books written about the ROC include “Forewarned is Forearmed” and “Attack Warning Red”. No book yet written that charts the history of the ROC from formation until it was disbanded.</p>
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