

When you see your mates joining up and going off, you don't want to be left out. I never volunteered, mind you, but I said, "When my time comes, I'll go in." Which I did.

I was in the bomb disposal squad. That was a regiment that was formed during the war. It never existed at the beginning of the war. They asked for volunteers but they didn't get any. It was "You, you and you" and that's it. I'm no hero! I didn't volunteer for it! I just happened to be standing too much to the front.

Joe Seeley

Of course all the people along the Irish coast, the majority of men along the coast line was in the Navy, even joined the British Navy and Air Fleet Arm, the Air Force. That was because they wanted to venture, young men - it was an adventure. Well it was hardly surprising. An awful lot of the young boys went from Ireland to England to fight the war. Although you think there is a lot of friction between England and Ireland, there isn't really, not from the South. England was bred into us really, wasn't it? I mean there was even men there who was in Irish Guards over here who lived in Ireland but were in the Irish Guards in England and that was even before the war. A lot of men are soldiers of fortune as they say - a lot of Irish people went to the war for England, they just joined up.

Stella Scanlon

He volunteered. He used to be a home guard, with the other boys, in the Drill Hall. Then he went and volunteered and put his age up. My dad tried to get him back. You're not supposed to go overseas before you're eighteen. He was about three months off of eighteen. My dad wrote to the commanding officer but they couldn't do nothing about it because he had volunteered. If he had been called up that would have been a different matter.

We didn't know until he got home. He came home and said, "I've joined up." I can remember, I was only young, see? Mum started crying 'cause he was her favourite. He said, "I've joined the army." "No, no!" 'Cause my brother had gone in the Royal Artillery, in front of him, 'cause he was about 4 years older than him, so he'd gone. He was called up and he went, and course he wanted to go in it 'cause his brother was in it.

"To my dear Mother.

Though distant seas keep us apart,
Fondest thoughts of you are in my heart.
And so dear mother do not pine,
For the storm will soon be over and once
more the sun will shine."

And there's a ship on the picture and it says, "To hands across the sea." My brother wrote that to my mother just before he died in May 1944. He got drowned out in Burma. He was eighteen and a half.

They got a telegram. My mum used to do office cleaning. She came home at lunchtime. Course my dad had come home from work. She broke her heart. She got pneumonia. She went all round. We used to have great big tubs full up with water, called them water tanks, what the firemen used to put their hose in for the water. My mum went all looking in the water tanks calling for our Eddie. His name was Eddie. All over Tower Bridge. A policeman picked her up. He said, "What's the matter?" She said, "My son's drowned." He said, "Where?" She said, "In the water." She's walking around the water tanks, looking in the water tanks thinking he was in there. She come home and she had that pneumonia and she was bad for about three months. I was about eight or nine at the time.

May Roberts

HAVING A GOOD TIME

When servicemen came home on leave there was always a party for them somewhere or other.

Pensioner at Kennington House

We used to go dancing at the Lyceum in the West End, it was two shillings. And Covent Garden, I always remember Covent Garden. That's where they have the opera. But they had it open for dancing. It was big and it used to be two shillings in the afternoon, just for the afternoon. And there was evening dancing too. I'd get the tube and walk home from the Elephant and everywhere there were searchlights going, but we seemed to just do it.

Ethel Dorney, Sabina Brooks

I'm not saying that we weren't frightened. We used to go dancing at the Astoria, Charing Cross Road in Covent Garden. We used to go to the Locarno, Streatham. And you used to come out of there at half past eleven at night and catch the 133 bus or tram to the Elephant. No thought of, "Will I be all right?" Sometimes you would go in the Milk Bar and have a milk shake. At half eleven, walk down Tooley Street down to where I lived. Not by myself - there used to be four boys who lived over at Stamford Hill way. Don't ask me how they got to Stamford Hill, but they used to come to Streatham and to London Bridge and walk down Tooley Street and then they would have to get back. I don't know how they got back. I'm looking back and sometimes you were very frightened. But on the whole you think, "Very nice" - the feeling of safety and being able to walk about the streets and never any fear that way. I don't know why.

Grace Shelford

I'd missed the last train home to Dulwich, and sitting on the station, very forlorn - because you couldn't get taxis either, you know, there was no petrol for taxis. Almost in tears because I thought my parents were going to kill me, my father was going to be absolutely furious if I wasn't in by a certain time. And the station master came up; he said, "What's the trouble, miss?" so I told him. So he said, "Well, I'll tell you what, there's an engine coming along in a minute, and if you'd like to go back, you can go back on the engine." I can never remember being so terrified - it was worse than the bombing - because it was a steam engine, and you had to climb up about...well it seemed about fifty feet, in high heels! And he said, "Sit on that ledge," which was about that wide, you know, and you're clinging on, and as you're dashing through the dark, all the steam and the sparks are flying back at you. And it was quite horrifying.

Ivy Maylan

As kids you would play normal games. Tippy Cat: that was played with two pieces of wood. You have a small piece on the pavement. You hit it with a bigger stick, hit it up in the air and try and hit it as far away as you could. It is rather like rounders without a ball. You didn't need a ball. All you needed was two pieces of wood.

Tin Tang Copper: two teams would part up. The idea was to hide. There was a tin and a couple of pieces of wood. You throw them. They've got to assemble the tin with the pieces of wood on top. While they are doing that, you are off and hiding and then they have got to find you.

Mr Winter

We used to go to the Trocette in the Old Kent Road. They used to have a picture house - you know where the Bingo Hall is, over on the corner there - and there used to be one called the Rialto. That was a posh one. If you was posh you'd go in there. It was all nice inside. Years ago I remember them putting a film on and you used to have to take a bit of brass with you to go in free. It was for the war effort. My dad give me this bit of brass, I don't know what it was. You couldn't go in unless you had this bit of brass. I remember going in there and seeing this film. It was called 'Bluebird'.

May Roberts

If you went to the pictures during the war and the siren went, they always used to put it up on the screen, "The air raid warning is now being sounded. If you want to leave the theatre, do so now." But you could stay in there. If you wanted to take the chance you stayed in there. You got to the point where you thought, "If I go outside I can get killed so I might as well see the film and if I'm going to get killed I'll get killed in here." You were very fatalistic.

Doreen Davis

One thing I used to listen to during the war, if I could talk my mother into letting me listen to it, was called "The Man in Black". Valentine Dially. He used to tell ghostly, eerie stories and if our dad was fire-watching or he was off and it was his night for the wardens I used to plead with my mother to let me stay up late so as I could listen. He used to come on about ten o'clock at night. Around that time I should have been in bed. I think she only let me stay up because she used to be frightened to listen to it on her own. We used to sit there together.

Doreen Davis



A pantomime show by a Southwark Civil Defence concert troupe run by Mr Pater.

One of the pleasures of coming home in the early hours of the morning was the American Forces programme. Wherever we'd been on our rambles, we'd get home - this was before I went into the forces - and the thing that kept us going, all us fellas and girls, we all used to listen to that, and wait up until it signed off, and they used to play that lovely tune at the end, you know, lovely.

Joe Scala

We used to do an awful lot of things, made our own entertainment. We never do them now. My brother and my cousin made up this football game and we used to use a farthing and a sixpence and an old penny. The sixpence was the ball and the other things were the players. We used to use a comb. We used to have matchsticks for the goalposts, stuck in plasticene on the table. You used to push the penny with the comb, and play all down this table. We played that for hours. It's a bit like Subbuteo when you think about it. We should have thought of that and patented it!

Doris Stevenson

ROMANCE

The war hurried things up. You felt as if you might never see them again. Best marry them and make the best of it.

Mary Ellmore

There was a bit of kissing and cuddling in the park, but that was about it. You always used to walk up Rye Lane then. There used to be all the boys up there and we used to go into the Black and White Milk Bar and have an ice cream. If you were wealthy you could have a Knickerbocker Glory.

Doris Stevenson

Hardly any serviceman that was serving away from home thought for one minute that his wife or girlfriend were pure - if he did he was very naive, very naive. On the other side, the man was just as bad. I was just as bad. Can't really blame the women. They didn't know whether they was going to be alive tomorrow - with the bombing - why not enjoy themselves while they could?

Two members of Blue Anchor Library

You'd all know the people down the street who'd been going out with Yanks!

Some of the women had a good time 'cause all the Americans and the Canadians was over here. They was all out for nylon stockings. They done all right.

The Germans used to broadcast about how the Americans were having your girls away and all that.

Group at Blue Anchor Library

Well all the men came home at the end of the war, you see, and all the wives got pregnant! It was the bulge! Do you remember the bulge? All the young ladies that were married, and some that weren't, all got pregnant at the same time! And the bulge is 50 now - do you realise that?

Elizabeth Cole

When I went with a chap during the war, when I used to come home I wouldn't dare go indoors so we'd say goodnight and that just round the corner, because my father - Oh Gawd! If any time I'd say, "I'm going to a dance," he'd say, "You been laying yourself on the line! That boy's out there fighting for you!" I think he must have guessed because I'd come in sometimes a bit late. But I used to make this chap I went with say goodnight round the corner, then I'd walk up my road because my father would sometimes think, "She's a long time," so he'd open the door and look up the road.

Doris Platt

Well I got married during the war. I got engaged in the August, and the war broke out in September, and I got married in '41. You know, my husband went away, and then he came back to me and got married, and then he went. But I suppose, maybe the reason that we got married, to be truthful, was also that I could save money, because we'd got no money between us. His allowance - you know, the wife's allowance - I used to put that away, but lived on my own money.

Doris Platt

There was the baby boom straight afterwards, wasn't there? That was to be expected. The men had been away all that amount of time. What can you expect?

Doris Stevenson

Yes, they used to say that people were getting married for the allowance. Some of the women couldn't give two hoots if their men came back or not, some of them.

Queenie Turner

Having a white wedding, I borrowed Bill's sister's wedding dress, but it only just about fitted me! I was quite tubby, because being the only child my parents used to feed me up. So I had to breathe in and hold this great big bouquet of carnations in front of me all day or it looked as though I was pregnant.

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You'd be surprised how the family all got together. I mean, you know - you'd got corned beef - you could get a tin of corned beef - and somebody had got a piece of ham, and somebody could make jelly, or blancmange.

People made presents for you. One of Bill's uncles made us a clock, with a great big horrible case like Big Ben with a tiny face on it. Bill's sister went to Regent Street and bought me a box of mixed china, all different cups and saucers. I bet she was terribly pleased to think she's gone over there and come back with this box. It wasn't that important in those days that you had a matching set, because you were grateful.

Bill and Eileen O'Sullivan

I had a terrible experience. I was going out with Jim who was in the regular army. He was going to Gibraltar for a couple of years. Something went on between us. We were supposed to get

engaged and we didn't. He come home and he'd spent all his money or something and we didn't get engaged. He said to me, "You're not sure of yourself, are you?" I said, "I'm sure of myself but I don't think you are." He was in the Kings Fusiliers. They was the first lot to go out into France. He got killed out there before it started properly. I don't know if it was the night he got killed, but I know I woke up in the night and I called out "Jim." Well, I was married then to my husband and his name was Den. He said, "What's the matter?" I remember afterwards calling out "Jim."

Mrs Quinlan



Mrs Quinlan in 1942

I was being harassed every time - "When are you going to marry me?" He sort of chased me. "Oh all right, we'll get married."

Grace Shelford

The Americans are wearing their uniforms and they look very nice and it's all happy and dancing. A lot of them married. But suppose he lived in a New York tenement or something like that. You never knew did you? You didn't take the chance.

Some had babies and the Yanks shot off.

We used to dance with them, have a drink with them and perhaps go out but I never got serious, bit frightened really. Our mums wouldn't let us.

But we used to go dancing. Everybody went dancing then. You had to dance.

There were more women knocking about than men.

And a lot of married women whose husbands were away, they were going with the Yanks, weren't they? I didn't approve of that.

Ethel Dorney and Sabina Brooks

We used to go to dances and the fact that we could jive - the girls were round you, wanted to learn to jive. I went to Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow one night and it was Greens Playhouse and we went in there and we started jiving and the girls came over and they wanted to dance and of course the local boys resented that. So they decided to go outside and wait for us. When we got outside we had about 300 yards to go to get to the YMCA - me and about six other guys, all black. A group of about twelve of them was waiting about a hundred yards from

the Playhouse. I know they was tooled up because the girls told us that they'd be after us. You talk about sprinting! When we hit the door, it was every man for himself. Luckily we got away, and we never did that no more. When we go in the dance hall, we don't dance, don't dance with the girls because of that. We knew what was coming. It was like that all the way over. When we went to Nuneaton there were Yanks there. That was worse. They couldn't understand the fraternising, black and white. When they come in the dance, they definitely come in the dance for war - we shouldn't be in the dance. But we got down there in numbers and we fight like hell!

You know a funny thing - I was guarding some Italians in Cranwell, Lincolnshire. Now these Italians were prisoners of war. They wore a green uniform. They were working in the fields with the Land Army girls and we were guarding them. Now, the funny thing is, you couldn't walk out with a WAAF or a Land Army girl because her life would be hell, yet these Italians who were supposed to be prisoners of war, were fraternising openly. I thought this was funny.

There was one German Prisoner of War, Hans, and one day he said to me, "Alec" - I'm standing with the rifle, he's having a drink, sitting down in the field - "Have you ever thought what will happen when this war is over?" So I says, "No. I suppose I'll go home. How about you?" He says - he's a cousin of the Messerschmidt family - "After the war I'll be staying at the Savoy. Where will you be?" That gave me food for thought. Later on, after I came out of the RAF and I became a cab driver, every time I picked up a German and took him to the Savoy I wondered if it was Hans. The man is so right!

Mr Elden

VE AND VJ DAY CELEBRATIONS



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A Victory Party in Southwark Park Road. Many of the people have been identified by Iris Peile (nee Framen) the baby in the triangular hat in front of the window of number 28.

Well there was a bombed area in Shadwell Road, and we spent all day, us kids (because we had two days off from school, I'll always remember it, I didn't have to do my maths homework!) and we went everywhere we could, finding wood and stuff, you know, to build a bonfire. And my father actually found some fire-works in the shop that we'd had since before the war. The sparklers and a couple of revolving ones - they worked! And I was allowed to stay up till 11 o'clock. We were singing and there was a pub opposite, so they opened all the doors and the piano was sort of drawn towards the door.

And I'll always remember the next night, my mother and I took the bus and walked up to St Paul's. And when we got up there, the lights were all focused on the cross above St Paul's and it was reflected in the sky behind. It was a marvellous sight! And all the lights were on the embankment, and we weren't used to having them like that, you see, like a necklace of pearls, all the way down to St Thomas's Hospital, all the way down the river. And I saw Piccadilly, and it was the brightest lights! God, I'd never seen anything like that!

Elizabeth Cole

The thing I remember most was the night prior to VE Day. We knew it was coming. For weeks where I worked we had been making these little flags that you stuck over and they could be strung across the road. I was listening to the radio. We'd been told, should the war be over, we would have the day off. I was listening to the radio and it suddenly came through that Churchill had said the war was over. That night stuck out more in my mind to think, "Thank God it's finished." Even now I feel so happy. It really was wonderful. The next day we had the parties.

I know me and Frank went out that night and my uncle came in. He'd been out with his friends and I said, "It's over, Frank." He said, "Let's go and see if we can find a party." We didn't have to go far. We went across Sumner Road and we found a party and there we stayed. We celebrated that night till the early hours of the morning. I didn't go to work the next day. I don't remember what I actually did on VE Day. I remember that night. That night will stand out in my mind. It was so glorious that you thought, "No more war!" You've got to think that at ten years old it started, sixteen years old you suddenly realise that it's over and it was wonderful!

Doreen Davis

VE day, that was the day I deserted! I deserted for the day. I was up near Yarmouth, on Air Sea Rescue. There was going to be this big celebration on VE day, and I just came out on the train, down to London, I went to Whitehall and joined in the festivities, and the next day I went back. No-one knew I'd been gone.

Joe Scala

I had cousins who was still out in Burma, they were all still there. The ones in the European war, you knew they were okay, apart from the ones who

had died, but you still had them out there in Burma so you didn't really feel the war was actually finished until the VJ - for me anyway.

Doris Stevenson

I was in the Land Army, and a group of us came up by train - to King's Cross, I think it was. Then you had to walk, because there were too many people. You could have walked on people's heads! It was tremendous! Oh, it was marvellous. Everybody was dancing, kissing one another, you know, arm in arm - it was really fantastic! And remember, we had to go back to work the next day! When we got to the station no trains were running, so we had to sit on the station all night, until the milk train came in. I was back on the tractor that morning.

Ivy Maylan

I came back to London with my kids a few weeks before the end of the war. It was a bit strange at first. There was three years between them, everything was all at sixes and sevens; they didn't really go to school, because nothing was organised or done properly.

Kathleen Ash

I didn't know much about politics, but I remember vividly soon after the war - we lived on a main road - Churchill drove past once, I remember everyone booed him. I remember thinking to myself, God, he just got us through a war and now they're booing him! That's something that sticks in my mind.

Win Mitchell

We had entertainment. Singing songs. They got a piano out. Most of the wartime songs... Rule Britannia... Tipperary... Run Rabbit Run... There were games for the children and rases.

Louise Sedgewick

A thing that sticks out in my mind from near the war's end that I shall never ever forget was when you saw the first pictures of the camps being opened. Belsen was the one I remember... And I thought, "How can anybody... How can one nation do that to another nation?" I cried my eyes out when I saw it on the news then, because I thought, "Those poor people."

Still this war was going on with Japan so in a way you were still thinking of any relatives or suchlike you had out in the Far East. Most of mine, except for my Uncle Cyril who was out in that area, most of mine were in the European part.

Doreen Davis

The people were so determined not to go back to the conditions that they'd had to put up with pre-war. And they somehow hoped that if the socialists got in, they would be prepared to do far more for them.

Mary Trivett

You see, what is difficult for you to understand is the depth of deprivation that we lived in. You've got to understand this first, before you can understand how deeply we feel. It was grim to say the least of it. The things you read about in Dickens were happening. If we wanted assistance in those days, our parents had to go before a board; they were called the Board of Guardians. And if you had anything in your home that was saleable, you had to sell that before you could get any assistance whatsoever. And you got food tickets, and you got tickets to get children's shoes. You didn't get money. This is the way they treated people. We're talking about the dignity of human beings, and this is why we feel so strongly, and this is why we all voted Labour.

Lil Patrick

When my husband came home, when we went round there they'd got this big flag out the window on a pole. They lived in a big house with a basement and three floors up in this big house they hung the flag out the window on a pole. My brother-in-law painted a big piece of cardboard, stuck paper over it and painted on it, "Welcome Home" for my husband for when he came home. They had all the neighbours in and they were having tea and cakes as a celebration. People made cakes, made jellies, all sorts of things. You all took it and it was all pooled together.

When my Uncle Will came home from El Alamein he was one of the first in our turning to come home so we decorated the streets with "Welcome Home Will!" and we had everything out and the whole turning turned out to welcome him back. And I think then you think, "Ah, he's alright. Yes, he's back. Its finished!" It was utter relief. A feeling of utter relief. That's all I can say.

Doreen Davis

In a way I think a lot of people were more apprehensive when the war finished. You didn't know what was going to happen. I think people were more apprehensive then. You certainly didn't know what peace was going to be. It's silly after six years of war to say you didn't know what peace was going to be, but you really didn't know what the future was going to hold. All you knew was, there wasn't going to be war there.

Doris Stevenson

They did hold street parties for the younger children up to about nine, and then they held another lot for the nine to fourteen lot. The parents, the families were giving up 'points' - we were still on rations, for goods - or they used to have a little pool and people put in what they