

Wartime Memories

Group:

Ann Webb 5 years old born 1934 Aged 80
John Webb 7 years old born 1932 Aged 83
Jean Wilkins 8 years old born 1931 Aged 84
Joan Harbottle 8 years old born 1931 Aged 84
Joan Plant 9 years old born 1930 Aged 85
Olive Williams 11 years old born 1928 Aged 87
May Wellard 22 years old born 1917 Aged 98

The start of the war:

All (sing):

Run rabbit – run rabbit – Run! Run! Run!
Run rabbit – run rabbit – Run! Run! Run!
Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!
Goes the farmer's gun.
Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run.
Run rabbit – run rabbit – Run! Run! Run!
Don't give the farmer his fun! Fun! Fun!
He'll get by
Without his rabbit pie
So run rabbit – run rabbit – Run! Run! Run!

May:

I'm May Wellard and I was 22 years old when war broke out. I remember the day that war was declared; it was a sunny Sunday and we were waiting for Chamberlain to talk to us on the radio and there was this feeling, a sort of excitement, because we had no idea what it was really like. Well, we listened and while we were listening the wind blew the curtains gently in and knocked over a vase of flowers onto the side board just as Chamberlain was saying we were at war and my mother was far more interested in the damage to the top of the cupboard than that war was being declared.

Ann:

I'm Ann Webb. I was about 5 years old when war broke out. I was very tiny and I can remember being popped, two legs, into one of uncles flying boots. I didn't understand much of what was going on. I thought the guns firing on Blackheath was thunder and I couldn't understand why during the night if there was a thunderstorm we all had to gather together. But then it started to dawn on me, when we got up in the morning when you opened the door after there had been air raids and there had been fire bombs. You could smell burning. And when you went to school the register was called. Sometimes your friends' names were not called and it was explained that they had died in an air raid.

John:

I'm John Webb. I was 7 years old when war broke out. We had chickens and rabbits. My job was to feed the rabbits and to clean them out. I got the princely

sum of about 2 shillings a week for that and it was a seven day week job, mixing up, boiling up the peelings mixing it with bran for the animals.

The house that we lived in was a three-storey plus a basement in Old Woolwich Rd in Greenwich. My father converted the basement into our own air raid shelter with tremendous timbers as supports for the ceiling, and bunk beds for us to sleep in. My own bedroom was in fact on the top floor but I was very lucky. We slept in the basement shelter or I wouldn't be here today. About 23-30 yards from our house was a little cobbled road and a bomb dropped on the house on the corner of that road and the result was that some of those cobble stones went through the roof and through my bed.

Joan:

I'm Joan Plant and I was 9 years old when war broke out. I had two brothers and a sister. Because my brother was very young, we were evacuated at the start of the war with my mother. The school closed and we were all evacuated to High Grooms near Tunbridge Wells. We stayed there about a month I think, but nothing much was happening in London. At the beginning of the war it was all very quiet. They called it the Phoney war. And so we all came home again.

Jean:

I'm Jean and I was 8 years old when war broke out. We stayed in London for the first four years. We used to go down the air-raid shelter at Southwark underground station. Each night we'd have a blanket over our arm and we would get on a 36 or a 38 bus and go and sleep down in the public shelter. As we went down they used to spray our throat every night with Dettol spray, in case of infection as there were so many of you down there. We used to come up in the morning and always go into a little cafe and have bread and dripping, which we absolutely loved, especially the jelly bit on top.

Olive:

I'm Olive Williams and I was 11 at start of war. I was the youngest of nine. We lived near Roman Road, north of the river. I had 6 brothers, and when war broke out, five of them went in the forces. I was never evacuated. I went through all the process, but I didn't want to go. And my mum said: All right, if you don't want to go, you don't go.' My mother was a very strong lady... well she had to be with 6 boys, didn't she? So I stayed with my mum. Lots of my classmates from school didn't go away either. We used to play in the streets every day; you never went out of your own street. Oh, the games we used to play!

Childhood Games: (*Improvisation*)

Olive: There was marbles made of glass... My dad made us a special game. It was a piece of wood that had arches and each arch had a number on and you tried to get the marbles to go through. (*Joan H. puts piece of wood in place in front and Olive demonstrates. She misses and everyone says Aah and then John succeeds and gets a clap from the others*)

Ann: We would go to the beach, down on the Greenwich Reach and look for piece of chalk and that was to draw out hopscotch (*May finds a piece of chalk and gives it to Ann who marks out the game and describes it. She gives Jean a piece of stone to throw. Jean throws it and plays hopscotch, but loses balance on one leg. May says Ooh you moved it... You knocked the stone out. You're out!*)

Gran always made us take a broom and scrub the chalk markings off after so we wouldn't disfigure the street. (*Everyone scrubs the markings off*)

Ann: And then there were allygobs or five stones? You could make those out of little squares you would have them in your hand, throw them up and catch them on the back of your hand. Then you'd throw them again and try to pick up more. (*Everyone demonstrates this simultaneously*)

Jean: And skipping. I always loved skipping. In fact I still do. (*Jean does little solo skip here while others recite*)

All: Jelly on the plate, jelly on the plate

Wibble wobble wibble wobble, jelly on the plate

And sometimes people in the street would turn the rope for you and you'd jump in (*Everyone turns the imaginary rope as Jean skips*)

All sing: All in together girls in the stormy weather girls One step, two step, out you go

Olive: We'd play with the ball against the wall, sometimes with two balls and sometimes throwing it under your leg..... (*demonstrating throwing and catching balls and everyone joins in!*)

All recite while doing the game: One two three Alairy, My balls down the Airy, Don't forget to give it to Mary, On a Sunday morning

Joan P: You would play flicks with cigarettes cards. (*Everyone flicks cards*) You would flick them against the wall. Yes just flicking, it's such a simple thing. (*May says I've got 4 and John says I've got 5*)

John: I had three like sticks, four and they were made like a cricket wicket and you put them against the wall and you had a ball and you had to knock them down. If you knocked them down you had to dash forward to rebuild them before the ball had been retrieved and thrown at you. If it hit you then you were out.

Olive: We used to find pieces of shrapnel and you'd keep it for yourself and I have to say we got one bigger bit than anybody else.

John: We had lots of neighbours and particularly a few of them were old very old and we would run errands for them and it was generally a good relationship with people in the street. Except the man next door to us that is. During the week he was okay but on a Saturday we had a very long garden and we loved to play out there but he kept homing pigeons and of course you had to have absolute silence when the birds were coming home, so we used to fall out with him on a Saturday.

Ann: I can remember the elderly people in our road mainly the old women would sit in the front window and as you passed they would rap on the glass and you'd knock

on the door and they'd say: Please go to the shop and get me so and so, and there's tuppence for you.

Olive: One of my errands was to,.... people would leave on their doorsteps the little glass batteries with a handle for their radiators, the accumulators. These had to be charged up. They were quite heavy. I would take them to the shops for a charge.

May: Oh and also a gramophone. When we came home from work one day my mother said 'I have brought you a gramophone, it's one of these big ones, she said 'He has forgotten to take his record with him. Shall we play it?' And we put it on and it said 'You are now the proud possessor of a Marconi Gramophone'. It came with it and she thought he had left it behind. You had to wind it up. All those little needles.

May: Oh yes we had two very old records, one was 'Wont you come home Bill Bailey' and I can't remember what the other one was but they were so scratchy and very old. Well, they were used and used and used (*Couple of lines of song here, Bill Bailey, with lots of hissing for scratchy record*)

Blackout: (*Improvisation, everyone joins in the actions, sitting on bus, peering out of window*)

Ann: Introduces the need for Air raid precautions in the Blitz.....

Do you remember how we had to tape over all the windows inside the house with sticky tape? So that when the blast blew the glass it didn't shatter. It broke, but it wasn't tiny shards, it was chunks.

May: We had blackout curtains and they had to cover the whole window. If there was even a chink of light showing The air raid warden would come and knock at the door and it'd be

All: 'Put that light out!'

Jean: And all the buses had their windows blacked out. (*group arranged in a line in profile like bus seats and peering at the audience out of the window*) You didn't know where you were. So the nippy (the bus conductor) used tell you where you were because you wouldn't know where you were. They'd say the name of the station.

Olive: Greenwich station

Jean (*getting off*) Thank you. That's me.

Olive: Woolwich Station.

Joan P: (*getting off*) That's my stop. And if you went out you could have a torch, 'cause there was no street lighting, but it was covered over except for a little round hole the size of a sixpence. And bicycle lamps were the same.

May: And all the trees had white bands round them so you could see them and you didn't bang into them. I think there were more accidents in the war than what there were in peacetime because people were tripping over in the blackout and because they were totally unused to complete darkness.

The Blitz:

May:

Everything was very quiet at the start of the war. Hitler was busy defeating the rest of mainland Europe and it was not really until the Blitz on London in September 1940 that the heat was turned up and all families were affected. I worked in Siemens, the big cable laying factory. They had concrete shelters in each factory building. There were green and red flashing warning lights. Green meant 'be aware' and red meant 'evacuate now'. On Saturday 21st September 1940, the red light flashed. So we made our way to the shelters. As we crossed the yard we saw a line of bombers flying low and as we seated ourselves on the wooden benches, we heard the bombs begin to fall. The ground shook and we were filled with fear. Two hours later, the All Clear sounded and we emerged to rush home. Was my family safe? When I looked back towards the river, the whole of the docks on the north side were burning.

Ann:

When the local bombing of the docks and things around here became so bad, my step-father suggested that we go away. My mother was in service to a family in Blackheath and they had property, cottages, in Yorkshire. I can remember us going, packing up things. There was me, Mum had another child by then a baby, and an auntie and a cousin. We were all crammed into this friend of Dad's taxi and taken to Yorkshire.

Mum couldn't stand it because there were no local shops it was a big walk. After about four days of getting water from a well and having to read by lamp-light she got fed up. We didn't have a phone at home but she phoned Dad's place of work, and we arranged to come home again back to Greenwich as quick as we could.

Joan H (read by Heather):

All the docks were alight, and my mother and all the mothers were at the school gate, Fosdene School in Charlton. And all the docks were alight, all the flames were going up and course all the mothers decided then to send the children away. We had a coach that took us up to Canon Street station. We had our identification pinned on our jackets or coats. We had a gas mask, and a little kit bag with all our belongings in. All our Mothers waved us goodbye – my Mother was smiling, really smiling and waving. I was thinking we was going on holiday. And I had my brother that was 2 years older than me. And Mother always said to my brother "look after Joanie". As the coach turned to go away, I looked back and my Mother had been smiling, but now she was sobbing her heart out, and I wondered why she was crying.

And then on the way, the warnings went to Canon Street Station and I was frightened. I said to my brother "Ooh, ooh the bombers are coming, the bombers are coming!" and my brother said "no its only thunder". So when we arrived at Byfield – that was up near Northamptonshire – they were farm people; so most of the farmers only wanted boys. My friend Elsie and I were almost the

last people to be picked. We were clinging to each other. We were posted to a lady, and he was a lay preacher. And my experiences there were really horrific. It was a thatched cottage, you could hear all the mice in the thatch. The toilet was outside, with no flush or anything like that. You still had to have blackout and it was only candle light. And any candles we used to take up to bed we used to have to blow it out straight away. It was very very strict. Elsie's parents came down to see us and they took Elsie back to London, so I was left on my own. The woman didn't feed me properly. I had to go to church 3 times a day on Sunday. I wasn't allowed to skip, play, the only things I could do was sing hymns on a Sunday. It was absolutely awful. My brother did what he could to look after me. He was in a more modern house and she was a lovely lady and they had 3 meals a day and I used to go up there and she used to feed me.

Rationing and Queuing:

Ann:

Back in London food was rationed and women spent long periods queuing for essentials. (*Everyone forms a queue*) Mum had to go to the shops each day to buy food. You could only get things on ration at a shop you were registered at and that had to be on a daily basis as you had no fridge and they may not have had a supply of things. Some days you had a fruitless shopping journey.

Joan P: I felt sorry for the women in those days, they spent their time queuing up. You'd hear there was 'such and such and such a thing at such and such a shop', and you would all queue for ages. (*Everyone switches quickly to new queue in different position*) As children, our mothers sometimes left us in the queue to keep their place.

May: Where's your mother? She can't just leave you here. What if there's an air-raid? I'll give her a piece of my mind.

Olive: But I don't ever remember going short of anything apart from fruit during the war. In Roman Road, where the market was, my mum knew all the people that she had always dealt with and you never went without anything.

Ann: In Britain in those days, each shop specialized in certain food and you had to register so that they had the number of your ration book and each shop you went to you had to produce your ration book so they could either clip a coupon or mark a coupon. And you were limited as to how much you could have each week. And you couldn't choose what you had; you had to have what was available.

Joan P: We used to have neighbours knocking on the door saying they've got sausages up at the co op! And we used to queue up and somebody from the shop, an assistant from the shop used to come out and say

John: (*Pulling down the shutter*) "Sorry after this there's none left"

Joan P. And we used to have to go home without anything after queuing for a long long time.

May: And you only got one egg a week, and sometimes that was restricted to pregnant women.

All (sing):

Hey! Little hen! When, when, when will you lay me an egg for my tea?

Hey! Little hen! When, when, when will you try to supply one for me?

Get into your nest, do your little best. Get it off your chest. I can do the rest.

Hey! Little hen! When, when, when, will you lay me an egg for my tea?

V1s and V2s

John:

In June 1944 the V1s or Doodlebugs appeared ... They were pilotless bombs which made a noise and then cut out and dropped causing much death and destruction.

Olive:

The V1s were awful. I was working in the East End then as a machinist and we had a man on the roof on the lookout to see if they were coming. Sometimes they'd change their routes and veer off away from you. On one occasion we were told to evacuate to the shelter. We were just coming down the stairs to the cellar when this V1 exploded across the road and we were just covered in dust. It was very sad because the house it hit had a young couple and two little children and they were all killed.

Olive: On the whole though, we never worried about the bombing. We'd go to the pictures and they'd announce:

Anne: There is an air raid beginning now. If you want to leave, please leave the cinema now.

Olive: Well, my friend and I would say:

Friend (Jean): Oh we don't want to go. We'll stay and watch the film.

Olive: And then one night they were dropping the big bombs and Mum heard they'd dropped one on the cinema where I was. Well she and my brother, they panicked. She said:

Mum: (Joan P:) Ooh you'd better go and find them...

Olive: And my brother panicked. He'd got a kettle in his hand and he spilled boiling water all over his foot in the rush. *John and Joan P. can act this out*) He dashed out to find us and there was my friend and me just walking along singing..... *(Olive and Jean arm in arm singing)* When he got home and got his sock off, his foot was all blisters....

He was off work for two weeks after that, poor boy. You got used to the raids and carried on.... An old lady said 'I love hearing you young people singing on the way home at night'. We'd sing all popular songs: Lambeth Walk, things like that.

All (sing):

Anytime you're Lambeth way,
Any evening, any day,
You'll find us all doin' the Lambeth walk.
Every little Lambeth gal,
With her little Lambeth pal,
You'll find 'em all doin' the Lambeth walk.
Everything's free and easy,
Do as you darn well pleasey,
Why don't you make your way there,
Go there, stay there.
Once you get down Lambeth way,
Every evening, every day,
You'll find yourself doin' the Lambeth walk.

Jean:

Some people who had stayed in London all through the war finally gave in when when the Doodle-Bugs started coming. My father said it was too dangerous to stay in London and my sister and I must go and be evacuated. He worked on the Ak-Ak (Anti-Aircraft guns) guns in Southwark Park, he was in the ARP so every night he wasn't with us and then eventually I can remember going to Paddington Station. From there, we went to St Ives in Cornwall. It was absolutely beautiful, as we arrived in St Ives we saw that beach, Porthminster Beach, oh it was absolutely wonderful.

We were all taken to this church and my twin sister and I were holding each other's hands and the lady wanted just one girl. They said she only wants one girl and we said "We're not going to be separated". In the end she said she would take both of us. They were absolutely wonderful. We called them auntie and uncle, he was a butcher so we had wonderful food. He knew the Co-op managers so we had clotted cream, sugar and butter.

While we were in Cornwall I remember the D-Day landing, the Americans coming to the harbour in St Ives before they went round to Slapton Sands. They threw us chocolate and oranges and we thought this was wonderful.

May:

On D-Day, 6th June 1944, my son John was born. We weren't evacuated, we just stayed in London. My husband had found a house for us and I shared it with my sister and every night we took a case down into the shelter with clothing for the children.

When John was six weeks old a bomb fell about 2 o'clock in the morning and just blew everything in the house, the windows absolutely everything. The clearest memory of the whole thing is getting out as soon as it was light and seeing this dirt and dust absolutely everywhere.

About an hour later at the end of the street were two elderly looking people, that was my Mother and Father coming to see what had happened to us . *(Ann and*

John stagger down the street and hug May) The news had flown very quickly. Immediately they took my son and my sister's two children and my sister. They all went off to Sheffield to stay with relatives. I stayed to start clearing up, trying to get what we left stored with other people and then I also went off to Sheffield. We stayed there for a year.

People just left London. They didn't care about what they had left behind them because everybody was being killed around them.

End of war:

Jean:

I can remember when the war ended in Fore Street St Ives, all the flags were up and music was playing and everybody was dancing and my sister and I had been so happy that last year. *(Possible tap dance here by Jean while everyone sings)* When the war was over we just felt we wanted to go home, but we had had a wonderful year. I wrote a poem about the end of the war for a school competition and I found it recently. Here it is:

This dreadful war has come to an end
We now must thank our Allied friends
The Russians and their leader Joe
The Americans and their leader also
The Army, the Navy, the Airforce in blue
The WAAFs the Wrens, the ATS too
We must not forget the wonderful Red Cross
But for their parcels, boys would have been lost
We thanks them all for what they have done
Also the war, which they have won.
We now can go to bed once more
And so forget that terrible war
We once again thank all our friends
Who helped to bring the war to an end.

May:

Yes. There was a great feeling because we'd been through so much; there was a fantastic feeling of relief. We would have gone out and built houses and done it for nothing, we were so eager to try and get going again. Finally it was over.

Olive:

The end of the war was absolutely brilliant. In the East End, the road you lived in was more or less like a village. There was a wonderful feeling of community in the road I lived in. On VE day everyone opened their doors, all the lights were on, someone brought a piano out into the street, someone built a bonfire in the middle of the road. Oh it was wonderful.

Joan H. We had a bonfire in the road too. It caused the tarmac to melt and the signs of this remained for a long time afterwards. There were flags strung up between the trees and a neighbour brought out a piano and we all danced around the bonfire.

Ann:

The street parties, that was brilliant. Everyone had saved up for the celebrations at the end of the war. My mother and father used to run a raffle to try to raise funds to provide for a party. Things were still rationed of course, but one or two neighbours I can remember were Dockers. I can remember these Dockers providing all sorts of goodies, which was against Mum's principles because the black market was a big thing.

Joan P:

I don't remember any of these celebrations that went on because in the February before the war ended, my dad who worked for the Post Office in Greenwich he got an almost direct hit and he was buried for almost three hours and he was in hospital for months afterwards. He had burns on his legs and all this shrapnel and glass embedded in his face. So we didn't really feel like celebrating. And a lot of our men were still away fighting in the far east.

John:

Yes, the war with Japan was not over till August 1944. I think the thing I remember mostly was the party we had in Azof Street to celebrate VJ Day, the end of the war in the Far East. In fact Ann has still got a photograph of myself and one of our neighbours running in a race down the street. It was wonderful camaraderie in those days. Although there was rationing, even then, people shared what they had.

(Song here: There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover)

All (sing):

There'll be bluebirds over
The white cliffs of Dover,
Tomorrow, just you wait and see.
There'll be love and laughter?
And peace ever after.
Tomorrow, when the world is free
The shepherd will tend his sheep.
The valley will bloom again.
And Jimmy will go to sleep
In his own little room again.
There'll be bluebirds over?
The white cliffs of Dover,
Tomorrow, just you wait and see.