



**TWO  
TALES OF  
WAR**

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## Foreword

This book has been written in two parts, the first tells the tale of my father who as a gunner in the army spent most of the war out in the Middle East, and my mother, who was a shop girl living on the Home Front. It then goes on to tell in a factual rather than romantic way how the two of them met after the war at the shop where my mother worked and quickly became involved and finally got married.

The story shows the harshness of the conditions facing the soldiers from the weather and the desert surroundings and the lack of modern conveniences. It also shows how as a gunner in the artillery, my father had more to fear from disease and poor diet than from the enemy. My father's tale illustrates how the boredom and endless routine of life as a gunner was broken up and relieved by trivial events that took on a new significance.

Life on the Home Front was also harsh but rather more civilised with the eternal problems of food shortages. Although many thousands of civilians were killed as a result of bombing life went on albeit in a very different way to that of today. This book clearly illustrates how lifestyles have changed since that almost forgotten age with a lack of modern equipment and technology. It reveals how life was before throw-away nappies and pre-packed food.

The book goes on to show how the shortages caused by the second world war carried on long after the war was over but did not prevent people from leading fulfilled lives and getting married.

## A Soldiers Tale

I was born the year after the First World War ended on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 1919 in Derby. When I was about 4 years old my family moved to a village called Shustoke near to Coleshill not far from Birmingham where I was brought up with my younger brother called Mervin. My school years were not especially memorable other than the fact that I won a scholarship to go to Coleshill Grammar School where I stayed until I was 18. I sat and passed the school higher certificate which was comparable to todays modern A level exams. It was rare for a boy from a working background to have such a good education in those days.

My father was head gardener at a local hall and my mother was a cook at the same big house as they called it. We lived in a cottage and money was not too plentiful so it was decided that I should not go to university but would get a job. My first job was in a furniture shop where the work was sometimes physical, moving stock about, but was always varied and enjoyable.

It was two years after I started work, when I was 20, that war broke out and the call up was made. My brother Mervin was 5 years younger than me so he did not get called up and join the war until later.

I received my call up papers and was sent to Yorkshire to carry out my basic training that lasted for about 6 months.

It was a particularly cold winter while I was there and we only had wooden huts to stay in at the training camp. There were

stoves in them but never anything supplied to burn to produce any heat. One very cold and snowy day I was out for a walk with a group of fellow recruits when just outside the camp I heard the call of nature. There were houses about so I went in the nearby public toilets where I spotted that there were many cubicles all with wooden seats fitted to the toilets. Quick thinking made me realise that these would make excellent firewood. So we got together and tore off all the seats, hiding them under our greatcoats as we walked back into camp.

That night we had a good fire in our hut and for once we all went to sleep warm. The next day the MPs (Military Police) went round the camp trying to find out who had been responsible for vandalising the public toilets but we never owned up and they never discovered the fresh ash in the stove in our hut.

After basic training was over I was sent to the Middle East where there was a battle front being fought. There were no long distance troop planes in the early days of the war so we were sent by ship. Quite a few cruise liners were commissioned for war use and were used as troop carriers. However, I was sent out on the Strathallen that I boarded at Greenock. We were there for three days loading the 60 guns and all the equipment.

Eventually we set sail for Cape Town and during the time that I was on watch we lost a man overboard. As we travelled south the soldiers found it too warm in their cramped cabins so most of them slept on the deck where it was a little cooler.

Upon arriving at Cape Town we all split up and toured the area. A small number of us had an invite from the local Mayor to tea and dinner with himself, his wife the lady Mayoress and his daughter. It was his last day in office and he wanted to make a

show of his support for our troops. We were treated like Royalty and really enjoyed the celebrations and banquet.

A few days later we sailed for Bombay and then on to Iraq. Many of the soldiers were not used to sailing and got seasick but fortunately I was not one of them. Food rations were fair on board ship but we had a rude awakening when we disembarked at our destination. I started my tour of duty with a temperature and bad cold and was sent to a convalescent camp at Phibes Fort.

Days later after recovering I was sent to a reinforcement camp but here I was ill again, this time with Influenza and I fainted while on guard duty so was sent to an RAF hospital. After examination the medics decided it was sand fly fever and I could not eat. Then I developed Pneumonia because of my weakened state of health and was violently sick all the time from the M& B tablets I was given. A few days later I got yellow jaundice. It was weeks before I had recovered enough to be given a discharge and then I spent 7 days on leave in the RAF camp.

That Xmas I had a good dinner with chicken soup followed by roast chicken with stuffing and all the trimmings including roast potatoes and marrow. This was followed by jelly, blancmange, Xmas pudding, fresh oranges, nuts and raisins. All of this was washed down with a generous helping of beer.

In the New Year I was sent back to camp but the journey was livened up by playing pontoon on the train. I managed to win over 350 fils, which was a nice win. That night at camp it was freezing cold in the tents and to make matters worse we were flooded out. It snowed regularly, thawing in the sunshine of day only to freeze hard again at night.

When we had first made camp the officers had instructed us all to sleep 6 men to a tent because of the cold nights. As the tents were not very large one group of foolhardy lads decided they would be alright with only 4 of them which would allow them a little more room to move. The next morning they were late getting up and when the officer went to investigate he found all 4 of the soldiers frozen stiff, dead of course.

We were stationed in large camps where artillery was set up with large gun embankments and smaller ack ack guns for firing at the planes coming in for air raids. Raids did not happen every day and when they did it only involved between ½ a dozen and a dozen planes at once. On most occasions a couple of planes would be shot down by our guns but they kept coming.

A lot of time was spent writing letters home to my mother and brother. Sometimes I would send them photographs that I had taken with my camera. It was simple camera by today's standards but things were much less technical in those days. Sometimes if we were lucky we would receive letters from home with news of current events. (There were no mobile phones to keep in touch with in those days, indeed there were no small portable transistor radios to listen to either.)

Every week we could draw our rations of 40 Players and 60 Woodbine cigarettes, 1 bottle of Lager and a small block of toffee. These were often exchanged and swapped between the soldiers.

Our equipment was very basic by today's standards and when we first arrived we did not have the proper desert kit such as special sand boots. Our ordinary army issue boots did not keep out the

sand so a lot of the time we had blisters on our feet. Shorts and other desert clothing were issued well after we arrived.

As the weeks went by the occasional snow turned to heavy rain and the tents were again flooded with three or four inches of water. This was not so much of a problem as it was trying to keep the gun pits dry with sand bags.

At night we played lots of cards and as I usually won I decided to go into town and buy a silver brooch for 400 fils that had been made locally.

One day I was told to help in the kitchens where I tried to light a petrol burner. Unfortunately the petrol vaporised in the hot metal and it exploded in my face. Luckily no real harm was done as the resulting fire was put out quickly.

Trips into the local towns were encouraged to improve moral so I spent some more of my card winnings and bought several items of jewellery to take home with me.

## A Break In Routine Life

The routine life of the camp went on for weeks until we were eventually moved and travelled to Teltawa and went through the Kilo Pass. From there into Baghdad and then Ramadi where we camped. It was a desert town with parks and was quite smart. I took the opportunity to buy 250 Players cigarettes and 2 tins of fruit.

From there we travelled further into the desert where we went for miles with no sign of people except for a lonely camel herd with its one driver. We made a temporary camp at a desert pumping station on the Trans Jordan Pipeline. Then the convoy gradually climbed upwards through rockier terrain, that took over from the sandy desert, into a mountainous region finally reaching Hirbid, a mountain town, with very beautiful orange groves and cactus hedges. From there we could see the snow topped mountains in the distance and below us a fertile green valley with houses.

We journeyed on and reached Hyfa where there was a gun site and settled into the camp. There was lots of guard duty and gun practice for weeks. However there was some incentive to be the best gun crew as they were rewarded with a pint of beer each. It might not seem much to today's soldiers with their well stocked nafis but then it was a rare treat.

One particular day when we had dummy runs several problems developed with my gun. One round jammed and one round failed to explode. Then we discovered the recoil was too slow. Eventually though all the faults were fixed on the different guns and the practice runs ceased.

The mosquitoes were always a problem and one night while I was on the eternal guard duty I was bitten very badly, but, the regular dose of anti-malaria tablets did its job and prevented me from ever getting malaria.

The next week or two was spent digging an alternative gun site and doing some guard duty. In the evenings that I had free I would often get a pass to go into Hyfa to watch a film at the pictures. Some films were all right such as 'Escape', 'Gone With The Wind', 'Each Dawn I Die' and 'Bitter Sweet' but one of the better ones that I saw was a Laurel and Hardy film called 'Flying Deuces'.

We received orders for a group of us to be sent across the border into Syria and on to Tripoli where we were attached to the 37<sup>th</sup> Light Artillery with the 9<sup>th</sup> Army. Upon arrival we were ordered to camouflage our tents. It was going to take us hours to paint them by hand so one lad had the bright idea of throwing the tins of paint over them to give a random pattern. Of course it took a lot of paint this way and when we asked for more the sergeant found out what we had done and we were all put on a charge. In the evening I went into town with a small group to watch a film, but, the MPs would not accept our late passes and we were sent back to camp. Other nights we had no problems and usually got in to the film for about 80 Piastres. Occasionally the film being shown would be a foreign one but usually they were English/American even in those days.

Some days I was ordered to chop firewood and on one occasion I cut my finger quite badly and was taken to the nearest hospital in the Major's car that was quite an honour. After having it cleaned up and dressed I had to make my own way back to the camp. That afternoon I had a pass into town again where I bought a

Conway Stuart fountain pen for £10. Even today this is expensive for a pen but then it was several weeks wages.

During the time I spent out in the Middle East it was a general belief that we, the ordinary soldiers would not be going home again after the war was finally over because we thought that it would be like the 1<sup>st</sup> world war where most of the soldiers were killed. Consequently we spent what money we had and did not try to save any for the future. Sometimes we would send a little home but mostly we got what enjoyment we could out of it.

Every so often we would have to go either to alternative gun sites that were already prepared, or dig another one. One day while digging in rocky ground I trapped my finger between the pick and a rock causing a very big blood blister with which I had to go sick again to get it dressed.

Most evenings were now spent on guard duty and to lighten this time we would often play cards in the guard tent. However, on one instance we were involved in our usual game, when, we were caught by a Lieutenant who threatened to send us to the Colonel if it happened again.

Free afternoons were often spent swimming in the Med as we were near to the coast. This may have seemed like a luxury but as we were short of water, we were only allocated 2 pints per man a day, we had no means of washing ourselves and keeping clean. We also had to wash our clothes in the sea. The salt made them a bit stiff for a while but gradually they softened up with wear. On one of these swims I had left the main party and found some Aussies who I spent some time chatting to. I totally lost track of the time and when I got back I found that a search party had been organised to try and find me as my squad thought I was lost.

As I have already stated we often had to dig new gun sites and once we had to make a new site near an olive grove. To clear our field of vision we tore down many old olive trees and loaded them into lorries to be taken away. This went on for days until the officer in charge decided that the site was ready and then it was back to the old routines.

The weather was a bit wilder and the sea was too rough for swimming. When it had calmed down a bit I was soon back in it enjoying the water along with many other soldiers. I had swum quite a way from shore when I spotted an Aussie in difficulties further out. I swam to him and decided it was too far to tow him back to shore but spied a very small island close by so I took him there. When the spectators on the shore saw what had happened the lifeguard was alerted who then decided the sea was too rough for him to swim that far out, so, a raft with 6 men on, linked to the shore by a rope, was sent out to fetch us back to the beach. After this rescue I spent more time with the Aussies who liked to gamble. After tossing coins and getting 18 tails in a row I lost £30 I curtailed my gambling habits for a short while.

During 14 days leave that I was given I met up with an Arab man who could speak good English and he invited a friend and myself back to his house. When we got there we discovered that he had 5 daughters who could not speak a word of English between them. After a short while he left us alone for the evening with the girls. We communicated as best we could but I think that the Arab man had hopes that we would get involved with the girls and be persuaded to perhaps go further. (A nice English soldier son in law!)

We returned to camp later that evening and when the next day came we were ordered to move the gun site from the olive grove to the top of a hill by a water tower. This meant more digging for several days and caused me to get some bad blisters on my hands that lasted for ages. They were so painful that I went sick in the mornings to get them dressed. Then to make matters worse I developed a bad cold again.

After a couple of days my temperature was far worse, over 100 degrees, so I was sent to a hospital and put on a fluid diet. Shortly after being put into a ward there was a panic about an infection that one of the patients had so it was isolated for 14 days. To pass the time those of us who were able played Monopoly at which I usually won. When the panic was over I was allowed into the gardens to do a little light gardening for some exercise. Eventually I was discharged and went back to guard and cookhouse duties.

As we had so little to eat constipation was sometimes a problem and one soldier had it really bad when his problem was solved in a rather brutal way. He was fooling around the tents and he fell landing on a tent peg. It pierced his trousers and went right inside him. He had to be lifted carefully off it and taken to hospital for treatment.

When I next had an evening pass I went into Tripoli and watched an Arab boxing match also taking the opportunity to buy some more rolls of film for my camera. The following afternoon some of the squadies played a game of volleyball against a team of local Arab lads behind a mosque. That evening I had a good win of £10 at Solo that rounded off the week very nicely.

The next week was cookhouse duties all week so to cheer myself up I sent some letters home with some of the jewellery that I had bought along with a number of photos. That Friday brought a dreaded route march. Of course my group got totally lost and could not find our way from the map at all. We waded through several small rivers and crossed 5 lots of barbed wire before we found out where we were. Then to get back to camp we hitched a lift on a French truck that happened to be going our way.

During our excursion I had grazed my hands and banged my knee when I had tripped over. Needless to say the hand festered and had to be dressed for several days and also I developed a bursar on my knee that swelled up to 3 times its normal size. For 4 days I had to treat my knee with an Epsom salt pack that eventually reduced the swelling.

Another afternoon pass took me into Baolbeck where I saw the ruined temples of Venus and Bacchus that were very interesting. The next few days brought heavy rains with strong winds and thunder and lightening but we still had our rifle knowledge tests. After the rains subsided a little I was sent scavenging firewood from local abandoned camps. Then more heavy rain came and caused our tent to leak soaking everything in it including our blankets.

As the weather improved we got back to our daily swims in the Med to keep ourselves clean and on one occasion while I was out for a swim I saw 2 of our lads in difficulties in deep water. Fortunately being a very strong but not stylish swimmer I managed to tow them back to shallow water. It was a first for me to tow two people at once but my abilities at swimming were recognised back at the camp because an officer told me to teach a bunch of soldiers to swim. There were about 50 of them and I had

never taught any one how to swim before. For a few minutes I puzzled over what to do then I had a brainwave. I lined them all up in shallow water and told them to walk out into deeper water and then run. It was a little reckless but it got them all doing the dog paddle. As they gained confidence they quickly learned to swim properly after a few lessons, at least they could manage a few yards. The officer was delighted.

For a while two Arab boys joined our camp doing odd jobs for various people and whatever small rewards that they could get. Then one morning some things were found to be missing from one of the tents and the boys had left the camp. The MPs informed the local Arab police of their suspicions and the two boys were caught shortly afterwards. The boys were beaten by the police and the things returned making an end to the matter. However a couple of days later my kit bag went missing in the night. After a long search it was found half buried in the sand 100 yards from my tent. There was a court of inquiry because the army takes it very seriously when equipment goes missing, but nobody was found guilty of misconduct although I had my suspicions as to who was to blame.

We moved to a different gun site and made camp on the beach. While exploring one day some of the lads came across some tins that the labels had washed off and some cases of cigarettes lying on the beach. We decided that they had washed ashore from a ship that had been bombed and sunk. Delightedly we shook the tins which rattled and decided that they contained tinned peaches. It was our lucky day, fruit and cigarettes. When we opened the tins they contained carrots, they were still welcomed at the cookhouse but no treat for us. The cigarettes were just as much of a let down because when we dried them they fell apart. We tried

smoking the baccy in roll ups but it was salty from being in the sea.

Two more Arab boys soon arrived and made themselves useful around camp washing the dixies and collecting firewood for the cookhouse. Later that week I had a day pass and went into town where I toured a textile mill and saw how the material was made into clothes.

## Travelling The Desert

The next move was a major journey into a different country along with the whole regiment. We started the trek by travelling to a transit camp in Beirout where we arrived at 8pm. Then we moved on to Ryhad arriving at 14-30. Here some of us were ordered to dig sanitation trenches.

One morning after making a late night camp in the dark we were woken by wailing cries and discovered that we had made camp in a large makeshift graveyard. The noise was the local women mourning their dead families. Needless to say we hurriedly moved on. After a short stop over we moved on to Zaband where all leave was cancelled because of a smallpox epidemic.

It was very wet and cold but we were allowed to draw some extra blankets from the stores and we made ourselves as comfortable as possible playing brag to while away the time. At one point I was £35 up which in those days was a very large sum indeed but needless to say I had a run of bad luck and lost the lot again. While wandering around the stores I found a shelf stacked with tins of peaches and managed to swipe half a dozen tins when no one was looking. After I got back to my tent my mates and myself tucked into them with relish as it was a real treat.

As day came we prepared to move out yet again leaving Ryhad behind and the rest of the regiment joined us as we travelled into Jordan where we saw a fertile valley surrounded by barren mountains. In the distance we were told lay the towns of Galilee and Nazareth. We made a brief stop in Tulkarem where it was very hot and then moved on into the desert and out of Palestine.

On one stop we found the local well and saw a dead German soldier floating in the bottom. Needless to say we did not drink any water from that well. Every day we were travelling over 100 miles and eventually we left the Sinai desert and reached Cairo where we saw the pyramids. On passing Al-a-Main we saw a huge dump where there were 100s of burnt out cars, lorries, tanks and even planes. The nearest town to the dump was totally destroyed with not a single building left standing. Eventually we arrived at Tobruk at 8pm at night. This was our final destination and we set about making a permanent camp.

For several weeks I was on telephone duty taking messages for the Officers and running back and forwards but it was a change from the usual guard duty. At night we had air raids one after another with many planes being shot down.

A couple of days after arriving the well for our drinking water was declared unfit because of Typhoid so we had to go back to drinking bottled water which was mildly salty and not very pleasant to drink. Our water was often stored in large cans that were made of thin tin that sometimes leaked. When we could find them we used any abandoned German cans for storage because they were made of steel and were much thicker. Wartime cans are still in use to day and now unkindly called Jerry cans after the Germans.

Near our camp a lot of large cacti were growing and one bright lad recognised that they were opuntias or prickly pear and they had fruits on that were good to eat. The first problem was how to pick them and get the outer prickly skins off the fleshy fruit inside. The same bright lad suggested using our handkerchiefs to wrap them in. It worked fine and we all tucked in but we had not

reckoned on the problem of getting the spines out of our handkerchiefs afterwards so that we could wipe our noses.

Christmas came and for once we had a proper dinner with turkey and pork along with all the trimmings including beans, potatoes and even stuffing. This was followed by Xmas pudding with sauce and two bottles of beer each, although we were allowed to buy 3 more from the canteen. Tea was just as special with Christmas cake followed by cheese and biscuits with some fresh fruit as well. By the end of the day we all felt really bloated as our stomachs were not used to so much good rich food. We slept well that night.

After some time out there I was given two weeks leave so I decided to go to a bigger town some way behind our lines. I left Tobruk by train at 10.30pm and arrived at Armariyah at 12pm cold and tired. There was no heating on the train and I only had one blanket with me. That night I stayed in a transit camp in a tent with no sides in it. 6 am the next morning I caught a train and arrived at my destination an hour later at 7 am. I found a hotel where I decided to stay in the lap of luxury for a few days or at least as long as my money lasted. The hotel was a big place called the Universal Hotel but after going out in the town for the evening I still managed to get lost and could not find my way back to it for some hours.

My first morning there I had breakfast in bed with extra bacon, a real treat as we had seen no real meat for months at the front. My stay lasted for 6 days before money became short and then I went to the YMCA. On the way there I thought that I had lost all my remaining money but fortunately I found it in an inside jacket pocket. During the day I wandered around the town but returned to the YMCA for my evening meal. There was time for shopping

and I even found a museum but it was closed for redecoration. One day I decided on a swim in the sea but it was far too cold.

After two weeks of relative luxury and relaxation it was time to return to the camp and the war. I caught a train to Armariyah and again slept in a transit camp. From here I travelled in a lorry in a convoy. There were 16 men of all nationalities to a lorry and we had to supply our own food for the trip.

The convoy did not travel by day and we slept in the desert with no tents around us for shelter. One break was taken outside Mersah and then we went through Hell Fire Pass. Eventually we arrived back at the camp at about 5pm.

I got back into the same daily routine of writing letters home and then one day we all had a treat as a mobile bath unit arrived. It was installed in tents and meant getting in with 30 other men but it was a special occasion as water was in such short supply.

Most of the time we had to drink tea made with salt water that was vile. It would not normally be considered healthy to drink salt water but it was so hot that we sweated out a lot of salt that had to be replaced. Indeed we also had to take salt tablets as a supplement.

Food rations were very meagre compared to that a modern soldier would receive. Our staple food was a type of biscuit that was mashed in water to form a sort of porridge for breakfast.

Then lunch would consist of whatever meat that could be obtained, usually tinned corn beef, made into a stew with biscuits broken into it to bulk it out. Then for tea we would have the ever

useful biscuits, sometimes spread with a little jam. If we were lucky we supplemented our diet with local fruit such as dates and anything else that could be obtained from nearby towns and villages.

I was wandering around the edge of the camp one day with a group of my mates when we spied a lorry travelling slowly towards us. As it got nearer we could see that it was loaded with nice juicy ripe fresh melons. So we ran along side the lorry as it went past and helped some melons roll off it. What a treat that was!

One week an assault course was set up which we trained on for about 1 hour every morning and afternoon. It was warm work but a welcome change from the monotonous days.

It was suggested by a friend that I should write an article for the camps magazine on a subject that I knew well, Card Sharping. It took me several days before I was satisfied with it and handed it in, I suggested in the article that there were even card sharps operating in my camp. Not me of course!

We all had a lot of spare time on our hands so some of the lads tried making things out of old shell cases but I tried carving out a walking stick.

Some of our time was taken up with a driving course. When the time came for the test I decided I did not want to be a driver so I tried to fluff it. The test was very basic and involved a number of us driving in a line across the desert with very little else. I was as erratic as I could be and the examining officer said that anybody who could drive that badly without hitting anything must be in full control of the car so he passed me.

I was a gunner on the big guns but my gun was out of action for a few days until one of the lads fiddled about with it and got the firing mechanism to work again. In those days there was no thought about wearing protection against the noise so the constant explosions of the guns going off led to my having hearing loss. I became quite deaf in one ear, the side that was kept nearest to the gun and had partial hearing loss in the other.

During the early part of the war radar started to be used with the guns. The radar units were housed in a small shed with no windows that was very dark. This was so that the screens could be seen more easily. We all took it in turns on the screens trying to spot enemy planes but were only allowed to do two hours on duty at any one time because it was thought that the radiation from the screens would cause sterility. It was always very hot and you felt stifled in the radar hut so we were always glad when our two hours was up.

At night when there were no air raids the soldiers would while away the evenings by gambling with various card games. This was frowned upon by the MPs as it would often lead to trouble over accusations of cheating with fights breaking out, but, it was so rife that they couldn't stop all the games. I was quite a gambler and by this time was £8 and 4/- in credit. This was a large sum in those days but the soldiers were paid in cash and had little to spend their money on in the camp. Some sent money home and others would sometimes make the long walk into town to find a bar.

## A Dishonest Bar Keeper

A group of us had gone into one bar and were introduced to the local spirit by the bar keeper. We all got blindingly drunk but left later that night and headed back for camp not suspecting anything. I felt better than the others so I left them behind and made my own way. Part way back I felt worse and it was a long walk so I took shelter in a small stone building. I passed out and was so bad that I did not wake up properly the next day but just slept through it. Finally after a couple of days I roused and felt woozy but dry and well enough to make it the rest of the way back to camp. When I got there the NCO asked me where I had been because they had sent out a search party for me. Apparently the other soldiers had collapsed in town and been taken to hospital where they had their stomachs pumped. It turned out that the bar keeper had been mixing aviation spirit with the local spirit to make it go further. They had given me up for dead it was that serious.

There were few cigarettes available so I bought a pipe and some baccy but I broke it on the first day. That night I found someone who had some adhesive tape and used it to mend my pipe. Then there was a row over how much tape I had used.

We made a new camp and found ourselves surrounded by mines that were forever exploding. For a while we had gunner practice and rifle firing exercises every day. We also had grenade throwing practice during which two Sudanese lads were seriously injured. Some afternoons we had time to play games of football and it was during one of these hard fought games I received a nasty kick which was painful for a couple of days.

Every so often a concert party would tour the camps, staying for a few days in each giving a musical performance to the troops. It was meant as a moral boost and was a very welcome change to the monotonous routine of camp life.

One day while having my morning shave I had a bright idea. Water was severely rationed to a few pints a day, that included water for washing with. It was so scarce that people saved it and washed in it several times before throwing it away.

I had read about filtration systems and how they worked so I thought that I could build a simple one. I found an old fuel drum of which there were many, upended it, cut out the top and fitted a tap on the bottom. After this I filled it with sand that was all around us. Then I explained the idea to a group of soldiers who I persuaded to tip in their dirty washing water. After several bowl fulls had been tipped in still nothing came out. More was added and eventually clean water started to trickle out. However only a small amount came out compared to that which had been tipped in. Then started an argument as to how the clean water was to be shared out. When the next morning came round the sand in the drum was dry again and needed a lot more water tipped in to wet it before clean water came out. After a couple of days the constant arguments over the clean water produced dissuaded people from using it and it was soon forgotten.

For several days we had air raids but most of the time the incoming planes were too high to hit. There was often gunnery practice but it made no difference in our success at hitting the raiders.

Occasionally we had showers but mostly it was just hot. On one day in particular we recorded a temperature of 109 degrees

Fahrenheit. In the evenings when it was a little cooler we often played football matches against groups of lads from different parts of Britain. West Yorkshire, Midlands, Tyne Tees etc were all areas that were represented in our camp. Some games we won and others we lost but most were a little rough to say the least but we always gave as good as we got. Often when I woke up the next morning I was stiff and bruised all over but it did not last.

Most days I went swimming in the sea in the afternoon when it was very hot to cool of but eventually this was stopped by the NCO who said he could find plenty of jobs for us to do. However he would let us swim on Saturdays and Sundays.

The latrines were a simple affair consisting of a trench with boarding secured above it to sit on and for privacy the whole lot was hidden behind a screen. Periodically these were filled in and a new one was dug but to save having to dig a new one every day, petrol was thrown in and this was then lit to burn the waste and reduce the smell and flies a little. One day everybody had been told that it was about to be lit when an officer rushed up and went in to do his business. He was warned that it was about to be lit and could not be used for 5 minutes, but it did not apply to him as he was an officer. The soldier with the match did not see him go in and tossed the lit match into the trench. There was a flash and an almighty howl from the officer who came out smoking.

I was only paid £1 a week but by this time I estimated that I was £10-18-8d in credit with the paymaster as I did not draw much of my wages. For one thing there was not much to spend it on unless you were on leave.

There was a daily ritual of writing letters home to mother and my brother and occasionally receiving one back. This boredom was

broken by an inspection for lice. All our kit and blankets were examined but none were found. Our blankets were even fumigated as a precaution.

By now I was in credit with the paymaster to the tune of £14-10-10d so I decided to send £5 home to mother. Also I made a weekly allowance home of 1/6d which in today's money would be 7 ½ p but then it was worth an awful lot more.

For a couple of days we were without any hard biscuits and had to manage on what little supplies we had got in the camp but eventually a fresh delivery arrived much to our relief. They were not particularly flavoursome but they filled our bellies up.

A small group of us took a short trip into the nearest town in the evening and while we were wandering around a sheik drove up to us and asked us if we had eaten. We all replied that we had not, wondering what was on his mind, he told us to jump into his large open car. Then he drove off and treated us to a 7 course meal at his mansion.

On a short trip into the local village I bought some cordial thinking that it would give me some relief from the camp brews but when I drank it, it tasted bad and shortly afterwards I was violently sick. Another highlight of that week came when a cat wandered into our tent. There was some speculation as to who's it was but it seemed happy enough to stay after being given a little milk (powdered milk of course). We kept it for a few days and then it wandered off just as easily as it had arrived.

We were getting plagued with flies so the NCO ordered us to dig some new latrines to freshen up the camp but when we started to dig where instructed we hit rock only 6 inches down. After much

scouting around and many experimental holes we eventually found a suitable site and the latrines were finally dug.

I had a cold for several days but eventually it cleared up and instead I was driven to distraction by fleas. After examining my bedding I found 20 of the little blighters that were duly exterminated. Next came a dust storm that reduced visibility to 5 yards at its worst. We all took shelter in our tents and sat it out until it was over. The wind was like a blast from a furnace making everything too hot to touch.

A few days later at 6-30pm one evening we were ordered to pull out and move camp. It was not until 4-30 am the next morning that the camp was ready to move with all the guns, munitions and kit stowed away on lorries. We had no sleep that night and the convoy got lost on the way to Tobruk but eventually we arrived and made camp.

This camp was nearer to a town and we got more post that meant that for several days running I was on post duty delivering the letters to my fellow soldiers. Also at night we often had an outdoor film show. In the morning we had a new routine of PT training and swimming.

One morning a small lorry arrived at the camp and the driver asked the officer in charge if we wanted to buy some cakes. All food was welcome so we took delivery and the driver started regularly supplying the camp. The cakes were a welcome relief from camp food and obviously fresh because they were baked locally. On a visit to the nearby village with some mates we spotted the delivery man and chatted to him. He proudly showed us where the cakes were baked. A crude oven was used which was lit with twigs and branches on the inside and then when it

was hot enough it had piles of camel dung thrown in. This burnt and then the cakes were slid in to cook. After we had returned to the camp and told them what we had seen the cake order was cancelled.

We were quite close to Heliopolis so at night some of us would take a trip into the town and have a drink. On one day in particular I took a trip into Cairo which was not too far away and went into the new museum of Hygiene. This illustrated vividly such diseases as Pox. Not a particularly savoury subject but it was interesting never the less.

Camp life made ordinary events take on a new significance such as the time I broke my glasses. The only person who could test my eyes and get me a replacement pair was the camp doctor. Of course the new pair took several days to arrive so I had to go sick until they did because my eyesight was too poor to carry out any duties.

## Sick With Pneumonia

I had another bad cold, or at least that is what it started as but I became feverish with headaches and started to be violently sick. The MO decided that I had a slight touch of pneumonia so he gave me some M&Bs that were the cure all tablets of the day. Penicillin was scarce and all the other powerful anti-biotics known about today had not been discovered then. For a couple of days I could not even keep fluids down properly but gradually I improved and started to eat a little minced chicken.

There were several days of total bed rest before the doc said that I could get up for an hour. Naturally I overdid it and played table tennis for quite a while which brought me a cursing from the MO but it was a sign that I was feeling better. The next day I was allowed up for two hours so I had a little walk and bought a bracelet which I was eventually to give as a present to my future wife. After this I was told to report to the wardmaster and then I was sent to a convalescence camp to fully recuperate.

I was transported to Cairo Railway Station by ambulance and from there caught a train at 9-30 for Alex. Upon arrival I was graded unfit for any duties for several days after which I was allowed a little swimming with some PT exercises every day.

While recuperating, I was seen by a dentist, who made a mould for my missing two front teeth. A few days later the replacements were fitted. After skipping fatigues one day I was sentenced to two days in the cooler.

For a short while I was placed on POW guard duty but as my boots were too small I had to buy a pair of shoes that cost £1-0-

10d. It may not seem much today but it was a weeks money in the army.

Soon I was discharged as fit by the CO but immediately reported sick as the new shoes had given me some very bad blisters on my feet. After my feet had recovered and the 5 days light duties were over I was ordered to give a pint of blood but the one consolation was all donors received a good measure of brandy afterwards.

Then I was fully discharged and left the base arriving back at camp 4-15. The journey back was by train and at one point I had a 4 hour wait on the station for my train. When I reported for duty I discovered that I was due for a few days leave so I left the camp by lorry and went to Suez to explore. The first thing I had to do was have a row in the Suez Canal, so I found a small boat that I could hire and set off. I rowed around for several hours until I was tired but in all that time I only saw two ships. Later I found a club and had a cheap meal that was still better than camp food.

After returning from leave I got back into the routine of writing letters home, playing football or cricket when there were no duties and generally whiling away the hours between air raids. The pneumonia left my lungs susceptible to infection and I was forever getting bad colds.

By this time I had drawn so much of my pay that I was actually in debt to the paymaster but that did not stop me from enjoying myself when I next took some leave in Port Said. After all I still had my gambling money to fall back on. A small group of us went into the YMCA for a meal and later on to a club where we had brandies followed by gin and limes. We all got thoroughly drunk but got home safely enough.

Night time brought guard duties but in the day we had discovered a new past-time. There were lots of crabs in the rock pools in the sea and we found that if we tied a small piece of meat to a length of string on the end of a long stick we could catch crabs. All we had to do was dangle the meat into a pool and wait for a couple of minutes. Then a gentle pull and a crab would come out clinging on to the scrap of meat. One afternoon I caught about 50 that were then taken back to the camp and given to the cook. We all looked forwards to cooked crab that night but unfortunately for us the cook served them to the officers as he said there was not enough to feed the whole camp.

We had been warned about the dangers of creeping, biting and stinging poisonous insects in camp but people sometimes forgot. One morning we left our tents to see an NCO run past shouting that he had been stung on his privates and someone would have to get the poison out to save his life. We all fell about laughing and no one volunteered but it was serious and we did not see that officer again in camp.

The weeks went by and I had another 7 days leave so I travelled to Cairo where I caught a barge up the Nile. On the trip I met some nursing Sisters and was invited to a tea party that was a very pleasant change from the bawdy nature of camp. Next I saw the Pyramids and for a few days behaved like a tourist wandering around and seeing the sights. Eventually my leave finished and I headed back to Port Said but no sooner was I back than I was on sick again. This time it was due to a swimming accident when I cut my forearm badly on some sharp rocks while swimming underwater. The cut turned septic so the medic sent me to the local hospital where I was given Morphine and taken straight into the theatre where it was treated. I was to be kept in but asked to

be discharged and left, returning to BHQ. From here I was sent to Amarya .

My arm was bad for several days so the doc put it in a sling and gave me the infamous M&B tablets. While off sick again, I sent some Xmas cards home with letters and did my best to while away the days.

Eventually the whole battalion was ordered to board a ship and was sent to Malta and then on to Tripoli. We travelled through the night and the sea was very rough making most of the soldiers on board seasick. The decks and passageways were covered in sick giving the whole ship an unpleasant smell. Next morning the decks had been washed clean by the rain and the spray but nobody came down to breakfast. I went into the galley where the cook had prepared masses of food including bacon, eggs, mushrooms, tinned tomatoes and fried bread. When I walked up to get my food the cook beamed at me and piled my plate high with as much as he could get on it. He was pleased that someone was going to eat his food. After clearing my plate I went back for seconds and then thirds until I was absolutely stodged.

We landed and were loaded onto dozens of trucks and then ferried inland travelling for hours before we reached RHQ.

Again we settled into a routine of football and swimming between raids and this went on for months. Occasionally in an evening there would be card games when we could get away with it. My gambling fund grew and grew until the end of the Middle East Campaign finally came and we were all to be flown home in one of the new transport planes before being sent into Europe.

We were advised of the different amounts of foreign currency that we could exchange and I realised that I was well over the limits. So I divided my pile of notes up into little bundles and passed them around the other soldiers on my flight. I said to them that if they changed the money for me they could keep a quarter of it. They changed it alright but naturally enough I did not see most of them again. A few honest individuals came up to me and handed me the English money that they had received in exchange. What I should have done was to take it to a bank when I got home but I was too keen and naive.

## Authors Addition

This story of my fathers life in the Middle East campaign was taken from 2 diaries that exist but unfortunately he did not keep any diaries of his time spent in Europe at the end of the war. We know that he travelled around Eastern Europe and even Germany at the end because he brought a lot of foreign coins and notes home with him after the war was finally over. We also know that he was de-mobbed in March 1946 when, along with all the other surviving soldiers, he was given a set of clothes to return to civy street with. These comprised of a navy blue pin striped suit, one white shirt, a trilby hat, an army great coat and a pair of black shoes.

One might have thought that jobs would be plentiful as factories returned to more normal production but a lot had been destroyed so jobs were quite scarce. After a week or two at home he did find a job in a factory. It was while working there that he first met my mother as you will see later on in the book.

# A Shop Girls Tale

## Rationing

Until I was 11 years old my family that consisted of my mother, my father and my younger sister lived in a council house in an avenue of new houses. We were nearly at the top of a hill and had about a 20 minute walk to school.

My parents were quite frugal and they saved up enough to put a deposit on a house that was a bit older but was also a bit bigger. Both houses were in a nice part of Small Heath, Birmingham.

My mother did not go to work as most married women stayed at home in those days to do the housework which was a lot more physical and basic. For instance few houses had any kind of carpets on the floors and instead had rugs most of which were home made. They were made in our spare time, mostly in the evenings, out of odd bits of material or very thick wool worked onto a canvas backing with a special hook. Because there were no carpets the tiled floors had to be scrubbed and wooden floors had to be polished. White doorsteps were cleaned with whitening and red ones were polished with cardinal red.

Clothes had to be mended, socks and stockings were darned, not like today with the throw away culture that we have. Meals took longer to prepare as there were no pre-prepared foods such as frozen vegetables and cleaning aids were very basic with no electric cleaners or anything like them. My mother always had plenty to do looking after the family.

My father worked at the B.S.A. factory where they made bicycles and motor bikes. When the war came the factory turned most of its work over to the production of munitions.

When the Second Great War started in September 1939 I was 17 years old and had been at work for 3 years since I was 14. (My sister also started work at 14 but she worked in an office at the CO-OP dairy.) I was doing a 57 hour working week including 1 hour on each of 5 days for a dinner break. The wages were low and there was no minimum wage stipulated by the government. At 14 I earned 10/- a week which in today's money was 50p. At 15 I had 12/6 and at 16 I earned 15/-. We were given a small rise each birthday until the age of 21. I had 1 weeks holiday a year till I was 21 then had 2 weeks and when I was managing a shop an extra 3 days holiday.

All the staff were paid cash out of the till each week. (few people had bank accounts or cheque books then) All sales made were in cash as there were no credit cards either. The sales were nearly always coins because notes were so valuable. It was very rare to see a 5 pound note and even one pound notes were an uncommon sight.

Before the war 10/- notes were brown and £1 notes were green but as the war started the colours were changed to mauve for the 10/- note and a combination of blue and pink for the £1. These colour changes lasted until 1948 when they reverted back to the old colours.

In the 1930s £10 , £50 and £100 notes had been issued but these were all withdrawn at the onset of the war. Few people knew that these notes existed and even fewer ever saw them because their

purchasing value must have been enormous. A £5 note in today's values would be worth about £300. The £5 note was plain in design being printed in black ink on white paper and was enormous. Because of its simple design and high value it was a target for forgers and the Germans hatched a plan to cripple the British economy. Their idea was to print forgeries of the banknotes and flood the country with them. The fakes were extremely good with the correct serial numbers on them but the plot was foiled and only a few surfaced.

In 1944 a new £5 note was introduced with a metal thread in it like we have today. This made forgery very difficult in those days. However it was some 10 years after the war before higher value notes started to be re-introduced. But enough talk of the banknotes so back to life in the shops.

To give some idea of how much things cost an ordinary loaf of bread was 4 old pence, less than 2 decimal pence today. You could buy buns for a farthing, which was a quarter of an old penny. There were 12 pennies to a shilling and 20 shillings to a pound. One pound was a typical wage for a young adult then.

I worked for the CO.OP. Society which ran a lot of shops in those days. There were no supermarkets but instead were blocks of shops, all different, but run by the CO.OP. Often there was a grocers, bread shop, butchers, drapers, green grocery, fresh fish and furniture.

My job was working in a grocers and confectioners but this type of shop was very different to any today. The shop was in a row of shops but not in a main town centre. It was on the main Coventry road that was busy with traffic even then. Most roads were quiet in those days compared to today especially so with the war on

because petrol was rationed with most of it going to the forces or essential delivery vehicles.

The food shops all had tiled floors in the public area but behind the counter were bare concrete. Just before closing each day the floors had to be washed using a mop and bucket of soapy water. After that we had to fetch some sawdust from one of the other shops in the block belonging to the CO.OP. This was then spread over the floor and swept up first thing in the morning. The sawdust made the tiles look quite shiney the next morning.

The front of the counter was dark wood (No plastic in those days) with a glass front and glass on top. All the woodwork had to be dusted and polished every day and the glass had to be cleaned.

There were no electric chiller cabinets or fridges in those days so the food such as Bacon, cooked meats, butter, cheese and eggs were stored until they were wanted in a cold room which had large stone slabs in it to keep it cool. The shop counters were marble which were icy to the touch in the winter. The concrete floors did not help you to keep warm either and a lot of staff used to get chilblains in their feet because of the cold.

Girls were not allowed to wear trousers (which would have been warmer for work) in those days, not even in the forces. The only place girls were allowed to wear them was in the Land Army. There was no heating allowed in any food shops except in the staff room where there was usually a small gas fire.

During the war everything came in loose and had to be packaged up. Any dried fruit we were lucky enough to get and even pepper had to be weighed up. We had to make paper cones to put the pepper in.

Jams and marmalade came in big containers. We had to wash jars which customers had returned to us and then spoon jam or marmalade into them and weigh them whilst allowing for the jars. All types of jam had apple mixed in them to make the jam go further as we had plenty of apples in our own orchards.

We also sold cooked meats when they were available. Boiled Ham, Corned Beef and Jellied Veal all came in 7lb blocks that had to be cut in fine slices by hand as there were no machines in those days. Carving knives had to be kept very sharp to give a clean cut as there was not supposed to be any waste.

The bread and cakes were delivered fresh every day on big black iron trays that were very heavy and never cleaned properly. Occasionally they were scraped but they always seemed to be caked with bits of old cakes that made them very dirty and sticky to handle. Admittedly a large sheet of greaseproof paper was used to line the trays before the cakes were put in but there was very little attention paid to health and hygiene in those days.

The first time I served a customer some farthing buns I really embarrassed myself. A lady came into the shop and asked for 4 farthing buns. So I placed them in a bag and held the two corners as I had seen the other girls do, then swung the bag to twist the top round. The bottom of the bag burst sending the buns across the shop.

The manageress quickly bagged some more and handed them to the customer apologising to her profusely. Then she told me to pick up the spilt buns and gave me a good telling off.

All food was rationed, some by government and some by short supply. Everyone was issued with ration books that contained coupons for all foods such as Bacon, Butter, Margarine, Lard, Sugar, Meat and Bread. Clothes were also rationed. The coupons said what they were for on them and could not be changed for anything else.

When a shop assistant served you they had to cut out the appropriate coupons and put them in boxes. The coupons had to be counted each night and balanced up as if they were money and then sent to head office. There was no self-service in those days. A shop assistant would serve the customer to everything that they wanted from a shop and then pack the purchases up in the customers own basket. There were no shopping trolleys then or plastic bags.

Any imported food had to be brought in by ship and the Germans used their submarines to sink as many cargo ships or otherwise as they could. All oranges and bananas that came in were only served to children and pregnant ladies. Sweets and chocolate were rationed but bread wasn't rationed till later on and then bread and flour were both rationed.

I had one lady who preferred to make her own bread so she bought the strong bread flour on her coupons and I had to order fresh yeast from the bakery. (There was no dried yeast then.) It always came in a bit overweight so I was in the habit of eating what was left. It may have done some good because I never had spots. On the other hand that may have been due to the fact that I never had any chocolate or cakes either.

In those days no scrap food was wasted. All hotels, restaurants and cafes had large bins into which any waste food was tipped.

These were then transported to the farms for pig-swill. This has all been stopped now on the grounds of hygiene. Worse than that any cakes that were left over in the shop and going stale were returned to the bakery the next day and were then chopped up and mixed together. Then the mixture was moistened and put between two squares of pastry, baked and sold as Nelson Squares or as they were commonly called "Door Stoppers." This name came from the fact that they were rather solid but never the less they sold well enough.

Rationing made people eat all sorts of things that they probably wouldn't otherwise have tried. Like everything else salad crops were in short supply so we often eked out the lettuce with dandelion leaves. They were rather hot though so you did not eat too many at once! Sometimes a brave member of the family would pick some nettle leaves to make some soup with.

As we had no fridges to keep milk in it would sometimes go sour, but it was not wasted. When a bottle had gone off for a day or two a piece of muslin was fastened over a basin and the sour milk would be poured onto it and left to drip through. The thin liquid that passed into the basin was put into the chickens drinking water but the curds left in the muslin were lightly pressed together and were then eaten as a soft cream cheese.

In the summer there was often a glut of tomatoes and as you could not get them in the winter they were boiled and put into jars with special seals on them to preserve them. Afterwards they could only be used in cooking but it did mean that an extra vegetable was available out of season. Runner beans were also preserved but this time they were done in layers of salt. The jars had a layer of sliced beans then a layer of salt and so on until the

jar was full. When using them they had to be rinsed thoroughly to remove the salt but they kept well.

Vegetables were always eaten in season apart from the few we preserved ourselves so winter meant eating cabbage, sprouts, swedes and turnips some of which I was not keen on. Very little food was tinned but fruit from our own orchards was often bottled for winter use. There were virtually no imports of fruit and vegetables because of the German submarines.

Home-grown vegetables became a very important source of food, so much so that the government came up with the slogan "Dig for victory" which was posted on billboards all over the country. The idea was that people should dig up their lawns and flower gardens and grow fresh vegetables instead to help balance their meagre diets and supplement what the farmers could produce.

One year my father grew a lot of surplus beetroot so mother suggested making some beetroot wine. (Like everything else there was little alcohol available of any sort in the shops. You could buy it at a price on the Black Market but my parents would not do that.) As a family we rarely drank at all anyway except perhaps the odd glass of cooking sherry on Christmas day but my mother thought that it would be a rare treat for us.

She started the beetroot fermenting and we bottled some up when she thought it was ready. There was gallons of it and we wondered who was going to drink it all. All was well for a few days. The bottles were stood on a stone shelf in the larder where it was cool. Then one day my father went downstairs in the morning and saw red liquid seeping under the larder door. His mouth dropped open as he wondered what had happened overnight. When he opened the door he found that the stone slab

had collapsed tipping and breaking all the bottles on the floor. There was a terrible mess to clear up.

There was going to be no problem about what to do with all the wine! Suddenly he saw the funny side and burst out laughing but mother did not as she was the one who had to clear up. Fortunately it was not too bad as the larder had a stone floor.

## The Air Raids

Not much has been said in any books written but we had a terrible amount of bombing in Birmingham which continued night after night. The constant raids lit up the skies with the explosions and the fires that were started. There was also constant noise, if not from the bombs then from the ante-aircraft guns in the parks. Birmingham is a bigger area than Coventry so the bombing wasn't so concentrated unlike in Coventry that was devastated by the air raids. Even so in the Birmingham Blitz over 2,000 civilians were killed by the bombs.

Before the war started we received our air raid shelter that was delivered in the May of 1939. It was made of corrugated steel in sections made in half hoop shapes with the ends being vertical pieces. The door end just had a piece cut out so that you could fit your own door if you wanted. Inside you dug a trench so that the shelter ended up half underground. The soil dug out was then thrown over the top of the structure for added protection. My father made a bench for each side of the shelter as there was no room for chairs.

When we were inside it we took cushions to sit on and candles to see by. There was a piece of sacking over the doorway to keep the wind out and also to prevent the light from showing to the planes overhead.

It was difficult to get any sleep with the noise and discomfort so we used to pass the hours away by knitting gloves, scarves and

socks for the soldiers in the army. We never knew how long the air raids would last so we took in thermos flasks of hot tea and cups.

Sometimes the raids would only last for an hour or two and other times they would go on all night. It was a routine that after a raid, when the all clear was sounded and we went back into the house, the first thing we did was to search the house including the loft to see if any incendiary bombs had hit it and started a fire. If we found a small fire we had to put it out with a bucket and stirrup pump, there were no plastic garden hose pipes in those days. The stirrup pump sat in the bucket of water. You then put your foot on the stirrup or flat piece to hold it down, pumped with one hand and directed the jet of water at the fire with the other. It was simple but more efficient than just throwing a bucket of water at the fire.

One particular night we were in the shelter till 6-30 in the morning. When we went into the house after the all-clear siren sounded we found that we had no water, gas or electricity. Fortunately all of the sauce pans, buckets and kettles in the house were filled each evening, so the fire was quickly lit and while we had a wash in cold water my mother made us a cup of tea and toast. The next job each morning was to feed the chickens. Most houses with enough garden kept a few hens which were fed on table scraps, vegetable peelings and a bit of corn. They provided valuable eggs and occasionally a roast chicken.

The scraps were kept in the larder over night to keep them fresh. (there were no fridges in those days.) Then we went off to work. We were without gas, water and electricity for 5 days. Water was brought round in an oil tanker that was used for washing and to keep the toilets clean.

When I started out for work that morning I started out extra early and found there were no trolley buses running, they had overhead poles connected to electric wires and the wires were all down through the air raid.

In the main Coventry Road where the houses had been bombed fire engines were still putting out fires and damping down. Hosepipes were still trailing across the pavement so I had to be careful where I stepped. I had an hours walk to work then.

I forgot to say that all parks and cemeteries had 6 foot iron railings round them and gates which were closed at night. All the railings throughout the country were collected up and melted down for ammunition and to help the war effort. Saucepans were mostly made of aluminium in those days so spare pans were also collected to make planes.

One other thing that happened during the war that may seem a strange thing to do now was that all church bells were silenced. They were not allowed to be rung at all except in the case of a gas attack when they would be sounded as a warning.

Clothes were also rationed including jumpers and sweaters. Any woollen clothes that had worn parts were un-picked. The wool was then washed and knitted into something else.

At the age of 16 I used to have to go out to different shops on relief if their junior was off sick. Sometimes it meant going to relieve at two different shops, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. A few times I worked at three shops in one day. We were allowed to claim our bus fare if we remembered to keep the

tickets. It was a common joke amongst us to say in fun, "work for the COOP and see the country."

Travelling about like this meant that my parents rarely knew what time to expect me home but it was interesting as you met lots of different staff and a variety of customers.

When I was about 17 I was sent to a shop with a grocery counter on either side and a half moon counter between the two shop doors. This counter displayed bread and cakes only and I was responsible for ordering them. The shop was in Sheldon and was the last shop before Elmdon airport.

When I was 18 I received an official form which I had to fill in regarding the war effort.

As a girl I had a choice of factory work, joining the land army girls or the forces. Also I had to say what work I was already doing. I chose the land army and said that I was working in a food shop.

The land army consisted of a large number of young girls who basically replaced the men farm workers who had gone to fight in the war.

A few days later I got a reply back saying that I was too old for the land army and that as I was working in an important trade (ie; food) I was exempt. I would however have to join the local first aid post and receive training.

If I lived less than half an hour's walk away from the post I would also have to go out to places that there had been an air raid to attend any wounded. That did not apply to me though because I

lived about 40 minutes away. Every Sunday evening I had to report for duty at the first aid post. Every part timer had to be there for 6-30pm.

We stayed all night practising first aid in preparation for an exam. We had to roll bandages that had been washed and learn what all the instruments were and how to put them into a steriliser. We had to practice with thick rubber gloves on undoing buttons, press studs etc. at the same time wearing wellingtons, water-proof trousers, jackets helmets and gas masks. This was in case gas was used in the bombing raids as anyone coming into the post would have had to be stripped and hosed down then wrapped in a blanket. Fortunately though gas was never used.

We were allowed to lie on a hospital type trolley bed at about 11pm and were woken up at 6am for a cup of tea. Then we went home for a wash, change and breakfast and on to work.

There were a lot of barrage balloons put up to prevent enemy planes coming down too low. The balloons were like big sausages with tail fins on them and were silvery in colour. The barrage balloons were anchored by ropes to the ground.

One morning I remember in particular there was a commotion in the local park because one of the balloons had gone missing. I suppose the guards on duty must have dozed off during the night and someone stole it. Material was in very short supply and the barrage balloon had a lot off material in it that was ideal for petticoats and blouses.

The balloons were huge things so it would have needed several men to haul it down and to take it away.

Very occasionally when a German plane was shot down the pilots parachute would be recovered by locals. These were very valuable on the black market because the fine silk that they were made of was ideal material for making knickers that were in short supply. Any captured German pilots joined the rest of the prisoners of war who were fed and looked after in camps.

However they had to earn their keep by being sent in small groups to work on the land and help the farmers. Quite a large number of them, especially Italians, liked the country so much that they stayed here and settled, marrying English girls after the war was over.

While walking home from the first aid post one winters day with my sister who joined for a short while, we saw a motorbike travelling slowly down the road. In those days the roads were not gritted when there was frost or snow about.

In mid winter the snow would build up and very often there would be a foot or more on the roads. The car drivers used to fasten chains round their wheels when it got bad but motorcyclists couldn't do this of course.

Any way back to the motorbike. We watched him for a minute or two struggling to keep his balance when he suddenly tipped over and went sliding down the road. I went back to see if he was all right but my sister wouldn't get involved. Fortunately he was unhurt except for dented pride, some minor grazes and a cut which I put a plaster on for him. Luckily I had some plasters with me as we had just come from the first aid post.

On my afternoon off I sometimes went for a walk round the local park if it was a nice day. To get to the park I had to pass a school

where I would often see the children out playing in the school yard.

Some games they played were similar to those of today such as Hopscotch and skipping but others belonged to a different time and are unheard of today.

One favourite pastime that children had was to bowl a wooden hoop along the playground with a stick or just their hands. The hoop was made out of bamboo that sometimes led to splinters, as there was no plastic in those days to make them from.

Cigarette cards also belong to a bygone era. These were small cards with pictures on one side of sports heroes, cars, planes or anything else that was of interest and could be made into sets. On the other side of the card was a little information about the subject.

They were given away in cigarette packets and are still collected to this day but by adults as now they are quite rare and some of them quite valuable. The cigarette manufacturers stopped putting them in packets some years ago. Children would swap them with each other to make up sets or to get favourites. They also played a game with them by standing some up against a wall and then taking it in turns to skim other Cards at them in an attempt to knock them down.

Marbles would probably be banned in schools today because they were made of glass and chipped easily on the tarmac. They were about the diameter of a modern penny and had a streak of colour through them.

The game with these was to set up a target marble and then roll others at it and try to hit it. If you hit it you won the marble. There were small ones and big ones which were worth more.

Whip and tops were also played with. These consisted of a long piece of string tied to a strong stick about 18 inches long. The string was wound round a small wooden spinning top that was placed on the floor and then the stick was given a sharp pull leaving the top to spin away. The idea was to see who could make the top spin the longest.

Girls would often play with dolls as they do now but the difference was that in those days most dolls came without clothes on them. You had to make your own by knitting or sewing.

Games were a lot more physical as well in those days such as Leap Frog, Tag and British bulldog. These all meant children charged round on the playground and sometimes resulted in grazed knees and worse. Nowadays teachers are afraid that a hurt child might result in a lawsuit. Metal climbing frames were high for children with only tarmac to land on. There were no soft landing areas such as chipped bark as there is today.

When I was 19 I started to go on relief managing at some of the smaller shops. Some had younger assistants and some did not. After about one year I was given a small shop of my own to manage. There was a grocers, butchers and a chemist in the same block of shops.

I got friendly with the butcher and he was very good to me because he kept my knives very sharp. They had to be sharp as all cooked meats such as boiled ham and corned beef had to be sliced by hand and the customers wanted it as thin as possible to

make it go further. Working at this shop was handier for me than some I had worked at because I was able to cycle to it.

I had just got home from work one day when there was the usual air raid. My father (who was in the Home Guard) rushed out of the house to go on duty. The Home Guard was made up of older men who were not called up to join the forces. They were the last line of defence against invading soldiers or German parachutists.

Also they went on duty whenever there was an air raid to prevent looters and help out generally. The Home Guard all had steel helmets, arm bands and gas masks. Unlike the television program Dads Army there was no fooling about as they took it very seriously. The Guard met several times a week for training and parades.

Apart from the 'Dig for victory' slogan, there were two others that were plastered on billboards everywhere. One was to encourage people to 'Join up,' and help the war effort, 'Your Country Needs You!' and the other was 'Careless Talk Costs Lives.' This referred to accidentally giving away important information to enemy spies or 'Fifth Columnists' who were thought to be around every corner. The Home Guard were constantly on the lookout for spies and some were undoubtedly caught but there was a lot of propaganda as there is with any war.

My mother and myself went down to the shelter in the garden where I sat and finished my tea in the semi-dark.

While we were in the shelter we heard heavy footsteps coming down the path. We knew it was not my father coming back because the all clear had not been sounded. There was no mugging and very little burglary or indeed crime of any sort then,

but at night women on their own were always wary. Anyway a man appeared at the shelter door and said he was looking for his wife who was not at home. We suggested that he tired the big public air raid shelter in the park. This was for people who were out when the air raids sounded or else who did not have their own shelters. He left and we continued waiting for the all clear.

After the all clear sounded it was still early so when we went back into the house we sat listening to the radio for a while. I remember the first radio that we owned was one that my father had made up from a kit. It had a great big battery that was called an accumulator. This was made of glass with metal plates inside. It was filled with acid of some sort the same as a modern car battery. It had to be taken to a specialist hardware shop every week to be charged up before you could use it. It was my job to take it to get it re-charged but I had to be very careful carrying it because if you spilt any of the acid on your clothes it was strong enough to burn holes in them. The radio contained valves (no printed circuits, or even transistors then, which came in the 60s.)

After you switched it on it took a minute or two for the valves to warm up before the sound came on. The case to enclose it was also home made with a fancy fret saw front panel to it. We only had it on to listen to the news broadcasts about the war and had to sit quietly around it to hear it. It was no Ghetto Blaster!

At night time before we could turn on any lights we had to put up the blackouts. These were heavy black curtains or blinds on every window. It was actually a criminal offence to show a chink of light at a window at night because the planes overhead could possibly see it and have a better target for bombing.

Mostly the bombing was carried out on factories and railways but there was also a lot of indiscriminate bombing as well. Large numbers of houses were destroyed and thousands of people were hurt and killed.

ARP wardens went round the different districts checking for lights and anybody showing one got into serious trouble.

There were no street lights so you were allowed to carry a very small torch when out walking. All cars, lorries and buses had their headlights masked so that only a small narrow beam showed. People got used to the dark but there was a big government campaign saying that carrots helped you to see in the dark. I don't know if there was any truth in this but as we grew a lot of carrots in this country it helped persuade people to eat our own vegetables which was good for food rationing.

My mother used to do the shopping for food almost every day as fresh food went off quickly and would only keep for a couple of days in the larder. One day when she was out she saw a queue at the fishmongers. (Fish was in very short supply because the fishing boats were often torpedoed by German submarines.) She thought he might have had some rabbits in so she joined the queue.

When my mother got nearer to the front she found out that he had some whale steaks for sale. (There were plenty of whales about then although they were regularly hunted for food.)

We had the steaks for dinner that day and they turned out to be quite tasty but they needed cooking longer than fish and were a bit more solid than cod. They were quite a treat for us.

During the war razor blades for the new safety razors, as they were called then, were in short supply like everything else. This did not affect my father however because he still used a cut throat open bladed razor. It meant that he had to continually sharpen it by honing the razor on a leather strop hung on the back of a chair while he was shaving but he was reluctant to change his habits.

One week he decided to grow a moustache and as it grew my mother started to complain about it telling him to shave it off. He was stubborn and refused to. Eventually she had had enough and told him that if he did not shave it off she would cut it off with a pair of scissors. He still did not shave, so one afternoon when he was asleep in his chair she got some scissors and cut a big piece out of the middle. That was the end off his moustache and he never tried to grow another one ever again.

Whenever you went for a walk you had to carry an ID card as you could get into trouble if you were stopped and didn't have it. Also you had to carry a gas mask at all times. Long journeys were made more difficult because all directional road signs were removed for the duration of the war. This was to make it difficult for any foreign soldiers or airmen who might land.

## Learning To Play The Piano And Dancing

One night at the first aid post we were talking about what we did in the evening when there were no air raids and it emerged that one girl was a qualified music teacher who taught children to play the piano. I asked her if she could teach me and she said that at 21 I was getting a bit old to learn because your fingers start to get a bit stiff as you get older. However she said she would try and I did not do to bad. I learnt to read music (no playing by ear) and I could play reasonably well. I was no maestro but I could play the popular songs.

I wanted to learn because both my parents and my grandfather could play, my grandfather also used to play the clarinet in the park band on a Sunday.

Before the war it was common for families to spend the evening around the piano having a sing song to pass the time as there were few radios then.

When we got the chance I liked to play a duet with my mother on the piano but after the war started there were fewer opportunities. One played the base end of the piano and the other the treble.

It was nearly Christmas one year when I was talking to some of the girls in the shop during a quiet moment. Some of them had young children who were at the new nurseries started by the councils to enable the childrens mothers to go out to work.

The children of school age had no school dinners provided for them then so their mums had to make up packed lunches every day before they went to work. Also there were no school buses to take them to school so their mothers had to do this as well.

Under guidelines the mums were allowed to be ½ an hour late getting to work. This meant a 9am start instead of 8.30am. If they lived near to work they would dash home from work in their dinner hour to prepare an evening meal. There were no instant meals such as Pizzas or Pot Noodles then.

The daily meal was often a stew. These were handy because they could be left simmering for hours and would use up any scraps of meat and vegetables. The meat ration was not very much so if the butcher had any bones it was sometimes possible to buy them which could then be boiled up to get off the last few bits of meat and to get the marrow out which was quite nutritious.

The women said that their children were looking forewards to Christmas but they were dreading it. Because of the war wood was in very short supply and most of it was going towards rebuilding and new furniture. There was very little available for making toys out of and toys generally were very scarce in the shops. It was alright for children to make their own amusement with cardboard boxes and old sheets but at Christmas they expected something special.

Most of the women had young children so I suggested that they make them soft toys. They all said what a good idea but after getting home from work, taking care of the children and doing all the daily chores they had no time. I liked knitting and my mother was good at sewing although I did not enjoy it so I said that if

they collected up all their oddments of wool and coloured material I would make them some.

All new wool was sold in skeins instead of balls as it is nowadays. For those that don't know what a skein is it is a very loose coil, usually about 18 inches across. When we unpicked knitted garments the wool was wound into skeins, usually round a fairly large tray. This was tied with a bit of wool that was a different colour and then washed. When it was dry it helped if there was another person available to hold the skein between two outstretched hands so that it could be wound into balls ready for knitting.

It was not till after the war that I managed to buy a wool winder that could be used for winding skeins into balls. It had 3 arms that opened out to hold the skein and clipped onto the edge of the dining room table. Turning a handle then spun the whole contraption round to wind the ball.

My mother and I bought a few skeins of new wool and scrounged some more off friends and family then set to work. We managed to get hold of some suitable patterns and made what we could. I found an old pair of fur backed gloves which we used to make the back of a monkey. All the toys were stuffed with old socks and stockings, anything soft and washable. There was no specially made fire resistant stuffing then.

When I presented the toys to the women in the shop they were delighted with them and afterwards said how much the children had liked them. I had saved their Christmas from being a disaster.

Wash day for my mother was by tradition, as it is now, a Monday. However during the Second World War washing

machines had not been invented so all washing was done by hand. This included big heavy blankets and sheets, because of course duvets were not made till many years after the war. There were no throw away nappies either. Muslin liners, which were soft, were used, with an outer terry towelling cover which was more absorbent. These had to be washed, like everything else, by hand. Neither were there any waterproof pants then.

Men's shirts still had detachable collars which along with the tablecloths had to be starched. The collars were fastened to the shirts with studs and nearly all men in non-manual jobs had to wear a white shirt and tie for work. This included all teachers, shop workers and bank clerks. Hence the expression 'white collar workers'.

Washing during the war was a major exercise and took all day. First of all the brick built boiler in the scullery had to be lit at about 6am. Then the boiler itself had to be filled with water bucketed from the tap on the sink. When it had got hot enough and the water was boiling the washing was put in and pummelled up and down with a wooden dolly. This had a strong wooden handle and a thick round piece on the bottom with three wooden prongs sticking from it.

When the washing was clean it was lifted out and rinsed in a bowl of cold water in the sink. Then it was put through a mangle or wringer to squeeze the excess water from it. The wringer had two wooden rollers and was turned by hand. After the washing was done the remaining hot water was used to clean down all the tiles on the floor in the kitchen and the indoor and outside toilet.

After the washing had been hung out to dry it had to be ironed just as today. The difference is that there were no electric irons or

fancy ironing boards. Ironing was done on a blanket on the table. The iron itself was solid metal and had to be heated up by placing near to a hot fire. We had a Trivet that slotted onto the front of the fire grate and onto which the iron was placed.

Needless to say the handle of the iron got very hot as did the handles on the metal saucepans and kettles. There were no electric kettles in those days or plastic handles to saucepans. So we used to make pan holders to hold them by. These consisted of 2 squares of material sewn together with 3 or 4 pieces of old vest or any other suitable material sewn in them. Children would often use pretty material to make them with and give them as Christmas or birthday presents.

Coal, like most other goods was rationed and we allowed only 1cwt a week per household. With that fires had to be lit, in the evening for heating, (there was no central heating then) the boiler for washing and the fire in the kitchen with a back boiler for general hot water.

Water supplies were short because of the need to put out the fires caused by bombing and the continual burst water mains which also often got hit. Because of this we were told to bath once a week in no more than 5 inches of water and to share baths where at all possible. It was alright putting two children in a bath at once but was a bit more difficult with 2 adults! (Showers had not been invented then.) Because of this we stripped off and had a wash down with a flannel and bowl of hot water every day. Very much like having a blanket bath that you would be given in hospital today.

We had gas and electric in the towns when the supplies were not cut off by the bombing. Of course the gas was not North Sea as it

is today but was Town gas or Coal gas. This was very poisonous and a lot of people used to commit suicide by putting their heads in the gas oven and turning it on. If you tried it today you would be more likely to blow yourself up as North Sea gas is not actually poisonous. They put a smell in modern gas but Town gas used to smell awful. Every town had large round gasometers that stored the gas and were very ugly blots on the landscape. It always smelt of gas near to them but the local residents did not seem to complain because they made gas available for cooking and heating which was a great improvement over life out of town in the country villages.

I was always fond of Ballroom Dancing and had been to classes with my sister when I was about 11 years old. I especially liked Waltzes but was happy with the Quickstep, Foxtrot and other dances such as the Military Two Step. When I was working I used to go on my own on a Saturday night and a group of us girls from work regularly used to go dancing on our half day.

On Christmas Eve although I did not finish work until 10pm after starting at 7.30am with no break in between, I still went dancing, I was so keen. Indeed there was not much other entertainment available for respectable young ladies then. It was almost unheard of for girls to go into pubs, especially on their own.

There were plenty of cinemas but all public places were closed when there was an air raid on and the people had to go to the nearest public shelter.

In those days it was only rich people who went out for a meal at a restaurant unless it was a special occasion. Ordinary pubs did not cater for meals in the way they do today. Food was short during the war anyway so it was very expensive and only the better class

hotels could offer it. There were no burger bars, chicken bars or pizza takeaways of any description. There were fish and chip shops but even these struggled to get a steady supply of fish and many closed. Incidentally a portion of chips cost one old penny then. That is less than half a new penny in today's money.

One morning when we got to work we were all dismayed to find that our favourite dance hall had been bombed and burnt down in the night's raid. The next nearest dance halls were in the centre of Birmingham.

There were two very good ones but it was a long way to go to them. One had an oblong floor and the other a round one which was unusual because it was raised with a step up all round. You had to be careful not to get too near to the edge or else if you misjudged the distance you could end up in an embarrassing heap sprawled on the floor.

One afternoon when a small group of us from the shops were there some Americans and Canadians came into the room. One Canadian came over and asked me to dance with him which I did. At first everything was fine and we danced together quite well but he had been drinking and got carried away. After a couple of dances he would not release me but promised me nylon stockings and chocolate if I danced with him for the rest of the session and if I would go back to his hotel with him that night.

When one of the lads that had arrived with us girls saw what was going on he came over and rescued me saying that I had promised him the next dance. Fortunately the Canadian was too drunk to start any trouble and that was that.

The Americans and Canadians did not come into the war until late on and then a lot were stationed over here. They had no rationing so when they got friendly, with the girls over here whose men folk were off fighting in the war, they were able to give them chocolates, stockings and other luxury goods that were in very short supply.

Some promised English girls that they would marry them if they went back to America with them after the war but there were a lot of broken promises.

## Celebrations

At the age of 21 I was moved to a bigger shop with a 16 years old assistant. This shop was in a large block of shops on the main Coventry road in Small Heath. It was nearer to home but still far enough to make me cycle there.

There was another young lad called Mervin who worked on the grocery side of the shop who was not very popular with any of the staff. I did not like him very much either and one day after a few heated words were exchanged between us he said to me that when his brother got home from the army he would bring him to tell me off. Admittedly this lad was younger than me but he was 6 feet 4 inches tall and I was only 5 feet 2 inches so it sounded very silly coming from him. I just walked away from him and said something like "You do that then" and thought nothing more about it.

The shop had a large window one side of the door and a small display window the other. This was used to show artificial wedding cakes. This window had a door to the display with a high fastener fixed to it so that children couldn't open it.

A couple of weeks before Xmas when our supervisor came round to inspect the cleanliness of the shop, which she did about once a month, I asked her if I could make a Christmas display for the children.

She hesitated and then said "All right as long as you don't claim any expenses for it and it is cleaned away by the New Year."

Everywhere seemed so dull considering it was Xmas, there were no street decorations and no large Christmas trees with lights on in the streets. Everybody was getting thoroughly depressed so I thought it would be nice if I could do my bit to cheer the shop up.

I managed to get a roll of cotton wool and spread it over the base of the display cabinet, ruffling it up to make it look like snow. Then I found some glitter in a box of old decorations and scattered it about. Next I made a cardboard Father Christmas with a cloak and hood made from some red felt I had managed to get hold of. I trimmed the felt with cotton wool to look like white fur.

Twigs were added and again covered with cotton wool to resemble bushes with snow on. A bigger twig stuck in some plasticine to hold it up looked like a small tree. This was hung with some tiny parcels made out of coloured paper. More cotton wool and a few beads from an old necklace finished it off.

Children going past on their way to school were very excited to see the display and always made their mums stop to look at the it. It was a fiddly job but it was worth it to see the pleasure it brought. Even my supervisor approved when she saw it and found out that it had cost nothing to make.

When the war ended in 1945 people organised street parties by pooling together any spare food that they had and gathering as many trestle tables as they could. My mother would not let my sister or myself join in with the festivities though. It was not on religious grounds but she believed that we should respect the memories of those who had lost their lives and sympathise with their loved ones. There were many thousands who had been killed both in the services and civilians in this country and

although we should be glad that war was over it was not a time to have a party.

After the celebrations were over the country gradually started to return to normal. Black out curtains were taken down and replaced with fancy ones that had been taken down for the duration of the war and stored carefully away for future use.

Street lights were turned on again as cables were repaired and builders were in great demand restoring war damaged houses and building new ones. Large numbers of temporary bungalows or prefabs were put up as emergency housing. They were very quick to erect and only meant to last for a few years until they were replaced with more permanent brick built houses but a handful still exist today nearly 50 years later.

## Meeting My Husband To Be

In the April of 1946 (the year after the war was over) I was still managing a confectionery shop on the Coventry Road in Small Heath when one morning a little sports car pulled up outside. My young assistant said "Look someone is waving at us, I wonder who that is?"

When I looked up I could see that it was Mervin with a very nice looking young man. They came into the shop and Mervin introduced me to his companion who turned out to be his older brother Jack who was home from the army.

We chatted for a while with them telling me about the car that they had just bought between them and then they left.

That evening I had just finished my evening meal and was clearing up the crocks when the front door bell rang. I went to answer it and when I opened the door there stood Mervin and Jack. They said that they had come to take me for a ride in their car. When I got closer to it I realised that it was quite old really but it was still quite fancy for that time. I left a note for my parents saying where I had gone because they were out. I was 24 by this time but I still had to do what I was told.

We drove out into the country and they took me to their home where I had a cup of tea with them. As a "Townie" we did not think of country folk as being house proud with their dirty boots but their mother fussed over the cushions plumping and straightening them on the chair before I sat down. After a little

chat the two lads took me home and I did not hear anything from them for a while.

Out of the blue I received a letter from Mervin telling me that Jack had started work in a factory which was a new type of work to him. He went on to say that Jack had cut his hand on a machine and was off work. He had cut his index finger vary badly and severed the tendon. The hospital had wired and stitched it up but because of the nature of the injury they had put his hand and wrist in plaster to hold it still. (His finger never did heal properly so he could not straighten it and it remained partially bent all his life. He always referred to it as his õgammy finger.ö)

I replied with a letter saying that I was sorry to hear of his accident and hoped he would get better quickly. Also I asked how he was getting on in õCivvy Streetö after being in the army for 6 years.

A few days passed and on the following Wednesday afternoon, which was my half day off, I was playing a duet with my mother on the piano in our front room, when I heard the gate go and saw someone with a bicycle coming up the path. I immediately recognised him and realised that it was Jack. He had cycled the 11 or 12 miles, from his house near Coleshill, with one arm in plaster, in answer to my letter.

I took his bike round the back of the house and we sat talking over a cup of tea. He stayed to evening tea and then we went out to the pictures afterwards. We got on really well together and he asked if he could see me again. I told him that I would like that and we went out again the following Sunday.

Jacks brother who was five years younger than him was by now in the army and his leave had finished so Jack had the car all to himself the next time we met. Although he was in plaster for weeks he was able to drive the car so we started to go out for picnics in it.

Jack was in plaster for 6 weeks after his accident before it was removed and he could go back to work. (Incidentally he got no compensation for his injury which someone injured at work would automatically get today.)

He decided not to go back to work at the factory but instead returned to his old job in the furniture store that he worked at before he went into the army.

The shop was in Lozelles Road in Birminham. This was a bit of a rough area and sometimes he had to go out collecting money and seizing goods from people who were behind with their higher purchase payments. He told me about one family that he went to see. As they always went in pairs he took a colleague with him and when they got to the house they were let in with no problems.

The people were in arrears on a bedroom suite that was upstairs. The woman said that they could not pay what they owed so they went upstairs to repossess the furniture. Her husband was waiting for them and as they started up the stairway the suite came flying down towards them. It ended up crashing at the bottom of the stairs and broke into many pieces. The husband called down öff we can't have the í í . furniture then neither can you. Now you can pick up the pieces and take them back to your miserable boss.ö

They gathered up the pieces of the wooden furniture that were now only good for firewood and took them back to the shop. They then got told off by their boss for not rescuing the suite.

The first time I went to Jacks house for tea and his mother brought the food out and put it on the table, I was amazed by the quantity. Rationing was still on but there were plenty of fresh vegetables because his father grew them in the garden. Normally when we ate lettuce at home we used every leaf that we could but there we were only expected to eat the crisp heart and throw the rest away.

Their country garden also housed something that we could not keep in the towns and that was 3 pigs that were fattened up and then slaughtered. When one was killed some of the meat was used to make sausages and pork pies. The meat from the head was used to make chawl for slicing and eating cold and even the pigs trotters were eaten. The main carcass and the bacon was cured by lying it in a bed of salt for two or three weeks, it was turned occasionally and finally it was cut up into joints. Then the meat was taken into a large stone floored pantry that had a big stone slab set into one wall to help keep it cool. Here the joints were suspended from the ceiling on S shaped metal meat hooks hung from the wooden beams. Sometimes flies would get in and settle on the meat that was kept for months before eating but it was cooked well and nobody ever seemed to suffer from food poisoning.

On another visit to Jacks parents house I saw his father smoking a pipe and as tobacco was still short I asked him where he got it from. He proudly told me that he grew his own in the garden and showed us the plants and the bundles of leaves drying in the outhouse. Then he cut some off and offered it to Jack who

occasionally smoked a pipe. When he lit up he found out that it was far stronger than anything he had ever smoked before and it made him choke. His father said "That's good stuff, I don't get any complaints from the lads at the pub." He went on to explain that he often swapped a bit of baccy with his mates at the pub for odd things.

We saw more and more of each other and by the July we decided to get engaged. Before I could have the engagement ring Jack had bought for me I was told by my mother that she expected him to ask my father's permission as it was only right even at that age. He did so the same evening and my father said yes as long as we knew what we were doing.

Both sets of parents were against the marriage with my parents saying that we had not known each other long enough and his parents saying that "Town's people and Country folk don't mix." However we knew our own minds and felt that 5 months from when we first met was long enough to get to know each other and be sure. At this time Jack was 27 and I was 24 years old.

I went to work the next day and my assistant and some of the customers immediately asked when the wedding was going to be. I said we had not decided yet but we would tell everybody when we had set a date. Some of the regular customers said if we let them know they would help out with the food from their rations.

We carried on going out for picnics on a Sunday and sometimes walks in an evening and one day towards the end of August Jack said "Look I don't fancy coming backwards and forwards in the winter so shall we get married? We could perhaps get a flat or two rooms somewhere and be on our own."

We were going to have just a quiet wedding in a registry office but when I told my parents they said that it would be far better to get married in church and have just a few relations back to their house afterwards. Mother said that she would do the catering. Jack's mother added that if we did not get married in church and I was not dressed in white then people would think, wrongly, that I was pregnant.

We planned to marry in the October of that year and to start off on the right foot we booked the church. When I told my mother the date she said "That only gives me 6 weeks to get everything organised."

We had no clothing coupons left for dresses then because rationing was still on. When I told the lady working in the butchers shop next door to my shop, she said that she knew someone who had a new dress to sell as her own wedding wasn't going to take place after all. She did not want any coupons for it, she just wanted to get rid of it so I bought it off her. Fortunately the dress fitted me perfectly so no alteration had to be made.

My mother managed to get some fancy net and silk material that was not rationed from the market and she made two lovely dresses for my sister and a girl that I had known nearly all of my life.

Customers were very generous saving what they could for me without being asked. My young assistant quickly spread the word around and the customers gave bread units, dried fruit, sugar, icing sugar and home made marzipan. (This could not be bought ready made then.) Jack's mother sent eggs as she had about two dozen hens. Mother made us a two-tier cake and managed to get a

tongue from the butchers. She skinned it, cooked it and pressed it. All the preparation were done in plenty of time for the wedding.

I booked a room in a boarding house in Wales for a week. Although unpopular today this was quite a common type of holiday in those days.

On the Friday, the day before the wedding, I had my dinner break as usual and got a surprise when I returned to the shop. My young assistant had stayed in the back room for dinner and let one of the grocers into the shop. At the back of my shop, behind the counters, were 5 X 4 feet X 2 feet mirrors. Between them they had written on the mirrors, in whitening that was used for writing on glass, ðlæt getting married in the morning. Get me to the church on time.ö (These were the 2 first lines of a song that was popular then.)

If the customers had not known before they did then! My assistant had the job of cleaning all of the mirrors at the end of the day and I took great delight in watching her clean them.

Counting Jack and myself there were 27 people at the house for the wedding that took place in October 1946.

The weather was beautiful that day and not bad for the rest of the week. We had gone away in the sports car but coming back the weather turned very cold and the car had no hood. It had a frame for it but the covering had been taken off as it was damaged beyond repair. I only had a two piece suit on with a blouse, no coat, and I was frozen.

We had not passed a house for miles when suddenly the car broke down and stopped. Fortunately as we looked to see where we

were we spotted a pub a few yards up the road so we went in it to see if they had a phone we could use. The pub Landlord was very obliging and phoned the nearest garage with a tow truck who were about half an hour away. I was very cold so he lit us a fire to warm us. It was the first time that I had ever been inside a pub and I did not like the smell of the beer but I was glad of the fire.

When the breakdown truck eventually arrived the mechanic found that the damage to the car was un-repairable there and then so it had to have a suspended tow back to the garage. The mechanic drove us to Wrexham, the nearest town, where we caught a train and returned home. We stayed at my parents house as we had nowhere else to stay. They had decided that we could rent a bedroom and the lounge from them and share their house for a while.

It was two or three weeks before the car was repaired and then we had to go back and fetch it.

As soon as we could we made a hood for the car out of duck cloth that was very similar to tent canvas. At first we tried to stitch it on my mothers pedal sewing machine but after we broke two needles she made us finish it by hand. It was very hard work and hurt our fingers as the material was so tough. Eventually we completed it, fitted it to the car and then stained it black. We had learned our lesson and were not going to be frozen again.

Jack bought some bedroom furniture from work and we started to keep a note of every penny that we spent to see how our money worked out. We decided to live off Jacks wages which were £5 a week and save mine which were £4-17-6d. We did this for 6 months and then started looking for a house or flat.

Eventually we saw a house in Sheldon that we could afford. It was a little more out of town and had just been rebuilt after the bombing. We viewed it and like it so after we had decided that we had enough for a deposit we started the legal proceedings to purchase it. We moved in, in the march of 1947 and I kept my job going so that we could afford some more furniture.

When we moved in all that we had was a bedroom suite, a table and chairs and a rug for in front of the fire. Even the washing had to be hung out dripping wet as we could not afford a mangle to wring it dry. After a while we saved up and bought a small gas boiler and a wringer then gradually finished furnishing and carpeting the house.

Everything we bought was for cash, no higher purchase or borrowing for us. (There were no credit cards then anyway.) We had a mortgage of course but the attitude then was if you could not afford something, you did not buy it until you could.

For all that people said about the marriage not lasting we were happy and stayed married for some 55 years until my husband sadly passed away. We have quite a family of our own now with three boys who between them grew up to have 5 lovely children of their own. These grandchildren are also grown up and we are looking forward to the first great grandchildren.

We never did buy anything on higher purchase or credit cards and for most of our lives did not have a mortgage either.