

After the War

by Keith H Lloyd

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I was thirteen in 1945 when the war with Germany ended. There was great rejoicing in the streets. Britain and our allies had won, although us kids didn't appreciate the full meaning of it all. It had been fun at times and often frightening. There had been some near misses especially during the Blitz but we did enjoy the Spitfire and Hurricane dog fights overhead, the pilots must have heard us cheering because they often did a victory roll.

We were lucky we came through our war at home unscathed, except that my mother's nerves were shattered which had manifested itself in a bad rash on her hands and between her fingers. But the worst for all the family was that my dad's cousin Ernie Lloyd was killed in the battle for Anthem - he was twenty-three.

People said it will be great, now we will be able to have sweets, ice cream, bananas and all kinds of fruit, we had been so long without these things that we were unmoved although I did miss sherbet lemons and buzz bars - they were chocolate covered biscuits and very nice too.

One thing that I was looking forward to was the homecoming of my dad's brothers and sisters from the Army and Navy. Aunt Gladys and Jean in the A.T.S. were almost home as they were stationed not far from London, Uncle George was in Italy with the tank recovery group, Uncle Wally was a Sapper with the Royal Engineers and was with the D-Day landings so he was somewhere in Europe. He did tell me that barbed wire saved his life; he was one of the first off the landing barges and his feet got tangled in the barbed wire below the water bringing him down. When he raised his head above the water all his mates had been machine gunned down but he had to keep running for the beach-head. Uncle Alf was in the Royal Navy and was somewhere between South Africa and the Indian Ocean, Uncle Bill, Aunt Jessie's husband, was also in the Royal Navy and was somewhere south of Suez. They did in fact meet when their respective ships docked at Bombay. They were also in South Africa. Uncle John and my Dad were on essential works and were close to home any-

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way.

Granny Lloyd said that when the boys were home we would have an enormous party. My brother John and I were looking forward to that most of all, he kept on asking me :

"Will I be allowed to go?"

I said" I don't know ask Granny Lloyd."

But I don't think he did.

Well in fact we had several parties, which usually started in a pub at Woolwich - The Three Crowns, The Royal Standard or the Graving Dock, which was a little closer to 38, Barnwood Road where we all ended up at Granny and Pop's house. Uncle John or Aunt Jean would play the piano and we would all have a jolly good sing-song, sometimes their cousin Violet Milton would turn up and play the piano which everyone seemed to enjoy. I was a bit young for the pubs but me and cousin Tina would sometimes be sat outside with a bag of peanuts and lemonade. I did try to dance at one of the parties but made a complete fool of myself ending up on my backside, everyone laughed but Granny said it was time I went home, so much for my attempt at being an adult.

The thing I remember most at that time was the bunting all across the street from house to house. When someone was due home "Welcome Home" signs were erected outside their houses. Gran and Pop's house was no exception, in fact their house was the most decorated in the street. Dad would paint large signs saying 'Welcome Home Alf' or Wally or George. My mum's brother Danny Orley was also due home but he was still in Canada with the R.A.F flying Sunderland Flying Boats but I don't remember Uncle Dan getting a party although "Welcome Home Danny" was displayed with lots of flags.

It was my leaving school year; I would be fourteen during the Easter holidays, the Eleven Plus exams had just come into being but I had missed it and was pleased. So without further ado I was shipped off to Pretoria Secondary Modern School, which was about five miles away. Although most of my mates were sent

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there also they soon split us up, streamlining they called it, but I preferred to think it was done in case we made trouble. I was selected for the top class, I suppose I should have been proud of that but I would have been happier in the other classes with my mates. As it turned out it was a good class with an interesting teacher, Mr. Smith, and a good group of lads.

We were issued with free bus tickets to enable us to travel to and from school but we did our best not to hand these over to the bus conductors so we could use them at other times. I found the school dinners hard to get used to. At Silvertown School I was home every lunch time which made a break, so mum made me some sandwiches and I went round to my aunt Aggie's (mum's sister) house every day, a short walk from the school in Canning Town.

There was great activity in Silvertown in those days. All the factories were still working flat out, workers crowded the shops all along the North Woolwich Road and when the factory whistles were blowing thousands of girls would stream out of John Knights soap factory, Tate & Lyle sugar factory and Pinchin Johnson paint factory and many others. People used to say that there were so many chemicals in the air from the factories that the fumes killed all the germs so it was a healthy place to live but sometimes it stunk to high heaven, but we kids loved it.

The Docks were packed with ships bringing food and goods from all over the world. The cargo was getting through now there were no German U-Boats to sink them. Convoys of lorries would be trundling out of the Docks loaded to the gunnels with all sorts of goodies and we kids usually knew which lorries had the fruit aboard. There were always two or three of the boys hanging on the back of the fruit lorries. They would break open the boxes and throw the contents, usually oranges or grapefruits, to the factory girls who were delighted to take home the spoils. Sometimes a driver would leave his cabin and chase us away but we would just wait for the next lorry.

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On one occasion somehow the boys had learnt that coconuts were in barges in the Albert Dock.

"We 'ave to get some" said Joe "Who's coming wiv me"

Of course we all were. So about 10pm one evening Joe, Buster, Ronnie, Ruzzo, Bronco, me and Pocko (Buster's cousin) climbed over the twelve feet high dock fence from Drew Road School which was a bit of a task. Each of us climbed on Pocko's shoulders to reach the top then over the barbed wire to a fifteen feet drop on the other side into a sort of ditch so we couldn't be seen from the dock area. Pocko stayed behind to keep doggo (watch).

To reach the barges at the dockside we had to run across an open area to the cover of a line of railway trucks hoping they were not going to move whilst we were under them, then another open area to the dockside. We set off at a rate of knots running as fast as we could across the first area then dived under the trucks but there was an almighty loud 'bong' we were covered in rust particles.

"What the **** was that?" Ruzzo had head butted the truck's brake arm, wouldn't you know it.

"You stupid sod" someone said but I don't think Ruzzo heard.

"Shut up" Joe said almost in a whisper "someone's coming" We lay under the trucks dead still not breathing, well almost, voices were heard coming closer, it turned out to be two chinamen but they walked by without noticing us.

Panic over, next we raced onto the dockside and jumped on the barge, as we did so the barge drifted out from the dock. Ruzzo was complaining about his headache and was told to shut up although the noise we were making ripping off the tarpaulin sheets could have awoken the dead, we were along side a ship and any minute I expected a sailor to look over the side and sound the alarm. Luck would have it the ship seemed deserted. The coconuts were in halves and we eagerly stuffed them in our army type tops, known as bomber jackets. We were ready to go then we noticed

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the barge had drifted a long way from the quayside, another panic! And Ruzzo still had a headache. Fortunately, Bronco found the barge was tethered so we pulled ourselves in.

I don't remember how we got over the fence but we did, Bronco didn't bother, he covered himself with flour and walked out the dock gate, he even said goodnight to the copper on duty. We had a great time upstairs on the bus sharing our spoils with the workers on their way home from the factories. It was the first time I had tasted coconut, it was delicious but now coconut gives me indigestion, is that retribution or what?

One of the errands that most of the boys, including myself, had to carry out was to charge or recharge 'accumulators' which were wet cell batteries for wireless sets (radios). Most families didn't have radios run off mains. The shop that carried out this service was in Canning Town some two miles away and we would save the bus fare money by riding on the backs of lorries hoping that the lorry would stop or slow down at the traffic lights to enable us to disembark. It wasn't easy carrying a heavy battery and hanging on to the lorry with one hand.

On one occasion five of us decided we would go to Scotland by lorry. Most of us had not ventured further north than Wanstead Flats about twelve mile away. Two of the lads were on the accumulator run and had to get off at Canning Town, that left Joe, Buster and me to attempt the ill-planned marathon ride. The first real stop was somewhere in north London. We got off but the driver went into a shop and was back in the lorry moving again in a matter of minutes but he was held up at the nearby traffic lights so we were able to climb aboard once more. At another stop at a junction a brewer's lorry pulled up along side so Buster reached over and lifted bottles from the crates, but we were unlucky, every bottle was empty.

We travelled mile after mile through the countryside; it was pleasant enough in the back, the lorry was covered and carrying sacks of warm grain. Eventually we stopped along side a row of

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houses just outside a town, which we later found out to be a place called Ware in Hertfordshire. The driver went into one of the houses but was so long that we almost fell asleep sitting at the roadside, we were some distance from the vehicle so when the driver did return to his cabin we were not quick enough to climb back on board, I thought I saw him smiling in his side mirror and I was certain of that when he gave us a wave.

It was getting dark and started to drizzle rain. We looked about us, there were just fields, we were lost, cold and hungry and beginning to regret this foolhardy adventure, without a word we proceeded to walk towards the town perhaps we might find a drinking fountain or something but we were disappointed, there were some shops open but we only had a few pence between us so we walked through the town and two miles out the other side.

I said, "Are we going home?"

The other two chorused "yes!!"

"Then we are going in the wrong direction."

So we turned around and with a series of curses proceeded to retrace our steps, now it was uphill, but just then a small lorry passed us going slowly up the hill without a word we ran after it and I climbed on first as the slowest runner. Buster was next while Joe who was the faster runner ran behind until we were both on board, unfortunately due to my weight, the tail board broke and hit Buster on the head and I fell into the road on my backside, the pain was excruciating but my exclamation "Oh mum my bum" made Joe and Buster burst out laughing. I didn't think it was funny sitting there in the wet road with the lorry disappearing over the hill but I eventually saw the funny side of it and was laughing with them. So we walked back into town with Buster holding his head and me rubbing my bum.

It was really dark now and the shops were shutting. I wondered why people were looking at us, Joe said, "It's because you've got your arse hanging out of your trousers" something I hadn't realised; we must have been a motley looking crew.

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Once out of the town we were soon on the road towards London. We searched fields for carrots or potatoes to eat without success but after about five miles we came upon a field of cabbages. We were so hungry that we tore off the outer leaves and ate the hearts, it was dark so we were not sure what we were eating but it satisfied a need at the time,

We jumped a lorry but the driver kept stopping and chasing us for many miles. We continued to climb back on when it was moving again but eventually he slowed his lorry down and jumped out of the cabin whilst the vehicle was still moving and almost caught us. He was able to drive off without us, we were stranded again.

After a few more miles we could see that the road ahead was well lit which gave us the courage to press on and we arrived at a place called Turnpike Lane. It must have been about 11.30 p.m when I noticed a bus going to Highbury and I knew it was in London because Arsenal played football there. The conductor said it was three pence each, when we got off I asked the conductor the way to Canning Town and although he pointed us in the right direction he gave us a puzzled look. I thought if we could find the route of the No.108 bus we could follow it and I knew we would get to Poplar. After that to get to Silvertown and home would be easy.

However things didn't quite work out that way, we were being watched by a man on the other side of the road who appeared to be following us for some time, he was smaller than Buster and there were three of us to his one, so we were not worried.

He said: "I have been observing you three for some time have you run away from an approved school"

When we said we hadn't, he said, "I'm a police officer I think you should accompany me to the station across the road" and for the first time we noticed the nick.

"We won't get much 'elp in a cop shop" said Joe, but he was wrong we did get help.

The man handed us over to the desk sergeant and said, "I

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found these three wandering the streets" then he went out, I suspected he wasn't a police officer after all.

The sergeant said, "Alright lads what's yer names?"

"Keith Lloyd" I answered."

"And how old are you?"

"Thirteen" I said, then he looked at Buster who didn't speak.

"Bill Parker" I said "he's fourteen" then he looked at Joe and he didn't speak either, "Joe Haymes" I said "and he's fourteen too."

The sergeant's bored expression didn't change "Can't they speak for themselves?" he said but I think I detected a slight smile when I replied "Sorry sarge I always jump in, we are all a bit tired see"

After taking down statements and addresses, we told him that the nearest police station to where we lived was North Woolwich so he telephoned that station right away to arrange for a constable to inform our parents of our whereabouts, it was 1.30 a.m. We were directed to a room, which had two hard chairs and one easy chair, the three of us dashed for the easy chair but Buster got there first.

A constable came in "Would you like a drink?"

Did he need to ask, apart from the cabbages we had eaten about four hours ago, we hadn't had a thing since 10 o'clock that morning, "Tea or water?" he said, Buster had tea and Joe and I had water and it was the best I'd ever tasted, then the officer gave us each a bun-like cake that I hadn't seen before, it was delicious.

About half an hour later another sergeant came in. "Sorry we kept you waiting" he said, in fact he woke us up we were nodding off. "We have been waiting for the Black Maria" he added.

"Are we going in a Black Maria?" I asked (which was a police van for transporting prisoners).

"Yes" he said, "I am taking you home." He said he didn't know where Silvertown was but he knew Aldgate, I knew the way home from Aldgate, so he agreed I could direct him from there.

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We arrived at my house at about 3 a.m. Mum and dad were at the front door. The sergeant wouldn't stop for tea at my mum's invitation because he wanted to keep the way back in his head being unfamiliar with the district. Mum and dad thanked him for his help and he went on his way. Buster and Joe ran to their houses with a wave to the copper.

We hadn't appreciated the anxiety we had caused our parents, dad said he was going to belt me when I got home but in the end he said he was glad to see me and hoped I had a good time then he went to bed. Mum gave me something to eat after I had washed myself and brother John came down sleepy eyed to ask, "What's going on?"

"Go back to bed" mum said and soon after I followed him. So ended my trip to Scotland in fact I did not get to see Scotland until 36 years later.

It must be remembered it was after the war and we had never known freedom like it. Yes, the war was exciting in some ways but we were never allowed to wander far from home, now we could go almost anywhere, excluding Scotland of course. There was even a sixpenny (about 2.5p) all day fare on the buses enabling us kids to travel all over London.

A favourite haunt of ours was Victoria Park in Hackney, a day on the boating lake there was great fun. On one occasion Buster, Joe and me had the Ruzzo kid with us, he was a pain in the behind at times and a bit accident prone, so we often had a laugh at his expense. He was always doing stupid things. The three of us were already in the boat, Ruzzo had gone to the toilet and was late.

"Come on Ruzzo" we yelled, the boat was only a step away from the side but Ruzzo had to leap, he landed in the boat alright but his momentum pushed the boat out further and he lost his balance and fell backwards with a big splash. "He's fallen in the water" we chorused in the Goons tradition. Poor old Ruzzo he was

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soaked. Much to our further amusement he took his clothes off down to his underpants and laid on the grass whilst his clothes were drying. Every time we rowed passed him he had to endure our rude comments.

One of Ruzzo's mishaps was quite serious. A number of the boys had been invited to a 'cubs and scouts' open day at the chapel. Although we were not interested in joining we had heard that lemonade and cakes would be provided, so that convinced us to attend. We were supposed to be there at 3 p.m. but lost time while playing football in the streets. We were late and running to the chapel but Ruzzo didn't go through the gate like the rest of us he had to leap over the railing which had large spikes, unfortunately Ruzzo landed directly on the spikes which penetrated his foot causing lots of blood. It was a hospital job for Ruzzo returning to the fold with his foot heavily bandaged causing him to limp. He still received no sympathy from the lads standing on the street corner and had to endure jibes like "You stupid sod" and "Hopper long Cassidy."

The street corner was a favourite haunt of all the boys, indeed I understood it was so even in my father's day. We would spin the coins for 'heads or tails' or 'penny up the line'; it was gambling but only small change. Most of the time we would be making funny or rude comment about the people passing by, but we never ridiculed the elderly. Henry Newcombe came into the most stick, he had a very pretty wife but she had a foul mouth, she would attract admiring glances, she would sit on the sill of her front bay window or just stand at the street door we used to call her "Helen of Barnwood Road" when we looked at her and it was difficult not to, she would say "What you xxxxxxxx looking at?" some of her words were vile she introduced us to swear words not previously known to us.

One night screaming and yelling could be heard coming from their house. There was a row going on but someone was surely in pain. As it turned out that someone was Henry, an ambulance and

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police were called, the medics found poor old Henry in a real state covered in blood, his wife had attempted to cut off his willy whilst Henry was asleep and had almost completed the job but he woke up hence the screaming.

The medic asked "How did this happen?"

His wife said she had been climbing across him and trod on his thing, apparently the medic said:

"What was you wearing hob-nail boots"

Well the boys never allowed Henry to live that down, he was trussed up for weeks and walked bent over like a very old man, the amount of comments the poor fellow got from the whole community would fill these pages. I never did find out what happened to him and his wife or whether in fact she was charged.

The 8th May 1945 was identified as V.E (Victory in Europe) Day. Dad had made a full size effigy of Adolf Hitler, which we mounted on top of a 10ft high stack of wood at the top of Cranbrook Road, ready for an enormous bonfire that night. Most of the wood came from bombed houses and the railway fence.

Unfortunately someone deliberately set fire to it during the day when most people were at work. It had taken several days to prepare and the children cried and the people were very annoyed. I had just started work with Bowden & Willis a local building firm working on houses that had bomb damage. The culprits even stole the builder's timber and a two-wheeled wooden barrow to feed the flames. The fire was so intense it burnt the tarmac in the road and the Fire Brigade had to be called out to douse the flames.

The builder's foreman quizzed me on the identity of the culprit but I knew nowt but everyone seem to think that Teaky Tirrell was the villain that spoilt the peoples fun that night. He was a six foot two, fourteen stone giant so I doubt if anyone challenged him. The street parties that followed were a lot of fun with singing and dancing and food for the kids.

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Cycling was one of our main recreations - one hilarious trip to Hullbridge is recorded in my story 'Trailers, Trials and Tribulations'. Buster and I had many plans for biking around the country but perhaps the most ambitious was a trip to the Isle of Man. It was our intention to travel to Liverpool starting at 9pm on Saturday evening, cycling through the night, sleeping for a few hours Sunday morning, probably on a haystack and catching the 6pm ferry that day arriving on the island by 9.30pm hoping to find lodgings that night.

We planned to complete a circuit of the island in three days then stay two nights in Douglas before journeying back home. However it wasn't to be. Buster caught diphtheria and was laid up for weeks. I couldn't go alone in fact I didn't set foot on the Isle of Man until 53 years later. But I did go alone on a trip to Dover. I left at 6am on Sunday morning with a small pack and arrived at Dover about 2pm without any incident, after a quick wash and brush up I settled down on the beach for a well earned kip. I awoke about 4pm and instead of finding lodgings as normal I decided to go home. I knew I could never get back before dark but I was going to have a go.

Just outside of Canterbury I had a puncture, I had omitted to include a puncture outfit in my saddlebag, absolutely stupid. I thought how was I to get home now with a flat tyre? However I found a cobbler in the town who helped me with some patches and gave me a glass of milk and a sandwich. We listened to the cricket on the wireless, there were no televisions then, it was England v Australia. Not wishing to outstay my welcome I thanked the man and proceeded on my way but the repair wasn't 100% and required pumping up every few miles. Worse was the tyre was split and the patches were not strong enough to prevent a large carbuncle forming on the tyre causing the bike to bump up and down every revolution, not a comfortable ride.

By the time I reached Chatham I was worn out and I struggled up Star Hill fit to collapse. My speed was almost down to zero,

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surely I must stop now or fall off but just then a very large gypsy looking character called to me from across the road.

"Just a minute son can I have a word with you?"

I had passed him and was about to turn back to talk to him when I had second thoughts.

"Sorry" I said, "I haven't got time"

I was remembering what my dad said before I left "Don't talk to strangers especially late at night".

Now I wasn't tired any more I had found extra energy from somewhere, I wanted to get as far away from Chatham and that bloke as I could.

I reached the north side of Rochester it was midnight and constant stopping and pumping up the tyre was taking its toll. I was exhausted, I had covered about 110 miles since 6am that day not what you would call good going, it seems I had been on the road weeks not just a day. I decided to pitch my tiny tent, an American army bivouac, in a field hidden from the road, the tent was only supposed to be suitable for one person but I managed to squeeze my bike in as well. I slept for about two hours when I was awoken by a chomping noise, somebody was walking around the tent. I silently undid the zip and with my mallet in my hand I pushed my head warily out the tent opening expecting to receive a whack on the head, had that gypsy bloke caught up with me? It was a brilliant moonlit night, the person was at the back of the tent, I decided the best defence was attack, so I summoned up all my courage and dashed out of the tent and round the back yelling blue murder at the top of my voice which startled a group of cows so much that they reared up and collided with each other in an effort to get away, this caused me to panic and I fell backwards onto the tent.

I re-erected the tent, but couldn't sleep anymore. Had I awoken the farmer, was the gypsy close at hand? It was time to leave, I eventually got back to the road after a great deal of slipping and sliding over the dew laden field, my tyre was a flat as a pancake

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but with the pump in my hand and with renewed vigour I arrived home much the worse for wear.

Mum said, "What are you doing here? I didn't expect you back so soon". I went straight to bed without comment.