
Joy Jeffes (nee Feather)

OH, WHAT A LOVELY WAR.

Date of Birth: 28th June, 1923

Place of Birth: Halifax, Yorks, U.K

I was still at boarding school when World War II began. School was near the south coast of England and home was on the Norfolk coast. Mother bought two bicycles and packed up essential supplies so we could quickly head inland if the Germans came.

My school stayed put for a while and the sixth form girls found some illicit fun with the men of a searchlight battery stationed on our playing field. Food of course was rationed and I remember, when the school's refrigerator broke down, we had to put up with increasingly rancid butter for three weeks until the next ration fell due.

After Dunkirk when invasion was a real threat, the whole school (less those students whose parents hurriedly shipped them to friends in North America) decamped inland to a palatial mansion, "Aldworth" owned by the Maharajah Gaekwar of Baroda and originally built for Alfred Lord Tennyson. Our class of sixteen girls slept on mattresses on the silk carpet of one of the bedrooms.

My time at Aldworth was memorable because I heard the first bomb drop on England, on the coast at Littlehampton and it was also where I learned my father had died.

The war was going badly so the school moved again, further inland to another large stately home where we were ringed by infantry units. By this time so many parents had withdrawn their daughters that I most unexpectedly found myself head girl over the dozen or so students still at the school.

In July 1940 I ended my school career, departed for home and was sent to one of mother's friends in Norwich to study at Norwich Art School as mother had decided that I was artistic. I spent most of my days at the local cinemas and many of my nights fire watching, as Norwich was a target of the German Baedeker raids.

I got fed up with this and after a disastrous bout of puppy love for an army officer stationed nearby, I took my broken heart to the recruiting office and joined the A.T.S. but not before my officer friend had brought me home one night in a Bren gun carrier, which nearly caused my mother a heart attack as it rumbled up our drive.

My initiation into the army was certainly an education. I had never hobnobbed with what my mother regarded as 'the lower classes' and finding myself checked for head lice and sundry other demeaning procedures left me wondering what on earth I'd got myself into. I made friends with a lass who'd been my hairdresser in civvy life and agreed to go out with her on a double date. I was astonished to discover she'd lined up two army corporals – I had never even considered going out with anyone other than an officer before I enlisted.

My first posting was to a maintenance depot near London. I shared a civilian billet with another recruit. We had a tiny room with a broken window and two single beds, one a child's size. As I was taller I got the full size one, thankfully, as my roommate woke me in tears one night to show me she was covered in bed bug bites.

A posting to another depot found me in another civilian billet but this time not shared. My 'landlady' (no lady she), literally kept coal in the bath so ablutions became a bit tricky.

At last I was posted to A.T.S. quarters in camp at Guildford. Our pay was still only 13/4d a week (\$1.35) so my new boyfriend and I used to play darts in the pub to score drinks – the only way we could afford them.

After that I was sent to officer training school but flunked out, partly because my latest boyfriend, an R.A.F. officer, buzzed my camp with a Wellington bomber, which really impressed me but not my superior officers!

My last posting was to one of the army's biggest camps at Colchester. Here I lived in solitary splendour in vacated married quarters, where I ran my electric fire and my radio all off my one light fitting and managed to blow all the fuses.

My current boyfriend was visiting me one evening when suddenly the A.T.S. quartermaster arrived to inspect my quarters. I had to think fast, so I parked him in one of the cupboards and pretended I didn't have a key to the room he was in. I prayed she wouldn't notice there was no keyhole by the handle. He, poor man, had in the meantime seriously considered jumping out of its first floor window.

One evening, towards the end of the war, the boyfriend and I decided to look for some fun so we cycled 20 miles from Colchester to Southend-On-Sea, but when we got there the town was dead so we promptly turned around and cycled back to camp, arriving at dawn. Enroute we spotted a Union Jack on a flagpole outside a village police station, so we souvenired it. I can tell you it's not easy to cycle with a six-foot flagpole between you knees.

One vivid memory I have of that time is visiting a nearby U.S. Army camp the day before its occupants were shipping out for the Normandy landings. The soldiers were busy trying to see who could throw their English money furthest down the road. Next day I went back but someone had beaten me to it – there wasn't a coin to be seen.

On V.E. Day I was part of a huge crowd in Piccadilly Circus. Suddenly the crowd surged towards a cinema where two sailors were climbing up the façade and I knew absolute fear, realising that if I tripped and fell I would certainly be crushed by the surging mass of people behind me. Somehow I escaped and fled down Piccadilly to Green Park where I slept the rest of the night under a bush.

With the war in Europe over, I decided it was time to try a little income enhancement. A friendly local taxi driver was turning his home into a B & B and hinted he could use some army blankets. This wasn't a problem for me as I was working in the stores, so, during the next few weeks, I smuggled out about six blankets for which he paid me ten shillings a time – a nice spot of black market money for me. Fortunately I wasn't caught.

On V.J. night I was on my own, once again in London having just seen my Canadian fiancé off back to his unit in Holland. Everyone was whooping and cheering the final end of the war, but I walked back to my hostel accommodation, tears streaming down my face.

The war had been the most exciting part of my life – and now it was over, and I really felt my life too had ended.