

# The War and its Climax



This is the photograph on which the front cover image is based. A party of children and their mothers enjoy a street party in Stanhope Street in Euston on VE Day, for which they had probably saved up for many months.

On VE Day I wanted a flag to wave and found one left over from Edward VIII's coronation, the one that didn't happen, all dusty from the back of the shop. I went to a parade in Mare Street and remember seeing armoured cars pass by with flails in front to set off mines. Not that there were any mines in Mare Street.

Few of the men were old enough to actually fight in the war, and we have stories from three: a merchant seaman, an RAF observer and glider pilot – and a conscientious objector.

I left Bromley Road school in 1934 when I was 14, and worked as a mechanic's assistant until I joined the Merchant Navy. When war broke out we were on a Romania and Black Sea trip, carrying grain to Rotterdam, then via Cardiff to Canada. On that run we were 100 miles from the *Athenia* when she sank. In those days we had no refrigerator, just an icebox on the stern, which meant the fresh meat would last about ten days, then we were back on to salt beef and salt pork. Later on during a round-the-world trip – Cape Horn, Valparaiso, Panama Canal, New York – we had four inches of ice on the bridge and the rails. When the war ended we were in Montevideo harbour.

The SS *Athenia* was the first passenger ship to be sunk by German submarines in the war. Despite the imminent threat of war, she set out from Liverpool on 1 September, and was near Rockall when she was attacked. She sank 14 hours later, by which time the crew and two thirds of the passengers, many of them Jewish refugees, had been rescued.

The next man was a conscientious objector, a 'conchie'. There was still a 'white feather' attitude lingering from World War I. He didn't face enemy fire, but it was hardly an easy life.

At the age of 16 I read *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, and joined the Labour Party League of Youth, the Peace Pledge Union and various other anti-war movements, and I remember a meeting at Kingsway Hall run by an organisation which incorporated all the Left Wing groups opposed to war. At one point there was squabbling and fist-cuffs on the platform and in the audience, fighting only quelled by an organist playing *The Red Flag*. Everybody stopped scrapping – but only until the end of the music, when they were at it again immediately.

At the outbreak of war the company I was working for sacked me when I registered as a conscientious objector. The Tribunal sent me to become an agricultural labourer, and my first job was clearing neglected farm land, 12 of us sleeping on straw in a derelict farmhouse with no running water or electricity, and only earth-closets. We washed in water from rain butts and had to wait to strain off the mosquito larvae after they had been killed off with soap, before we could make our ablutions. ... The six of us included religious objectors, a vegetarian who would kill nothing, not even insects or bacteria, and a communist who took the fact that Russia was not involved to prove that the war was therefore a capitalist war.

D-Day, the invasion of France, took place on 6 June 1944, and our third man was there. He'd volunteered as an observer while waiting to join the RAF.

I volunteered for the RAF at 17, which meant a gruelling three-day test and a wait till I was 18. I joined the Royal Observer Corps (ROC) while I was waiting. I was posted to Sicily – our gunners had been shooting down our own aircraft. Later, in early '44, a call went out for volunteers from the ROC for 'special operations', and I jumped at the chance. We 'Seaborne' volunteers were spread out among the ships of