

END OF WAR TAPE (2) 19.1.95
Interviewer: Pam Schweitzer.

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?: If you'd have seen a street in the blackout with shops, you didn't know there was a shop there, you wouldn't have known there was a shop there. You would just go to where you thought the door was and you opened it and it was a little glimmer of a little light in there. So everything was black and dark.

?: They couldn't light the windows. They weren't allowed to light the windows up for a long while. But the shop had lights and you could open the shop door.

P: You were in the army for how long after the war?

?: 47.

P: Two years?

?: I went to Italy after that. Marvellous time.

?: You were in the Artillery were you?

?: Yeah.

Marg. Kippin: My husband did tell me that the ..(?) on VE DAY made an announcement to all that to celebrate VE Day they'd all got to give one day's pay to the Royal Artillery Benevolent Fund. The men all got together and said "No". My husband was the sergeant. They told the sergeant "No way". He told the sergeant major, sergeant major told ...(?) and the ..(?) went back to the CI and said "No way".

P: You had another 2 years to go. Was your family in the Deptford area?

?: No. I was in Southwick (?) in Sussex.

P: Did you go home then after the war to stay for any period?

?: Yes. I went home for about 2 years and then I left home again to take up government re-training. That took me to Slough. I gradually got nearer and nearer to Deptford after that. I went Tooting to Streatham, Streatham to Deptford.

P: What about your colleagues - When the war ended were they celebrating, going mad with excitement or wasn't it like that?

?: I can't remember that at all. It was this terrific relief. The main thing was "What de-mob number are you?"

P: What does that mean?

?: You were all given a number. As people were de-mobbed they'd say "Righto, up to 15 via 97.(?)"

P: That was the order in which you were going to be de-mobbed, was it? How were those given?

?: No. It was on length of service.

?: And age.

?: For example, wherever you were, you'd probably get a note that all numbers below a certain number will not be going with the unit. They will stay here in the transit camp. I ended up in an intelligence unit for 3 months because they didn't want people in that unit too long. I just had time to realise who had got(?) ..(?).

P: So that was the topic of conversation?

?: It was getting out, mainly.

?: Tell us about your de-mob suit.

?: I had it for years. Grey chalk stripe. And a pork pie hat. Lovely.

P: Joyce has a story about that but we've got it written down.

MK: The varied, didn't they, the de-mob clothes. Some were good and some were not so good.

?: No. They was all the same.

?: They was all the same. You had a choice of about six, I think. Brown, black, blue, navy, single, double-breasted.

?: A mac with a belt or a mac without it.

?: A brown trilby. You were allowed to keep your own greatcoat.

P: Lets hear a bit from Laura about this period. You've written about your mother coming back.

L: At the beginning of the war my mother sent my younger brother and sister and my 2 sisters older than them away. The 2 older sisters went together and my youngest brother and sister went together. Mum had been bombed out with my little sister in the shelter. They weren't hurt but they had to be dug out of the shelter. She let them go and let my other 2 sisters go at that time. When they went down to Kent, mum went down unexpectedly on a Sunday and my little sister was walking around with her wet knickers tied round her neck. Cos she'd wet her knickers. And the woman'd tied them round her neck for punishment. She was 7 years old. Mum brought them back then, brought them all back and my other sister and brother were about 12 and 13, older than the other four. Then mum evacuated with them and my two older sisters who'd already had babies. They all evacuated together. By that time I was pregnant - I was married and expecting my baby - and mum said "You can come away with us. We'll all go together". I didn't want to go because my husband had been invalided out of the army and he had already been in hospital since being invalided out of the army. So I wouldn't leave him. So mum and all the other family went together up North to Brightford (?) and I stayed in London. When they came back - that's right, mum came back again from somewhere and then they were all evacuated again. I think they went down to Cornwall. Then they came back and then they went to Brightford. I had my little girl then. Mum had seen Eileen as a baby and I'd been with her - mum stayed home for a bit. Then they were all evacuated again - mum evacuated them, my sisters and their children. So when they came back to London, my girl was two. Before two, about 18 months when she went away for the last time with all the family. When she come back she was three and a half. She didn't know my mum. She didn't know my sisters. She didn't know their children because they were a bit older than her. All of a sudden - she knew my dad because my dad hadn't evacuated, and my brother below, younger brother hadn't evacuated then. I took her home and there was mum and all these sisters and all these children and their husbands all there. Poor kid, all she wanted was to sit on my lap. She couldn't understand it. Mum couldn't understand why my daughter didn't go to her. So it was very sad really.

(break)

P: So we're talking about your family coming back to you and your little girl not recognising them.

Lil M: Where were you living then, Laura?

LM: ...(?). And mum lived in Mabel Road, cos she got given a place cos she got bombed out.

P: Did your mum move in with you after the war?

LM: No. I moved in with her when my husband was invalided out. That was in January 1941. (muffled) ...So they evacuated. And dad was at home then with my brother. He was about 13 at that time. He wouldn't go away. So he stayed at home. I used to go over to dad with my girl so she knew my dad...(?) But when mum came back she didn't know her cos she was only a baby. Then mum moved to Mayhill Road..(?) came back. My brother what was a prisoner of war, he wasn't married. So he came back to mum. My eldest brother was married inb Lewisham, but he came back, him and his wife came to mum and dad.

P: So it was a very full house at the end of the war?

LM: It was. Yes.

P: Who was the breadwinner then?

LM: Dad was working. When my brother came back from war, because he was on the transport before the war, he came straight back to the tram depot in Greenwich. My younger brother just below me came back and he was working in the Arsenal before the war. He came back from prisoner of war and went on a course to re-habilitate him. He went into building. He done a year course in building and then they found out he had multiple sclerosis. I was married and Will was working. My other sister's two girls, they were both working, my other sister's husbands were working.

P: What do you remember about the atmosphere at that time? What the feeling was?

LM: I felt it was happy. Mum and all of them were happy to have my brothers back. I honestly think that's what my mother alive, was waiting for my brothers to come back from prisoner of war camp.

P: How long after the war was that, when they came back?

LM: Not long after. He came back and the eldest one came back from the war.

?: Was he in Germany in the POW camp?

LM: Yes. He was out there for three and a half years. So we were all away from each other all through the war.

P: For you then it was a joyful period to have everybody back?

LM: It was. I'd been in service all my life from 13 until I got married in 20. Came back, just beginning to get to know my mum again really, to live at home, and all of a sudden she evacuated again with the little sisters. Well, I didn't know them really, so by the time they came back from evacuation, I was 23, 24, and I hadn't really lived with them since I was 13. So it was getting to know my sisters as well as my mum all over again. I was happy with them all.

P: And your brothers who had been POWs in the war? Did they manage to settleback?

LM: My younger brother who was below me who was a POW came straight back, that same night when he came back from being prisoner of war, he brought a New Zealand chap home with him. Mum put them up. We were all sitting around the table, all laughing and joking and all of a sudden Bob gets up and says "I'm going out now". "You can't go out. You've only just come in" says mum. "It's the first time we've seen you". "Well, I want to go out". He goes straight out and he goes and calls on the girl living next door to us. And he met her again, went back to her. She'd never gone out with anyone else while Bob was prisoner of war. And they got married at Christmas in 1945, Christmas Day. So that was why he wanted to go out!

P: What about the other one?

LM: Him and his wife lived in Lewisham. So he kept coming to visit mum and dad but he soon settled down to life. Of course they were quite near. They used to come backwards and forwards.

P: You told a story about a VE Day party. What do you remember about that?

LM: Another thing I do remember is, when my brothers and everyone else was coming home, we put big pieces of paper up "Welcome home Bob" "Welcome home Bert". They were all over the place and all round, people had the same thing. When we had the party up in Shooters Hill, all the neighbours... (?) and tuppence then, and we all collected all our sugar. We used to give this woman all the sugar we could spare at the weekend and all the tea and bits and pieces like that for the end of the war, for the party, when we knew the war was ending. So we saved all this, got the party all ready, in a little alcove at the top of Red Lion Lane - I was actually living in that little Indian restaurant on the corner then. We were going to have the party in Red Lion Place which was just on the back there. We had it all arranged, all the neighbours, all the people, I got very good friends up there. We used to all put in together. The day of the party - we were going to have it on, was it the first or the second Saturday after the war. Got it all ready, hired the tables, hired the chairs, .. (?) got all the sandwiches ready, all of a sudden Eileen wakes up the day before the party "what's the matter?" "I've got all itchy, mum". She was covered in chicken pox. So we couldn't go! So we looked out the window and seen them down there having the party.

P: What was it like?

LM: It was lovely. They had all the tables laid out.

Kitty: I've got a photograph of a street party with all the children round it. I'll fetch it out.

P: Lisa and I were talking about what kind of tables people had.

All: We had those long ones like they have in churches. Trestles. And the benches.

P: People didn't bring tables out of their own houses?

All: No. Don't think so.

?: We did.

LM: we got them from the church hall.

Lisa: I thought maybe people all brought their own tables out and joined them up in a line.

?: It depends on where you were. If someone got the idea "Let's go to the church hall". Somewhere else, somebody didn't think of it. They just said "Let's take our own tables and chairs out".

?: There was always somebody that could play an instrument. My uncle would play the banjo. Somebody else would play the spoons.

?: They'd get about 6 blokes and lift somebody's piano and bring it out into the street.

LM: And someone would start singing songs and they'd all start.

?: There was always someone with the spoons, wasn't there.

P: Would it be more likely in the afternoon or the evening, a street party?

?: It started at morning. We had a dinner that was called a supper. That was about half past eleven when all the children were down sitting at the table having our fish supper in the daytime, half past eleven. That went on, all cleared off, and everybody took all their things inside what they'd lent for the table. In the evening it was all dancing in the street, a little stage built up against somebody's doors.

P: What would be on the stage then?

?: Anybody who could sing or do a tap dance, or do a turn. Everybody did a turn.

?: Go up the pub, get another crate of beer. ..(?) crocodile..(?)

(all talking together, muffled)

?: Down Tresillian Road then, when I can remember, I was quite small, very upper crust. They were massive houses.

?: A lot of them were still owner occupied. It was a posh area.

P: Lil, do you remember a street party or what happened on VE Day for you?

Lil: No. What I can really remember was that I was very happy that there weren't going to be any more bombings. We felt safe. Although I'd lived in London all through the war, put up with the bombing, I must admit I wasn't bombed out. There was a lot of bombing all around because we lived near the gas works. All the factories were burning the nights of the raids. I was out of a job because the factory had burnt down. I went back to work after a few weeks because they opened up again, it got bombed again and the boss said "We'll move out of London". So I went down to Bexley on the train every day and came back every night and lived in London. My younger brother and sister evacuated almost immediately. Didn't see them until after the war. My eldest brother was working in Softnalls (?) which was the fertilisers in Anchor and Hope Lane. At that time I think I was working at Hawkby Seal (?) just down the road. What I really remember, I had 2 friends, Georgina and Dorothy. We just walked the streets of Greenwich and everyone was very very happy. That was in the evening. And you were saying to people "Isn't it great - The war's over!" And then when all the shop lights came on, I thought that was absolutely fantastic, that you could walk out in the streets and everything was lit up. I think I remember that more than anything.

?: And the church bells.

Lil: Later on after you'd felt really happy that everyone would be coming home from the forces and there'd be no more bombing, but a few days later you came down to earth and you realise that life was never going to be the same again. That things had completely changed, your whole life. You'd been through the whole war. What I kept thinking was "It's never going to end". You knew it must end, it couldn't go on for ever. But I kept thinking "It's never going to end. The bombing is never going to end. People are never going to stop being injured. I was so happy when they actually said "it is over" but a few days later I think we all came down to

earth and realised that life was never going to be the same again. And I think we then started thinking, "What's life going to be like now?"

P: Do you remember conversations along those lines with friends?

All: Yes.

Lil: Yes. This is what we talked about. The following year Bill got demobbed. We actually got married on Christmas Day 1946. My mum said "Why do you want to wait till Christmas?" I said "I don't know. I just feel that Christmas is the right time to get married." We went to see the vicar and the first thing he said was "Well, I don't mind you getting married on Christmas Day but would you mind getting married at 12 o'clock cos I would like my Christmas dinner. It was bitter cold and I'd bought a wedding dress second hand from a lady who was selling it cos we didn't have any ..(?) to buy anything. It was bitter cold and it was snowing and it was freezing. It was the bitter winter of 1947.

P: 1946 or 47?

Lil: I was married in 46, but the beginning of 47 was one of the worst winter's we've had.

P: So when people say 'the winter of 47' they mean the one that began January 47.

Lil: That's right. I can remember the best man taking his jacket off and giving it to me to wear cos we stood outside that church and literally (froze). In the wedding photos, there is the snow on the ground.

?: I was in Italy at the time. That was the year the Grand Canal froze over. There was no question about it being cold!

?: My little cousin was born. I lived with my aunt...(?).

?: I remember we'd run out of coal and we couldn't even have a fire.

P: What did you do on the wedding? What kind of celebration did people manage to have around that time?

Lil: My mum gave me a load of fruit and stuff and some sugar and things. Bill's Aunt Mag, she was a real character, it was a laugh a minute when you were in her company. She made the cake for us. Not many people actually stayed. We didn't have what you would call a wedding reception because it was Christmas Day, although they came to the wedding. We went back to Bill's family.

?: I didn't think you could get married on Christmas DAY.

?: You could in those days.

MK: My mother in law got married Christmas Day.

Lil: People just gave us food and stuff, friends and family so that we had a bit of a ..., and as it was Christmas you did get extra stuff.

P: What about setting up home at that time? Was it difficult?

Lil: We had two rooms in my sister in laws, who had just bought a house. She hadn't got any family then. We had the front room downstairs and a back room as a bedroom. My mum gave me the bed. We had a dining room suite, like a sideboard; a drawn in table and four chairs. We bought two armchairs second hand from a lady who lived in Welling. I don't think we got a bedroom suite out of it. I think we just got a wardrobe, something like that. No, we got the

tallboy as well and a chest of drawers. And we had one docket left over and I remember we went to what is now Debenhams at Croydon, but it was then...a double name, one of the biggest stores around. We went there and the chap said "you can have one extra chair with that coupon". I've still got that one chair. A bedroom chair, and I've still got it. I'll have to have a look and see if there's a utility mark. We only had two pairs of sheets so you changed the bed and you had to make sure the other pair was washed...

?: Top to bottom.

Lil:...Two pairs of sheets and four pillow cases. My mum gave me towels and tea cloths and things like that. We had lino, nobody had fitted carpet. My mum kept buying us these little rugs in Sidney Greens, the one at the top of Apple Lane. You could pay a shilling a week and then they gave you what you'd paid for. She kept buying us these little rugs. Carpet rugs. About 2 by 3, not very big. Every time my mum came to see us, she brought us something. She always brought us spare dusters or tea cloths, always brought a gift with her, something that wasn't rationed. My mum didn't like Bill's sister. Bill's sister was one of these people who couldn't talk without swearing, and I mean swearing. My mum couldn't stand it and so she didn't like Bill when we first started out. We'd only been married a few weeks and from then on Bill was the blue-eyed boy. We'd set up home and she knew that he was taking care of me and he was going to be a good husband. She changed - she didn't come to the wedding. Always regret that. My father had just died, just as we got engaged, and we got married six months later.

?: did you have a real wedding cake?

Lil: Yes. We didn't buy it from a shop. Bill's aunt made it. She was a very good cook.

?: Because I went to weddings whewre it was just the cardboard fictitious cake. You lifted it up and there was a slab of madeira inside.

Lil: No, this was a real cake. She iced it and everything.

?: They got this icing gunk and it would be all in plaster.

Lil: I kept saying to mum, "Why won't you come to the wedding?" "No, I'm not coming. I don't mind you getting married if that's what you've made up your mind to do. You get married, bu I will not come". And my mum never ame to the wedding. But I'd only been married a few weeks when she changed her ideas completely about everything. From then on Bill was the blue-eyed boy. Every time she came to visit us, we were living in Welling, she always brought some thing for the house.

LM: It was sad really. With all our sisters, we all came back and my sisters used to say "What'll we do?" cos they were working up to when they evacuated. The children were at school. Mum was working. Suddenly they came back to London but they couldn't get the children straight in the schools. Mum couldn't go out to work, she was ill. We didn't realise at that time but she was ill. So it was us sisters going round mum's in Mayhill Road every afternoon. "Will you be round tomorrow afternoon, girls?" "All right then, mum". I used to come from Shooters Hill. Kathy used to come from Charlton Village. Kate used to come from Greenwich. We'd meet my mum in Mayhill Road. Mum would give us a cup of tea. "We'll go over Blackheath this afternoon?". "All right mum". We'd push her. I'd walk from Shooters Hill pushing a ..(?).

Lil: We walked everywhere, didn't we?

LM: Took her in the old pushchair then. Eileen was three, three and a half. Put her in the pushchair and walk all the way from Shooters Hill down to mums in Mayhill, back here. We'd go in Jobbin's if we had enough money to get a cup of tea, or four. Often we'd get two cups of tea and share it between four of us. We'd come out then and mum would say "I don't know

what you girls are going to do, but I am going to get the bus over there. She'd get the bus and we'd all have to walk home again. It was nice because we were all meeting and getting to know each other again.

Lisa W: Margaret, when the V2 came. What did you do about the windows. Did someone come round?

MK: I took all the bits out and cut my hand. Took all the worst bits out. I reported it and eventually someone came round.

?: Usually they just boarded it up.

MK: They boarded it up to start with.

P: Joan and Dorothy were saying that it took ages to get repairs done. Do you remember places not being rebuilt for ages and ages?

?: There was so much of it concentrated in one particular time, of course they couldn't do it all at once. They had to set priorities.

?: Hospitals and schools and then the houses.

?: When we came back after evacuation, cos our house had been bombed, in Lilac (?) Buildings in Deptford, we had nowhere to come back to, our flat being bombed. My father was in London and we was all in Loughborough at that time, in Leicester, all of us. He collected the money for the bombing. So we never got a penny. When we come home somebody said to my mother, "You're entitled to an allowance for the bombing". But she couldn't get it because he had already claimed it. We never got nothing. Eventually they give us this house in New King Street. I didn't, cos I was living with my aunt at the time, but they all got married from New King Street. When we was all children, it must have been two years, more than that, we had 2 big rooms like this, well, we had the whole house, but downstairs we had the bedrooms downstairs. Everybody used to clear to the bottom part, not to the top in the war. There was 8 of us in one bed. I used to go home to my mother and my sister and brother every fortnight "I'm coming home for a fortnight now". Then I'd say "I'm fed up here. I'm not getting what I want". So I'd go back to my aunt. I was spoilt round there, sure enough. But we had 2 big rooms, like bedrooms. This was the bedroom, the other was terrible, I never used to use it, it was cold and all floorboards was up and everything. There was a huge hole adjoining the two rooms where the bomb had blown the wall down. We used to lay in bed and go "Shhh!" Whistle through the hole, all of us. One turned over, we'd all turn over. There was about 4 of us up that end and four of us down here. Eight in the bed. It was a big bed. It was all snug. We was all children.

Lisa: There was a hole at the end and then that was another room?

?: Yes.

LM: If the outside of a house had been damaged, not bombed, they mainly put the tarpaulin up, until they came round to rebuild the walls.

?: I think it was when they bombed the cattle market.

?: You do see a lot of pictures Lisa, with "Business as Usual" and the way they boarded up the shops and still carried on their business.

Lisa: It would have been planks or something? It wouldn't be big boards?

Lil: No.

(all talk together).

P: It is all hugely interesting. Thankyou.

END OF SESSION.

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