

## VE Day, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945, as seen through Mum's letters to Dad.

### Prelude

*On 28<sup>th</sup> April, whilst Britain was shivering in the cold and snow was falling in Welling, Mum describes an:*

"extraordinary report today that Germany had offered unconditional surrender to the British and U.S., but not to the Russians. And we had turned it down.....if they surrender unconditionally what does it matter to whom? I don't get it".  
*She is desperate to see the end of the killing. In her letter on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May she casually mentions the news of the unconditional surrender in Italy.*

*On Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> May she writes,*

"Well, everybody in England expects the news to come through at any moment now, and there's a terrific undercurrent of excitement everywhere. All the buildings in Whitehall are having floodlights erected on their balconies, and there's a score or more getting ready to light up the Houses of Parliament. Generally the old place is getting ready for the celebrations and I reckon for all its bombed buildings & shabby paint ol' London will shine.

"It's really lovely to travel on buses with clear windows, gradually all the scrim & net is disappearing from windows & the daylight streaming into unaccustomed dark corners is really dazzling.

"Fancy never hearing a siren again! Looking back one can hardly imagine that never again need one listen to a whistle bomb, or go into a shelter, or wait for a flying-bomb to finish its dive. It seems incredible that it is all over!.....

"FLASH....The radio brings me back to earth with the announcement of the surrender of all Germans in Holland, NW Germany & Denmark. That only leaves Norway & the centre bit around Czechoslovakia. Any moment now, darling, the bells will start ringing the peace in."

*On Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> she writes that another German army has surrendered, and it can't be long now.*

*Monday 7<sup>th</sup> May she writes,*

"I don't think we've ever known such a long day! Everybody has been tense with excitement the whole time, and they might just as well have given us a day's leave for all the work that's been done.

"There are evidently crowds of people collected around Downing Street and Whitehall waiting for Churchill to make the long-awaited proclamation. Aeroplanes have been circling overhead all day.....they have certainly added to the general keyed-up feeling that pervades London right now."

*She adds that the weather has turned up trumps & the sun has been blazing all day out of a clear blue sky!*

Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> May, VE Day

"That long-awaited day is here at last, and it is a matter for great rejoicing and thankfulness.

"Every house in the road is displaying its flag or bunting, and everybody is wearing a red, white and blue button-hole."

*Civil servants were given two day's leave, and most other people seemed to have leave too.*

"Mr Churchill's proclamation was very stirring, and so were the descriptions of the scenes in various towns in the British Isles, as recounted by the BBC news reporters."

*She had been invited, by an American doctor she had met whilst with Lez in Portsmouth, to a dinner dance in town on VE Day. The next day she writes:*

"I left in plenty of time last evening, and it's just as well I did. Never in my life have I seen such crowds & I had visions of not reaching Piccadilly Hotel where I was to meet the others. The crowds were all on the move all the time, and provided one was ready to crawl along and go with the throng, everything was OK.

"The comparison between Welling which looked pretty much like any other Sunday – and the scene that met my eyes at Charing Cross – is unbelievable!!  
"All traffic had stopped & the people had taken over. Every colour of the rainbow was in evidence & hundreds of thousands of flags were waving everywhere. One walked on a carpet of paper and the temperature must have been over eighty in the shade. It was absolutely exhilarating! I was afraid that I would not be recognised, but it was OK and we were soon all introduced.

"I think half London was trying to get in somewhere for dinner, & all were being turned away. But our table was booked so we were among the lucky few. We danced and wined & danced & sang & laughed & generally had a great deal of fun along with a crowd of people who were really letting themselves go. There were medleys of Yankee, British, Irish, Russian & every other nationality's typical songs & everybody sang them all. There was a major & a Lt Cdr R.N. on the floor who were having the time of their lives. I love to see these stern-faced dry-witted Englishmen letting themselves go. No-one can equal them when they're out for fun.

"There was much cheering when, during an interval, a Yankee navy chap produced a huge Stars and Stripes flag & set it up in a Champagne bottle. And not to be outdone, a Union Jack was soon in view, followed by renderings of 'Rule Britannia' and 'Old Glory'. Then the flags were swapped, and everybody cheered all over again. Honestly it was a most wonderful experience!

"Outside, every building was floodlit, & it was a scene to be remembered always. Simpsons was covered in the flags of all nations, people were climbing the lamp-standards around Eros, dancing Ring 'o Roses around policemen, cheering and singing & dancing, and generally having the time of their lives. Fireworks were going off, hooters were blowing, flashlights were to be seen where newspaper cameras were taking photos, and coloured searchlights were weaving their light in & out of the crowds. It was simply wonderful.

"All the cinemas in Leicester Square, and all the historic buildings in Trafalgar Square were lit up in floods of different coloured light, and London really looked beautiful.

"There were relief trains running, so I did not have to fight my way home. I said goodbye to the others, and thanked them for making it possible for me to have joined in these historic scenes. Little did I ever dream that I would have done so!"

*Later she described that journey home in more detail:*

"The train, which was one of many relief trains run by an over-worked & exhausted railway staff to cope with the tremendous crowds, was absolutely packed to the eyebrows. I caught it by the skin of my teeth & was thus able to hang out of the window. Just as well, because the heat was almost unbearable. Everywhere had been like an oven all day!

"Remember that fateful night of Sept 7<sup>th</sup> when the blitz started? Well there were almost as many bonfires glowing along the route. Only this time people were not putting them out in fear, but dancing around them & piling on the bombed debris that was burnable. It was a glorious sight, and the kids must have had a wonderful time.

"Fireworks were exploding, and hooters & buzzers & rattles were creating as much noise as poss.

"Overhead I think every searchlight battery in London was doing its stuff. The long beams of light were weaving backwards and forwards over the sky in fantastic designs and webs, and occasionally they would meet overhead in a gigantic cone.

"Anybody coming out of a pub and gazing upwards would have felt just a little dizzier. But it was wonderful to think that never again would those lights be searching for a Gerry raider!

"Simply crowds of people got out at Welling, and though it was midnight there was an accordion playing outside the station hotel & a dance was in progress in the road. Every turning had its bonfire & there was a terrific blaze on the Granada car park."

*Unseen by Mum, but described to her later, the Westaways in Garibaldi Street also had a good VE Day: a visit to town in the morning, then in the evening, when they came back from the pub, they lit a bonfire in the road and pulled a piano and "jazz set" to a window. Whilst Albert played, everyone did the Conga, Lambeth Walk, "Okey Okey" etc dancing and singing in the street until 3am.*

#### Postscript

*On Friday 11<sup>th</sup> May she says that there are still crowds of people about in town & the place is still decked with thousands of flags.*

"All day long aeroplanes swoop over at low altitudes, bringing prisoners of war home and letting them see good old London on the way. What an experience it must be for them all.

"I find it hard to believe that all the misery is over at last & that Europe can go ahead building and restoring herself to former glory."

Jill Conroy  
5<sup>th</sup> May 2015