1943

John had to report to Pwelli in Wales in early January 1943. When he arrived he found that the camp had been built by Billy Butlin as a Butlin’s Holiday Camp which had been taken over by the Navy for the training of the new recruits! Unfortunately, the training wasn’t a holiday camp but a taste of how things would be in the Royal Navy and lasted for 3 months.

Following his training which lasted for 3 months John came home where he posed for photos with me and his Mum in his uniform in the back garden of his Mum’s house looking so young and handsome! We were all so proud of him - but soon the joy turned to fear as we said goodbye.

His first trip was to Canada in the summer of 1943 when he became a DEM - Defence of the Empire Merchant Ships - and passed out as a Gunner earning a few shillings extra on his pay.

It took weeks to cross the Atlantic where they sailed down the St Lawrence River to Quebec. During this time no one was to hear word from John for 3 months which was very worrying but no one asked questions it was war and he may have been on a secret mission.

During his stay in Quebec he made friends with a Canadian family - the Raymond Family - who adored him. His mother continued to write to them after the war as she was so grateful for the love they had given her youngest son.
It was here in Quebec that John was to see the famous meeting between Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt at the *First Quebec Conference* in August 1943. I was so surprised when I received John’s letter telling me about it!

John remained away in the Navy for next 15 months without any home leave. Instead, his leave was taken in faraway places such as Cairo and Jerusalem.

He wrote to me regularly and sent me photos of himself and his mates which I truly treasured.

I, in turn wrote to him every day telling him about our life back home praying that he would be safe.

It was so wonderful to get his letters and I saved all my sweet coupons for him to have on his next home leave to show him how much I cared.
The Land Army

My name had been down for war work (from the age of 18 years) either to work locally in a factory or the Land Army or other services. Our Audit clerk at the Dairy fought for us to be exempt from war work but it was of no use, although we managed to hold out until I was just over 19 years – before I had to join up.

I joined the Land Army and was so very lucky because instead of moving away a job was found for me locally in the with Mr Bradnam, in the Kitchen Garden trade. He had Land Army girls working for him at Crook Log, Bexleyheath and as soon as he was able to take on another girl he took me on.

So I joined the other girls Dot and Olive. Josie and her sister Jean Cotton worked for another Kitchen Gardener called Jim Holding but we soon became one and all worked together at Crook Log.

We were issued with Land Army gear which comprised of woollen socks up to our knees, breeches, boots, shoes, hat and badge and a lovely woollen coat.

I soon found that working out in the fresh air suited me and anyway I was so happy because I was lucky to have such a lovely boyfriend.

Mr Bradnam was a good employer and we were treated well. When needed we were sent on loan to another Kitchen Gardener at Sevenoaks to help with potato picking. We all travelled down to Sevenoaks in the back of the lorry and all huddled together singing away as we went along. The hours were long and the work was hard.

When it was cold and frosty we would all sit in the greenhouses, without any heat, and someone would heat the kettle up for hot ‘Oxo’ which did the trick and warmed us up. We would drink our Oxo while singing and pricking out the plants in the greenhouse. Mainly, we grew tomatoes, lettuces and chrysanthemums and we made it as happy as we could.
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Here we are outside one of the greenhouses with Mr Bradnam & his sister, Wyn, (who worked in the shop), with me on the left.

When the rockets went over we had to dive onto the ground to protect ourselves which was very frightening. But on the whole working at Crook Log was a happy time for us all.

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1944

D Day was on 6 June 1944 after which there were rumours of peace.

John was in Bari off the Italian coast where so many of our ships were anchored and when the Germans had got word of this they succeeded in blowing them all up. The ship that John was on sailed soon after and he personally witnessed the atrocities. He said it was such a terrible sight to see so many young boys’ and men’s bodies floating in the sea. How lucky they all felt to be alive and how very sad for all those that had got blown up and for their folk back home.

Fierce fighting continued for the next 5 months and when the Germans had their backs to the wall they started using the V2 rockets. We had no warning at all.

Christmas 1944 my parents we pleased to receive this special Navy card from John from Naples, Italy. We were all happy in the knowledge that he was still safe and well but I was fearful for him and longing for his next leave home.
1945

In January 1945 John asked me to get engaged when he was next home on leave. He had not been home for 15 months I was so thrilled to see him and together we bought the engagement ring from Hazelhursts, the Jewellers in the Broadway, Bexleyheath and, if I remember correctly, it cost £16 - which was a fortune in those days!

We were so happy to be together again that John told me that he did not want to go back to the Navy and purposefully missed the last bus. On returning home his mother was furious for she knew what would happen if he did not go back.

So it was decided that he should go back first thing the following day. Elsie, one of John’s sisters and myself would get up at 5am and together with John walked to catch the first tram from Wickham Lane corner to the Woolwich Dockyard where John had to report for duty. All was well – he managed to catch the ship before it sailed. I knew that I would miss him dreadfully but he had no option but to return to the Navy. I contented myself with looking forward to seeing the photos he sent me and his next leave in May.

Once again there were rumours of peace. The Germans were on the run and at last it was believed that the end of the war was in sight. John wrote to me and said we would get married on his next leave which was planned for the middle of May as he feared his next voyage would be to the Far East. My Mum and Dad were thrilled as they loved John and thought that was the only way we would be able to save a little money by getting the wife’s allowance on his next voyage.

John’s parents were rather shocked that John wanted to get married as he was not yet 21 (until the following June). They thought him too young but the wedding plans were put in place for 16 May 1945.

My two sisters, Joyce and Beryl and John’s sister Rose where to be my bridesmaids with Mr Bradnam’s daughter Coral as my flower girl. John’s brother, Bert was to be Best Man.

All clothing was on ration as were so many other items but my wedding dress was bought in London at Derry & Toms in Kensington. I often went shopping in London by train.

The dress was made of white figured satin and cost £7 which again was really quite a lot of money in those days. I had an orange blossom head-dress and a long veil which was borrowed from a friend. The bridesmaids had different coloured dresses in pink, turquoise, and mauve with Coral in pink satin.

To everyone’s delight, a week before the wedding, the war in Europe ended. It was such a relief to hear the news after such a long time of war and hardship.

VE Day was on 8 May 1945 and Beryl, my sister, and a couple of other friends went up to Trafalgar Square with thousands of others to celebrate the Victory in Europe.

I looked forward to our wedding the following week knowing that the war in Europe had finished and although the war was still going on in the Far East - everyone was in a very joyous frame of mind. But for many, of course, their loved ones would never come home.