



A Young Man's War: the personal story of an Auxiliary Fire Service volunteer

Roy is a cabinet maker and master story teller. Some of his stories are a mite taller than his cabinets, but he is a fund of anecdotes.

He is also a scribe of no little skill and a lot of humour. He has contributed verses of his own to the Poems and Pints evenings at The Angel.

This text was first written down in 1994, as an effort at recording the exploits of the Glemsford Auxiliary Fire Service during the Second World War.

It is all Roy's own work; it has been transcribed and adapted for this medium.

Read it with the twinkle in eye and voice with which it was written.

Set on Earth Brows

I was born on the right side of the Stour valley, some 66 years ago: the right side being, of course, the Suffolk side. Those unfortunate individuals that existed on the other side, known as North Essex to the present generation, were known as foreigners to us superior people of the Suffolk and (naturally) the Glemsford side.

The kind of life that went on in them days of long ago was as different as chalk and cheese to the present apology we know as modern life. For the countryside was then governed by the horse. Not the prancing skittish object ridden by over-dressed individuals one sees today, but the huge four-legged friends of man. Without their co-operation very little would have been achieved on the agricultural face of the land. Besides, he or she still held sway over a fair proportion of ordinary transport. Yet to come was the foreign farmer that knocked down trees and hedges, filled in ditches that had drained the land for hundreds of years, often without piping the same, turned the small meadows into large desert-like areas, destroyed the fragrant smells of spring with the vile smell of ICI, smothered the roads with mud from their

beet crop, filled the air with smoke and smuts at harvest and, after all this carnage, called for monetary subsidies.

Still to come were the TV soap operas, transistor radios and that insult to the artistic profession of the noise of what some people call music. The Suffolk countryside, and for that matter the foreigner's side as well, was a Constable-type picture of small fields and meadows, divided by small hedges set on earth brows. Trees of all types stood in abundance, trees that had known the Roundheads of Cromwell. It was a countryside on which night descended like a black velvet cloak, leaving peace and tranquility; a countryside that had answered the call of Mother Nature to a time to work and a time to rest as laid down by the great creator. Look out tonight at the same spot in the same land and you will observe by the electric glow from Lands' End to John O' Groats a land devoid of meadows, hedges, horse ponds and above all the peaceful silence that dwelt there in my younger days.

War in the village: Glemsford in 1939

Remain Resolute

All this, however, was to change, and the start of this change came in the late 1930's when the appeasing government of Stanley Baldwin and later the arch-appeaser Neville Chamberlain began to realise the need to re-arm against the infamous trio Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. War came on 3rd September 1939.

Large posters appeared on walls in the village urging us to join up in the services or, for the older or exempt classes, Dig for Victory, Remain Resolute, Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness Will Bring Us Victory. Senior pupils, of which I was one, often reflected on the latter, prominently displayed on the old blacksmith's shop across from the school, while waiting for some chastisement from the headmaster of the old school. Yes, I started the war still at school and ended it a member of the much maligned PBI.

The first six months of the war was an anti-climax: no bombs, no troops, no difference. True, the men on reserve had joined the colours, and some of my older mates, boys who had been at school when I commenced, had volunteered. The majority, however, waited for call up.

The senior pupils formed a first aid section for the girls and a fire brigade for the boys. We wore armbands displaying a red cross or a flame; I wore the latter. We had a stirrup pump. For the benefit of the present day's generation, this was a contraption one end of which was placed in a bucket of water. The other end (or top) had a handle which was pumped up and down by hand. Older hands referred to it as a beer and beef engine. The combined effect was to propel a jet or spray of water onto a fire. Two people were involved in this work: one to hold the small hose, the other to pump. The rest of the crew supplied the water in buckets.

I have long since ceased to be surprised by the deep intellectual thinking of the blimps that ran this country so disastrously for the first two or three years of the war: the Blogs anti-tank rifle that was far more dangerous to the marksman than the tanks; a two-pounder gun that had to have the wheels removed before it could fire, thus becoming immobile in a mobile tank war; a sticky bomb designed to stick to a tank which stuck to its user.

Therefore there was little surprise at the acceptance of a fire-extinguishing system which propelled water from a two-man pump supported by a bucket chain when the water could have been much more effectively thrown from the buckets!

His decision to equip eight fair-sized lads with a pump, six pails, white armbands and an unlimited supply of water did not, to my mind, say a lot for the Cambridge-trained headmaster. Climbing over old desks and 5 ft walls as training quickly turned the armbands grey, black or missing. Practice drill with real water resulted in one or two unpopular teachers getting wet. A jet of water shooting through an open window into the top class of girls of course did not help. I was on the jet that day. I saved my neck by insisting that I did not know that the window was open.

The climax came when the girls' first aid class at practice under the veranda got washed out. The headmaster pointed out that one bucketful of water may have been accidental, two improbable, three deliberate.

Thus ended the school boys' fire brigade.

The girls' first aid continued after I left, and no doubt longer. The knowledge of anatomy gained by the class must have helped a lot, particularly when the super race arrived to win the war for us.

War Comes Home

"Will ye nae come back again?"

1940, and the war started in earnest. The French army, shot through with apathy and panic, collapsed, and the BEF fought a stubborn if somewhat disorderly retreat and evacuation. A new name sprung to the lips of every Briton: Dunkirk.

Its impact was soon felt in the village.

A well-known light infantry, the HLI, came to billet, home from the beaches. Their uniforms were patched and stained. Some had steel helmets, some Glengarries, some the traditional side (Scottish) hats. Some had rifles, some bayonets, but they marched and drilled as soldiers on or off duty. They were soldiers - regulars - and each with a burning desire to avenge their comrades of the 51st division left behind in France, through trying to prop up a broken French army to which they had been attached.

The battalion was re-fitted with uniforms and equipment, and the pipe band arrived from Murrayhill Barracks. Drills, band concerts and church parades followed. They arrived battered but unbeaten; they left us marching behind the pipes and drums, playing "Will ye nae come back again?", to take up anti-invasion posts on the Channel coast.

One of Hitler's better decisions was not to invade, but this was to the bitter disappointment of the 1st Battalion, The Highland Light Infantry. God bless them! They certainly lifted our morale and, to judge by the number who returned to marry in the district, we must have done a lot for them.

Hitler met three more major set-backs that summer.

He tried to burn the corn crops with incendiary bombs. But the corn had already been cut thanks to an early harvest, and the spaced out stooks of corn made a bad target.

Us locals let the bombs burn out between the stooks, and the odd one or two that he hit were pulled away quite easily from the fire.

The other two were of course the Spitfire and the Hurricane which made the life of some enemy bomber crews a short one.

It began to dawn on me that, while still serving my time as an apprentice cabinet maker in a hand shop, a situation that entailed a 14 mile bike ride 6 days a week, plus some 10 hours away from home, that I should join in the fight against treachery and oppression.

The Home Guard had been formed. Previously known as the Local Defence Volunteers, their name was translated into "Suffolk" as the Look, Duck and Vanish Brigade. Watching this lot in their old denim-type battle dress did not inspire me to join them. First Aid was not my cup of tea.

The Suffolk Police were insistent on a higher age limit, and I knew that I stood a good chance of being disinherited if I joined them. Joining the Wehrmacht would have been a lesser crime.

This left the air raid wardens who it seemed wandered around the village looking for minute chinks of light whereupon they shouted "Put that light out. You want to get us all blown up?" Their uniform was non-existent and their equipment consisted of a large gas mask, a small blacked out torch and a steel helmet painted white with a prominent W in black on the front. They were all pronounced Wallies, or a less complimentary title.

This left the Auxiliary Fire Service.

Will I do?

The AFS was housed behind "The Cock" public house in a converted brick garage which contained a Coventry Climax grey trailer pump, the city of Coventry's response to the terror bombing of their homes and cathedral. I had yet to see a fireman, but this was about to change.

Walking past the yard gate of the public house, I espied a splendid apparition in the form of the well-built, if somewhat slight, figure of a man.

Black polished shoes (not boots) peeped out from a navy blue trouser, displaying a thin red line down both sides and a razor-sharp crease in front and back. This was surmounted by a navy blue Horse Guards-type tunic, buttoned up to the neck, with two rows of silver buttons displayed in double-breasted style from shoulders to belt. A large black three inch wide belt ran round the midriff, supporting a smart hand axe and a rope lanyard. The big silver buckle was held up dead square by four buttons at the front and two at the back. Topping all this was a peaked cap with red piping.

The wearer had bent the wire frame to resemble Field Marshall von Runstedt, the German C-in-C in France.

As I passed this Errol Flynn type, he gave me a languid wave, the sort of wave an active member of a civilian defence force would give a mere civilian. Closer inspection revealed to me the features of Bert Moore, a school mate of mine.

At that time, we were both showing an interest in a certain young lady from the top of Angel Lane. Bert had a brother and two or three sisters. This had advanced him in maturity somewhat more than me, an only child, and he appeared to be favourite for her affections.

The uniform he now wore had well and truly advanced him in that direction, or so I assumed. I considered making a cutting remark in my frustration, such as "When do the show start?", or hurling myself across the road in a vicious frontal attack.

My record in the eyes of the local constable was somewhat blemished however, and an unprovoked attack on the King's uniform would be frowned upon, particularly so when the person concerned was on official duty. I also recalled that Bert, a quite religious individual, carried a very nasty left jab. This was from the days of the old Church Club, when we had boxed each other under the eyes of the Rev. Harper, no mean performer himself. I resisted the impulse and passed by.

It came to me some time later that our ages were but a few weeks apart, I being the older. If you can't beat them, join them. Bert was still there, complete with some of the local talent, including the young lady in question. Marching straight up to them, I blurted out:

"Are you in the Fire Service?"

On reflection, this was not the most sensible of questions, considering the silver and blue uniform displaying the letters "AFS" in red on the breast, plus the silver and red on the badge.

Bert sprang to attention, gave the Hitler salute, and replied in the comic German of ITMA:

"Nein, nein, mein fuhrer. Field Marshall von Crappersitter, 21st Panzers, at your service."

To my great embarrassment, and roars of laughter from the female audience, I ignored this and pressed on with:

"How do I join the AFS?"

"Report to the Station Officer, " says Bert.

I made for the station and approached the first person in sight.

Judging from Fireman Moore's apparel, I expected the Station Officer to be wearing a tricorne hat and a sword, at least. Here I was brought down to earth, for he turned out to be none other than the local delivery driver, a man I knew well. He was a sort of untidy edition of Bert, with an extra small red bar on his shoulder.

"Yes, boy, we could do with a few more blokes so that we can make up four units of four: three nights off, and one on from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m.. You have to be fit enough to run out a hose, climb a ladder and lift an average man on your shoulders. Plus, be of good character."

He, being a village man, knew all that went on.

"You won't have no trouble with the first bit; the last bit, I ain't so sure. Go see Richie, the local doctor, tell him to look at you and bring me the envelope he'll give you. We'll take it from there."

Dr Richie felt my pulse, sounded my chest, looked me up and down and commenced to fill in a card. Somewhat apprehensively, I asked "Will I do?".

"Never brought a cad in yet, laddie" he replied, a reference to his attending my entry to this mortal coil.

Station Officer Percy Sparkes filled in more details, added Dr Richie's report, and told me my uniform would be available in about ten day's time. I was in.

Find your own wellingtons

"You can begin Sunday, if you like. That's a drill day. Or wait for your suit. We've got enough aprons and leggings for now. You'll have to find your own wellingtons till then."

I jumped at it. I should have been told how to march, stand to attention and the Fire Service salute. Leading Fireman Percy Sparkes gave me an FS manual, with the words

"That will tell you to go on. Forget the salute. That's for commissioned ranks. The kind of salute I get is not in the book, or any other that I know of. We'll show you how to use the pump from ponds or hydrants, run hoses, fit branch and diffusers, lash tripods, double up from one hose to two and use foam. We've all got to go to Sudbury to learn foam, so you'll know as much about that as all the others."

Percy, to his credit, was no swank or big-head, and made a rookie feel equal. He added:

"You'll be as good as the rest in about a month. Me, Leading Fireman Good and Firemen Osborne and Shinn are the only ones who've been to a real fire, and then we were under the command of a senior crew, complete with two section leaders and an Officer."

Taking my turn every fourth night from 9 to 6, and learning my drills, I got on well, with one small hiccup, when Fireman Moore failed to hold a canvas hose and I

got wet, to the great joy of the crew.

As I had seen Moore hold a full jet of water from a rubber hose, a performance that required great strength and skill, much more than the canvas job, I had my suspicions. So, collecting some coke and sticks for the tortoiseshell stove, I scattered them in what I thought was his bunk on his night of duty.

The bunk, it turned out, belonged to Leading Fireman Good, a man that was not as easy going as Leading Fireman Sparkes. It resulted in the only time I stood to attention to a member of the Glemsford Brigade.

"If you like coal so bloody much, I can arrange for you to be a miner,"

- not such an empty threat in the time of the Bevan Boys -

"What do you think we are, the so and so air raid wardens? Clean the station up, bits of boys ..., cradle marks ..., etc. etc.."

I crept off up to "The Cock" to find Fireman Moore with one of the looks he used to wear in the choir.

"You been upsetting Billy Boy?" he said, looking very angelic-like.

Putting on my penguin suit

An R.A.F. bomber, failing to get lift from Stradishall Aerodrome, crashed at Stansfield, to the rear of "The Compasses" public house. The full tank of fuel ruptured, sending the blazing mess downhill away from the 'plane. Some small fires were caused to adjoining property. Several crews arrived to fight the fire which, although blazing like a torch, was isolated. Two members of the R.A.F. crew, alas, paid the supreme price. The fire crews, mainly if not all part-timers, began to contain the fire like old pros.

At that point, there occurred a blimpish incident containing some elements of humour.

An air force car discharged an R.A.F. officer of the old school. Waving his arms like a dervish, he shouted

"This aircraft has a full complement of bombs, bullets and petrol, and could go up at any minute."

Before he had completed the sentence, a retirement of all the fire crews occurred, with such speed as to the make the retreat from Mons (which some of the older crews were in) look like a Sunday morning stroll.

The Glemsford crews, none of whom had been at Mons, made up for that omission by setting a prominent example.

Bombs at that time had a priming device activating the bomb a short time after release. In brief, they had to be dropped from the air. As the bombs had not been dropped, they were as safe as houses.

As the fire had moved away from the aircraft, both they and the .303 gun rounds were intact. There was not a chance in hell of an explosion.

The R.A.F. type did not know his job and being of the old school was naturally devoid of plain common sense.

Meanwhile, the retreat continued over a ditch and through a deep celery trench to

all crowd into a smallish single-brick building, held none-too-securely together with lime mortar. A good push would have put it over.

This scene of tightly packed men, in steel helmets, blackened faces, silver buttons and Horse Guards tunics (minus one), lit up by the blazing but rapidly dispersing petrol, had an air of the Crimea or Waterloo about it, totally disproportionate to the lime mortar, single skin, oversized outhouse or toilet. Sanity prevailed. A voice from the gloom announced:

"Come on, together. A good fart will knock this lot down. We'll be better off in the ditch."

Exit the Waterloo brigade to the ditch, a move towards the fire. They passed the ditch, picked up the hoses, manned the pumps and extinguished the fire. It is a lot harder to counter attack than hold the line. They had passed the test and, in doing so, had become real firemen.

Coming home from work about six one night, my mother informed me of a fire at the top of Windmill Row.

"A stack," she said.

It was indeed a stack. Two local lads, by the name of Plumb and Ablett, had decided to smoke their own version of tobacco in private, the privacy being a straw stack.

Having experience of mopping up behind the senior crew, and being on duty at nine that night, I decided to have a look at the incident being attended to by the senior brigade.

Putting on my penguin suit and proceeding to the scene was mistake No. 1. No. 2 mistake was to go up to the fire and have a look. I deduced quite rightly the fire would be out in about two hours. We were safe, it being about 6. 30. As I was about to retire, a hand fell on my shoulder. There stood a section leader of the senior brigade.

"Just the boy," he said, "take hold of the deviser."

"I haven't got my leggings," replied Messenger Porter.

He promptly gave me some.

"I'm not on this call."

"You are now," he said.

I did as I was bid.

Wet, cold and black, pulling down sodden, steaming straw, and dowsing same with short bursts of water from the hose, wandering about in the mud, I appeared to be on my own. I was. Setting the hose on a tripod, I proceeded to follow the supply to the pump. There was Fireman G. Betts, Long Melford Fire Brigade, complete with full mug of ale plus a full pint bottle.

"Give us a drink."

George said:

"It can't be done, boy; you're on duty at a fire."

"So b**** well are you," I replied, "and where's the rest of your mob?"

He indicated the "Prince of Wales" public house.

Crossing over and entering the bar, I found they were all there, well stocked up with beer, enjoying themselves at the con pulled on the Glemsford messenger.

"I shall be putting in for my turn out pay," said Messenger Porter to the Station Officer-cum-Section Leader.

"I don't think we'll put that through for two hours work," he replied.

"Number one crew, of which I am one, are on duty tonight. I'll inform HQ when I 'phone them, *"attached to senior crew on orders of a superior officer who now refuses to authorise pay."*" The smiles disappeared.

To call on a fireman of a junior crew is bad enough.

To call on a boy messenger to do a full fireman's work would, to say the least, be a bit of a let down.

I had no intention of carrying out my threat, but no Melford man was going to extract from a Glemsford man without a fight.

"Have a pint, boy," said the section leader.

This was followed by more offers from ordinary firemen.

I accepted the beer. Honour had been satisfied.

Two stacks, the clamp and the lean-to building

A knock on the door revealed the figure of Leading Fireman Sparkes.

"Fire at Thorpe Morieux. Go and get Fireman Shinn."

Mounting my cycle and knocking up the man in question, I grabbed my uniform and turned out with the rest - 1 Leading Fireman, 3 Firemen, 1 Messenger.

We were overmanned for once. Arriving at the incident, we found a mop up job. The red engine's peace-time crew was about to hand over to the AFS.

"Sorry mate," he said, "this is not my doing,"

and proceeded to give a report of the incident to us.

Down the road, a short distance from the fire, was a U.S.A.A.F. base.

Returning from a daylight raid over France, some crews had completed the full amount of missions, and would be returned to the U.S.A. as veterans, home leave, medals and heroes' welcome.

The thought induced the crews concerned to celebrate.

This was done by firing all their inflammable missiles from the plane. One of these had landed on a clamp of mangolds. The thin straw top had took fire and one of the base fire engines took off to the scene to help out the Limeys.

The small amount of water required could have been supplied by the Glemsford Lad's Brigade after the veranda incident.

The base crew arrived at the farm yard. Their monster engine ran over several fowl and two ducks. They then applied, at full pressure, a jet of water to the small fire.

This, no doubt, was the correct procedure for an aircraft fire, but not for a small amount of straw covering a non-combustible heap of mangolds or swedes.

The entire fire went skywards and, following Newton's theory, descended on the

stack yard.

They now had three fires to deal with. Oblivious to the cause of the problem, the U.S.A.A.F. crew employed the same method on the wet stacks.

Fires now five.

At this point the regular brigade arrived with timing that possibly saved the entire village of Thorpe Morieux.

This well turned out crew proceeded to tackle the fire and the huge American engine was dismissed, the crew still totally unaware of the damage done, and making bad-tempered comments about the "ungrateful Brits"!

The brigade extinguished the two stacks, the clamp and the lean-to building, failing to hold the last important straw stack. Hence the Glemsford crew's purpose.

"I have left you some support still to come," said the regular section leader, and departed. We took over the muddy, wet, cold and stinking job.

Some two to three hours later, an AFS mobile canteen arrived, and coffee and wads were handed out in relays of two or three men.

Returning to the fire with Fireman Beevis, he asked me to get one legging.

"Tie the bottom up, boy, and don't shout about it,"

said Albie, disappearing towards the undamaged farm building.

He returned some time later to inform me he was going to get some coffee.

"Follow me in ten minutes, boy," he said.

On reaching the van, now blacked out, I was received inside.

Fireman Beevis sat on a small seat close to a smart lady firewoman, drinking coffee and rum. Another girl, not much older than myself, got me coffee and rum, some wads and sat down beside me on the other seat.

We spent the rest of the call out together:- rum, coffee, wads, warm and pleasant company, and left the scene about 4. 30 a.m., rehousing the equipment at the station, with Beevis showing a marked reluctance to leave. He indicated by signs for me to stay as well.

Firemen Osborne and Sparkes went home and I then learned the purpose behind his reluctance.

Three plump cockerels were produced by Beevis from one legging.

"Take one of these to your father, boy. He'll know how to handle it," said he.

I gave it to dad, just up, it being 5. 30 a.m..

He grinned and said: "Beevis, boy."

How did he know?

There's a fireman down!

The Glemsford area was bombed by three nations: the master race, 1, the Italians and the super race, 2.

One Luftwaffe raid bombed near Glemsford station - six in all - no damage, plus

twelve or so that failed to explode, one oil bomb that exploded in open country and two parachute mines, one of which demolished an isolated farm cottage and killed a pig: very convenient in the times of food shortage.

One cat also suffered but returned later rather bemused.

One Molotov cocktail hit an empty factory, and about two hundred incendiary bombs were dropped, three of which hit and set fire to a bungalow.

The Italians made two raids on the British. They came in daylight, to the delight of the R.A.F.: badly mauled, Mussolini picked his ball up and returned to Rome.

One of these raids led to an attack on Cavendish station.

I saw the attack myself. He missed, but damaged an outhouse on the Glemsford-Cavendish border: no casualties.

Walking to a pub, long since shut, I met a group of 7 to 10 year old lads in a hurry, running down New Cut.

I saw a blue practice bomb half-buried in an allotment: the bomb was four feet long and about ten inches in diameter. It had a small red canister in the centre of the tail fin. The body of the bomb was filled with sand.

As I went up to the bomb, I got a shout from a member of the Home Guard, the late P. Mizon.

"Don't you go near that, boy, it'll go up."

"It's o.k., Perce," I replied. "It's full of sand and the smoke canister has been used. It can't hurt anyone,"

and to give credence to my words, I gave the bomb a kick.

Perce done the three minute mile down New Cut.

"That could give you a tidy old sole of the skull, boy," he informed me later.

"Don't meddle with bombs, met, stick to pints."

A full number one crew were woken one night with "air raid warning - red".

We all slept with clothes on, but a red alert meant getting on wellies and leggings.

This had hardly been done when we heard the roar of a diving aircraft, followed by a burst of automatic fire.

On going outside, we saw the entire arch of the sky behind the station lit up by a greenish glow, the centre of which was a flame like a large blow torch. Silhouetted in the glow was the gable end of my home, which contained the two people that meant a lot to me, Mum and Dad.

Grabbing my axe, I ran the short distance to the fire, jumping the iron stile.

I realised the house was o.k. and at the same time got a rocket from Dad, from the second storey window:

"I can handle this. Get back to your post."

This was my first realisation that I had broken the station drill: each station had its own because of the different types of buildings.

Back on the job in less than two minutes, I found Leading Fireman Sparkes lying unconscious by the door. Ted Osborne took his place at the wheel. Beevis and I clipped on the pump.

"Put him on the back seat," said Ted, now in charge.

We did as we were bid, arriving at the fire with the fire captain out to the world.

It appears that on running to get in the car, he had forgotten his drill and Fireman Osborne had not.

His job was to open the door of the tender.
Sparkes hit the door over his right eye, and passed out.

The hydrant was in the centre of the road, thus a heavy one.
The points in the pathways could be opened by a light flick of a lever; this one required keys, of which we had none.
Osborne took one lever, Beevis the other. I stood by to place my axe under to stop the top from falling back.
Thus engaged were all three fit men. Leading Fireman Sparkes (he had the right name), to his credit, came too and tried to resume command, bending down on his knees to view the progress.
I heard a swish, a clang, a clump, then a slight sigh.
The swish was Fireman Beevis' lever slipping; the clang from the lever hitting Sparkes' tin helmet.
The clump was the rest of the lever landing on his already damaged eye.
The sigh was his return to the arms of Morpheus.
Fireman Beevis surveyed the second-time recumbent form of his leader:
"He'll soon've done lying about, 'ont he."
We were now joined by a figure from the direction of the fire: Fireman Parker, regular fireman of the Clacton Brigade.
We could not have had a better man to replace Sparkes.
I did think at the time that Clacton had done well to get here from a distance of 30 odd miles, especially as Long Melford were not on the scene from only 3 miles.

The new man took command, giving orders short and clear.

"2CD run base of fire," he said to me.
Grabbing the hose, I made for the fire.
"Base of fire" meant the sharp end.
On reaching my point, Fireman Parker caught me up.
"Base men always carry a branch nozzle, mate," he said, and thrust one into my hands.
He was a regular pro.
I was not, being only 16 years old, and by rights a messenger.
As we had our overcoats on, he had no way of knowing this. Hence rocket number two:
"Water on Number Two; force the doors; use your axe. Points: don't open them (a pair of large double doors) till you get water. Then, and jet this round the bomb, not direct."

Fireman Beevis had taken over Number One.
Now Number Two, I forced the padlock. Albie put the jet round the bomb.
Leaving the door now open, I resumed Number Two job, taking the slack of the canvas hose.
There then arrived, in a dressing gown, the local shopkeeper and lay preacher, a man of some substance in the old village hierarchy.
He now attempted to use his position to take over the fire.
"Put the water on the bomb," he said to Fireman Beevis in a loud voice.

"We know what we're doing," replied Albie.

Grabbing Albie's shoulder, he repeated his order louder still.

"Hold the branch, boy," said Albie, and padded round the bomb.

He then turned to the shopkeeper:

"You wouldn't be here at all if you hadn't got a few bloody old sticks nearby."

(Property was referred to as sticks.)

"Now, stop getting in the way of trained men. Off the site you go or I'll order the boy to put the bloody fire hose on you."

Exit the spluttering civilian. Fireman Beevis rejoined me.

"That old sod used to weigh his bloody fingers, boy," he said.

Yet a third member of the public arrived - Dad.

"Come on together," he said, "Ernie Younger's bungalow is on fire. This lot can't spread."

Long Melford brigade arrived at the same time. So did Fireman Parker, for the second time.

"Sorry, boy," he said, "I didn't see you were a messenger. Join the section leader of Long Melford. He's in charge now. Top man gets the messenger to pass on the orders."

Doubling up to the bungalow, I joined a group of men near the back door: plenty of smoke.

A member of the Long Melford brigade, my old uncle, George Oakley, grabbed a hose and went in.

The Youngers - all four of them - were outside of the fire, near the door.

"There's a fireman down!" shouted Ernie Younger.

In went Dad, grabbed his relation Oakley's legs and proceeded to pull him out.

There followed a description of Glemsford men in general, from Uncle George, and of his relatives in particular.

Dad fled.

Fireman Oakley had been "down" to get under the smoke.

Knowing Dad's temper at the embarrassment, I joined my Uncle George.

"We'll soon have this lot out," he said, "that's if your old man don't come and throw us both out."

There was a sandbag and pole near the door, and on crawling to the open back door I received the bag and pole.

"Drop that on the bomb, boy,"

said George, which was done. George then doused the same with water.

On a concrete floor, the thing was soon out.

"Ladder," shouted Fireman Oakley.

This came through the door on his command. Long Melford crew were old peace-time hands and knew their jobs.

He then flung open the door to the hall and smashed the ladder through the trap door.

"Up you go boy," he said, giving me a torch.

"Shine it on the roof. Tell me how many holes. That's the amount of incendiaries."

"We got three," replied Messenger Porter.

"Leave the one to your left, forward, under control."

The noise below, of water, broken glass and the hiss of fire, confirmed this.
"Cut out the smouldering timber round the one behind, shout "Water on" and stand back."

I did so, but not before some of the water from below had got me as well.

"Fire to the right behind," I reported.

Firemen don't take kindly to fire at the rear.

"Come down," said George, "branch to the back and rear."

Descending to the hall, I found George standing by the door.

"As soon as you hear the water in there, kick the door in."

I followed his orders to the letter. Fireman Oakley knew his job and the outside crew soon had it well under control.

"Report to Webb," he said. "He's section leader. Tell him I'm making a last check, and stay out till I come out."

By this time, the four residents - three males, one female - all with overcoats on, were about to be moved to a safer area.

Mrs Younger made as if to re-enter the dwelling. She was promptly restrained by the local P.C., a man doing extra time past his pension, due to the war.

"Hold you hard, gel," he said, "you can go in a minute or two."

"I must, I must," replied the woman, "I want me teeth, I want me teeth."

"Teeth, Mrs," said the P.C., "these are bombs falling, not bloody sandwiches."

A fair crowd had now arrived, including two air raid wardens.

Dad had got a torch and was shining it on his own and a neighbour's roof. Too much of a temptation for the Wallies:

"Put that light out! You want to get us all blown up?" they shouted.

A hundred yards away, the factory roof was blazing like a beacon. Dad found someone to vent his anger on.

"I am looking for holes in the roof, to see if there are bombs in there," he replied, and added that if they knew their bloody jobs, it was what they got paid for.

Exit two wardens.

"This is out, boy, return to your crew," said the section leader.

Returning to the first fire, I followed the old drill of "round the bombs" - now considerably reduced.

There arrived yet a new person in the rank of a Fire Officer.

Fireman Parker, who had remained on fire number one, touched my shoulder:

"Officer, boy, give him your report, and don't forget to salute. He's now in charge."

Four head men on one job; I was doing well.

"Two incidents, both now under control. Senior crew returning to station."

Giving him a smart salute, he grew about a foot taller and replied by enquiring as to my name and the state of Fireman Sparkes' health.

"Wounded," I replied.

Sparkes then got his first aid, albeit somewhat overdue.

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