

# Events leading up to VE Day 8th May 1945

by Brian Vowles

## Germany

### 5th, 6th, and 7th APRIL 1945

My father's unit was the 224 Field Company R.E. and after being rescued from Dunkirk and landing in Normandy four years later, they had built bridges and cleared minefields all the way across France, Belgium & Holland. At the beginning of April after crossing the Rhine, it came under the command of the 11th Armoured Division as a CI.40 bridge over the River Weser at Stolzenau was needed and together with the 101st Field Company, the unit was given the job. Facing them were troops of the formidable 12th S.S. Panzer Division.

Despite the shelling by enemy guns and dive bombing by Stukas, the men moved down to the site on 5th April at 6.00pm. With only a 200 yard beachhead on the far side of the river the enemy overlooked the site and the engineers were constantly exposed to shelling, sniping, mortaring and machine gunning. In addition to this 30+ enemy planes flew overhead machine gunning and dropping anti-personnel bombs. In spite of this, miraculously, only one casualty was sustained. By 8.00am the next day most of the section had been completed but the men had to stop when a German counter attack threatened. The company returned to carry on the work at 2.30pm and had just got started when two waves of the new jet propelled aircraft swooped to the attack and dropped 500kg and 250kg bombs from low altitude. Several of the bombs bounced and landed right on top of the site causing a number of casualties and destroying a

considerable section of the bridge as well as five vehicles. Fortunately the men of the 224 had been able to dive under a warehouse full of timber and this undoubtedly saved their lives. Only one man was badly wounded but eight others had to be evacuated with shell shock. The other field company on the site had twelve killed and eighteen wounded.

### 13th April

A delegation from the German Medical Corps arrived under a white flag at the Cheshire Regiment H.Q. (attached to 11th Armoured Division) and told them of a concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, 10 miles north east of Engenhausen and warned the Division not to approach within 3 miles of the camp as a serious outbreak of typhus had reached epidemic proportions.

### 15th APRIL

As it drove northwards the British reconnaissance units of the 11th Armoured Division reached the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. That day the 224 Field Company moved to Eschede to fill in huge craters caused by



1000kg bombs and three bulldozers had to be employed to fill the holes with logs before tipping in tons of sand. But in the following days one of the unit was given the horrendous task of using another bulldozer to sweep hundreds of skeletal bodies into burial pits at Belsen.

The war was now in its final stages but in April 1945 the British received intelligence that their erstwhile allies, the Russians, intended to take Denmark to provide an ice-free naval base for their Fleet in defiance of the Yalta Agreement. It was obvious that a drive to the Baltic by 21st Army Group (Operation Eclipse) had to be mounted if Denmark was to be saved from the clutches of the rapidly advancing Red Army.

### 28th April

The order for the crossing of the Elbe came through, plans were made and equipment assembled.

### 29th April

The 224 Field Company R E., began the construction of a bridge over the River Elbe. About 400' of it had been completed when suddenly at 1.45 pm in the death throes of the Luftwaffe, a wave of enemy planes screamed into a low level strike on the home bank dropping about fifteen bombs including napalm which destroyed three of the houses there. A number of men were buried under the rubble and frantic efforts were made to dig them out. Tragically five men who had survived the drive all the way across Europe were killed that day with the end of the war already in sight.

### 1st May

The company crossed the bridge that they had just constructed and pushed on into Schleswig Holstein

arriving at the little town of Lüttau by 3pm. The distance was only 25 miles but the excessive heavy traffic caused considerable congestion.

### 3rd May

The unit moved onto Schwarzenbeck in Schleswig Holstein to block the Red Army's advance. By then, in a twist of fate, thousands of enemy soldiers made use of the bridge that the men had died for a few days previously, to surrender to them rather than to the Russians from whom they could expect no mercy.



### 4th May

On the following day, came the momentous news that they had been waiting for. It was a Friday night about 9 pm and they were relaxing and listening to music on the radio. Suddenly the broadcast was interrupted to make way for an unscheduled announcement which informed them that the fighting was to cease forthwith as, after five long years of suffering and turmoil, the German Forces in Northern Europe had surrendered to Field Marshal Montgomery on nearby Luneburg Heath. For a split second there was stunned silence - then all hell broke loose. They hugged each other and shook hands and opened the 'liberated' beer and wine that they had saved

for the occasion. The role of the 224 Field Company had now changed.



No longer were they erecting bridges and lifting mines as law and order had completely broken down and total chaos reigned. Security became the first priority.

### 5th May

The company arrived at Ahrensböök and, as the only British troops in the area, it was left to them to provide some vestige of basic social organisation and control. Patrols were sent out to the surrounding villages to order the local Burgermeisters to remove roadblocks and to collect in all arms, ammunition, cameras and binoculars that might be used in any uprising by Nazi fanatics (the official reason). Civilians often came to the unit with complaints about the behaviour of the newly liberated slave workers and the numerous P.O.W.s of different nationalities who were roaming the countryside pillaging and raping - but little

sympathy was forthcoming; following the discovery of the death camps the laconic answer usually given with a shrug was *“remember Belsen”*.

### 8th May

VE DAY was official.

The company was relieved of the “considerable worry” of their new role by a Commando Military Government Detachment and they were free to *“celebrate the official V.E. Day to the best of their ability”* as their war diary succinctly put it - although at first there was a feeling of total unreality and anti-climax.

*My father wrote home...“Now the end has come it is a case of after the Lord Mayor’s Show. Strangely we had our toughest time since we came over in the last couple of weeks before Jerry packed it in but we are forgetting that now, except for the lads we left behind”.*

### Meanwhile on the Home Front.

Back in England preparations were being made for a big celebration.

### 2nd May

At a special meeting of the Bristol licensing magistrates it was decided that on VE-Day all public-houses and licensed clubs would be allowed to stay open an extra hour - until 11 p.m. unless VE-Day fell on Sunday and the Chief Constable expressed the hope that the brewery companies concerned would do their best to see that there were reasonable supplies for the occasion. However, in spite of the extra hour available, there seemed to be little hope of additional supplies of beer being available for VE-Day. As an official of Georges

Brewery said, "Only normal supplies will be available, and when these are exhausted public-houses will perforce have to close until the next normal deliveries are available." A Bristol United Brewery Co. official added: *"There will be no extra beer for the simple fact that it is not there"*.

### 3rd May

It was announced that special arrangements had been made with the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company who would make every endeavour to maintain normal services and to get workers away from factories with a minimum of delay should the announcement of VE-Day come during the day. If notice was given and VE-Day known in advance, normal services would be operated.

### 4th May

In conformity with the decision of the Bristol Licensing Justices, the Licensing Justices of the surrounding districts of Long Ashton, Radstock, Temple Cloud, and Keynsham also granted special orders extending the permitted hours for the sale and consumption of intoxicating liquor during the evening of VE-Day. At home anticipation grew and it was hoped that the end might be nearer than expected, but the spotlight seemed to be focussing on Monday 7th or Tuesday 8th, while there were those who hoped it would be later if possible because an announcement then would in effect mean that the whole of the next week would be devoted by many to merry-making. Those who took this view would have preferred VE-Day to be on the Wednesday or Thursday.

Although the German Forces in Northern Europe had surrendered to Field Marshal Montgomery three days previously, the German defences were still resisting the

Russians and a separate announcement had to be delayed for diplomatic reasons for the sake of allied unity.

### 7th May

There was further speculation. The local paper reported...

**"VE-DAY MATTER OF HOURS SAYS S.H.A.E.F. AN OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT THAT THE WAR AGAINST GERMANY HAS ENDED IS EXPECTED "AT ANY TIME NOW," SAID A REUTER DISPATCH FROM SAN FRANCISCO LATE LAST NIGHT. The period put to the announcement at S.H.A.E.F. was "a matter of a day at most." Events have moved swiftly during the week-end. "Well-informed Norwegian circles expect Germany's capitulation to-day," says Reuters Stockholm correspondent. "The Germany Army commander has been ordered to disarm the 300 S.S. troops in the Segeberg Forest, north of Hamburg, who are retaining their arms in defiance of the unconditional surrender terms. The S.S. men are reported to have been swarming through the villages in the area around this forest telling the people to take down their white flags, and shooting villagers who protested. If the SS. refuses to comply, military action will be taken by the British Army."**

### 8th May

Finally the Western Daily Press was able to announce...

**"PEACE! IN WEST GUNS ARE SILENT. TO-DAY'S THE DAY. VE DAY BROADCASTS BY KING AND PREMIER TO-DAY. THE WAR IS OVER! Unconditional surrender has been received from Germany by Britain, America and Russia, but the official announcement from the lips of Mr Churchill will not come until this afternoon. To-day is VE-Day, and at three p.m. Mr Churchill will broadcast the news that the war in Europe is officially at an end. But for Germany the war**

ended yesterday, when at 2.41 a.m. (French time) General Jodl, German Army Chief of Staff, signed his country's unconditional surrender to Britain, America and Russia at the little red school house in Rheims which is General Eisenhower's headquarters. All day the world awaited news from the allies, crowds gathered in the streets, the flags of the free nations were unfurled, there was singing and dancing. Then at last came the official announcement that VE-Day is to-day, followed by an explanation that the delay was due to the anxiety of the Big Three to secure synchronised broadcasts from London, Washington and Moscow. At nine p.m. to-day the King will broadcast to the Empire and the world, and there are to be broadcasts by General Eisenhower and Field-Marshal Montgomery and Alexander. The Ministry of Information announced last night: "It is understood that, in accordance with arrangements between the three Great Powers, an official announcement will broadcast by the Prime Minister at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon, May 8. In view of this fact, to-morrow (Tuesday) will be treated as Victory in Europe Day, and will be regarded as a holiday. The day following, Wednesday, May 9, will also be a holiday. The King will broadcast to the peoples of the British Empire and Commonwealth to-morrow (Tuesday), at nine p.m."

In Keynsham and district, as the end of the war approached, people discussed how it was to be celebrated locally. In preparation for V.E.Day, flags and bunting were dug out from attics and cupboards to decorate the houses and shops with red, white and blue.

Plans for street parties in various parts of the town were discussed. Scarce rations were hoarded for the event and youngsters were out busy collecting old furniture and scrap timber in preparation for bonfires.

So when the great day arrived at last the celebrations began. In Albert Road these were held on forecourt of Mrs Vi Jarrett's grocery store (now a hairdresser's) Four trestle tables covered with white table cloths were set up in the centre of the road and children were treated to sandwiches, jelly and blancmange but sadly no ice cream was available for them at the time. After the meal the tables were cleared away and games were begun. Later in the evening a huge bonfire was lit in the middle of the road which inevitably scorched the road surface which had to be replaced at a later date.



**VE Day Street parties at Brick Town (Fairfield Terrace & Woodbine Cottages)**





Dancing in Pogam's Lane (next to the New Inn).

Another celebration was held in Temple Street. The children's party was organised by Mrs Hilda Green and as in Albert Road, trestle tables were set up down the centre of the road with cake, jelly and blancmange served to the children. After the treats the tables were cleared away and races and games began; 'pass the parcel', sack races and 3 legged races all entertained the children.

After the children were reluctantly packed off to bed the evening continued with wild enthusiasm as the normally staid and respectable townsfolk lost their inhibitions. An accordion player struck up outside the Ship and in the three other pubs in Temple Street a lot of ale was drunk. People were singing and dancing in the road, arm in arm doing the 'Hokey Cokey', the 'Palais Glide', the 'Lambeth Walk' and 'Knees up Mother Brown'.



**Above - A wheelbarrow race at the Charlton Park VE Day celebrations.**

**Below – The grownups join in the three-legged race.**



Wartime songs were sung and locally billeted service personnel joined in the revelry throwing their caps in the air. Another bonfire was lit and fireworks set off (although these were in fact tubular smoke canisters as no others were to be had). There were to be many sore heads and red faces the next day!



V.E.Day celebrations on St Anne's Avenue (Pittsville)

Other areas such as Pittsville, Brick Town and Park Road all had similar celebrations as mothers produced little feasts from their meagre saved rations.

A huge event took place in the old Drill Hall (now a gym) and children tasted ice cream for the very first time. At the end a fire was lit outside and a papier maché bomb shaped 'Doodle Bug', decorated with the face of Hitler, was ceremonially set on fire.



The End of the War Concert for children given at the old Drill Hall, Bath Hill.

**I SMELL PINEAPPLE**  
 Will you? Some thought it was the smell of victory...  
 NO. 15,290 ONE PENNY FOR KING AND EMPIRE TUESDAY, MAY 8, 1945

**Daily Mail** **VICTORY EDITION** **TUESDAY FIELD-DAY**

**3-POWER ANNOUNCEMENT TO-DAY; BUT BRITAIN KNEW LAST NIGHT**  
**VE-DAY—IT'S ALL OVER**

All quiet till 9 p.m.—then the London crowds went mad in the West End

*PM put off the big speech*

**UNTIL TO-DAY**  
 By WILSON BROADBENT, Diplomatic Correspondent  
**G**ERMANY surrendered unconditionally to the Allies yesterday. But there will be no official announcement of victory until 3 p.m. to-day—officially described as V-E-Day—when Mr. Churchill will give the news to the world.  
 He will follow this with an

**CZECHS TOLD TO 'SMASH GERMANS'**  
 Control-controlled radio early to-day appealed to Poles to smash German positions. Radio declared that "Protectorate" offer to resign and order cease fire, if Czechs would leave barricades.—Reuter.

**By Day**  
**By Night**

**But the war with Japan was not over. Even as Britain was celebrating VE-Day, the British Fleet was defying Japanese Kamikaze suicide bombers at the cost of two vessels slightly damaged, to maintain the relentless bombardment of the Rykuyu Islands, 600 miles south of Japan.**

**For many service men who thought they had already done their bit, their war was not yet over. My father's name appeared on a list of officers destined for the Far East but fortunately before he could be sent, he was saved when the Americans dropped their atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th and 9th August thus bringing about the Japanese surrender at long last.**

### **5th July**

**After the suffering of WW1, “the Home for Heroes” had brought bitterness and disillusionment and a feeling that all the deaths and hardships had not been worth it. Now a great determination spread amongst the people to create a better world and when a United Kingdom general election was held in July it resulted in one of the biggest electoral swings of the twentieth century. The Labour Party won decisively, winning 393 seats, while the second-placed Conservatives, led by the wartime hero Churchill, only secured 197. With an emphasis on social reform, the Labour Party's manifesto was strongly influenced by the Beveridge Report and included a commitment to full employment, affordable housing, and social security and health care for all - plus an implementation of the 1944 Education act. A year later, on 5th July 1948, 72 years ago the National Health Service (NHS) was born.**

15th August

VJ Day

**WORLD WAR TWO ENDED**  
*Cease Fire Ordered On All Fronts In  
The Far East*

**DRAMATIC MIDNIGHT  
BROADCAST**

**Unconditional Surrender  
Of Japan**

**Today - Tomorrow Holidays**

**WORLD WAR TWO HAS ENDED.**  
AS THE LAST STROKE OF BIG BEN DIED AWAY AT  
MIDNIGHT LAST NIGHT, MR ATTLEE STEPPED TO THE  
MICROPHONE AND GAVE THE DRAMATIC NEWS THAT  
JAPAN HAD SURRENDERED UNCONDITIONALLY.

*"The last of our enemies is laid low," he said,  
To-day and to-morrow are VJ Days.  
The Allied Armed Forces have been ordered to suspend offen-*



Emperor Hirohito's announcement of Japan's acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration was broadcast to the Japanese people over the radio and in Britain VJ Day was proclaimed.

The Western Daily Press announced on that day...

***"PEACE PARLIAMENT OPENS TO-DAY Crowds Will Throng Royal Route. ATTLEE'S dramatic midnight announcement that the war against Japan has ended, means that at 11 o'clock this morning the King, who will drive in State to Westminster, will open the peace Parliament for the first time for almost exactly six years. Peace has come back to the world. In those far-scattered places where soldiers of Britain, of America, and of Russia have been fighting, the guns at last have died away into enduring silence". Although this was a time for great rejoicing VJ Day was not celebrated with quite the same gusto as the previous***

event and certainly not with the same fervour as in the USA where the Pacific War had been a greater focus of attention.

The Bath Chronicle noted...

*“SOMETHING LACKING. Comparing the celebrations of the two Victory nights, there seems no doubt in our minds that VE was by far the better. Something seemed to be lacking in VJ. Maybe it was because it followed so (surprisingly) soon after VE; maybe it was because people had been out in the early hours of VJ day after the mid-night announcement and let off a lot of their steam then; maybe it was because little time was given to make adequate arrangements for bun-fights; maybe it was because VE lifted the air raid terror from us - there are lots of ‘maybes’. At any rate VJ night didn't provide the thrills of VE”.*

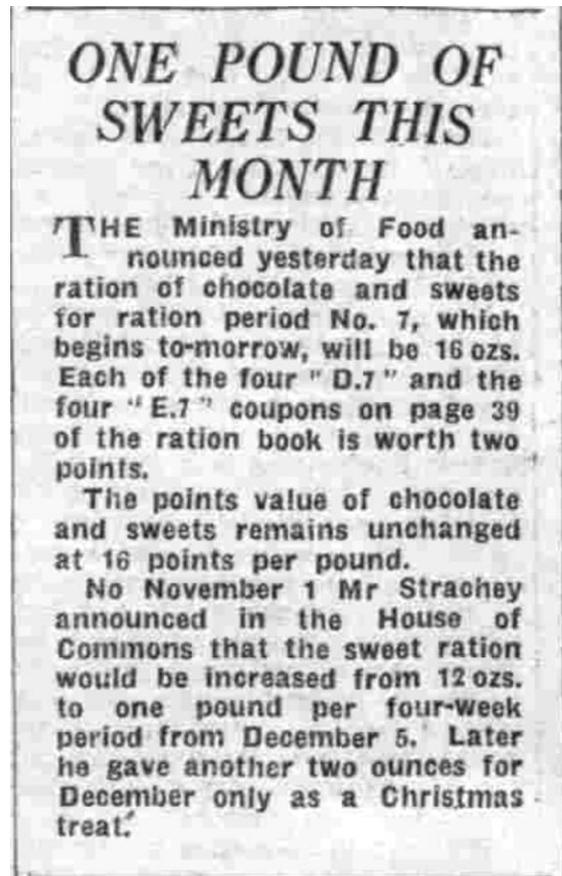
If there was a re-run of VE Day in Keynsham and district little evidence remains as to how it was spent.

### The Aftermath

Although the war was over, many years of austerity still lay ahead as the country had been exhausted by the conflict. Emergency houses - ‘Prefabs’ were introduced to accommodate those who had lost their homes as a result of bombing. The British zone of occupation in Germany had been the most devastated during the war and coal had to be supplied to its inhabitants to survive the harsh winters. In addition, following a mission to the U.S.A. by Sir Stafford Cripps, American banks would still not defer the repayment of wartime loans despite Britain’s leading the fight against Germany alone for the first two years of the war. All production had to be directed to exports rather

than domestic consumption and rationing became stricter than in wartime.

On 27 May 1945 bacon ration was cut from 4 to 3 ounces per week, cooking fat cut from 2 to 1 ounce per week and soap ration cut by an eighth - except for babies and young children (this led to protests from those living in hard water areas such as Keynsham). When continual rain ruined Britain's wheat crop in 1946, bread was added to the ration and the sweet ration was halved. The food rationing, initially brought in as a temporary measure in 1940 was to last in all for 14 years. Meat rationing continued for 10 years after D-Day until June 1954.



Western Daily Press 1st January 1949

Many children raised during the war years could not believe their luck when at last in February 1953 sweet rationing ended and they could spend their pocket money on chocolates and gobstoppers in Church's or Heseltine's shops on the High Street (to the detriment of their molars!)

Finally, on 4th July 1954 all other food rationing ended in Britain and the age of Macmillan's "*You've never had it so good*" had arrived.