

Mum Is In Charge

Born in India in 1929 into a military family of four children. His Father posted to Malta during 1932; as a consequence John had the privilege of experiencing childhood on such a wonderful Island. The family evacuated back to England in late 1937.

In 1938 his father was invalided from the Army. During resettlement the family had four moves within 12 months resulting in an adverse effect on his education. John however achieved a scholarship to Chipping Sodbury Grammar School in 1940.

After a Radio engineering apprenticeship, his career was in the Radio and Television Industry, with senior managerial appointments in Rank Organisation, Granada, PYE and Philips.

Following corporate retirement in 1989, he devoted his life to charitable fund raising projects. He formed two companies in organising celebrity/amateur golf events. First being 'Gemini Classics' in co-operation with a past business colleague Roger Dickinson and ex Ryder Cup player, Peter Dawson. Then a second company 'Celebrity Masters Tournaments' with entertainer, Jerry Stevens, serving as Joint Managing Directors.

John was on the first fund raising committee of the Prince's Trust in 1975

Appointed as President of the Radio and Television Industries Club in 1989 and is now honoured as a Companion.

He is also honoured as a Companion of the renowned entertainer's organisation, the "Grand Order of Water Rats".

He now lives the Cotswolds with his wife Diane

Over the past four years he has co-written a number of lyrics, with singer/composer David Capri.

He has two daughters, Donna and Kathryn.

John O'Neill

Mum Is In Charge

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I cannot make the disclaimer popular with writers of fiction who declare that the persons coming to life in their narratives are entirely imaginary and bear no intended resemblance to any person living or dead. Some of my characters were real, others were... not quite, and a few, mainly the unpleasant ones, are made up from whole cloth or patches from the same.

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Dedication

This story 'Mum is in Charge' is based on true events and is dedicated to my parents and siblings, but particularly Mum, who like the majority of mothers, was an inspiration to her children.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to the people who have assisted me with information or advice in the scribing of the manuscript through many years.

The family of Mum, Brothers Charles, George and Sister Eileen, being the topmost advisors in earlier years. Unfortunately all are now deceased and not able to enjoy the result of my final efforts.

My wife Diane has been very patient through many hours of my dedication in arriving at the final manuscript after numerous drafts, year in year out; therefore I say a big thank you to her.

Others, who have helped in some way or another during the past ten years include:

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Apologies for not including other people who have encouraged me to ensure I finished the manuscript and had time to see the story published.

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Prologue

In the kitchen making a pot of tea, my heart suddenly skipped a beat as I heard Mum going berserk. From upstairs she shouted, “Quick under the stairs.” Over the noise from outside I now heard Mum thumping down the stairs with my sister Eileen in hot pursuit. “Quick, quick! John, George, under the stairs, NOW!” Mum’s voice was quaking.

She came to the kitchen door, “Leave everything, and get under the stairs now,” she instructed with authority, frantically waving her arms as she rushed back. Bemused at what I thought was one of her excitable moments, I continued with my chores.

Then the air raid warning sirens began to sound and I thought, ‘Oh not another false alarm’, so I shouted back from the kitchen. “I will make the tea first.”

Mum burst in, trembling, “Come on, now! Now, now, now, under the stairs!”

My older brother George then emerged from the toilet, unconcerned he asked, “What’s all the fuss about?”

“Why not go the shelter?” I asked Mum.

“No time. Get under those stairs now. Do as you are bloody well told. NOW! NOW!”

Mum was frantic – and rightly so. The drone of the aircraft was intense, and suddenly explosions could be heard all around us, seemingly getting closer.

“Christ!” I shouted as I ran through the family room as worry turned into panic looking for my dog Rover and cat Fluffy. “Where are my pets?” I screamed.

“Come on, under the stairs, NOW. Leave Rover,” Mum shouted.

I was now panicking, trying frantically to find Fluffy and Rover. They were frightened in the corner, so I snatched the cat by the scruff of her neck and caught hold of Rover’s collar, dragging him to the stairs door.

In went the pets and as I tried to climb in myself, I saw the front door fly past me and smack into the back door, which was forced out onto the path. The headlong draught nearly pulled me back into the hall.

“God, help my dog,” I screamed.

Mum grabbed me by the back of my shirt collar and pulled me into the crowded area under the stairs, dragging the dog with me. George pulled the stairs door as tight as the rubble would allow. Eileen was screaming as crashes and bangs were heard all around us.

Suddenly, another huge explosion, followed by a series of loud bangs within the house, which caused violent vibrations in our confined area, as if the walls were going to collapse. Eileen was now screaming uncontrollably, and Mum turned and slapped her in the face. Eileen stopped immediately. Thank God Mum knew what to do, and as ever, she was in charge.

Chapter One

Victory Celebrations

Linda, an eighteen-year-old girl was a resident part-time helper at our Guesthouse named 'Delphine.' Unfortunately her amorous antics with some of our Lodgers met with strong disapproval from Mum. As a result in autumn 1944, the girl had to leave. Mum would not explain what had finally happened to end her service so suddenly. It was difficult for me to understand or judge her decision. Nevertheless I did chip in with my pennyworth and told her that I thought the action was too harsh and I did not agree. Her response shook me, "When you are old enough," then pointing a finger at the head, "you might understand." I was annoyed at her observation and it also hurt me. To avoid any confrontation I swiftly left the room thinking, "So at 15, nearly 16 I am still only a boy; am I? If only she knew!" What it meant I did not know and put it down to a teenage foible; but when are we teenagers ever right?

I called my dog Rover to come with me. As ever it is a comforting feeling to have my dog alongside wagging his tail, particularly when I am upset, or could it be a childish manner? I realised the minor altercation must have hurt Mum and that was the last thing I would want to have happened.

I explained to Rover, perhaps I should not have been too surprised at Mum's action, as I could remember a young man sneaking out of Linda's room late one night and he had his pyjamas on, well at least the trousers. I asked Rover, "What do you think of that?" He just rolled over, gazed at me and then put his paws over his ears. 'Dogs are so clever.' I thought.

While I hated myself for getting annoyed with Mum, I lived with it. Not having a Dad to turn to during the past three years caused me considerable and complex anxieties.

For my own personal reasons I never wanted to meet Linda again.

By chance however, I did see Linda just before Christmas when I was looking for affordable family presents in our local shopping parade. Fortunately, she did not notice me and I was very pleased, because without a doubt she was pregnant and I, being only 15, would be embarrassed in any discussion. Although having had a youths besotted period over her for some months, I had no intimate relations with the young woman, and I thought, 'thank goodness.' As usual I would tell my dog what I thought. If that was insufficient to clear my mind I could have a chat and seek guidance from our Old Lady Ghost.

At the Victory in Europe (VE) celebrations on May 8th 1945, I was to find out that Linda had an affair with a soldier from her hometown in the Midlands. On his questionable compassionate leave, they planned to get married, but suddenly his regiment, through a visit by the Military Police, recalled him to duty and they were not able to fulfil their marriage vows. Unfortunately, he lost his life in action and she had to resolve any problems on her own. It was a sad story which highlighted another of a war's unpleasant experiences.

Had I known the circumstances I might have hidden my pride and made a point of speaking when I had seen her shopping?

On reflection I realised that growing up was not easy.

Since the demise of Dad in 1941 I had lost a little faith in life generally, and that may have been due to lack of fatherly advice in a period when a young lad needed those special private discussions and support.

I consoled myself that the world would soon be a better place, as actions of the Allied Forces in Asia against the Japanese were favourable and we were on the brink of winning World War Two, in Asia as well as Europe.

On the Western Front, the Allies had advanced through France, Paris recaptured, Brussels had fallen, and the Rhine crossed with the swift occupation of many German cities. The British airborne divisions had suffered huge losses in a heroic battle in Holland, when they tried to capture a vital river bridge.

On the Eastern Front, the Russians had advanced much quicker than Allied forces and were the first to reach Berlin. At the end of April, an announcement of a historic meeting of Russian and American forces at the River Elbe proved exciting.

Fortunately, it was turning into a devastating defeat for Germany.

The discovery of Nazi concentration camps, where appalling stories of mass cruelty to human beings had been uncovered. In particular, the Jewish fraternity had suffered terribly.

Churchill finally announced in the spring of 1945 a broadcast, "The war with Germany is over." Churchill's most important message seemed less motivational to the people than many of his broadcasts over the previous six years of war.

The news received with less enthusiasm than I would have thought. Perhaps people were just tired after nearly six years of loss of lives, many injured, considerable fear, a lot of toil, painful rationing and now suspense on what the future might hold.

An abrupt attitudinal change took place, however, with Victory in Europe Day celebrations on 8th May, with the declaration as a national holiday. One good reason for me feeling happy about the acclaimed public holiday was that on that day we were supposed to be at school taking our French examination. Certainly the exams were rescheduled, so the only benefit was that we could give more time for swatting, although I did not feel confident of my success.

On the day, Mum who we always knew as 'Mum is in charge' since we occupied Delphine, looked drained of energy and did not want to join any partying, but said I should go out and enjoy myself. I noticed unusual glimpses of a saddened face, searching for energy and possibly wanting time to think.

The lodgers were suddenly up and away to their homes, and the fact that one of them had not paid his bill for four nights' accommodation did not seem to worry Mum.

It was as if an old era had ended so quickly and a new one with an unknown future faced us.

Brother George and I were excited, although he had his conscription papers for the Army, when he reached 18 which was in mid May.

There were opportunities to engage with several celebratory events, I decided to party with him outside a public house in Filton, which was opposite the main local police station. My age would prevent me from entry into the Pub, but I knew George would look after my needs. Friend Hugh mentioned I could join him in a church hall, on the opposite corner to the Pub, which could be an alternative and certainly different. Washed and suitably splashed with my wartime home brew rose water, I went to say goodbye to Mum having decided to join George who had departed earlier. My eldest brother Charles had already left to be with girlfriend Mary and her family.

I opened the kitchen door to say goodbye, thinking Mum would be busy in own Bastille, the kitchen. However, I was surprised that she was sobbing, standing near the wooden mangle. Even with her emotional strength, she could not stop when she saw me. I was concerned because my presence seemed to make her even worse.

I put my arms around her, with her head against my chest and gave a big cuddle with a kiss on the head. As I had a negative response, I thought I would try something else to console her despite a battle now raging inside me. The inevitable happened. I started sniffing. The trouble was that I did not know why, although I could not face seeing her in such a state, as she was my Mum, always in charge.

I made up my mind to stay home and put that to her, at which point she seemed unstable, shouting at me, as if she did not know me. That shook me as I tried desperately to give her more comfort, but it did not work as she started screaming and knocking cups and saucers and other crockery off the kitchen table.

Then a barrage of abuse followed. She blamed the Doctors for taking her husband Jack away from her. Puffing her cigarette and in a temper she turned and slammed the outside door, which closed with an almighty bang. Rover retreated under the family dining table, while my cat Fluffy remained unruffled by the noise.

I was experiencing a crazy scene, the like of which I had never seen before and hoped I would never see again. I was scared.

“Can I get you anything, Mum?”

“Get me anything?” she shouted, “You’re too young to understand.”

I was now perplexed as well as worried. There would be no way I could get a Doctor to call and see her on such a day as this declared holiday. Even if I could, I knew she would resent it, as she hated having to see a Doctor.

I said nothing but made a cup of tea. I took another woodbine from her packet and lit it. That was the first time I had ever put a cigarette to my mouth, and as I coughed I hoped it would be the last! It was horrible.

I offered the cigarette to Mum, who reluctantly took it. Then with unwilling shaking hands, she grappled with the tea. Putting my hand on her shoulder, I said, “You have always told me that if I had any worries I should come to you and chat about them.”

She looked at me with a piercing glare, her watery eyes sparkling like the sun reflects off a rippled pond. Spluttering, she made a profound statement, which hurt me, “Yes. However, grown-ups have experience and can advise young people. You are too young to understand about adult matters.”

“Why don’t you try me out? I must be intelligent, because you coaxed to the grammar school.” That being a bit tongue in cheek comment, I wish I had not made it.

After some deliberation, she was prepared to talk and then came the shock, a big shock. She mumbled and it was difficult to understand, so I had to listen more carefully.

“I learned this morning that we have had notice to quit our house shortly.” she murmured.

What a surprise! We had all worked hard over the five years to make a success of our bread winning Guesthouse. I now realised I was probably out of my depth. However, I remained quiet, giving her more chance to grasp her thoughts and I hope speak.

It worked; she spoke, “I do not know how we will cope. I will have to go out to some kind of work so as to pay the rent and buy food for my family.”

I replied, "I will be out to work shortly and pay my contribution towards the upkeep. Eileen would return from the WRENS soon and she will be earning. Charles will be easily able to make his contribution, until or if he gets married. George will be in the Army and would not be able to contribute." Catching my breath, "We will manage. What is more it's about time you took it a little easier after being always in charge for such a long time."

"It will not be enough to see us through the next year," she replied in a trembling voice. "I will have failed you children as I have not been able to save anything to cope with this unexpected situation."

Then the tears came again. "If only my Jack was with me, I would be alright."

"OK Mum, Dad is not here. We all miss him, but we just have to get on with our lives the best we can. That is what you have taught us."

For sure, the music and singing could now be easily heard from our house, which might have given Mum a bit of a lift as she liked partying. Mum said she was not going out, so we settled down and I insisted working out how much money Mum needed to see us through the first year, if we had to move. Apparently, the new owners had found us a semi-detached house, still in Filton, but nearer to Bristol, to move into and that was just around the corner from a good school friend Bryan. Furthermore, it was close to a church youth club, which I had recently joined. Charles was not happy at me joining a church club that was not Catholic, but Mum had soon smoothed over that crack in our relationship. It proved Mum was in charge, yet again.

We went through the possible costs, with the annual rent and food being the large percentage; we would need around £140, in the first year. We agreed that there was no way we could cope without a starting fund, and no state benefits with means testing. If there was any system for securing help, she would be too proud and never consider applying for help. We had no family treasures of any value. As a 'nomadic' family in the British

Army for so many years, items were either lost or sold for a pittance in our many moves.

Despite my insistence that all would be OK, Mum was still deeply troubled. I was reluctant, but I pulled my ace from the pack. "Mum, we do not have to worry as I have nearly £90 in savings."

That riveted her eyes on me. "Do not be daft, how could you have that kind of money?"

I left the room and came back with a couple of savings books. I smiled as I told her, "Now you know that I've always been popping down to the post office. Well, I have spent very little surplus money from my stamp approvals commission over the past four years. Most commission has gone immediately into savings. Also most of my other activities including the sale of rose water, the duplicate joke and information sheets, lodgers shoe cleaning," catching my breath with tinges of excitement coupled with nervousness I was in a spirited mood and continued, "then the sale of flower and vegetable plants, the newsboy earnings and Christmas post work which gave me extra income to save. Furthermore the many tips from lodgers, and of course love letter errands for Charles to his girlfriend Mary."

"How could you save so much? Let me see your savings book." She demanded with an out stretched arm. Although she was amazed that I had accumulated so much through the many small deposits over the period, she insisted, "That's yours!"

"What's mine is yours, as you and Dad used to say to each other, so the same applies with this money. What is mine is yours. But do not ever tell Charles or George!" A secrecy request, I would probably regret.

She beamed. "That's up to me. But I won't Johnny."

I had another surprise for her, as I handed her the other book. She looked at it, blurting out, "This is my name."

"Yes, you opened it with a deposit of twenty eight pounds after Dad died and thereafter too busy to remember you had it. That's yours," I advised. "All sixty one pounds, three shillings and sixpence."

“But I haven’t saved anything. It cannot be mine. I have never put anything into the savings,” she went ranting on a little confused, which I thought was understandable.

“No, you haven’t saved, as you would always give your money away in one way or another and not keeping anything for yourself.” I choked a little before telling her, “If ever you left any small change around, like after buying those cigs for example, I know it would just disappear, so I made it vanish quicker and deposited into your own account which you had forgotten all about.” She was flabbergasted, but joy returned to her eyes as a difficult situation seemed to become a little less foggy to her. I really did not think she was worrying about money, but these stunning revelations gave her something else to think about and maybe she would worry for the real reason: just sadness and the loneliness without Dad.

No matter how hard I tried she would not come with me to the celebrations, but as we were parting she held my hand, squeezed it, and said with a smile, “you have now grown up,” then with a laugh, “so you go to enjoy yourself as a youngster should.”

It certainly made me feel better, particularly, “you have now grown up.” I did not feel any different, but I felt a degree of achievement in hearing that statement from Mum, as I think it was the first time she had ever spoke of me as having grown up.

I was still very worried about leaving Mum on her own when she should have been with us, savouring the party. She deserved to celebrate, particularly as she had contributed to the war effort in her own way, by taking in lodgers from the factory, visiting executives, servicemen and sometimes displaced persons, plus the weird wealthy old gent who was retired and was a long term resident.

I felt pleased having consoled Mum and then to see her waving with a big smile as I opened the front gate. She put her hand to her ear, showing that she could hear the revelry. My dog Rover appeared content to stay with Mum. I blew kisses to them both.

I walked slowly down the drive, turning to shout, “Take care of one another,” Then added to see if Mum would smile

knowing she did not acknowledge or believe in my Ghost, “Remember you have the Old Lady to have a chat with if you are lonely.” Smiling and waving a hand she responded, “On your way you young teaser.”

Partying at the Anchor pub I had a lot of fun, enjoying the music and the celebrations and meeting two girls Linda and Laura, which turned out to be an unusual turn of events. I decided however to return home early so I could have some time with Mum and see whether she had overcome her unexpected mood.

As I walked along the road, people were laughing, dancing, having fun and we were all entitled to enjoy this important day.

When I reached Delphine, I thought that our house had a different aura and now seemed bleak. The mind was quickly asking, “Why?” No response was forthcoming. As I opened the gate, I thought I saw a flash coming from the house and wondered what it was. I shook my head, thinking it must be some kind of eye problem, so blinked. However, there it was again. I held onto the gate because I thought there might be something amiss, even though I had not had a drop of alcohol.

I closed the wide five bar wooden gate and looked up at the house. I shook my head very hard because there, up in the top left hand window, was Delphine’s Old Lady Ghost, swinging and swaying her body as if dancing and laughing, offering the happy gesture of the victory sign to me. At least I hoped that was the gesture. “Good grief I’m going bonkers!” I said to myself recalling a certain fracas and blurted out, “Perhaps that pavement did more damage to my head than I thought. Damn Sailor.”

I held my head and looked up again and I could see Mum, as the front door was wide open. My dog Rover sat on the step barking as if trying to get attention.

I was scared as I rushed to the front door. Mum was coming down the stairs very slowly tread by tread on her bottom and clinging onto the banister rail. She looked very unsteady and miserable. It felt like a nightmare. I looked with concern at Mum. I wondered if she had contacted the Old Lady for the first time and it had upset her. I had never seen her like that before and could not understand it.

She tried a faint smile and spoke incoherently, “Are you alright Johnny?”

It should have been me asking that question, but then she may have seen my black eyes and scraped nose prompting her to question me. The injury being a result of a fracas with a sailor who had married the Land Army girl I had met working on a farm through the school harvest camp. Laura and I were just chatting, when he came back with drinks and he obviously became very jealous and lost his temper, punching me to the ground. What a celebration.

“Yes Mum, I will tell you about it in a minute. I will make us a cup of tea first.”

“Not for me,” she murmured.

I knew then there must have been something radically wrong for Mum refusing a cup of tea. It gave me the tummy wobbles. I thought I should be positive and insist that she had one, so I made a cup of tea, sat her down at the family table, and move alongside her, she lit another cigarette and kept quiet so giving her time to settle.

Trying gently to engage in a conversation without success, I soon realised something was radically wrong. I thought, ‘Oh God, I wish brothers George or Charles were with me.’ Quickly I came to a decision that our family Doctor must see her. Not in a fit state to visit the surgery, he would have to come to Delphine. Having rung him and no reply, I decided without hesitation to go to the Surgery. I collected my bike from the stable and rode like a champion racer the half mile to the Surgery. With luck on my side, the Doctor was not celebrating but working in the garden and when I explained her symptoms, he downed his tools, smiled and said, “Race you back.” He did not beat me in his small Austin car!

The Doctor examined her and concluded that she might have suffered a mild heart attack and needed rest. No need for the hospital, but gave her some tablets and said he would call in again after seeing any patients in the evening Surgery. He always had a warm way whenever anyone in the family was ill and his parting words were so appropriate, “Be good Minnie and you will

soon be back in charge, but meantime do as the boys tell you.” They both smiled as I thought, ‘Fat chance of that.’

Mum was sensible and went to lie on the bed, in our vacant downstairs bedroom. Charles and George were not late coming home and I had to explain all that happened. We concluded it must have been the worry of the notice to move out of Delphine, coupled with the long, weary five years of seemingly non-stop work which must have taken its toll. As in any good family, we all pulled our weight in one way or another in the following few weeks.

The penalty for me was that any idea I had staying on in the sixth form and then hoping for university, training to be a Doctor, I would probably abandon that wish. I would have to get a job as soon as my Oxford School Certificate exams finished in July.

Within six weeks, we moved from Delphine, and I spent my birthday in June packing the tea chests, preparing for the move. George was extremely helpful before he joined the army and Charles became the main support for Mum. We hoped that our Sister Eileen could have compassionate leave from Wrens service, but we worked through the move without her presence.

Mum had moved so many times in her life that it was clear she knew just what to do and also proving she was in charge. However, this time was the first without dear Dad and it cut through her concentration as if she had no happy path to tread in the future.

The preparation for the move was during one of the most interesting periods revolving around of the war years. I should have kept my wartime scrapbook up to date, but with the need to revise for matriculation exams, I had no time maintaining the documents. The war in Europe was over, but in Asia and the Pacific, the advances were making demands on the fighting machines of America, Australasia, Britain and the other allies. It all seemed so far away.

Then, one day in early August, following a dramatic news announcement changed the face of war forever. The Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Japan, with devastating results. However, Japan would not surrender, that is until a second

atomic bomb dropped on another Japanese city. The estimated number of people killed was tens of thousands. All of us in the family thought it was a terrible tragedy, despite Japan being the enemy and themselves causing a shocking number of deaths.

VJ day in late August was decreed a public holiday, although the final surrender of Japan was not official until the 2nd September. Once again, celebrations were the order of the day and although I did not want to go to a party at the Bulldog Public House, close to our new home, Mum convinced me to pay a visit. I finally made the effort, but felt no enthusiasm for the community singing and general revelry.

After a short while, I drifted away from the crowd and sat on a wall across the road, just watching the celebrations.

Our new found freedom opened a dialogue in my mind amongst the past, present and future. I began reminiscing on the many interesting family and personal happenings in my life.

Probably the most significant thread in weaving my thoughts together was 'Mum is in Charge'. Her love, her simplistic approach to solving problems, her method of showing us the rights and wrongs of our ways in life so preparing us for adulthood in difficult circumstances was wonderful and accomplished without a father since 1941.

As I ruminated on my life's experience I knew tomorrow would be a new world and that I would have to mould my own future. Sitting by myself for some hours I spent the time reflecting on my life as far back as I could remember, but realising it was when Dad was invalided from the Army and then the war years that had the greatest impression upon me.

Chapter Two

Settling Back In England

I was only ten when we moved for the fourth time in under two years, since arriving back in England from Malta during 1937, following Dad's stand down from a long Army career.

'Yes, at long last we were going to settle down in one house,' Mum and Dad told us.

Should I believe it? YES. However, did I really believe it? NO. Unlike my siblings, I needed more assurances, despite a positive belief expressed by Mum and Dad.

Too young to understand all that was going on around me, despite the comforting chats with Mum, I took my own counsel from talking to our dog Judy. Such a relationship with a dog may be stupid, as they cannot talk, but we usually seemed to be managing with mutual trust on the same beautiful rainbow, with a shared unknown golden pot at the end. It was our special happy and private world.

On the first Sunday of September 1939, my 12-year-old brother George and I were taking our dog Judy for a walk in fields adjacent to our new rented house. My elder sibling Charles, aged 20 had the least amount of time, out of all the family to give attention to a dogs need. I did tease him about his lesser involvement, suggesting he was probably more attracted to girls than pets. As ever, he was thoughtful and rode above my young testing babble.

As George opened the gate to the field, Judy was eager to run. Who would blame her for she was an active 12-month-old girl, although I sensed she got tired more quickly than I had expected. We did not allow her off the lead until a reasonable distance after closing the gate. It was soon an enjoyable ball playtime. She loved it, coming back to us and looking very happy, but being a Schnauzer she had no tail to show the usual

doggy happiness. We were all the more pleased to do as she asked because it also proved fun for us.

In the field, there was another dog much bigger than Judy and playing with his owner, so we were careful to skirt that area to avoid any possible aggravation. There were two horses by the pond, seemingly having a drink. The murky still like water of the pond was at the lowest point of the field near the road and on the other side a steep climb towards my new school. Then across by the hedge to our right were a few cows, from which I made sure of keeping my distance as there might be a Bull mingling. George was unperturbed, but I could not hide my fear of the sizeable animals.

“No need to worry, they are docile,” he told me.

I was thoughtful, but I had to respond, “They may usually be docile animals, but if aggravated by a dog can turn and as a herd be frightened and give chase to a dog. Then they might then have us in their so called docile sights.” Catching my breath, I added “I could not run as fast as they can!”

“Don’t be daft; they are just peacefully chewing the cud.”

“That is what Charles told me about that super looking horse when we were having a wonderful game on a common, back in Hampshire. You must remember what happened when it was alarmed by some noise. He chased us. We ran away and I fell over breaking a bottle I was carrying, and the glass cut my hand.” I pointed to the scar on my thumb. “If Charles had not been so brave, picking up the picnic ground sheet and waving it in front of the horse’s face, I could have been trampled to death.” I asserted.

George responded in an agreeable voice, “Right. Let us go away from the ‘large animals’ and climb to the top of the field.” He looked at me with a smirk across his face which probably meant, ‘stupid little boy.’

When we reached the top, we sat for a while to give Judy a rest, as she was panting heavily. I shared my worry to George about the panting, as I needed assurance that she was okay. He said “It is normal for dogs to pant,” pausing as he looked at Judy, “but if you are worried we should talk to Mum and see if she

thought we should take her to the Vet on the Peoples Dispensary for Sick Animals mobile surgery.” I nodded in approval.

It gave us a chance to have a brotherly talk without any interruption. Our chat for some five minutes was mostly about our new surroundings and we both hoped we now had a permanent home base at last, having moved from India to England onto Malta and recently back to England. During those years, I had seven different schools and the changes had proved difficult for me to handle.

George suddenly jumped and pointed down towards the pond asking, “Wonder what is going on down there?” Catching his breath he went on, “Look John. There are a few people rushing around and seemingly in a panic.”

We could hear shouts and screams, coming from people in the pond area.

“Perhaps someone has fallen in.” I suggested.

We focused on the pond area for a few moments, and then I stood up alongside George as a strange feeling came over me and I turned to him, “I think one of those horses is in trouble. Look, near the centre of the pond. We ought to go down and see what is happening, “Sure thing boy, let’s make a move”

We picked up the tennis ball, and then rushed off at a sharp pace which Judy loved running ahead us. Before we reached the pond, I called her to heel because there was obvious trouble and, as I was not sure why the horse was in such difficulty. Judy was an inquisitive dog and sometimes feisty, so I put her lead on for her own safety and my peace of mind.

“You stay here John and I will find out what is happening.” George instructed.

He ran to the other side of the pond where a few people had gathered. I could see a horse having difficulty near the middle. The still but dirty water was half way up his legs and was only able to move his upper body, and he did move his wet tail. Even those movements seemed an effort for the animal. I was feeling dreadful and wanted to go to see if I could help, but realised George would be able to help more than I could. Furthermore I did not want to stress Judy.

Thoughts were rushing through my head when I heard the emergency sound of what I thought was an emergency vehicle in the distance and getting louder.

“Hey George” I shouted, as loud as I could and to aid the intensity I cupped my hands to the mouth, “I think I can see an old rescue vehicle coming down the hill on Station Road.”

He obviously could not hear me. I stroked Judy to calm her, as she was beginning to be restless and pull on the lead, then anxiously barking at all the action.

The firemen arrived and were quick to act and as a team, with two on an extended ladder and two in the water, they were carefully manoeuvring two planks towards the horse. The ‘Chief’ shouted instructions and from his vantage point on the tree determining how it would be possible to secure two planks under the horse. As they were testing the area near the horse it became clear to them that it was sinking into the mud from its knees; while there was a lot of water above.

George advised me, “Although it would not be easy they should be able to get the planks under the belly and secure either side with rope and if they could they should be able to winch the horse carefully up out of the mud.”

I looked at him in awe of his explanation, but I was concerned about the state of the horse. I asked, “Will he be too stressed to cope?” Judy was then barking towards the field gate area and I looked around to see a man running towards us. He had a small case which must have slowed his speed, but when he got nearer I realised it was more his age that reduced his speed. “He even looks older than Dad!” I quipped and as usual had a response, “that would be difficult, boy”

He spoke to the Chief, who then shouted out to his men, “This man is a Vet, give him some space to consider the condition of the horse.”

Time was running out as the horse was sinking slowly further into the mud.

The Vet quickly decided it would take too long for him to try to reach the horse and give an injection.

The firemen therefore continued on their rescue plan and they did just what George said. He looked down at me, nudged me, smirked and said, "Told you boy. Didn't I?"

"Yes," I reluctantly answered, but was more thoughtful about the horse than his proven judgement.

A few more people had come to see what was happening, not realising it was an emergency to rescue a horse.

The winching started and it was a slow action, testing the effect on the horse and on the Vets advice, they worked more slowly. We could begin to see more of the horse's legs. After only a few minutes, the horse moved freely and lifted out of the mud and we saw its own instinctive movement helping the pull of their mechanical efforts. There was instant applause from the spectators, with one man throwing his cap in the air, another jubilant. Huge smiles replaced the anxious blank stares of the moments beforehand.

With the rope ties released, the horse struggled onto the bank, but collapsed. There were anxious gasps from the people, including myself, although George stayed calm. The other horse, held by a man who had taken off his belt from his oversized trousers and tied it around the horse's neck, went over to the rescued horse and placed his nose on the neck. I thought, "What a lovely welcome back from a frightening experience." It confirmed my view that animals have caring feelings, like we humans.

The Vet used some spirit to clear and sterilise an area on the horse and gave an injection. George said, "I presume it is to calm him." I gave a deep sigh and replied, "I could do with some of that!" We looked at one another and laughed.

The main rescue over and within a quarter of an hour people moved away and we decided to go home once we were assured that the horse would be all right. For us it was to have been a relaxing walk, but little did we realise it would be such an adventurous morning.

We rushed home, both eager to tell the family of what we had seen. It had been planned to spend a quiet, restful Sabbath day together once Dad, Charles and Sister Eileen had returned from early morning service at the Catholic Church, St Teresa, on

Gloucester Road North, towards Bristol. After I had cleaned Judy's feet and my shoes, I joined George, "have you told them?" I asked. "Better wait John, they are a bit solemn after church. Perhaps you can tell Mum first."

I went to the kitchen and although Mum was busy, she was interested and showed an excitement about the experience we had just witnessed, which I told her in quick time. She looked down at me where I sat on a kitchen stool, "That is wonderful. I hope you have adventures and more experiences in life as you grow up." I was just happy at her showing interest. I jumped off the stool put my arms around her neck, pulling her towards me and kissed her on the cheek, "Thanks Mum you are a real friend." She smiled affectionately at me, and then continued her chores.

Judy had been sitting on the floor all the time as I was relating the story and latterly just looking at Mum. It was if she was recalling it herself and ensuring Mum was paying attention. I went into the garden again with Judy and just thought about our Mum.

Mum, always active, ensuring that everything in and around the house was clean and tidy.

She was small in stature but generous in her nature. She was frequently laughing, more often about her own thoughts, than the current happenings around her. However, when she listened to the radio comedy programmes, they often resulted in belly laughs, with happy tears flowing down her cheek.

The quiet surrender into her own world, often confirmed to me that everybody must have their periods of daydreaming with their own memories in life. Last week when Mum and I talked about our dreams and the way most people approached them she told me, "Everyone harbours secrets, some big, some small." That profound statement made me think intensely as I scanned my memory bank. Yes, I could think of a few secrets, but I did share them – with my dog.

Returning to the dream subject, it always seemed better to me to have the day dreams which are under our own control than have disorderly night dreams and certainly better than nightmares, which I frequently suffered.

The talk with Mum centred my mind on her characteristics. Her hair had a remarkable sheen as if she washed it every day, which was not the case, as it was just a wonderful natural texture. Her beautiful brown eyes usually sparkled with happiness. Clothes fashion was not her forte around the house, usually wearing simple frocks mostly with a flower pattern. However, her inevitable long working apron tied around the back covered up the splendour of her colourful attire.

When she went out of the house boundary, for whatever reason, it was different. I could only bring to mind a description of a lady being 'all dolled up'. A hat for her was then mandatory and often it was a bright colour.

Her complexion was admired by most and the need for any make up was unnecessary, but she did allow herself to indulge in a light lipstick.

A most compelling characteristic was her love for us four children and Dad. She was all that any child could ever wish to have as a Mother. "Thank you God," I often said to myself.

A typical happy family day looked promising – until Dad announced that, everybody had to be available to listen to the radio at eleven o'clock. Expected from the Government was a very important announcement. Suspense descended on the family during the following hour.

Dad told us that many British families would be listening to an expected epic radio broadcast from Downing Street on this morning of Sunday, 3rd September 1939. Some minutes before eleven, our family came together. It all seemed full of mystery and certainly suspense. As Big Ben struck 11 o'clock, our ears were riveted to our second hand PYE battery radio which the family had recently purchased at a jumble sale for one pound. Prime Minister Chamberlain's speech gave a review of recent happenings in Europe, and in conclusion announced that, "Britain is at War with Germany."

Dad was acutely aware of the implications with declaration of war. Silence descended around the radio as each of the family members digested the news, mulling over their own thoughts about the serious announcement.

Mum broke the silence, "First things first. I must attend to lunch." Looking around at blank expressed faces, she added. "We should enjoy our lunch, clear up, and then sit down and we can put our questions to you, Jack."

Dad offered a simple acknowledgement, "You're right Mother."

I could not interpret the implications of the announcement, but was acutely aware of the serious look on the faces of Dad, Mum, and my older siblings Charles, Eileen and George. Quietly I asked Charles, "What effect would the announcements have on families?" He put his arm around my shoulder and thoughtfully replied, "It would depend on individual family circumstances. It is in such difficult times when attitudes, close relationship ties, health conditions, national pride, government policies, and many other subsequent actions which would determine the destiny of each family." I looked at him in wonderment of the words in his explanation and in simple summing up, I thought, 'Blimey!'

I went to my bedroom, which I shared with Charles and George, to read my weekly comic. Judy followed me. I sat on the floor leaning against a wardrobe with Judy lying alongside. The announcement of War was playing on my mind and could not concentrate on the Beano comic. The brain was puzzled as I tried to interpret Charles profound words into something I could understand. Our family probably had a better understanding of the new crisis in what a war with Germany might entail, compared to most family units. The reason I had such a thought was because as a family wrapped in military disciplines, our lives had been shaped, through month-by-month uncertainties, with sudden suspense in different and sometimes difficult situations.

Dad had spent all his adult life under the colours of the Royal Horse Artillery (RHA), and had served throughout the First World War. On leave in December 1914, he married a beautiful, petite, demure, dark-haired eighteen-year-old girl named Minnie, from the Bromsgrove area in the Midlands. Like many other young men, he quickly returned to his army duties in France, with no possibility of a honeymoon with his newly-wed wife.

After spending twelve months in France at the beginning of the Great War, Dads' regiment departed to the Greek port of Salonika as part of the substantial Anglo-French contingent, to ensure control in the Balkans. During a skirmish, shrapnel embedded in his foot and ankle, which then prevented him from sailing in a small specialised reinforcement brigade to the disastrous campaign in the Dardanelles. He was later to spend the last year of the war back in France, during the notorious battles and stalemate on the Western Front. His brother Charles had been killed in action.

Shortly after the 1918 armistice, Dad returned home to Mum. Their first child Charles and second Reginald, were born in England. Dad was then drafted to India, soon to be followed by Mum with her babies. It was in India that a further three children, one girl and two boys, were born into the family. During the 1920s, all five children contracted dysentery, and one son, Reggie, sadly lost his life to the dreaded illness.

I was unsettled, could not concentrate, and so I went downstairs quickly followed by Judy to the front room, where Dad was reading.

I sat on the floor; Judy rolled over on her back. I was tickling her tummy, but was staring at Dad with young admiration. However, I began to wonder if I really knew him, as we had not spent sufficient time together due to his Army duties.

I thought Dad's long army service and the family travelling upheavals added to his direct action in several theatres of war was the possible reason that Dad's face was not a picture of good health. George tried to explain to me that it was more probable that his older look was due to whisky that had irritated his stomach. His home medicine was a raw egg in a glass of milk. Dad did however make great efforts to ensure his personal demeanour was a high priority, in his dress, mannerisms and in conversation which gave him a respected and presentable personality.

It flashed through my mind, "I wonder if he takes his tie off when he goes to bed," because his trademark was always to wear a tie.

He was not tall, but certainly still had a good physique and the fact that he was bald, conveyed an age more than the reality. He had been bald since he was young and I learned from family that when he got married at 28, he had little hair. Sparkling blue eyes could either enchant or cut right through us. It was through his eyes we could mostly judge his temperament but it was the intensity in his voice when he was upset, that could frighten me. Mum could control his stern voice mood quickly by telling him, "Stop acting Jack as if you are still a Sergeant Major on the parade ground."

If Mum were not around, I would for fun stand to attention, salute with a big smile and say, "Yes Sir." Sometimes it worked, and if it did not I scampered away and hid.

He sure was a tough disciplinarian and the odd belt was administered to us boys if warranted, but never to my sister leaving any correction of her to Mum. Whatever the circumstances, I had an admiration for Dad, whether I was in favour of punishment or not.

The most important characteristic I often noticed was that he had a great respect for Mum, frequently giving her a cuddle and many kisses on the cheek and with heads close together with soft words of, "I love you Minnie." Mum would usually respond, "Don't be daft Jack. Can't you see I'm busy?"

The family moved to Malta from India via a short stay in England in the early 1930s. We had so much happiness as a family on that lovely Island and although very young, I could recall so many events during our term of residence. I was sure that they would live with me forever.

During the mid-1930s the Mediterranean became a political hot spot, with the threat of fascist Italy aligning itself with the rising powers in Germany under the Hitler regime. We could all sense the tension was becoming critical and during mid-1937, we were on the move yet again, this time back to England.

The family events and the European scene were all so puzzling for me and I wanted to clear my head so I took the plunge and asked, "Can I take Judy for another walk, Dad?"

"Of course you can son," said Dad, looking at me with a hint of a smile, "providing you clean your boots by the back door

before using them, as I noticed they were dirty. You know clean shoes help to make a clean soul.” Clean footwear was just another in several strict disciplines that Dad insisted with all us boys.

“Oh Dad,” I sighed, and before I could say more I was immediately pulled up by him. “Oh Dad, nothing! No clean shoes no go out. Savvy, John?”

The markers were quickly in place. I knew I had to obey or accept the consequences. With my boots cleaned, I was ready and excited.

“Judy, Judy, walkies, walkies?” I voiced as melodiously as I could for a tone-deaf young boy. Up jumped Judy from her restful pose, game for another walk. Lead and collar linked, I rushed out of the door shouting, “see you soon everyone!”

Charles responded from the front room where he was studying his textbooks on aerodynamics, which he had taken out from the library. He was determined to prove himself in his training at the Bristol Aeroplane Company, Filton.

As I entered the field, I noticed that the rescue engine had gone. The horses were on leads tethered to a farm cart. Shivers went up my spine as I thought of just an hour earlier, but the horse did not now seem distressed. There was a temporary notice displayed by the pond; it read KEEP OUT, DANGEROUS.

As I was playing games with Judy, I had thoughts of my big brother Charles.

He was ten years my elder and at 20 was six-foot tall, with a slim body and dark wavy hair. He had always been lucky to have a good complexion, suffering little from the usual youth skin problems apart from on his nose. I always thought that he had blue/grey eyes, but my other siblings used to tease me because of my colour blindness and say they were brown, like Mums.

Whatever he was doing, his clothes were especially selected for the occasion, and hence he always looked elegant. Mum would say of her eldest son, “He will be a good catch for some girl.” Dad would add, “Yes, some good Catholic girl,” with emphasis on Catholic. Just a look between Mum and Dad reflected their own understanding of the added religious word.

Charles was reserved in nature, he was never controversial so would not argue on such religious assertions, but his smile revealed his feelings. George and I had seen him walking out with a girl, from the road opposite the main Filton Church, but we promised not to say anything to Mum or Dad. It was difficult for me to keep it secret, but I did.

Charles enjoyed football and encouraged me to train hard and observe any good footballers to build on my natural techniques. To help he took me to several local football matches. His favourite sport however was tennis; he often practiced his action shots in the garden or using me to throw balls to him in the field, and as a result, on more than the odd occasion returned balls hit me.

It was always satisfying to know I had a big brother who not only took interest in my growing up but also was also very protective of all the family.

He was handsome, with the poise and maturity of a much older person. His stability helped Mum and Dad during the many moves they had to make during the previous two years. He was particularly supportive to his younger siblings and I was so proud he was my brother.

Being out in the open, relaxed my mind, and as Mum would say, "It blows away the cobwebs." I began to think, once again, of our new environment. Although only ten years old, I was thankful of the happiness, that family love could bring to me. As the youngest, I had an advantage of learning from the experiences in life of my older siblings and such wonderful parents. I often thought just how lucky I was and felt a desire to repay them through some simple demonstrative and appreciative action. I knew Mum loved a cuddle so I would occasionally sneak up behind her and put my arms around her waist and say, "I love you." She would usually reply, "You're a right little flatterer."

With Dad, it was different, as he often seemed to be in a world of his own. I found he had to be prompted out of his trance and to do this I teased him. My usual method was to look at his bald head and ask him how the flies were performing on his skating rink today. Occasionally he accepted the teasing in a playful spirit, however it was sometimes bordering in dangerous

territory when even that could be exciting as he chased me around the house or garden.

Restless, my thoughts turned to myself and George; although only two years younger than he, I was, in comparison, physically much smaller. However, I believed I was academically way out in front of him, although my ego proved wrong on many occasions.

I had a habit of thinking why should somebody get the better of me. Even at my tender age, I recognised that everyone had weaknesses, just as I did, and it was due to a person's own weakness when others could be mentally on top. It was therefore important for me to strengthen those weaknesses, but I suppose like others, it was sometimes difficult to find or accept I had any weakness.

I had an unruly head of red hair, large freckles, a big nose and rosy cheeks, which were even brighter when I blushed and that was too often. I did not like being teased about my thin legs and particularly when they were called chicken legs and as a consequence I could not wait until I was allowed to wear long trousers! Contrasting the many downsides to my looks, it was the clear that my blue eyes were the ingredient that lifted my confidence and I used them advantageously.

When we reached the furthestmost point of our walk, where we had been earlier with George, Judy was panting and sluggish so it was time for a rest. It was also the highest area of the field and I could look down on our new house, which Mum and Dad had rented. To explore the area from a more advantageous point, I climbed a tree. This was to the annoyance of Judy, who frantically barked despite her tiredness. I could now see farther with many new houses clustered all the way to the railway station and then beyond surrounded by fields. I felt I could be happy in our new home in such a good town and hoped we could settle for a while, as again I felt fed up with so many moves, which entailed not only making new friends but also adjustment to new schools.

Our 'new town' was Filton, Gloucestershire, just outside the north Bristol boundary. It nestled south of the Cotswolds, which I had recently read it was an area of outstanding beauty.

I also read in a local guide that the small town was where strange companions had grown up in different eras. Its parishioners through many centuries of tranquillity must have loved the magnificent medieval church, with its commanding position over the surrounding countryside. Then came the twentieth century, when the transformation to accommodate the revolution in a new aero plane industry, which changed the way of life of local people forever.

The population of the area exploded in the 1930s, bringing changing times for most families in the new aero plane industry. Unsettled political influences in Europe stimulated the need for modern military aircraft, and suddenly Filton became an important township for Britain. Now with war declared it would become even more important

In this small but rapidly growing English community, the O'Neill family were one of the new residents living in a typical 1930s' semi-detached house in Station Road. Most properties were built to a standard commensurate with the income of working people. For a house built in that decade, ours had the unusual advantage of a garage, but we used it as a workshop and storage area because neither Dad nor Charles could afford a car.

To the back of the house was a manicured lawn, courtesy of us lads, but most of the credit was to George. Past the lawn was a small garden. Beyond the back boundary, there was a narrow copse, which ran behind the other houses on our side of the road, up as far as the church. The copse was considered dangerous and therefore out of bounds to me as it was known to have predators, both human and snakes. Because of my snake phobia, I would not have even attempted to enter.

Mum and Dad insisted that some of our garden should become a vegetable plot to help the war efforts. It certainly tested our amateur gardening skills. George was the family member to show his talent, ploughing into his tasks with enthusiasm.

In India, George had a serious attack of Rheumatic Fever, and despite medical predictions, he was growing into a sturdy lad. He would love to show off his strong muscles to the family and Mum would comment accompanied by a giggle, "Coo. You

better mind they don't explode." He would tackle any physical jobs with ease, which was fortuitous for me as I was much weaker, but I consoled myself and felt it was because he was older and I would catch up! Like me, he had tinges of ginger hair, but less intense. His blue eyes and nose were certainly from the same pod as mine. His humour was of a dry type and unless I was concentrating, I could easily miss the punch line. However, I knew it must be funny because he would laugh at himself and if in hearsay of the family, they would have a laugh, giggle or with Mum, a snorting noise.

George with his strength, coupled with a willingness to tackle most jobs complemented the efforts of Dad and Charles. Both of them were working full time at the Filton complex of the famous Bristol Aeroplane Company. The factory was close by and in easy walking distance. The manufacturing works spanned through a large area through not only of Filton, but also through the Rodney and Patchway areas. The Company had become one of the biggest manufacturers of aircraft in Great Britain and was still growing fast, sprawling over hundreds of acres.

Half of an hour later I found Eileen was very happy to be of assistance in the kitchen. She smiled as she came to greet me. "Did you enjoy that walk, the two of you?" I replied, "Fab." Giving Judy a pat on the back Eileen bent over and spoke quietly to me, "Hey John, you haven't forgotten to make your bed, have you?"

Well I had not made it, so I beat a quick retreat knowing that I had best do the chore and hoped Dad had not been on one of his inspection rounds. No, he could not have checked; otherwise, I would have immediately been on the 'carpet', and appropriately reprimanded. I rushed upstairs and as I was making the bed, well pulling the clothes up, with my thanks to Eileen, I began to draw an updated mental picture of her.

She was a girl of significant build and teased a lot about being overweight, which I thought was the reason she was a little shy towards people outside the family. However, it did not deter her from regular visits to the public swimming pool, where she continued her hobby of long-distance swimming. It was very different from the warm seawaters lapping the shores of Malta

where she held the children's record for the continuous number of times swimming around Menoel Island. Nevertheless, she was very happy just to be in the water in England, swimming length after length of the municipal pool.

On one recent visit to our local pool I felt upset as two boys and one girl who had been watching started teasing her, saying the reason for her being such a good swimmer was because she had big floaters, and a balloon body. That was insulting enough but when one boy called her a Walrus, I felt compelled to intervene and told him to shut up. As a result, I came off worse when they forcibly pushed me into the water and as I had not been swimming, I was fully clothed. It was an experience, which I would not wish to repeat, particularly as I could not swim very well. I climbed out and was in a fury, but saved from further confrontation as the tall well-built attendant who had seen what happened, was quick to act. He unceremoniously told them off, clipping a cheeky one around the ear and ushered them all out of the building. He then provided me with temporary trousers and a shirt from the lost property cupboard. He took my wet clothes to the boiler room to dry. When the attendant came back, he asked with a smile, "Temporary clothes OK?" I looked down at the trousers, giggled, and replied, "Thanks, but they would be better suited for Charlie Chaplin". We both burst out laughing. I continued to be in awe of Eileen's dedication and ability, as was the attendant.

My thoughts continued to reach out to Eileen. She had straight mousy coloured hair, usually cropped short with a forehead fringe. She had a dimple in each cheek and another in the chin, all emphasised when smiling. She had blue eyes, following the family side of Dad. Like Mum and Charles she had a near perfect complexion, but was now of the age when she wanted to wear make-up.

Because of her weight problem, due only to a medical condition, she had to be careful with the clothes she wore.

She was a super girl embracing a wonderful, kind, attentive, loving nature and very protective of her younger brothers despite knowing that George could take care of himself. I certainly appreciated her sisterly love.

When I had smartened up my bed and pyjamas, I came down stairs in my favourite way, which was courtesy of the banister rail. Dad was reading his Sunday Express, keeping abreast of the European problems inflamed by the greed of nationalism and power. He refused to read Mother's paper, the News of the World, calling it "two pennyworth of bad conduct."

An hour-and-a-half later, Mum announced in her Master of Ceremony voice, "Lunch is ready to be served in five minutes." We all knew that Dad would inspect our hands before we could sit at the table, so we quickly filed in and out of the only bathroom.

We lined up for Dad's entrance and the inspection of hands. Dad went down the line, and after inspecting my hands, I asked, "Why don't you check Mum's hands Dad? She has not been to the washroom."

Dad smiled and replied as he sympathetically patted me on the shoulder, "you will have to wait until you're married to find the answer for yourself."

Charles and Eileen understood the reply and both smiled. George might have known what Dad meant, but kept his usual counsel. I did not understand at all, but I was quick to learn, when Mum instructed "Less of the cackle Jack and get the children seated," The children knew who the real family boss was. Dad did too and it was not him! I now knew that Mum is in charge.

Singing away, Mum brought the joint in for Dad to carve. She was obviously proud of her cooking prowess. All the vegetables had been served on the Sunday best plates, too hot for me to touch. The hand-painted plates with oriental blue and white patterning acquired when the family lived in India. The gravy boat was already in the usual place next to Dad, as he had the privilege of being the first to pour.

All seated, we bowed our heads for Dad to say grace. I looked around out of the corner of my eye, hoping that George might be doing the same. If so, we would wink at one another. However, there was always the danger that Dad might catch us.

Dad was proud to say the simple grace on the Sunday and offered extra words asking the Lord to take care of all

Servicemen who would be facing military action. Charles and Eileen could say grace on other days when we were all sitting down together, which was now infrequent due to Dad and Charles working irregular hours. Both George's turn and mine to say grace would surely come when we were older and I was certainly not looking forward to that performance!

Mum was not concerned with the formality, but recognized it made Dad happy and contented, so her approach was to just to 'let it be.'

Eileen had suddenly remembered that I had 'Daddies' brown sauce with beef so she asked to be excused from the table to fetch it, for me.

'Excuse me' from the table was an essential part of Dads discipline in good manners.

"No talking when your mouth is full," was another such discipline but with all the hustle and bustle, Mum was exempt, although she did try sometimes to adhere to the discipline, but again I thought only to please Dad.

It was not difficult for anyone to keep to another discipline which was, "No talking at Sunday lunch until main course plates were off the table," as we children were like gannets after a long week where family income only allowed basic meals the rule was not difficult to support.

I, as ever, was the last to finish the meal, but was usually the first to talk, and more often than not it was a question. With 'cleaned' plates stacked in her hands, Mum was up, and on this occasion excused herself from the table. Eileen was next to be excused as she had another task in preparation for the only cooked pudding of the week.

"Will we have to be evacuated?" I asked Dad, when we were waiting for the next course.

Dad replied, "We will have to wait and see if any announcements are made shortly."

I was quick off the mark, said, "Well whatever anybody says, I'm not being evacuated."

George intervened, "That's a bit spunky, boy. If Mum and Dad tell us we have to go, then we will."

"What?" I paused, "With you?"

“No I could not stand it,” George replied, with his snigger.

“That’s it then, we don’t go,” I asserted. Looking at George, I asked, “Do you remember when we were evacuated from Malta?”

“Sure do. A bit of fun it was too, young ’un. I think of that photograph on the shelf of us, with other families all waiting for the evacuation transport. To our surprise it turned out to be an open top military truck that took us to embarkation, so some people had to sit on the side boards and others on the floor.”

I excused myself from the table and rushed over to the shelf, studied the photo, and in devilment shouted out, “Blimey! Doesn’t Mum look funny in that hat?”

Only I giggled, being caught out by Mum. She bellowed, “I can hear what you’re saying young man, so do not take it too far.”

I was quickly trying to cover my previous remarks. “I was saying Mum, when we were being evacuated from Malta we were all together” – pausing to catch my breath – “so why couldn’t we all be together, if we have to be evacuated from here?”

Mum then came in with a family favourite: rice pudding. “I could hear you talking about what is going to happen about evacuation.” I thought, ‘what good hearing she has.’ Mum continued, “Well, I will determine who does what.” She looked, with passion at everyone, “Understand?”

Everyone understood, and that set the mood for the rest of a lovely Sunday lunch.

However, I again broke the silence following a very quiet and thoughtful five minutes or so, with another question. “Should we all test our gas masks, together?”

With an excited tone in his voice, George asserted, “A good idea!”

My question seemed to be agreed, through nods of approval, as there was the possibility of some fun amid the seriousness of the task. We had not previously undertaken such a test together.

Mum had ensured there was a good meal, including some scraps, for Judy. I became part of the collective effort in washing up, then putting away the utensils and crockery.

The gas mask practice turned out to be a lot of fun. Dad was the first to fit his correctly. Charles was good. George the ever-practical lad was not far behind. I, as usual was unable to grasp the mechanics of many products, and was having difficulties.

Mum and Eileen were like two school kids, watching each other and having a good laugh together as they fumbled to secure their masks. They managed it in the end, but were still laughing as Eileen's mask steamed up just as she was saying, "Thank goodness, I cannot smell whoever has just released wind!"

Mum loved to have fun, cut loose and lighten up a little, which did not always match with Dad's approval. When still trying to get the mask on properly she rolled off the couch crashed to the floor but still laughing, but Dad intervened and spoke in an authoritative voice, "we have had enough of that."

Mum and Eileen were sticking together as the gal pals, making funny faces at old 'fuddy duddy' Daddy. To stop his feelings from boiling over he started to read the newspaper, having no trouble seeing through his gas mask. He must have been the only one!

Judy did not like what was going on so crept away behind the couch, with an occasional grumpy growl and bark.

As George and I removed our masks, the rubber friction made some rude noises – and that set the gals off again, laughing and slapping one another. Joviality took over the serious practice session.

Although Dad could be a strict disciplinarian, he brushed aside all the silly nonsense. He quietly appreciated fun, but did not always show it. He accepted such silly humour was something that most families could enjoy together, and this was such a time despite his Sabbath meditation.

Following the mirth, the gas masks were replaced in their cardboard boxes. Dad then went through the routine of the air raid siren; an alternate low and high pitched for the warning signal, then the long even tone sounding the all clear.

As suggested Dad answered many questions posed by the family, such as Eileen's, "Being a reservist, will you have to go back into the Army Dad?"

It was the most critical question of all. Dad simply replied, "I just do not know."

He looked around and saw the family had worried expressions. Eileen was beginning to shed a tear, so Dad added in a changed and confident voice, "But, I doubt it."

Mum, as ever in her spirited way, jumped up, ending the conversation with a general summing up, "In reality the answers from Dad show that it's just a question of being patient to see how the political and military scenes develops. Now that is another chapter. Everyone down to what they would normally be doing."

We all moved to our own favourite spots and ruminated in private thoughts.

The following few months there was a mix of worry, intrigue, sometimes excitement, occasionally stimulating, certainly absorbing, and some tinged with sadness.

Attitudes swiftly transformed with the War changing many lifestyles. Radio news broadcasts were coloured by a measure of official propaganda. Becoming more noticeable were many government announcements that told people what to do, rather than advising.

Advertisers adjusted their messages to take advantage of the period of worry for the public and to enhance their sales. Affordability rather than shortages blamed for the lack of variety and sufficient good food. Being thrifty, no longer considered miserly. Bonding and helping others was neighbourly, no longer branded as nosiness.

In the second week of September, the news that America had proclaimed neutrality was a blow to many who had studied the strategic implications. Dad was certain that America would help in the conflict at some stage, and certainly would not ignore any request to help Britain in a non-military cause.

Germany had surrounded the Polish capital of Warsaw by the middle of September. Not to be outdone, Russia invaded eastern Poland as a means to protect their state borders. Escalation seemed inevitable.

In the middle of September, the first Royal Navy loss announced when a U-boat sank the aircraft carrier HMS

Courageous. Further disasters quickly encountered as many German submarines targeted and sunk merchant vessels. Dad told the family that if the war were to last into the middle of 1940, then Britain would no longer have sufficient food stocks. Despite talk of rationing to cut food intake, Britain would then be relying on merchant ships to enable the nation to survive.

September was a busy month and proved difficult for me to keep up with events, so I started a special scrapbook, both on the European War and the home front. I also started painting war scenes and pasted them into the scrapbook.

Evacuated from London to the countryside were thousands of children and many mothers. The exodus was mainly by train, when all formalities such as tickets, were waived.

The evacuation scare had not hit the Bristol area, although many local families had made arrangements for their children to re-home in the countryside. I was still adamant that I was not going away, and George was now supporting me.

Rumours were circulating that there were air raids on London and some towns in Kent and Essex. Any confirmation in the press or on the radio was subject to censorship, so it was a matter of wait and see as the public would be late in receiving any dependable information.

Dusk to dawn blackout was obligatory. However, many people carried torches to light their way. There was some consolation on a clear night, when the moon brightened people's journey.

Charles' job thankfully was classified as a reserved occupation, therefore exempted him from joining the armed forces. The Army did not recall Dad, due to his severely ulcerated stomach, and the effects from First World War shrapnel still lodged in his ankle. Both Dad and Charles continued to work at the Aircraft Company.

George became involved with a young "group," which would not have been appreciated by Mum or Dad if they had found out. The group leader said I was too young to be a member. 'Stinker!' I thought.

They were a harmless enough bunch of youngsters, although their play was a little adventurous. Roller skates were

the ‘in thing.’ I watched them racing very fast on a side road pavement. Frequently there were tumbles as they jumped over human hurdles made up of other gang members crouching down on hands and knees. If someone was very good, he could try to jump two boys next to one another. George was brilliant and often won a competition with a big leap. He was not without the odd fall, but never flinched and was quickly up and into the action again.

I concluded they were a good bunch of lads, as the Staples gang also helped in a few local projects and like the scouts would undertake to help old or vulnerable people.

I had become pals with a boy named Harry from the same school class who lived just over the road in a corner house. Harry suffered from a speech impediment, eye blinking, and shaking arms and hands, supposedly St Vitas dance. This problem proved quite a benefit to him, as being on his own more than most boys he concentrated on learning the drums. Harry’s father was wealthy; being a supervisor at the big cigarette company in Bristol, and this enabled him to own a car. I joined them on trips to many places in the South Cotswolds and the Mendips. It was exciting.

Judy loved life with the family – but also she loved the boy dogs, although George said, “The boys loved her.” This created many problems, as dogs would hang around for hours just waiting an opportunity to be in her presence. This meant that we had to be more vigilant when taking her for walks.

We were all very upset one evening during the winter for she was very poorly and we took her to visit the local vet. Judy was diagnosed with a heart problem, and sadly, much to our surprise she died a few nights later. The whole family was devastated, and especially me who suffered severe emotional problems during a prolonged mourning period. The family bonding came to the front as we all tried to help one another through the grief. I had periods of blaming myself for her heart problem, as perhaps I should not have given her so many walks, particularly when she panted and got out of puff.

Eileen was to some extent shielded from the loss, as she was in part-time domestic service in a big country house, owned by a

wealthy businessman. She cared for small children and an elderly grandmother. This meant that she was often away from home for short periods, which she disliked as much as Mum did. We could see Mum's unhappiness without Eileen. She shed tears on one occasion while talking to Dad, but never showed the emotions in front of Eileen, as she knew it would upset her. Both Mum and Eileen thought that temporary domestic service would help her make her mind up about a future career to become a nurse.

It would certainly give her knowledge of working with people who are dependent on others.

Mum, like most mothers, was just happy to have her family around her. Caring for them in such a loving way came hand in hand with worrying about them. She was concerned about the health of Dad, and faced the possibility that she would have to take on the burden of being the breadwinner in the not-too-distant future.

Together they came up with a solution in January 1940. A decision made by Mum, Dad and Charles to take on a house large enough to take in lodgers. It was a surprise to us children, and it certainly would be a big gamble, but Filton needed more lodging accommodation, as labour from outside the area was required to work at the aircraft factory.

Mum and Dad took on the rental of a large house on Gloucester Road North, Filton. 'Delphine', being the name of the house and was to become our family home from February 1940. I commented to George, "Here we go again, on the move, and yet another school."

Following incessant pleading, Mum and Dad agreed that I could have another dog. I was so happy and we were very lucky that we quickly found another wonderful rescue dog. It was an English Standard Collie, christened Rover by me. He was very active and never seemed to tire, which I enjoyed, as I was always ready to play with him.

There was just one big problem to overcome; one that Mum and Dad were loath to tell us about, but eventually gave in. When checking the new house several people told them that an old person, who had lived in the house since Victorian times, now haunted the property. The old man had died in his sleep

following a protracted illness, which rendered him bedridden for many years. His trusted, all-in-one chauffeur, butler, cook, housekeeper and maintenance man looked after him. Apparently, he shuffled off his own mortal coil the day after the old man died. The story then went that the old man became the ghost servant and guarded the house from all intruders, protecting his resting servant and companion. Confusion reigned over the ghost as further information came to light, that it was Old Lady. I asked how we would be able to tell whether it was a man or lady. My comment was only answered by family laughter. Decision reached by Mum and Dad, they agreed to proceed with moving the family into 'Delphine' as long as there were no serious objections in a family vote. Mind you I knew Mum and Dad would go ahead.

Of all the chat that had been going on above my young head, the most exciting part of the move would be the opportunity of engaging once again with a Ghost, so I willingly put my hand up in a yes vote which was in favour for the move.

A Guesthouse would certainly be hard work, but a fascinating opportunity nonetheless, and undoubtedly interesting. The house had very large grounds, including an orchard, which would certainly help to make the household more self-sufficient in the time of anticipated food shortages.

All resources put into place to start a new, but uncertain era for our family.

Growing up seemed like shifting sands and I was realising that I relied so much on the family bonding to make sense of this important time of my life, but how would I cope and react with the next experience or adventure, or even another further move. Only time would tell.