

NORMA BASS

The first day of war

I was 16 going on 17 when war broke out and I was staying with my sister in London. There was all this talk of the war going about so we took her children down to my aunties in Whitney and I had to come home overnight on the train. The next morning I heard the news on the radio and I can remember it like it was yesterday. I was young and I didn't quite realise what it meant but my mum was breaking her heart because she had gone through the first world war and she'd lost a brother. Well, surely it wouldn't last that long.

Fire watch

At the time war broke out I was working at Middleton's the manufacturing chemist on the corner of Boundary Rd and Wilson Street and every sixth night we each had to take our turn at doing fire watch. We would get a couple of hours off in the middle of the afternoon so that we could go home and have a rest and then we would have to come back in the evening. There were camp beds set up in the office for us to try and get some rest on.

There were two places on Boundary Road where we did fire watch, the building opposite ours was where the men did their fire watch from, they had a snooker table, so we used to go over and have a game or two and then afterwards they would walk us home, we'd lock up and maybe have a good night's rest. But if there were any incendiary bombs dropped then we had to go up on the roof. We were in a part of the building where they stored the chemicals but we never thought about how dangerous it would be if they went up. To get to the roof we had to go up the stairs and out through a window, this took you up to the flat roof area which looked out over the whole of the back of Middlesbrough. In case any bombs did land there were buckets filled with sand and a stirrup pump was up there too. We were quite lucky because we never had to put any fires out up there, but I was on fire watch when they bombed the Leeds Hotel and Cannon Street, the bombs were coming down thick and fast. Now my dad was at home, he was in the home guard, and my mam had said to him that there was a raid on and would he go and check that I was alright, so, poor thing, he had to pedal down on his bike, guns going off all around him. He banged on the window and we let him in. "Are you alright?" he asked, "yes of course, why shouldn't I be?" We never did see the danger.

ATS

I joined the forces on June 18th 1943, I was twenty. I went to Fenham Barracks near Newcastle for my training. When we passed out, my dad came up to see us and he said the girls were the smartest he'd ever seen on parade, he was dead proud on me.

You never in your life seen anything like the uniforms that were issued to us when we joined up, there were woolly vests that came down to your ankles and the knickers, well, they were silky and the elastic came right up to under your arm pits, if you'd have put a string around them you could have used them as a swimming costume. And some other ones that were like men's boxer shorts with buttons up the side. They were hilarious, they really were. I never wore any of them and anyway

they were all far too big for me, I just took them home. Sometimes when we had concerts in the barracks we used to dress up in them for a lark.