

Title: Evelyn Lowe's Second World War Experiences - Liverpool War Work and the Bombing of Bootle and Liverpool from a Woman's Perspective

Story:

Evelyn Lowe was born on 23rd June 1917 at 254 Strand Road Bootle Lancashire England next to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. Her father was Thomas Lowe who was a Canal Boatman at that time and her mother was Jane Lowe nee Hawkins. Her mother died in the third wave of the influenza epidemic in 1919 before Evelyn reached the age of two and her father died in an industrial accident in 1931 when she was 14. She was brought up by her step-mother Ethel Lowe nee Kay and had a hard childhood losing contact with her real mother's relatives and her father's parents.

Evelyn was a very bright woman, but her family was too poor to pay the money to send her to secondary school, so she had to leave school at 14. Nevertheless, she was an avid reader throughout her life.

She left school at 14 and after jobs in a soap factory and a meat canning factory, she applied for and got a job with the new Littlewoods Pools - "in their office" in Liverpool - sorting pools coupons and answering correspondence.

War Work in Liverpool:

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Evelyn Hose [Evelyn Hose was Evelyn Lowe's married name] wrote five letters to her son about her life and three of those contained information about her Second World War experiences.

Evelyn worked for Littlewoods for many years including during the Second World War when they did war work in Liverpool making parachutes and then barrage balloons. She worked as a quality inspector of the rip panels on the barrage balloons, alternating between two weeks of night work and two weeks of day work.

She explained in a letter that the barrage balloons "were placed all around the coast .. at a certain height .. in case one of the German fighters or bombers got through [and was not shot down] .. If the plane caught the wire on the rip panel, .. the whole thing went up in flames taking the plane with it .. they were silver in colour and hard to see in the dark. .. You see we had disarmed, and had very few planes to fight the raiders, in other words we were not ready for war."

She said she used to "watch our planes fighting over the Mersey - sometimes they burst into flames, then some [German] men came down on parachutes [and] they were taken prisoners of war. I had mixed feelings about them. .. I did feel the Germans were people like us". She went on however, "I had a sense of pride in our pilots, we did not have many planes and at the beginning they were very old planes, taken out of mothballs, [but] the pilots did a wonderful job".

Speaking of herself and her colleagues doing war work in Littlewoods, she said "When we managed to dodge the machine gunning running to the shelter from the factory one night, we made a weegie board - one of the women thought of it. You put a glass on and then put our hands on top of it. The spirits in the other world were supposed to answer. We must have been crackers but it took our minds off the bombing, shooting and killing. Another night the raids were bad - we didn't go to the shelter each time the sirens went - but this night, one of the balloons had come back to be repaired, it was inflated and we went in with a lamp to repair it. To keep the air in, it had to be sealed, so we were sealed in - the sirens went, they forgot us, when the raid was over we were unconscious inside the balloon. They had forgotten us - fear did that, it made you forget everything but survival."

She explained that she was expected to take her turn fire watching - "one night I was on when they dropped incendiary bombs, a bomb blew up in someone's face, and although I was afraid, I went across and pulled him away from the fire and [there were] other bombs still dropping. I did not really think of the danger, I just did it because I thought it was the correct thing to do. It wasn't brave or anything like that, and it wasn't just me it was lots of other people who did much more dangerous things. I think the fear part was fear of death which most people have at some time or other. I don't even fear that as much as I used to."

She talked about the affect of all the air raids: "My eyes were beginning to sink back in my head through loss of sleep with the raids, which kept us up all night."

There was a much more serious affect one night during the bombing at work, she fell down some stairs and had a miscarriage losing her first daughter.

She also referred to the arrest of a stranger who went into Littlewoods during the war at the time of an air raid and was asking questions, despite there being "Hush Hush notices all over the place".

As an aside she said, "I smoked during the war years. The boss used to buy us a box of Sobranie. They were like cigars but I used to buy Churchman's. After getting letters that the soldiers could not get cigs, I started to collect them and I gave up smoking. I still bought them but sent them abroad for our lads out there - it helped me to give up smoking."

Rationing, Gas Masks & Identity Cards:

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Giving greater details about the war she said, "We had to carry gas masks and identity cards everywhere we went and ration books. Fruit was [in] short [supply], bannanas unobtainable."

She said "food, fuel, clothes and furniture were all on coupons" and her weekly ration was "1oz of butter, 2oz of marge, 2oz of bacon, 1 egg, 1/4 lb of meat, 4oz of sugar, 2oz of tea" - refering to the 1980s she ponders the response of today's people to such rationing "I often wonder what would happen in these times of plenty, how the people would react". She went on, "I wonder how I did a 12 hour day or night shift on that [her food ration]" and she refers to the other sacrifices they had to make because of the war, "I can't say we had much in the way of enjoyment, the cinema occasionally, that's all .. we had get togethers, played cards or had beetle drives, each of us would share food and drink, what we could spare".

She described the unfairness of rationing and the black market: "The rationing was not carried out honestly, some shops only served the well-to-do people with money in their shops first. ... I was allowed bananas [presumably because she was pregnant], but the only people that got them was on the black market. I never saw one for years."

She added "the country was in such a bad way - they took all the iron gates, railings, pans and anything iron we had for the war effort".

The Bombing of Her Bootle Home:

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Besides referring to her war work, she explained about the terrible bombing of the place where she lived with her step-mother:

"When I was home from work, and lived in Strand Road Bootle, we had shelters in our backyards. We all got shelters built in our back yards, the people at one side of us wouldn't have one built, so they had nowhere to go when the bombing was on, so we let them have ours and went to next door the other side - they had room for the two of us."

"We went next door where some people called Asbury lived - old people. Mr Asbury would not get out of bed and go into the shelter, until one night a screaming bomb dropped and his bed went right up in the air and hit the wall at the other side of the bedroom. Mr Asbury came downstairs at a run right into the yard striking match after match to try to light his pipe, he was turned 80 and we just couldn't make him understand the danger of planes seeing the light and dropping a bomb on us. I took the pipe off him and the matches, rushed him into the shelter with his wife, sat them down, covered their heads with a blanket. Then the bomb dropped. I had not time to sit down, so remaining standing, I was bounced into the air, hit my head on the ceiling of the shelter. [The] next morning my face was full of spots, the doctor said it was the blood mixing with the air cells in my body. I looked queer for about a week after."

"Another night Mr Asbury went into another shelter - ours was bombed - he forgot his hat and nothing would satisfy him but that I went back with him in the middle of the air-raid to get it, and being near 80, he didn't hurry .. he moved very slowly .. Can you imagine my feelings, houses being bombed and falling down and having to go slowly across the road and back? .. he never stopped telling people how I pushed him, he was highly indignant."

"Another night bombs had been dropped on Strand Road and I passed a house and the fire was in the middle of the room. It was as though a giant hand had lifted it out of the fireplace. An old lady lived three doors away from us with her daughter, she came to see if I could help her with her mother - she had told her to get dressed, then said she had difficulty moving her legs, so someone offered a glass of whiskey. She drank that off and enjoyed it. Then said perhaps if we massaged her legs we would get them working. It was then we found she had put two legs into one leg of her knickers. She made us all laugh, because the old devil wanted more whiskey. She still insisted she could not move her legs."

During the war, Evelyn still lived where she had been born, in 254 Strand Road Bootle. Strand Road was bombed and mostly flattened in the Second World War (see the photographs of the Strand Road Bootle bombing from sefton-digital-archive.org). Her house in Strand Road was bombed during May 1941: "I came home one day to find nearly the whole road where I lived down and a parachute hanging in the hall where I lived." As she looked inside, she saw an unexploded bomb in her hallway. She said their cat ran out of their house with part of its ear missing.

She said, "I saw a lot of people go into shelters and never come out alive." She lived around the corner from the Co-op Bomb Shelter off Ash Street in Bootle that was destroyed killing hundreds of people. "250 went in - only 2 came out alive ... the bodies had to be left because burst gas, electricity and water mains made it too difficult to get them out. They just threw lime down." She also reported that the people in the Metropole Theatre were killed after it was bombed [that was on 7th May 1941]. "Theatres, cinemas and dance halls were nearly all bombed", she said. "We did not

have much to laugh about or amuse us, but we somehow felt closer to each other those days, it was a sort of stiffening our resistance against the common enemy, helping each other through the bad times"

Referring again to the terrible bombing of her home street Strand Road, she reported: "As I was going away from home to try and find someone, anyone alive, I came to a house with a fire blazing in the middle of their sitting room, so I went around the back to find their air-raid shelter, it was down some steps underground in the cellar .. I got about twenty people out unhurt. As we arrived back on the street, planes started coming in again, but they came in by the coast and did not see the barrage balloons until it was too late. So two enemy planes went up in flames. No-one shouted or made a sound, they just looked up in silence. I think they had gone through too much that week in Bootle to bear any more."

Her Step-mother's Move to Burnley:

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Evelyn reported that after the bombing her "step-mother suffered from very bad nerves, and the doctor told me she would have to be evacuated, so she decided if I would go with her she would go to her sisters in Burnley. There was only her and me at home by then." [I think this means her step-mother was in Bootle during the worst of the 1941 bombing of Strand Road and they went together in late 1941 to Burnley. This explains why Evelyn lived in Burnley in December 1941 when she got married.]

Evelyn Lowe's Marriage:

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Later that year in Burnley on 20th December 1941, she married Edward Hose, an agricultural worker and driver. Evelyn said in her letters, "We never talked about money or after marriage your dad and I. I guess it was because things were so uncertain with the war. .. Your Dad [Edward Hose] was working for Donald Beardsall in Formby market gardening. .. Your Dad was in a reserved occupation but he saw all his pals going up in the army and wanted to go himself, although he was in the Home Guards and on guard on Formby Shore two nights a week all night. Anyway that was in June 1940. So next time your dad had to go before the Deferment Board your dad told them he was a motor driver so they would not defer him any longer." Apparently, Edward Hose got a house in Formby with his job and his mother and two of his sisters lived with him [presumably because nearby Bootle was so unsafe]. She mentions his sister Violet Hose living there with her husband Omar Lowe, who was Evelyn's brother, together with their young son.

Edward Hose [her husband Ted] joined the British Army to serve his country in the Second World War in North Africa shortly after their marriage. She briefly lived with him and his mother in Formby before he left. She moved back to Bootle and resumed her war work after he had gone. He was away five years before he got leave to come home again for a couple of weeks, but then had to return to North Africa before he was demobbed.

"I lost the little one I was carrying when Ted went away to join up. He was away five years before he got leave to come home again for a couple of weeks, then he had to go back to North Africa to be demobbed a year later in 1946."

Her brother Omar Lowe's War:

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Evelyn's brother Omar Lowe who had married her husband's sister Violet also joined the British Army and was sent to Egypt with the 8th Army [see photograph]. He survived the war and died in 1997.

Her brother William Lowe's War:

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Her brother William Lowe was not so lucky. This what she said about her brother Bill: "War was declared .. on a Sunday. Your Uncle Bill, my brother, who married a girl called Ann, was 21 years old on the following Tuesday after war was declared. On the Monday before his birthday, he was called up in the army and sent down near London to do his training. Ann gave birth to a little boy while down there. She lived in an army camp with Bill. When George, the baby, was 10 months old, Bill was sent abroad [to North Africa]. So she moved back to Bootle and lived in Worcester Road. .. Bill, my brother, died on active service. Before he went abroad he left a letter for his son to be opened when he was old enough to understand - to tell him the reason he had to leave his mother and him. That it was to fight for his country and protect the British Isles from invasion, thereby protecting the people of this country from the enemy. He implored him to care for his mother and to lead an upright and good life to be a credit to his mother and the country." William Lowe died on 13th June 1943 just outside Tunis in Tunisia and was buried in the Medjez-el-Bab War Cemetery there and is commemorated on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website. Evelyn Hose nee Lowe, his sister, visited his grave in Tunisia in 1988 (see photographs of her there and images of the gravestone and Commonwealth War Graves Commission Entry).

The Post-War Period:

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Nearer the end of the war, Evelyn moved to Burnley where her step-mother was from. Her husband joined her there in 1946 when he was demobbed and she had her two surviving children a girl and a boy a year or two afterwards. During some of her time in Burnley she worked for Lucas Industries as did her husband.

After a few years, Eve and Ted moved back to Bootle and lived there happily with their small family until the early 1960s. Evelyn rejoined Littlewoods Pools in Bootle and also worked for Vernons Pools.

In 1962 Evelyn's family left Bootle and moved to Hampshire and then a few years later to Wiltshire, where they stayed until the children grew up and left home.

Evelyn and her husband moved back to Lancashire in the early 70s to be near their daughter's family.

Her husband Ted died in January 1990 and Evelyn Hose nee Lowe died in 1991 at the age of 74 and she was buried next to her husband in Chorley Cemetery.