

# **The Final Chapter**

By Rob Lynde

War damaged Britain in 1942 was reeling under the continued bombing of its cities by German bombers. Liverpool, one of England's busiest ports, had been bombed more than any other city in the country. Vast areas adjacent to the Docklands were laid waste, but strangely the famous Liver building with its even more famous Liver Birds atop only ever lost a few windows, whilst whole rows of terrace houses were completely wiped out.

Not far from the docks, at 21 Dalglish Street, Lily Stevens was sweeping her front room, trying to get rid of the dust from the previous nights bombardment. As she passed the mantelpiece above the tiny fireplace, she caught sight of the photograph of her son proudly displayed there. Tears came to her eyes as she touched the telegram that lay beside the photograph, the wording burned into her memory, The Admiralty regrets to inform you that your son, Kenneth Stevens, died at sea in the execution of his duty.

Standing there sadly, her mind flew back to the past, to a picture of herself when she was twenty years old. She had met David at a dance one night and immediately for her it had been love at first sight. He had been a travelling salesman, good looking with a great personality and like no one she had ever met before. He wined and dined and passionately wooed her, her whole life had changed since meeting him and she blossomed. Her long time friend Myra, daughter of a well-to-do farmer, had tried to warn her that David was just a bit too smooth but Lily was so much in love, and the fact that he often spoke of marriage, and how they would move to Wales convinced her of his good intentions.

Two months after meeting David, Lily found she was pregnant and confided in Myra, who immediately voiced her misgivings, but advised her to tell her lover that night. Lily was unprepared for the terrible resulting harangue from David, who finally walked out vowing he'd never see her again.

Tom Brosnan was Myra's father who had lost his wife to T.B. at the end of World War 1, but had kept the farm going and was quite wealthy. It was at his suggestion that Lily became a housekeeper - companion in the Brosnan household whilst she awaited the birth of her child, and finally she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. No real parents could have been more proud than Tom and his daughter, who by this time had become very attached to Lily, so understandably they were shocked when told of Lily's intention to return to the city and have her baby adopted, she just wanted to rid herself of every memory of David, but though she tried several church groups in the neighbouring towns, no one wanted to take the newborn child. Finally in desperation, one cold February morning Lily quietly slipped out of the farmhouse, leaving her baby.

A year went by then Lily met Ken Craven. They were married in St. Augustine's Chapel and moved to Dalglish Street and twelve months later she gave birth to another son, Kenneth, who now had been lost at sea.

Lily's reverie was broken by the sound of a truck pulling up at the corner, and she watched as two A.R.P. men got down from the truck and commenced unloading sandbags, she stood at the window for a while then decided a cup of tea was what she needed right now and walked into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

The two A.R.P. men were chatting on the corner, discussing Lord Raw Haw. "Did you listen to him last night" - "No, he makes me sick just to listen to him" said the second. "Well he claims the Gerry's bombed Buckingham Palace last night, and the whole Royal Family was wiped out" retorted the first. The second man looked at him pityingly "Gawd, you don't believe that do you, that's just a whole lot of twaddle".

Their attention was then taken by a heavy truck going past. A bunch of Land Army girls were sitting in the back on their way to the farms to pick hops, both men waved and were rewarded by big smiles and catcalls from the girls. The young man walking towards the Wardens saw all this and smiled to himself, thinking how good it was to be home, then he approached the

men and asked how far it was to number 21. "Just a bit further on young fellah, who are you looking for" asks the more talkative of the two. On telling him it was the Craven home he was looking for, the A.R.P. man obviously knew the owners and replied "Oh, that's Ken and Lily's place, you can't miss it, it's the only house with a brass knocker on the door, Lily cleans it every day. I think their son brought it home from overseas, he's a seaman."

The young man thanked them and hefted his very new sea-bag to his shoulder and headed for No.21. On hearing his knock Lily came from the kitchen, opening the door she saw a lad, evidently a Merchant Navy lad by his sea-bag, shirt and dungarees. "Mrs. Craven', he enquired, "Yes" said Lily, "My name is George and I sailed with Ken, in fact we were in the same lifeboat after we were torpedoed". Lily's face broke into a kind of a smile, but the many hours of crying had wreaked havoc on the once lovely face. "Come in, come in, I suppose you could drink a cup of tea, I'm just making one", she said as she led him into the kitchen. Not wanting to use Lily's rations, George untied his sea-bag and produced a half-pound pack of tea. "Goodness gracious I have not seen a full packet like that since the war started" said Lily delightedly. Over a cup of tea George recounted how he had first met Ken on the Training Ship Vindicatrix, then when their training was over each had been posted to different ships, but fate took a hand and they had met again on the S.S. Pacific Star when she had sailed down the Mersey bound for the Argentine. "You know, we both had the same sense of humour, in fact one night we emptied a bottle full of ink into our bosun's sea-boots and he chased us around the ship with a lump of wood, only the ship's alarm went off and we all had to go to our stations, that saved us

George smiled as he remembered that night.

Lily did not ask about Ken but instead invited the boy to stay for the evening meal in order to hear from him in his own words, all the things this fresh faced easy to listen to kid could tell her about her beautiful son, her husband too would love to hear it all but he worked for the Water Board and the reservoir had taken a bit from a bomb the previous week, so he was working all the hours he could to restore the city's water supply.

The daylight was fading as Lily covered the windows with strong blackout curtains, and they ate their evening meal in the dull light of a low wattage electric light. "The air-raid siren will go off in a minute, but we don't go to the shelter until we hear the first explosions" she said needlessly. George did not reply at first, but then said "Do you really want to know what happened?" Lily looked straight at him for a full minute before replying in a raspy voice "Yes",

George explained, "Ken, myself and two other fellows had to standby the lifeboats take off the covers, move the chocks and push the lifeboat part of the way out as soon as any action started. The siren sounded, two ships ahead of us in the convoy, bought it within minutes. Then a Naval Corvette raced in between us and the other line in the convoy and started dropping depth charges. They had dropped about four, when the next explosion was us. We had been hit amidships, the whistles blew for abandon ship, so we got the lifeboat out and dropped it then about ten of us shinnied down the ropes and let go just as the old 'Star' went down. In the darkness we could hear different fellows calling out, but we couldn't see many, in fact we only picked up four". The young sailor stopped, the horrific situation still very vivid in his mind. Lily, aware of his distress, said "You don't have to tell me more if it upsets you, you know". The young man did not answer, but went on with his story. "When morning came, there were fourteen of us in the lifeboat, and not a ship in sight, not even a bloody navy ship, none!!"

Again there was silence broken this time by the wailing cry of the air raid siren. Lily broke the uneasy quiet by asking if he wanted to go to the air raid shelter, but George just shook his head and continued on with his story. "It was about lunch time when we could hear engines, but couldn't see anything until a bloody great Submarine, German of course, surfaced about a hundred yards away. The Germans came racing out on the Subs deck and pointed a machine gun at us, then somebody shouted in English "What ship are you from?". We looked at each other then Tug Wilson who was an A.B. called out "Get lost you German bastards," then

about two seconds later they started firing at us. I dived over the side and hid against the stern of the lifeboat and sang out to Ken to do the same, but as he stood up a bullet bit him. Two of the others also dived over and stayed under the water against the lifeboat and we could almost feel the boat sinking as they filled it with holes, but just as suddenly they stopped when a klaxon horn sounded and we could hear the whoosh, whoosh as she submerged.

Our lifeboat held nine dead mates and was slowly sinking, we put one guy on board and we stayed in the water, changing every half hour. The man in the lifeboat had to bail the water as fast as he could, then get back in the water. The fourth fellow up started screaming as a Corvette came into sight and seemed to be heading straight for us. We were picked up, given dry clothes, rum and food and then the Captain told us that he would have to bury our mates at sea. Ken was the second to go and I cried because he was like a brother to me. Anyhow Grandfather Brosnan always said a man is just as entitled to cry as any woman."

The boy had stopped talking and was feeling around in his pockets so failed to see the look of absolute disbelief on the woman's face. With a hand almost covering her mouth she queried hoarsely "You had a Grandfather called Brosnan?" George looked up as he lit a cigarette, "Yes" he said, "My father died before I was born and my Mother and Grandfather raised me." Lily's face was now ashen and she had begun to shake, a sixth sense told her what the answer to her next question would be, but with great difficulty she almost whispered, "And is your mother's name Myra Brosnan?" The look of total surprise on the boy's face confirmed her gut feeling before he even blurted "How did you know that, I had never told Ken."

The sound of bombs falling on Liverpool and the sounds of German aircraft above temporarily halted the question and answer. George then took from his top pocket a silver ring, shaped like a small belt with a buckle, and handed it to Lily. He said he knew Lily had given the ring to Ken when he left home to train on the Vindicatrix, and he had taken the ring from Ken's finger before he was buried, knowing how much it would mean to her.

Lily squeezed the ring in her palm, too overcome for the moment to say what was in her heart to this young man, to her son. Finally she said "George, I want to tell you a long story. Remember when you said you were like brothers? Well in fact you were." Slowly she began to speak, her voice breaking with emotion ...

Many hours later the wailing air raid sirens were telling weary residents of Liverpool that it was "All Clear." Just as the first fingers of grey light of dawn began to lighten the cold darkness, the Air Raid Wardens, Police and Soldiers were searching through the destroyed buildings. The city had taken a real battering the night before, two schools, the library, a bus depot and many many homes had been flattened. A Policeman remarked wryly to an A.R.P. Warden, "Not much of Daiglesh Street left hey fellah." "No came the reply, "Two direct bits on Dalglesh Street alone, got more than the docks. I wonder how that young sailor got on?"