

## BRANSCOMBE PROJECT: HISTORY SNIPS

### Les Rowson: a Wartime Story

*Barbara Farquharson:* When Sue Diamond wrote *Branscombe's War 1939-1945*, she concentrated on the home front. But she did ask whether she might talk to Les Rowson. His wife Betty said she was sure that he wouldn't want to talk about the war.

When Betty died in 2021 we wrote a piece about her for the Parish Newsletter. It mentions the war, but again, only from Betty's point of view.

She was only fourteen when the war started. She was a housemaid at Barnells and being an independent sort of girl, was not very happy. Then, in 1941, Nestles located to Branscombe and set up a factory at the south end of the Square. It was a front for an ammunitions factory. Betty immediately signed on, but being under age had to start by making hairdressing products. A year later she was allowed to work in the munitions factory.



In 1940 Les Rowson, who came from Liverpool and had joined the First Battalion of the Kings Own Royal Regiment, was billeted on Branscombe Beach. He started going out with Betty and about three months later when Les left to go to war, they got engaged.



There were letters, but then there was silence. Then a letter arrived: *'Missing, presumed dead'*.

After a while Betty started going out with a Canadian pilot stationed up at Weston. He was very tall

and a great dancer. She too loved dancing.

In 1943 a card arrived - Les wrote to say that he was alive and a prisoner of war. The Canadian left the scene and the one and only photo of him and Betty was torn up by Betty's mother. (Many years later, when I showed Betty some pictures of people dancing in the Square, she said, 'Oh my, there we are ...').

Les came home. He was thin and ill, and reluctant to talk about what had happened to him. The only person he talked with was Bill Whitworth who had fought alongside him, and who, after the war, came to visit him. Bill would tell stories and then Les would join in. They only talked about the latter years of the war, when they'd got to know each other. Betty listened in, and one day, sitting in the tea room of the Sidmouth Plant Centre, she told me the story as she remembered it -

They were sent out to Crete, and then Churchill decided to send them to Leros - 'to their death' (she said). On the way their boat was torpedoed. Bill could not swim and he said, '*This is it, I can't swim!*' Les replied, '*Now's your chance to learn!*' Bill paddled his feet, and Les kept him up. The oil from the boat was on fire and men were screaming, but they just managed to get out of range. Eventually they were picked up and brought back to Crete.

Then they returned to Leros. The sky was black with German paratroopers all with machine guns. After five days of fierce fighting, Bill and Les were among the few soldiers left to surrender. They were rounded up to be sent to prisoner of war camps. The German commander's arm came down between Les and Bill. Les went one way, Bill the other. Les went to Czechoslovakia and for days (?weeks) they were walked around in circles, no one knew where they were supposed to go. Eventually they ended up in a camp in Austria. Les was there for 17 weeks. One day they woke and found the guards were gone and the gates were open.

They started walking – one way were the Russians, the other the Americans. They walked towards the Americans. They found other deserted camps along the way and there were some food supplies. They came across an Australian camp – the men had gone but there was a lot of their gear. They put on Aussie caps.

Eventually they found the Americans and huge troop transport planes took them home.

On arrival in England, in the waiting camp, Les suddenly heard someone shout 'Les'. He looked across – 'Bill' he shouted back.

When Les got back his feet were a mass of blisters and he had a giant tape worm. The doctor gave him a huge black pill and told him to shit over a bucket. Three pills, three shits, all closely examined – lots of tape worm, but no head. The doctor gave him three pills. He shat, literally, buckets. The tape worm, with head, stretched from floor to ceiling, back down again, and half way up.

Later, their Colonel, Colonel Leahy, came to live in Branscombe, at Edge Barn. Les and Bill and their wives were invited to tea. The place was thick with cobwebs, and the pot simmering on the stove was black ...

Bill and his wife eventually retired to Seaton and then to Colyton, but Bill 'went funny'.

*(Many thanks to Betty and Les' son Barry and their daughter-in-law Jill who lent the photo of Les and gave permission for this piece to be published in the Newsletter)*