

# SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE SECOND WORLD WAR STORIES

*'I saw silver aeroplanes high up in the blue sky. I thought they looked beautiful. Later I found out that they were the planes that bombed the Parnall Aircraft factory in Yate. They were shooting them in the road as they were running out of the factory.'*

Eileen, Thornbury reminiscence session

The Second World War (1939 – 1945) was a global war involving over 100 million people from more than 30 countries. In Britain everyone played their part in the war effort and the people of South Gloucestershire were no exception. Tranquil village communities and small urban and rural industries dotted the area. Britain's declaration of war shattered this tranquillity.

Through reminiscence sessions and research, we have been exploring the war through the stories of the people who lived here.

*'It makes your brain go right back and say, 'Yes, don't forget that!'*

William, Filton reminiscence session

*'The Ministry of Labour told us where we had to work. I was sent to Fry's – making chocolate bars for soldiers. Some of the girls were cheeky; they wrote messages inside the wrappers, 'If you're married pass me by, if you're single please reply,' and then we added our address. One day an American jeep with a GI turned up with a chocolate wrapper from me – father went berserk.'*

Tina Dean, Cadbury Heath

*'My uncle volunteered for bomber command. As a four year old, I remember me and my cousin sitting on his knee. He was only 21 when he was killed. My grandfather would go out into the garden firing his gun at stray enemy planes. Even after the war, he couldn't accept that his son was never coming back and, to this day, we never knew what happened to his plane.'*

Jean, Kendlshire

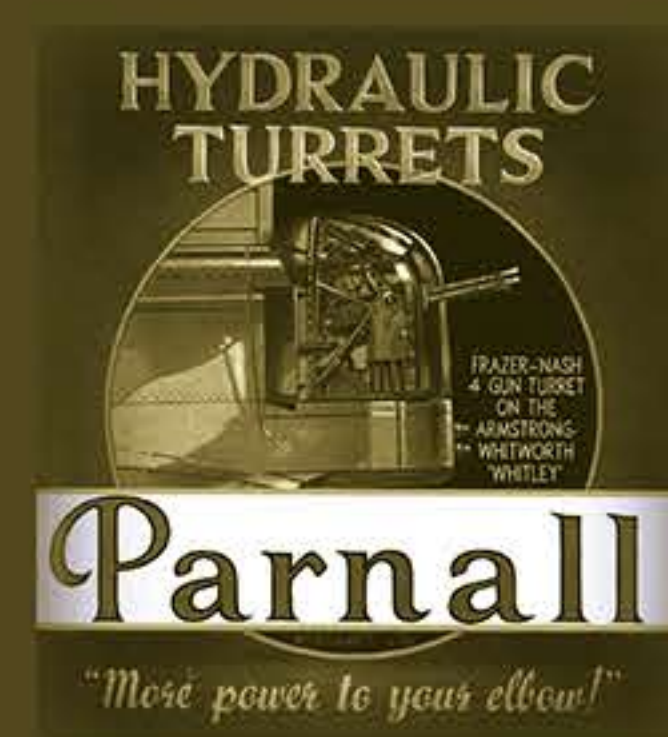
For more stories, go to [www.southglos.gov.uk/ww2stories](http://www.southglos.gov.uk/ww2stories)



Henry Arnold, Gunner in the 6th Maritime Regiment, billeted in Thornbury



Evacuees with Billeting officers at Oldbury on Severn, June 1940  
Courtesy of Thornbury & District Museum



Parnall poster

Look at the map below to see examples of some of the war time activity in South Gloucestershire



Land Army sowing potatoes  
Yate & District Heritage Centre





Girls assembling gas masks at Chipping Sodbury School  
Yate & District Heritage Centre

# AT HOME

*'At the school, vegetables were grown and the older boys were taught how to garden. A big shelter with duckboards and sacking over the door was built. I can still remember the smell of the soil.'*  
Rosemary King, Alveston

The Second World War was a time of major upheaval. Food, fuel, work and school were all significantly affected. By 1944 a third of the civilian population were engaged in war work, including over 7,000,000 women. Children also played their part in the war effort.

In 1939 Britain imported half of all its food requirements, most of its raw materials, and all of its oil. As Atlantic shipping convoys were attacked, goods became scarce. Austerity measures were necessary and in 1940 every member of the public was issued with ration books.

*'Our family loved butter, our neighbours loved sugar. We traded those coupons; it worked out well.'*  
Pam, Kendleshire reminiscence session

*'I lived on a farm between Wickwar and Kingswood. I remember, in the dead of night, a pig being killed and all the meat being shared out.'*  
Tony, Severn Beach reminiscence session

Gardens and parks were dug to grow vegetables. Farmers and market gardeners needed the help of a new workforce. **The Women's Land Army** worked on farms in Wickwar, Dodington and Marshfield.

*'I thought it would be exciting to join the Land Army. I lived in London and was billeted to Marshfield. To begin with the farmers didn't want us. They thought we weren't strong enough, but we soon proved our worth. I met my husband there and lived in Marshfield for the rest of my life.'*  
Mary Chivers, Marshfield

The labour force was directed wherever the need was identified. Many factories changed from domestic to armaments production. Women workers were conscripted.

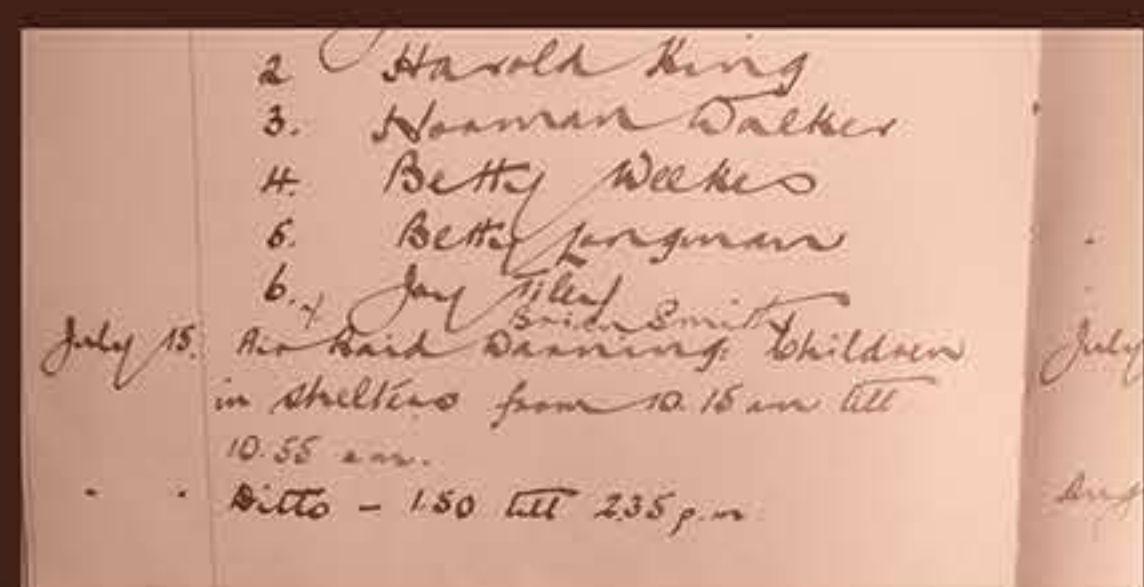
In Kingswood, the traditional boot and shoe firms were requisitioned to make army boots. Others repaired Beaufighter bomber wings and manufactured portable generating sets and munitions.

*'I worked at BAC in an office. During an air raid, the office was split and went to different shelters. It meant that if one was hit, everyone wasn't killed all at once.'*  
Olive, Filton reminiscence session

**Children carried gas masks at all times.** At school they practiced air raid and gas mask drills. They raised funds during Weapons Week and ran messages for air raid wardens.

*'As a child my husband was left handed. At school they used to tie his left hand to a chair to make him write with his right hand. One day, when the siren went off and all the children were taken to the shelter, they realised they had forgotten him and the teacher had to come back and untie him.'*  
Margaret Smith, Avon Valley Railway event

Daily log books from local schools offer a real insight into the effects of war. Thornbury schools absorbed evacuees and their teachers; they struggled with staff reductions and the measles. As the war progressed, the school day began later due to disrupted sleep from night-time air raids.



Entry from the Thornbury Council School (Gillingstool Primary School), 1940  
Transcription courtesy of Thornbury & District Museum

*'A Girl Guide organised a gang of us children to collect scrap materials in a cart. We deposited it in front of the forge in Hill Street in Kingswood.'*  
Mervyn, Kingswood reminiscence session

*'One of our teachers arranged for us to help with war work. We would roll bandages for first aid kits and picked the fluff from cotton sheets which was used as gun fluff.'*  
Iris Arnold, Alveston



Mary Chivers and friend working on a farm  
With kind permission of Mary Chivers



Mary Chivers in her land army uniform  
With kind permission of Mary Chivers



Children in Alveston with an incendiary bomb, Aug 1940  
Jim Facey: Bristol United Press



Newman's workers at the end of their working day  
Yate & District Heritage Centre and Creda Archive



# CIVIL DEFENCE



Warmley Auxillary Fire Service  
Kingswood Heritage Museum

*'We lived at the White Hart in Olveston. My job was to put up the blackouts every night and take them down in the morning. There was a mock invasion to simulate the Germans coming up the River Severn. Girl guides and scouts pretended to be casualties and there were military teams and medics. They were going to set off a gas bomb. Grandmother was an invalid and mother protested, so they didn't do it.'*

Eric Garrett, Olveston

During the war, civilians volunteered or were conscripted to help with the war effort. Whether it was joining the Home Guard, the Emergency Services, or Air Raid Precaution, everyone 'did their bit'.

As the German army advanced into France, there was a need for a home based army. The role of the Home Guard was to act as a secondary defence in case of invasion.

Many men who were unable to join the military volunteered for The Home Guard. Some men were in reserved occupations as their jobs were necessary to keep the country running; these included farm and railway workers and teachers. Others were too young, too old or not fit enough to join up.

Home Guard platoons were based in the village halls and factories. Each platoon comprised around thirty men including First World War veterans.

In Olveston experienced soldiers trained new recruits. A field by the parish hall was obtained for training and rifle practice.

*'In the early days there was no uniforms and they were short of weapons. It was very much shotguns and pitchforks.'*

John King, Alveston

The Home Guard guarded the Wickwar tunnel and ammunition stores at Dodington House. They also attempted to detect messages from overseas. The Kingswood Home Guards made anti-tank traps and practiced manoeuvres on Rodway Common. In Hawksbury Upton, the Home Guard kept watch from the Somerset Monument and wheeled logs across the road to stop invasion.

*'Father worked as a coal merchant all day and then at night as a special constable, helping the police force. I've got a scrap of paper with his instructions about what to do in the case of an accident.'*

Rosemary King, Alveston

The Country became more reliant on the volunteer troops. In 1943, they served a minimum of 48 hours duty over a four week period. Absence from parade or duty became a punishable offence that carried a fine of up to £10.



ARP (Air Raid Precautions) Team, Downend, 1939  
Kingswood Heritage Museum

During blackouts, Air Raid Precaution wardens ensured all house lights were smothered, aiming to confuse enemy bombers.

*'I was in the ARP in Filton. When everyone went to the shelters, we walked the streets making sure there were no lights. We had to throw ourselves into a trench when the planes came. Mine and father's tin helmets were dented all over from the shrapnel.'*

Nancy, Winterbourne reminiscence session.



Members of Civil Defence training on the Douglas Factory Sports Field, Kingswood  
Kingswood Heritage Museum

An Auxiliary Fire Service was set up in Chipping Sodbury.

A siren at Sodbury police station was linked to bells on each of the 12 volunteers' houses. Firemen from Sodbury and Thornbury were dispatched to deal with raids on Bristol, Plymouth and elsewhere.

*'My husband was a fire watch volunteer at Bristol Aeroplane Company. The night Filton got bombed I paced up and down with baby Peter in my arms, praying that my husband was alive. There was no way of knowing until he walked through the door.'*

Irene, Downend reminiscence session



First Aid Post group at Thornbury Castle 1941 - Courtesy of Thornbury & District Museum



Special Constables on parade on Thornbury High Street - Courtesy of Thornbury & District



# UNDER ATTACK

Dog fight over Filton 25th Sept 1940 - © Imperial War Museum (CH 1823)

*'As a seven year old in Hanham, we were in our shelter and could hear bombs dropping. I can remember Mother shaking. The planes were going to BAC where Father and Uncle Fred worked. When the sirens went there, Dad said, 'Let's go in this shelter,' but Fred said, 'No, let's go to the other one.' So they did and it was a good job because the first was one that got bombed.'*

Lillian Buck - AVR 1940s event

South Gloucestershire was a target because of its aeroplane and munition factories as well as its proximity to Bristol and the docks. On a moonlit night enemy bombers used the River Severn for navigation.

We know from maps that the German Airforce had identified specific targets in South Gloucestershire:

**Bristol Aeroplane Company was targeted many times during the war**, but bombs fell on the works on just four occasions. Three of these raids caused little damage, but the fourth was very serious and a squadron was moved to Filton to counteract future attacks.

Many people remember the dog fights between German and British planes.

On 25th September 1940, enemy aircraft dropped high explosives on the Bristol Aeroplane Company. Bombs with delayed fuses were also dropped. Six shelters took direct hits and 91 people died. Their names are on the memorial in St Peters Church, Filton.

**Yate became a strategic target** with Parnall making airframes and hydraulic gun turrets and Newman's making shell cases and super strong chains. There were several unsuccessful attempts, but in February and in March 1941, German planes bombed Parnall with the loss of 53 workers' lives.

*'I was 15 years old and working at Newman's. The all clear had gone and we were walking home across the fields. A German plane was coming up the railway line from Gloucester towards Yate. I could see the faces of the crew in the cockpit. My future wife lost her sister at Parnall that day, Barbara Amos; she's the first name on the memorial at St Mary's Church.'*

Tony, Severn Beach reminiscence session

**Stray bombs were also dropped** on mistaken targets or to save fuel when returning from raids.

*'The German planes were on their way back from a bombing raid. Our cottage was by Grovesend quarry, next to a railway line and a spoil heap. In the moonlight it must have looked like a huge building. We were in the kitchen; suddenly we heard the whistle of a bomb and dived under the table. I can still see the chenille table cloth. The bomb blast knocked off the chimney. Two bricks landed in the middle of my pillow.'*

Rosemary King, Alveston



Willsbridge Tunnel, Kingswood, used as a communal air raid shelter during the Blitz  
Kingswood Heritage Museum

**Communal and family air raid shelters became part of everyday life.**

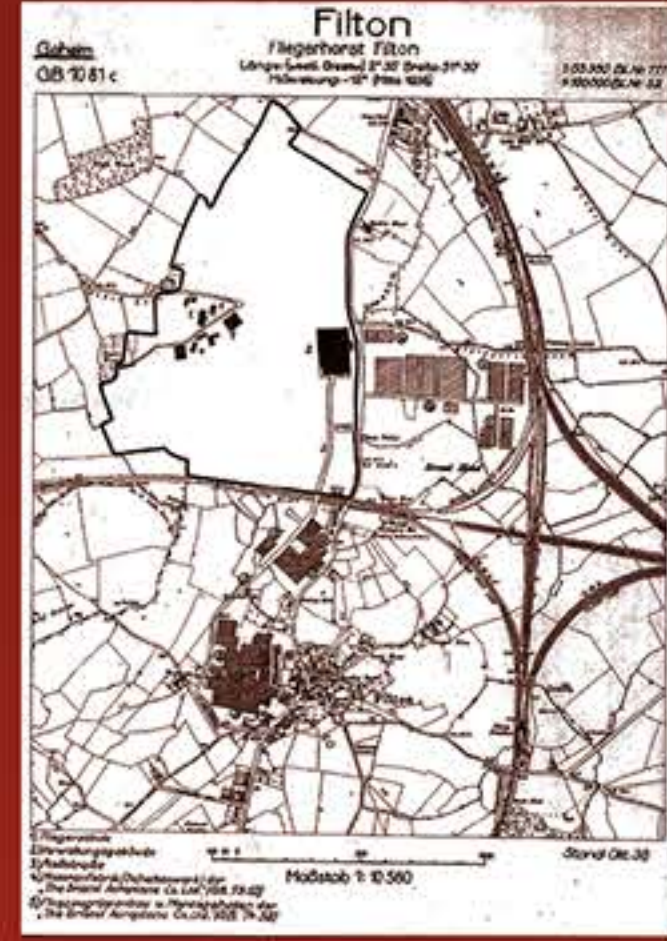
Anderson shelters were made of corrugated iron, set into the ground and covered with earth. It was said to be able to withstand all but a direct hit. People also had Morrison shelters, essentially a reinforced metal dining table. Others used communal shelters in tunnels, caves and cellars.

*'One night, I went with my sister to the communal shelter in Speedwell. It was a disused mining tunnel. We went there because it was more fun. Someone played the accordion all night and there was dancing. Mother and father were furious with us.'*

Mo, Hanham reminiscence session



German bombing raid photograph of Yate



German Map of Filton

*'After the all clear, Mother went out of the shelter to make a cup of tea. Father followed her and she said, 'Put your helmet on, Bill.' He said, 'I survived the last war and I'll survive this one.' She told him again to put his helmet on, so he did, and with that we heard a 'ping' and a jagged piece of shrapnel six inches long hit his helmet.'*

Roland, Hanham reminiscence session



# CHANGING PLACES



John and Arthur from Harwich playing at being 'airmen' in Thornbury  
With kind permission of John Heath



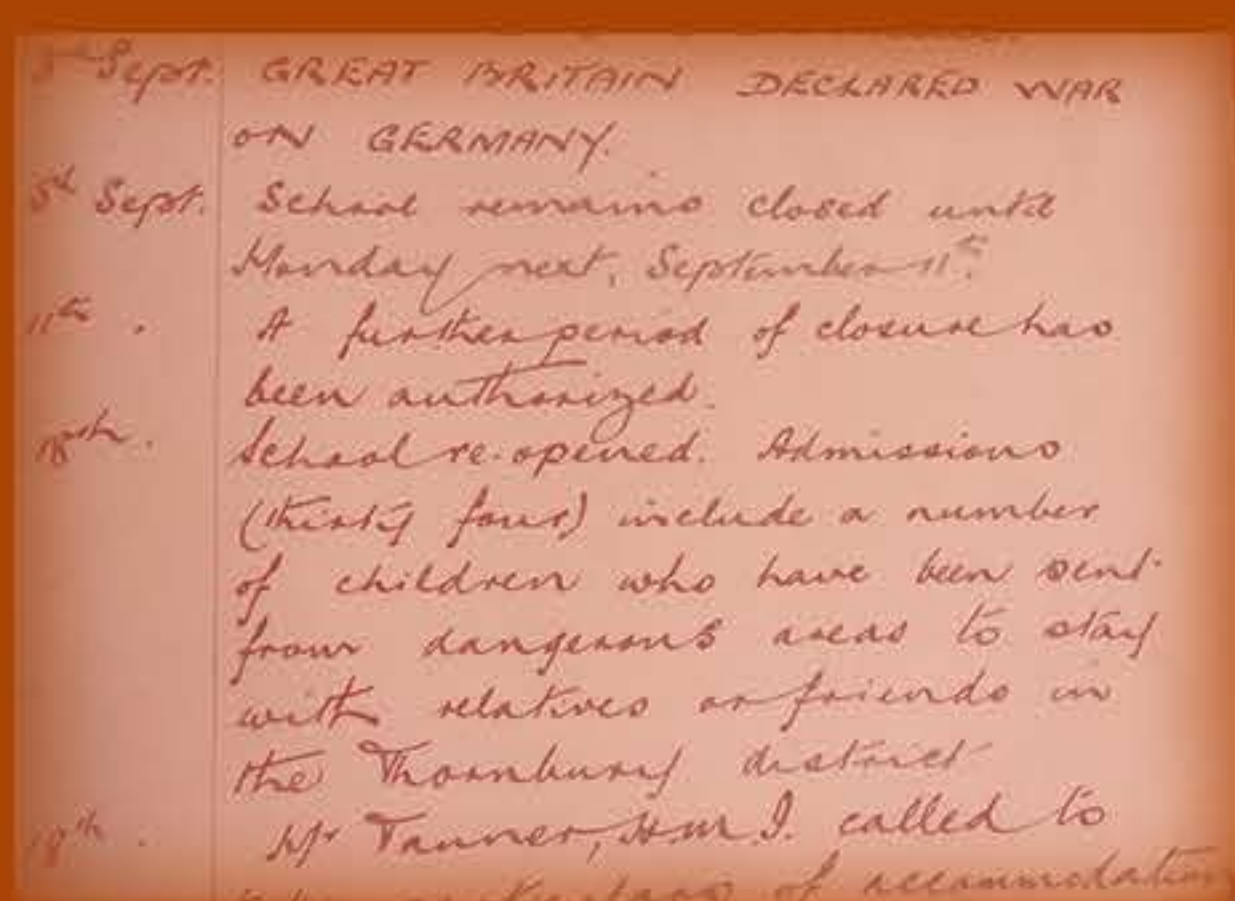
Hella and her father in Germany  
With kind permission of Hella

*'In Berlin, on Kristallnacht 9th November 1938, I saw Jewish shops broken into, burgled and set on fire and the owners dragged out and beaten. My father said to me, 'If you survive this, tell people about it.'*

Hella, Downend

Before the war, communities were relatively static. As the war progressed, evacuees moved from cities to the safer rural areas. Refugees from war-torn Europe made their home here and Prisoners of War became a common sight.

**Nearly 3 000 000 Britons were evacuated from their homes to escape the threat of enemy bombing.**



Daily log book, Thornbury Council School - showing arrival of unofficial evacuees  
Transcription courtesy of Thornbury & District Museum

School children from Harwich, on the east coast, came to schools in Thornbury and lived with local families. Their teachers came with them, essential as so many local teachers were called up for service.

*'We left Harwich on Mother's 28th birthday. Parents had been asked to say their goodbyes at home and not attend at the railway station. We assembled at the school and in pairs crocodile marched to the station. We didn't really know what was happening, it just seemed a great adventure. Our hosts were a mature family. I believe they shaped our future lives, and for my brother and I, for the better. Thornbury is guaranteed at least one visit a year.'*

John Heath, Harwich

**A steady stream of refugees came to Britain.**

Yate and Sodbury people took in Belgians, Poles and other Europeans. Refugees came from all over Europe and worked in local factories. Many remained here after the war.



Hella as a nurse  
With kind permission of Hella

*'Berlin was no longer safe for us. With the help of the Quakers we escaped on Kindertransport to Bristol. I wanted to pay back the country that gave me shelter. I became the first non-British nurse at Southmead Hospital and have lived in Downend for 50 years.'*

Hella, Downend

**Prisoners of War Camps were established on the Gloucester Road near Thornbury, at Hambrook and Yate.**

An Italian POW camp was set up in tents in Cadbury Heath. They were put to work on farms in the area and were distinguished by their chocolate-coloured uniforms with coloured patches. They were considered harmless; in the evenings, they were allowed out of the camp into the local area and, on Sunday mornings, were able to go to church.



ITALIAN POWs AT THE CADBURY HEATH CAMP, WYALDING, 1944  
(THE POW IN THE CENTRE IS GIUSEPPE RIZZO FROM CORCHI)  
Kingswood Heritage Museum

As the weather grew colder the POWs were transported to the Wapley Camp, near Yate.

German prisoners had to wear uniform and report back to the camp every day. The camp had barbed wire fencing and around 30 men.

The first two rows of the Yate cinema were hired out for the POWs on Saturday. The camp carried on after the war up until 1948. Local people still remember POWs coming to tea and being a part of the community.

*'I was eighteen and lived on a farm in Elberton. I got to know one of the German prisoners who worked there and we fell in love and wanted to get married. Mother wouldn't hear of it. But when she got to know him, she loved him as much as I did. Everybody did. He suffered a lot of prejudice but I wouldn't have changed marrying him for the world.'*

Rose, Hawkesbury Upton reminiscence session



Rose and Richard Kuhn on their wedding day after the war  
With kind permission of Rose Kuhn



Group photograph showing evacuees at Thornbury  
With kind permission of John Heath



# THE FRONT LINE



Soldiers from 52nd Heavy Artillery based at Kyneton House, Thornbury 1939 - Courtesy of Thornbury & District Museum

*'I was born in Patchway in 1937, the youngest of 9 boys and 2 girls. All my brothers were in the military services, posted across the world. One was on HMS Petard which captured the enigma cypher machine. One sister drove ambulances and was bombed out of her house three times. Amazingly not one of us was killed but I don't know how mother stayed so strong.'*  
Ken Evans, Almondsbury

At the start of the war, all males between 18 and 41 had to register for service. By December 1941 conscription was extended to unmarried women and childless widows between 20 and 30.

*'They were sending boys my age down the coal mines in Wales - the Bevin boys. I didn't want to do that so I put my name down for the Royal Navy.'*  
Roland, Hanham reminiscence session

*'When you joined the army you weren't allowed any civilian clothes at all. Not even a handkerchief. They were parcelled up and sent home.'*  
Don, Filton reminiscence session

*'One day we took a hit. I can remember a soldier saying, 'Over here, Sergeant. Can't you see it?' There was blood pouring out of him. I applied a pad to stem the flow, but I couldn't do anything to save him.'*  
Noel, Yate reminiscence session

**The lives of many servicemen and women were claimed.**

For names of the fallen on war memorials throughout South Gloucestershire, go to [www.southglos.gov.uk/war-memorials](http://www.southglos.gov.uk/war-memorials)

Regiments were billeted throughout South Gloucestershire. In Thornbury, the military used public buildings for operations and socialising. The 6th Maritime Regiment were there for five years.



Iris and Henry Arnold just after they were married  
With kind permission of Iris Arnold

*'I met my future husband when he was billeted in Thornbury. He was from Cornwall and everyone called him Corny. After the war, he had shell shock; he would shout out in his sleep. He never talked about what he'd been through.'*  
Iris Arnold, Alveston

**The United States joined the war in December 1941.** There were US bases in Yate, Chipping Sodbury, Wickwar and Kingswood and US hospitals at Frenchay and Tortworth. The soldiers became part of the local social scene and were loved and loathed in equal measure.



US soldier with 1000 kg bomb at Over Court, Almondsbury, Feb 1944  
US National Archives

*'When I was on leave we would play darts at the pub in Kingswood. Some black GIs were there and we taught them how to play. We got on well. Then the white GIs came in and told the black guys to leave. The landlord said that everyone was welcome and, if they didn't want to be in the same pub, they would be the ones that would have to go.'*  
Roland, Hanham reminiscence session

**On 8 May 1945, Winston Churchill announced Victory in Europe Day, though the war continued in the Far East until September.**

*'Uncle Ernest had been a Prisoner of War. When he came home we were all there to greet him and had hung up a welcome home sign. I can see him clearly; he was a shadow of his former self.'*  
Maureen, Downend reminiscence session



Maritime Regiment Dance with community at Old Down House near Thornbury  
Courtesy of Thornbury & District Museum

*'In Filton we had a wonderful street party. The butcher's boy stood on the table and sang. He was Welsh and had the most beautiful voice. Everyone was clapping and cheering.'*  
Kay, Thornbury reminiscence session

*'The war had a very strange effect; it seemed to divide people into two groups depending on their experiences, those who couldn't adjust and those who just got on and made the best of it. Yes, the war changed everything.'*  
John Heath, Harwich evacuee



Men of Maritime regiment being kitted out at quartermaster's stores, Thornbury  
Courtesy of Thornbury & District Museum