FM first person piece VE Day

As we get ready to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day on Friday, we do so at a most extraordinary time in our own history.

Coronavirus will change the way we commemorate this anniversary – we will do so at home and not at cenotaphs, war memorials, at churches and in street parties around Wales – it will not change our determination to pay tribute to a generation which helped to build the foundations of the society we all benefit from today.

More than 15,000 Welsh people died over the course of the Second World War. On battlefields across the world, across all branches of the Services, people from towns and villages throughout Wales served and sacrificed, fought and died.

The liberation of Europe was a massive effort by all the Allied forces – the 53rd (Welsh) Division played an integral part as they liberated the Dutch town of 'S-Hertogenbosch in October 1944. I was honoured to be invited to the town’s celebrations last year – every year it commemorates their sacrifice, bravery and endeavour.

There are so many people and so many stories.

The extraordinary Wing Commander Ken Rees, was shot down over Norway in October 1942 and taken to Stalag Luft III prison camp. He played a key part in the famous escape from that prison, as a digger in one of the tunnels. He was given the job on the assumption that, as a Welshman, he was a miner! When *The Great Escape* was filmed, many drew parallels between Rees and Steve McQueen’s character. “It’s always said that he was based on me,” said Rees, “apart from him being a 6ft tall American and me a Welshman of about 4ft 3in who can’t ride a motorbike.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Alan Higgins, from Bridgend joined the Royal Navy at just 15. He survived a torpedo attack on his vessel, the treacherous conditions of the Arctic convoys and the D-Day landings. Such experiences by those who were so young, should stay with all of us.

In Wales, the “people’s war” on the Home Front was a vital cog in the machinery of war but Caernarfon, Cardiff, Swansea and the Rhondda all witnessed air raids and many people were killed. Seventy enemy aircraft dropped some 56,000 incendiaries and 1,270 high explosive bombs over three days in the Swansea Blitz, in February 1941.

Women played a vital role, working in the munitions factories in Hirwaun, Glascoed and Bridgend. In 1943, more than half the war workers in Wales were women – the highest percentage anywhere in Britain. And all the while, the mothers and volunteers dealt with air raids, looked after evacuees, cooked and cleaned for the troops, while ensuring that the social fabric of Wales did not collapse.

Wales also had a job to ensure the mines continued to produce coal – 25,000 Welsh workers left the pits to join the Forces and other jobs between 1938 and 1941 leading to a serious labour shortage.

The so-called Bevin Boys helped fill the gap. One in 10 18-year-olds were drafted into mines and the introduction of middle and working-class Englishmen into the South Wales coalfield, helped reaffirm that the war was a shared experience.

Soldiers, sailors and airmen fought all over the world – many of them had never left their own communities before the war. One soldier from Cwmaman, Alun Lewis, turned to poetry for solace. He is considered to be one of the greatest poets of the Second World War.

In his poem, *Postscript for Gweno*, he captured his feelings towards his beloved wife:

*If I should go away, Beloved, do not say*

*'He has forgotten me'. For you abide,*

*A singing rib within my dreaming side;*

*You always stay.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

Lewis was not reunited with Gweno. He died in Burma in 1944.

Feelings of separation endured on home turf, too. Children were separated from their parents and evacuated away from the bombing raids – 110,000 children were evacuated to Wales, from the cities of England but also from urban areas in Wales to the countryside. Coupled with the sadness and separation, were also stories of joy, of new experiences of life in the countryside, learning Welsh and being part of Wales’ own culture and traditions.

Imagine the feelings of relief experienced by communities across Wales when the Ministry of Information announced on Tuesday May 8, 1945 “*will be treated as Victory in Europe Day and regarded as a holiday.”*

In Wales, street parties broke out in earnest. Sugar had been sharply rationed during the war and would not be available in any quantity for some time to come, but people used whatever they had managed to save to create sweets for the children. Long tables with the treats were set up in the streets; children also enjoyed a two-day holiday from school. People celebrated by singing *God Save the Queen* and *Hen Wlad fy Nhadau* and flew the Welsh Dragon alongside the Union Jack. War in Europe, was over.

On Friday, we will say a collective diolch yn fawr for what that generation did – on the battlefield and on the home front – to help achieve peace in Europe.

Seventy-five years on, we will decorate our homes, talk to our families and keep their memories alive.

We will – as I have done this week – talk to those who were there on VE Day via video chat and treasure their memories. We will celebrate what they did, and remember what it cost them. We will pay tribute to their efforts and we will – as ever – never forget.

**To be involved in the VE Day celebrations you can:**

* **Take part in a two minute silence at 11am**
* **Celebrate in your own home– for ideas go to** [**https://ve-vjday75.gov.uk/**](https://ve-vjday75.gov.uk/)
* **Sing *We’ll Meet Again* on your doorstep at 9pm**
* **Share your family stories on social media using the hashtags #VEDay75 #DiwrnodVE75**

1. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/03/19/wing-commander-ken-rees---obituary/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.warpoets.org/conflicts/world-war-ii/alun-lewis-1915-1944/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)