

Extract from **“None Stood Taller The Price of Freedom”** by Peter Turnham, published September 2022

Chapter One  
The Train to Middlebourne

The life we live is not always ours to choose. If you think your life is defined by your place of birth and upbringing, you would be wrong. Those things define what you are, not who you are. None of us truly understands what lies within until the moment comes when everything you hold dear is threatened and your country asks a question of you. When that time comes, your answer to that question is what defines you as a person. Are you prepared to sacrifice everything in the defence of your country? I answered ‘yes’ without hesitation.

I’m Dorothy Bartlett, I was Archer in those days, everyone calls me Dotty. I’m no-one really, I was just a woman from the East End of London. I stepped forward like so many others, and like so many others, I didn’t recognise that person. War defines us like no other event can. In its wake, when all else has been stripped away, only one thing remains. We are left with memories steeped in sorrow. Ours is knowledge that everyone should carry in their hearts. Humankind’s greatest tragedy is that the collective wisdom of the ages dies with each generation. Until the next time.

It’s a strange irony that the clearer those memories are, the less I choose to revisit them. The time before has been consigned to the past; it’s not lost, it’s eclipsed behind the shadow of war. All that remains is who I am today. My son has been told his father and I are so-called heroes. Charlie says he is imbued with a sense of pride. How can he possibly understand? There is only one crowning achievement in my life, one enormous sense of pride, and now he wants to understand our part in the war.

I understand his desire to know the truth about us, I also know it is not within my gift. If I must, then I can only reluctantly tell him what happened. That’s wholly different from understanding the truth of our wartime involvement. How can he understand that memories lie in wait behind every shadow? If I invite those memories back, they will consume me. The echoes of the past are all there, waiting patiently for me to step through the portal back into World War Two. I only have to close my eyes, and in an instant I am back to where it all began, sitting in a train carriage travelling towards Tunbridge Wells in Kent.

My rooms in East Ham are gone; a single raid in January 1941 destroyed the entire road. I emerged from the Tube station in the early hours of the morning to be confronted with a scene of total devastation. I didn’t even recognise where I used to live. With only the clothes I stood in and nowhere to go except for the rest centre, what was I to do? I didn’t even consider going back to my parents; they represented the last place on earth I wanted to be.

The government wanted us women to work in the factories or the Land Army, and so what better time could there be? I signed up for the Land Army because they said I would be given board and lodging with a nice family in the country. I remember the recruitment woman used those very words, ‘a room with a nice family’. Her words were my motivation. I didn’t understand the concept of a nice family, but it sounded inviting.

I sat in the train carriage watching the countryside move past me.....