



Dennis Vernals

Dennis was born in July 1925 in Attercliffe, Sheffield. His father, Leonard Henry Vernals, had served in the Great War as a gunner in the Royal Artillery and met Dennis' mother, Bertha, whilst on home leave. He died when Dennis was four.

Bertha was left to rear her son with very little income and in poor health. In 1938 she died of pneumonia and it was decided that Dennis should stay with his Aunt Laura and her family.

When he was thirteen, Dennis was confirmed by the Bishop of Sheffield and sang in the choir at St Hilda's church. He managed to contribute to the household when he found work as a paperboy at the local newsagents and gave serious consideration to his future. He had been given a pamphlet about the Army Apprentice School and was determined to apply when he reached the entrance age of fourteen.



Dennis Vernals, age 16 serving with the National Fire Service.

In July [I] reached the age of 14 years and made my way to the army recruiting office at Surrey Street in Sheffield, there to be confronted by a very large Guards Sergeant wearing a broad red sash over his smart khaki uniform. He took me into a side office sat me down and said "What can we do for you young man?" I explained that I wished to join the Army Apprentice School but he looked at me sadly and said "I am sorry but you are just too late as the school has been closed down because war is about to break out at any time and all the instructors from the Apprentice school are needed to train the men that are being called up so you will have to wait till you are 18 and then come and see us again".

A few weeks later, Germany invaded Poland and Britain was at war. Dennis felt relief that Britain had finally stood up to Germany, but worried how it might affect the future. Sheffield made immediate precautions:

A large amount of sand and sandbags was delivered to the child welfare centre opposite where I lived and a call went out for volunteers to help fill the sandbags and to build them around the doors & windows of the premises as a protection against bomb blast. There was no shortage of volunteers, including myself and the job was soon done.

Dennis' school was closed and he attended lessons at a private house. Uncle Bill spent long hours in the steel works and the family were finding it difficult to cope with the meagre rations and household chores. From September through Christmas and into 1940 they saw very little enemy action and Dennis remembers young evacuees returning home and cinemas re-opening.



In the spring, Firth Park in Sheffield provided billets for some of the veterans of Dunkirk:

Our next door neighbour took two of them, as they had the room, and when the men arrived they were in a bedraggled state, unshaven, no kit and only the few clothes they stood up in, they looked as if they had not slept for a week and this was the story all over the area. They were looked after by the people of Firth Park and after weeks of complete rest they were all rekkitted and would parade every morning in the park for roll call. Eventually they were issued with new vehicles and equipment and moved away.

Dennis left school in the summer with a Certificate of Merit and his Aunt Laura found him work with a co-operative dairy, delivering milk to households in the locality. It was in the dairy office that Dennis met his first girlfriend, Jean.

On Thursday 12th December, Sheffield suffered its first heavy air raid. Dennis had spent the evening at the cinema. When he left, he could hear the rattle of aircraft machine guns as the German gunners tried to shoot at the barrage balloons. Dennis was frightened and could see a red glow over the city centre. A policeman directed him to an air raid shelter where he stayed until the 'all clear'. The next morning he made his way to work;

I walked through the Wicker with much difficulty as the roadway was still strewn with rubble and a tramcar which had been sliced horizontally into two halves still lay across the road. I made my way, as best I could to the centre of the city to find the damage to the buildings in High Street, King Street and Church Street was disastrous... I carried on down the Moor to find that most of the buildings had been destroyed beyond belief. I made my way home at the end of a miserable day and I realised that most of the city centre, that I had known as a youngster, was now in ruins and would never be the same again.

Bombing raids continued and Dennis was eager to help the war effort. He began work as a trainee capstan lathe operator. He soon received a letter instructing him to register as a part time messenger for a civilian service and he chose the fire service.

It was a one-pump station manned by a full-time crew with a Company officer in charge and the appliance was an Austin K4 Regional van towing a Coventry Climax trailer pump... I was issued with a full uniform plus a pair of wellington boots, service gas mask and a steel helmet. On each arm of my tunic, about 6 inches below the epaulette, was stitched a black cloth patch with a large letter 'M' in white paint on it so I would be identified in the dark as a messenger.

Dennis was accepted as a full-time cadet fireman just after his sixteenth birthday and spent the following months at Elm Lane HQ.

In 1942, Dennis attended a residential training course at the Area Training School and became a Leading Cadet, which entitled him to wear a green stripe on his epaulette. He also had an interview with the Divisional Commander. He was offered a permanent post in the fire service which would be considered a 'reserved occupation' under the National Service Act. Dennis appreciated the offer but decided he still wanted to enlist in the army.



On 24 June 1943, Dennis' particulars were sent to the Royal Corps of Signals. He was given a very thorough medical and was devastated to find he had failed due to an enlarged scar on one of his lungs - possibly due to breathing smoke and fumes - and was advised to work outdoors. Dennis notified the fire service of the medical board's findings and was discharged on 2 April 1944.

I went to the Labour Exchange to register as unemployed and to seek employment. I was dealt with by a male clerk in a very brusque manner "You are 18 years old" he said, I nodded and he went on "Then why aren't you in the armed forces?" looking at me with disgust over his glasses. "I have been in uniform, in the fire service, full time for two years and the only thing I have to show for it is this green card" I said to him thrusting the card towards him. This was the card given to me by the Medical Board indicating that I had been medically examined and had been down graded to Grade 4. "I have done what was asked of me, so what's your excuse?"

The Labour Exchange did manage to find him suitable employment; he became a delivery driver for a large and exclusive grocery store. He continued socialising with his friends in the fire service and at one of these dances he met a girl called Joyce.

Dennis proposed to Joyce in April 1945 and they began to make plans for their wedding. On 8 May they celebrated VE Day,

Street parties had been organised throughout Sheffield and as I made my way across the city to be with Joyce, I saw plenty of evidence of this. The street on which the Calows lived was no exception, with red white and blue bunting stretched across the road at bedroom level, for the full length of the street. Long trestle tables had been placed down the centre of the street with chairs on either side and an upright piano had been strategically positioned halfway down the street, all ready for the party. When I arrived at the Calows they were already celebrating having already opened a few bottles and they were all frantically making loads of sandwiches as their share towards the party.

Dennis married Joyce on Saturday 6 August and the day seemed perfect. They later learned that it was on this very day that the Americans had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on the Japanese mainland, killing and injuring thousands of people.

The following day the newspapers were full of it, telling us how this new kind of energy was a great step forward in science and how eventually it could eliminate having to pay electricity bills.

The newlyweds enjoyed their honeymoon in Skegness and returned home in time to celebrate VJ Day.