Leslie and Mary Frost
Remember the Second World War Years
*Recorded conversations transcribed by their son Allan*

Leslie Frost’s story

During the war, I was in what you’d call a reserved occupation at Sankey’s in Hadley.

They (the government and public alike) didn’t look kindly on anybody volunteering and clearing off or disappearing at that time if they’d got any experience, particularly in the engineering world.

As it happened, I got stuck on spitfire fuselages assemblies. I was responsible for the drawing office ends of things; when drawings came from Vickers headquarters at Castle Bromwich, the Spitfire headquarters, management at Sankeys sent the drawings through to me for amendment. It was my job and responsibility to see that Vickers got the latest drawings.

If any alterations or repairs were wanted to be effected during the assembly of these things, then I used to have to make the drawings out for them and apply for the concession to be made so they could be passed by their engineers and then passed through to the Air Ministry inspection department for them to follow up as well, so everybody had records of them.

It was amazing the number of times that repairs were needed! And sometimes, of course, there was a problem when air operations were in progress (something giving way or needed enhancing, or some other battle damage) and emergency operations had to be put in to strenghten where necessary: these came through to me again to see that whatever needed to be done was carried through.

And that was more or less what I was on all the time during the war. Which meant considerable alteration down at Sankey’s itself because access to the works was only down one narrow lane and over two railways so that personnel had to walk down under two bridges but materials and stuff had to come to come to the firm over the top of the railways and over level crossings, then down to the front of the factory, which only had a comparatively narrow entrance.

The material for the fuselages and the framework, etc., had to be transported halfway across the works to the far end of the factory. So that’s why the main entrance to Sankey’s from the Leegomery end later came into being. A new road was put through to it and it certainly made it far easier to facilitate the in and out of materials and made a big difference to the firm itself as it started expanding: production was wanted and production was needed.

In addition to the Spitfire fuselages, there were spinner cones for Wellington bombers. We did one or two wings for Wellingtons as well, but the Spitfire was the main concern and at one stage we were getting around 3 or 4 fuselages out a day, complete with engine, and shipping them off to Castle Bromwich.

When the invasion scare came in 1940, well before it actually happened, the government decided to form Local Defence Volunteers to help patrol and watch for any parachutists being dropped over here, as spies I suppose: you never knew whether you were being told truth or lies during the war. The first casualty of war is truth.

We had no weapons; it was after Dunkirk when the big evacuation came through and the blitz had started. There wasn’t enough weaponry to go round the existing forces let alone anybody else, so people were wandering round the countryside looking and ducking and vanishing. That’s what LDV really stood for at that time: ‘Look, Duck and Vanish’: you were told to do that because you’d got nothing to do anything else with!

The idea was to report anything unusual and we went wandering round the countryside on bikes. One big advantage was that you could go anywhere on anybody’s land and you couldn’t be stopped. There was no question of anybody trespassing or anything like that. You had the right to go wherever you fancied. Certain areas were mapped out as routes, so you patrolled these areas and used these routes but there’s more than one person’s cabbages and beans had disappeared out of the various gardens up and down the country which were not the result of enemy
action (not in my case, I might say!). But, taking it by and large, the system worked reasonably well until munitions supplies started to come from Canada and America.

When the position improved, the government decided to run us on a more military basis and formed the Home Guard with proper army units. We (the platoon to which I belonged) were affiliated to the Regular units of the KSLI (King’s Shropshire Light Infantry) and were in the 5th Battalion. We belonged to D Company whose headquarters were at Wrekin College. I remember that all Home Guard platoons in the district held a parade along Sutherland Road in 1942 (see photo below).

One of the masters at the College with the same surname as myself, Frost, was the company commander but my platoon was based at Blockley’s Brick Works at Hadley, under the leadership of my old Sankey’s boss Mr Shaw. He was an old 1914-18 War veteran who’d been to Gallipoli and similar places. So that’s how we formed up and started training.

Regular soldiers came down to shove us through our paces, which was a very peculiar thing because we had such a mixed bag of odds in this Hadley platoon. There were people from Leegomery, farm labourers, older ones of course, who were a bit short-winded. There were us younger ones who were pretty fit and there were all shapes and sizes in between. So, when you were put through your paces, the younger ones were luckier because they could stand the pace while the older ones couldn’t. And we had to do quite a bit of background reading before the people who came in to instruct us realised the state we were in.

I seem to have had an eye for shooting because it wasn’t very often I didn’t get a possible top score with a gun on the 200 yard range they built at Blockley’s clay pits: they dug a trench out at the back, like at The Wrekin firing range, where men manipulated target boards and indicated whether shots were on target. The targets were under/over ones. I kept at it except when I started to wear glasses and, of course, you can’t focus properly at all with glasses.

I joined just as an ordinary private but I thought to myself, ‘Well, if it ever becomes necessary and you really are wanted, the more efficient you are the better.’ So I used to get stuck into the exercises and swotted. You could buy books on things and borrow official books on grenades.

Eventually, after a year or so, I went to a couple of courses, one down south and another up near Southport to train as a weapons training officer. I kept a notebook with instructions and drew my own detailed sketches of components (see above). Most of the training was to do with grenades, so at the end I was quite proficient on those.

We had to do the practical end of things as well, such as what you had to do when the bombs didn’t go off and had to destroy them. I became more and more interested in that side of things to be quite honest. I made myself some models and things like that to demonstrate how these things worked and, of course, you can’t do things like that without coming to the notice of others. So eventually I was made a Lance Corporal and then a Corps Sergeant and ended up as a Second Lieutenant and Training Officer for the Company. With powers to do all the necessary training, organise the training, review any new weapons coming through; all this had to be done by me for the Company.

And we had a subsistence allowance of 1/6d when we went on patrol and had to stop out most of the night, to provide our refreshments if we could get them off our rations. We did have a bit of concession, I suppose, in that we had a bit of tea, free tea and things like that. That’s how it worked out.

We used to stay the night up at Blockley’s works, which was all right during the summer but when winter came we didn’t go out on patrol but had to stop there to man the communications centre. On
one occasion, when we came to use the teapot, it was full of, er, well, we'd forgotten to empty out the dregs out from a month or two before and there was a lot of penicillin in it which had to be scalded out!

One of the drawbacks was that I lived in King Street, Wellington, near the drill hall, so whenever our company was supposed to be on duty there and didn't turn up (which happened quite often), I was dug out late at night or in the early hours to go and stop at the drill hall in the communications room, at the top of a bunk (with rats scurrying around underneath) in case phone calls come through. I never had a phone call but whether they'd come through or not when I was asleep I don't know!

The arsenal, the Woolwich Arsenal, moved up to Donnington. When the workers came up there were no houses for them and, although we'd got a baby and my wife's old Mum (we'd plenty to do to look after them) as we'd got a spare bedroom, we should have one of these London chappies billeted on us. And he proved to be a very nice fellow all round, a decent chap, and he did provide access to black market eggs and things like that from the local pub (the Black Horse just down the road) where he went to have his drink.

We looked after an evacuee from Smethwick for a short while from September 1939; she left some time later when her parents were expected to contribute a little to her keep. She was twelve years old.

My daughter Margaret had been born in August 1939, just before the War started. My elderly mother-in-law, Mary Jones, died in 1942. One of her grandsons came over with the American Forces (that branch of her family had emigrated to America some thirty- to forty-odd years earlier) a few months later to see her but he could only visit her grave in Wellington cemetery.

My first son, David, was born in 1943. Near the time he was due to be born, I was encouraged to go on a course down at Dorking, a Home Guard course on grenades and weapon training, with a view to becoming a weapon training bloke myself.

I had become very interested in these things and, with typical military efficiency, I was sent down a day too early, travelling down with my rifle and equipment and my allocation of the one or two rounds of ammunition they dare let us have.

Because I was a day early, they didn't know anything about me. I said, 'Well, You'd better find something about me because I want to come and I don't want to stop on the station all night.' So they sent a little truck to fetch me: it turned out to be the Lord Lieutenant of the County's place where this course was being run. Rank went by the board, everybody was in the big dining hall with the portraits of the Lord Lieutenant of the County's ancestors round the walls, with tablecloths, proper cutlery... and tipping everywhere you went ... to a grenade range, to the firing range, to the bombardier range, the spigot mortars range, etc. ... there was a tip for the driver, another tip for the driver, and so on.

It was a very interesting course, actually. I always remember one moment when it didn't seem to be such a good idea when the chappie who was taking us on mines was talking to us and had a mine in front of him. He was pretty deaf because of the bangs and explosions he'd been through during his operations and training and he kept idly pressing up and down on top of the mine; fortunately it was a dummy one.

I always remember the first night being there: I

Commendation certificate in recognition of 'good service' awarded to Cpl. W. L. Frost, 5th Shropshire Battalion, 1st January 1943.
ended up in the stoke hole with a little Irish bod who was three parts slewed with a bottle of whiskey by the side of him. We were sitting there looking at the stoke hole ... and what he wouldn't have done to the Pope if he'd have had him there! He'd have stuffed him up the stoke hole and all sorts of things! To me it seemed funny at the time. In view of what happens nowadays you realise how far back these things go because he wasn't joking.

It was a very interesting time down there. I was most impressed with the full gas hedge-hopper, which consisted of a forty gallon mixture of tar and oil and all sorts of things like that with a charge underneath it; the ideal thing was you waited until an enemy tank was just the other side of a hedge, and you blew it up. The idea was that you just tried to hawk it over the hedge, set it on fire so it smothered the tank and enveloped it in flame. Unfortunately, one (or fortunately as it went a bit wrong) had a bit too much charge underneath it (it was a delicate operation) and it went up in the air in one big ball of fire about 50 feet across, very impressive!

Another incident on the range was when we went to throw the anti-tank mines and lob them over the hedge into the tracks of the tanks. The mines were in the shape of a Thermos flask. The aim was to get them close to the tank, not from over a hedge like we did in practice because that isn't any protection against small arms fire or any other fire but from behind a suitable wall from where you could lob it. You took the cap off the mine, a little tape was wound round the handle and round the fuse, with a lead weight on the end ... and you lobbed it over.

However, when I got to the officer after the throwing part of the proceedings, he looked a bit shaken when he asked my companion, a little Welshman. 'How did you get on? 'Oh,' says the Welshman. 'Oh, I chucked mine up. The tape came out and all the rest, but it dropped down at our feet ... and it didn't go off.' 'It didn't go off?! You two are the luckiest people alive!'

I enjoyed the holiday down there, and the luxury. A change during the war years. When I returned home, I was fully expecting to find whatever it was, a boy or a girl, would have arrived. But he hadn't. My son was born a week later than expected. I wouldn't have known if the anti-tank mine had done its job properly!

In the years when our Country was in mortal danger
WILLIAM LESLIE FROST
who served 4th June 1940 - 31st December 1944
gave generously of his time and powers to make himself ready for her defence by force of arms and with his life if need be.

End-of-hostilities certificate presented to members of the Home Guard in recognition of their commitment to defend the realm ‘with his life if need be’, and signed by grateful monarch King George VI.

Postscript
Leslie Frost died on 24 December 1984. A working plywood model of a hand grenade (used in his Home Guard training sessions) and countless grenade firing pins with brass tags were discovered in the attic of his home in King Street, Wellington, together with his Second Lieutenant’s swagger stick.

The attic also contained several rounds of live rifle ammunition, two hand grenades (fortunately defused) and a smoke bomb (still ready for use!).

Victory Parade through Market Square, Wellington, led by local Home Guard platoons, 1945.
The government didn’t really prepare us for war. We were just listening to what was going on and, as we heard from Prime Minister Chamberlain, well, we thought the crisis was over. So, of course, over the next twelve months (in 1938/39) we (as ordinary people) didn’t know much that was going on.

I think we realised after the first two or three months that things were not going as we thought they would. Things were gradually getting worse in Europe, so we began to wonder what was actually going to happen and, of course, when the actual declaration of war came we knew then the balloon had gone up.

It seemed that ordinary people didn’t get involved ’til it actually started but there were preparations going on with the army and those in power, so that everything was put in place for when it started. Conscription didn’t come in straight away, at least I don’t think it did.

When the depot started being built at Donnington before the war started, we had some sort of inkling that something was going on but we in Wellington didn’t realise exactly what was going on there. We didn’t realise that the arsenal from Woolwich was coming up. It was obviously just part and parcel of the lead up to war. But we noticed an awful lot more workmen around. I don’t think the blackout started until 1940 but I could be wrong.

Children from Smethwick were evacuated (below) from August/September 1939. My husband and I were allocated Marion, a young girl from Hollyhedge, Holly Lodge or Holly-something school in Smethwick. Younger evacuees went to Constitution Hill school but ours went to the Girls’ High school, on the other side of the road and about 100 yards up from our home in King Street.

It must have been 1941, after the girl had gone back to Smethwick, when we then had a gentleman, Mr Daniels, billeted upon us. We had no choice in the matter and you could be prosecuted if you refused. A council officer had come physically round to the house to see whether we had any spare accommodation. That was what rather upset me, because I’d got my mother here in her 80s and my baby Margaret, but it didn’t make any difference. I’d got room and I was on the bus route to Donnington (where Woolwich Arsenal had been relocated), which was an important factor they had to think of for those people getting to work.

Mr Daniels arrived when the arsenal was ready for use after several years of preparation ... when it opened, this influx of Londoners came into the area and there weren’t enough houses to put them in. The work was there, but the houses were still being built so the first batch that came were billeted locally. If you’d got room, they would supply a bed, the bed linen and everything else he needed. There was only one fire in the house so we got no additional allowance for coal, although we did receive about 25 shillings a week for giving him breakfast and an evening meal.

He was here most of his spare time but I’ve an idea that he went down to the Black Horse in King Street; remember, it’s war time and they even worked Sundays, so he was only in our home in the evening until first thing in the morning before he went off to work.

There were some benefits in having a person staying with you. He was able to get things for you that you couldn’t normally get, like eggs. We all thought, ‘These Londoners can get where water canna creep’, and it was surprising what they could get: my gentleman always brought me half a dozen eggs and a War Cry for my mother from the Salvation Army people. And he also gave me money to buy fruit, which was in very short supply and quite expensive. He was what you would call a rough diamond but he was very kindly and wouldn’t impose on me in any shape or form, and he was very quiet.

Eventually, when some of the new houses were finished in Donnington, then the families came up a few at a time to join the men already here. Mr Daniels wasn’t married but he’d always been part of a family and I think his sister and her two sons had lived with him. He was in the first lot to be given a house in Donnington. Once they got started they threw houses up very quickly. Fortunately, we didn’t have anyone else billeted on us. We weren’t very fond of some of the Londoners when they first came because, when
we were quietly queuing, they would push in, not wait their turn. I think they were a strange race. A race apart.

Army convoys went regularly through here from Whitchurch; this was the main way to travel north or south. At first they were our own people but when the Yanks came they came with all their paraphernalia, their chewing gum, their chocolates and their nylons. I don’t think we had very many actually in Wellington: they’d be round about in places like Atcham, where there was quite a colony of them. They came into Wellington for entertainment, or the entertainment went out and met them; it seemed to me that were dances and things taking place on their own premises all the time.

Wellington put on a variety of entertainment. There were all sorts, like concert parties and individual people entertaining, using the Clifton Cinema for different things, including concerts as well as morale-boosting films, and bringing well-known artists in. And the churches and the YMCA, they opened up.

They were busy almost day and night providing refreshments and places for service personnel to go at night when they weren’t on duty. And there were a lot of instances where ordinary folk opened their houses to people who entertained (playing the piano, singing, etc.) for a meal or to save them wandering about doing nothing. Travel was quite restricted and, because they were not considered essential to the war effort, holidays were discouraged.

There were a few scandals; there must have been with our own but it was chiefly the Americans with their nylons that were the temptation for certain people… no doubt about it, the population went up!

We were all very conscious of the situation and that we weren’t to talk: ‘Walls have ears’. We went carefully around and had to learn how to use our few rations which were very, very scarce.

There was no lighting in the streets. The signposts were removed all over the country. You could go out in the dark and I suppose you could take a little flashlight but had got to hold it down; you hadn’t got to show anything light hardly at all, so it was not good to be out at night unless you were with other people and helping one another round and about. You weren’t to show any light through your windows. We had some covered frames made, wooden, that we used to stick up every night to hold in place. Some folk had curtains made of blackout material which didn’t show light through: I remember left-over blackout material was used to make Pierrot costumes for a concert party at the church Institute.

Then we had gas masks given out; they came in a little cardboard box. We had to collect them but when my youngest son was little (from 1943) we had a gas cradle for him: we had to push him into a sort of hooded thing and shut him up in there. It wouldn’t be a very nice thing to have to do in an emergency. Frightening. Somebody came round and showed me how to use it (I don’t think we ever did). When you went out anywhere, your gas mask went with you and, if you had a baby, well, you had to take the hooded thing with you on the pram.

I had ration books for the children. Cheese was rationed, sugar was rationed, butter was rationed, bacon was rationed, meat was rationed, sweets were rationed. Petrol and even furniture was rationed. Fruit was almost non-existent except for local fruit and when bananas came to town you were rationed on them (if you could find them) and people with children would go up to different fruit shops and

New Street Wesleyan Methodist church staged various ‘concert parties’ and opened its Institute doors for a variety of social events to brighten the austere lives of Wellington’s inhabitants. Above: A performance by Pierrots dressed in blackout material (1943), while Sunday School children sing patriotic and other songs to an appreciative audience (1941).
queue to get hold of a banana. And we had a minister here who didn’t have a car but who went round on his bike and if he saw anyone from church he used to say ‘bananas on Mill Bank’. That was one thing we always remembered about Rev. J. Edgar Noble, ‘bananas on Mill Bank’.

Rations got less and less: we’d have perhaps two ounces of butter per person a week. Everyone would have so much cooking fat. People were allowed and would be expected to keep a pig for their own use in the war. Mr. Owen (two doors away) had one and Thomsett’s over the road always had one. I don’t know whether many people had chickens but I think they had a little allowance for feeding them. I know if you had a farm you had an allowance as you always had to have food for livestock.

Rationing was bad enough for big shops where they got plenty of customers You had to register at a particular supplier so you couldn’t go here and there. Each shop was given rations for their registered customers. And my husband’s mother’s shop, being a smaller one, often had hardly enough because she had to weigh everything herself so that by the time she’d gone through all her customers, she was really down to a hair’s breadth of whatever it was on the turn of the scales.

Tinned food was very rare; we didn’t live from tins by any means. In those days you cooked your food fresh and tinned food and particularly tinned fruit was only on high days and holidays or Sunday. Something like 3p (4½d) for a tin of pineapple. Wages were only about £2-odd a week so you wouldn’t want to pay more than that. Corned beef was ½d per ounce, 2d per quarter.

I don’t know that you went shopping every day but you knew what would last a week. Many people had cellars in those days but you had to be very careful. You didn’t buy in advance much. You had nowhere to put it like you have now.

I would imagine that the Home Guard first started at the bigger factories, which formed their own group or platoons. Blockleys at Hadley had one. The Territorial Army often had their men on duty. My husband Leslie spent many nights on duty at the Drill Hall because he lived so near to it. Whether they had a rota of local people I don’t know but my husband spent many a night there. He used to mention the rats running round, keeping him company.

They didn’t get uniforms for a few months. They had their LDV armband and gradually they were issued with a uniform and, eventually, ammunition. It was something of a sad joke to begin with... LDV stood for ‘Local Defence Volunteers’ but, because they were unarmed, all they could do was observe in case of an emergency, so LDV came to mean ‘Look, Duck ... and Vanish!’

They had tuition locally from their own leader but anybody who was going to have a particular job to train went on an army course. My husband went on two occasions for training on ammunition. The one was in the Liverpool area and the big one he went to was down south somewhere. He had a week at each place; he could tell tales about what happened with amateurs while they were learning to throw grenades! It’s a wonder they hadn’t killed one another on the spot! He saw them have very near misses.

Locally, they were supposed to get to know their own area well, which seemed to mean spending evenings crawling through barbed wire on Ercall Hill. He once cut his foot severely on a broken bottle while scrambling though the undergrowth.

He used to say there were many folk’s gardens that were less a few cabbages and things with some of the men at the end of a night time exercise.

The Home Guard would be the last line of resistance, if it had come to that. If we’d been invaded, they’d have been very important because they’d be local and would be expected to take on the role of saboteurs (like on the Continent and the French resistance).

By the end of the war, a lot of them were quite well trained for what they were supposed to be doing. Naturally, people like my husband had to go to work in the day time: he was in a ‘reserved occupation’, involved with the war effort. He was a draughtsman at Sankeys and worked on the design of Spitfires so he didn’t have to go to war but was expected to be in the Home Guard.

I was the housewife with the family so I didn’t know a great deal about the secret things that were going on. However, I did know we had ammunition and other things that were likely to go bang at any time stored in our attic. My husband used them in demonstrations at the Home Guard and gave lectures on them at his and other platoons.

The flashing beacon on top of The Wrekin was erected, probably in 1943, as a result of some aircraft crashing into the hillside. My children could see it from the back bedrooms and, from then until it was
dismantled in the 1960s, it was custom to say
goodnight to the blinking beacon just before going to
bed.

We occasionally heard aircraft flying from Tern
Hill or one of the other airfields in the area. We very
rarely heard enemy aircraft, presumably on their way
to or from Coventry/Birmingham. We heard a lot
more of our own aircraft flying about at all hours of
the day and the night training or actually going out
on missions. There was plenty of noise.

Local newspapers seldom reported news of the war
itself; there was very little news until the war was
over: they published captions and different things
about what was going on in the world but no named
places, just very general things; certainly not the
coverage we get now telling us almost everything, but
with a political slant. There was a lot of censorship,
particularly regarding what was going on in Germany
and Russia at the time that people don’t believe now
but it was obvious terrible things were happening.
The Russians were doing bad things… until they
joined us.

When they put the Germans to rout, it saved us a
lot because the Germans were taken up with fighting
them instead of pursuing us, so the war swung one way
to the other. You could pick up different things from
different parts of the world on the radio, but even
then precise information was limited.

Even though many men and women died in the
war, I think we all feel that whatever happens to
anybody else is not likely to happen to us… you’re
going to be the one that’s left so that, when
something terrible does happen, you realise that
everybody is in it and you realise that it’s possible that
you or a relative can die. I think the worst thing in
many instances is never to know what happened,
where they are… missing, never heard of again or, if
they’re airmen particularly, they could come down
anywhere, be shot down anywhere and never be
found.

There was a great amount of neighbourliness: we
were all in it, we were all fighting the war in our own
way. Hitler was the arch enemy. With Mussolini …
we heard quite a bit about the fighting at Anzio with
its big monastery on a hill top but the newspapers
were very heavily censored as to what they could
publish.

I think in general it was just a case of making sure,
as far as one could, that individuals had no
connection with any foreign power or didn’t
constitute a fifth column or anything like that. Many
foreigners of military age living in Britain when war
broke out were taken to the Isle of Wight and other
centres, just in case, but it was no implication against
them that they were all baddies by any means. I don’t
think they were isolated by the British public because
of it, nor that there was any great degree of prejudice
against them, at least from most people.

I don’t recall much about Prisoners of war. There
were several camps in the district and they were sent
on to the farms to keep them occupied and help with
harvests and farming generally. I do know they
weren’t supervised as if they were criminals and I
understand a few remained after the war and married
local girls.

If nothing else, the war gave women the
opportunity to do jobs traditionally done by men. So
many men went off to war and women had to fill their
places in the factory, on the land and driving buses or
even trains. Many young men, too young to enlist,
were sent down the mines. Those whose consciences
forbade them enlisting were sometimes prosecuted; at
the very least they were made to do some sort of work
to contribute to the war effort, even if it was only
doing some office job on behalf of a ministry or
supplier.

Eventually, there was a feeling that we were on a
winning streak and when victory did come we were
more than grateful. But, of course, when the war with
Germany ended we’d still got the Japanese to contend
with. We celebrated Victory in Europe (VE) day and
had to roll on and on until the atomic bomb had
dropped at Hiroshima, and then we had Victory over
Japan (VJ) day. There were parades, celebrations and
tea parties in the streets.

It marked the end of a very hard period. We
weren’t to know it at the time, but austerity would
continue for at least six more years.

Parents and children of Prince’s Street school in an
impromptu VE Day victory parade along King Street.