What Did You Do   
In The War?

*by*

Richard Morris What Did You Do In The War?

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Characters

Old Lady

Brainy One

(Radio) Announcer

Bud

Chesney

Sergeant

Corporal

Bertie

Gertie

Flirty

Shirty

Farmer

Mrs Farmer

Grace

Debs

Matty

Chorus (nominally six)

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What did you do in the war?

(Music 1)

(Chorus Enter)

(Old Lady is sitting in a chair. She has a capacious bag.)

(Song 1: Bud, Chesney)

**Announcer:** We interrupt this broadcast for an important announcement. At 9 a.m. today, September the third 1939, an ultimatum was delivered to the German Government. No reply has been received and Britain is now at war with Germany. God Save the King.

(Music 2)

(Bertie, Shirty, Gertie, Flirty, enter in marching order with “ rifles” on shoulders led by Corporal and Sergeant.)

(Corporal imitates everything Sergeant does)

**Sergeant:** Halt Bertie

**Corporal:** Halt Bertie

**Sergeant:** Distance…. Shirty

**Corporal:** Distance… Shirty

**Sergeant:** ATTEN….SHUN! Face right!

**Corporal**: Face right!

**(They face left)**

**Sergeant:** I sa…id RIGHT

**Corporal:** He sa…id right

**Sergeant:** Face…. wait for it Flirty… Front!

(They turn their backs on him)

**Sergeant:** You….. silly billies…. The front… The front

Corporal: HE SAID “front “

(They face the front)

**Sergeant:** Shoulder… arms

**Corporal:** Shoulder… arms

(Bertie, Gertie, Flirty, Shirty drop their rifles and put their arms on their shoulders)

**Sergeant:** This is your last warning Bertie.

**Shirty:** I’m Shirty Sergeant.

**Sergeant:** I can see that…. Then who are you?

**Gertie** Gertie…..this is my mate…

**Flirty:** Flirty.

**Sergeant**: Bertie!

**Bertie** Sergeant Sir!

**Sergeant:** Shirty!

**Shirty:** Sergeant Sir!

**Sergeant**: Gertie!

**Gertie:** Sergeant Sir!

**Sergeant:** Flirty!

**Flirty:** Sergeant Sir!

**Sergeant:** What are you… comedians?

**Corporal** What are you… comedians?

**Old Lady:** I’d give up with this lot if I were you

**Sergeant:** Who goes there? Identify yourself you ‘orrible little woman.

**Old Lady:** I ain’t ‘orrible and I ain’t little. I may be old and often cold but I know things, **(She taps her head.)** You don’t know

(Cast tap their heads as if she’s mad.)

**Chorus:** Oh Yeah!

**Sergeant**: Squad.

**Corporal**: Squad

**Sergeant:** Atten… shun!

Don’t run!

(All stand to attention.)

**Sergeant:** At ease.

**Corporal**: **At ease**

**Chorus 1** **(sneezes.)** Ati…shoo.

**Sergeant** Don’t sneeze.

Fall out

**Chorus:** Yeh, Yeh, Yeh!

**Sergeant:** Don’t shout.

**Corporal:** Don’t shout

**Sergeant:** Approach this fossil from the past.

**Old Lady:** I’ll ‘ave you know that I ain’t a fossil, ain’t I?

I’m a ‘uman being and ‘ate fossils, don’t I?

**Announcer:** Can’t you say your aitches?

**Old Lady:** Aitches….. course I can….. ‘ere…. listen

‘Arry went to ‘Ampstead ‘Eath

‘Arry lorst is ‘at

‘Arry’s mother said to ‘Arry

‘Arry, where’s your ‘at?”

“Anging on the ‘ook in the ‘all, mother” said ‘Arry.

**Announcer:** I think we should help ‘er, Chorus…. ‘Ow about it?

**Chorus:** Oh, rather

**Announcer:** All together Now

**Chorus** Harry went to Hampstead Heath

Harry lost his hat

Harry’s mother said to Harry

“Harry where’s your hat?”

“Hanging on the hook in the hall, mother” said Harry.

**Bud:** Now you know ‘ow

**Chesney:** To say your aitches.

**Old Lady:** Old folk may cough and croak

And never get the joke.

But we’ve lived and learned

About pain and fear.

Remember.

We were also children once.

**Chorus:** Oh no you weren’t.

(Old Lady takes out of her bag a sign, holds it up and encourages adult audience members to say...)

**Old Lady** } **(together)**

**Audience.** } Oh yes we were.

**Chorus:** Oh no you weren’t

**Corporal**: Enough of this or I’ll have a fit

**Sergeant:** You may sit.

**Corporal:** You may sit

**(Chorus sit)**

**Sergeant:** Now you ratty rabble, approach the lady

And listen to her tattle.

**Corporal:** Listen to her tattle

**Announcer:** You’ve heard it all before….

(Various Chorus members.)

**Bud:** Many times.

**Chesney:** “When I was your age”

**Matty: “**If we were rude to the teachers,”

**Grace: “**We got the cane”.

**Debs:** “Oh… the pain…”

**Bud:** “My hand was sore for days”

**Chesney:** Et cetera,

**Matty:** Et cetera

**Grace:** Et cetera

**Debs:** “During the war…”

**Old Lady:** War!.... **(emphasising the word which.)**

*Which* war..?

*Which* war?

*Which* *War*?

**Flirty:** Witch war!

**Gertie:** Ooh missus...

**Flirty:** A Witches War?

**Bertie:** We didn't know…

**Flirty:** There was a war…

**Shirty:** With witches!

**Bertie:** What did witches fight with... broomsticks and magic spells?

**Flirty:** I’m a witch. **(She shrugs her shoulders up and down)** With a twitch.

**Gertie**: Boil her in oil and stir the pot.

**Bertie:** Er…. Won’t that make her a little hot?

**Shirty:** What a clot.

Of course not.

She has magic potions and funny voices.

**Bud:** Cackle cackle...

**Chorus:** Cackle cackle.....

(Music 3)

(Brainy One enters)

**Grace:** The Brainy One has come.

**Everyone** The Brainy One! The Brainy One! The Brainy One!

**Debs:** We bow to you,

**Announcer:** Does one and one make two?

**Brainy One:** Now that’s a very interesting question…. depending on the ratio of the square…

**Chorus:** Okay! Okay! Okay!…. we give in*.*

(Brainy One climbs onto a chair and declaims.)

**Brainy One:** Enough of this fun and games.

Let us be seri..us

And declare our pur..pus

**Bud:** Oh Brainy One do tell us..:

**Chesney:** What is our aim?

(Pause.)

**Chorus:** Or is it just a game..?

**Brainy One:** Repeat after me and you will see.... that our game..

**Announcer:** Is History.

**Chorus:** Boring.

(They start to walk away)

**Bertie:** Tales of blood and gore

**Flirty:** And sacrifice.

(Chorus turn immediately and with enthusiasm say.)

**Chorus:** Ooh that will be nice...

(They shake their fists and swagger around and say)

**Chorus:** We love a bit of bovver don't we?

**(menacingly)**  You know what we mean?

(All face the audience and smack fists into the palm of the hand, then point at the audience.)

Chorus: We can arrange to have your face re....arranged

Know what we mean?

**Brainy One:** Back to the plot you lot.

**Gertie:** When is our historical time?

**Bud:** 1939... the Second World War.

**Announcer:** In 1940 the battle of Britain began.

**Chesney:** Men as young as eighteen and nineteen flew little planes

**Matty:** They were called Spitfires

**Grace:** …into the skies of London and defended the people.

**Debs:** London was bombed,

**Matty:** For seventy six consecutive nights.

**Announcer:** “ Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few”.

**Brainy One “**We few, we happy few, we band of brothers”

**Sergeant:** It wasn’t just London as the war went on.

**Corporal:** Coventry

**Announcer:** Liverpool

**Flirty:** Manchester

**Announcer:** Plymouth.

**Brainy One:** Hull.

**Gertie:** Glasgow

**Announcer:** Belfast.

**Old Lady:** Lots of children were evacuated to the country

Away from harm

To stay on a farm.

(Bud, Chesneysimulate a steam train, Radio Announceris the driver, Gracethe fireman, Bertie, Shirty, Gertie, Flirtyare evacuees looking out of the windows with name labels round their necks)

**Bud:** Steam…

**Chesney:** Steam…

**Grace:** Steam…

**Announcer:** More coal, fireman….. look lively

**Grace:** Give us a chance…. I’m breaking me neck here

(Shovels energetically)

**Flirty:** What are those fings in the fields?

**Bertie:** Elephants

**Shirty:** Nah…. can’t be… they ain’t got no trunks

**Gertie**: Then they can’t go swimming

**Flirty:** The fields are so…. green

**Bertie:** I fink they paint ‘em

**Shirty**: Funny smells

**Gertie:** It ain’t me

**Flirty:** You sure?

**Bertie:** Look…. here’s the Station

**Shirty:** Chipping Norton

**Gertie:** I’m scared

(Children get off the train and look around anxiously).

**Farmer:** Ah….. here they be my dear…

**Mrs Farmer** Look like they need fattening up

What do they feed you on in London**?**

**Flirty:** Bread and Pull it

**Farmer:** What’s that?

**Bertie:** You buy a loaf of bread

**Gertie:** And….

**Shirty:** Pull it.

**Mrs Farmer:** I think you be pulling my leg

**Farmer:** Okay kids, get in the cart

**Evacuees:** What…. with them wild animals?

**Mrs Farmer:** They won’t harm you

(Chorus make sounds of chickens, ducks and lambs)

**Evacuees:** We want to Go Home!

**(Song 2. All.)**

**Old Lady:** Many children were glad to get back to London even though there were…

**Sergeant:** Blackouts…

**Corporal:** Bombs...

**Old Lady:** Ration books.

**Chorus:** Ration books? .

**Old Lady**: Still got mine. **(Takes a ration book from her bag)**

To buy meat or margarine

No treats, the portions mean

Not sugar and spice

And all things nice.

(She opens the ration book and takes out a coupon and gives it to Brainy One.)

**Old Lady:** You ‘ad to give the shop assistant a coupon.

**Brainy One:** That will do nicely thank you madam.

**Old Lady:** If you ‘ad no coupons... you got no food..... and no sweets!

(All sob, hit their heads and repeat)

**Chorus:** No sweets.. no sweets.. no sweets.

**Old Lady:** And no fish fingers!

(Chorus turn to each other and bury their heads in each other’s shoulders.)

**Bud:** It’s too much…

**Chesney:** No fish fingers… unbelievable.

**Matty:** The government should have done something about it.

**Grace:** I ‘d have complained.

**Debs:** People must have starved.

**Bud:** I’d have told my auntie.

**Chesney:** It’s….. tooo… much

(Gertie starts to leave the stage.)

**Sergeant:** Where are you going?

**Matty:** Fishing

**Corporal:** What for?

**Matty:** Fish fingers.

**Sergeant:** Back in line you silly lass.

**Old Lady:** Another problem

Was escaping gas.

**Chorus:** Gas! What did you do?

(Old Lady takes a gas mask out of bag.)

**Old Lady:** Since you ask,

I wore a mask.

(Puts it on.)

**Brainy One:** Ration books

**Matty:** Conscription

**Grace:** Gas masks,

**Debs:** What a life!

**Chorus:** Weren’t the people downhearted?

**Brainy One:** Never!

**Matty:** They were magnificent.

**Grace:** They danced

**Debs:** They sang.

**Chorus:** They followed the van

**Announcer:** We interrupt this broadcast…

**Chorus:** Get off!

(Old Lady takes off gas mask and gets up and comes centre stage).

**(Song 3. Old Lady & chorus)**

(Pause for applause).

**Old Lady:** There was such a sense of....

**Chorus:** Community?

**Old Lady:** People got together... shared and cared.

**Chorus:** Like Care Bears... cuddly and kind.

**Old Lady:** At night we had a blackout.

**Flirty:** My grandma had a blackout… she was talking to my mum and..

**Bud:** And she fell over.

**Chesney:** Too much gin and tonic.

**Chorus:** Boring!

(They all simulate fainting and fall on the floor.)

(Lighting: Blackout)

**Old Lady:** Hang about.

(Rummages in bag. Shines a torch.)

**Old Lady:** I was an A.R P. Warden.

**Brainy One:** Air Raid Precaution Warden.

**Chorus:** Ooh get you, Brainy One.

**Old Lady:** I went round in the dark telling people to put up their blackout curtains so the bombers couldn't see their targets.

(The Old Lady shines the torch on each speaker.)

**Gertie:** What were their targets?

**Old Lady:** Factories.

**Brainy One:** St Paul's Cathedral.

**Bertie:** Churches?

**Shirty:** Synagogues?

**Gertie:** Temples?

**Flirty:** Mosques?

**Bud:** Houses,

**Chesney:** Flats

**Matty:** Shops,

**Grace:** Schools?

**Debs:** People.

**Announcer:** Bombs don't know the difference.

**Bertie:** Like on the telly

**Old Lady:** We didn't have television.

(Lighting: The lights come up.)

**Chorus:** You mean no telly!

**Flirty:** What on earth did they do?

**Shirty:** My grandad said they talked.

**Chorus:** Talked! That's wicked.

**Bertie:** To each other?

**Old Lady:** To anybody. It was great. We had lots of knees ups. Come on you lot.

(Song 4: Chorus sing and everybody dances.)

**Old Lady:** Oh I’m puffed.

(She sits down and takes a drink out of her bag and hands it around. )

**Announcer:** Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen. It is nine o'clock. The prime minister speaks to you from Number Ten Downing Street.

**Old Lady:** Winston Churchill.

(Radio Announcer pretends to puff on a cigar and speaks in Churchillian voice)

**Announcer:** "I have nothing to offer you but blood, toil, tears and sweat.

We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be.

We shall fight on the beaches,

We shall fight on the landing grounds,

We shall fight in the fields and in the streets.

We shall fight in the hills.

We shall never surrender”.

(SFX 1)

(Everybody imitates soldiers running for cover, guns firing, some falling to the ground injured or dead.)

(SFX 2)

(Everybody stops moving and is silent. After a pause.)

**Bud:** What is that sound we hear...?

**Chesney:** Ominous?

**Matty**: Sad?

**Grace:** Full of fear?

**Debs:** Is it a warning?

**Brainy One:** That the planes are coming to bomb us.

**Bertie:** In ***[name of school]***?

(Cast move in slow motion wringing their hands.)

(Lighting: If the technology is available the stage should be dark and the actors illuminated by flickering lights giving the impression of slow motion.)

**Everyone:** **(whilst moving)** Twas on a Monday morning

That we first heard that warning.

It wasn't sweet and charming in any blooming way.

We ducked We dived

We weaved We cried

The bombs came anyway"

(Lighting: lights come up.)

**Gertie:** What will happen to us?

**Old Lady:** We must go underground.

**Gertie:** Like the rabbits in Watership Down?

**Bertie:** But we have no shovels to make a hole.

**Brainy One:** She means The Tube, the Tube... foolish boy.

**Flirty:** District or Circle line?

**Old Lady:** We used to shelter in the Piccadilly line.

**Corporal:** It's a long way to Piccadilly.

**Sergeant:** Especially if you’re carrying a kit bag.

(Song 5: Ensemble)

(Pause for applause.)

**Brainy One:** Hadn’t we better get going?

**Bertie:** Who knows the way?

**Shirty:** Or is it....

**Bertie:** Only a play?

**Old Lady:** Walk this way boys and girls, and you will learn what your grandparents did in the war.

(Old Lady starts to walk. The whole group gets into single file behind her and imitates her funny walk. They circle the stage and then simulate descending a staircase or if possible crawl through a plastic tunnel of some kind.)

(Lighting: Dim to blackout as they emerge)

(Brainy One shines a torch.)

**Brainy One:** Lights out... lights out.

The bombs are about.

Must hide like moles in the ground

If we do not want to be found

dead... Or drowned.

(Lighting: Lights come up.)

(Cast arrange themselves in a semi-circle.)

Sergeant: Lie on the mattresses… you'll be safe down here.

Corporal: You’ll be safe down here.

(The group lie down on the floor.)

**Chorus:** Oh it's scary… scary.

**Old Lady:** Just think… imagine... above you is forty metres of London clay.

**Brainy One:** And in the sky are planes.

**Bertie:** With bombs to drop.

**Gertie:** It is only a play... isn't it?

(SFX 3)

(All jump up and scream.)

**Chorus:** I want my mummy.

(They run around jumping into laps and sucking their thumbs).

**Old Lady:** Every night it was like that.

**Flirty:** Were you frightened?

**Bertie:** Scared?

**Shirty:** Terrified?

**Old Lady:** Nah... I was too young to be overwhelmed by fear.. it was fun..... like Star Wars. We were like rabbits in their cosy burrows.

**(Song 6: Chorus.)**

**Old Lady:** We went underground and had Fun, Fun, Fun.

**Gertie:** What did you do?

**Old Lady:** We told jokes or sang songs.

**Announcer:** I say! I say! I say! We interrupt this broadcast….

**Chorus**: Get off!

(Song 7, Ensemble, led by Bud and Chesney)

(At the finish of the songs they all lay down again and sit up on their elbows and are silent for a moment.)

**Gertie:** What was happening.

( she points her finger upwards) up there?

**Old Lady:** Men and women, black, white, and brown

Were fighting and dying for the Crown.

**Brainy One:** King George and Queen Elizabeth were in Buckingham Palace.

**Bertie:** Where were the Mums and Dads?

**Old Lady:** Working in the factories... in the mines... fighting in the trenches... making submarines, warships...

**Flirty:** Tanks?

**Old Lady:** What’s that dear?

**Flirty:** Tanks?

**Old Lady:** Oh don't thank me ... it's a pleasure to talk about that time. So much happened after Dunkirk.

**Shirty:** What happened at Dunkirk?

**Brainy One:** The Germans defeated the Dutch and the Belgians with their motorised army.

(The Chorus act as motor bikes and cars rushing around. )

(SFX 4)

**Announcer:** It is May 1940. The German army has swept across France and pushed the British army into the French port of Dunkirk. The British navy and many small ships rescued three quarters of a million soldiers.

**Sergeant:** Brought them back to fight another day.

**Corporal:** Fight another day

**Bertie:** So we won?

**Old Lady:** Eventually... it's a long story. It took the Allied Forces...

**Sergeant**: Australians,

**Corporal**: Indians,

**Bud:** Canadians,

**Chesney:** New Zealanders,

**Matty:** West Indians,

**Grace:** Africans,

**Debs:** Americans

**Gertie:** Russians

**Old Lady:** To finally end it all in 1945.

**Flirty:** With a big bomb?

**Sergeant:** Two big bombs.

**Corporal:** Two big Bombs

**Brainy One** The Atom Bombs.

**Bud:** Hiroshima

**Chesney:** Nagasaki.

**Bertie:** Mushroom clouds… it looked so… pretty.

**Shirty:** Like a painting.

**Old Lady:** So many dead... so many injured.

(All the children look up. They watch intently and one by one fall to the ground. After a pause one by one they rise to their feet. They reach out to each other and hold hands.)

**Bertie:** Why are there wars?

Old Lady: What do you think?

(Silence.)

(Song 8: Bud and Chesney)

**Brainy One:** Where have all the flowers gone?

**Old Lady:** On the graves of the fallen.

(She takes some poppies out of her bag and hands them around.)

**Announcer:** “They shall not grow old as we are left grow old

Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We shall remember them”

**Chorus.** We shall remember them.

(SFX 5)

**Old Lady:** So many never came back.

**(Song 8 reprise: Ensemble)**

(SFX 6)

**Old Lady:** It's safe to go up now.

(Cast simulate going up stairs or go back through a tunnel. They come out as into daylight. They shield their eyes, then rub them and look up into the sky. All turn to the audience. They form a line across the stage.)

**All say:** Girls and boys come out to play

We've lived to learn another day.

We know from books and in our mind

That human beings can be kind

If we grow up and fight and kill,

Then in our hearts, we will feel ill

Come my sisters, brothers, friends.

To the world let's make amends.

(All the cast turn to the person nearest and shake hands and make a sign of peace. Then shake hands with front row of the audience.)

**Old Lady:** ‘Ere.... come on let’s have a laugh.

(Song 9: Ensemble)

(Curtain)

Production Notes

Music/Song Suggestions

All the suggestions are songs which would have been familiar (in the UK) in the 1940s.

Caution: most of these songs are still in copyright.

**Music 1:** “There’ll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover” (Nat Burton in 1941.)

(Nat Burton was an American song writer, who didn’t realise that “bluebird” is an American species, not a British one!)

**Song 1:** “Daisy Bell” (Harry Dacre, 1892)

(Better known as “Daisy, Daisy” or “A bicycle made for two”, even though the original lyric says “built for two”, not “made for two”)

**Music 2:** “Colonel Bogey” (FJ Ricketts/Kenneth Alford)

(Best known in the arrangement by Malcolm Arnold from the film “Bridge on the River Kwai” where the British prisoners of war enter whistling “Colonel Bogey” whilst Malcolm Arnold’s “River Kwai March” is played by the orchestra.)

**Music 3:** A short fanfare

**Song 2:** “Show me the way to go home” (Reg Connelly & Jimmy Campbell/Irving King, 1925)

**Song 3:** “My old man said ‘follow the van’” (Charles Collins & Fred W. Leigh, 1919)

**Song 4:** “Knees up, Mother Brown” (Harris Weston & Bert Lee, 1939)

**Song 5:** “Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag” (Felix Powell & George Asaf, 1915)

**Song 6:** “Run rabbit, run” (Noel Gay & Ralph Butler, 1939)

**Song 7:** Medley:-

“Underneath the Arches” (Bud Flanagan & Chesney Allen, circa 1937)

“Baby Face” (Harry Akst & Benny Davis, 1926)

“She’ll be Coming Round the Mountain” (Traditional)

“Roll out the barrel” (Jaromir Vejvoda & Vasek Zeman, Lew Brown, 1934)

(The song was written in 1934 as "Skoda Lasky" (Lost Love) by Czech writers, the English lyrics were added by Lew Brown and it was given the [forgotten!] title “Beer Barrel Polka” by Wladimir Timm.)

**Song 8:** “Where have all the flowers gone?” (Pete Seeger, 1956)

**Song 9:** “The Hokey Cokey (Jimmy Kennedy, 1942)

There are CDs available containing most of these songs (the author suggests “50 Singalong Wartime Favourites Vol 1 Blueberry Hill”) and most are easily available as sheet music in popular song collections.

Costume Suggestions

**Brainy One** Glasses. Mortar Board labelled “Brainy One”. Pen behind ear.

**Announcer** Bow Tie, Dinner Jacket, an old fashioned Microphone

**Old Lady** Brown hand bag . Black Shawl, Black Skirt, Blue Hat with feather.

**Farmer:** Farmer’s hat and smock. Walking cane.

**Mrs Farmer** Shawl and hat

**Bertie }**

**Flirty }** Khaki Army uniforms

**Gertie }**

**Shirty }**

**Sergeant** Khaki Army uniform, 3 Stripes on Shirt. Baton.

**Corporal** Khaki Army uniform, 2 Stripes on Shirt.

**Bud:** Hat and long fur coat } Bud and Chesney are modelled on Bud Flanagan and

**Chesney**: Hat and long coat } Chesney Allen. Look for photographs!

Props

**On stage:** Armchair (used by the Old Lady)

Other chairs.

**Old Lady:** Large plain bag containing:-

torch, gas mask, ration book, sign saying “Oh yes we were”, poppies

**Brainy One:** Prompt book. (This can be used not only as prompts to the actors but for the Brainy One to read facts and Churchill’s speech.)

**Bertie }**

**Flirty }** Labels with names and addresses, small suitcases or bags.

**Gertie }**

**Shirty }**

**Grace** Shovel

Sound Effects

All the suggested sound effects can be found on a Sound Effects CD “SFX War & Disaster”, catalogue number PLATCD506 (available via the Internet or via HMV Shops).

The sound effects references are to tracks on that CD.

**SFX 1:** Tracks 45 46 47 48.

**SFX 2:** Track 49. (Siren)

**SFX 3:** Tracks 51 52 (Bombing)

**SFX 4**: Tracks 29 30 31 32 333 34 (military vehicles)

**SFX 5:** Track 62 (The Last Post)

**SFX 6:** Track 59 (start). (The “all clear” signal.)

Set

No specific requirements. Plain background. WW2 artifacts if available.