

# VE DAY 70th Anniversary



■ Joe Albon is on the left of this group marking VE Day with some good old newspaper-wrapped fish and chips!

Photo: CONTRIBUTED

## How Joe beat the odds - and celebrated with fish and chips!

**I**tell my great-grandchildren, when we go along the Northern Road in Sudbury, past Tesco's, 'Your great-grandfather built this road!'"

Sheila Albon's proud of late husband Joe, the dapper civil engineer she met at Newmarket Races in the early 1960s. Twenty years older, he'd travelled the world before they met - and before that had cheated death when his plane was shot down over Italy.

Little wonder he looks cheerful in this photograph taken on VE Day, 1945, as a cosmopolitan group of servicemen tucks into the first fish and chips of peacetime.

Sheila thinks it was taken outside a newspaper office in London. Joe is on the far left. The others are a couple of journalists and, in uniform, an American, a New Zealander and an Australian.

Joe Albon's all smiles on VE Day, but the picture doesn't tell the whole story. He'd been shot down, held by prisoner and escaped - only to be caught again. And then he helped shape Suffolk.

**STEVEN RUSSELL** hears the story - and about a photographer's time in India

Sheila doesn't know the details. Her husband was loath to talk about the war. "Lots of them were. You had to pull information out of them," she says. "Stiff upper lip thing."

Joe grew up in a large family in Long Melford. (He was actually Basil Raymond, but everyone called him Joe - though he was known as Raymond in his business dealings.)

He signed up at the start of the Second World War - "I think he was slightly under-age," says Sheila - and was a rear-gunner and wireless operator in the RAF.

At one point his plane was shot down over Italy and he became a prisoner of war. "He spent some

time in a prison camp, which he said was dreadful. They were so hungry they had to eat potato peelings and cardboard. He escaped and was on the run for around about a year. And then he got recaptured. I don't know much about the recapture; he just did not talk about it." It's also not clear exactly when he was freed.

However, Joe trained in civil engineering after the war and worked for construction firms such as Taylor Woodrow. Many projects took him abroad, to places such as Hong Kong, Japan, Kenya and the Middle East, and it seems he had a wonderful time travelling the world.

One project was the Tanganyika

Groundnut Scheme: an ill-fated British Government wheeze to cultivate parts of what's now Tanzania with peanuts. It was halted in 1951 after the areas chosen proved too dry for the crop.

When Sheila got to know him, Joe was working on the Essex River Board building at Chelmsford. They met at Newmarket Races in about 1961. "He liked the betting side and I liked horses," she says. What caught her eye? "He was well-dressed - always very smart. That's what I like!"

Sheila was a farmer's daughter, living not too far from Long Melford. Her family had been part of the influx of Scottish agricultural folk to East Anglia. "My mother's parents came down to Assington. They put everything on a train - all the animals, all the furniture, all the implements, and themselves. And came to Bures station!"

Joe and Sheila married in 1964 and set up home in a village not far from Sudbury. Towards the end of the year, she'll have lived there 51

years. Joe didn't work abroad after he became a husband. Projects in this country included working on a factory at Colchester for furniture maker Alstons. "Then he worked for the GLC" - the Greater London Council - "doing the overspill [housing] at Cornard, Thetford, Haverhill and Witham. He did roads and sewers."

The couple had a daughter. There's now two granddaughters and four great-grandchildren.

Joe died in 1988, aged 68. He'd never really opened up about the war, says Sheila, and she never pressed him too hard. "He just blanked it right out. 'I don't want to talk about it... I don't want to talk about it...'"

She herself had been only a baby, a toddler and then a very young girl during the conflict. "The only thing I do remember is doodlebugs coming over and my mother making us go into the cupboard under the stairs! She said 'When the engines stop, they just drop out of the sky.'"

