

DANCING FOR JOY

By Joy Denny ©2013



Joy Denney in her ENSA Days

I was always a dancer from a young age. When I was eleven, I was ill and to build up my strength again I went to dancing for exercise. I enjoyed it and went on to study ballet seriously after that, and I went to the Bush Davis School in Tottenham Court Road. At one time, I was in a Spanish dancing company performing in London. I was the only English girl and they wanted me to keep quiet and not let it be known that I was actually English. My stage name was Joy Tudor, but with them it was Alegria, which means Joy in Spanish and I had to pretend to be shy and not say much! I did some early TV at Alexandra Palace with the Spanish company. I remember the makeup was an odd yellowy colour. Perhaps it was to do with the lighting and cameras at that time. I also taught dancing a bit. When the war came, I felt I should do something. My brother advised my father not to let Joy join the ATS, because he had a slightly starchy view of women and thought I might get too much freedom. However, I thought I should do what I



knew I could do, so I went to Drury Lane and volunteered for ENSA. At first, I did a tour of aerodromes playing to the RAF in England and Wales for about a year. At that time, I was not in a company, but part of a triple act, Barbara, JoJo and Joy and we were fitted into shows. We met Douglas Bader during that time, who was going out with one of our singers. Then I got into a company called Lucky Dip and was sent abroad with them.

We were given some training at Drury Lane as to our behaviour on tour. They explained that whilst we must be friendly and chat to the boys and cheer them up, we must be sure not to be flighty or lead them on in any way. They wanted no loose behaviour and no pregnancies. Generally, behaviour between the sexes was much more reserved then than now, but there were one or two instances of girls becoming pregnant.



We sailed from Liverpool. One thing I took for myself was 12 pairs of ballet shoes as I was sure I wouldn't be able to get any especially in my little size 2! We were supplied with topees (which looked as though they were left over from the First World War and which we never wore), sleeping bags, camp beds etc. We were only given all this on boarding the train and we didn't even know where we were going.

My two brothers had already enlisted and were overseas and it must have been hard for my Mother who came to see me off, but she never spoke about it. In those days you just had to do what you had to do. There was a war on and we weren't going to lose it.



We had a very good manager with our party. His name was Bertram Otto. He was very responsible and sensitive in spite of being in great discomfort a lot of the time because he suffered from stomach ulcers. He could speak seven languages which was incredibly useful on our travels. He also did a Chinese conjuror's act and called himself Ming Chow. His act always went down well and caused a storm with the boys

when he used to get the CO up on stage and later when he had returned to his seat he

discovered that Bertram had expertly palmed his watch. 'Ming Chow' could also make cards rise vertically from the pack - but this was with my secret assistance, actually pulling them with a strand of cotton.

We ended up in Liverpool and sailed in a convoy to Algiers. We had a naval escort and at times we were in danger from enemy submarines. There were depth charge attacks and the noise was terrific; the ship was rocking violently with the backwash from the explosions. We were lucky not to be attacked, although another ENSA party was on a ship that was hit. However, they were all safe.

Our billet in Algiers was a shock. It was a beautiful Arab house built around a courtyard with a fountain in the middle. The bathroom was ensuite and had gold taps and all these elegant fittings — but no water! It was very glamorous and of course, straight out from home, we weren't used to anything like that. We were very impressed, it was lovely. We had an Army CO for the area who was the Entertainments Officer. At one time it was Jack Hawkins, the actor, who was in the Army during the war.



We went gradually across N. Africa, playing shows as we went and we went down into the desert too. One of the things we had to learn is that you couldn't just stop on the road. If you did, you would be surrounded by the local people in no time and your kit and equipment would disappear very fast.

We travelled in a 3-ton lorry, sitting on our stuff in the back and as the mountains came right to the coast, we had to go round mountain roads. On one occasion, we noticed that the truck kept weaving and our manager went to check and found that the driver was almost falling asleep. We had to take turns riding with him in the front to try to prevent him nodding off. When I took over, I finally said to him, "If you don't pay attention, I'll drive!" but far from taking it as a threat, to my astonishment he just said, "Go on then," so I actually did take over and drive for a while, which was no easy task when there was no power steering plus the fact that I was only 4ft. 11ins. tall!

That was near Tunis and we went on through Bengazi and other places in North Africa. On one trip down into the desert, we were with the Long Range Desert Group. My brother had been serving with them but had been invalided home and whilst chatting with some of them I mentioned that all his kit and belongings had been left behind. One of them offered to locate his things and send them home for him and I heard later that he had done so which was very kind of him. I still have the letter he sent to me

afterwards. After going across North Africa, we went over to Sicily then Italy.



Our company used to play to troops not far from the front lines. We would be transported in to do the show and chat to the boys afterwards and then we would be transported out again further back, to our base. Sometimes, especially in Italy, we were far enough forward to be within reach of gunfire which on one occasion was especially hair-raising. We went to play to the troops at a fuel depot. At many of the places we played, we had a make-shift stage. At the fuel dump, they used the most handy thing — jerry cans of petrol! Our stage was some boards supported on the jerry cans full of fuel and we were within reach of enemy fire. That made for a very lively show. Fortunately, the enemy must have been having some time off, as we safely performed the show and went back to our camp. However, on our way home, we did hear the crump of gunfire and explosions so we'd left with not much time to spare.

We were in Italy quite a long time and for a while, the CO in charge of ENSA in Italy was another well-known actor, Nigel Patrick. Although you think of Italy as a warm country, the winters could be very severe. Our billets varied from nice hotels to tented camps and everything in between. We were once in a village at the top of a hill in wintertime and were staying in a building which had the usual Italian stone floors and because of previous damage, had no glass in the windows. We put up our camp beds there, all the girls in one room and all the boys in another. It was very cold and we lined our beds up close to the far wall to try to get some shelter. In the morning, we swung our feet out of bed and straight into piles of snow. It had gradually blown in through the windows during the night and formed a drift beside the beds.

At that village, we had to queue with the local people for water which was pumped from the well. They didn't like us because they felt we were taking their water and we couldn't have much — just one container between us. Washing was a bit primitive. There were six of us girls and we had to keep clean and nice for the job we were doing but we had to share the water. We all six washed our faces, then we all washed our bodies and finally, in the 'soup' that was left, we all washed our feet. Roughing it was something we just got used to; although occasionally we stayed in some beautiful places, there were also



times when we had to make camp wherever we could. We had to turn our hands to most things because everyone just had to pitch in



In February 1944 we had a particularly harrowing experience. We had been in a hotel in Campo Basso, near Montecassini and were moving on. The weather was terrible, cold and snowing. We had a truck and a desert caravan brought from N. Africa and at one point on the road, we became utterly stuck in the snow. We tried to go back but were blocked by drifts in that

direction too. There was our little group and our two drivers from the Army. They were very good and did their best to look after us. It was a very serious situation and we later heard that in other vehicles, people had frozen to death. The desert caravan only had slats in the windows, being designed to be cool, so we had to block the slats up with snow to stop the blizzards blowing through and after a while we only had melted snow to drink. We were stuck there for three days and our food had almost run out but eventually, some chaps on skis were able to bring us some more rations and later they were able to send a bulldozer to rescue us, but even then the only way was to go back to Campo Basso. During the time we were stuck there, our driver saved the life of an Italian whose hand he saw sticking out of the snow - he had fallen into a big drift and was stuck. This little adventure being stuck on the mountain gave us a claim to fame back home with a headline in the Wimbledon Borough News, "Local Girls Stranded — With ENSA Party in Mountain Blizzard".

Even in Italy, we had some good billets. In one area, a well-known authoress, Naomi Jacob, who lived there, used to arrange very nice billets for us. The trouble was, she would then tell all the Army officers locally where we were and tell them to visit us. This was a bit difficult at times - we were supposed to be friendly but we didn't want to be too accessible. Occasionally a chap became a little too interested in one of us and we had to handle that carefully. We knew they were a long way from home and lonely, but we couldn't get involved with them.

Near the front in Italy, we visited a hospital. We used to go to visit the wounded soldiers and cheer them up. On this occasion, I was invited to watch an operation. The surgeon was going to remove shrapnel from a shoulder wound. I said I would like to see, but I kept well back in case I should faint, so that I wouldn't be in the way. Far from fainting, I got so interested I gradually crept nearer and nearer so that I could see better. I wasn't at all as squeamish as I expected and found it a very interesting experience.

We had the opportunity to do all sorts of things which we wouldn't normally have been able to do. When we were being flown by Dakota from place to place as we sometimes were, we would sit with the Pilot for a while and I have been allowed to 'have a go' and fly the plane in level flight. I hate to think what my colleagues would have thought if someone had told them Joy was flying the plane. Another time, in Trincomalee, Ceylon, we were invited to visit a submarine — although we weren't allowed to pilot that! Whilst we were in Italy, some chaps also let me drive a tank. That was quite funny because being so small, I had to sit right at the edge of the seat in order to reach the controls and we were driving in an olive grove having to miss all the trees.



Another 'first' for me was having a go on skis. Whilst we were at Campo Basso, just below Montecassini, we had some very snowy weather. Our manager got some skis for us and found a sloping field where we could have a go. He put his on and started off, but he had been skiing before and knew how to do it. I had never done it before and I started off down the field but suddenly, one leg disappeared deep into the snow : I had skied over a well and my leg had gone in. We shouldn't have done it at all as it was too dangerous in an area we didn't know, but fortunately, I was all right so we didn't really take it very seriously.

Being so far from home, if we had some free time, we used to try to maintain some bits of normality. When Christmas came, we thought even though we couldn't do most of the traditional things, we could at least have a tree, so we went out foraging for one. Eventually we found a little tree that wasn't really a fir tree but it was an evergreen and about the right size, so we just lopped it off and took it back to decorate. Looking back, we didn't ask if the land belonged to anyone so it was rather a liberty really.

Travelling about in Italy in areas where the battle had moved on, we often used to see beside the roads a stick with a Tommy's helmet on top. These marked the graves of the boys who had been killed. It was very sad, but you had to train yourself not to think about it too much. It wasn't that it made us afraid for ourselves — although we had some worrying moments, we didn't really think about being killed, we were too busy travelling, rehearsing and doing our shows. As an example of how near the front lines we sometimes were, I remember going up on to the roof of the place we were staying to look at the view. I could see right across the valley to the village on the next hilltop. Looking across with a pair of binoculars, I found myself looking straight at a German soldier on a rooftop there - and he was looking back at me with his binoculars.

A lot of the time, we were able to wear civvies, but if we were playing anywhere near the front lines, as we often did, we had to wear our uniform because if there was any action



which caused a retreat, the army units would not bring you back if you were in civvies. In ENSA we had officer status, although we were not actually officers. The girls had silk blouses with ENSA insignia on the shoulders and a khaki tie - I always used to tie mine in a bow rather than knot it. Our cap was a little softer than the usual uniform cap, so you could wear it at an angle and it looked quite nice. A problem for me was that I was so small I couldn't get battle dress to fit me, so I had to take the smallest and get it altered.

The Stars who came out to entertain the troops were usually inserted into shows which were doing the rounds at the time. We didn't see many because they were not usually sent too near the front lines. Usually, they played to bigger groups in mustering areas further back. I suppose the managers didn't want to risk letting them go anywhere more dangerous. However, I did do a show with Tommy Trinder when he came out. He came forward to do some shows with our group, Lucky Dip. When we did these shows, we had to do anything, we didn't just dance. We would appear in sketches, or be the feed

for the comedian. I was feeding lines for Tommy. He was very nice and I still have a note he wrote for me on a 5-lire note : in a parody of his catch phrase, 'A-ha, you lucky people', he wrote, "You plucky people". At one of his shows a film was taken and I remember my parents were notified afterwards so that they could go and see me performing in the show. One thing I didn't do was sing - I can dance and act, but I have a voice like fried ice! On one occasion I was obliged to sing as part of a sketch with one of the comedians. We had no rehearsal time; he said all I had to do was come on and sing 'Because'. I have never had a worse time - in the first place I couldn't sing and in the second, I only knew two lines of the song! The comedian went around the building intending to come in from the back but couldn't get in, which caused a bit of an uproar but that was probably fortunate for me.

Even though we were in the middle of war, we had opportunities to see so many lovely and interesting things during our time in Italy. I





remember being in Naples in March 1944 when Vesuvius erupted. [23 March 1944 was the last time Vesuvium erupted.] I will never forget the sight of that red river of lava flowing down the mountain. The next day, it had slowed down and we were able to go and see the lava flow in the daytime. When we got near, there were dense yellow clouds of steam and gas. The flow had gone right through a village so that on one side, the houses were all gone and on the other, they were intact. Those that had been destroyed were still suddenly flaring up here and there. At about the same time, we also had the chance to see the ruins of Pompeii which was not far away.

We had a good billet in a hotel in Naples. It was built around a square staircase and I remember we could hear the chambermaids singing as they did the rooms, their voices echoing up the staircase. There was still entertainment going on in cities during the

war and I recall seeing *The Barber of Seville* and *Madama Butterfly* at Naples Opera House.

I also went to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv later that year. I saw the 'wailing wall' as it was called and was amazed at all the little pieces of paper tucked into the wall. I thought Tel Aviv was a lovely place and our billet there was very good. We went to Tripoli and Beirut and to Damascus where we stayed in a wonderful hotel. It was so elegant and beautiful with marble floors. I went to Sakis which was a very good store - they had one in London as well - and got some lovely material and I still have a little bit of it. Most of the places we stayed in were little hotels of differing standards but most were all right.

We got a little bit of leave while we were in Naples and went to Ischia for a week. It was beautiful and while we were there they said we should see the hot mud springs. They took us over there and I remember there was only a small walkway across these mud springs where this black mud was boiling and we were told to be sure we didn't fall in because it was so dangerous. We arrived at this marble building and they offered to give us a mud bath which was supposed to be very good for you. You lay on a kind of bed and they slopped warm mud all over you, then wrapped a towel over you and left you to rest. It doesn't sound very nice having mud all over you but actually it was very relaxing and quite pleasant. After a



while, they put you in a kind of large sink and hosed all the mud off. We noticed that when the Germans had control of the area, they had made good use of the baths as well because there was German graffiti all over the walls.



At the end of our tour in Italy, we were going back to North Africa to Cairo to prepare and practice a new show. Just before we were due to leave, I became very ill with bad pain in my chest and a very high temperature. We had to leave on the plane at five in the morning and I wondered whether I would be able to go, but the thought uppermost in my mind was that I must stay with the unit. All our kit had already gone to be loaded and I had such a high fever that the things I was wearing were soaked so we had to

rummage around for bits here and there and I ended up wearing underwear borrowed from some of the men! Dakotas weren't the most comfortable way to travel, but at least I was still with the unit although feeling wretched. When we arrived in Cairo, I was sent to hospital with pleurisy, but I soon recovered and was back with the unit again. I used to make quite a few of my costumes and while in Egypt, I found a Singer sewing machine shop and arranged to hire a machine. Whilst I thought I was going to take it away and return it, they had set it up for me to do the work in the shop. The machine was all ready, right by the window. It was a sunny day so I had plenty of light, but gradually I noticed it seem to get darker and I wondered if a storm was coming, but when I looked round, there were Arabs all gathered round outside the window to watch me sewing.

Towards the end of my service, we went to play to an RAF station on the Cocos Islands. These islands were atolls and you had to come in through the reef to the lagoon. We lived in little huts which were quite nice and we enhanced them by giving ourselves a little live 'fence'. Many coconuts fell from the trees and sprouted without putting down any roots, so we just gathered some and lined them up to make a border around our huts. When we were due to leave, we were aware of many trips being made to an old Catalina sea-plane moored in the lagoon and were a little dismayed to learn that it was our transport out! Getting us and all our equipment loaded was hard enough - we were obliged to lie on the top of our baggage and were quite near the roof. We were sure it would never be able to take off with such a load in the limited space





of the lagoon but to our relief, it did.

I went on the Dunera to Hong Kong and stayed at the Peninsula Hotel. It had been very rough weather and one of those times when, after going ashore, it was difficult to walk on steady ground because you could still feel the rocking of the ship and it took a while to lose your 'sea legs'. The enemy had taken the cable from the peak

railway and dropped it in the harbour and during the time I was there it was found and put back. We went up to the peak and there were beautiful houses up there from the colonial period, but all the wooden fixings and staircases had been stripped out to the level of a person's reach by the Chinese natives to use for fuel. It was sad to see but I suppose they had to survive.

We were able to have lovely clothes made in Hong Kong and they would actually make shoes for you as well, which was very useful for me, having such little feet.

We left Hong Kong on the Cheshire and gradually began to work our way home. There were a lot of women and children on the ships, being taken back to England. Many had been prisoners of war and of course quite a few of the children were half Japanese, the results, in many cases, of rape when the women were prisoners. It was very sad and we wondered how these children would be received when they got back to the families in England. Although they looked Japanese, they were effectively English, having been brought up by English mothers. We used to do shows on board the ships and to see all these children singing their little hearts out in "God Save the King" at the end of the show was very touching and used to have us almost in tears.

So after years abroad entertaining our fighting forces through the war, we finally arrived back in Southampton aboard the Strathnarva on 5 May 1946. We never received a medal, although they were officially awarded and I feel it is very sad that ENSA is never represented in the Armistice Day parades, but I was glad to be able to make my contribution in my own way to the war effort.

