

SIMON BILL

I'm from about the last generation whose parents were involved in WW2. For boys this meant you were constantly asking dads and uncles and your friends' dads if they'd killed a German. Most of the answers you got weren't the sort of thing you were after. My Uncle Jack said he hadn't killed a German because he was in Burma fighting the Japs, and he was a rotten shot (a lot of them claimed to be rotten shots), and, anyway, every time they gave him a rifle to hold he would throw it down and refuse to pick it up. Finally they just put him in the Military Police. I remember being quite disappointed by this and similar admissions of cowardice or incompetence. Anyhow, having been pestered about it, here is what my father eventually told me about killing the enemy: Dad was also in the East; on a battle cruiser in the Royal Navy's Pacific Fleet, supporting the American landings by bombarding islands like Iwo Jima to 'soften them up'. Following the surrender of Japan the Royal Navy formed part of the Allied occupation force. A job he had was to guard some Japanese POWs being transported by freight train between camps, and part of the route was along a mountainside. When they reached a point where there was a vertical drop on one side they opened the doors and pushed prisoners out. I remember clearly saying, 'Weren't some of them killed?' and Dad saying, 'Oh, all of them were.' A detail that has stuck in my mind is that these British sailors didn't manhandle the POWs to the edge, or use their bayonets to goad them. They would just beckon one over, guide him gently to the doorway and give him a little nudge. They were doing it partly because they were fascinated by how obedient these prisoners were. My father also said, bafflingly, that the other sailors involved were all Brummies, as if that somehow explained or excused it. He was seventeen at this time and held the rank of Petty Officer. He also told me another, similar, story about his friend Max (Max worked for my father in his direct mail business in Kingston-on-Thames). He was an MP (a 'redcap') in northern France, and they were rounding up Germans as they surrendered. In France they have those apartment buildings constructed around a deep central courtyard, and there's always a big heavy wooden gate. These MPs were using a courtyard like this to hold prisoners, adding more and more as they were being captured in the surrounding countryside. When the courtyard was so full of Germans that nobody could move, a British armoured car, that had seemed to be just parked there, started up, and was driven round and round until they were all killed. The fact that my father and Max worked together and had both been involved in 'war crimes' was a coincidence, which suggests to me that things like that happened quite a lot.