

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

JOANNE CAMPBELL



Thomas Benignus Mullan| Fireman during World War Two.

Thomas Benignus Mullan, my maternal Grandfather, was born in Cromac Street, Belfast on 4th June 1913. He worked in the Ormeau bakery but became a full time fireman, with ambulance duties, in 1939, at the outbreak of World War 2.

During the Easter Tuesday Blitz on Belfast, in April 1941, he battled fires at the Belfast docks and due to the numerous fires at one point only himself and five others were in that area. He didn't like to talk about the War as many of his firemen friends were killed; in one instance when an oil storage tank was bombed only the men's helmets and axes were recovered. But he did tell me how he had a lucky escape during the Easter Tuesday Blitz. The pressure in the hoses was dropping, due to the water mains being damaged, so he started to pump water out of the river Lagan with his fire engine. A Salvation Army woman, who he later said must have been his guardian angel, was very insistent that he left his fire engine to go for a cup of tea. He eventually did so and when he returned he told me the engine had suffered a direct hit and that there was only a crater left where he had been standing!

He later volunteered to go to London and Plymouth to help the firemen there, even falling of the pier in Plymouth at one point and although being a non-swimmer he survived.

After the War he married my Granny and after they had my Mum they moved to Carrickfergus. He died aged 86 on 28th December 1999 and was buried on Millennium Eve, the last day of the century.

I hope my Grandfather and other emergency workers, such as the Salvation Army, who risked their lives during the city Blitzes are remembered for their bravery. Books I have read about the Belfast Blitz in particular, noted how unprepared the city was and how the emergency services were overwhelmed. Indeed my grandfather only spoke about some of his experiences towards the end of his life, giving me some indication of the trauma suffered. I am only here today because on that terrible night an act of kindness by a stranger took my Grandfather to safety.