

Act one.

Scene. 1

It is May 1940 and once more England is faced with fighting a war in France. All over the country young men are heeding the call to arms, and so we go to the small market town of Upper Catchpole in the Pennines where the town Mayor has called the people to a meeting in the village hall.

Door stage left. Large table with two chairs stage right.

Opens with the Mayor stood behind the table reading a letter, rest just mingling around and chatting in small groups. From table. Margie and Sarah. Bill and Pat. Tina and Frank. Mike and Reg stage left.

Reg. Of course I served with distinction in the last one so the man from the ministry will obviously put me in charge.

Mike Oh! Really. You think so?

Reg Stands to reason doesn't it? Ex-serviceman. One of the leading lights in this town, successful in business and all that. What are all these women doing here? Surely they can't be expecting to join up as well.

Mike I don't see why not. Bring a little glamour into the proceedings.

Sarah Do you really think that they'll let us join Margie?

Margie Of course I do Sarah. They don't have enough men in this town for it. We outnumber them five to one. Jolly exciting isn't it. I wonder what the uniform will be like. If we'll have to wear trousers like the men.

Sarah Oh I do hope not, I'd much prefer a skirt. You don't think that we'll have to do night duty do you?

Margie I would think so yes. If the men can do it so can we Sarah old girl. By god this is spiffing good fun. I wonder when it will all start.

Bill What are you doing here? This is no place for a young girl like you.

Pat Hello dad. Miss Margery's here so why shouldn't I be here too?

Bill What the squire lets his daughter do is his business, but you my girl.....

Pat Am old enough to make my own mind up. Oh dad I have to do something, I can't sit at home and worry about my Stuart over there in France all the time. I feel that I have to do my bit for the war.

Bill Well alright, but if we come to doing any shooting you keep your head down and out of trouble.

Pat I just hope he comes back in one piece, with nothing missing.

(Enter Steve. He moves to Sarah)

Bill There's no arm in that. *(Shaking his empty left sleeve.)* If I know that your husband of yours he'll be alright, this isn't like the last one, and you've heard what they said on the wireless, that it'll all be over by Christmas.

Sarah Uncle Steve!! What are you doing here?

Steve The same as you Sarah. Wanting to do my bit for the country.

Sarah Does aunty Ada know you're here?

Steve She does and thinks that I'm daft. Just because the regulars won't have me she thinks that I won't be taken on here either.

Sarah Well we'll just have to show her then won't we?

Steve Hopefully lass, hopefully. Does your mam and dad know you're here?

Sarah Yes they do, but mam thinks that I'm doing too much.

Margie *(To Sarah)* If daddy knew I was doing this he'd have a dickey fit. He's in London where he's just got a position at the Air Ministry.

Bill *(Over his shoulder to Margie)* I should keep that quiet if I were you Miss, you never know who might be listening.

Frank Mrs Wickam! I'm pleased that you've come this evening; I was going to call in on my way home. Could you please tell Geoff that I've finished the lorry? If he'd like to pick it up when he has the time.

Tina Thank you Frank, he'll be pleased to hear that. I think that the other one is giving trouble now.

Frank Well if he can bring it in when he picks the other one up, I'll have a look at it.

Mayor Ladies and gentlemen. If I could have your attention please.....
Thank you. I have called the meeting this evening because I have had a letter from the Ministry of Defence. As you all know, or will have heard, a Local Defence Volunteer force is being formed. Now it is being formed, not only to protect our shores from a sea born invasion, but also round every military installation to combat an airborne assault.

Reg We're not on the coast, nor do we have a military installation nearby.

Mayor If I may continue. We here at Upper Catchpole have been asked if we could form a platoon of twenty men.

Reg Then why are these women here then?

Mayor I'll come to that in a moment. As you are all aware the young men of our little town were decimated during the last war. In fact of the seventy men who departed our shores only six returned to the safety of our bosom so to speak? *(Looks at Bill and smiles)* Now all our able bodied young men have answered the call to arms again. I told the man from the Ministry, when he telephoned me this morning that the only way we could muster a platoon of twenty was by asking the ladies to help us.

Reg Why form one of these forces when we're miles inland, I just don't see the point.

Mike I thought you wanted to be its captain?

Mayor After some consideration he gave his permission for the ladies to be recruited. We do in fact have a military installation nearby, although it is top secret, so forget that I've told you about it.

Bill Good job Ted's not here otherwise it wouldn't be for long. Not after he's had a few down the Rose and Crown.

(Enter Sally still in her usherette uniform but a coat on top. They all stop and look at her)

Sally Sorry I'm late but I had to get the house settled before I could leave. Have I missed much?

Mayor Not much Mrs Bridges. I'm sure one of the others will fill you in later.

Mike Yes why isn't Ted here? He's always up for a fight when he's had a few.

Bill You have to ask that Mike? You know what Teds like.

Mike I keep forgetting that I've managed to get my life back together, sort of, but Ted. By all accounts he was worse than me.

Reg Disgusting. Should never be allowed.

Margie Good. We'll show them that we're just as good as they are won't we girls?

Mayor If I may be permitted to continue. The platoon will be made up of equal men and ladies. He did point out however that there should not be any differences between the sexes. You ladies will be expected to perform the same duties as the men. Though quite what you do for bathroom facilities when you're out on patrol I don't know. As for when you will get your uniforms and weapons, well that's anyone's guess. Those of you who would like to volunteer please form an orderly line in front of the desk where I'll take your details. I am afraid that I am having to do this as the town clerk is spending a little time with her son who has managed to get a few days leave. He's serving on HMS Hood you know. My office will be acting as a go between until you can get sorted out.

Bill Are you not joining us then sir?

Mayor No Bill, I'm afraid not. Ann is away nursing in Singapore; Anthony is on his ship somewhere in the Med. Did I tell you that he's a Captain now? And David has just moved to a new squadron and is flying Wellingtons. With Mary as she is then I'm afraid that; well I think that I'm doing my bit.

(Line forms. Margie, who pulls Sarah in with her. Tina, Sally, Pat, Frank, Steve, Mike, Bill. Reg pushes his way to the front.)

Reg Excuse me but we should do this by rank.

Tina Really!!!!!! How rude.

Margie Then, as the squire's daughter I should go first.

Reg It may be women and children first on board ships, but men do the fighting in a war.

Margie Yes well if it was left to the women then Mrs Churchill and Mrs Hitler would get together over a cup of tea and sort out their differences. Then there wouldn't be a war.

Mayor Heir Hitler isn't married Miss.

Margie Well that explains it. There must be something wrong with a man of his age to never have married.

Reg I was in the last one you know?
(He gets to the front)

Mayor Good evening Mr Hurst.

Reg Good evening Mr Mayor.

Mayor Name?

Reg I beg your pardon?

Mayor Your name?..... For the paperwork.

Reg You know my name Mr Mayor.

Mike Just tell him your name, we don't want to be here all night.

Reg *(Calling over his shoulder)* Keep out of this you. This is between the Mayor and me.

Mike Shouldn't that be I?

Reg What?

Mike Well you said the Mayor and me. Surely it should have been the Mayor and I.

Mayor I think that he's right you know. Now, name?

Reg Goodness gracious Mr Mayor you know my name. Oh! Reginald Hurst.

Mayor Age?

Reg What? Are all these questions really necessary?

Mayor I didn't compile the forms, they came from the ministry. Now age please.

Reg Fifty six.

Mayor Have you ever served in any of His Majesties services?

Reg Yes! *(Chest out and chin up looking round proudly)* I served with distinction in the last war you know.

Mayor Really!!! That's good. What regiment?

Reg Pay Corps.

Mayor What rank did you achieve?

Reg I beg your pardon?

Mayor What was your rank when you left the service after the war?

Reg Is this really important. This is a different war, a different time.

Mayor For the ministry, not me, you understand.

Mike Just answer the question please. I have an appointment to keep.

Bill I'm sure she'll wait for you Mike.

Mayor Now please, your rank when you left the Army?
(They all lean forward to hear, pushing Margi into him.)

Mayor Give the man a little room please ladies and gentlemen.
(They all back off a little except Margie)

Reg *(Muttering)* Private.

Mayor Pardon! I didn't quite hear that.

Reg *(Muttering again but a little louder)* Private.

Mayor I still didn't catch it. Would you mind repeating it?

Margie I think that he said private.

Mayor So you left as a private.

Reg Yes! *(Turns looks at Margie)* Thank you. *(Turns back)*

Mayor Where did you see service?

Reg Pardon?

Mayor Which front were you on?

Reg *(Muttering again)* Aldershot.

Mayor Would you care for a glass of water, your voice seems to have gone.

Reg No thank you, my voice is fine. I said *(Muttering hand over mouth)* Aldershot.

Mayor I'm sorry but I still didn't hear you.

Margie I think that he said Aldershot.

Mayor Is that what you said?

Reg Yes. *(Turns, looks daggers at Margie)* Thank you. *(Turns back)* I never left England.

Mayor Well some of us were lucky and others weren't. *(He looks at Bill and smiles)*

Reg I was waiting to go. *(Looking round at the rest.)* I wanted to go but they wouldn't send me. I kept asking.....

Mayor One of the lucky ones. Never mind they serve even though they stand and wait. When were you demobbed?

Reg I left the service in nineteen nineteen.

Mayor At the end of the war, right.

Reg We had to sort out the pay of all those returning from France. It was a very important job you know.

Mayor Yes I can imagine. What is your employment at the moment?

Reg Really! I can't see that all this is necessary.

Mayor It is a simple case of knowing whether you'll be able to attend most, if not every parade. Whether or not you'll be able to do guard duty at night.

Reg Well you won't be asking the ladies to do night duty surely?

Mayor That is not for me to say, but the ministry. Now please your place of work.

Reg I am a self-employed solicitor. I have an office on the high street, as you well know.

Mayor Thank you, that didn't hurt did it. So there'll not be any problem with you doing guard duty at night will there?

Reg I suppose not, no. But when they put me in command I won't have to will I?

Mayor If they put you in command you will be expected to lead by example. Next one please.
(Reg moves off, head down slightly embarrassed)

Margie Margery Chesington- Smythe. Do you want to know my age?

Mayor Good evening Miss. No, I wouldn't be so rude as to ask a ladies age.

Margie Don't you need it for that ministerial form?

Mayor I think that is only applicable to the men, Miss.

Margie Thank you for your consideration Mr Mayor, but I am twenty five, and if they'd accept me I'd go across and give those Nazis hell.

Mayor Quite Miss. What qualities do you think you'll be able to bring to the platoon?

Margie Well I'm a damn good shot. Bagged twenty two at the final shoot of the season last year.

Mayor I'm sure you did Miss.

Margie Ask Mr Brack there, he was beating for us.

Bill That's right Mr Mayor. Miss Margery beat all the men when it came to the shooting.

Margie I can ride as well as any man.

Mayor Thank you but I think that you'll be patrolling on foot. Your employment Miss?

Margie Well I don't really have any. Does that matter? Although I do help out at the hospital now and again. I'll be available for duty at any time.

Mayor Excellent. Next please.

Margie That's you Sarah. Remember to speak up so the Mayor can hear you. *(She moves away.)*

Mayor Good evening Sarah. Would you please state your name?

Sarah It's Sarah Cross sir, and I'm twenty two.

Mayor Thank you Sarah. What do you think you can bring to the platoon?

Sarah I'm a good cook sir, and can do sewing and knitting.

Reg That's just dandy, we'll kill the Nazi parachutists by sticking them with knitting needles shall we?

Mayor Please Mr Hurst, can't you see the young lady is nervous and shy. Don't worry Sarah; you'll soon get into the swing of things when we start up. What sort of work do you do Sarah?

Sarah I look after people in the cottage hospital sir.

Mayor So you're a nurse?

Sarah Not really sir, they're short of nurses so I go in and help out, doing the cleaning and tidying. But I do change the dressings sometimes, I've been taught how.

Margie She's damn good at it as well. She also takes care of my mother.

Mayor Would you be available for duties during the night if you were asked?

Sarah I would sir. I can make time.

Mayor Isn't your mother bed ridden? Don't you look after her too?

Sarah I do sir, but she sleeps all the night now. She'll be alright.

Mayor As long as you're sure Sarah. I don't want to sign you up and you let the platoon down.

Sarah I won't let them down sir. I just want to do my bit, sort of, if you know what I mean, sir.

Mayor I do Sarah. The platoon will be in need of someone who can administer first aid. Thank you. Next. *(She moves to Margie)*

Tina Christine Wickam, age, over twenty one Mr Mayor.

Mayor Good evening Mrs Wickam. What brings you here tonight?

Tina Good evening Mr Mayor. Well I lost my dad and three brothers in the last one. My dad didn't die fighting you understand but the shock of losing his three sons killed him. So when the chance came to fight the Nazis I jumped at it sir.

Mayor If I may ask, what does your husband think about you doing this?

Tina He's alright about it, he understands why I have to do it.

Mayor I hope that you'll not even see a Nazi, let alone get the chance to fight one.

Tina I don't care Mr Mayor. I'll be doing my bit for the brave lads over there, keeping their homes safe to come home to.

Mayor Would there be any problem in you doing night duty or attending parades.

Tina Non that I know of Mr Mayor. My Albert can cope on his own when I have to be on parade. Either that or he can go round to his mums. I hardly see him now anyway as he's on fire watch most nights. Seems a bit daft doesn't it, him selling stuff to make fires all day, then he spends all night looking for fires so they can put them out. By the looks

of these young lasses, (*She turns and semi curtsies then turns back*) no offence meant Miss Margery, but they look as though they could do with a bit of chaperoning.

Mayor Quite. What is your place of employment?

Tina I work in my husband's coal yard office sir.

Mayor Thank you Mrs Wickam. Next.

Sally Good evening Mr Mayor.

Mayor Good evening Sally. So you would like to join up as well?

Sally I would Mr Mayor. We girls have to do our part now that all the men are away fighting.

Mayor Quite. Could I have your details please?

Sally Certainly Mr Mayor. I'm Sally Bridges and I'm forty five. I don't know what I can bring to the platoon sir, but I'm a quick learner.

Mayor Thank you Sally. What about parades?

Sally That wouldn't be a problem sir. The picture show starts at half past seven and everyone is seated by twenty past, so I can get here for seven thirty. If you want me any earlier then my husband will just have to cope won't he sir?

Mayor All right Sally. Next please.

Pat That's me Mr Mayor Sir. Patricia Clark.

Mayor Well now Patricia, I won't ask your age but what do you think that you could bring to the platoon?

Pat I've been listening and I'm twenty one sir. I don't know exactly what I could bring to the platoon, but I do know that I have to do something to help the war effort sir. My Stuart is over there fighting the Nazis; I feel that I have to do something.

Mayor Very commendable of you. How is Stuart anyway?

Pat He's well enough; I had a letter from him yesterday. He says that they're working all hours just to keep the planes flying, robbing one to fix two sort of thing. Says that his Pilot officer told him not to worry about getting home because he'd see to it, even if he had to have him on his knee.

Mayor So long as he is safe Pat. What sort of work do you do?

Pat Why Mr Mayor I work in my dad's shop, you know that.

Bill Now then girl.

Pat Sorry sir, sorry dad.

Mayor Would you be able to do guard duty at night if you were asked to

Bill She would not.

Pat *(She turns to face him.)* Dad!!! I'm not a little girl anymore. *(Turns back)* Yes Mr Mayor Sir I would, whatever my dad says.

Mayor Thank you. Next please.

Frank Hello Mr Mayor.

Major Good evening Frank. This is a pleasant surprise. Name?

Frank Frank Adams sir.

Mayor Your age?

Frank I'm thirty five sir.

Mayor Have you ever been in any of His Majesties services?

Frank No Mr Mayor I haven't. I tried to join up last September but I failed the medical. They wouldn't let me into any of the services.

Mayor What's wrong with you Frank?

Frank I suffer from Asthma sir.

Mayor Are you sure you'll be alright to do all the duties?

Frank I think so sir. Unless we get any emergencies at the garage, I can attend the parades and doing night duty would be no problem.

Mayor What is you line of work?

Frank I'm a garage mechanic sir.

Mayor Right, thank you Frank. Who'll be driving the taxi when you're on parade?

Frank Dad says he'll take that over sir.

Mayor That's good Frank. Who's next?

Steve Hello Mr Mayor.

Mayor Good evening Steve. It's nice to see you here.

Steve Hope to do my bit sir.

Mayor Name?

Steve Steven Cross sir.

Mayor Your age?

Steve I'm forty five sir.

Mayor Have you ever been in His Majesties services?

Steve No sir I haven't. They wouldn't let me join, me having this leg and all.

Mayor I have been instructed to recruit only able bodied men Steve.

Steve This leg doesn't stop me from doing my job sir, you know that.

Mayor Yes I do Steve. What is your employment?

Steve I suppose that I'm the road mender sir.

Mayor Would there be any problem with you attending parades or doing night patrols?

Steve I can do them sir. Do my bit for the war.

Mayor Good man. Next please.

Mike Good evening Mr Mayor.

Mayor You don't have to do this you know Mike.

Mike I know Mr Mayor but I feel that I must do something to help.

Reg My god he's not a conchie is he?

Mayor Thank you Mike. Would you state your name please?

Mike Yes its Mike Riches.

Mayor And your age please Mike?

Mike I'm forty one years old Mr Mayor.

Mayor I'm afraid that I have to ask these questions Mike.

Mike I know that it's for the record.

Mayor Have you been in His Majesties forces?

Mike Yes I have. I was in the last war.

Mayor Which regiment were you with Mike?

Mike I was with the Cheshire's.

Mayor What rank did you achieve?

Mike Captain. Although it was a battle field promotion.

Mayor When did you leave the Army Mike?

Mike I can't remember.

Reg Oh for goodness sake.

Mike I've been told that I was shipped home after Passchendaele with something. I don't remember much about it or the hospital. I think they let me leave in nineteen twenty but I'm not too sure.

Reg My god! What was wrong with him?

Bill Shell shock. Talking to his mother, he was in a hospital near Edinburgh until nineteen twenty when they let him out. She wasn't sure why they kept him in, until she found him cowering in a corner of his bedroom with his arms over his head, screaming.

Mike I tried to get back in last September but they wouldn't have me, not with my record.

Reg I didn't know.

Mike How were you to know? You weren't born here. You're an outsider aren't you?

Mayor Thank you Mike. I'm sorry to have to put you through that.

Mike That's alright Mr Mayor, you've a job to do.

Mayor What is your form of employment?

Mike I'm a teacher at the junior school.

Reg My god!!! A teacher and he had shell shock? There's more to him that meets the eye.

Mayor Would you be able to do night duty?

Mike I would sir, yes.

Mayor I have to ask this question Mike, for myself not the ministry you understand. How do you think that you'd react to gun fire.

Mike Well I'm alright with shotguns and four tens, as for others, I don't know. I'll have to cross that bridge when I come to it, won't I, sir.

Mayor Thank you Mike. Next please.

Bill Mr Mayor.

Reg Surely not a one armed man. What's this war coming to when we have to take women and one armed men into the defence of our country

Mayor Bill!!!!!! I'm sorry Bill my friend but I can only take able bodied men.

Reg Good. Send him home, there's no room in this business for baggage.

Pat My dad's not anyone's baggage. He might only have one arm but I'll bet he works twice as hard as you.

Bill Now Pat remember your manners. I am able bodied, it's just my left arm that isn't bodied.

Mayor Please Bill. I can't take you.

Bill *(Quietly)* Can't you say that you didn't notice.

Mayor I'm sorry Bill but.....

Bill I volunteered for the last one sir. We went in together, not that I want our friendship to influence you. The Hun took my left arm sir and I want to show them that I'm still ready to fight and lay my life down for my King and country sir. Left arm or no left arm.

Reg Why does he keep calling the Mayor Sir?

Mike Because the Mayor was a Major in the Cheshire's.

Reg A Major! My god.

Mike Don't worry he won't be joining the platoon, he has to look after his wife, she's very ill.

Mayor If it was up to me Bill.....

Bill *(Quietly)* Don't make me beg Sid. I have to do something, to play my part. You of all people should understand that.

Mayor I'm.....

Bill I can still hold a rifle and shoot one, just ask Miss Margery there.

Margi That's correct Mr Mayor. And a damn good shot too.

Mayor Look Bill if it was up to me I would, but it isn't.....

Bill The Somme was a long time ago Sid. Turn a blind eye, please. For old times' sake.

Mayor You are quite determined to play your part aren't you Bill?

Bill I am sir. Come hell or high water, I want to have a go at the Hun again.

Mayor Alright, but if the ministry finds out they'll ask you to leave. Name?

Bill I'll have to cross that bridge if I come to it won't I? William Brack sir.

Mayor Age?

Bill Forty five sir.

Reg *(To Mike)* There's something between those two Mike do you know what?

Mike Sorry I don't. Why don't you ask them?

Reg You were in the same regiment as they were.

Mike But I left. I don't know what went on afterwards.

Mayor Which regiment were you with Bill?

Bill The same as you Sid. Sorry! I was with the Cheshire regiment sir.

Mayor When did you leave the forces?

Bill I was invalided out in nineteen seventeen, sir.

Mayor What was your rank at the time of your discharge?

Bill Sergeant, sir.

Mike *(To Reg)* It seems that you are the lowest ranking ex-serviceman here.
Still have dreams of command?

Mayor What is your form of employment?

Bill I own the ironmongers shop in town sir.

Mayor Can you see any reason why you wouldn't be able to do any duties.

Bill Not that I can see sir.

Mayor Welcome to the Local defence volunteers Bill.

Bill Thank you sir.

CURTAIN