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Transcript

INTRO:

Dr Matthew Kidd:

Out of the six and a half million men and women who served in the British Armed Forces during World War Two, as many as 1.2 million may have experienced some form of same-sex intimacy. In this episode of their finest hour podcast, Matthew Kidd - yes, that's me - speaks to Stephen Bourne, a social historian who specialises in both black heritage and gay culture.

Most of the episode deals with Stephens 2017 book *Fighting Proud*, a wonderful study that unearths fascinating stories about some of the gay men who served in the British Armed Forces and at home. In our discussion, we begin by talking about what life was like for a gay man in the UK in the 1940s. We then talk about popular assumptions about homosexuality during World War Two, how certain individuals mentioned in Stephen's book defied these assumptions, and we finished by moving to the home front. I hope you enjoy the discussion and don't forget to let us know if you have any stories or objects relating to gay men or women during the Second World War at theirfinesthour.org.

Matthew:

So how did the book come about?

Stephen Bourne:

Fighting Proud is an interest in book to talk about - I mean the way it came about that - it's because it's not often in an author's life that a publisher comes to you, but I never intended to write this book. Nothing was further from my mind. I never pursued a publisher. I never thought about this book. I had an article written for BBC History Magazine - and BBC History Magazine published this feature that I'd written for them on the lives of various gay men in the Second World War - their experiences both in the Armed Services and on the home front. And, as I did with the book, I didn't want to focus on the usual suspects - that the men I called the usual suspects who are Alan Turing and the kind of people that we know about. I wanted to excavate, if you like, the more hidden stories that were not so well known, and I knew enough to fill an article and it was published.

And then an editor at a publishing house contacted me and said, "I've read this article. I love the way you write, you know, free of academic jargon and theory, kind of natural kind of writing style. And the subject matter is fascinating. Can you work it up into a book?" So I said, in a moment of madness, "Yes, of course I can." And got a publishing contract - so his authors don't often have publishers knocking on their doors. It's usually the other way around and I thought, well, I'll go for it. I'll have a go and I - because we were still in the World War One centenary, I did say to him, can I expand it to include World War One? And that proves to be very challenging, but I'd rather just focus

on World War Two, because that was a lot easier. But I had to then do quite a bit of extra research, which didn't bother me because I had some leads I had some interest in the subject, and for me it became an enormous journey of discovery as a gay man delving into the lives of gay men in that period, 1939 to 1945. It was brilliant, absolutely brilliant experience, because I just kept finding more and more gay men that I'd never heard of - didn't know existed, and there's still more stories out there. But yeah, it - and the book was finally written and published in 2017.

Matthew:

Your focus is on ordinary people. Everyone knows about Alan Turing and this book I think embraces a much wider range of gay men's lives than if it just focused on some of those standout individuals. So, and I should say the diversity is also in the fact that you don't just look at the frontline or soldiers or RAF, you're looking at the home front as well and what life was like for people who didn't go off and fight as well. I just wonder, when we think generally about popular histories of the Second World War, I think there has been, over the last 20-25 years, much more of a greater focus on moving away from looking at Montgomery and Churchill.

But I'd still say, in the popular consciousness, if you talk to people about gay men during the Second World War, they'll go just Turing and not know anything else. And I know you probably hope your book will change people's minds on that, but why do you think that is? Why do you think that area hasn't really caught up with other perceptions of the Second World War in the popular mind?

Stephen:

Traditionally, historians have always had what I describe as a touch of tunnel vision - very limited kind of view of Britain at war. I mean you - you get that from the kind of films of the 1950s and 60s about the Second World War. Very much white male or heterosexual dominated. It's - you never see or read about black servicemen and women in the Second World War. Neither do you read about or see in films gay men.

And so coupled with that there are two sort of aspects of this. It's the traditional historians that exclude that story from the narrative, but also the LGBT community itself is at fault because although traditionally we in the gay community, as we were before we became LGBT+, were very good at acknowledging our histories. I don't think that's any longer the case, because I think what we did as a community - and I find this with the now contemporary LGBT committee - we put certain people on pedestals. So, in cinema it will be Derek Jarman. In literature, it will be Oscar Wilde. In World War Two, it will be Alan Turing and that's it. No one else existed. And that really, as a gay man, frustrates me because in the handful of gay history books I've written, I've tried to widen the narrative and expand it so that people are aware that there are these other stories. And it shocks me even now, six years after *Fighting Proud* was published, that a lot of the gay men that I wrote about in *Fighting Proud* are still excluded from gay histories or LGBT histories or queer histories, and that I find very sad.

Matthew:

The archive we're putting together - we're hoping to encourage people with stories about their loved ones. And, like you say, not necessarily famous people. And our real focus is on convincing people that the stories and objects relating to, say, their grandparents are worthy of historical explanation and preservation. So, you've got an ally here with regards to your focus. Another question I wanted to ask you maybe help to set the scene for people that don't know – typically, what was life like for a gay man in the UK?

Stephen:

The draconian law that existed would have seen gay men arrested and put in prison for what was known as homosexual offences. That still existed until partial decriminalisation in 1967. So, during the war, we were criminals. We lived outside the law and existed outside the law in the Armed Services. It was just as draconian. But you know if you were a Battle of Britain hero and you were found out to be gay - you risk losing everything, your job, your respect that that you had and you again you would be thrown in in prison. It was a terrible time in that respect. But having said that, what I discovered - and there were many, many examples of that happening during the war, some awful stories that I have included in the book – but, as a gay man, I was empowered by the stories that didn't fit that narrative. And when I did, *Fighting Proud*, I kept an open mind. And I'm so glad I did, because I discovered stories that were actually very progressive and very positive for the time, I mean gay men, but weren't known to be OK. In the RAF for - mainly the RAF - it's that seemed to be the place - the safest place for gay men, although there would have been some gay men in the Army and the Navy, obviously, and I found some of those stories as well.

But gay men who were integrated and in some cases were mascots in their regiments or on their ships, and some of them were given a hard time, some of them weren't. It was extraordinary to discover this and to discover the life of someone like Ian Gleed, who was a Battle of Britain hero, RAF officer, shot down, survived, was awarded the DFC, the DSO, the highest honours in the RAF by King George VI at Buckingham Palace - extraordinary story! And then he was eventually shot down by the Germans and killed in action in 1943. But his story doesn't register either in history books, or, sadly, gay history books. So that unravelling that story was quite extraordinary, and it resonated very much with me.

And then, you know, you discover links. He was friends with a writer called Hector Bolitho, who had never heard of, never heard of this kind - uncovered his story, his war diary, which was published. Nothing overtly gay, but if you read between the lines and find out and do your homework, do a bit more research. Hector was gay. He knew Ian Gleed. Hector ad to work very closely with the RAF. He wasn't in the area, but he was - and befriended. But he, before the war, had begun a relationship with John Simpson, who went on, like Ian Gleed, to become a World War Two RAF hero. And they live together - Hector describes this in his books, but he always paints a picture of John Simpson as being his secretary. Well, that was a euphemism, as I discovered, a euphemism for gay couples.

There would be a professional member of the couple - while the other one was either a gardener or a butler or a secretary, and John became Hector's secretary. That's how Hector described it - Hector even wrote a whole - an entire book about him, published in 1943, called *Combat Report*. I didn't know that John was gay. I didn't want to assume this when I wrote *Fighting Proud*. I've discovered all this and confirmed it since, but when you go back to that chapter and you go back to the books, I found that Hector had written so extraordinarily emotionally charged. Talks about describing air raids in London and he's not - again, he's not even recognised in traditional World War Two books. Hector Bolitho should be up there, not necessarily because he's gay, but because he was a brilliant chronicler of World War Two - the Home Front, the RAF. The book he did about John Simpson, called *Combat Report* in 1943, with John's picture on the cover, but now that I've discovered that they were a couple - John was very traumatised, one of those RAF men that survived the war but didn't really because he'd lost so many of his RAF pals during the Battle of Britain and consequent battles.

He committed suicide. I think it was in 1948 or 1949, and Hector moved on to another partner and had a successful, relatively successful life as a writer. And these are the things that opened up to me

when I did additional research for *Fighting Proud*. And, as I said at the beginning, that was the joy of doing this particular book.

Matthew:

I should say you mentioned earlier some of the - I think you used the word progressive and I think that would surprise a lot of people reading your book. It certainly surprised me. I just thought I'd mentioned three things that shocked me, and you've touched on it already. I was surprised by the sometimes indifferent response of authorities and others to openly gay servicemen. I mean, I would have assumed that every single gay man serving in the armed forces during the Second World War would have to keep that quiet and maybe suppress the - so much of their personalities and things like that. But not only did some people openly express that someone even wanted to leave the army. I seem to remember, in one chapter, someone wanted to leave the army, but they're actually refused even after they admitted to the authorities they were gay. And I don't know if this was the same story.

Stephen:

I know. In the Navy.

Matthew:

Yeah. So, the authorities knew. And, actually, the idea that they were just all absolutely - I don't know, locked up and things like that, which I would have expected wasn't the case for every one. And so, I think what surprised me, and this is the second, was how many gay men were actually able to assert themselves and avoid trouble which your book has really opened my eyes to. Now, I know that's not necessarily the typical experience of gay men in the war, but I think it definitely does revise maybe some of our assumptions. And then, lastly - this is what I'd like you maybe to pick up on for us - is it seemed to be in working class communities that gay men seem to be more accepted? I know that's a slight generalisation, but generally it seems to be that and you've got some really fascinating stories and anecdotes about that. I think where - particularly London's East End, for example - openly gay men were known about, and they maybe had names and there was - what was it, pillari? - another language that people used and things like that, I just wonder if you could speak to that a little bit?

Stephen:

Well, going back to the beginning, I discover and, like you've said, I was as surprised as you were when you read it in the book, but at some point during the war, a blind eye was turned by the military by the government - by the police. A blind eye was turned to men's sexuality because they couldn't afford not to. They needed the manpower, as it was known then, especially in the RAF, and they were decimated during the 1940 Battle of Britain and as more and more men were tragically killed in battle they couldn't afford to lose the gay men.

So it may have created in some cases - not every case - it created in some cases in the Armed Services, all of them kind of relatively safe spaces for them, whether they be gay men serving on ships who would - there was one that I told the story of one who was determined to join the Navy. He was determined to join up. All his gay friends said, “You don't have to. You're queer. Tell them you're queer and they won't have you. You'll fail the test, but I want to join that because my father served in the First World War. My brothers now serve in the Second World War. I want to join up.” So he joined the Navy. And he said he stuffed in his duffle bag down the bottom of the duffel bag high heels, some slap makeup and - a frock and a wig. And then as soon as he got on ship, he let it be

known that he was queer and that he was up for a bit of entertainment. Drag queen. He was a drag queen before the war, and he served and served with great honour, I think. And so yes, you're right. That there was a sort of - I mean, the law remained the law. The draconian law remained draconian law, but I was all constantly shocked and surprised and delighted by finding examples of gay men who kind of got away with it, but also this turning a blind eye to their sexuality was a revelation to me.

And the point you raise about the working class - I'm from a working class background myself and I and I would never ever say cause it's not true that working class communities and families are more accepting of gays in history - than the middle classes. But there is a divide in - when again doing more research I discovered that in some working class communities, not all of them, but in some working class communities, particularly in the East End, they did watch out for their gay sons and their gay brothers. There are examples of that - that they were part of that wider family because working class families and community was like a wider extended family. That's like my working class family from Fulham. They all lived in the same place, never moved. They were like an extended family and so that came across very clearly as well. And when you think about it, it's more like that if there was tolerance, it would have come from the working classes and not the middle classes, and certainly not the upper classes. It, you know it - a lot of gay men from middle classes and the upper classes were thrown to the wolves if they were found out.

But it's more complicated than that, I know, but it was a revelation when I found those stories. And the other thing that also was wonderful was the story of Montague Glover, who served in the army in the First World War, and his young lover, Ralph Hall, who served in the RAF in the Second World War. And Ralph was younger than Monty.

Ralph - as I've already explained, in certain gay relationships, Monty was the professional, Ralph was the help in the house. That was sort of handy man, so to speak, until he joined up during the war. But he wrote lovely - he wrote over 300 love letters to Monty and Monty kept them. They got past the censor. So the censors weren't always doing a very good job. 300 letters! “I love you. I miss you. Your photograph is by my bedside.” All this kind of thing. And - and they survived. And they were found by a gay ephemera collector. Thank God, you know, that he did this and he - and he published some of them and gave me permission to publish this story in my book, because it bridged the First World War to the Second World War. But what was the censor doing, allowing all these letters to go - so it makes you wonder how much else there is out there?

My book, *Fighting Proud*, is not definitive - there must be hundreds and thousands of more stories out there, and it's fantastic that your project is advertising for that - for people to come forward.

Matthew:

Well, thank you. I should say that the Ralph and Monty relationship is one of those I want to talk to you about. It's one that I found really fascinating and touching, and there was a quote in one of the letters that Ralph sent Monty that we Tweeted the other day based on your book actually saying, he's going past all the islands, what we've done in the crosswords, which I thought was such a lovely thing and that really spoke to Ralph's experiences in the RAF.

I think you said, yeah, going to these other parts of the world he's probably never visited, but all he's thinking about is that time he spent at home with Ralph, and I think wasn't he employed as a servant or something? And, like you said earlier on, that's almost like a euphemistic thing. That was the way that they got away with it.

Stephen:

They were, so they were a couple. They were together. They were lovers. They were in a long-term relationship. But in order to avoid an arrest or getting into trouble with the law, Monty posed as the sort of professional which he was - I think he was a civil servant or something - while Ralph was employed as his manservant cum gardener. I mean, I've come across a few examples like this, particularly in the 1939 register. I mean, that happens as well. I've come across this and so, yes, it - that's what some gay men who were in long term relationships had to do to avoid detection.

Matthew:

This avoiding detection thing and the fact that you're saying it got through the censor - another thing that surprised me in those letters that you acknowledged in your book were - there was no attempt to hide the fact that we were in a relationship. And you mentioned it earlier, "I love you" and things like that they were saying, but it was more than that! It was almost the whole of those letters were taken up with - how long apart they've been and how long he longed to be back with him - and the actual war seemed to take up such a small portion of those letters, and I think that you might see that in other letters from heterosexual couples. But I don't think I would have expected that. I think there would have been a greater attempt to…

Stephen:

And, also, in addition to that, romance. Yes, it's new romance. It's a fascinating story.

Matthew:

You mentioned earlier about one of the people in your book taking their high heels and things like that. There was - there's a lot of humour in your book as well, which I really enjoyed, and there was one story of Neil – Roger, Bunny Roger?

Stephen:

Oh. Neil "Bunny" Roger! Yeah.

Matthew:

Served in Italy, North Africa, fought in the Battle of Monte Casino wearing a Chiffon scarf, I believe you said?

Stephen:

In battle! And no, that's, yes, Neil "Bunny" Roger, a revelation to me again. He was at the Battle of Monte Casino and fighting in one of the worst battles - one of the most famous battles of the Second World War. And a Sergeant said to him - he was wearing, Bunny was wearing a Chiffon scarf and had a copy of Vogue tucked in his army - pocket of his jacket. And the Sergeant apparently said to him, "What do you think you're doing?" And he said, "Shopping!" So it was just this sense of humour. You have to read it in the book to get the context. But it - they did - a lot of these gay men did survive with their brilliant sense of humour.

That - counteracted a lot of the sort of - not so much homophobia, which would have been part of that, but also just straight men who are a bit unsure and - a bit curious. You know, "What is this doing on the front line, fighting in a battle?"

Matthew:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, that's the point that's worth talking about, actually. It wasn't just homosexual men that had relations in the army, was it? There were actually heterosexual men that were away, and you - you talk a lot about those experiences where - maybe it was curiosity or you know those kind of things?

Stephen:

Loneliness!

Matthew:

Yeah, absolutely.

Stephen:

Companionship. And when you're in a prisoner of war camp, as indeed some of these gay men were, I mean, particularly Dudley Cave's story is in the book from who was in the army and incarcerated in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. I mean there were straight men away from home not knowing if they were going to survive. Not knowing if they were gonna get back to their girlfriends or their wives or ever get married, it's - that would have relationships with other men.

It was sort of accepted, but not, you know, as long as it was discreet then they could get away with it. I don't think it was something they flaunted in one of everyone but - but certainly it happened on ships, especially, and, also, in the RAF. I mean Ian Gleed had a male lover, Christopher, in the RAF during the war. But they were very discreet. I mean, as long as you didn't fight in horses, you could - and the blind eye was turned, you could get away with it.

Matthew:

So what stories did you uncover about the Home Front?

Stephen:

The Home Front had to be in the book. I didn't just want *Fighting Proud* to be about the Armed Services, of which there were numerous extraordinary stories to tell. But the Home Front intrigued me because I knew that there were gay men on the Home Front, I was - the best known story is, of course, Quentin Crisp, the artist model - the naked civil servant. There is a chapter about him, but I'm not going to talk about him today because he's kind of one of the more familiar figures from that period. As is Noël Coward, the actor writer, who was a man for all seasons and produced and co-directed and acted in one of British cinema's most famous war films, *In Which We Serve*, 1942. I talk about him in a chapter as well.

But the two - the two gay men that I want to focus on for this talk are two gay men that are not that well known. Well, one of them, his name is known. It often gets mentioned in *Strictly Come Dancing* on the television. And the other one not so well known. So, I'll start with Snakehips, Ken "Snakehips" Johnson and - Ken was born into a middle class Guyanese family, sent to England to be educated at William Ballet School where he was an outstanding pupil, athletic, he was - I think he was 6 ft 4. He was very tall and, drawn away from his studies - his family in Guyana expected him to become a lawyer, but he didn't want to be a lawyer, he wanted to be a dancer. He wanted to get into show business. So, when he was about 20 years old, he was quite young, 1934. He went to New York to see Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, all the all the jazz greats. He was drawn to them and he loved - he particularly loved Cab Calloway because Cab Calloway was this very tall, flamboyant bandleader. So, when Ken came back to London he formed probably the first all-black swing band, not jazz. There is

a difference. They keep saying Ken “Snakehips” Johnson was a jazz band leader. He wasn't jazz, he was swing. Swing music was the thing in the late 30s, and in 1936 he formed this band, which later became known as Ken “Snakehips” Johnson and his West Indian Dance Orchestra. Very popular, not just popular with the hoy poloy, the upper classes, in swanky nightclubs in London, Soho, and that kind of area, but he also was popular on BBC Radio. He would entertain the masses in cinemas and music halls, went out on tour. So he was very, very famous – ‘“Snakehip” Swing’ was one of his famous 78’ records. He made quite a few 78’ records with his orchestra. And so, by the time the war broke out, he was one of the most famous black men in Britain, alongside Leslie Hutchinson, the cabaret entertainer, and Paul Robeson, the singer and political activist.

So Ken, then, during the early part of the war, had a residency at the famous Cafe de Paris, which was advertised by its owner as the safest nightclub in Britain. So the Blitz starts in September 1940 - it's advertised as the safest nightclub in Britain because it was down deep down underground. And Ken was the resident bandleader with his orchestra. Their kind of theme song was “Oh Johnny”, which they played every night and - but Ken wasn't a musician. I interviewed, one of the band members, Joe Denise, some years ago and Joe said he didn't know B. Flat from a pig's foot. He just didn't understand music, but he could swing in front of the band, waving the banner. Very, very charismatic, very flamboyant, always dressed immaculately in - in a white suit with a carnation in his lapel and so did the band. He expected that higher standard of dress because he wanted to project a kind of positive image of black men.

And then March 8th, 1941 came. And he was having dinner with some friends, and sadly the air raid started and they told him, “Don't go, it's too dangerous.” But he said, “No. I've got to be there”, I think it was 11 o'clock at night “for my performance-” you know, he was in between performances, I think, “and they're expecting me.” So he ran through the air raid through London's West End to the to the nightclub. And stood on, got in, got there on time, stood on the bandstand and within seconds there was this almighty flash and a bomb exploded on the dance floor - killing and maiming many people and Ken was found afterwards, not a mark on him, but he was dead. He was gone at the age of 26. I kind of knew about his sexuality from people like Joe. But it was always talked about in hushed tones and in the sort of jazz swing world. Homophobia was virulent, so it's very difficult to uncover the stories of black gay men in that world of jazz and swing music. I wasn't sure whether to put it in the public domain, but then when I was doing the research for *Fighting Proud*, I discovered a biography of his partner, Gerald Hamilton, which went into some detail about their relationship and that how when Ken was killed in this terrible air raid incident. Gerald was telephoned by the police. He was in a in their house at a small house on the River Thames - along the River Thames, down in the countryside. And he said he had to come up to London to identify Ken. And then until the day he died, and Gerald lived until he was in his 90s, I think always had a framed photograph of Ken by his bedside. And I thought that I - didn't have to put it in the public domain. Somebody else had. So that's how I came to include Ken “Snakehips” Johnson, the legend who, as I say, is still mentioned even today on *Strictly Come Dancing* and programmes to do with dance.

And the other Home Front story that intrigued me, that I had to tell - I didn't know a lot about PC Police Constable Harry Daley, who by the time the war broke out had been - had become a Sergeant, promoted to Sergeant and he was a working class chap from Lowestoft, who came up to London in 1925 to join the police - the Metropolitan Police. He served his full 25 years from 1925 to 1950. Believed in self-improvement, he had no formal education, so he read widely, had him thousands of recordings, classical music. He went to concerts, he went to the theatre and his cultural pursuits led him to befriend the Bloomsbury Group - members of the Bloomsbury group. But he became in the early 1930s, the lover of E.M. Forster, of *A Passage to India* fame, the novelist and - but Harry was

too indiscreet for E.M. Forster and some of the Bloomsbury group at that time. So, eventually, they fell out. But by the time the war broke out in 1939, Harry was stationed - I think he was stationed at Vine Street, and living in a section house. He never seemed to have a home of his own. You always lived in section houses.

But after the war, after he retired from the police, he wrote an autobiography, and it wasn't, sadly - it wasn't published in his lifetime. He died in 1971. His brother didn't approve of the autobiography because it was too probably too explicit, although he didn't mention E.M. Forster because he'd fallen out with them. He was quite open about his homosexuality when he was a police officer and indeed was quite indiscreet. In his public life as a police officer while being - in a time when, you know, he could have been arrested, but he kind of got away with it. Again, like in the Armed Services in the Second World War. So to cut a long story short, Harry's autobiography was eventually published in 1986, called *This Small Cloud*, and it's one of the rare chronicles of a gay man, in in the last century, who was a police officer. And he goes into great detail, very moving descriptions of what life was like during the London Blitz. He said that there would be young male officers joining the police and then within two weeks of leaving the police to join the Armed Services they would be killed in action - broke his heart.

He talked about the "one bomb - one police officer" rule that they had during the Blitz. So if the ARP - Air Paid Precautions couldn't cope on the fire aid couldn't cope, the police officers that were on duty, like Harry in London, would go to the scene and he describes in in detail about an air raid shelter, public air raid shelter, that suffers a direct hit. And he picks up the handbag of one of the elderly women who has been killed, and the handbag is covered in congealed blood that he pulls out trying to identify - he pulls out a note saying - that the woman wrote – "If you find this, please let my son" Ohh, and she spelt "know" NO. So she - one had a feeling that if she was killed in an air raid, please let her son know. And he kind of has little anecdotes like this, which really are rare to find from a gay police officer, or anyone from that period. It's - and all that has gone into my book *Fighting Proud* as well and – Harry - I've championed Harry a lot over time, and Ken "Snakehips" Johnson because they're two stories that really resonate as a black gay man and a gay police officer, which is very unusual. I always, as a historian, try to find the unusual stories.

Matthew:

No, you certainly have. And I should say that those stories you've just shared again demonstrate, I think, the diversity of people's experiences during World War Two, not just diversity in terms of race, sexuality, gender, that kind of thing, but even in terms of, like you say, occupation and what people endured and where they endured it. So, that's great! I think your book does that really well, and I just want to say thank you for joining us, but also, more broadly, thanks for bringing so many of these fascinating stories to our attention.

Now, if listeners want to read more about any of the individuals Stephen has discussed today, you can find out details about Stephens book *Fighting Proud*, or several other books that he's written at that stephenbourne.co.uk. And that's Bourne - BOURNE. And, of course, if you have any stories or objects relating to gay men during the Second World War, please do visit theirfinesthour.org.

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