KHAKI BREECHES - by John Bowley

When young, my grandfather recollected,
He worked in a sweat shop in the City,
In the rag trade. The Great War stagnated.
Business went slack; that was more the pity.

At last came in an order, not too soon,
From the Admiralty: 'Stitch together
Khaki breeches for a naval platoon
From the battle-fleet moored up at Scapa'.

Put ashore! Bet they wished they could scarper.
Sailors knew that they had a better chance
Back aboard a North Sea battle-cruiser
Than fighting on land in Belgium or France.

Perhaps the wisest from this shirk?
Wally thought on. At Agincourt,
A few men did the killing work.
Most slept at home, whilst others fought.

"Hey Wally! Wake up!" called Solly, his boss, in a fright.
"That khaki has us in the kak. See it in the light.
The legs are different shades, now sewn together tight.
Yet this order must go out, at latest by tonight."

Artful Wally thought a while, then leaped up to his feet.
"Lad! Fetch an ounce of ochre from Moss’s down the street."

As all looked on, Wal took the powder and rubbed it on the breeches.
It worked a treat. Colour now the same. He had them all in stitches.

"Wally, that is genius!" Solly said with glee. "Thanks to your brain,
No-one will know till out in France, not till the first shower of rain."

To himself, Wally thought: "That and more there will plenty be.
But these breeches will soon lie strewn upon a muddy sea."

When Wal’s own call-up inevitably came, his grateful boss,
Awash with yet more uniforms to make, could not spare his loss.
Sol fixed it for Wal’s medical to state a dodgy ticker.
He squared it with the doctor and it cost him twenty nicker.

Yet strange to say, though Wal lived on past his eighty-fourth year,
He often felt his heart would burst, it was his greatest fear.
"I was best out of that nightmare, really" Wal said he thought.
But, deep inside him, he wished he had been at Agincourt.

This is based upon a memory of my mother’s father, Wal Louden, as he told it to me when I was about ten years old. It is rhymed, but is as it was, with his old East London argot, pronunciation and with his combination of being pleased with himself and regretful.

My other grandfather was Will Bowley, Chief ERA, RN, who served on our fighting ships throughout World War 1 and survived several sinkings but did not talk much about it.