

WARTIME (2nd World War)

In 1939, my mother, my elder sister, and I lived in Ealing, West London. My father had served in WW1 and had been taken captured. He spent the last 18 months of WW1 in a prisoner of war camp in east Germany and he died in 1935 from tuberculosis, almost certainly contracted in the POW camp but taking time to prove fatal.

On Sunday 3rd September 1939, the Second World War broke out. Houses were not allowed to show any light at all and car headlights had to have hoods fitted so that they only showed a narrow strip of light. All the street lights were turned out for the duration of the war and it was too easy to walk into a tree in the dark if you didn't have a torch so white rings were painted round trees and the unlit lampposts. It was called the blackout. House windows had to have heavy blackout curtains so that not even a chink of light showed. That way, enemy bombers would find it harder to identify targets on a dark night. You can imagine what it must have been like if you think of a complete power failure, with no house lights, no street lights, and not even a glow in the sky from the lights of nearby towns. Black out really meant everything was pitch black, especially if there were clouds and the stars could not be seen.

Even the direction blinds on buses were reduced in size to minimise the amount of light showing.

Arrangements to evacuate all the children to the country out of the way of the bombing must have been in hand before the war started. I think our school was evacuated just before the war began.

No one knew what the effects of bombing would be and my mother decided that, if my older sister and I went with our respective school groups, we would all be in different parts of the country and might never meet up again so we, and a number of other families, stayed at home and waited to see what would happen. The schools had shut so, for a few months, we had no schooling.

Aunt Carrie and her family moved as far away from London as they could and went to live in Barnstaple in Devon. Uncle Charlie must have been retired by then. On the few occasions when they heard anti-aircraft gunfire, they were convinced the explosions were bombs falling. I guess some people are naturally panicky.

Poisonous gas had been used in the First World War and there was concern that it might be used against the civilian population in the Second. We were all issued with gas masks which we were supposed to carry with us at all times. When I tried mine on, I felt I was suffocating as it needed a superhuman effort to draw air through it but, in true fashion, I was told "don't be a baby. You'll be alright". Nothing was done to help me get used to it. No-one even considered that there might be something wrong with it or that the airflow might be blocked or impeded. 'Shut up! Your elders know best.'

I'm glad I never had to wear it.

We were advised to select one room where we could be safe and, if there was a gas attack, to seal it by putting wet blankets or wet towels round the doors and windows to keep gas out.

We also had to carry an identity card. The identity card number consisted of 4 letters and 3 or 4 figures. The letters related to the area you lived in and the first two figures to your family. The last figure identified you. My number was BCAB 78/3. That number became my National Health number.

I don't ever remember being asked to show my identity card although, as a child, I would not have come under suspicion but it may have been necessary to show it when collecting things like ration books. There were posters everywhere warning that 'careless talk costs lives' but I think that people just took life as it came.

Other preparations included putting sticky paper in a criss-cross fashion on the windows to prevent glass splinters from flying about. We didn't bother because our panes of glass were small but shops did and so did some people.

The Underground trains had a sort of netting stuck on the inside of the windows with a small circular peep hole left uncovered. Of course, people picked away at the netting and adverts appeared telling people not to do it. The advert was in a rhyme, the last line of which read "it's there for your protection". The wags wrote another 2-line poem underneath which went "We thank you for your information but we're trying to see the blinking station".

At some stage after the war had started, the government decided that all wrought iron railings would be collected in and the metal would be used as scrap to support the War Effort. They sent teams round the country cutting down everyone's iron railings and I suspect it was psychological more than anything. It was designed to convince everyone that we all had to make sacrifices. I heard that there were great piles of scrap railings that had never been melted down. Only the parks were allowed to keep their railings and they weren't usually very ornamental anyway.

The siren warning of an approaching enemy raid had a rising and falling note. You could hear distant sirens before the local one sounded but the sound we always welcomed was a steady note indicating 'all clear'. We had an air raid warning on the morning war broke out but it turned out to be a false alarm. Apart from that, the early days of the war were very quiet and raids didn't really hot up until mid 1940.

Some people installed Anderson shelters in their back gardens. The shelter came in kit form. They dug a large hole and assembled some preshaped sheets of corrugated iron into something the size of a garden shed in the hole. Then they covered the curved roof with the soil they had dug out to a depth of about 2 feet.

Like so many good ideas, they had snags. If you were unlucky, the excavation might have gone below the winter water table level and the shelter would half fill with water. In any case, most were damp and unheated, many were without lighting, and it meant going out into the garden in night-clothes when the air raid warning sounded. Not very funny in the winter.

We didn't have a shelter. In any case, there would not have been anyone to dig it for us. My father had died in 1935.

During the blitz, there were air-raids every night and initially, we spent them lying under the bed which would not have offered much protection. We soon progressed from there to lying on the lounge floor with our heads protected by the overhang of the piano until we heard of someone who

was killed when their piano fell on them. From pictures of bombed buildings we saw that the staircase often survived when the rest of the house collapsed so we then moved under the stairs. It was very cramped and there was just about room for my sister and me to lie down. The lady who lived opposite (her husband worked nights on war work) spent most of the nights with us and, when the raid got very close, she and my mother would tuck under the stairs with us. I think they spent much of the night drinking tea although tea was rationed (2ozs per person per week) so there wasn't much to spare. Anyway, no-one got much sleep.

Not only did the raids occur every night but they sometimes lasted all day as well. Anti-aircraft guns put up a continuous barrage and our dog Chum barked the whole time. I don't think it was his reaction to the proximity of the enemy but much more likely, he hated the noise of the gunfire.

You could identify the sound of the enemy bombers because they had 2 engines which always seemed slightly out of synchronisation, and the beat frequency made a droning noise. Fighters were seldom heard at night and anyway, were mostly single engined and in a hurry.

Added to the aircraft noise was the sound of bombs exploding if you were near the heart of the attack, but most of the noise came from the anti-aircraft barrage of shells being fired at the enemy planes. Mobile anti-aircraft guns together with searchlights were set up in many suitable open spaces.

Nothing would have saved you from a direct hit but a shelter could protect you from blast, flying debris and falling masonry. One high explosive bomb landed at the end of our road but failed to go off. Our road was cordoned off while the bomb disposal team worked on it and we were advised to leave until it was cleared. We went to spend the night with my grandparents who live about ½ a mile away. That night I was going to sleep under the dining room table and I had just undressed. As I stood, completely naked and about to put on my pyjamas, there was a blinding flash of bluish-white light, an almighty crash, and a high explosive bomb which had landed in the next street, blew in the front windows. Luckily the blackout curtains caught the flying glass or I would have been badly cut. I stood there shaking. I was about 7 or 8 at the time.

The next day, a repair team came round and closed off the hole with roofing felt and battens where the glass had been. This kept the weather out until the window could be replaced.

I think we became resigned to it. If you woke up in the morning, that was good news. You had survived another night of bombing. As children, we looked forward to the time when the war would end and I certainly longed to be able to go on seaside holidays in the summer. Seaside was out of bounds to civilians.

But we also had daylight air raids. I went to a school called Ealing College from 1940 to 1944. It was in a large old house whose rooms had been converted into classrooms. The underside of the downstairs floors had been reinforced and shored up with acro props so that the cellar became a shelter. We spent some classroom time down there during daylight raids.

I used to walk about ½ a mile to get a bus to school in the mornings and sometimes there were air raid warnings. One morning in 1940, soon after we had boarded the bus, there was a heavy raid. All the parks had been dug up and underground shelters had been built in them. The driver decided to stop at the nearest public shelter and we all, driver, conductor, and passengers piled out into it. Each

section of the shelter was lit by a single lightbulb and we sat on benches in the dismal gloom. I sat next to a man who talked to me about the Plimsoll line on ships.

We stayed there from about half past eight to three thirty by which time, although the raid was still on, it had eased up. We left the shelter and I walked back the half mile towards the point where I had boarded the bus in the morning, but the raid started to become more intense again. The other kids and I were eagerly watching the aerial dogfights and vapour trails in the sky when someone bundled us into the back of a shop for our safety whereas we had been hoping to stay and watch and, if lucky, to pick up some spent cartridge cases.

Like most boys, I collected shrapnel, pieces of anti-aircraft shell cases and shell nose cones, pieces of incendiary bombs, pieces of parachute that land mines had floated down on, and pieces of bomb casing. We were normally indoors or went into a shelter when raids were on but we went out searching for souvenirs when the raid was over or the next day. One piece of shrapnel I found was about 300 mm long with sharp jagged ends and was stuck in the footpath. No wonder ARP wardens were issued with tin hats (steel helmets) although civilians did not get them. No-one would have survived if something like that had hit them.

Early on in the war my Grandfather and I stopped to watch an ARP (Air Raid Precautions) demonstration of how to fight fires with a stirrup pump and a bucket of water. One person put the pump into the bucket while the other one took the nozzle end of the hose and directed it at the flames. Then the pump man pumped while the nozzle man adjusted the spray to suit the type of fire he was dealing with. Fuel fires could be handled with a fine mist but incendiary bombs were much more difficult to handle because, when water was applied, they flared up even more. You had to use sand.

All able-bodied men from 18 to 41, and later 51, were called up for military service i.e., conscripted into the services unless they were exempt. Exempt people included those working in war work factories although most of the jobs including manual jobs and typically engineering jobs like welding and machining were taken over by women. Other exempt occupations included doctors, dentists, miners and merchant seamen.

My cousin Robert was in the Merchant Navy, sailing in the Atlantic convoys that brought food, fuel, armaments and other supplies to the beleaguered British Isles. I think theirs was one of the most unenviable jobs, constantly fighting the Atlantic weather and, at the same time, risking being torpedoed by enemy submarines with no way of fighting back. War wasn't really much fun for anyone.

Every able bodied adult outside the age limits and also the exempt not only had daytime jobs but also had to take an active part in civil defence. My mother's brother Ernest joined his local Home Guard unit and his car was classified as the unit's official transport so he got an allocation of petrol to run it. Others joined the ARP and were Air Raid Wardens or joined Light or Heavy Rescue. My Uncle Dick was in the ARP stores and Uncle Bob who had been in the Army in first World War was in Heavy Rescue.

The Home Guard were a para-military organisation who trained like soldiers although, because of their age, were not as fit but were intended to defend their local area against enemy troops in the

event of an invasion. In the early stages of the war the fear was of enemy paratroops so signposts were removed so that the enemy, if they landed, would not know exactly where they were.

The Air Raid Wardens were responsible for ushering people into shelters during bombing raids, ensuring that no house showed the slightest chink of light to the outside and warning of fire bomb raids or gas attacks.

Light and Heavy Rescue were responsible for getting people out of bombed buildings, shoring the buildings up to prevent further collapse and for temporarily blocking up damaged windows. It was quite normal to see a shop with its front boarded up after its windows had been blown in by a bomb explosion. Then the owners painted a sign saying "business as usual" on the boarding to let you know it was still open and I think the "business as usual" attitude epitomised the spirit of the times. Regardless of the war, people carried on their lives as normally as possible.

My mother had to do a fire watch duty. Because she had young children at home her shift was, I think, from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. One night at one or two in the morning during a raid, we saw the whole sky was brilliantly lit up, almost like daylight and there were sounds of blowing whistles. We wondered what it might be and my mother thought that, perhaps, Ealing Film Studios, less than a couple of miles away, had been hit and that their magnesium flares had gone up in flames.

Well she was right about the magnesium but not about the source. It turned out to be an incendiary bomb raid. One had gone down the wall of the house next door and put itself out as it buried itself in the earth. One had hit the garden wall of the house opposite and burned itself out on the pavement, melting stones from the wall into the pool of metal that remained. One had gone through the roof of the house diagonally opposite and set fire to the back bedroom. They managed to get the fire under control by smothering it in sand. Others had landed in other houses and gardens in the road but fortunately they were all brought under control.

Despite the fact that she was a firewatcher and had been taught what to do, my mother had completely forgotten her training and the meaning of the whistle blowing. Good job we didn't have a firebomb raid when she was on duty.

We were very lucky. Our family didn't suffer much from the bombing. The east end of London and, particularly, the areas around the docks suffered very badly; large areas of houses were flattened and many people died, were injured, or made homeless. In the early days of the blitz, bombs were generally small and only damaged the 3 or 4 houses immediately around the impact but, as the war progressed, bombing soon became more effective and the bombs became more powerful. Our front bedroom ceiling fell down one day because of the shaking the house received from nearby bomb explosions and we had a window broken by flying debris.

The next road parallel to us, Boston Road, was the main road along which ran a trolleybus route (the 655). A bomb landed on a café at the side of the road and also made a large hole in the road. The café was demolished and so was a lorry parked beside it. They found the axle of the lorry had been blown onto a nearby roof. The trolley buses had to be turned round using their on-board batteries for the manoeuvre but they didn't have the range to detour off the main road. Petrol and diesel buses were much more flexible and could be diverted round side roads if their route was obstructed.

One type of bomb was dropped by parachute so that the explosion caused blast damage over a wide area. One of these flattened several streets of houses in nearby West Ealing, killing, injuring, and trapping a lot of families, and keeping the rescue services very busy. It also damaged many houses in the surrounding streets and, after the war, the whole area was rebuilt.

Later in the war we were allocated a Morrison shelter. It was an indoor shelter, occupied about the floor space of a 4 foot double bed, and was table height. It was set up in the dining room. It had 4 very stout angle iron corners. Two sets of angle irons were bolted round the sides and ends from corner to corner, one set about 3 inches above the floor, and another set round the top. On the top set was bolted a sheet of steel which served to hold up any falling masonry and also doubled as a table top.

On the bottom set, steel laths stretched from side to side and end to end to support a mattress so that it could be used as a bed. Weldmesh panels fitted on the sides and ends but were removable when the shelter was used as a table.

We spent many nights of heavy air raids sleeping under the shelter. My sister slept against the wall. Next, my mother slept in the middle, while I slept on the outside. Sometimes we didn't bother to put on the outside sheet of weldmesh. One night we had a very heavy raid but I was tired. A nearby explosion shook the house and I rolled out of the shelter onto the floor and towards the fireplace so my mother grabbed hold of me and rolled me back in. I slept through the whole thing and only knew about it when she told me the next morning. It just indicates how accustomed to the bombing we had become or, perhaps, how tired we were from sleepless nights.

By 1944 we were getting very frequent raids by V1 flying bombs, nicknamed Doodlebugs. These were small pilotless planes loaded with high explosive and driven by a pulse jet engine which gave them their distinctive sound. If you heard one pass overhead, all was well for you because it was going further. If you heard the engine cut out, take cover. It was going to crash somewhere nearby. Several landed in our town and one landed on the bus route I took to school although fortunately after I had gone by. A 97 bus had just come round the corner at the Lido traffic lights, West Ealing, into the Uxbridge Road, when the driver saw a V1 diving towards him. With great presence of mind, he swung the bus into a narrow side street called Chapel Road and saved the bus and its passengers. The V1 landed on Abernethy's, the men's outfitters, in the Uxbridge Road and destroyed the shop as well as killing some of the family and staff.

People were killed, buildings destroyed, and roads torn up and blocked, every time one landed.

In the summer of 1944 my sister went with her school to harvest camp where they all worked to help bring in the harvest so my mother and I went to visit her cousin Elsie in Lancashire. We saw my sister off at Waterloo and then had to get to Euston station. There was an air raid on at the time so my mother took a taxi. My first taxi ride. When we arrived at Manchester Piccadilly station and were making our way, with our suitcase, to Manchester Victoria for the next train to Bury, someone assumed we were evacuees from the bombing and kindly asked my mother if we were looking for somewhere to stay.

We were then subjected to V2 rocket attacks. There was no warning. All anyone nearby knew was when a rocket landed with a devastating explosion. Those on whom it landed never knew what hit

them. The first one landed in Chiswick and the authorities tried to claim that a gas main had exploded. That didn't fool people for long and they attributed the explosion to a "flying gas main", typical of the sense of humour that prevailed.

On 8th May 1945, peace was declared in Europe and, despite the fact that the law on blackout had not been repealed many people rigged up lights to floodlight their houses. I wanted to do the same but my mother was afraid I would electrocute myself. Thinking back on it, she was probably right. It would certainly have been unsafe. I wouldn't have thought to earth it. My grandfather had been brought up before electricity was introduced into houses and he didn't understand mains electricity. He was only happy with low voltage D.C. which he used for his electroplating and that only needed two wires, so there was no-one to supervise what I wanted to do.

War in the Far East lasted for another 3 months and peace was declared in August 1945 but, for most of us, it did not have a direct effect on our lives.

Wartime (Part 2)

Rationing was introduced a few months after the war started and lasted into the 1950s.

Meat, butter, margarine, cooking fat, eggs and sweets, were all rationed as a fixed quantity per person each week and you also had points allocated from which you could buy dried fruits, tinned food, jams and sugar. It was probably the need to accurately control the quantities being sold that finally caused pre-packed quantities to oust the sale of butter, tea and sugar loose. Until then it was normal to go into the grocer's and to find different types of butter on marble slabs behind the counter. The housewife would taste one or two before deciding which to buy and the grocer would then chop off a chunk, weigh it, add or remove a small portion till the weight was right, and then pat it into a small block which he then wrapped in greaseproof paper for the housewife to buy. Tea and sugar were similarly sold loose.

Locally grown fruit and vegetables in season were sold in the shops but bananas were never available and oranges were unheard of. Housewives preserved surplus fruits and vegetables like tomatoes or string beans in jars for use when the season was over. There were no domestic refrigerators and there was no such luxury as buying food out of season. Crops were not imported and only those grown in UK were available. Everyone was encouraged to 'Dig for Victory' and large parts of the parks were dug up and converted to allotments. Anyone who was prepared to grow his own food was allowed to rent an allotment. In one of the local parks (Lamas Park) they had managed to tap into the water table and had installed several pumps so that people could draw water to water their plants. After the war, the allotments were gradually taken back and grassed over again.

Because the butter ration was so meagre and, when it ran out, you had to use margarine, my sister and I always wanted to scrape the butter paper. It left me with a liking for butter and, when no-one was looking, you could shave a thin slice off the butter block and it wouldn't be missed.

In the first few days of rationing it was exciting to find a slot machine on the railway station with chocolate still in it but, of course, that didn't last for long.

By saving up points, my mother managed to celebrate Christmas quite well each year although, on reflection, I think I was probably undernourished as a child.

Inevitably there was a black market although I was unaware of it at the time. I am sure my mother would not have bought any black market goods on principle but some people found ways of getting hold of rationed goods and selling them, off ration, at inflated prices.

Clothes and furniture were also rationed on a points system. You were not able to stock a wardrobe but merely to buy a minimum of replacement clothing or bedding with your points although I think newly-weds had a special allowance to help them set up house and I am sure people who had been bombed out must have had an extra allowance.

Furniture was built to a standard called 'utility' and carried a 'utility' mark. Utility furniture was not elaborate but was quite well made and serviceable. We bought a Utility single bed, again with our points, which lasted in the family for 40 years.

There were special allowances for certain things. Bee keepers were allowed an extra sugar ration to feed to the bees as replacement for the honey they removed. There was also an allowance of grain for people who kept chickens but you had to sacrifice your egg ration.

My mother thought it would be an excellent idea to keep chickens so that we could have a lot more eggs. She spoke to one or two people, not necessarily particularly knowledgeable about chickens but who knew a bit more than she did, which was absolute zero. They advised her to get Rhode Island Red/White Sussex crosses so she ordered about 10 or a dozen one day old chicks. They also advised her to have one cockerel but she knew best. She wasn't going to have to feed a non-productive cockerel so she didn't order one.

We converted the garden shed with some perches for the hens to roost on and some boxes filled with straw for the hens to lay their eggs in. We also cut a hatch in the side of the shed with a covering flap so that the hens could get into the run surrounded by wire netting during the day, and be shut in snugly and away from foxes at night. Although the urban fox was unheard of in those days we lived fairly near open country.

We bought grain from Silvester's, the local corn chandler and pet shop which always had a distinctive smell about it, and fed them on a mixture of that and some mash my mother stewed up, together with grit and crushed sea shells.

As soon as the hens reached the age for laying, they started to fight. Without a cockerel to keep order, each one wanted to be boss. Some died, some went off laying, and, after about a year, we gave up the idea and ate the survivors. Grandfather wrang their necks and plucked and trussed them and we had a chicken for Sunday lunch for several weeks on the trot.

Otherwise we usually had a small half shoulder of lamb for Sunday lunch. Shoulder is cheaper than leg and fattier. Then we had the lamb served cold on Monday and on Tuesday, what was left was minced and re-cooked. It did not appreciate proper, fresh cooked mince until I left home.

Later in the war, we occasionally received a food parcel from America. How they were allocated, I don't know, but I do recall that they contained a white margarine. The food rules where they came

from did not allow it to be coloured so it came with a packet of yellow colouring powder which you could add but the powder settled in the area it fell on and the rest of the margarine stayed white so we gave up the idea and used it for cooking. We also got dried powdered egg. It was pretty foul stuff but you could just about make scrambled egg from it when it had been reconstituted. The powdered egg went better in cooking.

Britain was devastated financially by the war and rationing continued until about 1954.