

## Reminiscences of a Wartime Child 1939-1945

I remember, I remember the 2nd of September 1939.

It was a warm sunny day and my six year old brother and I (seven years) were playing by the river in the grounds of Hertford Castle. This was our first day in Hertford - then a small quiet market town with little traffic.

My mother had taken us to the Castle so my Father could complete the move with the removal man as we moved from Harrow to Hertford.

If my parents knew that something momentous was going to happen the following day there was no sign of it to the two of us. I suspect they did not know.

On Sunday 3rd September 1939 my brother and I were noisily running up and down the poppy-filled back garden when suddenly at 11am there were two loud noises. One was the clanging of All Saint's Church bells and the other more frightening sound was the loud wailing of the siren to warn us of an air raid. In fact there was no air raid but it was to tell us the Prime Minister Mr Chamberlain was to speak to the Nation at 11.15am. Everyone rushed indoors and we already had the radio on and were told to be very quiet. I can still see the shock on my dear Mother's face when the Prime Minister announced "today I regret to tell you that we are at war with Germany". That wailing siren was to become a feature of our lives for the next six years.

I had no idea of what a war was but knew from the sound of everyone's voices that it was serious. Then a woman came on and sang "The White Cliffs of Dover". I learned later that this was Vera Lynn who was to become known as the Forces' Sweetheart.

It took six years of great courage and fortitude of the Nation before peace was declared.

So much happened during the next few weeks. New Schools beckoned for my brother and me of which more later.

The house had to have every window covered inside with thick black sticky tape to prevent windows shattering if a bomb fell. Very soon a landmine landed in a neighbouring road and five people were killed. We had damage but the tape was successful. Beds were brought downstairs and acted as our air raid shelter. Our garden had a large Andersen shelter built but it flooded easily and it was never used. Some neighbours had an inside shelter called the Morrison but later we learned that it was not very successful either. The black tape also acted as a blackout as not a glimmer of light had to be seen and air raid wardens patrolled every night. If it did the warden would shout 'put out that b..... light!!!! Street lights then were all switched off and torches shaded as were bus and train lights. It is hard to describe just how black it was.

Many people were injured, including my Father, as they bumped into posts and fences. All iron fences had already been removed to build spitfires and aluminium saucepans had to be given towards the war effort. The only lights one could ever see were searchlights over London searching for enemy planes.

Gas Masks were allocated to children and adults alike. Young children like my brother had Mickey Mouse gas masks. All were actually uncomfortable and we had to carry them at all times. We were sent home from School should we have forgotten them and we had regular gas mask practices. Later we learnt that they were useless!!!!

Rationing began on the 8th January 1940. I remember it well as it was my eighth birthday. A great deal of food and clothes were put on ration throughout the war and beyond. German forces targeted ships importing food and other goods. Ration books were given to everyone who then registered with a grocers, butchers and a baker shop - there was no such thing then as a Supermarket. Sugar was still carved off a large sugar loaf and put in blue bags and so on. There was very little money then and the choice in shops was miniscule compared to today. The first things rationed were bacon, sugar and butter. The 2ozs of butter each were used on Tuesday mornings in my family. Known hereafter as 'best fresh butter day'. My mother gave us the choice of a scraping of butter on toast each day or a real coating of butter on Tuesdays. We must have chosen the latter! Not long after milk, meat, cheese, one egg, cooking fat were also rationed. People who kept hens were not allowed an egg. It must have been a battle for our Mums - but there were a lot of cooking programmes on the BBC Home Service.

Many people rented allotments including one we shared with a neighbour. We as children missed our sweets. At first we were allowed 16ozs a month down to 8ozs (227g) a month as sugar lessened. The sweets I remember were sherbet dabs, lemon sherbets, barley sugar twists, jelly babies, liquorice twists, Fry's chocolate creams and pear drops. A sherbet dab could be bought for a farthing - a quarter of a penny!!!!

We missed fruit, many children had never seen a banana. The excitement after the war of seeing a banana was immense. That and sweets coming off ration. No oranges but babies had concentrated orange juice. I do not recall fruit being rationed as it was unobtainable unless apples and pears in season.

My brother was in hospital for a long period and recalls having fruit, illegally brought from overseas, delivered by our Mum to the hospital - particularly a pineapple because none of the boys in the ward had seen one before. He feels sure it was imported via Bristol-Filton where my Father was stationed!!!

Meat was in very short supply. Every kitchen had a mincer screwed to a bench. The weekly ration was the equivalent to 2 small lamb chops today. Most families chose a joint for Sunday which then lasted for two or even three more meals - cold meal, rissoles and so on. Pasta was unknown and rice saved for rice puddings. New things came in, Spam and Baked Beans from America and Corned Beef from Argentina. Biscuits were rationed but on Saturday, we all rushed to Woolworths which sold scraps of biscuits off ration. Shopping took forever and today's queuing in the Coronavirus would seem very familiar to our Mums in the War.

After the war my mother was told a secret by an old lady who lived close by and whose husband had been a Vicar in the East End - Bromley -by Bow. Three of his parishioners were famous then as comedians on the radio. Jack Warner and his two sisters Elsie and Doris Waters - known as Gert and Daisy. They were called to the Ministry of Food to meet with the Minister. He told them that Britain had food sufficient for only one week as so many convoys had been bombed. Only three people knew this - The King, Winston Churchill and Lord Woolton. It was to be a strict secret. However a supply of SNOEK had come in from South Africa. The taste was so awful that people refused to eat it. Gert and Daisy were asked to do a programme that night which was a comedy act saying - it was either Snoek or Mr Adolf Hitler! That awful fish went down in legend.

January 1940 had terrible weather with sub-zero temperatures. The Thames froze so did the local rivers. Coal was in short supply. Did we miss school? No, of course not, discipline was instilled in us even though 40-50 children in the class huddled round a single coke fire. Then in my grammar school in 1947 when no heating was available we sat in overcoats and hoods as did our teachers .

Discipline was the order of the day. At no time were we sent home early even then with the cold and during peaseouper fogs. Many girls lived very far away as there were very few schools compared to now. No excuses were made.

In my long life I have come to appreciate the value of self discipline and thank those in the past who passed it on to their pupils.

So what was schooling like when we were young. The curriculum was pretty basic - the three R's . Girls had an occasional needlework lesson whilst the boys did drill. There were a few text books in the school but no 'real' books. We had a nature reading once every term. I was lucky in my first class as a young teacher who taught us loved history and had large posters in the classroom - most unusual. They were of Medieval Kings and Queens. In many ways she passed her love of British History to me which has lasted all my life. History was not of course on the curriculum but her story telling was good!!! It was a Church of England School and the Vicar came in once a week to give us Bible Lessons supplemented by attendance at Sunday School to which nearly all the class went. The Headmaster was a strict disciplinarian. We were made to run round the school every morning and then do exercises on rush mats in the cold playground. Not surprisingly he had been a Major in the First World War and taught PE to the troops.

Classes were crowded and especially when the evacuees came in from the Jewish Orphanage although they were mostly taught in their own separate and very crowded school. They were very clever young people and I remember being told I could go to their performance of the Mikado. The costumes, from before the War, were fabulous. So was their acting. It gave me a love later of Opera. The Battersea Boys Grammar School was also evacuated to a local Boys Grammar School, and for a while Hertford was very crowded as we had two Scottish Regiments in the Barracks. One was the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and I think the other was the Black Watch or the Gordon Highlanders.

There were no school dinners in our Primary School and we had to walk quickly home and back every day. In my Grammar School there were school dinners provided. Occasionally my Mother took us to the British Restaurant. These were communal kitchens provided mainly for those who had been bombed out but later helped those who had run out of ration coupons. The food was not appetising if I remember but it helped the ration books go further.

I was one of those fortunate children who could read before I went to the Infants school in Pinner. Reading was my passion and my mother took me to the Hertford Public Library soon after we moved. From a young age I carried around a leather Satchell with books that my father had used during the First World War. I can even now remember their titles: Hall and Knights Algebra; Halls Geometry and Trigonometry; Bulwer Lytton Last days of Pompeii; Imperial history encyclopaedia; Christie's old organ.

In 1942 I sat "The Scholarship" exam. A small number of us passed from our large class of 40 plus children. My best friend Sheila and I passed to go to the Ware Grammar School and the boys passed to the Hertford Grammar school, with one to Christs Hospital School in Horsham.

My general knowledge and spelling was also good and this was due entirely to my Father who when he was home set us quizzes of general knowledge and spelling 'B's'. His catch question was always :

"Which is the longest river in the World"

Invariably I would say 'The Amazon'

No, No!!

'Okay was it The Nile?  
Yes, Yes!!! Don't forget.

I am sure all this tutoring and my reading helped me win the Scholarship exams to my Grammar School.

Were we aware of the war and what was happening? Yes definitely, as we were encouraged to help in the war effort. We went into the hedges to pick rose hips for rose hip jelly - a source of vitamin C. We knitted long scarves and balaclavas for the troops. We had special waterproof wool which we knitted on long thick wooden needles. We helped 'Dig for Victory' on the allotment. We chatted to the American forces stationed not far away and they showed us photos of their children.

In the town we saw our 'boys' who had been wounded and who wore blue woollen suits with a red tie. Also we saw Italian young men in brown uniforms. Apparently they loved gardens and agriculture and never sought to escape. Most of my friends were Brownies and then Guides and we worked hard for our badges and promised 'to do our duty to God and the King!' I was at first a Pixie and then a Scarlet Pimpernel in the Guides.

We were encouraged to give our toys away when we grew out of them and hand them over to younger children who did not have dolls at such. This was harder than it seems as I was very attached to Goldie my darling doll. But in the end she left me!! Radio was the only form of communication. Very few people had phones and one usually had to queue to use the nearest public one. BBC did us proud. There was only one programme - The Home Service. Later there was the Light Programme and of course the Forces programme. As I grew older I listened to comedians like Tommy Handley and ITMA, wonderful plays, Dick Barton Special Agent and Classical concerts. One concert I shall never forget was held in the Ware Drill Hall and was crowded with adults and children. Our famous concert pianist was Dame Myra Hess (who had pioneered lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery). She was playing Schumann's Carnival without music. Half way through she stood up and apologised and said she had momentarily forgotten it but it would soon come back as she fiddled with the keys. It did of course - she continued! At the end everyone stood up and gave her thunderous applause. A lesson in humility for us all.

All children were aware of bombs not far away. We certainly knew the difference between German planes and our Spitfires and Hurricanes. Those bombs dropped in our area were normally from Germans heading home and offloading before crossing the channel or North Sea. At first there were V1's and V2's and later, and more frightening, were the Doodlebugs which dropped when out of fuel and were therefore random. One moment they were making a loud noise and then there was sudden silence. They were going to fall. Terrifying!

A boy's hobby was looking for shrapnel in the fields-usually from anti aircraft shells. An abiding memory was when everyone came out to look at the sky in July 1940 when overhead we saw hundreds of planes, mostly British but some from the Luftwaffe. These were all heading for the south coast. It was the beginning of the war in the air when the Royal Air Force started to defend Britain. Later known as The Battle of Britain. A cousin of mine was killed in this battle like many other airmen.

My Father was a qualified electrical engineer but was not called up to go into the forces as he was blinded in one eye as a young man. He was therefore a special reservist and was posted to various airfields during the war including Shannon in Ireland and Glasgow in Scotland. Mostly

however he was in Bristol and Bovington not far from Hertford. His job was to ensure that the communication systems on American bombers were always in working order after they landed and before taking off on bombing raids with new crews. My Mother missed him very much especially in 1944 when my brother was suddenly taken very ill and moved to the Hertford County Hospital. The initial prognosis was cerebral meningitis but he did not improve and our own very good GP told my Mother he was sure it was a disease called Infantile Paralysis - later known as Polio. Could my parents afford a consultant to come down from Harley Street to confirm his findings. Cost £5 guineas. The cost was probably three weeks wages for my Father but of course the answer was Yes. This was confirmed that the diagnosis of our GP who had actually worked in Australia with the famous Sister Kenny who nursed polio patients, there was no NHS in those days and people depended upon health insurance.

My brother was then taken to the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore where he stayed for well over a year in the Duke of Gloucester ward with several other boys. Tony remembers seeing Doodlebugs in the sky through big windows and the boys were told to throw themselves on the floor if this happened. This was a very worrying time for my parents, my Mother especially. She was allowed along with other Mums, to see her son for an hour each Wednesday afternoon. I remember her as being in tears when she got home from a very arduous bus journey and seeing Tony in tears also as she had to leave after just one hour. She started out at 7am in the morning and arrived home about 8pm in the pitch black after numerous bus changes. One day our dog called Teddy came down to the bus stop with her and she said (without thinking) 'good dog - stay! When she got home late that night she said where is Teddy - he is a naughty boy staying out. She then suddenly remembered and rushed down to the bus stop where our lovely dog was still waiting for her!

We also were blessed to have a lodger called Kath. Every home had to have either an evacuee or a lodger who was taking the place of a man away in the Forces. I remember Kath coming to see us and walking down the steps in a fur coat. My brother and I thought she must be very rich! Later she told us it was a cheap old rabbit fur!!! Kath proved not only a blessing and companion to my Mother during the war but became one of our family's greatest friends. She wrote every day to Tony in hospital and often sent him little presents. My brother looked after her long after when Kath and her sister moved not far away from Tony and his family. My brother was still in hospital when the war ended and we had a great street party. When he eventually came home our neighbours arranged another party for Tony complete with Union Jacks. Rejoice our family was together again.

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