

My recollections of the War

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This article has been revised to add photographs and information obtained since 2005.

Originally written for my own amusement I have been encouraged when others have found something of interest.

I enjoy listening to experiences of the now elderly citizens, many having very interesting stories to tell. I have been very fortunate to have recently met two such people, one a Lancaster pilot who was actually on the infamous Dresden raid and another who was involved in the 1940 Taranto raid. When I suggested recording their exploits I received the same reply, nobody would be interested. The war has now become history and apparently not a subject of any interest to the modern generation. So much for Churchill's plea that those who fought and gave their lives to save Britain from Nazi domination shall never be forgotten. Today many are not sure who Churchill was!

In writing this article I have attempted to describe what it was like for a teenager living in London during the war, if somebody else finds something of interest in it then that would be a bonus.



I am fortunate in that I am still able to enjoy the company of school friends. Standing Roy Page, Johnny Cook, I am the one holding the puppy.

My recollection of the War

The other day I watched a programme where a family attempted to show what it must have been like to have lived in the war. It involved dressing up in 1940 clothes and spending time in an Anderson shelter, with sounds of an air raid and the music of Glen Miller. I found I could in no way relate to this and felt it did little to show people what it was really like. The war has been very well documented and there is no shortage of material for people interested in reading about the war, but what was it really like for me?

In 1938 I was eleven years old and lived with my parents in Lewisham. I was aware that there was talk about another war with Germany and saw various preparations taking place. I had recently joined my new school, Brockley Grammar in Hilly Fields and there was talk about the school being evacuated. Towards the end of the year the school was evacuated to Robertsbridge in Kent, I chose not to go.

I remember seeing anti-aircraft guns being installed in Hilly Fields, close to my school, windows being taped up, buildings being protected with sand bags and gas masks being issued. Although I can remember a lot of events I cannot recall the specific dates on which they occurred. However with the aid of the modern computer and by re-reading various books on the subject, I am now able to record events more clearly, but for what purpose? Mainly so that my recollections can be easily accessed for future reference and perhaps somebody else may find something of interest. My father served throughout the First World War and I now deeply regret not finding out more about his experiences.

In starting to write this I find it difficult to accept that the war started over sixty five years ago and must now be considered history, but here goes!

My first recollection connected with the forthcoming war was at a Biggin Hill flying day. Together with my parents we used to visit RAF Biggin Hill for their annual flying display, held to celebrate Empire Air Day and visited the last one on the 20th May 1938. Being very interested in aircraft I was well aware that the Germans had a modern air force and a very formidable new fighter, the Messerschmitt BF 109.

At the show we were treated to air displays by the squadron's Gloster Gauntlets, Gladiators and other biplane aircraft. As I recall most of the show consisted of ancient biplanes, fighters and bombers, however we did have a fly past by our latest monoplane fighter, the Hawker Hurricane. On the ground we were allowed to see a closely guarded Hurricane and Spitfire! The Spitfire shown was evidently the first production model. Also featured were the latest additions to the RAF, a Wellington Bomber, a Blenheim and a new monoplane the Defiant. I remember leaving the show being very impressed with the Hurricane and Spitfire but also concerned that the squadron's main aircraft was still the biplane Gauntlet, certainly no match for the Messerschmitt.

I had seen pictures showing the results of the German air force bombing villages in Spain, (Spain's civil war, 1936 to 1939) and was well aware what could be in store for us in the event of another war with Germany.

During this period I had attended various local schools catering for those children not evacuated,

ending up at a local school called Morden Terrace. Eventually I was offered a place at the South East London Technical Institute and in September 1938 began a three year course in mechanical engineering.

To add some order to these recollections I have decided to place them in the order they happened, beginning with the day Germany invaded Czechoslovakia.

In March 1939 Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and then on the 1st September invaded Poland. We gave Germany an ultimatum which they chose to ignore. As a result our Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced at 11am on the 3rd September 1939 that we were once again at war with Germany. France joined us as did most of the countries in the British Empire and the Commonwealth.

This was a very sombre occasion as my parents' memories of the last war were still very fresh in their minds. Shortly afterwards the air raid siren sounded and we expected the worse, but fortunately it was a false alarm. We obtained our main information about the progress of the war from the radio, especially the evening 9 o'clock news. The BBC had decided to name its announcers so that we could distinguish them from imitations by the German propagandists. I still remember the start of the news which began "Here is the news, and this is Alvar Lidell reading it".

The BBC news bulletins, although censored, gave us an idea of the progress of the war and generally determined how we felt. Initially we expected heavy bombing by the German air force but as this did not materialise we began to feel more confident.

The main evacuation of children from our cities commenced shortly afterwards, although the first evacuation had occurred at the time of the Munich Crisis, a year earlier.

Following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, the British Expeditionary Force was sent to France shortly after Britain and France had declared war on Germany. It was commanded by Lord Gort, who was under the command of the French General Maurice Gamelin. The BEF was considered to be a formidable fighting force and together with the huge French Army we had every reason to think the war would soon be over, however most of us were unaware of the political situation in France at the time. The senior French generals could not agree on a coordinated plan of attack, preferring to wait to see what the Germans would do. In the pre-war years the French had built a series of fortifications known as the Maginot Line and the Germans had built a similar one called the Siegfried Line. Most of the allied forces were sent to reinforce the Maginot Line against the expected German attack.

At this time the French had the largest army in Europe, with the support of a large air force and navy, however its Generals were mostly veterans of the First World War and consequently thought in terms of defeating any German attack at the Maginot Line.

On the 14th October.1939 our battleship HMS Royal Oak was hit by 3 torpedoes and sunk with heavy loss of life, whilst at anchor in our Naval Base at Scapa Flow.

On the 13th December.1939 we lost an aircraft carrier, HMS Courageous. I remember visiting this ship earlier in the year at a Royal Navy open day at Portsmouth and being impressed with its size.

The German submarine U29 fired three torpedoes with two hitting the ship. It sunk in less than 15 minutes killing 518 of its crew, including the Captain. This was not a good start to the war.

German warships and in particular their pocket battleship Graf Spee, had been very active in sinking our merchant ships. The Graf Spee was eventually sighted by three of our cruisers, Ajax, Achilles and Exeter and after a short engagement was eventually scuttled on the 13th December 1939, in what has since become known as the "Battle of the River Plate". At last we had some good news which helped to cheer us up!

In 1939 Britain only grew enough food to feed one person in three and the German submarines and surface ships now threatened to starve the U.K. into defeat. But it was not just food, many other essential things had to be imported such as rubber, wood, crude oil etc, were now threatened.

Petrol (distilled from imported crude oil) was rationed soon after the war started and butter, sugar, bacon and meat rationed from January 1940. So even before the first signs of war in France we were already feeling the effects of the war.

The first deployment of our forces was completed by the 11th October 1939 at which point 158,000 men and equipment had been transported to France. It was lead by our General Lord Gort under the Supreme Commander of the French Army, General Maurice Gamelin aged 68 and a veteran of the First World War. The majority of his troops were stationed along the Franco-Belgian border at the Maginot Line. Belgium and Holland were not at war and so no troops were sent to them.

By September 1939 we had rapidly modernised our Air Force which now featured over 500 of the latest Hurricanes and Spitfires. Although still falling far short of the estimated strength of the Luftwaffe, it was a considerable improvement on our resources in 1938, at the time of the Munich Crisis.

Most members of the French army were in the infantry. The first armoured divisions had just been formed but the first three would not be ready until the spring of 1940. At the start of the war the French air force had 826 fighter planes, including 370 modern fighters capable of taking on the latest German fighter, the Messerschmitt 109. It also had over 400 modern bombers, plus a large navy featuring some very useful capital ships. By the spring of 1940 the French air force had increased to 740 modern fighters.

Over the next few months troops, materials and vehicles continued to be sent to France and by the 13th March 1940 the BEF had doubled in size to around 316,000 men, with further tanks, guns, ammunition and supplies including an initial RAF detachment of about 500 assorted aircraft. With our combined Forces it did not seem unreasonable to expect that we were in a very strong position to defeat the German forces. However after establishing our armies at the German frontier General Gamelin, instead of attacking, decided to wait to see what the Germans would do.

On the 1st January 1940, conscription began of all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 to 27, later this was increased to the age of 50. You were exempted if you could prove you were employed on vital war work. My brother, an apprentice printer aged 20, had already volunteered for the RAF as an airframe fitter. On completion of his training he was transferred to an RAF training airfield at Oudtshoorn in South Africa. In early February we became aware of a German merchant ship called

“Altmark” which we understood contained a number of crews from merchant ships sunk by the German pocket battleship “Graf Spee”. We then learnt that it was located in neutral Norwegian waters, however, despite this, on February 14th 1940 our destroyer HMS Cossack sailed into Jossing Fjord and with the call “OK mates the Navy’s here” rescued 299 of our sailors. At last we had something to be proud of, but not for long!

It soon became apparent that Gamelin was not willing to engage in an attacking battle with the German army, somehow hoping this could be avoided. This gave Hitler time to decide when and where to attack. When he was ready, on the 9th April 1940, Germany avoided the Maginot Line by invading neutral Denmark and Norway and, shortly afterwards followed with the invasion of Holland, Belgium and then attacked France, avoiding the Maginot Line by going through Belgium.

This took the French generals completely by surprise as they were not expecting or prepared for this development and never recovered in sufficient time to confront the Germans in any great force. Without leadership the French morale soon crumbled under the sudden attack from the air and German armour.

The German advance had been achieved by the combined use of tanks, infantry and aircraft in what has become known as a blitzkrieg. The word, usually shortened to blitz, means a “lightning war” and is associated with a series of quick and decisive short battles aimed at creating fear and confusion in the opposing force and delivering a knockout blow before it could fully recover.

The German air force (Luftwaffe) played a very important part in this exercise using the Junkers 87 Stuka dive bomber to create panic and confusion in both the troops and retreating civilians.

When the fighting in France began it soon became apparent that the majority of the French forces were already demoralised, due to bad leadership and political corruption and when the Luftwaffe started their bombing campaign the French army quickly disintegrated leading the way open for immediate action by the German army. French troops were seen to throw away their guns and even discard their uniforms to join the fleeing civilians. There were even reports about some French pilots actually trying to prevent our aircraft from taking off for fear of reprisals, saying "why risk your life when the war is already lost".

On May 10th 1940 Chamberlain resigned, following our retreat from Norway, and Winston Churchill became our new Prime Minister, this despite some hostility from members of our government. Some, like the French, thought the war was already lost and that we should be talking with Hitler in an attempt to obtain the best terms for surrender. Fortunately Winston’s inspiring oratory resulted in a small majority in favour of us continuing to fight.

Without the full co-operation of the French forces and the almost immediate surrender of both Belgium and Holland, General Gort decided that our continued presence in France had become untenable and on the 26th May we began evacuating our troops from Dunkirk.

Although we managed to save 338,226 allied troops we had to leave all our supplies behind, including 615 tanks, 2,472 guns, 65,000 vehicles, 25,000 motorcycles, 416,000 tons of stores, 75,000 tons of ammunition and 162,000 tons of petrol. (These surprising and very precise figures have been obtained from historical records and demonstrate the extent of the disaster).

In just a few weeks Britain had gone from having one of the best equipped armies to being almost non-existent, and this without engaging the enemy in any major battle. We at home could not believe it and wondered what disaster was going to happen to us next!

During the few weeks of actual fighting it has been estimated that the French lost 757 aircraft (mostly on the ground) and two million French soldiers had surrendered. However some must have fought because the French lost nearly 94,000 dead with 250,000 wounded. The British lost 3,475 dead and 15,850 wounded, with many thousands more taken prisoner.

General Lord Gort, commander of the BEF was subsequently criticized for his actions during the short French campaign, but most realised that without support from our allies he had little choice but to withdraw. His subsequent actions meant that a high proportion of our troops were saved and thus able to fight again, but the loss of so much equipment was extremely serious.

Whilst the RAF's Hurricanes and Spitfires had already proven themselves against the German Luftwaffe the RAF had lost a considerable number of its valuable front line aircraft and experienced pilots. The operations in France cost the Royal Air Force a total of 959 aircraft, including 477 of its latest Hurricanes and Spitfires and other aircraft including bombers operating from U.K. bases. Two hundred and eighty of our fighter pilots had lost their lives or been taken prisoner.

Well aware of the speed with which Germany had just conquered most of Europe we wondered just how much time we had before Germany turned its attention to us. Before using its ground troops it had softened up the target by intense bombing and we expected the same would happen to us. There were plenty of rumours about German agents being already here, the forerunner of a massive attack by German airborne soldiers. This was reinforced by the German radio frequently giving accurate reports about local conditions in the UK.

This waiting for the expected attack was probably the worst part of the war for its civilians; however unlike the French and other Europeans we were prepared to defend our Country. We had heard frequent reports of atrocities being carried out by the Germans on prisoners and refugees which only hardened our resolve not to let them land. Our immediate problem was how were we going to stop them?

After Dunkirk we had no army and a depleted air force with only 331 modern Spitfires and Hurricanes to defend Britain from the expected invasion. If the Germans attacked Britain right away Dowding, who was in charge of Fighter Command, was concerned that his forces would be very hard pushed to keep them at bay, and it was an immediate attack that was thought most likely.

Seeing the remnants of our army arriving back in the UK we had to accept how vulnerable our position had suddenly become. On the home front we were already suffering from the effects of both food and material shortages and with the fear of an invasion imminent our future suddenly looked very bleak. When war was declared on September 3rd 1939, together with the considerable forces of France, we had every reason to expect a quick end to the war; however things had not gone according to plan and in just ten months we were facing defeat!

Like the French we had many people saying the situation was hopeless and that we should try to get the best possible terms for surrender, but unlike the French we now had a fighting Prime Minister

in Winston Churchill. Through his broadcasts he encouraged us to keep our nerve and to fight on. Despite little resources he assured us that we could and would eventually win. Then to make matters worse, on the 10th June thinking the war would soon be over and wanting a share in the spoils, Italy declared war on us.

On the 22nd June France surrendered. All this happened within a few weeks from Germany commencing the ground war in Europe. We had no doubt what was in store for us and wondered how long we had before the invasion of our island. Winston Churchill, our new prime minister, then assured everybody that we would and could fight on!

There can be no doubt that his attitude and speeches helped us to believe we still had a future, despite certain defeat staring us in the face. Unfortunately some modern historians find it difficult to accept the fact that without Churchill's leadership our government, with some public support, may well have been seeking the best terms for surrender. People alive at this time will remember the importance of Churchill's oratory on our morale. We trusted him and his leadership.

Although the French Army was shattered, the French Navy was still very much intact. Darlan, the Admiral of the French Fleet, had told Churchill that the Fleet would be sunk before it would be surrendered to the Germans; however Churchill was not convinced. If the French Navy had fallen into German hands the situation at sea would have become critical. Added to all our other problems this could have been the last straw.

Churchill was therefore faced with a decision, either to trust that Darlan would and could keep his word or that events would quickly determine the result. On the 22nd June France finally surrendered and it was time for Churchill to decide what he had to do.

On the 1st of July Churchill, with the backing of our government, gave Darlan an immediate ultimatum regarding the fate of the French Navy. On the 3rd July the British surrounded the French Fleet at the port of Mers-el-Kebir right outside Oran, Algeria. Churchill's message was loud and clear, "sail to Britain, sail to the USA, or scuttle your ships within the next six hours, or we will be forced to take action"

At first the French refused to speak to our negotiators. Two hours later the French showed the British an order they had received from Admiral Darlan instructing them to sail the ships to the USA if the Germans broke the armistice and demanded the ships. Meanwhile the British had intercepted a message from the German sympathetic French Vichy Government ordering reinforcements to move urgently to Oran. This was not good news. "Settle everything before dark or you will have reinforcements to deal with" Churchill told them but received no reply. Churchill was left with no alternative other than to order an immediate attack on the French ships.

An hour and a half later the British Fleet attacked and in less than ten minutes, 1,297 French soldiers were dead and three battleships sunk. One battleship and five destroyers managed to escape. We suffered no loss or damage.

While the French were furious over the events the reaction in England was the exact opposite. For the first time since taking over as Prime Minister Churchill received a unanimous standing ovation. Churchill had a message for the British, for Hitler, and for the rest of the world and that message was

heard loud and clear. England was prepared to fight on whatever the outcome!

Sometimes at weekends and evenings I cycled with a school friend to see what was happening at our local airfield, RAF Biggin Hill. We had discovered a field in Downe which gave us a good view of the northern part of the airfield. The main road from Bromley to Westerham, which previously passed through the airfield was now closed, the traffic being diverted through country lanes to Westerham.

From our vantage point we had a good view of the aircraft, which were mostly Hawker Hurricanes. The squadrons had been very active having been involved in the battle for France and our subsequent evacuation from Dunkirk. The aircraft and buildings had been camouflaged during September 1938 at the time of the Munich crisis, when the Hurricane slowly began to replace the Gauntlet biplane fighters. Although we saw little of the German air force it was evident that air battles had been occurring off the coast, from news we heard on the radio. The war news was not good, as we had already lost some of our capital ships and the German submarines were very active sinking our supply ships. The war was already beginning to have an effect on our well-being and we were very apprehensive as to what the future held in store for us.

From the 10th July, now recorded as the start of the "Battle of Britain", the Germans carried out heavy raids on Falmouth, Swansea, Aberdeen and Cardiff. This was phase one of four phases featured in the German plan necessary to obtain air superiority prior to the invasion of our shores. Hitler was convinced that in our current situation we would have no choice but to seek talks, in order to secure the best terms for our surrender. By demonstrating the strength of his Luftwaffe he had hoped to speed these talks on their way.

On the 19th July Hitler gave us the last chance to surrender on his terms and on the 22nd July Lord Halifax responded by saying that we would continue to fight until we had secured freedom for us and others.

This was good to hear, but did little to convince us that we had much left to continue the fight. All we had to stop the Germans was our Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Up to now the RAF, mainly consisting of Hurricanes, had shown that they could compete against the Messerschmitt and were more than a match for their bombers. We were aware that the German Luftwaffe had already shown itself to be a very formidable fighting force, much larger than anything we could offer. Our Royal Navy was busy protecting our merchant ships and was prepared for possible action against German capital ships.

At this stage I had personally seen little of the fighting, apart from watching news reels and hearing the news on the radio, both censored in our favour. However this all changed on the 18th August with the introduction of phase two of Hitler's plan, with attacks on our air fields, including Biggin Hill. Thirty bombers attacked the airfield causing damage to the motor transport sheds. Two airmen were killed and three wounded. A number of high explosive and delayed action bombs were dropped on the airfield, but it remained operational. Three further raids occurred on the airfield on the 22/23rd August and the following two days, but the airfield did not suffer any further damage. I was unaware of these raids when we decided to visit the airfield on Saturday the 30th August.

I remember it was a sunny evening and, with my school friend Ron Poole, we decided to cycle to our local airfield to see what was going on. We arrived about 5.39 and settled in our usual place.

Nothing much appeared to be going on apart from a few Hurricanes being refuelled when suddenly we saw many aircraft coming in very low and then things really began to happen. We heard the rattle of machine guns and then the deafening sound of bombs exploding, much too close for our comfort. The noise was terrific and in a very short time our airfield was in a mess with planes and vehicles burning everywhere.

There was no warning that anything unusual was about to happen, but in a few moments the scene had changed and the airfield was in a mess, with fires, explosions and the noise of fire bells and with smoke and dust covering the airfield. When we first saw the aircraft we thought they were Blenheims, but were soon disillusioned. After the initial shock we decided it was time to leave and did not visit the airfield for some time after that. An official report of the raid reads as follows:

“Saturday August 31st 1940 at 1800 hours

For the second time that day Biggin Hill was bombed and almost put out of action. Oil tanks were hit and set ablaze, the main electricity cable was hit and cut the power lines to all buildings. With hangars and roadways cratered it was anticipated that the airfield would be out of action for at least two days.

Nine Ju88 bombers had managed to get through the British defences taking everybody by surprise and struck Biggin Hill with a low level bombing attack, dropping 1000 lb bombs and causing mayhem. The transport yard was destroyed, storerooms, the armoury and both officers and sergeants messes were severely damaged, two hangars had been wrecked earlier in the day and now another hanger was almost flattened and on top of all that telephone and communication lines were severed and gas and water mains ruptured. Casualties amounted to thirty-nine personnel killed and thirty five injured”.

Raids continued on the airfield until the 20th April 1941, a total of 25 causing considerable damage. 42 personnel were killed during the raids with many injured. Biggin Hill was considered a very important target by the Germans, but remained operational throughout the war. During this period the weather was very good and we watched many contrails in the sky, caused by the fighting aircraft and sometimes heard machine and cannon fire. The good news was that we were told we were winning the battle.

On the 7th September the Germans put into action phase three of their plan to terrorise the civilian population and to force our Government to sue for peace. The German Luftwaffe switched their attack from the RAF airfields and attacked London, which became the start of the “Blitz.” This was very fortunate as it allowed the RAF to recover, but not so good for the Londoners, who were not aware of the critical situation with our air force. This switch of the German attacks has been considered by historians as a great German blunder and may well have lost them the war.

On Sunday the 15th September 1940 we were informed that we had shot down 183 aircraft for the loss of only 30, good news indeed. In fact actual figures compiled after the war showed that we had destroyed only 56 for the loss of 26. However it was apparent that the Germans could not sustain these losses, especially the loss of their experienced aircrew. In the meantime our bombers had been attacking the embarkation ports and destroying their invasion barges. Goring had promised Hitler that the RAF would be destroyed in a maximum of three weeks, allowing the invasion to take place. This

obviously was not happening and Hitler decided to delay the invasion, as he had plans to invade Russia and gave this priority. Unfortunately we did not know this at the time and still thought that the expected invasion could occur at any moment. Although we had lost a lot of aircraft, the loss of experienced pilots was much more serious. The figures showed that this situation could not continue for much longer.

While the critical Battle of Britain officially commenced on the 10th July 1940 and ended on the 31st October, the raids and destruction continued long afterwards.

For me the real Battle of Britain began on the 26th May 1940, when our troops began to arrive back from Dunkirk, and didn't end until the fear of an invasion had receded, when the Germans invaded Russia on the 22nd June 1941. This was the period when we felt we could and probably would lose the war.

Phase four began on the 6th of October and continued until the 31st of October. As the long hot summer ran into October the German daylight bomber losses became too heavy to sustain, and they started to operate only at night.

The London Blitz started on the 7th of September 1940 and continued until the 19th of May 1941, for 76 consecutive nights, resulting in over a million London houses being destroyed or damaged. During this period many of our other cities were also attacked, resulting in further damage and loss of life. Coventry, for instance, was almost completely destroyed on the 13th November 1940. In one night, more than 4,000 homes were destroyed, along with around three quarters of the city's factories. There was barely an undamaged building left in the city centre. Two hospitals, two churches and a police station were also among the damaged buildings. More than 600 people were killed and over 1,000 had been badly injured.

The Blitz had killed at least 60,575 with 86,182 wounded; however the bombing had not achieved Hitler's intended goal of demoralizing the British into surrender and by June 1941 the threat of an invasion of Britain had passed. Hitler had by this time realised that the British were not going to be terrorized into accepting defeat, as had happened to the rest of Europe. He then turned his attention to attacking Russia and the Battle of Britain was finally over. Germany conceded that she had not won the battle, despite all the odds being in her favour.

When the Battle of Britain officially ended, figures obtained after the war showed Germany had lost 1389 aircraft with 643 badly damaged. As the battle took part over the UK, most of the German aircrew shot down were either killed or became prisoners. We lost 792 aircraft shot down and a considerable number destroyed on the ground. Apparently the loss in aircraft was never serious as these were being replaced. However the loss of experienced pilots was crucial. We had lost 544 pilots killed, with a large number seriously wounded. This represented a very high proportion of the pilots available to continue the battle. It was calculated that if these losses continued the RAF would soon be put out of action, perhaps in weeks.

What did the battle achieve? The answer is very simple; it prevented the Germans from obtaining air superiority, allowing us to remain in the war. If we had lost the battle the Germans may well have invaded and we would have had very little to stop them. We would then have become another member of the Third Reich! Some youngsters may well ask would this have been a bad thing? To

this I would say look at what had happened to those countries already under German rule and if you really care, take the time to study the considerable amount of documentary evidence available. If this was done then I am quite certain the question would not arise. We should never forget the debt we owe to those who lost their lives fighting the "Battle of Britain" and remember the considerable part my local airfield, Biggin Hill played in winning this battle.

At the start of the Blitz my brother was in Africa, my father was working at the Evening Standard, a newspaper owned by Lord Beaverbrook, and my mother working part time at the Dockhead School, Bermondsey, where Tommy Steele (aged about 6) was a pupil and I was still at school. We kept chickens in the garden and I had a mongrel dog called Raff and a pet tortoise. My father was trained in first aid and was an air raid warden. Food was in short supply, as was clothing and other items considered essential for a normal existence. We still thought invasion was imminent and generally very depressed with the war news.

Frequent telegrams were arriving indicating the loss of loved ones. Two of my brother's friends in the RAF had already been killed and my parents talked of others they knew who were no longer with us. A lot had already happened before the first bombs had fallen on London, mostly bad news, all contributing to our general depression.

Some house-holders had an Anderson shelter. The Anderson shelter was designed to go in a garden and over one million were issued by the end of 1938. Eventually over 2.5 million were issued, free to people earning less than £250 per year, otherwise the cost was £7. They measured 6.5 ft. by 4.5 ft. and consisted of curved corrugated iron sheets. They had to be sunk 3 ft. in the ground and covered with earth and sandbags, the front entrance had a sandbag blast wall. They were designed to accommodate 4 to 6 people. They were cold, draughty and damp, but nevertheless saved a lot of lives. They were usually lit by paraffin hurricane lamp and unheated. Like most things paraffin, candles and batteries were in short supply. Everything needed for creature comfort seemed to be unavailable; "after all there is a war on" we were told.

My father had strengthened our cellar and placed planks of wood on which we tried to sleep. It had electric light, but very few other luxuries. For the first weeks the Germans seemed to do as they pleased, with little opposition. We heard a few anti-aircraft guns firing, but saw little of any real opposition from our fighters. On most days and nights we heard bombs exploding and the bells of rescue lorries. The next day we saw damaged houses and heard about people being killed and wounded. This was mostly by word of mouth as the news on our radio and newspapers was censored. If we listened to the German radio an Irishman, William Joyce, known by us as "Lord Haw Haw" gave his version of the air raids. In the evening we listened to the radio and sometimes played card games or Monopoly.

I remember my mother frequently joining a queue, although mostly she had no idea what she was queuing for. It didn't matter, if it was still available when she got to the head of the queue she bought it anyway. A sausage, rabbit or even offal was considered a luxury. Lack of essential food was becoming a problem, even fruit and vegetables were now in short supply.

The actual Blitz has been very well documented, so I will only comment on my experience. I spent a lot of my school attendance in their air raid shelter. Sometimes I accompanied my mother shopping

at Lewisham and Catford, but nearly always spent some time in a convenient surface shelter. We later heard that these were not safe. They were constructed with a brick wall and a heavy concrete roof. Consequently if a bomb landed nearby, the blast could cause the walls to collapse and the heavy roof fall on the people inside. We had heard of deaths so caused, but with bombs exploding near by it somehow seemed safer to get under cover. Incendiary bombs were falling everywhere and to make life even more exciting, the Germans added a device which caused the incendiary bomb to explode, causing an extra hazard.

Eventually we had more anti-aircraft guns and these brought another danger, that of falling shrapnel. I remember my father saying that there was more chance of being hit on the head with a piece of hot shrapnel than being hit with a bomb! One thing I recall is that our Navy brought some ships up the Thames to assist the London anti-aircraft guns. Cycling to Greenwich I remember seeing a destroyer which we were informed was the famous "Cossack," the destroyer which had achieved fame when it had rescued our merchant sailors from the German prison ship, "Altmark".

Sometime in November 1940, at about 3 o'clock in the morning, I remember it was cold and raining, our house at 43 Overcliff Road, Lewisham received a direct hit. My Aunt Ethel and Uncle Reg were staying with us as their flat in nearby Brockley had been badly damaged. We prepared for bed soon after listening to the 9 o'clock news, the siren had already sounded and we could hear the usual noise of aircraft, anti-aircraft guns and bombs dropping in the distance. We tried to sleep in old clothes on wooden planks covered by a blanket. The planks were placed both sides of the cellar accommodating the five of us. With a supply of coal at the far end the air was far from fresh! At the time we were hit, although I was awake (the noise of an air raid did not encourage sleep) I cannot remember hearing the actual explosion of the bomb, but became aware that I was suddenly in darkness and covered in dust and rubble. It was completely dark, I heard my father calling to hear if we were all right and we all replied saying we were. Evidently both my mother and aunt said that they couldn't move because they were covered in debris. I was still lying on the wooden planks but found it was difficult to move and breathe because of the dust and rubble.

My uncle had been in the garden to have a smoke and said he clearly remembered hearing the sound of bombs dropping and then reaching the top of the cellar stairs, but little else. He landed on top of my father. My father was asking us to turn off the gas. Something was lying on my legs and I discovered it was the gas meter. I could smell gas and hear water running but was disorientated and couldn't find the tap to turn off the gas.

I cannot remember how long we lay there, but the next thing I remember was hearing somebody asking if we were all right. A torch shone and soon people were lifting us out. We stood in a rubble strewn road, in the wet and darkness, but could not see our house! Luckily apart from some cuts and bruises we were all in one piece. I remember feeling thankful that we were all alive but feeling very cold, wet and dirty. There seemed to be a lot of people helping us and the next thing I remember was being taken to a disused snooker hall in nearby Catford, which was being used as a rescue centre. My memory is vague as to what exactly happened next, but somehow we ended up with a mug of tea and clean dry clothes.

My next memory is going back with my father to see what could be rescued. I was surprised to see the house was just a heap of rubble. Our house and the adjoining house, number 45 had just

gone! Where our garden should have been was a big hole. No chickens, tortoise or dog. We could not even discover the cellar door or the stairs. How we had survived was incredible, there was nothing to save!

My uncle said he believed my dog was in the garden with him but despite hoping that somehow he had survived we never saw him again. It was like losing a member of our family and somehow I felt responsible.

A lot of our elderly neighbours had moved into the country and their empty houses were commandeered by the council. We were given one of these houses as temporary accommodation. We did not realise how temporary it was going to be. A week later a bomb had fallen nearby and the house was declared unsafe. We were then given another house, where we managed to stay for the rest of the war, despite replacing windows and other damage.

The London Blitz officially ended on the 19th May 1941 but we were unaware of this at the time and still expected the raids to continue. The Germans had decided to halt the bombing when it became apparent that bombing alone was unlikely to cause the British civilians to insist that their Government seek the best terms for surrender. The Germans apparently could not understand this as bombing civilians, or even the threat of bombing had worked very successfully before, as in Belgium, Holland and France.

During the Blitz on London more than 36,000 bombs had fallen, killing 12,696 with over 20,000 seriously injured. More than a million homes had been demolished and many more badly damaged. Germany had hoped that the civilian population would want to surrender, but I was not aware of any such feeling. Hitler had certainly made us very angry, but all this did was to make us more determined to continue the fight. Unfortunately we civilians had nothing with which to fight back. However it helped our morale considerably when we heard that our bombers were active over Germany, especially when they bombed Berlin!

Fire watching had now been introduced and employees became responsible for detecting fires in their buildings. My father had to spend several nights a week on fire duty. Those of us who ventured out at night had to contend with the black out. It was almost impossible to see anything. In the winter houses and factories burnt a very sub-standard coal; this resulted in a sulphurous gas called smog. It was far from pleasant when this was added to fog and the blackout. Despite the London Blitz being very well documented I feel it is necessary to list a few of the instances in order to show the result of some of these raids.

7th September 1940 300 bombers accompanied by over 600 fighters bombed the London docks and central London, starting over 1,000 individual fires and causing a considerable amount of damage; 430 people killed and over a thousand seriously injured. The fires were clearly visible by me in Lewisham.

17th September Marble Arch underground station received a direct hit, killing 17 and injuring many others. By mid October well over 250,000 Londoners had been made homeless.

11th January 1941 the Bank underground station received a direct hit and killed 117 and left hundreds seriously injured.

19th March 500 bombers accompanied by a large number of fighters attacked the docks and central London. 750 were killed and over 1,000 injured.

16th April 685 bombers accompanied by 700 plus fighters dropped a large number of high explosive bombs and incendiaries causing more than 2,000 individual fires. Over 1,000 were killed and many more seriously injured. The all clear sounded at 6 am on Sunday morning when over 700 acres of London had suffered severe bomb damage, with 11,000 homes destroyed or badly damaged. The bombing had extended as far as Lewisham, Deptford and Croydon. Main line railway stations had been put out of action, including Waterloo and thousands of streets made impassable. Over 600 water mains were broken and the supply of gas and electricity badly disrupted. Telephone lines were broken, adding to the communication problems of the essential services. The last fires were finally extinguished four days later. It took several weeks before services were back to some normality.

Apart from the night when we had suffered a direct hit this was probably one of our worst nights. We could clearly see the fires at the docks from our home in Lewisham, and heard the sound of bombs dropping ever closer. The Germans seemed to proceed unhindered with no anti aircraft fire or the presence of any of our night fighters.

Next day we discovered more wrecked and damaged houses close to where we lived.

Fortunately there were no follow-up raids to disrupt the repair and salvage operations.

Although the above lists only some of the serious events even a single person killed would cause hurt and despair to the family affected. During every raid I wondered if I would survive or if I should suffer a serious injury, a loss of a limb or eyesight.

After the raid, those of us not directly affected just carried on as usual. Somehow we were grateful to still be alive and determined to make the most of the next day, after all what else could we do? I think most of us felt that if we could only survive the present day, tomorrow had to be better or perhaps the next day! The last thing we wanted was for the Germans to win. We rejoiced every time we heard our bombers had raided Germany and hoped this would soon end the war. The Churchill broadcasts helped tremendously by strengthening our morale. The radio and newspapers also helped, by concentrating on whatever good news they could find and censoring the bad. We were certainly not enjoying life and wondering just how much more we could take when Hitler decided to turn his attention towards attacking Russia in order to gain access to its oil, mineral and other resources. He expected it to be a quick victory and it nearly was until the Russian winter took a hand.

During the Blitz my father and his crew were busy dealing with the incendiaries, whilst the experts dealt with the high explosives, sometimes with tragic results. We owed a lot to them and many others, especially the firemen and ambulance drivers who regularly risked their lives and to the women who were often driving the rescue vehicles and helping in so many other ways. In one of the raids I lost a cousin Olive who was an ambulance driver.

It was amazing that so many people were ready to risk their lives whilst helping others, the events certainly brought out the best in people.

The Italians had a formidable navy based at Taranto in the Mediterranean and on the 11th of November our navy decided to do something about it in what has become known as the Battle of Taranto.

On the night of 11/12th November 1940 our Royal Navy launched the first all-aircraft ship-to-ship naval attack in history, flying a small number of obsolescent Fairy Swordfish biplane torpedo bombers from an aircraft carrier, the HMS Illustrious, in the Mediterranean Sea.

The first wave of 12 aircraft left Illustrious just before 21:00 hours on 11th November 1940, followed by a second wave of nine about 90 minutes later. Of the second wave, one turned back with a problem with its auxiliary fuel tank, and one aircraft launched 20 minutes late, after requiring emergency repairs to damage from a minor taxiing accident. We lost two aircraft shot down.

The devastation wrought by the British carrier-launched aircraft on the large Italian warships was the beginning of the rise of the power of naval aviation, over the big guns of battleships and was subsequently copied by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour.

The Italian fleet lost about half its strength in one night, and the next day the Italians transferred its undamaged ships from Taranto to Naples to protect them from similar attacks.

This was the news we badly needed to hear.

In April 1941 Germany launched their African offensive and invaded Yugoslavia and Greece.

24th May we heard that our most famous capital ship, HMS Hood had been sunk during an engagement with the German battleship, Bismarck. The Hood had a crew of over 1,700 and only 3 had survived, we couldn't believe it! Later we heard that Winston Churchill ordered the Bismarck to be sunk at all costs and on the 27th May it was! Nevertheless we couldn't help wondering what was wrong with our warships. We knew our Navy was doing an excellent job protecting our merchant ships from submarine attack, but when faced with the more modern German surface ships and attacks from the air the results were not so encouraging. Now a teenager I was well aware that my schooling was seriously lacking, although by experience I had learnt about things that really mattered, the help and friendship of others when most needed.

In May 1941, aged 14, I had finished my three years at technical school and went to work at the Redwing Aircraft Company in Croydon. I was shown how to rivet fuel tanks for Wellington bombers, but the interest did not last long. On the 17th June I joined the No.1 Maintenance Unit and Barrage Balloon Centre at RAF Kidbrooke as a Trade Lad on a seven year mechanical engineering apprenticeship. This was also the home of the Skyrockets Dance Orchestra conducted by Paul Fenhoulet and was my introduction to dance and swing music.

If I remember correctly I started work at 7.30 until 5.30 and Saturdays until 12.30 to complete a 50 hour week. We had a ten minute break in the morning and afternoon where we were allowed to sit down. I remember my wage was 17shillings and sixpence (85 p). I worked with a Rolls Royce fitter who had recently returned from fighting in Africa. He had been in a tank and suffered ear trouble. When told he had Gunners Ear he was puzzled as he thought the doctor had said Gonorrhoea. Our job was to repair damaged Merlin aero engines.

Being a reasonable distance from where I lived meant that I could cycle to work; this in itself could be quite eventful, as I remember arriving at work in a very dishevelled state after cycling into a recently created bomb crater! Cycle and car lamps had to be hooded to prevent any light escaping upwards, unfortunately this also prevented most of the light reaching the ground!

On the 22nd of June Germany invaded Russia. June also saw the start of clothes rationing and the utility system for retail goods. In November, unmarried women aged 20 to 30 were conscripted into the services or other war work. By mid 1943 nine out of ten single women, between the ages of 20 and 40, were employed in the forces or industry. My aunt Ethel was detailed to work in the local laundry and my uncle had to report for work in the building and repair industry. This meant that he was away from home for considerable periods. Apart from the men being away in the services we now had families broken up by members being away, while not affecting my parents or me directly, it did add another concern.

By the end of the year food had become a major problem and we were all feeling the effects of food rationing, which had begun in January 1940. We had been issued with a food ration card and had to register to buy food from a specific shop. The shop was then issued with the relevant amount of food for the number of registered customers. However, as food was in short supply the shops often did not receive enough for all their customers. News that a delivery had arrived at the shop spread fast and long queues soon formed as everyone was keen to get their share before it was all sold.

Each person's weekly allowance was 4 oz of bacon and ham, 2 oz of butter and 8 oz of sugar. In March meat was added to the value of 1 shilling and 6 pence (6p) and over the next two years other foods added including 1 fresh egg, 1 packet of dried eggs every 4 weeks, 4oz of margarine, 2 oz of cheese, 2 oz of tea, three pints of milk, 1 pound of jam every eight weeks and 12 oz of sweets every four weeks.

Other foods rationed between 1940 and 1942 included dried fruit, canned fruit, rice, cooking fat, biscuits and breakfast cereals while some foods such as potatoes onions and fish were not rationed but mostly difficult to obtain.

Fresh fruit was also in very short supply but was not rationed. Only fruit which could be grown in Britain, such as apples, pears, raspberries, blackberries and strawberries were sometimes available. Imported fruit such as bananas, oranges and peaches were not available in the shops.

Clothes and furnishings were rationed on a points system, in 1943 we were each allowed 66 points a year, reduced to 48 in 1942, 36 in '43 and 24 by the end of the war. A man's overcoat took 18 coupons, a suit 26 and shoes 9, a woman's simple dress took 11 and her shoes 7. Children aged 14 to 16 got 20 more coupons.

As well as food and clothing many other items were in short supply. A utility range of household furniture was introduced. The items were plain, functional and hard-wearing, but were the only option for people who had lost their homes in the bombing and newly married couples setting up their first home.

Canteen food was not very appetizing and I remember frequently feeling very uncomfortable after a cooked meal, so mostly stuck to salads or things that I could recognise.

In restaurants a meal was limited to five shillings (25p) and could not have more than three courses; with meat and fish unable to be served at the same sitting.

Establishments known as British Restaurants appeared and were run by local authorities, who set them up in schools and church halls and intended as a temporary emergency system for feeding those who had been bombed out. By mid 1941 the London County Council was operating 200 of these restaurants and from 1942 to 1944 there were around 2000 of them open to anybody. They proved very popular and greatly appreciated as a three course meal cost only nine pence (4p in new money). When I used them I had no complaints and found the meal better than some others I had experienced. Despite the end of the blitz raids by German fighter bombers continued to cause damage and disruption.

After two years at Kidbrooke I realised that at the end of a seven year apprenticeship the best I could hope for was to end up as a competent fitter, not what I wanted. Somehow I managed to get an interview with the station commander, Wing Commander Clapp, to ask if it would be possible to have my apprenticeship transferred to an aircraft Company. I was 16 at the time! As a result in June 1943 I was accepted as a student with the famous de Havilland Aircraft Company and after a year training in their technical school started work in their engine division at Edgware. The journey from my home in Lewisham was daunting to say the least, Lewisham to London Bridge station, then underground to Edgware followed by a fifteen minute walk to their works at Stag Lane.

I remember people sleeping on the underground platforms and the smell; there were no proper toilets, the smoke filled railway carriages with the windows heavily taped and shut during the blackout, the crowded trains and delays caused by enemy action, the smog and frequently travelling next to somebody being sick, this was all part of the war as I remember it! Despite the problems of getting to work we all, apart from office staff, had to clock in and five minutes after starting time the clock cards would be removed. After that you had to ask the foreman for permission to start work and pay was then deducted per quarter of an hour.

I had joined the Air Training Corp shortly after it was formed and particularly enjoyed the weeks spent at RAF airfields. For a week we became part of the airfield's wartime routine, hopeful for a chance of a flight. During my stay in the ATC I had visited three RAF airfields, at Odiham, Wing and Holmsley South, enjoying flights in six aircraft, a Cygnet, Lysander, Wellington, Ventura, Tiger Moth and Dakota.

The Commanding Officer at Wing was Wing Commander Lionel Van Praag, a speedway rider I remembered from the pre-war days when I had regularly visited the New Cross Speedway with my father. Lionel won the Speedway World Championship in 1936 riding against Eric Langton and I can still remember the event. Many years later I met a WAAF officer who in 1942 was stationed at Wing, she was surprised that I had even heard of Wing let alone knew the Station Commander's name.

However memories of pleasant events in the ATC and being accepted by de Havilland have allowed me to jump some important events in the war, most not affecting my wellbeing.

In March 1941 a new shelter appeared, the Morrison. This was a steel structure designed to hold 2 to 3 people lying down. It had a thick steel roof with open wire sides and intended to be used as a

table. It was not very popular and could be a death-trap if the building collapsed on it. Figures revealed that in November 1940 the majority of Londoners were not using special shelters, 27% used the Anderson, 9% public shelters and 4% used the tube stations the rest, including me, slept in their homes.

On December 7th 1941 Japan bombed Pearl Harbour and at last America was forced into the war. A few days later, on the 10th December, we were shocked to hear that Japanese aircraft had sunk two of our capital ships, our latest battleship the "Prince of Wales" and our battle cruiser "Repulse", few of the crew were saved. Would the bad news never end?

The first US infantry troops of around four thousand men arrived in Britain on January 26th, 1942 and eventually swelled to more than 1.5 million. We began to see the first of the Americans and I was not particularly keen on what I saw. To me they appeared brash and cocky, wore smart uniforms and had plenty of money. It was obvious that they had not just endured three years of war! However our girls were very impressed. With their boy friends and husbands away they appeared all too ready to be seen in the arms of the GI's. They began to appear in railway carriages, all too ready to disturb the peace of their fellow travellers. When in the company of our girls they could demonstrate just how friendly they could be, much to our disgust. It may be significant that the Ministry of Health launched a campaign to warn the public against Venereal Disease shortly after the GI's arrived!

Venereal disease I am sure was news to most of us, it certainly was to me. My main contact with girls had been in the factories and I was not impressed. These were girls who had been conscripted for war work and away from home for the first time. Sex seemed to be their main topic and they delighted in embarrassing young apprentices.

I learnt that the women's toilets were frequently daubed with sexual scribbling and drawings, but was still surprised when the girls appeared not to be embarrassed when caught in compromising positions. Some men working in the factories had recently returned from our Forces and were not impressed to see how their wives might have behaved when they were away.

It may have been noticed that I have not mentioned our Army apart from their evacuation from Dunkirk. The simple reason is that there was very little good news to report and to make matters worse, on the 15th February 1942 General Percival surrendered Singapore to the Japanese in what has been described as the worst and largest capitulation in British history.

In only seven days of fighting Singapore was surrendered and about 80,000 of our troops joined the 50,000 British, Australian and Indian troops already captured during the disastrous Malayan Campaign. The Japanese treated our troops with appalling cruelty and inhumanity, many dying in captivity. Churchill was definitely not amused and our opinion that something was seriously wrong with our generals confirmed.

October 1942, at last we had the prospect of good news when General Montgomery commenced the greatest bombardment in history with a surprise attack on the German army in North Africa, which started on the evening of 23rd October and, together with the RAF, eventually resulted in the end of Rommel's African Campaign.

During the Blitz and early part of the war we listened to the radio which featured plenty of dance

music and variety shows, but I cannot remember hearing any American bands, including Glen Miller. My first introduction to Glen Miller was probably on film. Miller and his band appeared in two Twentieth Century Fox films, in 1941's Sun Valley Serenade and 1942's Orchestra Wives. I remember buying a 78 recording of Joe Loss playing In the Mood which became a UK's best seller, but this was after the Blitz. At the beginning of the war, all cinemas were closed and there was a ban on large gatherings which meant no concerts, dances or football matches, however this did not last very long and most cinemas had re-opened by the time of the Blitz. My main introduction to American bands came from listening to radio broadcasts from the American Forces Network, this didn't start until July 4th, 1943.

Air raids continued to have an effect on our lives. The raids were being carried out mostly by fighter bombers. These came in very fast and frequently without warning. At 12.30 on Wednesday afternoon of the 20th January 1943, several Focke Wulf fighter bombers came in fast and low (the balloon barrage was down) and without warning began machine gunning the streets in Lewisham. Many people reported near misses, including my father who was coming home for lunch. As the aircraft flew overhead machine gun bullets hit the houses and streets. My father said that he was aware of the sudden noise of the aircraft but they flashed past too quickly to see much else. They eventually dropped their bombs on a school at Sangley Road, Catford, killing 38 children and 6 teachers. 60 children were seriously injured. The air raids and killing had not stopped with the Blitz.

I recently read in a local newspaper of eye-witness accounts of how the Germans had especially targeted the school and people remembering seeing the pilots waving as they flew overhead! One woman who was having her hair done heard the noise of the aircraft and rushed outside to see the Germans circling and targeting the children in the playground.

The school was in a built up area and the aircraft were flying very low at over 300 mph, which is 440 feet per second, so the aircraft would have been visible for only a fraction of a second, assuming you were looking in the right direction at the time! It makes no sense that the pilots would risk their lives just to target a school, despite how we felt about them at the time. While these reports may make interesting reading I don't see the value in reporting incidences that obviously cannot be true.

The result of five years bombing was to be seen every where. While the streets were cleaned, nothing could be done to hide the damaged and demolished buildings. On the 3rd

March 1943 there occurred the greatest loss of life in one single incident. On that day there had been 10 raids on London and at 8.17 pm the alert sounded at Bethnel Green. In the tube station 500 people were already installed. It was raining and the entrance to the station dimly

lit with only a 25 watt bulb. The stairs were wet and slippery. A large number of people were approaching the station when the local "Z" anti-aircraft battalion fired 60 rockets. The noise was deafening and caused an estimated 1,500 people to surge towards the entrance to the station. Somebody slipped and people behind fell down the stairs crushing those below.

This resulted in 173 people being killed, including 62 children. There was also a large number of serious injuries.

6th June 1944 was D day when we landed back in France. At last the end of the war appeared in

sight. By this time we were really feeling the effects of the war, the shortage of food, clothing, loss of loved ones, the long working hours with little time for relaxation and the uncertainty as to what the future would hold. Would this end in disaster? Historians are fortunate in that they are able to review events knowing the result, whereas those actually living the event did not. Unfortunately many of today's representations of events in the war do not portray them as I, and other veterans, remember.

While we were hoping that the war would soon be over we were in for another shock. On June 13th 1944 the first of Hitler's revenge weapons hit London, landing at Hackney and killing six. The V1 flying bomb (Doodlebug) carried one ton of high explosive and no pilot. It flew at about 350 mph. By the end of August over 3,000 had been launched with 500 hitting the South East of England and London. They landed at any time, day or night. Eventually the flying bombs were intercepted by our fighters, anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons, the launching sites receiving the attention of our bombers.

I am disgusted how some today are all too ready to criticise the supreme effort made by the bomber arm of our air force. Flying in a British bomber during World War Two was one of the most dangerous jobs imaginable. 55,000 aircrew died during the war with many more taken prisoner, the highest loss rate of any major branch of the British armed forces. Yet there is no official campaign medal commemorating the sacrifices of these men. We lost over 2,000 American and British air crew in bombing the launch sites of the V1.

Those bombs which did get through caused a tremendous amount of blast damage. We listened for the engine to stop and knew that we had but a short time before it hit. When the sites were overrun the flying bombs were launched from the air by Heinkel bombers.

The flying bombs killed 8,938 with an estimated 25,000 seriously injured. Lewisham came third on the list of hits with 114; Croydon came top of the list with 141 and Wandsworth second with 122.

The original German plan was to launch 200 bombs an hour, but the most they ever achieved was 200 a day, but this was enough to severely dent our morale! People were leaving London in huge numbers. In mid July 1944 15,000 were estimated to be leaving the main London stations a day! Between 1.5 and 2 million people had left during the summer, which had been particularly wet and cold. Many businesses and Civil Service departments were evacuated and the absence of people became noticeable, especially to those having to travel through London. Some of the worst incidents occurred in South East London, close to Lewisham where I lived. I recall one event which occurred on my mother's shopping day.

Friday 28th July at 9.41 a bomb landed at the Lewisham market, killing 59 with 124 seriously injured. The resulting blast destroyed and badly damaged over a hundred shops, flats and houses. It came as a great shock to see so much damage where our local shopping centre had once been. Everybody seemed to know somebody who had either been killed or seriously wounded.

My mother went shopping as usual in the afternoon, unaware that her shopping centre had been demolished. She didn't do much shopping that day and had a harrowing story to tell when I arrived home in the evening.

8th September 1944 the first V2 rocket landed in Chiswick, killing 3 with 17 injured. The rocket hit

at about 3000 mph, with no warning. It carried a ton of high explosive and the impact caused a deep penetration. The effect was like a mini earthquake, with damage being recorded up to a quarter of a mile away. The high death rate was mainly caused by the lack of any warning. Some of the worst tragedies again occurring in South East London, many close to where I lived.

Over 500 were killed and many more injured in just 14 instances, with the worst one occurring at New Cross on the 15th November, when a rocket landed on a Woolworths store killing 173 and leaving many more seriously injured, I lost another cousin, Joyce.

27th March was the last day of the rocket attack, unfortunately one of the final rockets fell on Hughes Mansions, in Vallence Road, Stepney, killing 134 and seriously injuring many others. The last rocket fell in Orpington on the same day and the final flying bomb in Swanscombe the next day.

The above figures show that the attacks on London certainly did not end with the Blitz.

The later attacks affected us even more; because they were unexpected and by this time we were feeling very exhausted and thinking the war would never end, and then on the 30th April we heard that Hitler had committed suicide.

On the 7th May 1945 Hitler's successor, Admiral Donitz, offered an unconditional surrender to the allies and on the 8th May we celebrated Victory in Europe day. On Monday the 7th May 1945 Germany finally surrendered and at last the European war was over. We officially celebrated victory with a holiday on the following day, called Victory in Europe day or VE day. What happened on this particular day? Did we all get drunk and dance around merrily? I saw little evidence of that. It is true that there were thanksgiving services, victory salutes and impromptu street concerts, but the majority of us were just thankful that we had survived uninjured.

Pierre Clostermann, a French pilot who had flown from Biggin Hill, wrote "That evening the Mess was like some extraordinary vigil over a corpse. The pilots were slumped in their chairs; no one spoke a word or sang anything. Round about eleven o'clock someone switched on the wireless and we listened to some music."

Lieutenant Colonel H.W.L. Nichols wrote from Germany "We were all taken by surprise when the surrender was announced on the wireless, as we had no hint of it coming so soon. It was a bit of an anti-climax though and there was no excitement in the mess. We trooped into the bar had a drink on the strength of it and were all in bed by 10.30". Major A.J.Forest also wrote from Germany "inwardly I felt melancholic, I wanted quiet to absorb this overwhelming blessing, the restoration of peace after six years of war and above all to be alone"

I spent VE day with my parents and had difficulty in accepting that the war was over and would no longer suffer the apprehension felt upon hearing the sound of the air raid warning.

Next day we went back to work and found that little had changed and then realised that the war would not finally be over until Japan had surrendered. It looked as if the war with Japan would be hard fought and an eventual end to the war a long way off.

Early in 1945 I had been transferred to work at Hatfield, promoted from a trade apprentice to an aeronautical student. This meant that I could now continue my training in their design offices, it also

meant a considerable increase in travelling time, as I was still living in Lewisham. The factory working week was 50 hours including Saturday mornings, reduced to 48 for senior staff and office workers. As a student I was now expected to aim towards becoming a member of a professional body such as the Royal Aeronautical Society. To do this I had to attend evening classes, preferably at Hatfield. After much discussion I was allowed to enrol back at my old school, the South East London Technical Institute, in order to study for the Higher National Certificate in mechanical and structural engineering, three nights a week!



Six de Havilland Students, photographed for the DH magazine

I am standing top left. The aircraft is an Avro Lincoln.

It was a rush to get back from Hatfield in time to start evening classes at 6.30 pm; however I cannot remember having any time off due to stress or illness. It was later shown that despite the horrendous working conditions very few days were lost due to sickness or other causes. If we were lucky we had a whole week off for a holiday, which if I remember correctly, was unpaid I cannot remember either my family or me actually having a holiday during the war.

As far as I was concerned the war might be over but nothing much changed, the daily chore was just the same. Food and other materials were still in short supply and rationing still continued. The war with Japan was still going on but seemed too distant to be of particular concern until the 6th of August 1945, when we became aware of a devastating new weapon called the atom bomb. The United States had dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima causing extensive damage and loss of life. The Americans gave the Japanese an offer to surrender but the Japanese generals refused and so on the 9th of August the US dropped a second atom bomb, this time on Nagasaki.

The Japanese government then realised that they had little alternative but to immediately consider a surrender. On the 14th August the Japanese unconditionally surrendered to the allies and on the 2nd of September 1945 the U.S. General Douglas Mac Arthur accepted Japan's surrender thus formally ending the Second World War.

Subsequently historians have reviewed the use of this deadly weapon forgetting that we were still at war. Without employing this weapon there can be no doubt that the Japanese would have continued with their horrendous form of unconditional warfare, with death seen as an act of heroism. This would

have cost the lives of many more Americans and allied troops. If the Germans or Japanese had such a weapon do these historians really believe they would have hesitated before using it? Who knows what might have happened if the war had continued and Germany or Japan had been allowed to become the first to use an atomic weapon.

One of the last of our Bomber Command raids was on the German city of Dresden. Many historians have managed to convince our younger generation that we had committed a horrendous crime against innocent civilians. They forget that we were still at war having experienced five years of indiscriminate German raids on our cities, with Hitler promising even more deadly attacks. We rejoiced when we heard our bombers had caused maximum damage to their German cities, letting them experience what it was like to be on the receiving end of bombs they had enjoyed dropping on us.

The result of reviewing this one raid on a German city is that the tremendous sacrifice made by our bomber boys during the war has been forgotten. Instead of being considered heroes they have been unjustly vilified, but was the Dresden raid justified?

I recently came across this document, written by a German scientist:

: "Dresden was not simply a cultural centre, there were factories there manufacturing weapons and equipment for the Nazi war effort. To produce an atom bomb a supply of heavy water is needed and the main source had already been destroyed in Norway. There is sufficient evidence that the Nazis were producing heavy water in the centre of Dresden, under the impression that because of the large civilian population it would not be bombed. Dresden was also an important rail base for the Nazis to send troops and equipment to the front and so would be considered an important war target."

I have also read that right up to his suicide on April 30th 1945 Hitler was still hoping for news that a new deadly weapon would soon be ready; could this have been an atomic device? Due to so much of the evidence being destroyed in the latter stages of the war, we cannot be certain just how advanced the Germans were towards obtaining such a weapon and did the raids on Dresden on the 13/15th February finally convince him that this was not going to happen?

We will never know if this was true, but if it was suspected that Dresden contained such an important war target then it was right to be attacked. While historians argue that with Germany's surrender only weeks away we should not have bombed the city. The truth is that I, and probably most of us, did not know the end of the war was only weeks away and felt as though it would go on for ever.

Demobilisation began on the 18th June 1945. Bread was rationed after the war, on the 21st July 1946, and food rationing did not finally end until July 1954.

At the end of the war I was aged 18 and with three years of my apprenticeship to complete had enjoyed very little social life. I had had some contact with factory girls but had not been impressed. I was thankful that I had not suffered any injuries nor lost any of my close family, although my brother had lost his wife.

During my brother's stay in South Africa he had married the daughter of the owner of a well known Cape Town newspaper, Cape Argus and on his return to the UK he had to leave without her; however some months later she managed to get a passage on a merchant ship but never arrived. My brother

received a telegram to say she had become ill on the voyage and had subsequently died and been buried at sea. It was a sad occasion for me to accompany my brother to Southampton to collect her things, which included presents for us.

In May 1944 there were nearly two million American service men over here, plus Canadians and other nationalities. The American GIs had plenty of money to spend (the ordinary GIs earning five times more than a British private) and a smart uniform, their accent reminding us of the glamour of Hollywood films. They had gum and candy, silk stockings, plenty of cigarettes and were generally very polite. What else did a lonely girl need? As a result these friendships produced a lot of "Dear John" letters written to their husbands and fiancés overseas. Some of our returning soldiers (over 265,000 had been killed) did not find the expected welcoming homecoming.

To become pregnant out of marriage was considered a very serious breach of family life. I have had personal experience of this when my cousin became pregnant by her American boy friend and was asked to leave home. Despite subsequently keeping in touch with my uncle I never found out what happened to her.

By the end of 1945 the number of divorces had reached 25,000, compared with less than 8,500 in 1938. By the end of the war over 100,000 British girls had married American and Dominion servicemen. The number of illegitimate births had reached 64,000 by the end of the war. Venereal disease had become a major concern and there was an added problem of relationships ceasing, when their lovers had to return overseas, some to their wives! The end of the war certainly raised many problems. To many the peace was going to prove a very difficult time!

Perhaps the reader can now see why dressing up in war time clothes, sitting in an Anderson shelter and listening to a recording of bombs falling has little to do with the reality of my war. One important ingredient missing is how we felt at the time, personal memories which can only be recalled by those that were present at the time. For some the memory may be of a particular instance which is very painful to recall, for me it was part of my teenage experience.

I was too young to do any fighting, but at least I had survived and with my war years still reasonably clear in my memory have been able to document some of my wartime memories. Hopefully this recollection will do a little to help; if only to cause the reader to reflect that there was more to the war than can be depicted by sitting in an Anderson shelter. A famous novelist, J.B. Priestly wrote, "The British were absolutely at their best in the Second World War. They were never so good in my lifetime before it, and I'm sorry to say that they've never been so good after it"

I am very grateful that my computer and reference books have allowed me to quickly check facts and figures which the passing years may well have caused my memory to distort.

Having asked my wife to read this, in order to correct any grammatical and spelling mistakes, she said it was a noble effort, but what was the purpose, who would be interested? I had no idea, I just felt the need to record the war as I remembered it and to express my concern at some of the inaccuracies being displayed in recent television programmes and films. I have no problems with most documentaries; they are generally excellent, especially those of the Great War.

When I see pictures of the terrible trench war I think of my father. He had joined as an infantry man

at the beginning of the war in 1914 and was present at some of the famous battles. However I showed little interest in hearing about his wartime experiences, after all to me it was ancient history! Now I deeply regret the lost opportunity. His war ended on November 1918 with a horrifying casualty rate of 35.8 %. But just a few years later he must have been well aware that another war was a distinct possibility. I can now imagine how he must have felt, with memories of his war still very fresh in his mind! I also think about the problems faced by my parents and others, in trying to look after their families.

After the war we learnt that Hitler had not approved any plans for an invasion of the British Isles. None of the plans submitted were considered feasible, especially with the Royal Navy still intact a seaborne invasion was out of the question. But Hitler assumed invasion would not be necessary, based on what had happened in Europe. After a short blitz on the British civilian population he assumed we would soon sue for peace, especially following the defeat and evacuation of our troops at Dunkirk. Most thought it would be a matter of weeks before Britain admitted defeat, including America but they had not reckoned with the courage of our youngsters in the Royal Air force and the character of the British people, led by our exceptional Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

The war was certainly a defining moment in my teenage life, having come so close to being a witness to the end of the British Empire.

Alan Mann