

Written by Barry Fincham

Memories – A Boy's War in Hellfire Corner

I was born in Buckland in the early 1930's and attended Barton Road School. 1936. Early memories of the trams standing bumper on bumper in River (now Lewisham Road) awaiting disposal. My parents concern listening to Chamberlain's speech and his declaration of war against Germany on 3rd September 1939. Earning rebukes from my Father as he struggled to erect the Anderson shelter in our back garden. The first air raid warning, which was a false alarm, but the sound of the sirens frightened all of us and we took shelter in the next door neighbour's wooden garden shell!! Fun trying on our gas masks; my younger sister had a Mickey Mouse design and the baby of the family was placed in a sealed canopy which he didn't like one bit. Moving to a bigger house in Shrubbery Cottages and watching soldiers drilling in the road outside.

With my little sister watching soldiers camouflaging themselves in hedgerows all around our locality, tanks traps constructed alongside the railway lines and with concrete obstacles at the bottom of Crabble Hill, (now the Diahatsu Garage).

The Schools closing, talk of invasion, and many of our friends being evacuated. My Mother told us we should stay together when the Germans came and not be afraid. Being taken to Waldershire Hospital for a tonsil extraction. Wounded soldiers seemed to be everywhere. Being sent home straight away after the operation as every bed was needed – everyone talking about the retreat from Dunkirk – when would the dreaded Germans come? The Battle of Britain – watching from our shelter the skies full of aeroplanes. Gunfire – and being told to stay in the shelter because of falling shrapnel.

With no school there was plenty of time to watch barrage balloons and searchlights being installed, and the one in Cherry Tree Avenue (now Kwikfit Garage) was one of my favourite places when getting the groceries from the Co-operative Store. Ration books and no more sweets, bananas or oranges. Dark bread.

The night of the 12th June 1941. The dropping of an aerial landmine over Diver. An air raid warning had been sounded but no enemy planes heard, so after an hour or so we went back to bed. A huge explosion occurred some hours later and the sky was seen to be glowing over the Union Road area, but only a distant hum of a plane was heard. Trying to see the next morning what had happened, but not able to get very far up Union Road (now Coombe Valley) as the road and pavements were ankle deep in debris. Randolph Road was obliterated and I could see many rescue workers searching the rubble and feeling sick with fear as my Grandparent's once stood there – Very little found of my Grandfather and my Grandmother died a few weeks later from her injuries. – 15 people perished on that night. The coffins were draped with Union Jacks as they were taken for burial in Buckland Cemetery. Feeling deep sadness and shock at the loss of my Grandparents but also a sense of pride that the two older sons, both in Uniform stood to attention and saluted their parent's coffins as they passed by. Acquired two new members of our family, my Grandparent's two surviving teenage sons (from the Randolph Road disaster), so a move to a bigger house in London Road was necessary.

Part time schooling commenced in 1942 at Buckland School. Boys in the morning and girls in the afternoon. Now a member of Buckland Church Choir and graduated from the Cubs into the Scouts 15th Saint Andrew's. Every morning a paper round serving Kearsney and River districts from Eddy Mills Paper Shop (now Crabble Post Office). Early morning start and at the end a cup of tea, no sugar, from Olivers Tea Barrow (2d. cup) parked in the ARP yard next to the tram sheds (now Hollis Motors).

Scout camps in Kent countryside, always under canvas, and great fun fruit picking and finding our way around with all road signs etc. removed as a War security measure.

More and more evacuated children returning to Dover from their billets in Wales, (except County School pupils). Conversely, more Dover residents leaving the town as the shelling increased. The Dover population almost halved and I knew practically everyone in our locality – surprisingly very little reported theft from vacated property – despite heavy policing (the enthusiastic Specials) – people were too preoccupied with looking after their own safety to be bothered with thieving. Buckland School recommended full time education in January 1943. Miss Radford as head teacher. Transferred back to Barton Road School later in the year.

Frequent air raids and shelling from the German guns in the Pas de Calais now a regular occurrence – most nights disturbed and spent in the shelter. One frightful aspect of shelling was that a shell had to fall before the air raid siren could be sounded and people could take shelter. In Buckland, a fore warning of an imminent shelling attack was to hear the hooters of the army diesel trains used to haul the shells etc. for the long range guns hidden in the Guston railway tunnel. We knew that when our guns fired the Germans would retaliate. 1944 – A shell fell at the back of our house and badly damaged the rear half. Our family had taken refuge under the stairs being too frightened to run to the Buckland School Shelter. Despite debris, Mother lit the gas stove to make us tea and the rescue workers went berserk as there was gas leaking everywhere, but we had tea nonetheless!! Moved to new home on Crabble Hill with only a few bits and pieces salvaged from our shell damaged home – the Utility furniture purchased was of poor quality, and there was no Social Security or Counselling in those days.

1944. Air raids and shelling now more intense. Old Park Barracks becoming full of American GIs and French Canadians as well as many British Regiments. The GIs were extremely generous and a great favour with the children – always ready to give us sweet or Gum, and the Black Americans were especially nice and would always be interested to talk and listen to your news.

The Royal Engineer Regiment occupying Buckland Mill House began to move out in May 1944 and it was common knowledge that an invasion of Europe was imminent. Crabble Hill was jam packed with tanks and heavy equipment. As a paper delivery boy I was always up to date with the latest war news, and keenly followed the progress maps in the papers of the Allied advance into France following the Invasion of Europe on June 6th 1944 – we were longing for the long range guns in the Pas de Calais to be captured and silenced – earning extra money by selling newspapers to the transit troops as they

moved from Old Park Barracks, and always some extra rations from the cookhouse! Completing my paper round towards the end of the month I was terrified to watch a low flying German plane roar over head with flames shooting out from its tail end. The noise was tremendous and I didn't realise that I was witnessing the sight of the first doodlebug (V1s) en route to London.

The shelling in the town during August and September was intense and in one day in September over 50 shells fell in the town. We stayed and slept in the deep air raid shelter in Buckland Mill grounds. In October the Canadians finally captured the German cross channel guns, and for us it felt like peace at last. Along with 100 other Dover children we were given a fortnights holiday in Brighton, courtesy of the New Zealand Regiment stationed in that town – it was marvellous.

German POWs started working in the town, digging a large trench up London Road and Old Park Road to install a new drainage system. They were unguarded and seemed a sullen downtrodden lot – many housewives gave them tea and showed them sympathy although they were still our sworn enemies – I learnt my first German word – Jause – (Southern German for break time).

V1s and now V2s raining down on London with no defence at all against the V2 rockets – fortunately Dover only experienced 3 V1s and they were on the outskirts.

May 8th 1945. Victory at last with Germany having to accept unconditional surrender. Jubilation all over town. A huge bonfire on the beach with plenty of wood from the damaged property to keep it going. Singing in Buckland Church choir in a massed Church service in Charlton Parish Church to celebrate Victory in Europe.

Following the dropping of the Atomic Bombs, Japan surrendered on 15th August. Feeling immense relief that the Americans had developed these horrendous weapons before the Nazis.

Food rationing still in force and in winter of 45-46 was particularly sever and fuel was hard to come by. The Council decided to rip out all the hardwood blocks between the old tram lines in London Road and Crabble Hill, and these provided a much needed heating source for many households – and also caused many chimney fires.

Singing in the choir in St. Mary's in Castro at the Castle for the inauguration of Winston Churchill as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. I was thrilled to be sitting only a few feet away from this great man who had inspired us all during the long terrible years of the war.

Now working for my living assisting a Blacksmith/Plumber at the Western Heights Citadel and working alongside German POWs who were imprisoned up there. Despite everything I felt a certain pity for some of the younger POWs and helped them by selling their cleverly made wooden toys for cigarettes to friends and family. Walking along the former Liverpool Street to the Drill Hall for the Sea Cadets parades and band practice, (now the Leisure Centre). No street lights and the utter desolation and shattered silhouettes of the once proud Burlington Hotel and Granville Gardens. (Now Gateway Flats and part of Townwall Street). Apprenticeship at the Dover Packet Yard and restarting my education again in earnest at the Dover Technical College, (now being converted into luxury apartments).

Attending evening classes four times a week and sitting alongside the returning County School boys, realising that I had a mountain to climb if I was to achieve anything in my life.

The joy of being able to swim in the sea once more, and the beached stern half of HMS Codrington made a first class diving platform. Being a member of OC Punter's Penguin Swimming Club and using the Duke of York's swimming pool.

Reflections

Was in any form is terrible, and for civilians caught up in it, it is especially terrifying and shelling from an unseen enemy is horrific. During those war years 2,226 shells fell on Dover, and everyone in the town heard each terrifying explosion and thanked God they were not on the receiving end. In addition to the shelling hundreds of H.E. bombs and incendiaries were dropped on the town and numerous attacks over these years. Even after 60 years I still feel my stomach turn over when a low flying aircraft goes overhead, and sudden loud explosions cause my heart to miss a beat. Anyone who thinks or says they had a good war is either lying or simply stupid – for those who suffered it leaves permanent scars and glorifying war is totally incompressible to my mind and has no place in a modern society. The Second World War cost the lives of 55 million people, and I will always be grateful to all those young men and women from all over the Free World who gave their lives to defeat Nazism. We could not have made it along.

Dover had the heart ripped out of it and it has never recovered. There was never any money available from the Government or private investment to restructure the town back into its pre-war elegance and character. Old much loved damaged properties were demolished and cheap colourless buildings lacking all sort of character were substituted in their place. The one exception is the Gateway Flats which, over the years, have slowly merged into the Seafront landscape and now appear quite acceptable.

The one jewel in Dover's crown remains the Seafront and Promenade, and thankfully every effort to turn it into another Southend have been resisted. When I walk along the Seafront and gaze up at the magnificent Dover Castle, where in 1907 in the Army Married Quarters, my Father was born, I feel a sense of pride in the town which is still very dear to my heart.