

Written by Jean Elizabeth Martin (nee Nabbs)

Second World War Memories

I was born in 1937 so, although I now know that war was declared at 11am on Sunday 3rd September 1939, I cannot remember that precise day. I do have many memories but they are not in any particular order. War to me was just how life was; I had never known anything else so it did not occur to me that it was not normal at all.

As so many of my memories are tied up with our neighbours I must explain whom they were. We lived at No.4 and at No.3 were Mr & Mrs Harrison, everyone called them Pop and Aunt May, and they had 7 grownup children and 3 grandchildren, my playmates when they came to visit. Their two eldest sons were policemen, the next three were in the army and 1 daughter (Lily) and 1 son (Frank) were still at home. Pop was an ARP (Air Raid Precaution) warden. They had a small farm on the outskirts of Erith with pigs, chickens, ducks and goats as well as vegetables. Pop delivered greengrocery with his horse and cart and a great highlight was being allowed to sit beside him and hold the reins. Everyone in the road knew and helped each other. I also had a cousin at No.17 and Nan and Granddad at No.36. Mr Jennings lived at No.1 and made the identity tag that I wore on a chain round my neck during the war.

I lived with my mother, father and uncle Percy in a terraced house in Erith, Kent; a very small industrial town on the River Thames about 25 miles from London. I was never evacuated nor were any of my cousins as the family considered that it was more important to stay together and take our chances. Most men had to go into the forces but some worked in the factories producing the needed machines i.e. my father was an engineer at the Woolwich Arsenal making the guns, tanks and ammunition whilst my uncle worked at Handley Pages making aeroplanes. However, they had to do a certain amount of voluntary work and were in the AFS (Auxiliary Fire Service).

What must be my very first war memory is being in Erith town with my father who was talking to a friend. We were standing on the corner of Pier Road and High Street, gazing in wonder at the sky that was absolutely black with aeroplanes. They stretched as far as one could see and were heading up river towards London; the noise was unforgettable, a remark was made that "someone's got to cop it" but I cannot remember anyone being in a panic. At other times we would have been ushered down into the basement of one of the shops (Burtons) that served as a public air raid shelter, but I don't think it happened on that day. This would have been Saturday 7th September 1940 and the beginning of the London Blitz. I can even remember the man my father was talking to. He was a fellow fireman called George Crispin and at some point later we visited him in hospital where he was recovering from burns. Thereafter he bore the scars on his face where his helmet strap, presumably, welded to his skin.

We had an air raid shelter in our garden; in fact we had two connected together because our next door neighbours couldn't dig deep enough in their garden owing to underground pipes. They also had a large

shed at the bottom of their garden used to incubate chicken eggs, which would have been considered an essential thing to continue. Our shelter was very comfortable in comparison to others, lit by rows of torch bulbs fixed to shelves above the top bunks, powered by a car battery. Lily and I slept in the two top bunks, which were pieces of canvas slung between poles, mum and aunt May slept at the bottom. The second shelter was behind our bit and whoever was home at night slept there in what was really one big giant bed. The men all worked very hard to half sink it in the ground, surround it with sheeting which I suspect was asbestos) and cover it with earth; we even grew vegetables on the top. Because you were not allowed to have doors on shelters they could be very draughty so they built a covered in passage way in front made of old water tanks filled with earth and a thick curtain was hung across the opening. The majority of air raids seemed to happen at night and eventually we gave up going to bed indoors and just went down the garden path instead of up the stairs. Most people wished for bad weather because then the planes would not come. Air raids are horrifically noisy, the air is filled with flying metal and in the morning we would pick up pieces of shrapnel. If things were too bad and nobody could sleep the grownups played cards and I was taught how to keep the scores so that was where I first learned to count and do sums. As you can imagine there were no toilets and I'm sure I must have had a potty when I was small but people just waited for a lull in activities then made a dash for the back of the house, where our toilets were situated. It is strange to think now but most toilets were outside in those days. When one of the men left the shelter they would often say "just going to water the rhubarb" and it was a long time before I knew exactly what they meant!

One night an ARP warden shouted over the fence "NABBS – your house is on fire". Dad and uncle were both away that night on fire duty. So Pop dashed into the house to find an incendiary bomb lodged in the ceiling of mum and dad's bedroom. Incendiary bombs don't explode but burn continuously and were always the first things to be dropped during raids as the ensuing fires lit the way for the following planes. They couldn't be put out with water but had to be smothered and most people kept buckets of sand around for such things. He pulled it down with the garden rake and threw the sand on it but sparks flew onto the eiderdown. We were all very grateful for his quick actions but mum was not too happy about her eiderdown. When I left that house aged 24 the floorboards still bore the scars.

With factories all around (Fraser & Chalmers, Vickers, Sovex, Burndepts, Vindors, Vestas, which were all local to our road with the Oilworks, Calendars and many others along the river) plus the mina railway line to London crossing the end of the road, I am surprised that we didn't receive more damage. The factories draped their roofs with camouflage matting and the nearest bomb I remember dropped right in the middle of the road at the bottom of the adjacent hill, narrowly missing all the factories and railway lines. Having no water, no electricity or gas was a common thing. We lost our windows more than once through a bomb blast. You were not allowed to show a light during darkness so shutters and blinds of special material were out up every night, and room lights were covered with a dark material. The wardens patrolled the streets to make sure everyone was adhering to the rules. Candles were always to hand but the favourite

emergency light was the hurricane lamp. Kettles and saucepans were always kept full of water and we had a primus stove and an open fire that could be used for cooking. For the rest of her life my mother always filled the kettle with water before going to bed and I am sad to admit that I still follow her instructions and do the same, it has paid off on more than one occasion, though happily not for exactly the same reason.

Just about everything was rationed and certain foods were in very short supply. However, I cannot remember ever being particularly hungry. You were never asked what you wanted to eat you just ate what you were given. There were no fridges or freezers so people shopped almost daily for small amounts. I can remember standing for ages in queues with my mother and sometimes when you reached the shop counter they had sold out. One highlight was a trip to Dartford where a butchers shop now and then sold rabbits; I have no idea how mum knew which day to go on but I guess such news travelled fast! You ate what was in season and bottled, pickled and preserved an excess for later in the year. Mr Tampsett at No.2 had a large allotment which ran the length of our back alley behind all the houses and would often let me help with the watering and picking of runner beans. Not many things came in packets or tins; biscuits, dried fruit and pulses when available were sold loose. Sugar was used very sparingly and sweets were an occasional luxury. Now and again we would get an orange, tangerines were looked forward to at Christmas. These came in little squares of tissue paper that was carefully ironed and used as toilet paper. I was actually 9 years old before I even saw a banana and I had never tasted ice cream. The milkman and baker delivered every day; they also used horses and covered in carts. The cream from the top of the milk was poured into screw top jar and my job was to shake it for seemingly hours to produce a small knob of butter which I was allowed to eat on a crust of bread. My favourite was the small brown loaf that we had once a week. The white bread was OK but really quite grey in colour and to this day I still prefer brown bread. Every scrap of left-over food had to be donated to the pig-bin. There as one chained to a lamp post in every road. Pop also had one in his back garden and another of my jobs was to take the scarps out before I went to school every morning. One morning an extremely large spider had spun its web across the gateway and I walked straight through it. With the spider on my gymslip I screamed so much that everyone thought I had found something terrible and I was thoroughly told off for causing such a fright, and certainly did not get much sympathy. It was a very long time before I conquered my fear of spiders.

When I started school my mother took me every morning and collected me at 12 o'clock for dinner (nobody used the word lunch then, dinner was midday and tea was a five o'clock) then it was back to school by 1.30pm until 4pm. The infant school was mixed boys and girls and on the ground floor but at 7 years you went to the juniors, girls on the first floor and boys on the top floor. Only children whose mothers worked could have school dinners, which were served at a nearby canteen, used by the local factory workers. We had shelters in the playground but I cannot honestly remember using one except for practice sessions. The walls were excellent for playing ball against and nearly every girl carried two balls

in her coat pocket; skipping games were also popular as well as tops and whips, Mr. Bearman at No.5 was good at making these.

When sirens sounded we knew that there would usually be 15-30 minutes before anything happened and parents could come and collect their children if they wished. We only lived about 10 minutes away so I was always collected. We never took anything to eat or drink at playtime but each had an enamel mug in the classroom for a cup of milk in the morning and there was a drinking fountain in the classroom. As with our houses, we often arrived at school to find that the windows were missing and had been boarded up by the caretaker and if there was no heating we wore our coats. After about the first year, I went to school with older children from the road and then eventually on my own. You must remember that there was very little traffic, petrol was only for the use of essential services like doctors, ambulances etc, so one rarely saw a car or a lorry. My dad and uncle had shared a car but it spent the war in my granddad's garage on blocks of wood, with the wheels hanging on the walls. It would not have been that easy to travel far by road because they had taken all the signposts away, just in case we were invaded. Most people travelled on trolley buses or trams that ran on rails or overhead wires in the main road. Apart from that bicycles were much in use. I know that we all had gas masks but, again, I cannot remember carrying mine on a regular basis. Everyone also had an identity card. My mother would have carried mine but its number was inscribed on a tag round my neck. You might be interested to know that it eventually became my National Health Number (there was no National Health Service in those days).

We hardly threw anything away, even toffee wrappers when you had some, were saved for Christmas and then my play bricks would be covered and hung on the Christmas tree. The tree was very small and grew in the front garden; each year it would be dug up, potted and placed on a table in the bay window. Even presents were mostly home made. My pride and joy was the wooden scooter made, again, by Mr Jennings at No.1. Mum usually made new dresses for my dolls and everyone I knew knitted, I was taught to knit at school in the top class of the infants. When one grew out of a jumper it would be unpicked and knitted up again with a few extra stripes. It was an excellent way of passing time in the shelters. The best and fastest knitter around was Mrs Medgitt at No.6; she worked at the Oilworks and always had peanut butter (I assumed that was what was made there!) We were not too keen but my granddad loved it. Her daughter was in the WAAFS and I was very envious of the fact that she was allowed to wear trousers. When years later they were given to me I found them horribly rough and itchy. Another waste not exercise was making rag mats. Any unwanted clothing would be cut into strips and, with a special hook needle, threaded through pieces of sacking in interesting patterns to produce new mats for the kitchen. Everyone listened constantly to the radio news and although I didn't understand what mum and dad found so interesting I remember being worried when we heard that a ship had been sunk, probably because a favourite pastime was to watch all the ships on the river, which was busier than any road; we also had an uncle who was a tugboat captain on the river. They listened for news of the Channel Islands because we had relatives there and did not know what had happened to them. I looked forward to Children's Hour with

Uncle Mac at 5pm. There was no TV of course, though dad and uncle both loved playing records and mum played the latest songs on the piano, I can still remember many of those as well. I played a lot with the grandchildren of Mrs Charlton at No.7. They and their mother came to live with her as their father was in the Navy and I think their house had been bombed. We liked to hide behind their gran's enormous gooseberry bush and eat the fruit. Second best were the sticks of rhubarb and if we could scrounge a little sugar to dip them in it was even better. (I am sure that one of my own daughters will absolutely cringe!)

I often went with Aunt May and her grandchildren to spend a day at the farm which I looked on as a trip to the country but in fact was only about 3 miles away and the big dip it was situated in (Corner of Colyers Lane and the Northend Road) has now been filled in and houses built there. If the sirens sounded we would lie flat in the fields and watch the planes overhead, we could tell which planes were which by their sound and outline, and had a special cheer for the Spitfires and Hurricanes. The days always seem to have been long and sunny, so I guess this must have been the battle of Britain and, as I said before, good weather when the planes came. The government also gave us double summertime when the clocks were put forward 2 hours instead of 1 to give people time to get home from work and get things done before the nightly ritual. One day when I was at home, kneeling in the armchair looking out of the window a German fight plane flew low across the garden and I looked right into the eyes of the pilot. I was so surprised that I didn't move. We later heard that it had crashed in the mud on the other side of the river. It was only then, I think, that people really believed what I had seen.

Each house had a low wall at the front topped with fancy iron railings and an iron gate and I remember that one day men came round and took them all away. They also collected any old pots and pans not required. I understood that they were to be used to make more planes. The war was over for quite a while before we had a replacement wooden gate. At least it made it easy for the Home Guard when they hid in our gardens whilst on practice.

At some time during all this I was bridesmaid to Lily together with her niece and the two nephews were pageboys. Everyone donated a few clothing coupons and the dresses were made of pretty peach stain, my plimsolls were covered with the same material and we carried small baskets of garden flowers. My uncle Percy also had a war wedding and I was bridesmaid to him as well. Dad was best man. This time mum made my dress of pale blue with tiny white spots, and again the plimsolls were covered, and I had a muff with white artificial flowers. Land used for growing flowers was now used for food so florist flowers were quite expensive and not easy to obtain. If you couldn't get enough ingredients together for a large wedding cake, icing sugar being the biggest problem, you could hire a very realistic cardboard cake and place the small fruitcake underneath.

The worst and most frightening time was when the doodlebugs (V1 flying bombs) began arriving in 1944. They came over at any time and were not always detected so the sirens didn't sound. They spurted flame from the back and had a very distinctive noise. The time to worry was when the engine stopped;

sometimes they came straight down like a stone and sometimes glided on for miles. My job in the summer holidays was to keep my eyes and ears open whilst in the garden and if I detected one heading our way I rang a hand bell furiously and anyone around made for their shelter. On the 2st July 1944 one fell on an air raid shelter at the Woolwich Arsenal. Fortunately the sirens had not sounded so the shelter was empty but my father was in the adjacent shop (each factory building was called a shop and given a specific name or number which indicated the nature of its work). He always said that there were five of them working in a line on lathes, he knew it was nearly lunchtime, turned to look at the clock and that was the last thing he remembered. A workmate who lived in the next Road, Jock Powry (many years later he became a local councillor) came to tell mum that things looked bad. It took a day to remove the debris with cranes and dad was the only one they found alive. We didn't know for another day because, among other things, his jaw was broken, couldn't speak, had tried to write his name but it came out as T Hobbs instead of F Nabbs. It was on the Sunday that Pop took mum on a tour of hospitals that had taken the Arsenal casualties and they found dad at the Royal Herbert. He was in hospital for a long time and I was not allowed to visit at first. Later he was moved to a special hospital in East Grinstead where Sir Archibald McIndoe, the New Zealand plastic surgeon, was pioneering skin grafts. Mum must have obtained a pass or extra money for travelling and we both then did the lengthy train trip and visited once a week or so. During this time another strong memory is of being in a compartment full of soldiers, the sirens sounded and the train slowed to a crawl, they always kept moving during a raid and the blinds were pulled down. A doodlebug came over, the engine cut out; a soldier grabbed me, pushed me to the floor and lay on top of me (I was very indignant). There was a loud explosion, the train rocked violently but we were soon on our feet being dusted down and, peeping round the corner of a blind, could see all the debris flying through the air not so very far away.

Dad's ward seemed to contain mainly facial injuries, especially burn cases, the majority of which were pilots. I cannot say that their injuries worried me at all although I imagine today's children would be horrified. Only one person left a big impression. It was a young teenage boy who was obviously in a great deal of pain when his dressings were changed. He had lain down in the gutter during an air raid and taken bomb blast down one side of his face. This may seem a strange thing to have done but he was only following one of the rules given to schoolchildren. If you were ever caught out in the streets and bombs started falling you were advised to lay flat on the ground preferably in the gutter if there was no other cover. I had only ever done it once but from then on decided that it was not a sensible thing to do. The hospital had its very good side. The American forces ran the canteen and the food was just wonderful, although we generally took our own sandwiches I looked forward to special treats of junket, and raspberries and real cream – we only ever had evaporated milk. Dad hated junket, his jaw was wired shut whilst the bones mended and there was a straw sized hole to suck food through so he was given a lot of junket. One day he coaxed a fellow patient into cutting up pieces of meat and potato small enough to poke through the little hole; he then squashed it as well as he could. He said it tasted good but gave him a blister on his tongue!

Also during this time I was bridesmaid yet again to another of dad's brother. He should have been best man but uncle Percy had to take his place. Mum made my dress of white brocade and the plimsolls were again covered. I should tell you that in those days plimsolls were always black and did not have laces, just a piece of elastic across the top. I think my new aunt had some connection with a florist because this time I carried a small posy that I proudly took to my father in hospital. This was my fourth and last time as a bridesmaid. The first had been to one of mum's friends when I was just three but all I remember there is that the florist sent a bouquet instead of a posy and it was almost too heavy to carry.

After the doodlebugs came the V2 flying bombs and these were silent. When you heard the explosion you knew you were safe. Dad was out of hospital and I now understand that his nerves were quite jumpy so it must have been at this point that I was sent to stay with friends in Gloucestershire. They had two daughters and I was well looked after but the local children made fun of my accent and I became very homesick, especially now that dad was back home. I was probably only there during school holiday time but it seemed forever and I was amazed at how many lights there were in the streets. Aunt Edith made great cakes from puffed wheat, dried milk, cocoa and condensed milk. We called them nutty slack and still make them today but with slightly healthier ingredients.

When the end of the war came in May 1945 there was great rejoicing and street parties were planned. Imagine how cross I was to miss the fun because I was in bed with measles.

For us children the years following the war were relatively quite boring. Shortages seemed to become worse and rationing went on for a long time (another 9 years). It was only as I grew older that I realised what a terrible time it must have been for those truly involved. I know that my father suffered for years, unknown to me, and pieces of shrapnel were always working their way out of his body. After the war he worked in the ship building trade and often had to sailed down river with the ships to finish a job, being brought off by the pilot boat. He would joke that should he fall into the water they could get him out with a magnet!

Happily our relatives in Guernsey survived the war though aunt and uncle had been taken to a concentration camp in Germany. Their daughter had escaped with her children on coal boats to England but their son-in-law had to remain because he was the only chemist on the island. He was involved with the resistance and we listened with great fascination to their stories when we eventually visited.