

**Written by Sonia Vanstone**

### **Some Childhood Experiences of 1940s Wartime**

Why were there little knots of people standing about on the kerbside in Cranford Lane? I was hurrying to Heston Library to change my book. I had reached Mr Fenton's grand old house behind its high stone walls (now about where Heston Health Centre stands), when sounds of cheering reached me.

As I joined a group, a big, black, shiny, car drove slowly past. In it sat a man, with a moustache, smiling and waving at us. It was Mr Chamberlain, who had landed at Heston Aerodrome and held up his piece of paper, proclaiming peace after his talks in Germany with Mr Hitler. It was 1938. I was thrilled to report this to my mother on my return home with my fresh library book. I had been face-to-face with someone famous - quite an event for a youngster of nine years old. I felt the same about three years later, when the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret walked right in front of me on Ealing Green, on their way into Ealing Film Studios on a visit - my only two claims to being so close up to famous personalities! Sunday morning, September 3rd 1939, remains bright in anyone's memory who lived on that day. After the news of the outbreak of war was broadcast by that same Mr Chamberlain, my father went to the coal cellar in our sideways, the interior of which was under the stairs. He emptied out the remnants of last winter's coal, swept it as best he could and then the siren wailed. An air raid warden rode past on his bike just at that time and shouted at us to take cover. My parents and I climbed in and we waited for the bombs to fall. Nothing happened. The all clear sounded and we emerged unscathed. That was my first experience of war!

Later, we were sent to Springwell School Hall to obtain our gas-masks. Each had its own little box, which had to be hung on a tape over the shoulder and carried at all times. There were strict instructions from school to obey this rule. The children were lined up and fitted with a mask of the correct size. We laughed at each other's funny appearance, seen through a narrow, see-through covering. The rubber surrounds to the face smelt absolutely horrible and I hated the smell, so our laughter relieved this fooling for everyone. We were too young to realise the implications or the need for gas-masks.

My father was busy making wooden shutters for the dining room and kitchen windows, to use as blackout coverings. These were hung up on hooks every evening and easily removed the following morning. I cannot remember how we coped upstairs - just pulled the curtains and used dim lights or candles, I suppose. I know that baths, using just a few inches of water, were taken in daylight and anything essential was done upstairs during the day, to avoid the need to put on a light.

The coal cellar was all the shelter we had until Mr Anderson, in the government, provided everyone who could accommodate one, with his famous garden shelter. All the men around dug great pits in their gardens to specific measurements, then lined them with the corrugated iron sides and topped it all with round roofs. Soil was shovelled back on the structure, on which my father added the precious grass squares he had cut from his lawn. There was just enough of it all above the ground to

enter through a little space. He added a door and some wooden steps leading down into the dark interior. He fixed up bunk beds for three and a shelf for candles, etc.

When the night raids began, the siren would sound between 6pm-7pm, when, armed with flasks and sandwiches, we descended into the Anderson to spend our nights there. We emerged the next morning, desperate to see whether the houses on the street were safe. What a relief when no broken windows or missing tiles were found.

I remember vividly one bad night: with German planes above, I had the audacity to open the shelter door to look out. I was shocked to be staring up into, I presume, a parachute immediately above me, under which hung a brilliant flare. I shot back and slammed the door, wondering in my young innocence if the German pilot had seen me and might come back to machine-gun us. I opened the door again after a while, but the flare, along with several others, had drifted away. They were dropped to light up the area around Heston Aerodrome.

The aroma, even to this day and wherever I am when my nose senses it, that brings back memories of our shelter nights, is the smell candles leave when they are blown out. It lingered for ages in that confined space. It reminds me of the hours spent listening to thumps, bangs, whines and imagining what the world would look like in the morning.

About three months before one Christmas, my father managed to obtain a young cockerel. He built a smallish coop for it at the bottom of the garden. From then on, we fattened it up with table scraps and whatever was available. I loved spending time down there with it, but the bird must have been miserable, strutting about in its confined space. One evening just before Christmas, I was ordered not to enter the kitchen on any account. I didn't know why, but later found out the poor cockerel had had its neck wrung and my father was out there disembowelling it. I felt heartbroken, but at least we had a Christmas dinner to augment our rations. This "good life" experiment was never repeated. Was it worth all the trouble?

By this time, I was at Ealing County Girls' School. We had been sent from Berkeley Junior School to take our scholarship at Gumley House Catholic School. It was the first time I had ever met any nuns. This was a scary experience in itself - then to be aware of them in their dark habits and head-dresses standing round the hall, invigilating - well, it was a wonder I got anything down on paper. However, I passed and later travelled each day to South Ealing.

The only shelters our school possessed were the two cloakrooms, in which we spent odd hours having lessons. It was forbidden to arrive at school while an air raid warning was still in force. However, I had a long journey to make. Although I set out when it was all clear, the siren would go when I was on the train. I remember once, that I arrived before the all clear and got a good tongue-lashing, although no enemy action was taking place.

From then on, if I alighted at South Ealing station and saw the red warning sign displayed, I went into the waiting room on the platform to sit there until the all clear sounded and the green sign was put up.

I look back on that - which, for a young child was worse? To walk to school and get a strong telling off, or to sit on a railway platform where train movements could be a target for bombs? I have never seen the logic of the teachers' reasoning. Still, I never told them where I had waited anyway. I still remember the odd hours I have sat in that waiting room every time I passed by on the Piccadilly Line. It was still there the last time I travelled on the tube.

Air raids lessened and we were able to abandon the Anderson shelter in the garden. Later, Mr Morrison, in the government, supplied households with an indoor shelter. It was of thick steel with a top to use as a table. Due to a large piano being in our front room, it had to be erected in the dining room, which proved a life saving action. Night raids started again, so we fitted it out with inflated lilo beds and cushions. Sometimes we were a little blasé about sheltering. My mother had a habit of standing at the front door while waiting for my father to get home if he was on a late shift. She liked to watch the gunfire flashes and search lights and listen to bombs falling. I suppose she was worried how bad things were for his journey. I would often go to bed upstairs if it was quietish.

One night-raid was particularly bad - February 23rd 1944. My father had been on late shift and arrived at Hounslow West Station about 11:30pm Bombs were raining down and guns sounding. Falling shrapnel was always a danger to people outside. The porters at the station, whom my father knew, begged him to stay and shelter until the worst was over. Something urged him to refuse and say he just had to get home. So, he collected his bike and rode home with all speed. The next thing I knew was that my father had raced upstairs and got me out of bed, wrapped the eiderdown around me and made me get into the Morrison shelter in the dining room. My parents climbed in too and we lay down for five minutes. Then, at 12:05am - OBLIVION!

My father and his brave action of cycling home through danger had saved all our lives by just five minutes. If he had not listened to his inner heart, but had succumbed to the pleadings of the men at Hounslow West Station, I would not be writing this and my mother would not have lived a further 30-odd years. Even writing now still brings a lump to my throat and a stinging in my eyes and my unending gratitude for such a wonderful man. I always thank God for directing my father's thoughts and actions. The bomb had landed on our front doorstep, just where my mother had been standing a while before. A woman a little further up the road, doing the same thing, was killed by the blast. If the shelter had been placed in our front room and we were in it, I doubt we should have survived. A further bomb fell on Springwell Road, but remained unexploded, or the blast effect would have been far worse.

My next vivid memory is of men of the Home Guard coming to our rescue. Our Morrison had been blown completely from our house into my aunt's next-door. We were in her dining room. Evidently nothing of our house existed at all anymore. It was just a huge pile of rubble, although we knew nothing of this at that time. We had heard nothing and felt nothing. When we came to our senses, however long that loss had been we didn't know, we told each other we were alright, except my mother said she could feel blood running down her face. She had "lacerated head-wounds"

- a phrase from the doctor she often repeated when telling the tale in the coming weeks. We wondered why it was dark and my father - a horrifying thought now if there had been a gas escape - flicked his lighter. We saw bits of brick and rubbish inside the shelter. Why?

A Home Guard soldier cleared a small hole to call out to us and I was hauled out face-upwards. I just wondered "Why are those rafters sticking out like that?" That memory is sharp and clear still, those long stark fingers of my aunt's roof rafters above her bathroom, silhouetted against those very bright stars. The night was so cold and frosty, the sky was absolutely full of stars everywhere and they seemed to twinkle so much. There was no ambient light at all around then, as now, to obliterate this marvellous spectacle. But all those rafters? Why? It was all too impossible for me to realise and, of course, I was in shock.

My parents were rescued and also my aunt and uncle from their shelter and we were all taken to someone's house for cups of hot, sweet tea. I didn't take sugar, but was forced to drink it. Then our Dr Lloyd came to attend to us and get us into a car, which then nearly reversed into the unexploded bombs crater. We rode to Heston Village Hall to rest the remains of the night on the floor, along with several other people. The next day we were taken to the Congregational church on Vicarage Farm Road, now where the new URC building is. We stayed about a fortnight there, although the mother of my school friend, Jean, took me to live with them fairly nearby. It was a kindly act for which I have always been thankful.

My first thought though that next morning, had been to let my school know why I had not returned after the Half Term holiday I must have been so agitated about this that one of the nurses in the Village Hall phoned school to tell them of events. I heard later on that an announcement had been made to my class and that I was alright and would come back soon my uniform had been laid out clean and pressed, so when I returned to school I had none to go in! I was given some clothes and I recall how I seemed to stand out from the other girls. A knitted green skirt and purple jumper was one of my ensembles, instead of the neat light brown tunic and cream blouse oil the other girls wore. I felt so embarrassed until my mother got clothing coupons to get me a new uniform and I could blend in. I cannot remember if it was before or after this that our school outfitters, "Abernethies", in West Ealing, was flattened by a bomb. We heard that the assistant my mother always chose to serve her from when I first went to school was killed. She had been so kind and helpful to us always.

Life continued and we were given a house in Cranford Lane, which had been requisitioned by the Council when the owners had escaped to the country and just left it empty. We all lived there another five years, my aunt and uncle at the back and we three in the front. Sometimes I went with my father to try to rescue bits and pieces from the rubble of bricks and wrecked garden. Is it because I unconsciously tried to block out memories of this part of my life, but I do not recall quite so vividly this part of my life. Perhaps it was too traumatic to revisit the actual spot and I to forget the loss of home and belongings. Books, school things, games, music, piano, toys, clothes were all gone. Things of my babyhood and younger life were no more. We did find my first little pink baby's hair brush that my mother must have kept I still have it, but that is all. It was not until later that I came to realise the

greater losses of my parents and what they must have suffered. Anything we found was put in the garage of our new home - little boxes of fragments of our past lives; my uncle's on one side and ours on the other. But everything smelt with the pungent bitter smell of blast-dust. It clung to everything. Whenever I smell thick, old, brick dust today, it brings back those terrible times.

The authorities lent us a few pieces of furniture, linen and household items. We could keep them for three months, then pay for what we wished to keep and return the rest. I still have all the paperwork and lists my mother made. We seemed to have returned quite a few things. There was only my father's wage to keep us going, the mortgage on a now non-existent house to be kept up and rent for the present accommodation, so money was not plentiful. I only had a canvas camp bed in my small room. It sagged in the middle and the iron sides hurt, but cushions helped to alleviate the hardship. Many others were in the same plight all over the country, so we just had to manage as best we could. My father's relaxation was in a deckchair in our one downstairs room - no armchairs available and only hard-backed chairs for us. We had to adapt to our new way of life.

Our next dangers were the flying bombs and the V2 rockets. When the drone of the first was heard, one dived under the nearest table or took cover if in the street. The longer the noise kept going, the safer it was, but when the engine cut out, there came that dreaded silence and then the waiting, Where would the bomb fall? Then an explosion in the distance and it was all over till the next one came. When a flying bomb landed in Summerhouse Avenue, our windows shook violently and our curtains were blown off their hooks. This happened quite a few times. V2 rockets created huge impacts and I recall hearing the explosions of the one on the Rectory in Bath Road, the only building in a vast field I believe, and of that on a factory on the Great West Road where a number of employees were killed.

My last two memories to share are happier - the day the war ended, May 8th 1945 and the surrender of the Japanese on August 15th 1945.

Whenever the armistice would come, we knew we need not attend school. The parents of my school friend, Margaret, had asked me to join their family for the day. Mr Hill must have had sufficient petrol coupons because we drove to Bognor. On the journey, I learnt of "Hotel de Move-along" and "Hotel de Never-shift", both of which establishments we visited. The first was a hut on wheels with a large window from which snacks and drinks were sold. The second, without wheels, had no opportunity of relocating its site. I still call them by those names today if I see one on a trip out. Also, often a demand was made for a "hedge-ticket", obvious to very young children on a long journey in those days, with no "Services" available. Oh, it was a grand day out. Margaret and I had recently passed our swimming life-saving exams at school and got our bronze medals, so we practised our life-saving skills on each other in a rather choppy sea - not all that warm for May. It was all great fun.

My parents and I were on our holidays on the farm in Cornwall in the August. Whilst walking past a farm cottage (no petrol to spare for taking long sightseeing trips), the lady we knew ran out waving her

arms to shout to us the Japs had surrendered and all was now really over. We hurried to the hayfield, where the men were working, to share in this wonderful news. They were forking up the hay into the haywain in the middle of the field, the huge carthorse standing patiently before it. I remember them cheering and waving at us as we sat amidst the peace, the sun hot and the sky blue and everywhere looking golden and full of the scent of hay. The old carthorse slowly pulled its load to the corner of the field and the men continued to build the haystack up there. That is how I remember the end of the war and all those experiences. I can't imagine that scene being repeated anywhere now. In 1949 our house was rebuilt on its former site while I was away at college. I still live there to this day.