

Written by William Robert Epps

Memories of World War II

The war began when I was four and a half years old. At the time I was living with my parents and very new baby sister in RAF housing at Cranwell, Sleaford in Lincolnshire. My father, a schoolmaster by profession, had joined the Royal Air Force earlier in the year and we had moved to Cranwell from our former home in Sidcup, Kent.

I recall the house we lived in being in row of similar ones with gardens backing onto a field with long grass. Another boy and I regularly played in that field and it was on returning from it one day that there was a buss of activity around the houses. Some men were digging large holes whilst others were filling sacks and building walls. My parents were indoors listening to the radio with some other grown ups and it was all rather solemn. I did not really understand what was going on but they were saying that Britain had declared war on Germany.

Apart from building shelters and sandbagged gun emplacements around the camp, nothing much else seemed to happen until my father was posted to the Air Ministry in London and we moved to Brockley. I recall it being near a big park called Hilly Fields and the house was quite tall. I believe that was around the spring of 1940 and still things were quiet. Although adults talked about the war and listened to the radio a lot, nothing much else seemed to happen.

One night it all changed when there was a lot of noise and my mother and I could see from the upstairs window that the sky over East London was all red. It was the start of the blitz and we went to see family who lived near Rotherhithe Docks a couple of days later. All round where they lived was badly damaged with broken houses and piles of debris. There were many holes in the road. A boy in a neighbour's house gave me a piece of jagged metal which he said was shrapnel and it became the start of a collection.

After that almost every night was spent in an Anderson Shelter in our garden and our district was often hit by bombs. I used to lie in my bunk listening to the whistling of the bombs falling, the explosions and the sounds of gun fire. It was always a relief when the 'all clear' siren sounded and we went out to see what new damage had been done. My collection of shrapnel grew and I regularly swapped pieces with other local boys. The bits with screw thread, markings or obvious tail fin sections were much sought after and could command several ordinary bits plus even a couple of marbles thrown in for a trade.

My father was home less and less now and when our neighbour's house was hit, killing the granddad of the family, who had left the shelter to go to the toilet, it was decided that it was time to move out of London. The house we were living in had been quite badly damaged anyway so we moved to a village near Cranleigh in Surrey, initially staying at a large house with the people there.

Eventually we moved into a little thatched cottage surrounded by farm land with just a few houses and in inn further up the road. It all went quiet again though we sometimes saw planes going over and

convoys of soldiers travelling along the road passed our cottage. It was only that my father was seldom home and that he and my uncles, when rarely seen, were always in uniform, that one knew there was a war on.

My mother, I recall, complained about rationing, but we always seemed to have food and we wrapped apples from the garden in newspaper and stored them in boxes for the winter. A farmer's son who I befriended also taught me how to find mushrooms, edible fungi and an assortment of nuts and berries in the surrounding countryside. Apart from missing my father a lot it was a happy time.

It was whilst living in the countryside that I started school. I had started briefly whilst in London, but, the school closed after just a week due to bomb damage. This new one was in a village about a mile and a half away to which I went to by bus though often walked home. It was very small, children of different ages were taught together and the schoolmistress, as I recall, was very strict, quick to slap the inattentive and she kept a large stick hanging threateningly on the wall behind her desk. Nonetheless, I quickly added reading to my life skills.

Life was divided between school and being out in the countryside with friends. We also used to collect things like rose hips and crab apples which went to the farms to use as animal food. Once day, with the farmer's son, we were going through a small wood when we noticed a parachute tangled in the upper branches of a tree. We ran as fast as we could to a nearby field where some farm labourers were working and told them what we had seen. Later we were told the man was a German airman but that he was dead.

My teenage female cousin, Rene, then came to stay with us and she was an irritating girl from a small boy's view point. Convoys of soldiers were becoming more frequent including now, American ones, and Rene would rush to the gate when they went by waving whilst they all whistled. One day, when she was sitting on the gate waving to soldiers and swinging her legs, I crept up behind her and popped a life grass snake down the back of her blouse. Much shrieking ensued and I was sent to my room without supper but reckoned it was worth it. She treated me with more respect, possibly even fear, after that incident.

Shortly after that Rene went back to her own home in London and we moved again to Keston in Kent because my father had been posted to Biggin Hill. We lived in a bungalow on Keston Avenue, right by the path through the woods that led to the lakes, and I went to the school that existed then up on the common. Most of the bigger houses on the main road through the village had been taken over by the RAF as billets for airmen or as offices and messes.

An interesting time followed. I still enjoyed access to countryside with the added pleasure provided by the lakes but saw much more of father and the RAF. Planes were always going over and on part of the common there were anti-aircraft gun emplacements to protect London. People in uniform were regularly seen walking around the village and I got to know many of them. I also learned to score at cricket and became the scorer for the RAF Biggin Hill cricket team. Going on such matches I saw many top cricketers like Denis Compton, the Bedser twins, Jimmy Cornford of Sussex and Jack

Davies of Kent playing for their unit sides and it helped to develop what was to become a lifelong love of the game.

It was whilst living at Keston that the flying bombs, or doodlebugs, started. Prior to the start of these terror weapons, we had suffered no bombing in the village though we had a Morrison shelter, like a large metal table, in our home. The flying bombs were unpredictable and, although they regularly cut out their engines overhead of us, they normally glided on to London. Some, however, were tipped over by fighters from the airfield or hit by the guns on the common. These ones often came down around the locality though usually in the countryside.

My first close encounter with the results of a flying bomb was when shopping in Lewisham with my father. We were near the clock tower when there was an almighty explosion up the road. An air raid warden came rushing up, shouted out that Woolworths had been hit and asked my father, who was in uniform, to help. I was told to stay where I was until he got back. Standing there I could see much of the activity with people being removed from the rubble, emergency vehicles coming and going and policemen keeping other people away. I saw some men lift up a horse that was lying in the road and underneath there was a lady covered in what appeared to be blood. It was a bit scary and I was relieved when my father got back.

It was late by then so we could only get a bus to Bromley from where we set out to walk to Keston via Hayes. Halfway across Hayes Common all the guns started up and searchlight lit up the sky. You could hear shrapnel from the exploding shells hitting the tarmac of the road so my father pushed me into a ditch and we stayed there until it quietened down again before completing our journey home.

My next encounter with a doodlebug was even closer and happened one afternoon when I was playing cricket in Lakes Road with some friends. We heard the flying bomb coming and then it cut out. Looking up we saw it was coming straight down, instead of gliding, so we ran into the alley way between the terraced cottages on that road. It all went dark, though I had a vision of something glowing coming towards me. The next things I knew was some men lighting bricks and rubble off me, there was a strong dust smell that I had encountered before in the blitz in London and, right next to me, my friend's head was sticking out from debris covered in blood.

Having got me out, the men asked me if I could stand, which I could, and told me to go down the road to the first aid post that had been set up. I was somewhat disorientated and a row of terraced cottages seemed to have completely disappeared. As I went down the road, which was in the direction of home anyway, I passed some other men carrying another friend's grandfather over a pile of bricks and met my mother running towards me, her legs bleeding badly.

At the first aid post I was checked over but only had a few bruises and scratches and a burn on the back of my hand. Others were not so lucky and five people in the village, including one of the boys I had been playing with, had been killed. My mother and siblings had gone into the Morrison in time, though my mother's legs were still sticking out, as the bomb went off and the windows had all blown in

sending slivers of glass across the room. My mother's legs were badly lacerated and the dressing table mirror actually had glass sticking in it such was the force of the blast.

It was now near the end of June 1944, my family had increased to include a brother born in 1942 and another baby sister that month. All had survived the flying bomb but our home was no longer habitable. Furthermore, much of the accommodation used by my father's unit had also been damaged so they moved to Manston whilst, after a short stay at my grandmother's home, we also moved to live in Broadstairs right on the coast.

I had mixed feelings about the move at first. Whilst there was the sea, the beaches were all closed off, access roads and steps were full of anti-tank obstacles and barbed wire and there were minefields. Along the cliff tops there were concrete gun emplacements though, apart from anti-aircraft guns, the heavy artillery had now gone now that there was no longer an invasion risk. There was no wooded common land as at Keston.

Despite the lack of playing areas, as it seemed to me, there were many other things to see. The channel was very active with naval shipping and there were big blocks being towed along westward by tugs. These I later learned were the Marlborough Harbour sections. On one day the sky seemed to be full of Dakotas towing gliders and squadron Mosquitoes, fighter bombers, were regularly seen heading for France. At nearby Ramsgate harbour there were RAF Air Sea Rescue launches which seemed to cut through the waves at speed. There was plenty for a small boy to marvel at.

We had moved to Broadstairs to be near my father but he seemed to be home less and less, sometimes not to be seen for weeks on end as he was sent away to other RAF stations. With my mother now having two very small children, I became the man of the house, doing shopping and sitting up with her listening to the radio whilst my elder sister, Barbara, who was now five, helped around the house. Often I queued at shops in the High Street to find there was nothing left, particularly of non-rationed items. Queuing was common place and I went from the queue at the bakers to the one at the butchers and so on to the grocer and the greengrocer. People were nice though and sometimes a shopkeeper would give you an alternative to what was on your list. I cannot recall ever going hungry.

Eventually, just under a year after moving to the coast, the war in Europe ended. My Aunty Ethel, mother's sister, and cousin Bill, were staying with us at the time and we went down to the sea front in the late afternoon of the 8th May, 1944. The place was thronged with people, there were flags and bunting everywhere and an atmosphere of joyous celebration. Lots of people hugged each other and the younger children were picked up and carried.

Mind you, the war in the Far East was still going on, and my mother was anxious for news of her brother, who was a prisoner of war. My father was still away as was his brother Jim, on a ship somewhere, and younger brother, Bert, in the Far East army. Eventually though, it all ended, and the men folk came home in dribs and drabs for more family gatherings and reunions. We seemed to have constant visitors in Broadstairs.

The Yarrow Convalescent Home in the town was taken over to house Australian and New Zealand soldiers released from the Japanese P.O.W. camps. Many of these men were desperately thin and ill looking but I recall them sitting along the wall at the front of the home in their slouch hats, chatting to us children and handed out bars of chocolate which were serious luxuries in those days. One gave me a bag one day and told me to take it home for my mum. It contained a few tins of condensed milk and Spam.

Then the army and navy engineers and bomb disposal teams arrived to clear the beaches. When they were done and the beaches opened it was incredible, especially for young boys. I found mortar bombs, cartridge cases, bullet heads in the chalk rocks, prized out with a pen knife, and one day even, a group of us tried to tow a sea mine along the beach until a policeman came and stopped us. Later the RN team arrived and blew it up. Gradually life returned to normal, leastways that is what adults said, but, as a ten year old who had only really known war, peace and having a father at home again took some adjustment. In a way it all seemed a bit tame.