

War Time Childhood Memories at Chailey Heritage

Aged 77, my childhood memories of World War II are as vivid now as they were then. When I was six, war was declared in September 1939 between Britain and Germany. My earliest recollections are being told by the visiting teachers that came to Chailey Heritage that we were at War with Germany, with maps of France drawn on the blackboard showing the two opposing armies facing each other along a squiggly line. I began to perceive my very first understanding of what the hazy rumours and stories passed amongst ourselves were all about.

However, it would be some time before the fear and other mundane events would make their presence felt. At first we accepted events at face value when they happened without fully understanding them but, in times of war, even a child learns things quickly.

Frequently we heard the word rationing being bandied about but we had little idea of what it really meant. I suppose, being in a hospital for disabled children, we were sheltered from the harshest of the food restrictions but even so I can recall being told that in future we would only have brown bread to eat. It was always thick, very dry and grainy, and to go with it we no longer had butter but something called margarine. This was really hated by all. It tasted nothing like butter and had a funny smell. It was not until after the war in 1945 that we saw white bread again.

Also on ration were meat, eggs and sugar, but powdered egg was soon introduced to replace eggs. This looked like custard powder and had to be reconstituted by mixing with water when it could then be scrambled.

Another favourite to go on ration were sweets, with only a few ounces of mixed sweets being allowed for each person per month. This meant that most of the children would receive a parcel from home at least once a month. My grandmother always sent my ration and her own which always arrived packed in a shredded wheat box. We were allowed to open our own parcels, after which we handed them in. All the sweets would be shared out between all of the children because some of them didn't have a parcel of their own for some reason.

Clothes too were on ration and people used to save up their coupons so that they could buy something special when it arrived in the shops. Rationing meant you couldn't buy any of the goods unless you had your ration book with the correct number of coupons needed to buy your ration for that month. Special rations were allowed for young mums with babes. Food rationing didn't end until 1954.

My real fear of war happened when I became aware of German planes flying overhead and dropping bombs. I spent the war years at St Georges and in Kent where I stayed during holidays at the home of a friend, Eric Fryer, also from St Georges. We were not far from the south coast and so witnessed many bombing raids coming over the coast to bomb London and the Kent naval docks at Snodland. I saw many dog fights, with German planes being chased and shot down by British planes as they crossed the Sussex coast. The first line of defence was barrage balloons, through which the planes had to fly when crossing the coast, then they had to face the anti-

aircraft guns that were placed around towns and villages, after which the British planes would then attempt to shoot down German planes.

The most terrifying thing about the war for me was the V1s or doodlebugs and the V2s long-range ballistic missiles.

These were both flying bombs; the doodlebugs were pilotless planes with flames shooting out of a rocket at the back. When the flame went out it meant they had run out of fuel and they would then nose dive into the ground where the explosive packed into the nose of V1 would destroy whole streets of houses, killing or wounding the occupants.

When doodlebugs approached the coast British planes, such as Spitfires, Hurricanes and Typhoons, would go up to meet them and shoot them down. Sometimes the Spitfires, which were the fastest planes of their time, would intercept a doodlebug and with its wing tip the wing of the doodlebug to make it crash into the ground. The way the V1s worked meant they only had enough fuel to reach its target so that when they reached London they would crash.

It was the V2 that really frightened me. Because it was a rocket it went up into the stratosphere and would crash onto its target without anyone hearing it coming. This gave me nightmares. I would lie in bed at night frightened to go to sleep in case one landed and killed me while I was asleep. It was a weapon of terror and as a child of ten it terrified me so much I didn't want to go to bed.

When there was an air raid all 150 of us disabled children were ushered from our dormitories into the corridors where there were no windows where we would all sit on the floor. During one raid there was a terrific explosion and one child put his hand on the floor and on to a red-hot piece of shrapnel which had found its way into the corridor. The next morning when we assembled on the playground, we found that it was embedded with shrapnel from a doodlebug that had crashed nearby.

While staying on holiday at Eric Fryer's house in Snodland, Kent, I was sitting in a tin bath in front of the fire being washed when suddenly the lady from across the road burst into the room, scooped me up, ran out of the back door and threw me down into the garden air raid shelter and landed on top of me. Suddenly there was a huge explosion. A doodlebug had crashed onto the street behind ours. The neighbour was watching the doodlebug fly over from her front door when she saw the flame go out at the back and it started to nose dive, that was when she ran over to our house.

After the battle of Britain in 1941, I can remember seeing the 1000-bomber, 24-hour raids converging on the south coast on their way to bomb Germany. The Americans would do the daytime bombing with their Flying Fortresses whilst the British would do the night bombing. When the American planes came back from their raids many of them would be badly damaged with holes in the wings and tails of their planes. I was hospitalised at St Martins at the time lying on my back with my leg in traction and can remember seeing one Flying Fortress limping back over the coast flying very low over the hospital, there were so many holes in it I could see the sky through its wings as it flew overhead.

Another memory is of our troops on manoeuvres whilst training for the invasion of France. Our school was out in the country, on common land, several miles from the nearest village. The place was full of tanks, lorries and troops for weeks. Live ammunition was used in training and for ages we were never allowed to play on the common. When we were eventually allowed back, after it was supposed to be clear, we often found packs of live ammunition that had been lost in the undergrowth. We also found lots of empty gas mask tins that the troops left behind, I kept mine for years before donating it to STEAM museum.

With the end of the war there came big celebrations but it took many years to really begin to live a new life, in fact it took until the 1960s before a new generation came along who were not influenced by the war.



Jack Hayward 11/03/2010