

This is a testimony from
GLYNNE THOMAS BOWSHER
Born the 5th of October 1939

And concerns
MEMORIES OF
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

FOR 30 YEARS LIVING AT
21 WHEELER STREET
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MONMOUTHSHIRE

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Memories of the Second World War

Reminiscences of Glynne Thomas Bowsher

This narrative will be given in two parts. Part one will be what I remember being told, particularly if it involved me, even though, through age probably, I do not actually remember these things. Part two will be my actual memories, with a degree of corroboration, and which I still remember quite clearly.

First, who am I? I am the only son, and second child, of Thomas Henry & Lilian May (nee Taylor) Bowsher, who lived at No 21 Wheeler Street, Newport, Monmouthshire, South Wales. I then had an elder sister, Sheila Rosemary, who, being born in 1936, was just three years older than myself, and would have remembered more, but she passed away in 2007 and I cannot now tap that source. I popped into this world on the 5th October 1939, just one month after war was declared on the 3rd September 1939. So, I was officially a 'war baby'!

The town of Newport was a strategic target for the Germans, because of its industry, which included a munitions factory and specialist steel works, and its extensive docks area which could receive shipping from anywhere, but particularly from America & Canada. Aerial photographs and maps of the docks and surrounding industry, with target information written in German, are things that I have seen. The town was occasionally bombed and there was damage and civilian casualties, but it never saw the extensive bombing that towns & cities like Swansea, Coventry, and of course London had to endure, among other places.

My father, aged about 36 when the war started, gained a job with the local water tank and metal box maker, Braithwaite's. His job was to take a group of men to anywhere in the country, particularly military sites, where he and his team would erect the quite large water tanks and the structures for holding them aloft. He ranged from Scotland to Cornwall & Devon, and from West Wales to East Anglia. He did receive his 'call up' papers, but after his medical checks was given the lowest rating possible, because although he was physically quite fit, he was also very deaf from childhood Scarlet Fever. He was told that he would never be called into any of the forces, and could not join 'Dad's Army' because he was constantly moving around the country.

Air raid shelters of the Anderson type, semi-submerged in a back garden, were common in many houses throughout this country, but No 21 Wheeler Street had a Morrison Shelter, which in our case lived in our 'middle room'. It was a 1/8 inch thick steel sheet approximately 6ft x 4ft in area, spaced off the floor by steel stantions about 2ft high, and surrounded by steel mesh. In the event of an air raid, the family would lie inside it, and it had the strength to withstand a roof falling on it without collapse if a bomb had dropped nearby! I remember the shelter well, though that is probably because it was some time after the war had finished before it was taken away by some authority or other. I have no memory of it being used during a raid, because I was informed by my mother that if a raid was underway she was usually at the front door of the house looking at what was going on! A larger and more commodious group shelter was also built at our end of Wheeler Street, but I have no memory of it being used.

My memories are not extensive, I was just five and a half when it all ended!

Part 1. Things told to by my family after the war. Items in no particular order.

It was usual for the Germans to attach whistles to at least some of their bombs, so that they made a loud whistling noise as they fell. My mother told me that one night, when they were all in the house as a raid was underway, they heard the whistle of a falling bomb; it got louder and louder and they feared the worst, but suddenly the whistling stopped and there was no explosion! The following day a hole in the river bank, at the end of Wheeler Street showed where the bomb had gone, but the ground being soft with river mud it had penetrated but not exploded; strangely, 80 years or so later, it is probably still there!

Wheeler Street was then, as it still is, facing the small 'Shaftesbury Park', then a low lying and roughly triangular area bounded by the River Usk on one side and its tributary the River Sketty on another. In order to protect the town, its industry and docks, the R.A.F arrived and flew Barrage Balloons into the sky from several locations around the town, and one of these was Shaftesbury Park. Accommodation for the R.A.F personnel was not built, but the airmen were instead billeted out in the local houses. With No 21 having four bedrooms, we were allocated three airmen to stay with us, Bill Parker, and two Scotsmen, who I simply remember as 'Big Jock' and 'Little Jock', probably because of a difference in height. Little Jock was actually Jimmy Oetegen, who, strangely, we re-met in later years. After he had moved away, still during the war and into the Middle East with the R.A.F, he sent us Christmas Cards from there which I still have. He referred to Sheila and myself as 'the rebels'! Big Jock was actually Jock Drummond.

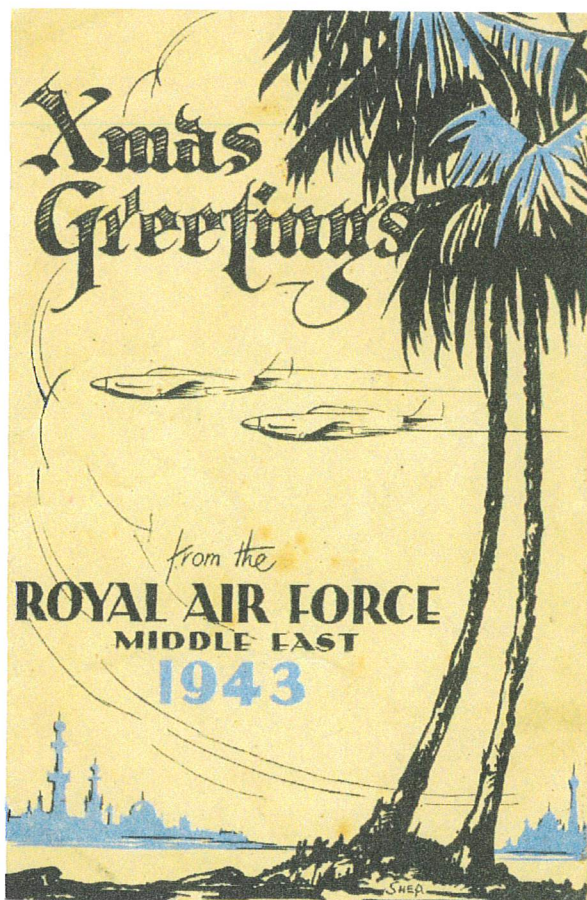


One of the features of service life is regular 'square bashing' to help keep discipline in place, and this took place on the old bowling green of the park. It must have been summer because I was apparently clad only in my little 'Cossie' but old enough to be out of doors on my own; a neighbour called my mother for her to see what I was up to! I had stripped my little bathing costume off so that I was 'starkers', put a stick over my shoulder, and was marching up and down with the regular troops, much to their amusement I am sure, but not to the Officer in charge!

Bill Parker, Jock Drummond & Jock Oetegen.

Another evening/night there was another air raid going on and my mother was at the front door watching. This was the night that a 'land mine' was dropped onto Archibald Street on the other side of the river, and the blast blew my mother backwards into the house and onto the stairs, I am unsure if I was asleep in bed or with her. Archibald Street was largely removed from the map of the town, leaving a large cleared area, and it was only in more recent years that that area was built on.

Another time, during daytime, my mother was in the small back garden watching an aeroplane flying over low, and as she said it had large black crosses on its wings and body. She was pushed back into the house by one of the R.A.F men, because the gunners in the aircraft were machine gunning anything seen moving below.



Postcards sent from RAF Middle East by Jimmy (Jock) Oetegen to the Bowsher family.

Part 2. Things that I do remember.

Items again in no particular order.

My most profound memories of the Second World War were from a period spent in London itself, when the nightly bombing was a continuing reality. I have no memory of when it was, but it was probably during 1944 because of one incident which involved the German V1 Flying Bomb, or 'Doodlebug' or 'Buzz-bomb'; these were deployed by the Germans during the latter stages of the war.

My mother's Aunt, her mother's youngest sister Margaret, lived on her own in Cleveland Avenue, Chiswick, in London. She had married a Canadian soldier (Ernest Lee) after the First World War, but he had died years earlier and her two children Edward (Teddy) and Elizabeth (Cissy) were old enough to be on their own, Cissy had married Jack Webb, and was living in Gunnersbury, London, Teddy of course may have been in the services. My mother corresponded with 'Aunty Maggie' and knew that she was suffering terribly during the air raids and slept under the dining table! My father was going to work in the London area for a period and therefore my mother contacted Aunty Maggie and told her that we were all

coming to live with her for a time, I presume that by this time the R.A.F had left Newport and No 21 was not needed as a billet.

So, my mother with cases and two children, decamped from Newport and took the train to London! She told me that she had to stand all the way as there were no seats available, but Sheila and I could at least sit on the cases in the corridor! She told me that one man on the train asked her where she was going, so she told him London, and he apparently replied that she must be a bloody fool! (What would I now give to know the name of the locomotive that hauled me on my very first long distance railway trip to the capital)?

We did visit some places by day, and more of that later, but it was during the night that the bombing took place when there was less risk to the German aircrew. The houses in Cleveland Avenue had a cellar, accessed from inside the house, and from a manhole outside the house so that coal could be tipped into it for household use. I have no memory of it being used as an air-raid shelter, and no memory of either an Anderson or Morrison shelter at the house; from one account to follow I think we just went to bed as night came!

I cannot say whether London was bombed every night, but it might have been. The first warning of course were the sirens, and when we heard them we knew that a wave of enemy aircraft were on their way. The initial siren warning was of variable tone, up and down like a sine wave, and then we would hear the sounds of aircraft and the explosions of bombs; I do not think that Chiswick was being targeted directly as there were probably better targets nearby, but aerial bombing was relatively imprecise and unintended areas could get hit quite easily. Sometime after the raid that we had heard had passed, the sirens came again to sound the 'all clear', and this was just a constant level of sound with no variation.

One evening we had all been invited to visit Jack & Cissy Webb in their flat in Gunnersbury, and we travelled there by tube train. We remember the silly things quite easily, and I remember that as the tube train stopped at each station, the opposite doors would open in sequence as that was how the stations had been laid out. When it came to our station the doors opened, but we could not get out, as Auntie Maggie's coat had got trapped in the opposite door at the last stop – she was standing by that door as there were no seats available! The result was that we had to go on to the next station to release her coat, and then go back to the correct station to leave the railway.

Whilst in the flat, and when it was dark outside, I remember the sirens starting up to warn of another raid, and we all moved out of the flat and into a corridor, though it might have been a stairwell. I remember the sound of aircraft and someone in our group saying 'they are coming', then saying 'they are overhead', and then the sounds of explosions, some of which of course would have been the anti-aircraft guns firing shells at the enemy aircraft. Eventually the sounds of aircraft moved away, and we heard the sound of the 'all clear' sirens. I guess we then went back to Auntie Maggie's house, but I recall no further problems with the tube train.

My most vivid memory of being in London and coming under attack came one evening when both Sheila and I had been put to bed, as we slept together. Sheila was asleep but I wasn't as I heard a throbbing sound in the sky; my mother came into the room and I remember saying

to her “what is that noise Mam”? She replied, “Don’t worry son, it is just one of our bombers going over”, and with that she lay on the bed covering over both Sheila and me. The sound then stopped abruptly, followed by a silence, and then a huge explosion which rocked the house. What I had heard was the sound of the pulse jet engine powering the V1 flying bomb which the Germans were now aiming at London in large numbers, my mother knew what the sound was and its potential implications, and she was clearly ready to sacrifice herself in order to save her children!

This incident stuck in my memory as I grew older, and when I was about 10’ish in age, I related it to my mother and asked her whether my memory was correct or whether I had dreamed it, but she replied that it was, and that I was absolutely correct in the detail. What I did not remember from that night, and which she then added to the story for me, was that my father was on his way back to the house when he saw the flying bomb in the sky and where it was heading to, he ran towards the house, but had not reached it when the bomb came down. We were fortunate in that we were not hit by the thing, but that also meant of course that someone nearby was and suffered accordingly.

A couple of incidents are worth relating, though nothing to do with the war itself. I remember visiting the then under construction Westminster Cathedral, for the Roman Catholic faith. At one point my mother had missed me, and then went on a search to find me; when she did find me I was at the entrance flicking ‘holy water’ from the font over people coming into the building! I have no doubt that I was suitably chastised for that as my mother was very quick with her hand! I also remember getting a wallop from her at that time for kicking and screaming at her because she would not go into the shop and buy me the model of the boat that was in the window! The ‘shop’ was the offices of the Cunard Company, and the model boat in the window was of the Queen Mary, and probably well too big to go into my bathtub!

We also visited the ‘Chiswick Empire’ theatre, and although I have no real memory of what we saw there, my mother did buy some postcards of what it was and we still have them.

I have tried to remember more precisely of when we were in London as I have no written record. My guess is the summer of 1944, on the assumption that Sheila was by then at school, and would have returned to school during that September. That was the month that I also went to school for the first time, being 5 years old in the September that followed, and my mother would not have let me miss that. The flying bomb raids on London began in June 1944 and ended at the end of August of that year when the launch sites in France were overrun by allied troops, so the June/July/August of 1944 would seem to be correct.

Back in Newport the war was now far away as the enemy were in no position to launch raids as far away as South Wales, and life returned to normal, whatever that was then! I remember being taken to school for the first time, to Crindau Infants School, and my first teacher was Miss Lynch, a lovely and homely lady.

Another memory was the arrival in the town of American Troops, and I think many were billeted in tented accommodation in the park. It was usual for us children to approach them with the message “got any gum chum” in the hope of a gift of chewing gum, though I cannot remember if I was successful? I do remember being told that Americans liked and ate snails,

and I remember collecting a boxful and offering them to a G.I in exchange for chewing gum, though again I have no memory of being successful!

One of those G.I's met a local girl, Mr & Mrs Wright's daughter who lived in Evans Street on the other side of the park to us. They eventually married, and she went to America when the war was over as a 'G.I Bride'. I remember them returning to see the family in later years.

V.E day came of course, but I have no memory of there being a party in Wheeler Street to celebrate it. Bearing in mind that I remember much of what preceded that event I think I would have remembered a party if there had been one. Sadly, there is no one left now to ask, Sheila would have remembered, but she has been gone for almost 13 years, and I know of no contemporary child's whereabouts even if they are still with us.

The only thing that I do remember is that my mother heard Churchill speaking on the radio announcing that the war in Europe had ended, and that she rushed out into the street to tell anyone who was outside; there were two neighbours outside talking, and she said that they seemed quite indifferent to the fact!

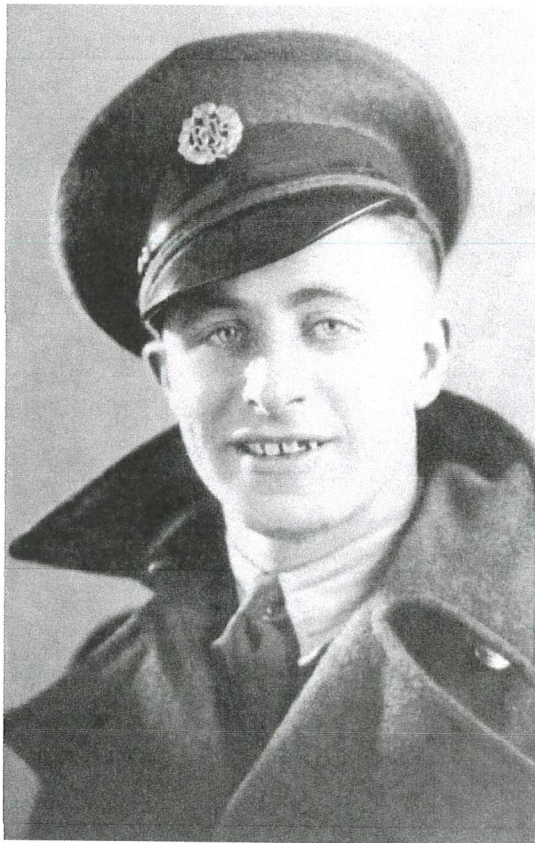
Family conversations on WW2 and its aftermath were frequent in my young days, and on one of them I remember my mother saying that if the Germans had successfully invaded and occupied this country, then she would have lost both Sheila and me, as both of us would have been taken away.

This made no sense to me in my younger days, but later I fully understood her comment. In their quest for this perfect Aryan Race, the Germans would look at all children in the countries occupied and choose those who fitted the Aryan Race description – fair haired, fair skinned, and with no physical or mental deformities, and ship them off to Germany to be brought up by German 'parents'. Both Sheila and I fitted that description in those days, and she was probably quite correct in her comment.

When Germany occupied other countries they did just that, and Polish children in particular were directly affected by it. After the war was over, these children would naturally have been returned to their families, but the difficulty was that Poland had now become a part of the Soviet Empire, and a return was neither practical nor possible. When Poland finally became an independent nation again the parents of these children naturally began looking for them, and when found it caused major problems as the children concerned had no concept of their origins and only recognised themselves as being German. Both Sheila and I had a narrow escape, as we both might have had very different lives?

Those are my immediate memories of the Second World War. Not a lot I know, but I was minus one month when the war started, and only five and a half years old when it finished, it would have been better to have talked to my parents, but they are gone and they took all of their information with them, as I will one day, but at least I have been pushed into recording what I could remember for my family!

Just a few more photographs from those now far off wartime days and later.



A rather good photograph of Jimmy (Jock) Oetegen in his R.A.F uniform'

On the back he has written 'for Sheila', so that is why I found it in my sister's box of old pictures.



Wartime picture of me with Mum February 1940, Sheila looking in the box behind!
Jock with his wife Jean and Mum & Dad, John O'Groats, 1960's