

## **Beryl Francis – Memories of WW2**

In 1939 I was 5 years old and had just started school. I lived in Portsmouth.

My parents and I had gone across the harbour to Gosport and then to Alverstoke to enjoy a day on the sands. We had just unpacked our picnic lunch when we were approached by an officious little man, wearing a tin hat.

### **WHERE'S YOUR GAS MASKS? He roared.**

He went on to say that war had been declared and that it was a legal requirement that we carried our gas masks with us at all times.

We went home, hurriedly. My Dad and our neighbour dug a deep trench in the garden. He went to his workshop, he was a cabinet maker, fetched wood that they put over it and covered it with soil. We had an air raid shelter. Later we were given a metal Anderson shelter. People with no garden were equipped with a reinforced metal table under which they had to crouch cover.

Very soon, arrangements were made to evacuate all children to a safer location.

It was terrible. Their Mums took them to the railway station and put them on a special train. They carried their identity cards, their gas masks and a small bag with some clothes and personal items. Some teachers went with them. Nobody knew where they were going.

In fact, many of them went to locations in the New Forest.

People in the areas concerned were inspected to see if they had an unoccupied bedroom or two. If they did, they **had** to take evacuees. There were no checks regarding suitability.

My parents decided that we should stay together in Portsmouth.

There was half day schooling. One week we would go in the morning, the alternate on in the afternoon. On the weeks when the afternoon was free, my Mum would take me to a tea dance, in the local hall, where we would dance and sing to, "We're going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried line, if the Siegfried lines' still there," or "Run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run,"

In school we were made to sit in our gas masks for short periods for practice. I would never have survived a gas attack. Mine used to steam up and I would panic.

For a longish time there everything was quiet, but then it began. Every night the sirens would sound and we would rush to shelter. I would be wearing my syren suit and clutching my gas mask and teddy bear. My parents fixed up a little hammock for me. They would sit up all night. My Dad had been called up to work in the Dockyard as a joiner and had to be at work by 7 o'clock in the morning. On occasions the Germans would machine the men at out muster, on their way home. They all rode bicycles and it was a sight to see when they all poured out of the Unicorn Gates.

Times were hard. One night there was a big glow in the sky. The Guildhall , the theatre and central Portsmouth were burning down. The bombing continued and one night a land mine fell close to our house. Our doors jammed. Soot came down the chimney. Windows were broken. It was said that the blast was so strong that a man was sucked out of his bed, through his window and into the road below. My parents panicked and decided to send me to an aunt who had, herself, been evacuated from Folkestone to Eton. Her husband had been a railway porter in Folkestone docks.

We went to Eton by train, which was, itself, dangerous because we had to change trains in London. I remember my parents catching the train home and leaning out of the carriage window, waving and waving. I ran along, waving and calling out, until the platform ran out. I thought that I would never see them again. I was seven.

I cannot bear the current news about the children in Palestine. I know what they are feeling – except it is a thousand times worse.

I lived in a little cottage on the river bank. It had no electricity. We had gas lights downstairs; nothing upstairs. We cooked on a range over a coal fire. Someone had built a modern bathroom just before the war started but had failed to install any hot water. To have a bath, it was necessary to heat buckets of water on the range. Very difficult to get the temperature right. There was a danger of being scalded or of cooling the hot water too much, which was a disaster.

I attended the local school, where a wonderful teacher instilled in me a great love of maths..

I was not happy. My Aunty was difficult. She could not bear to see me sit down and read. On Sundays I had to wear a pretty, but tickly, straw hat. We attended the Parish church one Sunday and St George's chapel in Windsor Castle the next. That was exciting. As there was only a reduced choir , we were allowed to sit in the choir stalls under all the banners.

One morning, as we were walking to church, a big car stopped for us to cross the road and the King smiled and saluted us. My Aunty said, **"If he knew what a naughty girl you are, he would never have done that."**

I looked forward to visits from my parents. The Dockyard finished early on Fridays and occasionally my parents would get on their bikes and after having, maybe, to walk up Portsdown hill, would cycle around 60 miles to get to Eton.

Eventually the dockyard decided to distribute its workers along the coast because of the enemy attacks. They were in Roedean School, King Alfred's baths in Hove and Caffyns garage in Worthing.

My parents were sent to Worthing and went to live in Findon Valley, under the wonderful Cisbury Ring. I was able to go home to them. It was wonderful.

Even there, things could go wrong occasionally. One day this little girl was walking home from school, when a plane swooped down machine gunning. I had reached my home. I flung myself down behind our garden wall. After the plane had gone, I went to go indoors. There, by the side of the door, a bullet was embedded in the wall. That could have been me. These wars engender such dreadful actions. How could a little girl be an enemy to be killed?

There were years of shortages and restrictions to come. Practically everything was rationed. We even ran out of toilet paper and were forced to use the daily newspaper, torn into squares, instead.

Problems continued long after the war was over. I started work in 1953 and lived in lodgings. I had to give my land lady my ration card so that she could buy food for my meals.