

A Brush with the War

To put things into perspective I had just achieved my third birthday when the "Battle of Britain" took place in the skies above us. Horam was 15 miles from the south coast, on a flight path to London so much of the action took place here.

On reflection, I cannot say that, apart from one incident, the war left more memories than other events. At such a young age I had no real conception of death or serious injury and if I saw aeroplanes I did not think of the people in them or what would happen to them if the aeroplane was shot down or crashed or caught fire. To a small boy most of what happens in war is exciting, not real to him, something like a game of cowboys and Indians. Thank goodness, I never saw a dead body or even someone seriously injured in the war.

If, at times I was afraid, I think I would have been so because I caught the fear of the adults around me. Not that they would have said anything to that effect but I would have sensed their fear and anxiety by their behaviour.

Having seen, as an adult, films about those days I understand that the government supplied Anderson air raid shelters which people constructed themselves in their garden. They began by digging out a large hole and then put the shelter together so that the shelter was underground and covered on top with a thick layer of earth. To my amazement now, Aunt Phoebe and Uncle Ernest did not have one constructed. Instead, at times of emergency, we crouched in a hidey hole under the main staircase in the hall of the house. This space was protected by the heavy oak treads of the staircase above, a wall at the back and a large heavy oak chest in front.

In this "shelter" I would listen to the German bombers approaching and going overhead. "Zoom—zoom" "Zoom—zoom". David said that the bombers engines were not synchronised and so made a double sound instead of a continuous "Zoom". Later on we would argue as to whether it was a Dornier or a Heinkel.

I well remember the aeroplane recognition books showing silhouettes of all the British and German planes. Here were front view, side view, top and rear view. Soon we were expert in identification. We would argue happily for hours about the minor differences between the different planes and how to tell one from another.

This occupation regarding aircraft recognition gave rise to others. Much of our pocket money was spent on making model aeroplanes of all shapes and sizes. British and German fighters and bombers, and later American, were constructed with enthusiasm. All had to be painted in realistic colours—camouflage on top and blue underneath with the relevant insignia. Later David made a model of a B52 Flying Fortress bomber painted in silver.

From this arose my interest in drawing and painting. In those days there were excellent books with pictures on all topics of interest to small boys, not least being about the British and German aeroplanes, ships and army weapons. I began by copying the pictures and painting the exact colours. From there I went on to develop my own.

Uncle's farm had fields fronting onto the main road close to the cottage occupied by Smith and his family. Unfortunately for Smith here was situated an anti-aircraft battery of long barrelled guns with attendant searchlights. As soon as bombers were spotted or close by the searchlights would weave their beams of light across the sky and the guns would fire in a fearsome barrage. The noise was ear-splitting. How successful the gunners were I do not know- I was never told.

I remember nights where several times I saw German bombers on fire. The planes were plummeting to earth with a long trail of flame. Then would come a large explosion. I got the impression that no sympathy was wasted on the Germans. Looking back, I wonder why we were looking out of the bedroom window

instead of being in the shelter under the stairs. Perhaps the adults became bored with crouching down in an uncomfortable space when no bombs came near us.

In the daytime we would see dogfights but they were usually so high up that we saw very little clearly. Certainly we saw the vapour trails and heard the gunfire. David and I would argue as to whether we liked the Hurricane or Spitfire best.

Souvenir hunting was a popular activity. David and I would scour the fields of the farm and elsewhere and we were rewarded with a mass of spent cannon and other shells, even bits of anti-aircraft shells and shrapnel. Also twisted bits of metal that we were unable to identify but which must have come from planes. Later on we would find almost every morning what we called tinsel- big bunches of long strips of paper shiny silver on one side and matt black on the other. Apparently the bombers used to drop these in the hope of confusing our radar and direction finding systems.

Had we found the remains of any crashed planes I am sure that I would have remembered. Anyway souvenir hunting from these was discouraged. Much later in the war a Mosquito fighter/bomber crashed on what was known as The Crumbles – a long pebbly beach between Eastbourne and Pevensey. I was at prep school in Eastbourne at the time and some school friends and I cycled out to see it. It was interesting because the skin of the plane and wings were made out of balsa wood (which we used for making model planes). This was sandwiched between sheets of plywood thus making the plane very light. The Mosquito was fast because of the two huge engines. I acquired one of the dials from the cockpit. I think we got there before the armed guards.

Mummy followed the progress of the war very closely. Every evening at, I think, six o'clock she would sit closely to the radio and listen to the news of the war with rapt attention. David (in the holidays) and I listened also but I doubt if we understood much.

A magazine called "War Illustrated" was bought every week and this was read and re-read from cover to cover. This magazine had dramatic photographs. The one that sticks in my mind is a photograph taking up the whole front cover showing H.M.S. Exeter on fire and listing heavily just before it sank after trying valiantly to take on a much more heavily armed German pocket battleship. Some of the other photographs were very graphic and horrible but I did not appreciate this at that time.

Apart from the people at the anti-aircraft battery nearby we did not see or have much to do with other soldiers. From time to time soldiers in large numbers would be stationed in the area or passed through the village. At one time the woods bounding one of our favourite lanes was the site for a large encampment. Tents and prefabricated buildings would suddenly appear. For some time the place would swarm with soldiers and then they went just as suddenly as they came.

At one time a Canadian contingent descended on the area and created havoc. They were billeted in a beautiful old manor house and grounds, which they almost destroyed. They ripped out all the oak panelling and carvings in the rooms and burned them. Doors and anything else made of wood were also burned. Statues and ornamental stonework in the gardens were vandalised.

I saw the place after the war and it was almost a ruin.

Not content with that, the men made a lot of the village girls pregnant, it was rumoured. But it takes two to tango, as they say. Therefore the soldiers were not too popular with the menfolk and mothers of the girls in the village

I was at a pre-preparatory school in Heathfield when I met some Canadian soldiers. My friend and I were walking down the High Street after class when along comes a string of soldiers in jeeps. Of course we got talking and ended up getting much coveted chewing gum and "candy" in exchange for souvenirs.

I saw but never talked to Italian prisoners of war who were allowed to work on the farms. As far as I know Uncle Ernest never had P.O.Ws or Land Army girls working on his farm.

Later on in the war David and I were sitting on top of one of the side gates fronting the main road when we saw convoys of well over a hundred army lorries packed with troops plus lorries pulling howitzer guns or carrying tanks. It was a very hot day and I remember that the tarmac in the road was melting. As a result the big tyres of the lorries made a wonderful wow wow wow noise. Some of the lorries must have stopped because David and I ended up with a large number of cap badges from many regiments. Presumably they were going to the coast in readiness for the Allied invasion at Normandy.

At or around the same time we would see and hear many allied planes. David and I would stand in the garden and look up at the sky. There right above us flew wave after wave of our four engined bombers (probably Lancasters) with their fighters in attendance all at fairly low level on their way to targets in Germany. Although it was night we could see them clearly against the sky. The noise was indescribable. What a long time it took for the whole armada to pass and how thrilling it was for small boys.

The most frightening events of the war undoubtedly were the German flying rockets – doodlebugs – as they were called. Most people were afraid of them. The crew of a bomber plane might decide to ignore you and the village but the doodlebug had no pilot. It was a robot and it was a game of chance where it fell to the ground and exploded.

The whole rocket looked menacing, painted black all over, with its long pointed nose, stubby wings and tail. Then there was the long exhaust belching a long trail of flame. The engine had a very distinctive growl.

What was worst of all was that everyone knew that the most danger came when the engine stopped. When that happened everyone would wait anxiously and find the silence interminable. That was when the rocket plummeted to earth and, when it hit the ground, the ton of explosive in its nose exploded with a deafening roar.

Most of the time the doodle bugs flew overhead quite high and so left the village in peace. But not all. Some came down near the village and mainly blew huge holes in the fields thus frightening the livestock and people.

On one occasion a doodlebug came a lot too close for comfort and I will never forget it.

One morning I was walking with Aunt Phoebe on the footpath of the main road going down the hill to the village. We had just passed the ruins of the old Manor and Mr Turners builders' yard. Gradually we became aware of the familiar growl of the engine of a doodlebug.

"What is that noise, John?" said Aunt Phoebe.

"Look out, it is a doodlebug coming our way very fast. We had better run and find some shelter" I said.

"Too late, there is nowhere close to hide" said Aunt Phoebe.

By the time it takes to say the above the doodlebug was over our heads flying very low. Not more than two hundred feet or so.

To our dismay just as it got above us the worst happened – the engine stopped. I can still picture today the menacing black shape, so low we could see all its detail clearly, with its exhaust shooting out a long plume of flame. Then no flame, no engine noise, and, in what seemed to be slow motion, the nose of the doodlebug starting to point downwards.

There was nothing we could do. We just stood and stared up at the rocket. It seemed a very long time for the doodlebug to hit the ground. Then there was a most enormous explosion. Quite ear-splitting and the ground under our feet shook violently.

It appeared to us that the doodlebug hit just behind the old Manor but, to our surprise, we later discovered that it had hit and exploded in a field over a mile away.

Whilst we were shaken by the experience, we were otherwise unhurt. Aunt Phoebe, being religious, was convinced that God had looked after us and saved us. Who knows?

The V2 rocket (V2's as they were known) was even more feared than the doodlebug. They were much bigger and more like the rocket or missile of today. What made them so fearsome was that you could not hear them coming and the first you heard of them was the bang if you were lucky. I do not remember any V2s striking in our area but they caused terror in London until the launch sites were captured by the British and Americans.

If the village had a "Dads Army" I do not remember seeing them. Most of the young men (and later some of the young women) of the village had been recruited to the armed forces and the village was populated for the most part by men too old to fight. As far as I remember, the men employed at Coxlow and on the farm were not young. No wonder the village girls enjoyed themselves with the Canadian soldiers.

As was said about the Americans "Overpaid, oversexed and over here"

Of course during the war one had to have the blackout at night when not a chink of light must be seen for fear of making the Germans aware of the village. The dreaded Air Raid Wardens would patrol and as in the T.V. programme "Dads Army" the command "Put that light out" could sometimes be heard.

Nor was there any street lighting so, once it got dark, you had to walk the roads and paths without a light. As I said before, usually this was not a problem.

The end of the war rather missed me as I was a boarder at a preparatory school in Eastbourne by then. All I remember of this great event was receiving with all the other schoolboys a printed letter purporting to be signed by King George VI. Of course the signature was a facsimile. It thanked us for helping in the war effort and, I suppose, congratulated us on still being alive.

On a practical note one job that had to be done early on in the war was to paint the inside of every window in the house with a clear substance which was supposed to make the glass more resistant to shattering. I would have been too young to be involved in this but I do remember at the end of the war, having to use methylated spirits to dissolve this coating on the windows and scraping it off. The house contained very many windows and it was a long long task.

If Mummy thought things would improve when war ended she was sadly disillusioned. Aunt Phoebe had become so used to living on starvation rations, making everything last and not using the central heating that she continued to live as if the war continued and imposed this regime on her brother and us.

To make things worse Daddy by this time was in the United States of America supposedly doing a Public Relations job for the Royal Air Force or so he said. He was having such a good time that he preferred it out there to being back home. No food or other restrictions and the women were "easy". As a result he did not return to the UK for at least a year after the war ended.

It does not take much imagination to guess what happened when he discovered the conditions imposed on us throughout the war by Aunt Phoebe who was extremely wealthy. My father was not one to mince his words-as they say.

Not surprisingly we quickly left Coxlow to set up our own home in another part of the village not far from the school.