

Recollections of my father William John Hood Austin born in Woolhampton West Berkshire 29<sup>th</sup> June 1922 and my mother Kathleen Austin born at Keykel Hill Ford Sittingbourne Kent 22 November 1922

After an idyllic childhood in rural Sulhamstead a beautiful Berkshire village living with his parents and younger sister Marie in firstly a thatched cottage post office and latterly a charming post office cottage Dad joined the Ufton Home Guard platoon at 18 shortly after the outbreak of World War 11. There were around 60 volunteers many being farmworkers who had fought in the trenches in WW1. They attached their medal ribbons to their khaki Home Guard uniforms. Their commander was Major Jessop also a WW1 veteran and he led his men on parades from the Bath Road up through the village of Sulhamstead to the old thatched Post Office. They patrolled for 2 hours in pairs Dad's partner was Mr Wilson the village school and choir master. Their only weapons were 2 American P2 and Remington Rifles and 1 Browning Automatic Rifle so heavy it could only be issued to the strongest man in the platoon. As most of the British Army's weapons had been left behind in France on the Evacuation they were dependant on the trusty Americans for rifles and ammunition. Their duty sergeant was Mr Fred Monger head gamekeeper at Ufton Court an ex Black Watch soldier and he allocated my father and Mr Wilson the midnight until 2 am patrol fro HQ in Sir George Usher's gun room at Tyle Mill. As they reached the canal swing bridge a 2 engine enemy plane flew along the canal at 300 feet and a burst of machine gun fire and tracer bullets shot into the ground. Fortunately the firing stopped abruptly and the plane soared away. Possibly the plane was photographing the defence line of the canal and the concrete pill boxes built every half mile.

My mother's life was equally affected by wartime and she and her sister Elsie trained as St John's Ambulance Nurses. Firstly they worked at the temporary Maternity Hospital near Maidstone and then were transferred with all their expectant charges to Sulhamstead. The new hospital was in Folly Farm lent by Gilbey's the wine and spirit vintners who kept this beautiful Lutyens designed house with fabulous Gertrude Jekyll garden in well-ordered splendour. It was a wonderful haven for pregnant servicemen's wives from the threatened South Coast towns. The expectant Mums stayed there for about 6 weeks and visiting husbands stayed in B&B in the village for 2/6p a night. A local lady did all the babies' washing and my mother inititally worked in the kitchen preparing meals. However Elsie took her place as her cooking skills were greater and Mum was in her element looking after the adorable babies.

Mum and Dad met in the sleepy village and at his parent's post office and general store where queues of expectant mothers formed outside awaiting a chance to buy sweets, cigarettes, wools, cottons, and postage stamps. Only 6 people could enter the shop at a time and the numbers were greatly increased by Evacuee children also staying in the village. His parents were busier than they had ever been in their small village shop.

In 1941 my father's call up papers arrived and he joined the RAF. He had 12 weeks of 'square bashing' His army toe capped boots stood out like sore thumbs compared with others Air force boots without stitched toecaps. Then 6 months at RAF Henlow electrical school training as an aircraft electrician and passing out transfer to Lancaster Squadron 97 Pathfinder Force stationed at Conningsby Lincolnshire. During his 3 monthly leave periods he continued to meet up with Kathleen and they were engaged choosing a 3 diamond gold ring with a twist which I wear every day. They were finally able to fix a wedding date of 24 June 1944.

On arriving in Kent he found barrage balloons almost shut out the daylight as protection from the V1 Pilotless planes. During the ceremony Dad had one ear out for V1s and one for the vicar's words. They had a brief honeymoon in Ilfracombe and the train was crammed with soldiers on both journeys so they sat in the corridor on their cases.

Back to duty Mum to a new hospital in Kent and Dad to 97 Squadron. They had 3 children and were married for nearly 74 years before the final parting.