

# What happened to me during the war 1939-45

Sept. 1939

War was declared during my long vacation from college. As I only had my last year to complete, I decided to return notwithstanding. Kings College had evacuated to Bristol in the West of England, and I was there till June 1940 finishing off my studies. I was taking my final exams in June 1940, just at the time when France was being invaded and the situation seemed almost completely hopeless. You can imagine how difficult it was to concentrate on academic things at such a time of crisis! I think we hardly realised how very near defeat we were at that time, though we knew that we were pathetically inadequately equipped to meet a Nazi invasion, had Hitler decided to come to England.<sup>[L]</sup><sup>[SEP]</sup> All through the summer after my exams were over, I was at home, helping a young farmer friend of ours with his harvest, teaching myself typing, and looking out for a job. This, of course, was the period of the Battle of Britain, and air raid warnings were sounding all day long. As Dorking is directly in between London and the coast, there were constant air battles over head between our fighters and the Nazi bombers. Often we stood and watched while the sky was thick with planes. One day from the window I saw a parachute descending from a German plane, and called to Father and rushed outside thinking that a Nazi was going to land in our garden and we should have to capture him! Unfortunately (for I was really rather excited at the prospect!) he floated over the house and landed in a field the other side of Chichester Rd. He was very badly burned – his plane had been on fire – and was taken to Dorking hospital. Often at night we could see the terrible glare from the huge fire raids on London, and stray bombs were frequently dropped in and around Dorking, though it was never actually made a target. Every night however, we had to be on alert and used to sleep downstairs on the floor in the hall and the kitchen which was the safest place in the house.<sup>[L]</sup><sup>[SEP]</sup> In October 1940 I got a job at the BBC and was sent off to Bristol because it was thought to be safe, and several of the BBC departments had evacuated there. I was quite glad to go, because Kings College was still there, and naturally I had a number of friends in the district. I was billeted in a family who were very kind to me and I was quite comfortable and happy. It was, however, far from safe! Bristol had an important port and airfield, and was one of the chief targets for Nazi bombers in the West of England. Night after night we had 'blitzes' (in England, a bad air raid soon came to be known as a 'blitz' – the German term of course which we used mockingly!) My billetors had an air raid shelter in their garden, and we used to spend many of the evenings in it during that winter. When Bristol was the target for the night we had quite a lively time with incendiaries and high explosives. One bomb dropped a few houses away, and all our windows were broken, but apart from that we were very lucky. On more than one occasion I was caught in the town during an air raid, and had some narrow escapes. One night I spent in the crypt of the Catholic cathedral in Bristol, and I couldn't leave because there was a fire directly outside, and bombs dropping all the time. I remember Sir Adrian Boult (perhaps you have heard of him! – he is well known in the musical world) was there too, and he was very worried because he was supposed to be broadcasting, but couldn't get to the studio. I also sometimes spent the night at Broadcasting House in Bristol in the underground shelter. Many programs came from there whilst the raids were on. In the office in the mornings it was an anxious time waiting for everyone to arrive, and we all had experiences to relate of the night before! Fortunately no one that I knew there was killed, though many were bombed out of their houses and flats.<sup>[L]</sup><sup>[SEP]</sup> One of the worst inconveniences after the raids was the lack of gas and water, though it was wonderful how, in spite of all the

difficulties, the BBC canteen managed to provide meals for us, and everything carried on somehow.

#### February 1941

Having survived the blitzes all through the winter, the BBC decided that the place wasn't safe! So in February, we were moved to a large country house near Evesham (also in the West of England). Several other BBC departments were there or in the surrounding district, and we were rather overcrowded – in fact, we did not live in the house itself, but in a hut in the grounds. This was my first experience of communal life (which I have now suffered for many years in the army!) and about 20 of us slept in rows in one hut. It was impossible to have any privacy at all, and I hated it at first, but became accustomed to it after a while, and was quite happy there eventually. The surrounding country was very lovely, and we were there all through the summer, and I used to cycle and walk a great deal in my free time. Also, of course, we were well away from the air raids, and it was wonderful to go to bed at night and sleep soundly instead of sitting in a shelter or extinguishing incendiaries in the garden!

#### July 1941

Joan's first child Margaret Susan, was born on July 27<sup>th</sup>. All this time Joan (whose wedding took place on Sept. 1939) had been teaching as usual. Tim of course, had been in the Army from the very beginning of the war, so they couldn't have a house together. Joan's school was evacuated from London, first to Worthing, on the South coast, then when that became dangerous with the threat of invasion, to a village in Berkshire. When Joan was expecting Margaret, of course she gave up teaching and came to live at home. In July 1941, also, I came home for about 2 months in order to have an operation on my eye. I expect you may remember that I used to squint quite noticeably! I was advised to have an operation to correct it, and it proved very successful. I had to have both eyes bandaged for a week or so afterwards, and then was only allowed to use one eye for some considerable time – it was really well worth while however, as my eyes are now quite straight, though I still have to wear glasses.

#### Sept. 1941

I returned to the BBC. In the meantime my department had moved yet again, and this time we were in another big country house outside... much nearer home for me. Apart from the work, there was nothing much to do there, though I used to help at a Soldier's canteen in the evenings. I began to get very restless – the war was going badly for the Allies at that time, and I felt that I should be doing a more active job, instead of living in comfort!

#### March 1942

Therefore, I joined the WLA (Women's Land Army – an organisation for girls who took up farm work during the war). I had always been interested in farming, and so many men had been called-up that there was a desperate shortage of labour. [L  
SEP] I was sent to an agricultural training college for a month, where I had a very strenuous time – I had to be at work in the cowsheds at 5:45am! It was all very interesting and I enjoyed it, though I have never worked so hard in my life! I learned how to milk a cow, groom horses, drive a tractor, and all the other things one has to do on a farm.

#### April – December 1942

I had a job on a farm in Surrey (not at all near home, however) – I helped with the milking and did general field work. With hay and harvest we often were working from 6:30 in the morning until darkness fell at night. I enjoyed most of it very much, and was extremely sun-tanned and healthy. In December I left there, because part of the farmer's land was being taken over by the military, and being the winter also, he hadn't enough work for me then. [SEP] The WLA couldn't find me another job at that time – unless one was an experienced tractor driver (which I wasn't) or prepared to do milking all the time (which I didn't want to do) it was rather difficult to find a job for a girl in the winter. Finally I discovered that they were urgently needing girls in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) with my particular qualifications (i.e. a degree and office experience) so as I seemed to be rather wasting my qualifications by being just a farm labourer, and my family were keen for me to give it up, I decided to join the Army.

### February 1943

I went into the ATS where I have been ever since. First of all, I went to a general training centre where we learned to march and drill and salute and perform fatigues! We lived in camp – about 20 of us in a hut, and it was bitterly cold. Every morning by 8am we had to be ready to have ourselves and our huts inspected. It was all an interesting and rather amusing experience, and I met many various types of girls. After the training centre I was sent on a course for the particular work I was going to do. As I think I told you, I have been doing intelligence work, so cannot tell you any more than that, except that it has been very interesting, and I have met some awfully nice people. I was in a billet for a year, but for the last two years have lived in a camp, so am now completely hardened to communal life, though I can assure you, I shall not be at all sorry to return to civilian conditions! [SEP] At the present rate of demobilisation I ought to be out of the Army by March or April.

*Written by Pauline Shergold*

*Riek Merkens wrote, in English, this account of her experiences in Holland during the War years. She sent it to her English pen-friend Pauline Shergold.*

*Gaps underscored in the text indicate unreadable or damaged parts of the original documents.*