

Walter Handley: Memories of 14th November 1940 Coventry Blitz

At the time I was living with my mother and father at 114 Moseley Avenue, Coventry. From our back door they looked out to Lydgate Hill about ¼ mile away.

We had a great crop of Brussel sprouts that year. At the end of the garden we had a wooden garage and a 20' pole to hold the wireless aerial. In the house, we had 2 objects of special interest: My mothers pet canary and a cuckoo clock. The clock had been brought back from Germany in 1936 by my sister Margaret. From the outset of the first raid, the cuckoo clock hadn't retained it's composure. It was supposed to cuckoo once on the ¼ hr and the time on the hour, but now on the ¼ hr it gave a half strangled screech and on the hour, the effort used to defeat it. It retreated back into the clock with it's beak just outside the door! Dad used to swear at it. He claimed it was a secret agent, giving warnings to the Germans.

When bombs exploded, the Canary would jump up and down on its perch like something demented. It made so much noise, we couldn't hear the bombs coming down.

My mother and father were both 57 years old. Dad was a heavy drinker and would retire into the front room with 3 pints of beer during raids. He'd lie on the floor by the fireplace and would record the amount of bombs that fell each night. He reached 168 on that night of 14th November 1940 before the 169th hit our house at 10.30 pm.

My sister Margaret and her husband Alf (he worked at Courtaulds) would come over to ours when he was on night shift, bringing their baby Leonie. Margaret and Leonie would spend the night at ours. (Leonie was born on the day of the first raid on Coventry in June that year). We were expecting them about 7.00 pm.

November 14th was a bright, cold day and as evening fell, what clouds there had been, just disappeared and the bright moon rose from the back of Lydgate Hill. It was now nearly 6.00 pm. I was member of a local motorcycle despatch corp. Dad came out to me and asked if I was going out. He was concerned as he felt sure the bombs would be hitting that night. I stood and smelled the air. Yes, there will be a raid tonight.

Normally, when an air raid was on, Dad & I played chess, but tonight as we got the chess set out, the sirens went off (about 7.00 pm). At the same time the cuckoo popped his head out and gave a strangled screech and the carnary started whistling like mad.

I nipped up to a friends house on my motorbike, but the house was empty. As I returned, my front tyre burst. I pushed the bike home and took it to the shed at the rear of the house. Suddenly it became as light as day. I stood and looked up. There were at least 6 flares floating down. It gave the most beautiful light. The only drawback is that death usually follows these lights, in the shape of bombs. Some of the flares dropped into our road. As Dad came out of the house, I became conscious of a whistling sound, like a train running through a station and I knew immediately what that sound entailed. I shouted to Dad to get his back against the wall and ran towards him. We stood there. An insendary fell between us and struck the earth about 2' from where we stood and immediately began to burn and set fire to the fence. In order to fight insendary fires, we had a spade both at the front and back of the house. Dad carried earth and put on to the burning insendaries both the one in the garden and those out on the street. One of these was the 'jumping jack' kind that exploded several times. The best way to deal with these, was to cover it with a dustbin. The dustbin usually contained them.

We were joined by several wardens who helped us put out the flares and incendiaries. One of the Wardens noticed smoke coming from the house on our left – the one attached to ours. They had an Anderson shelter in their garden. I rushed around to let them know a bomb had gone through their roof and did they need help? Back at the house, I found Dad staring at more flares in the sky. We stood with our backs to the house and waited for the bombs to come. They were more incendiary devices. They fell the length of the Avenue about 10 yds apart. By this time I was wondering why there had been no high explosive bombs following the incendiaries. These were to come before the night was out.

The Avenue was alive with burning flares and incendiaries. On the other side of the road, about 100 yds away, a man and woman were 'strolling' up the street pushing a pram and were in earnest conversation. They crossed the road and approached us. It was my sister, brother in law and their baby. We saw them into the sunroom and put the baby in the corner of the room. My mother (as in previous raids) was calmly sitting under the table, knitting. It was now about 7.30/8.00 pm. The bombs now started to fall. Dad and I stood on the kitchen step and tried to estimate where the bombs were falling. Dad retired to the front room with his bottles of beer and me not to disturb him unless things got beyond my control. I stood on the doorstep, calling 'down' when a bomb got too near. It was then I saw my first plane shot down. I am sure it was the guns in Sandpits Lane that shot it. At 9.00 pm the guns ceased firing. I then heard an unusual popping noise at the front of the house. From the top of the Rialto, I could see flashes of fire and a () light was fired into the air. I could see they were firing at a parachute with what appeared to be a large man hanging from it. It looked as though it was going to land on the shops opposite the Rialto. I started running as quickly as I could, ran through the gate, missing turning into the kitchen door and slammed into the coalbox. Then the walls shook and a hard blast went over me and was blown into my face. Dad came out and asked if I was ok. 'I didn't like that one bit' he said. 'it was too loud'. It was this explosion that brought our neighbours out from next door. Mother and daughter joined my Mum under the table.

I then decided I'd repair the puncture my motorcycle wheel, with a view to moving everyone out into the country. I brought the tyre into the kitchen. It was 10.30 pm and I was surprised we actually had running water at that time. The next event stopped my watch. I had blown the tyre up and immersed it in water and then froze. A bomb made a rushing noise and then a scream. I held myself to the floor. Heard a thud and crash. I thought I'd been blown to smithereens. It was totally quiet. There was a roar from Broadgate direction as it burned furiously. No crackling of glass. Silence. I thought I was dead. I then became aware I could see. I was looking into a dark void with a blue light. I could then hear a voice calling. I recognised this as our next door neighbour, who's wife and daughter were in our house. I could also hear my father shouting my name. I then realised I was looking at the sky. There was something hard and smooth pressing against my hand. This turned out to be our kitchen wall. Using this as a prop, I got up. All the noises of the night then came back to me. I realised I could see straight through where the wall had been and into the pantry and then beyond into the neighbours house, where he was still calling. He was struggling with a table which had moved and trapped him into the fireplace. Where my feet had been, was the edge of the bomb crater. I had been laying down on the carpet in the kitchen when the bomb fell and must have been lifted up with the carpet whilst the pantry door and rubble passed underneath me and I had been turned 90 degrees. I was now standing on about 2' of rubble. Dad pushed the kitchen door open through the rubble. I called that I was ok and that we must go and help our neighbour.

Our neighbour was jammed into the fireplace by the table and rubble from the wall. He had been

held tight in the there just above the burning embers of the fire. He had been very lucky. He had a nasty cut on his lips and bridge of his nose. We took him back to ours.

After clearing rubble so we could shut the back door, Dad and I joined the others in the sun room. We stayed there for several hours listening to the whistles and screams of exploding bombs. At times it sounded like express trains going through a tunnel. There were long drawn out moments of rushing noise. We eventually realised, this was noise of exploding bombs coming up the sewers and drains.

There was another loud rushing noise and the windows and blackout boards at the back of the house just disappeared. Silence.

We went out to look. I think they have a DA in the garden. There was an intermittent ticking noise. There, hanging down from the wireless pole

We were relieved. We then noticed that the sprouts had been completely blown off, just the stalks remained. We never found one of them.

We then could smell a strange smell. Gas. The one thing we feared the most. I'd been through the gas chamber at work and knew gas smells. There was a blazing gas main up the road. We put our gas masks on. The baby was not keen on hers and screamed. It then struck me that this gas smell was ether. The bomb had struck the Dentists!

And so the endless night went on. Then quiet. Bombs and planes had stopped. It was now 3.00 a.m. Dad and I went out as an ambulance driven by a friend pulled up outside. He asked if we were ok. This friend later became Alderman of Coventry and had a school named after him (Alderman Callow). My friend and his team mates had received orders to clear the streets as best as possible, before dawn. As my friend drove off, he shouted 'they've come 10 days too late for bonfire night'. I walked towards Crampers Fields to where the Polish men had been firing at the landmine came down in the parachute.

I then knocked on a friends door to see if he was ok. He invited us in. We went to the back door. 'Don't go into the garden' he warned. He had a torch in his hand. There was an edge of a bomb crater. It was at least 40' across. 'I've always wanted to go to Australia' he said 'and if, in the morning, I can see the bottom and it's touching the foundations of the Brisbane post office, I'm off'. I replied that I'd go with him.

We made our way up to the burning gas main. We saw Mr Stringer, our mayor, staring up into the air. We looked up. All the tiles had been blown off his roof when the gas main was bombed. Only the rafters remained.

At this point, the planes and bombs could be heard again. We went home and spent the rest of the night lying on the floor of the sun room listening to the monotonous noise of bombs exploding. At 7.00 in the morning we heard the milk lorries. Another bomb. Our front door and windows were blown out. Our stair carpet which had only been down two weeks and had taken over a year to make was covered in milk and grass. Mum sat down and had a weep. We were very cold as the frost was now creeping into the house. The canary still made a noise. The baby furiously sucked on her dummy with every loud noise.

Dawn broke and then came the 'all clear'. Dad made a fire. Mum was bending over the baby in her carry cot, talking to a white haired old lady. I asked Mum who this old lady was. She took me straight in the kitchen. 'That white haired old lady is your sister'. She started to weep.