

### **Joan Bomford, extracts from memoirs 'Up With The Lark: My Life on the Land'**

Joan Bomford lives near Evesham in Worcestershire. Joan has been farming since the 1930s. She continues to be very active on the farm today, and in 2015 she was BBC Countryfile's Farming Hero 2015. Joan Bomford published her memoirs in 'Up With The Lark: My Life on the Land', 2015. This is included here with Joan's permission. When the War began she would be about 8 years old. Throughout the War Joan's father Colin Collins was required to continue working at Quarry Pits, a 100 acres farm near Inkberrow, Dormston, "in the heart of Worcestershire".

"It was a responsibility he took very seriously indeed... every man of fighting age who worked for him had been called up. It left Father with the same tasks... we were required to pull together like never before. At the time, I was struck by how dark life became on our farm: 'Joan, take yourself outside and check the windows', Mother ('Kitty') would say to me at dusk. We had already been around every room inside the farmhouse, drawing all the blinds and closing every curtain tight, but my role was to see if any light might still be seeping through. With a threat from the air, we had been warned that any visible landmark on the ground could guide the German bombers to their destination. Even more immediately, as my dad warned, with so much of the countryside enshrouded in darkness it would take just one rogue lamp for a bomber to perfect his target practice... This was a nightly chore, which we carried out with painstaking care. Even then, however, nobody ever felt quite safe. Living in a rural landscape, surrounded by fields and woodland, it was easy to think the dark unnatural footprint of a dwelling like a farmhouse could be distinguished from the night sky. In a sense, there was nowhere to hide. ...We had no electricity ...moving around the farmhouse with a paraffin lamp in hand would cause shadows to creep or leap across the walls, and that movement would always come alive in my imagination."

[To use our only privy outside] "From the kitchen door, you took the path alongside the farmhouse and then followed it across the grass between borders of blue lilacs. The privy housed two latrine pits side by side: one big and one small. I could only use the small pit. Being so little, there was always a danger that I might fall clean through the other one. During the blackout, however, my biggest fear wasn't the cesspool below ground but the threat from above.

As soon as I cracked open the kitchen door, ready to answer the call of nature, I'd sense my heartbeat quicken. Growing up in the countryside, I wasn't scared of the dark at all. Even so, when I padded out in my nightgown... I did so with bated breath. In my young mind, that candle in my hand must've shone so brightly, like a beacon that could be seen for miles around. Were Jerry to be flying around up there, looking for somewhere to drop their bombs, surely they'd have me in their sights within a blink... Where the path extended beyond the corner of the farmhouse, a small cross-breeze from across the fields would always catch me. Even in calm conditions, it was enough to blow out the candle flame. And on an overcast night, with no light peeping through the curtains from the farmhouse, I would be left blind and disorientated.

With all manner of fears unfurling in my mind, I would sometimes have to rely on the feel of the lilacs to guide me across the garden. Even having reached the relative solace of the

privy, and closed the door behind me, my ordeal continued. For sometimes I would have no way of knowing whether I was settling over the big latrine which I feared might swallow me whole if I lost my footing. It was a question of keeping my nerve throughout and then focusing on getting back to the farmhouse as calmly, silently and swiftly as I could. Any noise or dawdling, I thought to myself, might alert the enemy.

After dark, it's common to hear the distant cry of a fox, a dog barking from a neighbouring farm or the rustle caused by some nocturnal creature as it scrabbles into the undergrowth. It leaves you keenly aware of any sound that might not seem in keeping with that world. The first time I heard what would become a familiar drone, it seemed to reach out over the night sky and proved impossible to pinpoint. Like an unseen swarm of bees, it was an inescapable and malevolent presence. On hearing those bombers I'd catch my breath and then just run for the kitchen door.

Even back inside the farmhouse, among my family once more, I never felt entirely safe. We'd sit together... sometimes without breathing a word. With the paraffin lamps extinguished, all we could do was listen and hope for the best as the planes passed overhead. 'They're gone for now', Father would say eventually, and light up a lamp once more... 'Let's pray for those who might not be so fortunate.' The Luftwaffe had set their sights on Birmingham and other industrial towns near us such as Coventry; some 30 miles to the NE. Dad always told my little brother that we would not be targets, but nobody could be certain where the bombs would drop. Often, after an air raid, the Luftwaffe would simply shed the last of their loads over the countryside at random before hightailing it for the Channel. It was these moments that left everyone in the area fearful for their lives. One night a bomb must've detonated in nearby woods because the force of the explosion could be felt through the house. Thankfully nobody was injured..."

The memoirs continue, Joan's sister Marian, and her brother John; Joan driving a tractor as a very young girl; milking the cows; her Dad's relationship with the War Ag (The War Agricultural Executive Committee); the Home Guard; locals (including Harry Taylor, Arthur Wilkins, Tom Roberts, Frank Davis and Bill Allen); the Land Girls (including Kath and Brinie) who like the rest of the farm were plagued by rats; the dogs and ferrets used to control the vermin, the latter with the help of David Jones son of Swanker Jones; harvesting the potato crops (spuds); harvesting the grain and getting the straw into ricks; unsuccessfully concocting ersatz coffee; making cider; ungrateful evacuees (adults, retired couples from Birmingham and other cities); German POWs (Bruno and Karl); the bombing of Coventry; and when an elephant came to stay in the barn!

And meeting the enemy for the first time: "They're soldiers,' I said, noting the uniform, though the blue circles on the back of their jackets wasn't like anything I'd seen our boys wearing. It could mean only one thing, I thought with a gasp as John reached up and found my hand. 'The Germans have landed!' ...the soldiers were making their way diagonally across the bushy fields, heading for the brook... Without doubt, I decided, barely able to muster a breath, the invasion that everyone feared had begun. With little John at my side, pale and frightened just like me, we kept our heads low and hoped the Nazis would not see us... After several hours, with those voices still audible from the brook, we hatched an escape plan ...brother John and I ran all the way back to the farmhouse without stopping.

'Where have you been?' asked Mother when we tore through the door... Breathlessly, as Dad arrived to see what the commotion was all about, I reported our Nazi encounter, from the truck to the guns and the striking blue circles on the back of their jackets. 'And you saw this down by the brook?' he said, as if reading my mind. ...'Children, they were prisoners of war! Those blue circles mean they're Italian, I believe.' 'There's a new camp near here', Mother added. 'Those men have been put to work.' I felt a great weight leave my shoulders on hearing this, but after such a frightening experience it didn't stop my brother and I from sobbing. It was the first time we had encountered enemy soldiers, even if they had been here as prisoners of war, but it also wasn't the last. Within the year, one became such a familiar face at Quarry Pits that we would consider him part of the family."

Joan devotes more than a chapter to her friendship with a German POW Karl who became a dear friend: "After some time inside his camp, he'd proven himself to be one of the Trusted - a compliant prisoner who could work without military supervision during the day. Karl was a blacksmith by trade. "Karl had a long face, both physically and in spirit, with a receding hairline that he swept back to the nape of his neck."

"'My sweetheart,' he would say, having learned the word from a German-to-English dictionary I gave him as a gift..."

"After a year at Quarry Pits, escorted to and from work by prison truck each day, Karl was permitted to move in with us... This was regarded as a great privilege, not just by the army but by Karl himself... I believe Karl went on to play an important role in civic life, and even served as mayor in his community."

The bombing of Coventry November 1940 is still talked about all around the county. Here are Joan's memories: "Brother John was by my side on the night the northeast horizon lit up like a forge. The bombing runs had become a regular feature of our lives by then. I still went around the outside of the house at dusk each day, helping Mother and Marian to secure the curtains, but by then the eerie drone that would later cut through the darkness no longer sent me scuttling. On that night, midway through November, we had heard the planes in the distance and the dull thuds that followed. On this occasion, however, those thuds had been so numerous it felt like it might never end. We both knew that it was Coventry. The Luftwaffe had been targeting the city for months, but never like this. 'Those poor sods', Dad said, when he came out to fetch us in. Standing behind my brother and me, he placed a hand on each of our shoulders and just watched as that awful band flickered and flexed under the caul of the night."