

A CHILD'S MEMORY OF WAR;

Although I was only attending my first 'infants' school at the outbreak of war I thought that it might be useful to note down my earliest memories. I was living in Grimsby, at that stage, one of the worlds largest fishing ports. It would be a target for a number of reasons; firstly it was seen by the Luftwaffe as an easy gateway to the flat Lincolnshire countryside- home to a number of R,A.F. bases. It also housed large numbers of North Sea trawler-men who were to be invaluable in the United Kingdom's war effort. With their extensive knowledge of the North Sea they were to play a vital role in Minesweeping, and in importing many necessary goods. A large fleet of minesweepers was based in the Royal Dock. The port of Hull suffered worse damage, and after the war it was found that in German records Grimsby was reserved to to be the main point of attack for the supposed invasion, and so they wanted its infrastructure to be preserved.

One of its landmarks is the Dock Tower. It stands 309 feet high and was opened by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in October 1854.It was designed by its architect to resemble a tower in the Italian city of Siena It can be seen for miles around and was used by the Luftwaffe as a beacon for bombers heading for those R.A.F. Bases and overland to Liverpool and other cities. Such was its significance that the Government decided at one stage to demolish it. Thankfully that it did not happen and there is now even a Lego reproduction tof the Dock Tower at Legoland in Windsor.

I clearly remember the air aid shelters hastily erected. I envied my next door neighbours who had an 'Anderson' shelter made out of corrugated sheet iron and buried three feet in the ground and covered over with soil. It contained two bunks and a supply of bedding and candles. I don't remember whether it was ever used for it real purpose although we initially saw it as a useful play den for us children. Unfortunately its construction was such that there was always several inches of water on the floor, and bedding etc. quickly became mouldy. In my house we had a Morrison Shelter This was a large metal cage the height of a dinner table. It had a hefty iron frame.. It was very large and ugly and filled our 'front room' making that room unusable for anything else. My memory of sleeping in it was that when bombs fell I remember rusty iron filings falling on my face. However, as a child I rather enjoyed the many Barrage Balloons floating above – to me they were just like a fairground attraction. I rmember having to try on the standard issue Mickey Mouse gas mask and the smell and feeling of claustrophobia but it was never used thankfully.

On 14 June 1943, an early-morning air raid on Grimsby by the Luftwaffe dropped several 1,000 kg bombs, 6,000 incendiary bombs and more than 3,000 anti personnel bombs called 'butterfly bombs' so called because on landing they had two wings which opened up. They were not designed to explode on impact but would explode when picked up. Obviously the hope was that they would cause maximum civilian casualties. I can remember walking to school with my mother along pavements which had been cleared by bomb disposal

experts and cordoned off, so that we were warned not to pick anything up, and not to stray outside the ropes. Presumably they were dropped in other towns as well, but the government imposed a news blackout and the Germans assuming that they had been a failure did not thankfully repeat the experiment. Ninety-nine people died that night (During the war the name of Grimsby was replaced in censored newspapers by a simple reference to 'an East Coast town').

This was probably the last straw for my Mother and with my Father away in the army she decided that we would return to South Wales to the small mining village we came from where life would be much more secure. She was right, and my only experience of bombing there was when she took me with her to Cardiff to visit a dentist for a tooth removal. As was the habit during the war they removed all her teeth at the same time – for which she never forgave them. On our way back to the train station Cardiff suffered a raid, and I remember dodging from shop door to shop door to escape the shrapnel. I don't remember being particularly frightened and we made it safely home. When quite rare air raid sirens sounded (and even now if that noise sounds again on a T.V. broadcast or radio play, many of us still feel that frisson of fear at the noise), we were ordered to leave school and go straight home, not to return until the All Clear sounded. You can imagine what happened, At the first wail of the alert we children trooped happily off – not home but to play up the mountain. When the All Clear sounded there was a standard response the next day. 'Sorry Miss, I didn't hear the All Clear;'. The Teachers realised very quickly that any air raid warning signalled the end of the school day !

Food was a constant preoccupation although being surrounded by hill farms we managed to acquire extra eggs and occasionally other food items. Somebody only has to say 'isinglass' and I can immediately smell that faintly unpleasant smell coming from the crock of surplus eggs in the pantry. Another special hate was the everlasting 'lamb broth'. My memory of it is of a very watery pan with a very few fresh vegetables and extremely small slivers of braised mutton. I hate it to this day ! I was often sent to collect the basic rations from the local grocers shop and you could only collect them from the shop you were registered with. Even now when I am getting ready to re stock my kitchen shelves I still recite the mantra which is burned into my memory: Butter; lard, marga, sugar, tea, eggs, cheese. bacon , matches. (Although I haven't bought matches for years.)

Another vivid memory is of the day that the evacuees arrived. Only now can I imagine the fear of those London children uprooted to a strange country where people spoke with funny accents, and being taken into a small living room where lots of people stared at you. 'Our' refugee- a boy of about 8- was quite quickly taken back home by his parents when they decided that the threat of London bombing was not as bad as the no doubt tearful letters home. I think that was quite common as I don't remember any of them at school or play.

Eventually the war ended and I can remember the inevitable Welsh singing which went on for hours as we celebrated in the street. When it was eventually decided that we return to Grimsby that brought another memory too. During the war years the coal pit canteens were allowed extra rations and as one of my relatives worked in the local colliery canteen she made us sandwiches for the long train journey back to Lincolnshire.. Real ham and real butter. I still never eat a ham sandwich with anything but 'real; butter. That was a stand out moment, as was the night when I was awoken to be shown the first banana brought in a local shop. I was not impressed. We returned to a Grimsby much different than when we had left it; many bomb sites and ruined houses.

A sad footnote is that in the local Grimsby cemetery were a number of gravestones of young German Soldiers killed in a strange country It reminded me that on our mountain in the Rhymney Valley where my Grandfather took me for walks, there was a gravestone (now in the National Museum of Wales) dedicated long ago to a very young Roman Soldier who had lost his life fighting in a far off strange land – nothing changes

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