

RECOLLECTIONS OF A TEENAGER

G.A. Wilson - 14th May, 1999

INTRODUCTION

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I remember, in the middle of one of the first air raids, walking rapidly down our long garden to the Anderson shelter in the middle of the night, trying not to run.

German bombers were overhead, the occasional bomb was whistling down and exploding round about, searchlights wandered around the sky, flashes split the darkness, A.A. (Anti-Aircraft) batteries for miles around were banging away and the A.A. shells were exploding overhead like enormous fireworks. My main memory is of shrapnel from the shells whizzing and whirring as it rained down and thumped into the garden round about and rattled on the roofs of the houses.

I suppose one would say "all hell broke loose". It didn't really and I suppose, on reflection, there was no great possibility of being hit by shrapnel, which seemed at the time to be the most immediate danger. Old soldiers from the first war would think it quite commonplace, but, to a teenager new to war, it certainly seemed like being under fire.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

I have often thought how interesting it would have been if my parents, grand-parents and older generations had left some record of what life had been like for them during their life-times. I wondered if it would be of any interest to succeeding generations if I put down a few of my own very ordinary experiences during the Second World War.

I was just 17 when war broke out, working for the S.W.S. Co. (Shropshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire Electric Power Company) as an apprentice, having left school at 14.

Just before war broke out I was working in the electrical contracting department and we had the job of installing air raid sirens on top of high structures and poles. Fire Stations were favourite locations with their tall hose drying towers and there was always someone there to switch the sirens on and off. We lost some of our electricians who went off to install power supplies to new aerodromes which were being built around the Midlands. Later in the war all the apprentices in the year ahead of mine (they were all of 19 years old) were sent off to ports around the coast to supervise the installation of cables around ships which, when energised, neutralised the inherent magnetic field of the steel ship and prevented it triggering magnetic mines when it got close. We were having tremendous losses of shipping bringing in food and supplies because of magnetic mines. Being in the Power Co. we were quite familiar with handling heavy cables. My year of apprentices quite thought we would be sent for but they managed without us.

Early in the war I was working at Stourport Power Station. I was there when the painters arrived to camouflage the buildings and chimneys. The chimneys must have been 400 or 500 feet high. The steeple-jacks fixed up their own ladders until they reached

the top when they let down cradles on ropes. On these they swung around the chimneys to do their painting. They used to walk around the top of the chimneys with nothing to hold on to and we thought this was incredible. We used to go up on the roof to watch them. Occasionally, R.A.F. planes from nearby airfields would fly low around the chimneys and we could see the pilots quite plainly. Probably quite against regulations.

One day I was in the Control Room in the Company Control Centre at Halesowen, when we heard a plane approaching rapidly. We rushed to the windows as a German plane flew over the Control Centre literally at roof top height and the black crosses were plain to see. It would have had to climb quite appreciably to clear the hill behind the Control Centre. If it had dropped just one bomb on the Control Centre, it could have disrupted the electricity supply throughout the West Midlands, bringing all the factories to a standstill. It was unusual to see a German plane inland in the Midlands in daylight hours and we thought it would be shot down before it got back to the Continent.

At the time of Dunkirk, I was working in the Company workshops at Bromsgrove. It was said that the local hospital was full of wounded soldiers who had been rescued from the beaches. In fact, it was said that hospitals everywhere were full of wounded. This sort of information was passed by word of mouth. There was no T.V. of course and we had no morning papers, although they were probably available. Wireless was in its infancy and I can rarely remember listening to it. I remember hearing Prime Minister Chamberlain announcing we were at war on the Sunday in 1939. I once heard the traitor, "Lord Haw Haw" speaking from "Gairmany". I heard some of Churchill's speeches; "We shall never surrender".

Even though there was a shortage of official information, we often knew about quite secret occurrences. For example, when, later in the war, the Americans lost about 600 men while practising off Slapton Sands for the D-Day landings when German E-boats got amongst them at night, it was supposed to be kept top secret and details were only released quite recently, about 50 years later. In fact, we in the Army all knew about it within days of it happening.

Barrage Balloons

All cities sprouted barrage balloons all around as some protection against enemy aircraft. They were silver in colour and much larger than those you see used for advertising these days.

One night I saw one shot down in flames. Masses of flames flared up as it drifted slowly down through the clouds, pulled down by the weight of its steel mooring rope.

It was not unknown for a balloon to break away from its mooring when it would drift across country, dragging its mooring rope and bringing down power lines. When I was with the overhead lines department, we went out into the country one day to repair lines after such an incident. We made our base at the balloon site that had lost its balloon and I remember they had been showered with incendiary bombs the night before. I remember seeing the R.A.F. uniforms that had been half burnt in the fires.

My mother worked at various factories during the war. (She had also worked in a munitions factory - Kynochs - during the

first war when she was a teenager.) She also belonged to the W.V.S. (Women's Voluntary Service). She kept a few chickens at the end of the garden so that we had a few eggs which were otherwise unobtainable.

When I was out in the country with the overhead line gang, I was sometimes able to do some gleaning after the harvest had been taken in and was able to find enough ears of corn to fill the bicycle saddlebag to give to my mother to feed the chickens.

Air Raids

In my part of the world we did not have concentrated air raids such as those suffered by the East End of London, Coventry, Portsmouth, etc., where whole areas were flattened. Our air raids tended to be sporadic, but some memorable incidents might be of interest.

The most violent incident took place one night, starting with the sound of machine guns overhead as a night fighter fired at a German bomber. The tracer bullets could be seen quite plainly. The enemy plane was shot down, the crew baled out and was captured by the Home Guard.

The stricken plane went away then did a U-turn and came back making the most screaming crescendo of noise as it came down, sounding as if it was aimed at you personally. It came down about 100 yards away in the next street in a straight line for our house. As the plane swept through the row of houses, everything exploded in a great, roaring fireball of flames as the fuel tanks and ammunition went up.

I forget how many people were killed, but I remember one family (less the father) were sheltering under the stairs, which was said to be the safest part of the house. When the plane struck they were completely obliterated. The father was standing in an entry over the road with other men and survived, but the poor man lost his family, his home and everything. We ran round the corner to help, but there was nothing we could do. It was dreadful to see people's homes and possessions going up in flames.

There was a sequel next day when some small boys came along our road with a small wooden wheelbarrow with a very large, heavy, metal propeller they had removed from the crash site. The propeller had 3 or 4 blades, I forget which. Each blade was bent in the middle at right angles caused by hitting the ground while still spinning. The little boys decided it was too heavy for them so we carried it into our garden and put it behind the shed. Over the years it became covered with garden rubbish and is probably still there to this day.

I noticed you get the Doppler effect when a bomb is coming down. If it seems to be coming straight for you, the whistling increases in pitch until it seems to pass over, when the whistle pitch decreases rapidly until it thumps into the ground.

One night, when there was a full moon, a German bomber passed over. I was surprised at how small it appeared and how slowly it seemed to move. When it passed over the moon, the A.A. batteries for miles around opened up and dozens of round, white shell bursts appeared all around the moon.

Another night, when I was fire watching in the street by myself, a bomber dropped a parachute flare directly overhead. It took some minutes to drift slowly down and lit up everywhere like bright sunshine. I quite expected a stick of bombs to come down but nothing happened.

One night, instead of ordinary bombs, we had a number of parachute mines dropped around. I believe these were actually sea mines (with detonating horns). Coming down comparatively slowly, when they hit the ground the blast went sideways instead of causing a crater.

In the morning I was going to work on my bike and went past the site of one of these explosions. There was devastation for hundreds of yards round, with roofs blown off and windows and doors blown in. I was impressed with the speed with which the local authorities were already getting on with temporary repairs, putting tarpaulins over houses and so on.

One night an unexploded bomb landed near to my uncle's house not far away and they came to stay with us for a night or two, until the Army Bomb Disposal people had taken it away.

I remember seeing the Bomb Disposal people at work in the centre of Birmingham, assisted by German prisoners of war, which I thought was rather strange.

It was common practice for Italian prisoners of war to be employed on farms. I believe quite a number of them married English girls and stayed on in England after the war.

The people who lived next door to my other cousins had a direct hit on their Anderson air raid shelter. Parts of the corrugated iron were blown over the house, across the road, over the next row of houses and into the cemetery beyond. Fortunately, the family were in the house and not in the garden shelter.

In our part of the world we had mainly Anderson type air raid shelters. These were delivered as corrugated iron sections, curved at the top, which we assembled and half buried in the garden. The top was then covered over with earth and whatever else you had. The entrance at one end was protected by a wall of sand bags. Inside, they were quite tiny, about 6ft. x 5ft. They were cold and damp; ours was running with condensation, not helped because we found an underground spring ran at the bottom of our gardens. Ours had makeshift bunks, but I only remember sleeping down there once. At one time, I used to sleep on a campbed downstairs in the house, as this was reckoned to be safer than sleeping upstairs, but I doubt it.

For a few years I went to night school 3 or 4 times per week, until day release classes came in. Night school finished early at 9 pm. because of the air raids and I remember walking home listening to the enemy bombers overhead. The German bombers could be easily identified because of the distinctive fluctuating noise of their twin engines out of synch. British planes had a steady note. If the air raid warning had sounded, you were supposed to go to a public shelter if away from home, but I never did and I don't think anybody else did either. It wasn't very practical because you had to get home and get some sleep. Sometimes the "all clear" didn't sound until you were going to work in the morning.

Into Services

If our house had been bombed or relatives killed, no doubt I would have felt differently but, as it was ^{it was} all exciting, I wanted to be part of it and was anxious to get into the Army, preferably in R.E.M.E. in charge of an L.A.D. (Light Aid Detachment). These were fairly close to the sharp end, being attached to fighting units such as an Infantry Brigade, Armoured Brigade or artillery batteries.

Actually, it was not until after the war that I got my L.A.D., when I was called up (being in the Z Reserve) at the time of the Suez crisis and was given an L.A.D. attached to an artillery field regiment of 25 pounders (shells, that is). We hauled these guns around the firing ranges of the Brecon Beacons for 2 weeks and I don't think it stopped raining, night or day. However, I digress.

My father said he didn't mind me going into the Army, so long as I didn't go into the infantry. He was in the infantry in the trenches for 4 years during the First World War, so he knew what he was talking about. During the Second World War he was a Sergeant in the St. John's Ambulance Brigade and drove ambulances all through the war (all voluntary of course) in addition to his job at the factory.

I couldn't join until I had finished my exams and got some qualifications. This was a most frustrating period, but it turned out to be just as well in the long run.

While I was waiting, I joined the A.F.S. (Auxiliary Fire Service) as a despatch rider since I had a motor bike. After a

while, I decided that if I was going into the Army, it would be better experience if I joined the Home Guard. The Home Guard is now the subject of some amusement because of "Dad's Army", but I found the Home Guard training to be virtually the same as the initial Army training in many respects and was very useful.

I also did fire watching duties at work in a large, un-manned electricity sub-station and occasionally at Technical College and also took my turn in the street. The idea was, we were to raise the alarm and put out any incendiary (phosphorous) bombs with buckets of sand and stirrup pumps. All this was voluntary and un-paid, although I think I did get a tiny amount from the Company for sleeping at the sub-station, perhaps 2s/6p (12½p). These little bits of responsibility were good training for the automatic acceptance of responsibility later in life.

When I finished my exams, I was directed to join the A.I.D. (Aircraft Inspection Department) much to my disgust, at £20 per week. This was riches, bearing in mind I was getting about £1 per week and my father, who was foreman electrician, never earned more than about £4 per week all through the war. By this time I was desperate to get into the Army before the war was over. This desperation to get into the Army may seem strange now, but in those days it was total war, you were either in or out, everything was black and white and not the shades of grey and uncertainties we have today. And teenagers never think they are going to come to any harm.

I fought the A.I.D. as I didn't want to work in an aircraft factory and there followed frustrating months of writing letters and attending Selection Boards. First there was an interview and I.Q. test at the Recruiting Centre, Dale End, Birmingham.

Then the University Selection Board at Birmingham University - all day leadership testing. Followed by an all day W.O.S.B. (War Office Selection Board) at Golders Green, London. You wouldn't think it would be so difficult.

About this time, teenagers without qualifications were being called up and put down the coal mines because the country was short of coal. These were the so called "Bevin Boys", named after Bevin, one of the war time ministers. They all wanted to go into the Services and the last thing they wanted was to go down the mines. The stupid part was that the miners had been called up and put into the Army and now these young lads had to go down the mines. I felt desperately sorry for them because I knew how I would have felt if I had been put down the mines.

However, I got into the Army and did initial training with the Rifle Brigade. Then followed pre-O.C.T.U. (Officer Cadet Training Unit) at Wrotham in Kent. Then O.C.T.U. at Repton, Derby. At any time one could be R.T.U.'d (Returned To Unit) if found to be unsuitable in any way and people did mysteriously disappear. I thoroughly enjoyed the training, have never been so fit before or since, and I must say we were pretty good soldiers at the end of it all.

Eventually, I was commissioned into the R.E.M.E. (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) when I was 21. We recovered and repaired all the Army's vehicles, guns and equipment. During the training we drove everything and fired everything and they never tired of telling us we were soldiers first and engineers second.

At Weybourne Firing Camp, near Sheringham, Norfolk, we fired

all kinds of A.A. guns. It was firing one of these that made me permanently deaf. From memory, I think it was a Naval 5.5 in. modified for A.A. with a 4.5 in. barrel.

It was on this gun that another incident occurred. The gun was mounted on a raised platform with the barrel pointing to the sky. Those of us not actually firing the gun at the time were in the gunpit handling the ammunition. One man could just about carry one shell. When loading, for some reason the shell slid backwards out of the breech and fell vertically about 12 feet, in slow motion it seemed, hit the floor of the gunpit almost vertically, balanced there for ever then slowly toppled over. We breathed again and the Gunnery Instructor was visibly shaken. If the detonator at the base of the shell had hit a stone or something on the floor of the gunpit and exploded, none of us would have survived, particularly with all the shells stacked around the sandbag walls. It was not uncommon for injuries and fatalities to occur during training as we always used live ammunition on exercises, etc. and accidents will happen.

It was about October, 1944 that Wyn came into my life. I was on a gun course at Stoke. Wyn was working at the large munitions factory at Swynnerton, near Stone. It was not very pleasant in the factory and the explosive powder made all the girls' skin bright yellow. After a time they were short of typists and when they found Wyn and her friend could type, they were transferred into the offices, which was much better. We met one evening and arranged to meet again an evening or two later, but she didn't turn up. It transpired that she was unable to get away from the factory. She couldn't contact me and was unable to trace me, although Mr. Dexter went around all the Army units in the area, inquiring for Lieutenant Wilson, without success. Meanwhile, I didn't even know her name.

To add to the confusion, she called herself Anne at that time because she absolutely hated her name, Winifred. The only piece of information I had was that she was billeted on a Mrs. Dexter at Trent Vale. I went to the Public Library to see if I could find anybody of that name at Trent Vale. Fortunately, I was successful and wrote to Anne, c/o the Dexters, and so made contact again. Otherwise it would have been one more fleeting, wartime acquaintanceship instead of a lifetime of love and companionship.

It was while at Stoke that I heard the largest explosion ever to have taken place in Britain. I was in *an* Army hut attending a lecture on mines and explosives, when we heard a tremendous explosion which rattled the place. We heard later it was an accident at a munitions factory not far away. I read recently that the crater is still there.

Later on, I was stationed at Croydon at the time when V2 rocket bombs were hitting London. One night, around Christmas time, Wyn and I were at her house at Raynes Park; she must have been on Christmas leave from the factory. About midnight, we heard a tremendous bang some distance away. We heard later a V2 had hit the Cafe de Paris in Leicester Square, with terrible casualties to Service men and women. V2 rockets were the forerunners of today's space rockets, designed by the German scientist, von Braun, who was hustled off to America as the war finished.

My cousin, Frank, was a few years older than me and was the nearest relative I had to an older brother. Before the war, he did a lot of cycling and camping and, about the time war broke out, he contracted T.B. I believe this was because of drinking untreated milk from farms which I had no doubt done myself before the days of universal T.B. testing of herds. He gradually became more frail and was eventually bed-ridden.

When I was on embarkation leave, I went to see him for the last time. He said that he wished that he and others like him with T.B. could be in the forefront of landings, such as on D-Day in Normandy, as it didn't matter if they got killed as they were going to die anyway. I remember plainly sitting at the side of the bed downstairs when he said this and thinking what a brave thing it was to say. Comparing our two situations, I was aware of how terribly unfair life was. There was no cure for T.B. in those days. Frank was about 23 or 24 when he died. Harry, his younger brother, scattered his ashes on the top of Cader Idris.

I went overseas for 2½ years in R.E.M.E. and, for a large part of this time, was seconded to the Indian Army.

So this brings to an end these sketchy reminiscences of life for a teenager in wartime Britain. Without the drama, horror and hardships suffered by many people during the war, they perhaps give an idea of some aspects of life and fairly wide experiences. I count myself lucky.

Life is all a matter of luck. Luck in dodging the bombs. Luck in dodging the germs. Luck in being born in the right country, with good parents, in meeting the right people and having good children to live your life with.