

The Days of Their Lives

Recollections of the Second World War, as told in their own words, by men and women currently living in the Grantham area.

Collected and edited by Matthew Graham, Harlaxton College, spring, 2006

Introduction

The Second World War changed forever the 20th century as well as the lives of millions upon millions of people. My idea behind this project was to collect some of the memories of that time; memories of the home front as well as the fighting front, and also of British experiences with Americans. I believe the enclosed recollections, both the every day and the extraordinary, bring to life a seemingly lost time that I hope will never be lost.

I am grateful to the men and women who responded to my query. And I hope at some further date this will see a wider audience.

Matthew Graham, Harlaxton College, spring 2006

The Children

A Near Miss

It was the evening of February 4th, 1941. The warning siren had wailed its stomach turning sound and the three of us were under the stairs of our home. The “cubby – hole” had been reinforced by thick supporting timber and my six year old sister and ten year old me were sheltering in there with our mother. My father – a part time special constable was out on patrol in our area and mother had set the table for his hot cup of tea during his 10:00 pm break. Our aged brown and white dog, Vic, was asleep on the carpet in front of the dying embers of the living room fire.

Then suddenly there was the roar of a low flying aircraft quite quickly followed by the loudest bang I ever expect to hear.

The back door burst open. The soot came down the chimney all over the hearth, rug and Vic! The next door neighbours came hurtling in through the wide open door (the light was still on) confirming they were alright, were we? We were as mother and I emerged from under the stairs just as father dashed in to confirm we had survived, as he had. The window and display of our local grocery store had deposited the contents and glass all over him as he was taking cover. He was nearer the bombs than we were.

Mother organized we two children in tidying up a bit. The front door was damaged – the ornamental glass was broken, several ceilings had collapsed and the back door needed repair, and soot was all over the place – the floor, the carpet and the table setting mother had set for father’s 10pm break, and a black Vic shook himself!

The incident I recall most vividly, other than the tremendous explosion of twelve bombs exploding about a hundred yards away, was mother, seeing that the sugar bowl containing our sugar ration was covered with soot, just took the spoon and stirred it all in. It has to last us for the rest of the week!

Seven people were killed in Grantham that night and over twenty seriously hurt, but not by these bombs. They all fell in an orchard.

Malcolm G. Knapp

Anecdote

I was just a child of eight and was visiting my grandmother who lived close to a large American army base.

Standing at her front garden gate one day, some children, about the same age as I, were passing, each carrying a large orange. Today this would not be remarked on but at that time in the war, in England, an orange was an exotic item. None were ever available in English shops. Although, of course, I could recognize an orange, I could not recall what one tasted like. At that point one of the children said to me that “the yanks” at the camp were giving oranges to children.

I raced to the camp as fast as my legs would carry me and was given this lovely orange by a young and smiling American soldier.

Racing back to my grandmother’s I showed her my prize. We sat together in her kitchen and shared that lovely piece of fruit.

A few days later the American soldiers left the camp and a few days after that came D Day.

The point of this little unimportant story is, I remember that soldier’s face vividly, young and smiling, as he gave me that orange. His kindness has been with me every day since, so, his memory is with me constantly.

I wonder if he went back to his home and lived a long and happy life or if he lays somewhere in Europe.

In any case, he is a very alive memory to me and will be until my time.

Lionel Gibbs

Excerpts

School for me was new and exciting. We carried metal helmets to school and they were kept in our desks. Mine had a large dent and I pretended that I had been hit by shrapnel but it was really my father's before he entered the Navy and apparently he had dropped it accidentally from a roof during an air raid!

With frequent visits to the school bomb shelter during air raids each child carried a gas mask and a box of "emergency rations" which included water (or lemonade if you were lucky), nuts and sweets, for use only in emergencies! Many of the class hoped the air raids would "spin out" long enough to justify opening our bags (and missing our lessons). On one occasion German support fighters flew so low across the school that we could see the pilots immediately above us. In our innocence we thought it very exciting.

Unfortunately about this time our dog, Paddy, (of German descent no less) suffered badly during the bombing. She dug holes in the garden and went missing on several occasions. She survived until the end of the war but died shortly after ... I was very upset. She had been my friend for many years.

Later into the war the Germans gave up daylight bombing, and to a great extent night raids, and concentrated on sending over self-navigated bombs nicknamed "Doodle Bugs". Because of this my father's sister, Aunt Elsie, who lived in Crewe (well north of London) offered to accommodate me "for the time being", so I was "evacuated".

My aunt and uncle found me a place at the local junior school, within walking distance, and I stayed there a whole school year. At first I was joked about my southern accent (considered posh). Much to my embarrassment the class teacher insisted on using me to correct their northern accents but I was eventually forgiven when they found out that I could play a good game of football (and I also had my own football –they were very scarce by then!) In fact, at weekends the local boys got wind of this and came knocking at my aunt's door to see if "Cockney" could come out to play football – which meant – "can we play with Ken's football"?

Kenneth Staines

The End of Childhood

The war passed very peacefully for me! My father was Headmaster of the boy's school in a small mining village in Derbyshire. In spite of being in the middle of a very important coalfield and on the edge of Sherwood Forest (which we all knew was sheltering a large amount of armaments) we were never attacked. In fact, if anything, the war was good for the villages. At night my sister and I could hear the machinery rumbling underground as the miners worked through the night. No one seemed to complain and everyone got on with their work.

The cinema was packed every evening as people wanted to watch the Pâté News Bulletin (as well as the films). Concerts were arranged, the brass band played on and there was even a dance organized for the nearby American soldiers in the Underground Ballroom of Welbeck Abbey.

My three uncles came through the war safely, having driven tanks and army lorries in the desert with Montgomery and then up through Italy. Sadly though one found his wife no longer wanted him when he arrived home.

One of my grandfathers grew most of the vegetables we needed on our allotment, and the other grandfather was a pig breeder and butcher so we had rather too much very salty pork!

My brother was born in 1940 and I have memories of mother trying to fit him into a big gas mask. In fact we all had gas masks and looking back it is sad to think that everyone feared we should all be gassed.

The only taste of war we had was on the night the nearby city of Sheffield was bombed. My sister was ill at the time and the very brave doctor who was treating her arrived as we were cowering under the stairs. He had driven without lights while German bombers roared overhead. We could see the flames in the distance. Next day my grandfather went with the mine's rescue team to help, but he said later that they were unable to save a lot of people buried under fallen masonry.

There were a few Italian prisoners in a camp in the village. They came to the cinema and concerts and seemed quite happy! Towards the end of the war they went home to be replaced by German prisoners. One lovely summer day I set out to visit a friend in the next village, a three mile walk and I was asked by a German prisoner in his orange uniform if I could show him the short cut across the fields. This I duly did and then he thanked me politely and set off on his errand. Father said he had probably been sent to pick up spare parts for machines at the pit!

The saddest part of the war for me was when we had to endure the pictures coming out of Belsen and other concentration camps. As a young girl I had led a sheltered life, with regular visits to Sunday school. The discovery that there was so much evil in the world came as a very nasty shock and caused me to realize that the church had been lying to me. I never really forgave it. My childhood ended then.

Margaret Staines (Nee Sharpe)

A Grand Lot

The Americans were a grand lot of guys. Every Christmas they went around the local villages, picked up all the local children, and took them back to camp for a smashing party with oranges, ice cream, and candy. Some of the kids had never seen such a spread. You see, all the food was rationed with just a few ounces of meat, butter, and sugar. I remember when my sister was twenty one there was no way my mother could find enough ingredients to make a cake, but lo and behold the camp cooks had got enough together to make a most beautiful iced birthday cake.

Several of the American lads married local girls and took them back to the states. At one time they used to come back pretty regular on vacation. One fellow we knew as Johnny used to come back and he said the George and Dragon pub was the only place on earth where a chap could get a proper game of darts.

I had just finished school when the lads came. I was working on a local farm with what we called "land army girls". You see a lot of men had gone off to war so these girls came in to help gather the crops. However one girl was going out with a corporal and every dinner time he would bring her a box of candy, ciggis and sometimes a pair of nylon stockings, which by the way, were as precious as gold.

After the lads left for Europe the village was like a ghost town.

Hugo Meads

To Evacuate Or Not. That Was The Question

We lived in Fulham and my most vivid memory of World War Two is of sitting on a train along with my sister, a label tied to our coat lapels, and crying our eyes out because we had just been told by our Mum that we were going to be sent to stay with someone we didn't know and who lived somewhere in Wales a place we had only ever heard of in a geography lesson and to make matters worse having to leave Mum behind, Dad already being in the Army.

Just before the train was ready to pull out a little old lady came striding up to our carriage and said, "You've not been evacuated anywhere, you're coming to stay with me and you Granddad!" This lady turned out to be my grandmother who lived in Kent.

We went to live with her and my granddad for the rest of the war. One of the days I can remember quite clearly is when my Dad came to visit us because he was on leave from the army and we went for a walk up Robin Hood Lane on Bluebell Hill. As we walked along I could see some aeroplanes weaving about overhead, some leaving vapour trails behind them. Suddenly my Dad pushed me to the ground and threw himself over me, and as he did so I heard the sound of an aeroplane flying just overhead. When my Dad did let me get up I was crying and upset but he just brushed me down and then showed me where the bullets from the plane had just missed both of us. They couldn't have been more than a couple of inches away from where we had been on the ground.

At one stage we had to go to school on the back of a lorry because the bus depot had been badly bombed and if the sirens sounded when you were at school you were told to stop what you were doing and make your way to the air raid shelters that were in the school grounds. I can hear the teacher's voice even now saying, "Walk slowly, do not run, someone may get hurt."

My Mum worked in an ammunition factory during the war putting the gun powder into the cartridge cases and this caused her skin to turn a light yellow. "Are you turning into a Chinese lady?" I asked when she visited us at grandmas. But as we all know now the colour went away when she stopped working there.

Another thing that I will always remember is the terrible noise that was made by the anti-aircraft guns that were mounted on the back of a big lorry. It used to move from place to place where it was thought to be needed most. When ever it opened fire it would almost make you jump out of your skin.

Sheila Howe (nee Gray)

At War – Village Style

My father was the head forester at Belton house on the outskirts of Grantham during the 1939-45 war and so we lived in the centre of the grounds belonging to the big house. As the war progressed I saw my eldest brother leave home to join the Grenadier Guards and my dad become a Special Constable helping to keep the police service at full strength whilst the regular men served in the armed services.

We used to go to school in Syston, which is about a mile away and is the next village to us, and so we were able to walk to and from school even going home for dinner.

Because we were near to Barkston Heath Aerodrome which was subject to bombing we were taught to sit under the teacher's table when a raid was on. I can remember feeling the ground move under me as the bombs were dropped close by.

I don't think the war made a lot of difference to us in villages, we still played in the fields, we never went short of many things, and there was always some one close by that you could barter with if you were short of some thing.

Although I can remember two evacuees from London being billeted at our house. I felt really sorry for them when I saw them standing on our front doorstep, they looked quite mucky compared to us, but then again I did not know that they had come a long way and only had the clothes that they stood up in. They looked lost and sorry for themselves as they stood in front of us with their gasmasks slung over their shoulders with a label in their lapels showing their names and where they had come from. It didn't help matters when it was found out that the evacuees had got nits in their hair but my Mum soon got rid of them with some lotion and horrible smelling soap. My mum also did some dress making and knitting and generally helped all the children in the village.

Later on during the war I went to The National School and Girls Central School in Grantham. I caught the bus in and out staying for dinner at the school and carrying my gas mask at all times. Because Grantham was subject to more air raids, at these schools you were taught to sit under your school desk during air raids until the all clear was given.

Pauline Green (nee Barr)

Memories of a Wartime Childhood

I was born in one of a row of cottages in front of what was known as The Steam Laundry on Belton Lane in Grantham in Lincolnshire. The steam room in the laundry had a steel roof so whenever the sirens went off warning of an impending air raid the whole of the work force plus the mothers and their children from the adjoining cottages crowded into this one room. Later on in the war we were issued with a big steel shelter that was erected in the front room of the house, called a Morrison shelter. The whole family would squeeze in if necessary.

There were quite a few Army and RAF troops stationed nearby and I can remember quite clearly that every Thursday during the war one of the big rooms in the factory was cleared so that dances could be held. We weren't allowed in so we would peep in through the open door where we could see the troops and the local girls dancing together. My father used to attend every one so he could keep an eye on my four sisters! As with other fathers he was very strict and no boyfriends were allowed to come to the house without being vetted by him first.

I played in the Ruston and Hornsby band throughout the war; this was a local engineering firm at which I started apprenticeship when I left school at 14 years of age. During air raids we kept watch on the factory roofs. We were to take note of where the bombs dropped. This was relayed to the firm's fire brigade who would attend to the incident. We used to be paid 2/6d for doing this and got a free meal if we had to stop over night so there was no shortage of volunteers if someone couldn't do their designated night. We were instructed on what to do if an incendiary bomb dropped close by and we practised the routine many times but when some high explosive bombs were dropped in a pub yard close by going off with an awful loud bang we all ran off in the opposite direction.

I had a newspaper round at night after school and work with another one to do on a Sunday morning but I had to hand over the money I earned to my mother. "I need the money to help feed the family," she used to say. I used to take a newspaper to the Lion Lodge which is the back entrance to Belton Park and at least once a week they would give me a rabbit or a pheasant to take home to help feed the family.

Dad used to keep pigs on a nearby allotment and I can remember going with him to the market, taking a pig to sell, the pig being transported in a steel wheelbarrow.

The other things I remember are delivering goods to customers for a local drapers firm using one of those old fashioned bikes with a basket on the front. The other that comes to mind is helping out at St Wulframs church when the organ was being tuned. I got paid 6d a day and allowed to be off school. Can't be bad, can it?

Philip Green

The Austerity Years

Rationing didn't finally finish until the early 1950s. All the women made an effort and economy became a cult. We were often reminded that everything brought into the country from overseas put our sailors at risk. So we did our utmost. When I later read "The Little House on the Prairie" series some of the almost desperate economies practiced then reminded me of my mother's War Effort. She was very good at keeping the home fires burning.

A lively imagination helped, in both food and clothes rationing. She made probably hundreds of charming Black Mammy dolls – no political correctness against them in those days – for charities like the Red Cross, from ends of blackout fabric, their colourful dresses from scraps of cut-down and refashioned clothes: also soft toy elephants from the relatively unworn legs of derelict trousers. Later, when the lights went up again, she decorated many attractive peasant skirts, tea aprons and cushions made from the discarded black curtains. We were delighted to see these curtains go but the fabric was still good and all the articles sold rapidly from Sale of Work stalls. She unknitted any tired woollens that would unknit, to make what we called "Blitzrugs", cheerful patchwork blankets much in demand as raffle prizes. We knitted those by candlelight in the air raid shelter as a distraction from bombing. My niece still treasures one although it is frighteningly thin now.

My mother never bought food on the black market and was scornful of those who did. It must have been a temptation. However, we did have other ways for making more of the distinctly pitiful rations. One egg and a rasher of bacon a week was normal for most of my childhood. Other rations were a few ounces of sugar, tea, butter, fat, and meat, for a week that was, not for each day. There was extra milk for children and we had plenty of ordinary vegetables and good bread. The National Loaf was rather grey because unbleached but made from unadulterated and decent flour. Most people near us grew vegetables as ours was a suburban area with gardens although people in inner London had not this advantage. Runner beans, marrows and tomatoes all grew happily over the air raid shelters.

Rations were also eked out by School Dinners, Works Canteens and British Restaurants. The meals were not as bad as many people like to make out, just a limited menu of simple wholesome if rather stodgy food, although now old standbys like Sea Pie or Spotted Dick are coming back as fashionable recipes. The idea was that communal eating saved on both food and fuel even if you couldn't have exactly what you wanted. The schemes were subsidised so all dishes were very inexpensive.

My father and I were the hunter/gatherers. He could catch a rabbit or two while on fire watching duty and the headquarters of his Home Guard unit was based in a large old house that had a big walled vegetable garden, now neglected. It yielded soft fruits, quinces and medlars, dark morello cherries, asparagus and other things people were unsure about using. For one thing most needed sugar. This didn't stop my mother. She cooked our food mainly unsweetened and all the sugar she saved was used to barter with the neighbours for things she knew were more nourishing for us – liver or other offal, tinned corned beef, perhaps a few eggs. She also hoarded our tea ration for exchange and we drank water as "better for our skin."

My duty was mostly scrumping – the taking of fruit by youngsters was not called theft unless you took unreasonable amounts. In the back alleys of our area were many overhanging branches of apple, pear and plum trees, great swathes of large sweet blackberry and loganberry briars, escaped raspberry canes and abandoned clumps of rhubarb. My mother could use it all. Each year I went into the old Polo field now a market garden, after the crops were harvested, and gleaned; potatoes, tomatoes or sprouts considered too small to be worthwhile, lettuces too bolted, cabbages, leeks and onions too trampled. Once large tomatoes that had not ripened before the frost were left and these reddened up beautifully in a drawer. We had them at Christmas that year. I went onto the common too. We still had a lot of open space around London then – it was useful for absorbing stray bombs. I gathered mushrooms, rosehips and tiny tasty wild blackberries there, in season. I know now there was much more we could have used, nettles for instance or wild cress.

So my mother kept an interesting table despite the Fuhrer and taught me a lot about economical catering, in fact sometimes my husband feels obliged to point out that the war is over. But Bread Pudding made to mother's recipe is still a favourite in our house. She had at least 20 uses for stale bread and she made soup from almost anything. I can taste her Green Tomato Gravy, her Corned Beef Hash or her Summer Pudding yet; they were delicious always, not just with the sauce of hunger.

Rose Bakker

A Childhood Memory of the Second World War

We lived deep in the slums of Bethnal Green in London's East End. Money was tight, food was scarce and holidays non-existent. Any extras came courtesy of the Salvation Army from their Citadel on the street corner. One yearly highlight of course was the hop picking in Kent; this was the East Enders' only "holiday" and they enjoyed it. Travelling there and back in bone shaking trucks, singing all the old cockney songs. Accommodation was a wooden hut and the bed was a straw palliasse. The toilets were in another hut and primitive to say the least.

Life was hard and the opportunities to escape the depressing poverty were extremely rare. The only things that seemed to thrive were the rats and they were everywhere. The Wire Haired Fox Terrier was reckoned to be the only answer to the rat and any man with such a dog was much respected and sought after. He would come on request with a couple of mates and everybody would get excited. The sewer covers would come off, there would be much activity and the dog would stand by the open sewer alert and ready but I never saw them catch anything, there was always talk of other successes and rats endowed with human cunning.

Prior to the outbreak of the war we had visits from Oswald Moseley and his Black shirts. His meetings usually finished with a punch up and blood on the pavement but it was the source of much excitement.

The bulk of the housing where I lived were tenement buildings, about four stories high. The stairway was very narrow and seemed to go through other people's flats; I can't remember any landings. It was impossible to move furniture, either in or out, via those narrow stairs. So when people moved, as they quite often did, the windows came out, ropes and pulleys would appear, and everything came and went through the window.

Funerals were very important in the East End. It didn't matter how poor you were; they feared the pauper's grave. So regardless of their poverty, some would put a little money aside over many years to ensure a good "send off." It was a strange sight to see a magnificent hearse drawn by four jet black horses. Immaculate and gleaming complete with tall, black plumes, collecting the coffin in such a deprived area.

Another yearly event that was held in high regard was Bonfire Night. Great piles of cast off furniture would appear on the streets and in the cul-de-sacs ready for their blazing bonfires on the 5th of November. Many roads in those days were paved with wooden blocks and covered with tar, the tar would melt and burn, as would the blocks. Great flagstones would burst with the heat and go off like rifle shots. There were very few fireworks, mostly bangers but the great blazing bonfires seemed excitement enough. It was never long before the clang of bells heralded the arrival of the fire brigade. They doused the fires with hoses, but they were quickly restarted as soon as the fire engines went.

On Sunday 3rd of September 1939, when I had just turned ten, war was declared on Germany and things started to happen. London was expected to be the first and immediate target for the German bombers and the children were to be evacuated.

With my six year old brother holding one hand and clutching a small paper parcel, containing all our worldly possessions, in the other, we assembled in the street. Carrying a gas mask in a cardboard box and identified with a luggage label tied to our lapel with a piece of string, we boarded a bus that would take us to the station bound for I didn't know where and even if they told me, I'd have been no wiser.

I can't remember the train journey although it would have been my first on a steam train. On arrival at Norwich station we had a packed lunch and a drink. There were a large number of children to find homes for and it took a very long time. The ladies were slow to finalize their choices. Girls were the favourite, one or two. A boy on his own or maybe with a girl. Any combination was acceptable – except two boys. We waited until it was dusk and my brother and I were the only two children left on the platform. It felt very lonely.

Just when I thought we would have to go back to Bethnal Green a lady stepped forward and said she would take us. The memory of that moment will always remain vivid in my mind. Even a naïve ten year old could sense the drama. Nobody wanted to take two boys but neither did they want to split us. It needed a miracle to achieve a happy ending and it arrived in the form of Mrs. Murton. It was the beginning of a relationship which continued until she died in 1969.

My little brother and I were bundled into a bus and we set off for Mrs. Murton's cottage in Ranworth. A journey of about 8 miles. It was dark when we arrived and we saw very little of our new home. We slept on feather mattresses, incredibly soft and deep. I had no idea what to expect the following morning but what I saw eclipsed anything my limited imagination could have conjured up. Looking out of the bedroom window, there was nothing but fields and trees. The only sign of human inhabitation was a farm, on the other side of an adjacent field. Downstairs surprise followed surprise. An ignorant cockney lad whose short life amid the concrete, bricks and grime of London's East End, had difficulty taking it all in.

The Murtons lived in one of a pair of semi-detached thatched cottages. It seemed to be situated in the middle of a large field. Access was along a narrow green lane about a quarter of a mile from the road. The cottage with its huge garden full of fruit, vegetables, flowers and dozens of chickens in a large pen. It was everyone's dream of a country cottage. But there was no gas, electricity, and no mains water or mains sewage and of course there were no shops.

Mr. Murton was a Master Thatcher, a big man with a big sense of humour. He was steeped in country ways and had the skills of a countryman. He was strict but fair, sometimes more strict than fair. Mrs Murton was a small, good natured woman. She could cook anything on her wood burning range and in the wall oven, including bread with flour delivered by the sack full. Eggs were stored in enamelled buckets full of isinglass for winter use. The Murtons lived and worked in close harmony with nature and the seasons. It was really the only way to live successfully in remote rural communities, and the Murtons were good at it.

My brother was even more ignorant of country ways than I. He'd never seen a garden full of vegetables and flowers actually growing out of the ground. He found two cockerels fighting, eye to eye. Their little heads bobbing up and down in unison, the

funniest thing he'd ever seen. "Can I dig an ole?" was his first question, repeated many times.

The village school was at Woodbastwick, about two miles away, down narrow country lanes. There were no buses or cycles, we had to walk, rain or shine, with our gas masks in their cardboard boxes and a tin carrying our lunch. Woodbastwick was a very pretty village; it had a pond and a wonderful old fashioned blacksmith. I never tired of watching him work. Horses were still the main source of power on Norfolk farms in the first years of the war. There was a covered seating area and communal well on the village green. This was a place where the villagers could meet and gossip.

The school was very small and couldn't accommodate the extra evacuees. So we had to use a little thatched cottage. It was a real gem of a place, like something out of a storybook. We seemed to spend most of our time making puppets with paper-mache and other similar things. Very enjoyable but hardly the grounding for an academic career.

Despite the lack of education our time in Norfolk, with the Murtons was a truly wonderful experience. They set standards of behaviour and principles, which I have tried to maintain.

Bill Cross

A Lasting Friendship

I was just seven years of age when like many other children in the small market town of Kingsbridge in Devon I was anxious to meet some Americans and hopefully receive some sweets, biscuits and gum which they appeared to hand out so freely.

My friend Ronnie and I were enjoying the excitement of watching our normally quiet town suddenly transformed into a Mecca for servicemen of all nationalities. Shops, cinemas and public houses became crowded and the town throbbed with life.

Ronnie and I struck up a friendship with a small group of American Shore Patrols positioned on the quay, a jeep stood alongside of them. They were all friendly and didn't seem to resent two small children trailing after them. After giving us some coveted gum they asked our names and ages. That small group were always referred to in the future as "our Americans" and we returned to visit them time and time again.

One of our friends had a strange name that neither Ronnie or I could remember for quite some time, but eventually we did. This man Franchini was someone who would play a large part in my future. "Our Americans" enriched our lives not only for the gifts they gave to us but also for giving us both the opportunity to ride in a jeep. We felt akin to royalty perched in the back of this escorted by two of our American friends. On occasions they took us along to the Red Cross canteen and supplied us with drinks and sugar coated doughnuts.

One evening when we arrived one of them told me he had a special present for me. This proved to be a stuffed monkey, two tone brown with a china head, its hat was similar to our friend's but had a ribbon trailing down its back. None of them could have realized how special this gift was, for due to the fact that I came from a family of eleven and my father had been killed during the early part of the war, there had never been surplus money to buy presents of any description. I cherished that special toy for many years.

Franchini was the most talkative of the group and invariably asked about our families and our schooling. He stressed the importance of a good education. One day he told me that Lillian, his wife, had sent me a parcel. I had no idea of what the parcel would contain and he never enlightened me.

Finally it arrived and the contents were unbelievable. Beautiful dresses trimmed with lace, skirts, two-tone shoes, nightwear and much more. Each of my six sisters peered at each article hoping that perhaps there would be something that would fit them, however the majority of the clothes fitted both me and the next eldest, in time as we out grew them the two youngest would also reap the benefit.

My mother took the first opportunity to thank Franchini and his wife for their generous gift. He asked if she would select an outfit for me to be photographed in and this he would send to his wife back in Adams, Massachusetts. How well I remember the navy crushed velvet skirt, white blouse with a lace collar, red blazer with shiny buttons and a tartan hat with ribbons trailing down the back. My sister recalls me wearing the hat for weeks afterwards.

The photograph showed me, Ronnie and Franchini standing in front of one of the jeeps. How I wished the colour film had been available at that time for how much a photograph that would have been.

When the war ended our town slowly reverted to its original state, and life returned to normal once more. How empty the streets now appeared and how sad many people were, for many friendships had been formed, some that would last a lifetime.

I believed that once Franchini had returned home I would hear no more of him but further parcels arrived from both him and his wife and I discovered that his name in fact was John, and that Franchini was his surname, however I continued referring to him by the name I had grown used to. Many photographs were exchanged and my mother bought small gifts for them at Christmas.

From that friendship another followed for their niece Peggy Lou began to write also. She was slightly older than me but we shared experiences of our school and the area in which we lived.

I was about thirteen when I heard from Lillian that Franchini had died. I was aware that he had been unwell but not that it was as serious as it obviously was. I was devastated for he had not only been the father that I had never known but also a great friend and mentor. It was him that encouraged me to work hard at school and secure good grades. This I did and was the only member of our family to pass the entrance examination into a college. I hoped he would have been proud of me.

Kathy Fisher

April 25, 1942

I was seven years old when war was declared. I lived in the beautiful city of Bath with my three aunts, my uncle, and my two brothers, one aged eight and the other eleven. My parents lived in Africa where my father worked for the British government – but the Gold Coast was not considered a healthy climate for English children.

The most frightening time of the war came for me on the night of April 25th, 1942 when the Germans decided to attack Bath in retribution for British attacks on Lubeck and Rostock. Prior to this there had been the odd night when bombs were jettisoned by crippled German planes but there was very little damage. 163 German bombers were sent to attack Bath. Huddled together in our cellar, we began to hear many heavy explosions and the rumble of many planes. Every now and then everything shook. This lasted from 11pm till about 12:30. The All Clear sounded at 1:20 am but three hours later the Alert sounded again as another 40 German planes arrived to deliver another raid – not only did they drop bombs but they machine gunned the streets as well.

On the morning of the 26th we were relieved to find the house still standing – a few broken windows and a broken chimney, was the extent of the damage. We could see from our windows buildings burning down in the city and the air was full of dust and smoke. We were not allowed to go outside or to church. We heard many people walking up the hill past our house on Sunday evening, planning to spend the night out in the country side. We stayed put. So it was another noisy and frightening night. Altogether about 400 people were killed and many more injured. 329 homes and shops were destroyed and another 732 had to be demolished.

On the third night many more people left the city, mainly on foot, but the raids didn't come again. It was some weeks before we were allowed to go outside our garden – there were many dreadful sights immediately after the raids, and some danger from unexploded bombs and unsafe buildings.

To this day I don't really like loud bangs, but we live quite near where the Battle of Britain Flight are based, and I still recognize the friendly sound of the Lancaster bomber, the Spitfire and the Hurricane fighters, as they fly over on their way to give displays.

Margaret Ashley

Snatches of Memories

I was nine when war was declared. There had been talk of war for some months and a gas mask had been issued to all the population – a considerable feat of manufacture and supply. I remember excitedly standing in line to have one fitted in a local school hall. It was to be carried at all times and sat on our desks at school in a cardboard box with a string to hang it round the neck. Teachers were not keen on them as we had to have practice sessions at putting them on swiftly. We quickly learned a farting noise could be made exciting great laughter.

I lived at Oxford. My father was the ambulance driver. There was only one. Goodness knows what would have happened if the Germans bombed us. But they didn't. For some reason Oxford was spared. In the whole war only three bombs were dropped on an airfield ten miles away. Amazing because a mile from where we lived Spitfire aircraft were being made as were munitions. It was rumoured that Oxford and its dreaming spires was to be home of Goering, the German Field Marshall, when the Germans won the war. People pointed out a mansion, Headington Hill Hall, as his planned abode. I cycled past it daily on my way to the grammar school.

My mother had a brief spell in the munitions factory but was soon judged not deft enough for the assembly line as was dismissed. After much pestering I persuaded her instead to let us have an evacuee. One duly arrived, a ginger haired lad older than me. It was a great disappointment to me as he seemed unable to play my sort of games. After a couple of months his mother arrived and took him back to the East End of London. I have no idea if he survived the blitz.

My father was also a member of Saint John Ambulance Brigade and, as soon as he could, persuaded me to become a SJAB Cadet. This became a great asset and a love of theatre grew inside me. The cadets helped the senior members on duty and we stood at the back of the stalls and saw all the shows. The New Theatre remained open during all the war years to help morale. My father and I also worked backstage on some shows changing the light colours and acting as extras in plays. My first paid performance was with the Doyle Carte Opera Company's Mikado. I carried on the axe behind Koko and can remember the audience's laughter to this day. So the war was not all darkness and gloom.

What about schoolwork you may ask? I did very little. What I loved was acting in school plays in which I had leading parts. I did not realise the education in drama I was getting from the New Theatre. This led to me being awarded a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Art at the age of 17.

Paul Groves

The Young Adults

V2

In 1943 at the age of 16, I lived on the outskirts of Dover and was an apprentice in the building trade. I joined the Royal Observer Corps part time and was sent to "Charlie 4." This particular morning on my way to go on duty at 4am it was just becoming light. Suddenly a Messerschmitt 109 with a yellow nosecone pancaked across the road about 40 yards in front of me. I was, of course, most surprised. I stopped and on seeing me, the German pilot jumped out of his cockpit and threw his pistol down in front of me. I have often wondered if I was the youngest person to take the surrender of a German officer.

On the Observer post we were supplied with marvellous U.S. naval binoculars on a tripod. Early one morning, looking through them and sweeping along the enemy coastline, I saw what looked like a projectile, dark in colour, flames coming out of one end, leaving a vapour trail and going in a large arch. I took an angle and immediately informed my centre at Maidstone, which was the headquarters for No. 1 Group. They had no idea what it could be. Later on we were told it was a V2 Rocket launched from Holland and landing in London. It was the first to be reported in the U.K. The time of sighting was approximately 5:30am. On that day I was on duty with a friend who was also 16 years old. His name was Norman Liewellyn.

John Barber

Office Work

One day I was cycling to London – ten miles—and was stopped on the south side of Westminster Bridge by a policeman directing traffic. The sirens had gone off and the policeman suddenly yelled for us to get down. There was nowhere to take cover and I was in the gutter with a soldier on the pavement at my side. The soldier was trying to unfasten his tin helmet which was strapped to his chest and not being very successful he managed to loosen it and place it on my head. Suddenly there was an explosion and I glanced up to see the sky full of black objects. I thought the building had been hit and we were going to be hit by the debris until I realized it was a flock of pigeons taking flight.

When we recovered ourselves and our bicycles we continued on our way but I discovered Metropole buildings had been hit the bomb going through about six floors and luckily falling to pieces on the way. The nose cap imbedded itself into a very solid office chair only vacated a few minutes before. The only casualty was a man who had been drawn by suction from the third to the second floor breaking his leg.

After the Battle of Britain personal was changed at the airport and my husband was to be stationed there. When he arrived in London he really thought he was in the front line. We met at a dance in September and married the following April, three months later he was sent to Iceland where he was a lot safer than I was!

Vera Pexton

Snippets of Memory

I was home for my lunch and saw the plane so arrogantly positioning itself for a bombing run – Mr. Andrews from the top of the cul-de-sac was killed – getting his cycle out of the cycle stand. This was the beginning of incidents that we learned to accept, planes coming back in the early hours struggling to get back to their bases, a light on the horizon showing Sheffield being bombed.

Very early into the next week we heard the march of feet along the avenue. Looking out we saw double ranks of soldiers, newly dispatched from Aldershot looking tired and apprehensive. So many were assigned to each house. We were told that they were self sufficient and only need a Sunday lunch as they would soon be on their way overseas. So my mom looked after eight hungry soldiers. Somehow we all ate and kept from under one another's feet. They left us very quickly. I think they may have gone to Dunkirk. We did not hear from them again although some bits of information about them filtered through later.

Eric – became a Captain

Ernie – died when he dived into three feet of water and broke his neck

John – saved a man from drowning near the Trent Bridge during one of his visits home.

Coffee – married a local girl

Taffy – borrowed Grandma's suitcase to go on leave and did not return it.

Bill – died in some early landing

Sunday Morning Duty

Mr. Blanchard asked me to do the duty in the telegraph room that Sunday morning as there was no one else he could call on. He said "You'll close at 11am." All I had to do was open the teleprinter to Nottingham and wait for closing at 11. We had four phone switchboards and at 9:05 am all the lights started. It turned out sadly that they were from RAF Syerston-Winthorpe and Ossington. Between them they had lost 8 planes on operations equalling 56 crew and 56 priority telegrams to relatives. I could only use two fingers on the printer but I told Nottingham to hold – took the telegrams down – remembering how careful one had to be with the service numbers and names, particularly in those circumstances, then I had to send them on the printer. I finished by 1:00pm and Nottingham said although painfully slow I had not made any errors. I thought when cycling home that they would be just about delivering the bad news to the unsuspecting families. The overseer said the next day that I had done well but I said, "counter or sorting, but not that duty again."

The Corn Exchange

6d to get in, 2d for the cloakroom, and we were in to a place of light and music where we could forget the war going on for so long.

We danced to a three piece band, piano, saxophone and drums, and by halftime it was heaving with marvellous dancers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Poland, France, the U.S. and many places I cannot remember.

If you had 1p to spare you could go up the creaking stairs taking your cup of tea with you, but most stayed on the dance floor swapping partners and watching to see who else came through the door. The floor was surprisingly good but I never really felt safe on those rickety stairs.

Aircrews used to come in together and newcomers watched to see whether they were good dancers. Crews who didn't appear had "bought it" and no further mention of them was ever made.

June Marron

World War II in Trawlers

I was born in Grantham in 1918 and so in 1939 I was aware that a war with Germany was imminent. I joined the navy in January 1940 and for my basic training I was sent to H.M.S. Royal Arthur.

After a suitable amount of training I was sent to the docks at Grimsby and from there I was drafted to "His Majesty's Trawler Elbury." Along with a couple of other trawlers we were ordered to take some barges to Poole in Dorset. Then we helped to sweep some of the areas around Dover, Sheerness and Felixstowe. After sweeping for mines we also had to lay Dan Buoys that showed our ships where the channel had been swept. Not an easy task at the best of times and very tricky in bad weather in the North Sea or English Channel.

We came into Lowestoft Harbour one Christmas Day and as usual in harbour we settled down to have our dinner and open parcels and letters that had been waiting for us. As I read one of my letters my best mate opened a parcel from his mum.

"Look at this," he said.

He showed me a pot basin that had smashed in transit with a Christmas pudding in it. "That's no good," he said as he threw it out the porthole.

He then started to read a letter from his mum in which she told him to be careful whilst eating the pudding because she had put some silver sixpences, wrapped in greaseproof paper, in the pudding!

"There will be enough to take you and your mate for a drink at the local pub," the letter explained.

With that my mate started to take most of his clothes off.

"What are you doing," I asked?

He said, "I'm going to tie a rope round my waist and go over the side to get that pudding and you will hold the end of the rope for me!"

He noticed some time before that there was only about 6 feet of water under the ship. He did just as he said and after he had a shower and got changed we went ashore and had a good time.

I can remember one incident when there were three trawlers sweeping for mines in the Wash near Boston. There was also a paddle steamer bringing in supplies following us wanting to go into Boston docks. Three German fighter planes came into sight and started to bomb the paddle steamer and although we opened fire on the planes at the third try they hit the steamer in the middle of the ship and it immediately started to sink. We went in to see if we could rescue anyone and I found this chap with his hands wrapped very, very tightly round a 5 gallon drum that he had found floating by. He turned out to be South African who had come over to England to fight on our side. He later gave me his cap as a keepsake. When we were being attacked my job was to keep the gun supplied with ammunition at all times. Having used the ammunition close by I leaned over to get the shells stacked in front of the gun and whilst in this position the gun was fired right over my head. This damaged my ears and to this day 63 years later I am still very deaf.

Harry Gray

On the Sea and On the Land

I joined the navy as soon as I could in January 1941. After training I was drafted onboard the cruiser H.H.S. Frobisher. We had hardly settled in when the ship was ordered to sail up to Greenock on the east coast of Scotland where we found out that we were to be part of the escort to a convoy of troops and material bound for Durban in South Africa. As we made our way to Durban we were called to action stations at dawn and dusk but we got there without mishaps.

We were supposed to be scheduled to return to the U.K. as soon as the convoy reached South Africa but instead we were detailed to go to the assistance of a French destroyer that had been badly damaged in a typhoon. On the instructions of the powers that be we ended up towing the destroyer 1200 miles to Diego Suarez in India. After that the ship was detailed to stay in the area of the Indian Ocean and for the next two years we sailed as escort to lots of other convoys sailing between India and Ceylon.

We were sent back to the U.K. in February 1944. We were told that we were getting ready for something big. This turned out to be the D-Day landings. I have never seen so many ships and men in one place in my life. Once the landings started we were on continuous watch, so when you weren't shooting at targets called up for you by the Command Ship you slept fully clothed at your action station which in my case was the 4.5 gun. The ship was sent back into Portsmouth with some of the troops who had been injured while landing on the beaches. Once they had been loaded into the waiting ambulances we were sent straight back to our D-Day station defending the landings.

An officer came round and told us that because the D-Day landings had been a success the army needed more men to help with the land battle, and as a consequence of this half of the ship's company would be immediately transferred into the army. There were no volunteers asked for just a list of names of the persons to be transferred and mine was one of those on the list. I was sent up to Carlisle in Cumbria for further training, army style, and spent until 1946 serving with the Lincolnshire Regiment in Germany. I later found out that my best mate who stayed on the ship was demobbed 18 months earlier than me. Now that's what I call a green rub!!

Albert Matsell B.E.M.

Life on Flat Bottomed Ships

I had been a member of the local Grammar school army cadet corps before the war started so to some extent I was used to a life that involved discipline and order but when I was called up for military service in 1943 I decided to join the Royal Navy.

I was commissioned as an officer in May 1944 and shortly after D-Day I was sent to join the crew of a flat bottomed ship what was to be used for carrying troops onto the beaches during the D-Day landings. This was based at South End. These ships were known as LSTs and not to be confused with another craft that carried tanks and was called an LCT. At this time the craft didn't have a name it was simply known as ship No. 11 of the 4th Flotilla.

After a little bit of training we were sent to the D-Day beaches to take off any injured men ferrying them back for further treatment in England. Attached to almost every ship was a huge barrage balloon, this was supposed to deter enemy planes from attacking you, sometimes it did, sometimes it didn't. Anyway, as the captain brought the ship along side the Mulberry Harbour where the injured men would be brought on board, the wire attaching the balloon to the ship got snagged up on the steel works of the harbour. Before anyone could make a move to free the wire it broke and the last anyone saw of the balloon was as it drifted over the beaches and further into France. Everything in the navy has to be signed for and as I was the person who had signed for that balloon I was more than a little worried as to how much per week I would have to pay the navy to recompense them for their loss. Later the captain told me not to worry about it because he had already written it off as lost in action.

After a few days of ferrying injured British and American troops we were given orders to take on some German prisoners of war so some of the crew were issued with small arms and detailed to watch over them during transportation. As we prepared to leave harbour the weather in the English Channel blew up very rough indeed and a journey that normally took about three hours took over eight. When we eventually got to Portsmouth and opened up the troop deck we saw that nearly all the Germans had been violently sick, and I was given the job of making sure that they cleaned out the area very thoroughly using hose pipes and brushes. They didn't look much like conquering heroes to me at that particular time.

Frank Parker

Can You Hear Something Ticking?

I joined the armed forces as soon as I could get away from the discipline that was in place at home. I joined the RAF and soon settled into the military routine and became intrigued enough to volunteer to join a new branch just being formed called the RAF Bomb Disposal Unit.

We spent a few weeks having the usual lectures explaining how to defuse all the know devices. (At the same time the Germans were working on ideas of how to make things more dangerous to defuse.) We then practiced on dismantling dummy devices for a short time before being sent out to a unit that could be operating anywhere in any part of the country.

The tools of the trade you soon found out were very basic; you were issued with a shovel, a pickaxe, and six empty sand bags. With these items plus your note book with the information on how to deal with unexploded devices you were let loose on the unsuspecting public! Most of the incidents you were called out to were unexploded bombs and all you would see at the scene would be a hole, which was sometimes quite deep. If you were lucky, on peering down the hole you might just see part of the crumpled fins that were on top of the bomb. You were then expected to use your pickaxe and shovel to dig around the bomb thus exposing the trigger. One bit of advice I was given was to place the 6 sandbags, by now filled with sand or garden earth, on top of the device and then send for a more experienced expert. Now these were few and far between so eventually you would decide to put your theory into practice. Often I would use the wheel barrow to take the defused device away somewhere safer for detonation, using the filled sandbags as a cushion.

Because of the long hours on duty you often went to sleep in the back of the lorry taking you to the next device which could be miles away.

Because I was smaller, (they used to call me Tich) and thinner than a lot of my bomb disposal mates I was picked out and asked to volunteer to fly out to Malta and then be put aboard the tanker Ohio which was the last tanker afloat in Operation Pedestal and which they were hoping to relieve Malta. I was told that luckily the bomb was on the upper deck of the tanker but the down side was that a German bomber had crashed on top of the bomb and only someone like me could get into the space left underneath. I eventually managed to disarm the bomb and after spending a few hours in Malta was flown back to England.

Towards the end of the war we used to defuse devices and then move on to the next one, the device being taken out of the hole it was resting in by a gang of airmen in a truck that had a crane on it. A sergeant and I were defusing some bombs in a wood near to Lakenheath, the American air base. Having taken out the triggers we were going to move onto the next job. The hole that the bomb was in was quite deep so to get out of the hole the sergeant suggested that he would stand on my shoulders and then pull himself out after which he would help me out with the tools. Usually the blokes doing the bomb removal came along after we had moved on but this time they drove up and started to drop the hook of the crane. I heard the sergeant shout, "Don't touch that." I heard a loud bang and the next thing that I remember is waking up in the

hospital. I was told that my hearing had been damaged and that the sergeant was dead.
I was discharged from the RAF shortly afterwards.

Ron Howe

Escape From a German Prison Camp, January 1945

Jack Ford and I were captured in Norway in April 1940 and thrown in to the Mullagarten Jail in Oslo with the words "you won't be here for long as you'll be shot in the morning."

In fact we were flown to Germany 23 days later and spent time in Moosburg. Thence to Laufen, the first British Army Officers Camp, then to Wulzburg, then moved to two Internment Camps, one at Tost (1941) the other at Krutzburg (1943).

Our general attitude was one of defiance and we were always in trouble one way or the other. We had a failed escape from Tost in 1942, but we also were part of a successful escape team where Jack and I operated a plank system by which two others got out and were never re-captured. They crawled out on a plank which I held out, grabbing a rope which was tied to an upstairs window bar and twisted around the plank end so when I pushed it out the end was held up. The rope continued along the plank. One by one they crawled out, grabbed the rope which Jack controlled by threading it around a radiator tap. As he feed the rope out they were lowered on to the flat wall top from which they jumped out. I then immediately pulled the plank back, ready for the second man. From the ground there was a sentry pathway and the wall had barbed wire curling inwards at the top, but not on the flat top. After this the escape material was hidden in a loft, but found, and I was accused of being the owner – hotly refuted, of course -- but was given 10 days bread and water in a pretty nasty rat infested dungeon. Jack was removed to another camp because it was thought we were a bad influence on each other as well as others. In this, whilst denied, they were of course right. On release I too was removed and sent to Krutzburg.

To my surprise Jack joined me there in December 1944. We were sophisticated prisoners by this time and we were operating a radio (under floorboards) and picking up London nightly. In early January 1945 I picked up a report that the Russians had started what they called the 'last winter offensive'. After four days I reported to Jack that according to my reckoning they would be where we where in 16 – 17 days. Days later we were all pulled out on a special parade and roll call and addressed by the Camp Commandant saying, "Tomorrow the whole camp is to be marched westward. What you cannot carry of your belongings you will have to leave. You will all be ready to move at 8am. Any one attempting to move out of line or to disobey orders will be shot without trial. Parade dismiss."

Jack turned to me and said, "This is it, C."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We'll go tonight."

"Don't let's be mad, we know which way the war is going, we've already done 4 3/4 years – surely we can see it through now."

"You're yellow."

"You know damn well I'm not."

"You're the brains, C., put something together and we'll go tonight."

Our camp was not a barrack camp, it had been an asylum – the morgue, a small building on its own was used as a reading room. It was around 16 by 10 feet with a

long table and bench seating along each side. There was in the middle of the back wall a narrow, short 3foot wide passage which was bricked up at the end. My plan was to put a double locker along the back wall across the bricked up passage. The gamble was that the German search party would not know of this passage, so when they entered it was obvious no one was in the room as one could see immediately no one could hide under the table. A small stool was placed behind the locker within the passage area. I could sit on the stool with Jack sitting between my legs with his legs under the stool. When he felt cramp, I would stand up, lift him up and we would change places turning inch by inch – it was that cramped. We went down around 18 pm, my memory says it was January 11, a Wednesday (?) In the locker we placed a bucket – you can guess for what reason – and a large jug full of drinking water. (In reflection these should have been our downfall.) We heard the camp move out the next morning. At around 6 pm we heard shouting, and almost immediately thereafter the search party came in. They could see instantly no one was there. Two came over to the locker, opened it and banged on the back. I was sitting on the stool and could feel the pressure of the knock on my arm. We were holding hands tightly together each saying, through our hands, “don’t even breathe.” Then I heard one say, “there’s no one in here.”

We were three days behind that locker. On Saturday and Sunday we could hear all hell let loose as the Russians over ran the township. A shell landed outside and blew the window in. We decided to break out – into an empty town. We broke into empty houses to find food. Every Russian soldier was trigger happy, so it was extremely dangerous to walk about in daylight. Ultimately – a couple of weeks later – we reported to the Russian military and managed to convince them we were English.

Our route from the camp in eastern Poland was by train to Krakow, then another eight days on a train ending up in Odessa where we boarded a British vessel, The Highland Princess, which had docked to return Russian war prisoners back to their country. Jack and I were finally free after 1742 days.

Odessa, Istanbul, Port Said, Naples, Gibraltar, Liverpool, London, Home.

After over 5 years away I was only 23 on my return, although it is now over 60 years -
- a lifetime ago!

A postscript. In 1940 Jack was keen for us to have a reunion after the war. I was against this, but he pressurized me so we made a pact to meet outside the Strand Place Hotel in London “twenty years from tonight.” We did and he paid me an enormous compliment that night.

“C., with you I’d do it all again.”

Anonymous

Kenneth Staines, c: 1940, with father



Kenneth Staines, c: 1943 and Paddy



Kathy Fisher with Franchini and Ronnie

