

Memories of war 1939 –1945

Sept 3rd 1940 - Outbreak – mother sits talking to neighbours of front steps of 6 Lynsted Lane PM Chamberlain's solemn tones from the radio "We are at war with Germany".

The "phoney war" – September 1939 to the spring of 1940. Nothing much appears to happen on the "home front". We had an young evacuee billeted on us. I welcomed him, and enjoyed having a playmate at home. He seemed OK, but after about two weeks, his parents (from the London area) came down to see how he was getting on. This upset him so much, that they decided to take him back with them.

Gas masks – tested at school. They smelled strongly of rubber ! A van came round, and we all had to get in to the back, and put on our gas masks. The van was closed off, and some form of (harmless) gas let loose in it. All I remember, was the HEAT. With all us kinds crammed into a small van, it got unbelievably hot !. I nearly got to the point where I just wanted to tear off my mask, regardless of the consequences. Fortunately, the test came to an end at that point, and we staggered thankfully into the open air.

Rationing – dried egg and "snook". It is perhaps surprising, with hindsight, that we couldn't get fresh eggs – after all, we were living in a small village in the Kent countryside. I remember the ration books, and in particular, the dried eggs and a fish known as "snook" – from South Africa I believe. My parents always made sure I didn't go short of anything important. Our rations were being brought in by merchant ships constantly braving the U boat menace.

1940 – Battle of Britain – see separate memories

Evacuees – at Lynsted school. Discipline at school. During the blitz a large number of young "townies" were suddenly uprooted and sent to live in the country, and attend our primary school. They were a tough lot, often intimidating and even bullying their "country cousins". They brought with them two of their own schoolmasters, who had their own ideas of discipline. Prior to their arrival, the cane was used quite rarely, only by the village headmaster, and always given on the hands. I thought this was brutal – glad it never happened to me. The newcomers used the cane quite freely, usually the offender had to walk up to the teacher's raised platform, and bend over his desk, for (usually) six, or more "of the best" across their bottoms. It looked – and sounded, very painful. Offenders usually made their way back to their seats howling and holding tightly the punished areas ! Not all though – some of the real toughies seemed to revel in this form of punishment, even displaying their marks to an admiring crowd behind the toilets during break time !

I was never aware that i was considered "brighter" than my school mates. However, the Headmaster decided that I was "Grammar School material", and, so I found myself, together with my parents, in George's study, together with one of the school governors, for an interview.

The governor turned out to be something to do with the RAF, so my interest in aircraft led to a friendly discussion. I also did well at one or two (very elementary, I thought,) "intelligent tests".

Soon after, a letter arrived, informing my parents that I had been successful, and was to start at the school that autumn. Of course, my parents were delighted. I was kitted out with uniform etc., and soon started at my new school, not without nerves and trepidation!.

For the next five years, I caught the No26 bus from Teynham, to Sittingbourne, getting off at the post office, then walking up through the alleyway past the Bull Inn, to arrive at the Grammar School. In the evening, I caught the bus outside Burton's to return to Teynham. As my father was a bus driver, I got a cheap season ticket, but that was about all the financial help my parents did get. I cost them a lot of money, in the next few years, but they never complained.

The first year was largely PT and games, which suited me fine. I made a few friends, Nigel Baker in particular, but also Peter Bennett, Roy (?) Pemburton, and a rather odd boy whose surname was "Gunter" or something like that.

Generally I got on well with the staff. Like all the others, I had a crush on Miss Moore, the Latin teacher, but didn't repay her efforts to teach me Latin. I particularly liked Mr Ashby, Mr Goff, the art teacher, and Mr Beer, the English Teacher. didn't much like Mr Comber (Maths) and definitely disliked Mr Davies. who taught chemistry. Also, of course, Mr Horlock, the gym master - a very likeable and eccentric character! He didn't like Norman, and insisted on calling me "Eric" - my second name. Actually, I myself prefer it to Norman.

I was pleased to "repay" Mr Beer for his pleasant and easy going teaching, when the School Cert / matric results were announced. I think just about everybody in the class had passed, but Mr Beer announced this, and added, in perhaps a slightly surprised tone, "and Wigg got a distinction". My only one! All the others were "credits" except for French - a failure! Trouble is, I always hated that idiotic "Toto", and his family, who appeared in our textbook "En Route".

American soldiers, baseball and road accident. American soldiers were based near Lynsted, and brought their (to us) strange game of baseball. They played it on the area of grass tennis courts just outside the village. Their "larger than life" personalities were fascinating to us village lads. One day, I witnessed a road accident when two of them on a motor bike hit a stray sheep crossing the road (killing it) and doing some damage to themselves in the process.

My cousin and ROC. My cousin Ron, a few years older than me, and living at Whitstable, served in the Royal Observer Corps. His house had aircraft recognition charts all over the walls, and I quickly became an expert at this. So much so, that I won a public competition set up by the ROC involving recognising aircraft from a large selection of models. I also became a keen "aero modeller" myself.

Hurricane, low flying at Whitstable. While staying at Whitstable, I often escaped to climb up Duncan Downs, the higher ground overlooking the town. Once, sitting there to admire the view, I saw a Hurricane fighter flash low across the landscape in front of, and actually below the my level . I envied the pilot his fun.

Fun with bangers ! A friend of my cousin had got hold of some of the bangers used in military training. They were much better than ordinary fireworks !

Father – home guard service

The blitz – air raids

Spitfire at Detling – I think it was the spring of 1942, when I spent the best part of a lovely warm spring day, with a schoolfriend. We both had small bicycles, and we had decided to cycle to Detling, to observe the aircraft at the famous Battle of Britain fighter base. It was about ten miles, probably took us a couple of hours, passing through the villages of Doddington, Wormshill, and along the old Pilgrim's way route to Detling. Strangely, for it was still wartime, security seemed very relaxed. Nobody stopped two little boys pressing their noses to the perimeter fence to watch the activities of the air base. Actually, it seemed a quiet day, with not much flying going on. We lay in the grass, ate some sandwiches our mothers had packed for us, and indulged in aircraft recognition.

There didn't seem to be much activity going on, although in the distance an aircraft engine was running on an Anson aircraft standing near a hanger. Several fighter planes were partly visible, but largely concealed behind "blast walls" – probably a relic of the pounding that this airfield had suffered in the Battle of Britain.

After a short time another Anson appeared, gliding in almost silently over our heads to touch down and taxi towards the hangers. Then, nothing else for at least half an hour. Then, another engine started, this time I recognised the note of a "Merlin", and, sure enough, a

Spitfire appeared, taxiing around the perimeter track, towards us. I think it was a Mark V. It had the studs of four cannon (but not the barrels) projecting from the wings.

The pilot had both the canopy open and the side panel down, and waved cheerfully to us, as he approached. Almost opposite to us, he turned his aircraft into the wind, and started to go through his pre-flight checks. Control surfaces and flaps were moved,, and checked, then the engine, which had been idling over, was suddenly opened up with a great thunder of sound. A gale came blowing into our faces, sending the trees behind us into a frenzied dance. The Spitfire seemed to be like a great beast, vibrating, straining against its brakes, just wanting to GO. Then, the engine roar died to almost a whisper as the pilot tried the "slow running".

Now, he was ready. I was at a slight angle to the tail of the aeroplane, and saw the pilot raise the side flap of the cockpit. Then, engine opened up full, brakes released, and the fighter accelerated away from me, getting airborne in an amazingly short run, wheels tucking up and the plane going into a steep climbing turn, that showed off perfectly its elegant lines.

We watched it out of sight, among the scattering of white clouds. At that moment, I decided that I wanted to be a RAF pilot !

(Of course, it didn't work out that way !)

Bismarck sinking

The drama of the Bismarck – its sinking of the battleship Hood, with huge loss of life, and the subsequent pursuit by naval forces, of Bismarck, as it ran for the safety of the Channel ports, filled the newspapers and radio news for several days. I remember coming into the house, just as the announcer started with "The Bismarck has been sunk". My mother immediately switched off the news, saying that "that was all she had been waiting to hear.". In fact, the Bismarck very nearly made it to safety. Only a lucky strike near its rudders and propellers by a torpedo from a Swordfish aircraft launched from "Ark Royal" slowed it down and enabled the main fleet to catch up and destroy it.

At the time a poem appeared in a newspaper – must have been written just before the end of the drama.

THE HUNTING OF THE BISMARCK

The winged eyes of the navy watched, the news came from the sky:
"In Norway's fretted coast today the ships of Hitler lie."
From cloud to cloud the message ran, the watching eagles soared,
"The Bismarck and Prinz Eugen have sailed from Bergenfiord.
From cloud to cloud the answer flashed, and war was on the sea,
With "Find the foe and sink the foe, wherever they may be."
The dogs of war were off the leash in snow and mist and gale,
And Suffolk found and Norfolk found and finding held the trail.
The mist came down upon the sea and day withdrew her light;
The quarry blessed the cloak of dark, the hunter cursed the night.
But when the red and level sun the sky began to burn
The Suffolk and the Norfolk hung like shadows at the stern.
The night rolled back across the sea. And to the west there stood
Twice twenty thousand tons of steel ... the vengeance of the Hood.
And by her side The Prince of Wales, the hounds were giving tongue
Their voices spoke across the waves, the old one and the young.
Through thirteen miles of quaking air the shells screamed on their
Track The Bismarck showed a blazing wound and flung her fury back;
She hurled her fury at the Hood and split her to the keel
And thirteen hundred men went down within a tomb of steel.
And like a cur that snape and flees the Bismarck with her tail,
But Suffolk clung and Norfolk clung, relentless to the trail.
The watching eagles saw her slow, though safety was at stake,
And oil, the lifeblood of a ship, was spilling in her wake.
They ran the quarry through the day, till evening dulled the sky
And guns upon the Prince of Wales drew once a brief reply
And from the north, the west, the south, new hunters joined the
chase, The vow was in their hearts to find, and sink, or find disgrace.

Victorious put her hawks aloft to battle in the dark,
And one torpedo deadly true smashed home upon its' mark.
But mist came down upon the sea to mock the passing night,
And Suffolk tracked and Norfolk sought a quarry out of sight.
King George V, the Home Fleet brought from north in hot foot haste,
Renown and all her company from the south were not outpaced.
The call was throbbing on the air before the dawn was grey
And Rodney from convoy turned away.
And south and westward from the chase all day and all the night
Across the sea and from the sky the watchers strained their sight.
Day came. They lost her, searched and their reward was won
They saw the Bismarck swinging east, alone and on the run.
The Sheffield sat upon her heels, Ark Royal's planes put out
The ship the Hun so often sank put Goebel's word in doubt.
For lies, the ship their lies had sunk exacted now the price
And twice torpedoed, Bismarck slowed ... and reeled ... and circled
twice.

The V1 (a small, pilot-less aircraft, known as "no balls" in RAF slang at the time) and V2 – damage to Lynsted Church

The V1's were terrifying. In recent years I have seen the remains of some of the sites in the Pas de Calais area from which they were launched. Their high speed and small size made them very difficult targets. Moving at over 400 mph, only the new RAF Tempest fighter could catch up with them in normal flight. As they often exploded violently when fired upon, it was quite dangerous to attack them. However, usually it was when they ran out of fuel, and started to dive to earth that they were dangerous. I did hear several do this, and, fortunately, none of them fell very close. One did fall at Lynsted, about a mile away, and did some blast damage to the Church windows.

At the time, the "Kent Messenger" published a map of Kent, with a spot showing where each recorded V1 had fallen. Off the Kent coast were several hundred smaller dots, indicating where one had been destroyed before reaching the UK.

For the V2's there was no warning, or defence (except to attack the sites from which they were fired). One morning one landed about a mile away, in a field near Lynsted. I recall the enormous double bang, but didn't appreciate at the time that I had heard a sonic boom, and the explosion. I am still not quite clear which one came first. Probably the explosion, with the boom of the rockets supersonic passage through the atmosphere following. The crater was visible for many years, but I think has now disappeared.

BGS – strange lines in sky ? We were doing PT in the playing field. Suddenly, somebody drew our attention to a strange phenomena. The sky was a mixture of cloud and blue patches. Across the blue patches, a series of parallel white lines moved rapidly, like spreading ripples in the puddle. Yet there was no sound. I think now they were probably the result of a massive explosion somewhere over the horizon. I read after the war of a huge ammunition dump that exploded – possibly it was the after effect of this.

D day – air armada. Right over my house they came, the Dakota's each towing up to three huge gliders. It seemed to go on for hours. All marked clearly with the black and white stripes intended to show our own gunners whose side they were on. I imagined the young soldiers looking down at the peaceful countryside of Kent, and wondering if this would be the last time they saw it. For many, it was.

The atomic bomb. It must have been something in the announcers voice. I got in the house as the news was being broadcast, and not in time to hear the first announcements of this event. Yet, I felt that something, world shaking, had happened.

VE and VJ days. Strangely enough, I have no memories at all of these festivities !

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