

Some recollections of childhood during the Second World War

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In October 1940 I was three years old. I don't think I remember anything before then. Some things I know about only because they were spoken of as I grew older. When war broke out, my Dad wanted to serve his country in the Royal Navy but he was not allowed to join up because his job as a tool-room turner was vital to the war effort. Thus, when the blitz spread from London to the Midlands my Dad was home each night, that is, when he was not on fire watch duty at a local factory. As far as I know our council house in Trinity Street did not have an Anderson shelter. Down the road there was a communal shelter, a large concrete blockhouse but my Dad did not trust these aboveground shelters. He thought that somehow we would be safer in the cellar of our own home and that is where we went when the sirens sounded. I had a little bed on the floor. I don't recall what else was in there or how the cellar was lit. Perhaps there was an oil lamp, for I know I could still see the cellar walls after the bomb had exploded. That is my first vivid childhood memory, plaster on the walls turning into a jigsaw puzzle and little pieces falling out. There must have been noise, lots of noise, but of that I have no recollection. I am told that my parents heard the whistle of the bomb as it fell and that my Dad said, "This one's going to be close." My Mom arched her body over mine to protect me, my Dad shielded my Mom as best he could. It was the night of 21st November 1940, the second time that week that West Bromwich was badly hit by German bombs.

After the plaster crumbling, the next thing I recall is a man with an ARP helmet standing in the doorway of the cellar with a spade in his hand. We were all safe but had been trapped by the rubble. We were taken to the communal shelter. This time, the flashback is of sitting on the shoulders of the same ARP man as we passed a side of the house that was still standing and of being able to make out in the darkness that all the windows were smashed. "Look what Gerry Diddler has done to our windows," I exclaimed.

I don't know the details of what happened next. We had been 'bombed out.' That was the expression. Our house was a rented council house but the local authority could not re-house us immediately. My Grandma, Dad's mother, lived across the road and I know we stayed there for a little while. I recall the bedroom with a night-light burning in a saucer of

water. There was no electricity in those old houses. Then we went to stay with my Granny, my Mom's mom in Smethwick. Her house was in a row of back-to-back terraced houses with a communal yard and communal outside toilets! I do mean communal. They were three-seaters! I wouldn't go unless a grown-up stood at the door to stop anyone else coming in.

At Granny's house, our night-time shelter was the heavy wooden kitchen table. We crowded under it when the air raid warning sounded. I can remember being taken one morning to see the church across the road. It was standing as an empty shell having been burnt out by incendiary bombs that had fallen the night before. Sometimes my uncle Alf was there, on leave from the R.A.F. During air raids he would go outside with a stirrup pump in case incendiary bombs struck any of the houses. My old Granny used to shout at him to put his tin hat on in case he got hit by a cannon ball. Goodness knows what war she was recalling.

Various things were salvaged from our stricken house in Trinity Street including a settee which had numerous holes caused by shrapnel but which had to last us many more years. I suppose the items were stored somewhere by the Council until we could be re-housed. Eventually, we were found a council house in Ruskin Street. This had a long garden with an Anderson shelter at the top end. Beyond that was the garden of another house, except that there was no longer a house there, just a bombsite. I don't know exactly when we moved in but I know that I was there when I was four and I was certainly there when night-time bombing raids were still in progress.

I never heard the air raid sirens go off in the night. My mother always had to come and wake me saying, "The sirens have gone." Then half-asleep, I'd be zipped into my siren suit and hustled down to the shelter. I wanted to take our cat with us but my Dad said she would be safer in her cupboard in the house. In the shelter we would listen to the droning of the German bombers and the sounds of the anti-aircraft guns. Bang, Bang, Bang, Boom! The great 'boom' was said to be 'Big Bertha' a very large anti-aircraft gun located somewhere down Newton Road.

One night as I said my prayers before going to bed, my mother overheard me tack on at the end "And God Bless Hitler." "I don't think that's a nice thing to say," she exclaimed. "But Mom, you said that God told us to love our enemies." I responded with the simple logic of a child. "Oh, I don't know" was all she could say then.

I do not recall ever feeling afraid during the war. I knew that buildings that were around one day might be gone the next and that I had to memorise my Identity Number 'in case anything should happen' but I don't think I ever imagined that anything would happen to me or to my immediate family. I guess I had total faith in the air raid shelter, any air raid shelter. What I hated was my gas mask, initially the child's pink 'Mickey Mouse' gas mask, later the standard black version. The idea of it going over my face filled me with dread.

As the war progressed - I was nearly eight when it ended - I began to take more notice of the News on the radio. Everything was about the war. I recall asking my Mom one day "What will they put on the News when the war is over?" I could not imagine. Several people we knew used to listen to the Nazi propaganda broadcasts from Germany by Lord Haw Haw but only so they could laugh at him but my Dad thought it was wrong even to listen to him for whatever reason and his voice was never heard in our house. I heard people impersonate the voice with 'Germany calling, Germany calling' so I guess that is how the broadcasts started.

Another Uncle, Uncle Albert, not long married was a Captain in the Territorial Army. He was posted to the desert with Monty. Because he had no children then and, I guess, to help keep his spirits up, he used to write to me back home. Sadly, I never kept the letters. I recall having a child's storybook at the time, about a little girl whose father was in the desert. When she was asleep the fairies took her to visit her father on his tank. Today, it is difficult to imagine such a storybook ever being written but it probably gave some brief comfort to many children.

As an adult, I have read about food rationing and the unavailability of some foods during the War but that did not mean much to me as a child. What we had was all I had ever known and my parents would give me the best of what there was. Nothing was ever wasted and scraps of anything edible plus potato peelings and the like all had to go in the 'Pig Bin' later to be turned into pigswill to help the nation's farmers.

I recall how cold it was in winter. Usually, only one room of the house was heated, the Kitchen/Living Room. At Christmas another fire would be lit in the front room. Of course, there was no central heating in those days and bedrooms were particularly cold. With ice on the inside of the windows when one got up in the morning with beautiful fern-like patterns, you slept with the blankets pulled right up over your face. Sometimes coal was in such short supply that anything available would

be burned to help us keep warm, including tiny bits of broken coal known as 'slack' packed into blue sugar bags or perhaps an old shoe. Firefighters were made from old newspapers folded in a special way. Newspaper torn into squares also served as toilet paper!

I guess that the uncertainty of the war years encouraged promiscuity. There were posters around saying, in very large letters 'Beware of VD'. Once I caused an embarrassing silence on a bus when out with my favourite aunt. I had learned to read and shouted out in a very loud voice "What is VD Auntie?" While she struggled to think of a suitable reply, I continued, "Oh, I know. It's Victory Day..." I had heard that was coming and thought 'beware' simply meant 'be aware of.' Other posters of those war years have affected me to this day. 'Beware the Squander Bug' together with the slogan 'Make do and mend' have ensured that it takes a wife to get me to buy new clothes from time to time and stay reasonably presentable.



The storybook sent to children of personnel serving with Armed Forces in North Africa.

Note: Gerald's family lived at 31 Trinity Street, their neighbours at number 29. Remains of both houses were demolished after the war and replaced by a single larger house at the end of the terrace, now called 41 owing to renumbering of houses in Trinity Street.