

Sandbags and Sirens.

By Alan Rawlinson

(A WW2 childhood)

Locations: Finsbury Park - London
Chesham. - Buckinghamshire
Stanmore. - Middlesex
Monkseaton. - Northumberland

80 odd years ago I grew up in wartime Britain. With the benefit of hindsight and the history books it was much better than the horrific experience that many children in Europe were going through. No German boots tramping through the towns for instance, and no daily shelling, but life for a young boy was quite different from peacetime in England. But like children do, everything was taken in our stride and with nothing to compare it with, all the wartime happenings were accepted as normal life. It was fun, each day bringing new surprises.



With the threat of imminent invasion by the Germans, our family left Jersey in the Channel Islands where they lived and worked, and boarded the railway steamer for the night crossing to England, thus giving me my first memory which was that of having some difficulty crawling into the narrow bunks with mother. (The picture shows happier days at the beach in Jersey) It

was ironic that friends accompanying us on the ship were to be later killed in air raids on the mainland. Almost inevitably, the years immediately after arriving on the mainland, and with the war starting, life events tumbled one over the other. It was this way for most people caught up in rationing, air raids, blackouts, sirens, and of course austerity and the later rationing of foodstuffs. Lives were disrupted and the urgent need to find work came in parallel with demands to serve in the war effort for fit adults. At some stage early on, father left his occupation working as doorman in hotels and joined the RASC, the Royal Army Service Corp. He was a driver after some training, but within 18 months he suffered injuries in a training crash which invalidated him out of the services and back home.

There followed years of new homes and new schools punctuated by a spell of evacuation to the far distant and seemingly remote town of Monkseaton in Northumberland in 1944. This was agreed after the threat from the V2 rockets that were hammering London and the home counties at that time. I have a clear recollection of the characteristic pulsing sound of the rockets as they approached and grew louder, and the reaction of Mother waving them on. Occasionally, the rasping noise stopped suddenly giving everyone a fright until an explosion was heard. I guess this experience coupled with the uncertainty of knowing when it might end was the deciding factor in applying for re-location to a safer place. We boarded the train, my Mother with us because my sister was under five years old, thus sparing me the sometimes grim experience of being shoved in to an unknown strangers home alone. Most of my fellow evacuees were unaccompanied and in

various stages of bewilderment at the sudden parting from home. Many were tearful, and one or two inconsolable.



(The picture shows a typical scene of children being evacuated by train). We were met at the station in Newcastle by kind ladies from the Women's Voluntary Service, (the WVS), we were loaded on to a coach and driven around Colorcoats and Monkseaton. It was a sunny peaceful afternoon, and at the destination the coach commenced kerb crawling along the leafy suburban streets, door to door. Such was the urgency in wartime, no prior arrangements had been made for accommodation and the ad hoc plan was that a policeman stood on the running board of the bus, and jumped down as it slowed at each house entrance or driveway. It was his job to approach the

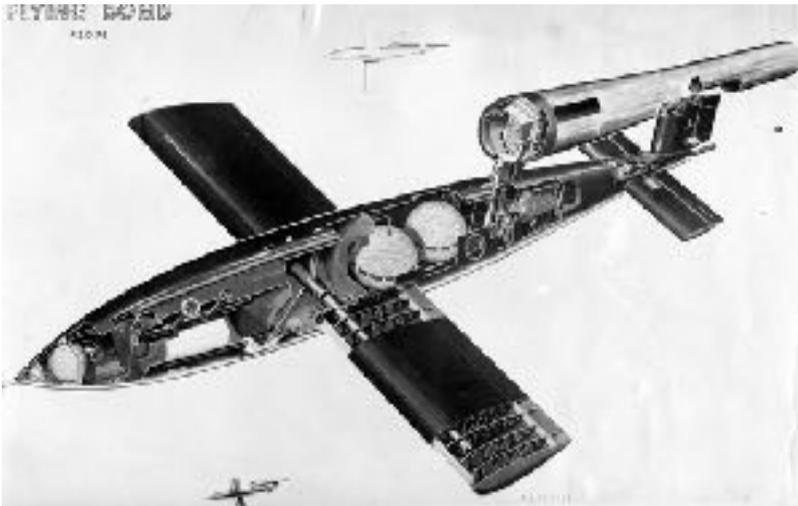
front doors of homes, and then knock to find out if the owners had spare bedrooms. I have vivid memories of watching him in his blue uniform from the safety of the rear coach windows as he would stand talking for a few minutes and then turn and beckon with his fingers for 1 or 2 children to be off loaded and taken into the homes. Looking back today, the idea that children could be foisted on strangers without any checks seems dangerous and somewhat bizarre, but at that time, it was acceptable and even sought after. Probably because we were 2 children plus an adult we had no takers and the day wore on until finally we were left on the near empty coach. As desperation grew, two of the ladies of the WVS, sisters at the front of the coach, who had been efficiently organising the trip took sympathy and offered us a place in their comfortable large home. Their surname was Arthur, and they treated us wonderfully. Even at my young age I can recall the palpable relief given out by mother when they made their offer of a home.

With my sister safe at home with mother in the big old house, I walked to school each day, a 30 plus minute ramble with plenty of time for small boys to get into mischief. Unlike our home in London there were no frequent air-raid sirens wailing to make it more interesting, but leafy streets and gardens. It turned out the school in Monkseaton, probably like others, had been saddled with dozens of kids from London - suddenly thrust into the classrooms, and some teachers didn't like it. My class became unbearable, with the teacher openly hostile and insulting about the 'cockneys', as she saw us, making negative comments daily. After a few days of this I decided to skip school altogether. So each day armed

with the dinner money provided my mother, I would continue past the school to the seafront and the attraction of the many slot machines on the Whitley bay promenade. Some pals joined me, and this way I passed the day, often feeling a bit hungry, and I then wandered back home to an unsuspecting mother. This went on for some time with no complaints from the school.

The home we shared was large and owned by a man I never saw. Mother mentioned he was a shipping executive, and I know he had a box of tantalising cigars on the lounge sideboard which tempted me to try an early experiment at smoking. Another memory is of the variety of butterflies that summer on the bushes fronting the house. All in all, it was a pleasant stay, and eventually after the best part of a year we took the train back to London. It was a fact that evacuees were at liberty to return or be recalled, and a high percentage did. There was no enforcement and many families rejected the idea of leaving or splitting the children from parents. Today and with hindsight it seems the right choice perhaps, but at the time and in the midst of a war, uncertainty was rife. Invasion was a possibility, and no one knew what was ahead. The London area and the home counties were being pounded by V1 (buzzbomb) doodlebugs with their terrifying raucous sound, and later the silent but more deadly V2 rockets gave everyone the jitters. I heard many 'buzz bombs' and experienced the dreaded sudden cut-off of the pulse engine followed by a few seconds of silence and then the crash as it hit. People soon realised that once the bomb was overhead it would not hit them because it had to perform a shallow dive after the engine stopped. None of them could be targeted. It

was simply a matter for the German aggressors to try and calculate enough fuel for the rocket to make it to where the most damage could be done, i.e. a heavily built up area. Many went astray both in distance and direction. Later in this account I write about our time in Stanmore, Middlesex, and a stray landed not far from our street enabling me and my friends to scamper over to the site. We tried



unsuccessfully to drag the tail piece home. This was a prominent and elevated heavy exhaust pipe which was attached to the bomb by 2 brackets and which had been blown clear, surviving the impact.

At the time of the battle of Britain which ran in the summer and autumn of 1940, we lived in Finsbury Park London, in an early tower block, where Father had a job as the caretaker. I recall nights of terrifying noises, bombs and guns, and at the tender age of 5 I had difficulty at first interpreting the sounds. A huge battery in the park, close by, pounded away all night, the searchlights and guns hammering away at German planes. In the morning the streets were peppered with shrapnel, pure delight to young boys like me who collected the often hot metal shards. Many years later, I realised that a lot of it was fragments from the exploding anti-aircraft shells, but what made it fascinating was the aluminium pieces from some German

Heinkel, Messerschmitt, or Dornier bomber - quite different in weight and contorted shapes. It fell everywhere, but for some reason mostly it seemed to be in the gutters. We stuffed the smaller bits in our pockets for later 'swops'. All night long there was banging and explosions. Many shops and buildings around were hit and when I was let out in the morning, it was to look for shrapnel and also view the damaged buildings. The open sided tall blocks often had the white baths exposed in a bizarre column. The stark view of stacked up baths and associated pipework open to the world with jagged broken floors hanging down is an indelible memory. This feature was picked up by mother who decided the bath was a relatively safe place in the event of a direct hit. So it was in the empty bath I went most nights! Later, I realised that the pipes acted as a sort of lattice framework that retained them on the various floors, sagging maybe, but still intact. Another common site was staff sweeping broken glass from shop windows, and the pavement being swept of debris. Our block of flats had small locker type doors adjacent to the main entry doors and these were for the rubbish bins that could then be taken out. On quite a few nights, being small, I was pressed into service crawling through these openings to open the main door of tenants from the inside. Sometimes they had lost keys but the severe vibrations jammed the doors, and they called the caretaker for help.

A war might have been on, but the pubs were still open - and doing a roaring trade! Memories include being despatched to fetch Father which meant standing in the door and peeking in or calling for him to come home for meals. This was a regular occurrence, walking alone at 5

years old about half a mile to the big pub opposite Finsbury Park entrance. He usually came when called. There were also family friends nearby, and I have memories of them fussing over me when we visited their apartments.

At least our family were together, and we enjoyed Xmas 1940 in the flat. I still had Santa as an Xmas visitor, and he was generous, bringing me among other things a red fire engine. This toy I hammered flat shortly after getting it out of the sack! It was big and made of thin tin, and flattened nicely to my satisfaction but much to the horror, and later anger of my parents. Was this some sort of reaction to the fearful apprehension of nightly air raids? Who knows?

Chesham

The time in London ended when father, now in the Army was sent to the RASC as a driver. We left the tower block when the call-up papers came, and re-located to escape the bombing. The grand parents lived in leafy Chesham, Buckinghamshire. Mother left me with her Mother and step father in Church Road and she went off to work in Maynard's sweet factory most days. I had a happy but turbulent time living with them. "Bob Bob" as he was termed, was a veteran from the Boer war and had many tales to tell, backed up by a row of medals proudly displayed on the wall. He had lost a foot in the conflict, and took to a wheel chair which he rarely left, but he was a very jolly man who laughed at most things, sending me running to the bookies with his frequent bets. Calling me, "The boy of the village" with gusts of laughter, I could do no

wrong! Coming home from school I one day presented my Grandmother with a bunch of wild flowers picked at the roadside. She was so effusive about this that I made it a regular business, and the flowers grew more exotic day by day, until one day she said, “ These are not wild flowers at all, Whose garden have you been in? “ Bob Bob would roar with laughter.

The terraced house was old and tiny, but it holds many memories with a backdrop of wartime living. I went to the church school almost opposite and have vivid memories of being ordered under the desk whenever the air raid siren went. Windows were taped with black tape and the entrance shielded with damp sandbags in the familiar Z shape as an anti-blast measure. Just further down the road was a huge pile of rubble on which we youngsters played, and close behind a large park with a magical big pond. This park, with the church at one end opposite our house holds many lasting memories . In winter the lake froze hard and we ran and skated all over it, and in the usual fashion, the centre island had nesting ducks and geese which could then be reached. The winter of 1940 was one of the coldest on record, and the Chesham park had deep snow, enabling me and my pals to actually build an igloo out of blocks of hard snow formed by rolling them up into large barrel shapes. Other memories are of watching planes in dog fights in the sky when raids happened. Most people were directed to shelters but there were many occasions as a boy when I preferred the excitement of staring upwards at the contrails with strangers explaining what was going on. At other times we played and we fought like boys do. Bullying was normal

and I recall a great feeling of satisfaction when pushing a bigger bullying lad into the pond when he was on the edge and then racing for safety as he followed, dripping wet, past the churchyard to the sanctuary which was Granny's house. The following summer was a hot one and the garden blossomed. An ad hoc tent was made with a blanket, and I can still recall the strange warm smell of the hot wool today.

The park opposite became a huge part of our young lives. At the upper end, next to a wired fence guarding a field full of cows and cow pats, some swings, slides, and a large bell shaped roundabout took up our time. If the siren went we were meant to find a shelter, but needless to say, I usually stayed. It was fun to misuse the roundabout, climbing on the head height rail and bouncing the whole thing violently up and down and side to side against the stops. It never broke in my time there. Then there was the absolute magic conjured up by the effort to raise money for the war effort. In the lower part of the park, inside the flower beds, a concrete band stand area served to display shot down German aircraft. They arrived regularly towed in by a truck and installed prominently in the centre of the area, together with notices and an invitation to climb aboard! It was pure heaven - the sights and sounds, the mystery of the perspex covered cockpits, gun turrets, and instrument panels. To cap it all, the fuselage had the infamous swastika decals on the wings and tail. There were the strong smells of burnt rubber, varnish, and acrid smoke. We were allowed to climb aboard and sit at the controls, and the whole experience was immensely popular. The exercise raised much cash which was collected in buckets. Nearby was a

giant gaudy wood and cardboard thermometer towering over the people, and it displayed the level of donations against the target total for that month. The planes were usually bombers, but some fighters made it to our bandstand. It's worth mentioning the obvious, namely that the war and the implications were lost on children too young to comprehend. Yes, we all knew that a war was on, and that the enemy was Germany, as evidenced by the wrecked German planes, but apart from echoing and repeating what the adults were saying, the possible consequences and outcome did not concern young minds. On this note, I clearly recall our mother being concerned when Singapore was reported as captured in Feb 1942. Her immortal words were: " We won't see any more bananas now that Singapore is captured" !

We later shared a house in Birkhamstead road and while here my sister Brenda was born. It was 1941. Father was given 2 days leave from the army. Mother went to Shardloes, a large country house with extensive grounds in nearby Amersham. Here she gave birth to my sister Brenda, and I have a good memory of visiting with Granny and knocking conkers from the trees in the luxurious grounds of the estate, whilst waiting for her to return. Oddly enough, I can also still see the huge patches of

Rhododendron bushes which at the time I thought very unattractive. Times change.

About this time I had all of the diseases going around for children like Measles Mumps and scarlet fever, leading to a spell in a cottage hospital in Chesham. It was summer and I recall the long hot afternoons with food smells, background Glenn Millar music non-stop, and the unappetising food. Memories still linger of the squares of solid fat in the meat dishes and being told to eat it by the matron. It was a children's ward, and there were afternoon visits from Mother, fussing over the conditions and the pyjamas, before I eventually was released back into wartime normality.

Now there were two of us, I was old enough at six and a half to be given tasks which included walking my young baby sister around the block where we now lived in order to get some fresh air, an essential task in my mother's eyes. Unfortunately, it was a struggle negotiating the pram up and down kerbs and she slid out more than once because the pram had a flap at the rear! Luckily no lasting damage occurred - the blankets protecting her.

One day, lorries came along the street burning railings and stacking them high on the back. These were burnt off from all the houses gardens as far as I remember without any fanfare! At the same time, women were coming out and throwing pots and pans into the pile. This remarkable event was in response to a plea from the Government to aid the war effort. History now shows that this exercise was huge moral boosting success, but that little, if any, of the

metal was used. The whole idea might have been to whip up enthusiasm for the war effort. Anyway, it was fun for us boys, and we happily followed the lorries, no doubt making a nuisance of ourselves.

Still in Berkamstead road, my bedroom was in the attic. It had a dormer style window with a huge convenient shelf which served me as a little den. At night and with an air-raid in progress, I could sit in the dark, hunched up, hands over knees staring out at the searchlights waving around the sky and watching any action, and listening to the noises through the glass.

One reason Chesham found itself caught up in the war was the presence of a big American airbase nearby at Bovingdon. It was a training base but also figured in the big raids where many squadrons formed up before heading to Germany. The town was flooded with smartly dressed young men from another world. They left a lasting memory of their generosity as we young boys pestered them for gum, money, and whatever we could get. At the time, and still today, some 80 years later, I was, and I am, amazed at their generosity. We only had to ask once. Now as an octogenarian I have read many of the interesting and heart rending accounts of the air war, and it makes those days back in Chesham more understandable because those same young men were going through life and death torment. The book to read above all others is called “Serenade to the Big Birds” by Bert Stiles. He kept an account going which was later found in the loft and published by his Mother after Bert was killed in action.

The hot summer in 1942 made the tar bubble and the wood blocks forming the road shift out of line. It was fascinating to observe. In the shops it was still the era of 'patted' butter using wood paddles with the butter wrapped in greaseproof paper. Rationing for some items came in and the ration books with coupons appeared. Some pages just had a big pencil cross over the coupon. The grocers shop on the high street still gave out a rich aroma emanating from the items displayed. Life was not too bad but sweet rationing was then also being introduced. Granny got mad at me for singing in the centre of a Salvation Army group with their band playing in the high street. They gave me sixpence. I never understood why she was so angry. The high street had many indications that a war was on and I recall at least 2 huge wood and cardboard thermometers indicating the amount of money collected from the buckets beneath. They were colourful and effective. Sandbagged entrances were common - the sand giving off a damp musty smell up close, and they were always arranged in a sort of Z pattern.

Other activities that are suitable for this account include the many happy days with friends fishing on Chesham waterside, adjacent to the river Chess. It was a short walk, and here we could catch sticklebacks and put them in jars like kids do. Needless to say we often ended up in the water too.

The wartime airbase at Bovington was just over 3 miles away and we reached it up the road winding upwards past beech and Hawthorn hedges containing many birds nests. At the end of our journey was farmers fields and a sea of

ripening strawberries. We lay between the furrows undetected and gorged on the berries whilst on some days the 'Flying Fortresses' from the USA 8th airforce skimmed over our heads. They were very low - so low we could see the pilots and we waved. We were blissfully ignorant of the horror they faced each day of operations. It was all accepted as normal life.

Although Chesham was away from the main bombing areas, it had its share, with over 40 bombs and 9 people killed during the war from air raids. Usually it was stray aircraft maybe dumping a bomb load or mistakenly getting the navigation askew. So, one night as I lay in bed in Church road, I heard a whistling sound and a big crash which turned out to be a direct hit on a house backing on to our street. First thing in the morning I scampered around to find the still smouldering ruins and a smell that I have never forgotten. What it was I don't know, but any whiff of that particular odour takes me straight back. It was an acrid, unpleasant smell, and one that still gives me instant recall.

Other memories? I once followed a brass band for what seemed miles, and then bursting into tears when they finished playing and dispersed with me realising I didn't have a clue where I was and then panicking! The weekly 'Dandy' and 'Beano' comics were favourites also, and left a strong impression on my young mind.

Altogether I lived in 4 locations in Chesham and this meant changing school a few times. The church school, with its taped windows and sandbagged entrance, high ceilings

and portable desks doubling as mini air raid shelters was given up. Instead I found myself at a rather huge, forbidding sort of modern junior school on Berkhamstead road. Here I fought to feel comfortable and never really succeeded. It sounds odd, but I regularly panicked at playtime when a whistle went and everyone ran into neat lines leaving me standing there confused. The problem was solved by hiding in some bushes and watching the lines walking into the buildings until I saw someone from my class I recognised whereupon I could dart out and join on the end! Was this the start of a life of self reliance - I wonder?

Our time in Chesham ended when Father sustained an accident driving for the RASC and was discharged as unfit for service. We needed a home together, and somehow a home in Stanmore, Middlesex was allocated after being requisitioned by the Government. The address was 72 Elm Park and it was a rather nice semi-detached house on a quiet road with two ugly brick built shelters, one halfway down, and the other at the bottom near our house just round the corner from Nelson Avenue. However, it was a leafy street lined with trees including chestnuts which produced a nice crop of conkers. These could be picked easily by us street kids from the top of the shelters, once we managed the tricky bit climbing onto the 8ft high roof. The shelters themselves were extremely basic - and smelly. Double tiered wooden bunks lined the walls and one end, whilst at the other end near the door there was an Elson toilet closet. It didn't take long for the interior to smell foul with stale urine and other unmentionable items. We never ever used the shelters, mother preferring her faith in the

bathtub, but there were occasional nights during a raid when people slept there.

I will never know if the house came with the job, but Father was briefly appointed as the personnel manager at the important De Havilland's aircraft factory near Watford making the famous Mosquito fighter bomber. Much later after the war he told me (in a pub) it was a tough job that he found difficult, and he struggled with it. The dates are somewhat a jumble but later he was a stoker at the nearby Bentley Priory - the headquarters of fighter command and a prime target for the German bombers. This was a tough physical job working with much younger men. Towards the end of the war yet another change took place and he travelled daily to London where he was the stage door keeper at the London Pavilion theatre. Here on a visit I was to meet stage stars like Stanley Holloway and the actress Celia Lipton. Still quiet small in stature, I stood in the wings of the stage peering around the curtains with the legs of the chorus girls waiting to run on reaching up to my shoulders! The sirens were still going off periodically in the evenings but the shows went on. (The picture shows Father and me near the war's end in 1945)



Stanmore holds a host of wartime memories, including the iconic VE Day celebrations in 1945. To the Church of England school on Stanmore hill I walked every morning, sometimes with friends. It was a game because quite often the air raid siren would sound its distinctive wailing notes as we walked.

This was a signal to scamper back home, much to our delight, and we walked slowly hoping like mad that it WOULD sound. The memories are still strong today - The crates of milk in one third pint bottles; the strong smelling sand bagged entrance; taped up windows high up on the tall walls. Often the milk was warm and curdling from being left in the crates at the door, standing in the morning sun whilst we received lessons. I still drank mine, and also gratefully drank the ones that other children shunned! Periodically, we were solemnly lined up and measured by a visiting official. The circumference of our heads and length of our feet, and anyone judged oversize for their age were separated out for extra clothing coupons. I always made the grade in this, if not in my academic studies. Mother was of course delighted to get extra coupons.

Mr Williams, the headmaster smoked a pipe constantly with a strong aroma which spread around the school building. Our teacher was a Mrs Delafield, a lady with strong views and a musical bent. She was fond of saying, "Use your common sense", and it stayed with me. Often she played the piano and we all had to step up and sing solo to the music, and receive her approval or otherwise.

As a church school in Stanmore, there was a strong link with the beautiful St John's Church a short walk down the hill and along the high street, and we were marched there on special days for services. We had to pass a much loved bakery that offered buns and other treats too good to miss, so one of us would usually manage to dart away from the line and find some goodies to share. Already marked

out as a good reader in class, I was often selected to read a lesson from the pulpit at church. Later, I would join the choir there and earn good money at weddings. Air raid warnings were frequent, and as the school was adjacent to a recreation ground with underground shelters, all the pupils were hastily marched there. Once inside, the teachers sat near the door until the 'all clear' siren went. I remember being successful at dodging out quickly at an opportune moment and joining some adults looking up to see any action in the sky.

Elm Park, or at least the bottom end had quite a social life in the war. Coming up to 9 and 10 years old, I was into most things and there are many strong memories of street parties, ad hoc cricket matches, Nov 5th fireworks at which bangers were thrown around willy nilly, and lots of events. I also ran wild and recall setting fire to fields nearby which conjured up some angry firemen. Another escapade involved climbing up a tall look-out tower erected in woods nearby. It was composed of scaffolding about 100 ft high and on top was an enclosed room with glass windows all round. Egged on by a particular friend, we managed to slide out the glass panels and drop them down through the scaffolding where they made a most satisfying crash through the metal poles. Someone must have called the police, because we were summoned from the ground and made to climb down. For a while there was a stand-off but we had no choice but to descend. As I recall, we had the choice of parents being informed or a hiding there and then. We took the hiding!

The V2 rockets were starting to arrive and a stray landed about half a mile from our home leaving a massive crater in a spare piece of ground but fortunately no casualties. We boys from the street scampered over to gawp down from the rim of the crater. There was nothing to see except a crater of about 60ft wide.

The day arrived in 1945 when VE Day was announced. Everyone of the adults were ecstatic, and a bonfire was soon being built in the centre of Stanmore village. It was on a bomb site opposite shops, and days were spent hauling wood and cardboard, and lots of other material into a huge pile until we were all satisfied with the creation. On the evening it was to be lit, I was disastrously informed by my parents that they were off to celebrate, and they instructed me to stay at home and watch baby sister Brenda, now 4 years old. They even locked the doors to keep things safe. After they went out I lost no time in climbing out of the lounge window to spend a riotous and memorable evening with friends. We let off fireworks around the blaze and generally ran amok. A good time was had by all, and no harm came to my sister. This was a night to remember!

So ended our war. We had suffered nothing except inconvenience and a few scares. Relatives had been killed in the fighting, but years later after reading all the harrowing accounts by participants and military personnel on both sides who had been lucky enough to survive, I understand just how fortunate we had been.

