

CHAPTER TWELVE - WAR 2

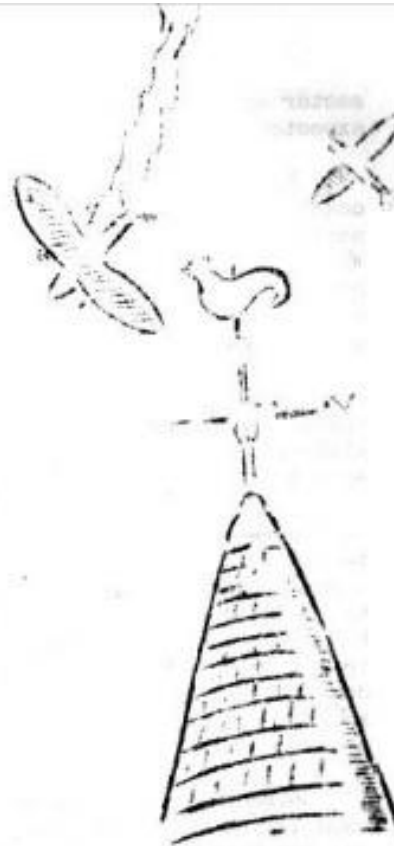
After experiences gained in the 1914/18 campaign much more preparation was made beforehand when world tension was running high, for all grown-ups remembered the horrors of gas warfare, and all were sure that aircraft would play a very large part in any conflict, and so while every effort was being made to put off the evil day, the A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) in all its branches was for some time working and training at a feverish pace.

The first band recruited were the Wardens. One of their first jobs was to see that one and all were fitted out with a gas mask. There were several different types, light ones for most people, who could be moved from a contaminated area fairly quickly, a little heavier one for those with light duties and service ones for others who had got to work in it should an attack be made, and these hideous things had to be close at hand at all times.

The wonderful thing was, thank God, they were never needed for at no time anywhere, was gas used by any nation. The cost of defence preparations against it must have run into millions of pounds. Our Church Institute this time, instead of being a V.A.D. hospital was fitted up as a casualty and clearing station, manned by a First Aid Party of both men and women. They and men of the Rescue Party had weekly practice in the building. Apart from that it was never needed. How much we have to be grateful for.

After the first duty of the wardens was completed it was not long before the greatest exodus from big towns that the world had ever known began. It was said that it was a bigger movement of people even than the famous exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

This time the great majority were children. There was hardly a home in the country that was not affected. Beforehand the wardens, each of whom was responsible for a given area, made a survey of their



sector and found what room and accommodation was available for the expected evacuees from London.

Then came the day of the great invasion when several 'bus and coach loads arrived in the village in the late afternoon, with school teachers doing their best to keep them in some sort of order. What a job they had! Many of the children had never been away from home before, and most of them came from poor families with few possessions. To see these kiddies with their little bundles and parcels was truly a sad and sorry sight.

By this time the girl with the curly hair had been my wife for several years. We had a daughter aged ten, and a baby nephew living with us. We had agreed to take in two of these young strangers. When the coach arrived in our road, my wife was seeing to the baby and so my daughter went and sorted out two likely looking playmates. Both were tired and hungry and strangers to each other. Something to eat soon brought them out a bit, but oh dear! - after tea things weren't quite so easy for they came from entirely different homes, one made no bones about having a bath, but the other, I doubt if she had ever seen one before. Poor child! She had a still bigger shock to get over that evening, for they had a room on their own with a double bed. On getting into the room she just stood and looked, for she had never slept in a bed before, and I think she would far rather have curled up in the corner for the night.

Life to these youngsters must have been strange. There was a mile each way to walk to school, which took them ever such a long time to do, for they had both been used to just popping over the road. Poor Winnie! Many things worried her; she was just not accustomed to sitting down with a family for her meals. At the weekend we had our usual joint and vegetables from the garden, which she didn't think she would like, so my wife asked her what she would like. A cold pig's trotter, and sit on the door-step with it and watch the people go by! We were unable to let her have it, and so she made a gallant effort with what we had.

Both of them liked being in the garden with us, and would often do little jobs. One evening they were tying up the celery plants for me to earth. After a while they sat on the side of the trench and the following conversation took place -
Violet. "I hope we shan't have to eat this after its all been covered with dirt".
Winnie. "No, I would rather have it off a barrow".
Violet. "Just fancy! We've been here ten weeks and no fish and chips".
Winnie. "And no tripe".
Violet. "Still, we have some nice apples".
Winnie. "Yes, but I would like a cold trotter and some of my Gran's stout".

They were with us for some months, and things as far as the war was concerned were comparatively quiet, and like many others they went back home. In both cases it was the parents who wanted them back. Violet was first. Her mother and father came down one Sunday and met us on our way to Church. As soon as her mother saw her it was enough. She just could not leave her behind. Winnie went in the same way two months later.

We had another large crowd of strangers in our midst, not to be found in other places, for we have a large county hospital, and it also so happened that the head surgeon of Guy's had lived here for a number of years, and the whole of the training section of the famous hospital was moved to our village.

Many of these young people joined in various village activities and in many ways livened things up considerably. Some of them were more than a little surprised at the way our country coppers and the specials were able to keep law and order, for their road racing with all kinds of motor vehicles, and after dark escapades in the local swimming pool didn't last long, but the things they did for the good of those around them by far outweighed their bit of mischief. In their ranks were entertainers of all kinds, and at what few affairs there were, their help was very much appreciated, and they also helped in all branches of A.R.P.

What other jobs fell to the lot of the special constable? Apart from looking after the students, with all sorts of other jobs, I suppose the most monotonous was the nightly round looking for lights. Some folks seemed to be always in trouble on this count. It was a big problem, since hardly a room anywhere was not occupied and every window and crack had to be blacked out.

At one phase the public were constantly being warned about booby traps dropped from aircraft. These could be of any kind or shape of container, and if you saw anything suspicious you were asked to report it, and many were the false errands the police had on this count. I am afraid I was responsible for one -

One Saturday evening I earthed my potatoes and thus left the soil with a nice clean and fresh appearance. The following afternoon I was looking at my previous evening's work when I noticed a bright cylinder hanging on a potato plant and I just could not make out what it was. We had had a raid during the night. It was certain that it could not have been there when I was working on the rows, so in the end I fetched the police sergeant to have a look. We were both afraid to touch it, but eventually he crawled along the next deep drill, keeping as flat as possible until he could reach it with a clothes prop, with which he gently shook it, nothing happened, and so he picked it up and carefully put it into a case which he had brought, and then off by car to the police station five miles away.

Next door, there lived a large family of children ranging from a baby up to a girl of fifteen. Now the sergeant had not been gone long when a little voice through the hedge said, "I had a job not to laugh at the policeman crawling after Jean's hair curler, he did look funny!"

"Crawling after what?" I exclaimed.

"Jean's hair curler, Peter threw it from the bedroom window". Well, I expect you know, potatoes are not earthed on April 1st.

Another team formed before the war started, was the Rescue Party, and the men for this work, as far as possible were recruited from building workers with knowledge of ropes and lifting tackle, able to do first aid to buildings and people if necessary.

In our Rural District there were four parties, in villages as near as possible, north, south, east and west. Those north and south were on call for the whole district on even dates, and those on odd dates from east and west. Each party had three teams of seven men, which included a leader, and a driver, with a lorry equipped for all kinds of jobs. I was responsible for the one in our village. It was started up every day and actually went out seventeen times on real incidents.

When the Battle of Britain began the teams answered every call, as they were all voluntary workers, doing their normal jobs as well, so it soon became necessary to have somewhere to rest and sleep when possible and so the garage on the side of the head warden's house was made into a bunk house where a team slept on every odd date, for it was almost certain that the siren would wail some time during the night.

From the garden of this house we saw some of the fiercest battles overhead in 1940. Sometimes we hardly like to believe the newspapers for most of the planes that we saw brought down were our own, for you see we were in the area where the "few" met the German hoards and many of our pilots lay in the garage which housed the Rescue Party van, also used as a temporary mortuary.

In the service register at our Church is an entry on that famous Sunday in September which proved to be the turning point of the battle that tells how just as the priest was on the point of closing the building after evening service, when in walked most of the A.R.P. personnel who had been on duty for many hours. He stayed with them and conducted a very short service of prayer, but if anyone there had realized what a terrific day they had just passed through, those prayers would have been of a very different nature, but they didn't know then how much they had to be thankful for.

When the fury of the Battle of Britain had died down, the calls on the Rescue Party became fewer for some time, until the advent of the flying bomb or V.I. still better known as the "Doodle Bug". I think that these were far more frightening than the bombers.

On the first night that they came over we had no idea what they were. A mighty roar, with fire belching from their tails, going over at clockwork intervals, and biggest puzzle of all they did not come back. After a day or two it was seen that they were going too far, most of them passing over London but the enemy soon altered this, and then some began to fall short of the target, these were the chaps that we got to know very well indeed.

One housing estate was blasted three times by these terrible things and the remarkable thing was that although dozens of buildings were badly damaged each time, not one person was seriously hurt, but everybody's nerves were strained to the uttermost.

There was one old fellow in this district, who, no matter how often the siren sounded, would be out until the all clear went. Many of the women who were without their menfolk felt safer with the knowledge that old Bill was certain to be on the look out, but on the last occasion these houses caught it, the leader called to me to start searching at old Bill's. I said, "Why? Isn't he out here?" He replied, "No, that's why I think something must have happened there".

And sure enough when I knocked on the door, frame and all fell in, and what a mess. Ceilings which had only just been repaired, all down, with broken china and glass everywhere. I went upstairs and found Bill and his old housekeeper still in their beds. The report had been so great that it had temporarily stunned them, and they hadn't heard it. By this time the leader had joined me, so we found their clothes and got them out rather shocked and shaken, but after a good strong cup of tea they felt better, and Bill went to work as usual in the morning.

After that he was able to have better nights, for I believe that that was the very last doodle bug to land in this country. It was certainly the last time that the local Rescue Party was called out.

In the mess room of the builder's yard, another team were housed every night, with one woman in a little room adjoining to answer the telephone. This was the headquarters of the A.F.S. (Auxiliary Fire Service). For a long time their vehicle was a big old Austin saloon, which carried seven men inside, while on top was a box of equipment and spare hose, and towed behind a petrol driven fire pump also piled high with equipment.

Now this outfit as crude as it may seem, did wonderful service, for as well as dealing with incendiary bombs in our district during the blitz, it was called to the outskirts of London many times to stand by as reserve, and on other occasions to Brighton and Eastbourne.

Before the war ended they were supplied with a proper fire tender, but it was the old Austin saloon that did the real job.

There is no doubt that transport for the different services was a problem, and all sorts and conditions were called upon for the many jobs to be done. I have already spoken about the First Aid Party, and also of Sam the carrier. Although Sam was not so young as he was, he was still very fit. He and his van were on call every night for ambulance service. Luckily he was never wanted for a real case, but he put in a lot of time on exercises which often had their funny side.

Now our Deputy Head Warden was a very active Baronet, who had never had occasion to do hard manual work, but in many other ways he was a most useful member of the service, and he really did try to do some of the hard grind which did not come easily to him and if others laughed, he saw the joke even if it was on him.

One evening an exercise was being held and we were trained to make the best use of whatever was at hand. One casualty had got to be lowered from the rafters of a barn, and stored away on those rafters was a tall narrow book-case with the usual loose shelves. These were taken out and the patient put in. Two ropes were passed under the case for lowering to four people on the floor, waiting to take a corner each, Sir Walter being one of them. Now instead of letting it go down with his arms, he kept them above his head and lowered his body until he was in a kneeling position and could not go any further. As you probably know, the back panels in such furniture are very thin, so there was a sudden crack and Sir Walter's head came right through the panel. The "patient" jumped out and helped to free the poor fellow.

On another occasion at a combined practice in a neighbouring village I was an unopious casualty to be lowered from the top of a three-story building by chair knot. The three men sent to rescue me were strangers, and the following conversation took place.

"I don't know, George, but I can't tie this blooming knot!"
George. "I ought to be able to, but I'm blowed if I like sending a chap down in it. Can you do it, Bill?"

Bill. "No, I can't."
Bill then gave me a gentle kick, and said - "Can you tie it, mate?"
You've got to go down in it."

I obliged, and they got me down alright, but what a good job it was only practice!

Often at real incidents things happened which caused a smile. One night we were called to carry out temporary repairs to a house which had had part of an outside wall blown out, and when we arrived the light was still on, with supper laid on the table, with a lovely clump of snowdrops in the butter dish and a brussel sprout plant in the armchair by the fire.

On another occasion after a "doodle bug" had dropped, two of us saw a light flickering. On making a closer inspection we found an old lady whom we knew very well, standing in the midst of a pile of rubble in her night dress, with a candle in her hand; at any other time we should have thought it was a ghost. The remarkable thing was that although everything was flat around her, and she had nothing on her feet, she had not got a scratch anywhere.

The services that I have spoken of so far, were all set up before hostilities started, but as time went on, and as occasion demanded, others were introduced, such as Fire-watchers and Home Guard.

Fire Watchers as the name implies were men and women who worked by rota, keeping a look out for incendiaries, sometimes dropped in large numbers and scattered all over the place, but if dealt with promptly, the damage was mostly slight.

On looking back, what a terrible state we were in, in 1940, when our troops were coming back from Dunkirk. Invasion seemed almost certain and here we were with hardly anything to defend ourselves. Now we can see how futile our feverish efforts would have been if the enemy had crossed the Channel then.

All the bodies already organized were called upon to put up poles in all large fields to impede the landing of aircraft. In our village this was done by wardens and first aid parties, while the fire service and rescue men, with their vehicles, built road blocks with oil drums and railway sleepers.

We had been working without a break for two nights and two days at a very important cross roads on one of these blockades, leaving a gap just big enough for a 'bus to go through, with other drums filled with earth, ready to roll into the opening if needed. The tools were being packed into a lorry, the job having been completed to the satisfaction of the army officer in charge, when along came a double decker 'bus, which slowly made its way through the gap, and before it was quite clear, the driver turned his wheels and carried off a large chunk of the structure on the platform by which the passengers entered and left the 'bus. What chance would it have stood if the 'bus had been a tank?

It may have been worth while, for no doubt it helped to keep up the morale when people saw that we were trying to do something, however small and poor the effort.

These blockades were not left up for long, for it was soon found that they were restricting the movement of our own traffic too much as each day our resources were being built up.

At the same time that these defences were going up hundreds of men were answering the historic call for Local Defence Volunteers. They were issued with khaki arm-bands with letters L.D.V. They mounted guard with any kind of fire-arm that could be found and in some cases with pitch forks and axes, but whatever their uniform or weapon, the one thing that all had in plenty was determination.

The great majority of these men had seen service in the 1914/18 conflict and it was surprising how soon every village and town had a reasonably well trained company or two to keep watch every night and drilling at every spare moment. In a short time the L.D.V. became the Home Guard, all in uniform, and every man with a rifle or sten gun, and I am sure that if it had ever been necessary Britain's Civilian Army would have given a very good account of itself.

At one or two places we still have evidence of this tremendous defence plan in the shape of concrete gun emplacements. Quite a number have been pulled down at considerable expense, for they were put up to withstand real punishment if need be. The ideas used for camouflage were most remarkable. One had a roof of felt and was placed in a chicken run, another looked like a small bungalow, while there is no doubt that the best one was on the village green. The superstructure on this particular one was that of a band stand, complete with weather vane.

When the war finished this was one of the first to be removed, but I sometimes think how nice it would have been to have left it in the hope that a band could have been formed to use it. Once during its life the band of the Royal Corps of Signals gave a concert from it and one Sunday evening the Bishop of the Diocese conducted a service from it, two wonderfully peaceful pursuits, but what an awful reminder underneath.

The great difference between this campaign and the earlier one, was that this time there were troops stationed here all the time, with searchlights, a gas school and often anti-aircraft guns. Marching this time was far too slow. There was instead fast moving transport of all kinds; lorries, Bren gun carriers and tanks. Only in the very early days did we have any music and men on the march, and this was from the 1st Battalion London Irish Rifles, with their quite famous pipe band. All the men wore a green plume in their tammies, and the members of the band also had khaki kilts.

Many of the men as far as possible took part in the everyday life of the place. For some time we had the pleasure of a first-rate musical trio for dances and concerts, such as could be arranged.

They were piano, trumpet and saxophone and sometimes with them a bass who in peace time was a member of the Dooly Carte Opera Company.

How war takes people away from their normal surroundings! You never knew who you might be talking to. One outstanding case I well remember was on one Sunday morning. I was standing at the Church door handing out books, when in came a not too smart corporal. I spoke to him, and from one or two questions that he asked I thought it might be well if I pointed him out to the Vicar.

After the service the Vicar asked if he would care to come in the choir while stationed here. His answer was that he might come. That evening, in the blackout we heard someone shuffling about outside the vestry and on opening the door in came the corporal, with his kit bag. After introductions all round, he took off his boots and put on a pair of slippers from his kit bag. I am afraid that the few of us there were all staring to see what would come next. It proved to be his own cassock and surplice and then the most beautiful hood we had ever seen. When he had put them on amidst absolute silence, our elderly Vicar asked "And what are you?" His answer "I am a university professor, not a priest, but willing to help you all I can." This he did. He was quite a good singer, a first class reader, and we were all sorry when he moved on soon after D-day, and as far as I know, no one here heard of him again.

Because of experience gained years before, food was rationed from the start, and as time went on other things as well. I often think that the women left at home had one of the hardest tasks of all especially when dealing with this great problem. Almost every essential item of food was rationed, but this scheme did, as far as possible ensure for one and all a share of what there was, although as always, there were loopholes, and many made money fast in the black market which developed.

All sorts of things were tried to help things out which we had never heard of before; spam (I never did find out what this was made from,) whale meat and kipper sausages, to say nothing of the pea-nut butter. These are just a few of the many wonders.

At home, to help the fat ration, my wife took what little cream there was on the milk, put it into a small screw-topped honey jar, and we took turns in shaking it until it turned into butter, there wasn't much, but it was worth while.

Perhaps one of the biggest worries were the clothing coupons. No one seemed to have enough of these and at times, if spare ones could be found outrageous prices were often paid for them. A man's suit took more than one year's issue, and so you may be sure there were not many new suits seen at all.

When the war ended, this reticence went on for quite a long time to allow stocks to be built up again, but there were soon a number of army surplus goods for sale. Of the earliest of these which were in great demand were parachutes, which were taken to pieces carefully, provided many yards of suitable material for women's and children's clothes. Army blankets too were sought after, sometimes to be used as blankets, and often to be made into warm coats.

V.E. Day was like a great big sigh of relief, not quite such a day as Armistice Day of 1918, for this was only the end of the fighting close at hand. As far as could be seen the trouble with the Japanese in the Far East could have gone on for years, but we at least could go to bed without fear of being wakened by the dreaded siren.

Many small parties were given for the children. Tables were set up in the streets and residents pooled what they could find in the way of food and refreshments, but the larger public celebrations did not take place until the following summer. By this time V.J. Day had passed and everybody was looking for a lasting peace.

Just before 3 p.m. of V.E. Day while I was making my way to the Church to ring the bell for victory, the only other person to be seen, was a small girl of about 7 or 8 years of age, playing in a garden. She was the daughter of the officer in charge of the bomb disposal squad in the district. Everybody else was listening to Churchill's famous message on the wireless. I knew this child to speak to and I asked her if she would like to come with me and she did. Together we rang the bell, much to her delight and I feel sure that she realized that it was a great occasion for everybody.