

LONDON IN THE BLITZ: a “Remainer” remembers!

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I was a child of barely seven when the war broke out. Unlike more than a million other children, I was not judged in need of permanent evacuation, to the countryside or the Colonies. So, I stayed at home. And I did escape most of the Blitz, living in Windsor Drive, East Barnet, South Herts. I was still in primary school there, when Queen Elizabeth’s Grammar School up in High Barnet (my elite future Alma Mater) was hit, on the night of 11 January 1941. Seven bombs were dropped, four falling in the surrounding fields, but three of them hitting the school building, destroying the refectory and some of the science laboratories. Yet eventually Fate caught up with little me. On the night of 22 February 1944, four big bombs fell alongside Windsor Drive – of which, more below.

What was it all like? What was a little boy’s wartime Weltanschauung and Sitz im Leben?

Public morale was, I think, quite good- Class Distinctions, for example, tended to dissolve, in the shared peril, and Religious Faith to flourish. But my infant patriotism notwithstanding, the actual progress of the war, worldwide, mostly passed me by. I vaguely remember some stirring speeches of Sir Winston Churchill on the radio. Also my mother, turning from her wireless, telling me that France had fallen. But that meant almost nothing to me. It was day-to-day, local things that really signified, and the changes in day to day living.

Civilian life was naturally very different from before the war. Food was rationed – especially things like butter, eggs, meat, sweets and sugar; but also even clothing. We had to put our spare scraps of food in “pig bins”. We were told to “Dig for Victory”, by growing our own vegetables in “allotments”. We had to have “coupons” for everything. Even sweet coupons. I remember going down Cat Hill to a little sweet shop once a week to get my six pennyworth: usually a lemonade and some chocolate buttons. In the main shopping area down in East Barnet village, there were long queues at the butchers and grocery shops whenever they had something to offer. When my poor mother had nothing whatsoever in the larder to give me, I would be sent out to walk up to New Barnet at lunchtime, to get a basic meal at a so-called “British Restaurant”, a kind of field kitchen.

In The Battle of Britain, the initial mass German daytime air-raids were broken up and repelled, by our Spitfires and Hurricanes. Most bombers thereafter came at night, even though they inevitably met difficulty in locating their precise targets. The daytime in North London became largely free of incident, for the rest of the war (until the V1s and V2s came-on which more below). For me, to the point that, all day Saturday, the playground of the

Primary School, adjacent to our house, was used for drilling young women volunteers in the ATS or WAAF. Before I went up to QE at High Barnet with a Scholarship, and had other things to do on Saturdays, I used to gawp at these girls in uniform, awestruck by their discipline and precision.

Occasionally, my parents would take me up to town for the day, to watch a play or a musical. (There was no evening theatre; because of the bombing, that finished at 5 o'clock, so that everyone could go home safely).

Things changed with the German introduction of subsonic, pilotless V1 buzz bombs and supersonic V2 rockets, towards the end of the war. Daytime became as lively as night. I still recall sitting petrified in a carriage in St Pancras station, listening to the characteristic stuttering engine, as a buzz bomb flew close over the glass roof and onwards. The moment their engines stopped, they dropped vertically and delivered a massive load of high explosive. The V2 rockets were less of a challenge to morale, because they were supersonic – you heard the explosion first and then the rushing of their approach second.

But I digress. For most of the war, German aircraft bombing was usually at night. The approach of enemy aircraft was signalled by an air-raid siren (called 'Moaning Minnie', for the rise and fall of its penetrating note – it always gave me the shivers). We then had to get out of bed and go outdoors to the bottom of the garden, into a cold, damp "dugout", until the siren sounded the "All clear". Once in this shelter, I could nevertheless still hear the tinkle of shrapnel, falling on roof tiles and roads and the school playground. It came from the flak – the anti-aircraft shells – bursting in the sky overhead. We boys used to collect it. There was always a rush, once daylight had come, to see who could find the biggest and most jagged pieces. Before that, once the All Clear had sounded, we could escape from our garden shelter and go back to the house. The skyline to the South was often luridly illuminated by burning buildings in The City. My father (a veteran of World War I, having fought with the Artists' Rifles, but despite that being tolerant of the Germans, with whom the family business had traded for almost a century) used to tell me that the fires made him contemptuous: "Why don't they just drop leaflets? People might see them in a less bad light!"

Meanwhile, outside The City, up in Barnet, people adapted quite well. In fact, it was all a bit like Dad's Army. In our own Windsor Drive, there was a cheerful social life in the street shelters, once they had been erected: oblong structures with massive walls and reinforced concrete roofs, equipped with bunk beds and toilets. Lots of playing cards and drinking beer and even singing. (Sadly, my parents, who disapproved, kept me away). There was also a quiet, illegal local trade in coupons. (We Fieldings got extra clothing coupons from our elderly cleaning lady on a local council housing estate, who needed the money). And just as burglary and bomb-site looting and pick-pocketing took place in town, petty theft was not unknown in the suburbs - especially, our way, the pilfering of allotments.

Enterprise went even further. One very pretty, dark-haired and buxom wench, with masses of make-up, living up the road from us, would stalk off to the bus stop each morning, on her way to earning her living, allegedly, on Piccadilly Circus - sometimes at night bringing back a friendly American GI with her.

But, make no mistake, the war was in deadly earnest, which brings me now to the night of 22 February, 1944.

P. Fielding Ltd had three small factories, making artificial flowers and feathers (which kept women's clothes attractive, despite the clothes rationing) ladies' hats and children's toys. One of them was in Luton and out of harm's way, but the other two were in the City and in need of care and attention. So on the night of the 22nd, my father was up in town, performing his ARP duties and guarding our premises off Old Street, in Helmet Row (the bigger, in Fann Street, had already been destroyed). Mother and I were back at home in the ground floor drawing room, warm and snug inside our new Morrison Shelter: a steel table with side shutters which, it was hoped, would protect us from all but a direct hit. The siren had sounded and we heard the familiar note of an approaching Heinkel bomber (its two engines were unsynchronised and so emitted a characteristic oscillating growl). Looking back, I would guess flak and Spitfires had split the raiders up. This plane found itself alone and lost over North London and had decided simply to dump its bombs, in order to try and get off home as soon as possible. The pilot had spotted Littlegrove Primary School in the moonlight, an extensive and sprawling building, which could well have looked like a barracks. (Probably the bombers had thought the same of Queen Elizabeth's School, up in High Barnet three years before). We heard the penetrating screams of three or four bombs. Then almighty crashes. One bomb hit the house in Cat Hill, nearest to us. Another bomb, also in Cat Hill, blew the leg off a fellow Elizabethan (M.J. Rogers, of Underne House), who had been standing outside his front door to watch. The targeted neighbouring Primary School escaped, although its playing field was cratered.

In our house, in Windsor Drive, the ceiling fell down with a thump on the steel Morrison table and glass from the window panes, notwithstanding the tape on them, flew about everywhere. But my mother and I were okay. After a bit, the ARP came to the rescue, taking us to a "Rest Centre", in East Barnet village hall. Being by then 11 years of age, I was determined to be a Big Boy. So I remained stiff upper lip and unperturbed – until someone gave me a cup of tea. Then, my shoulders began to shake and I wept like never before or since. Naturally, mum gave me a cuddle.

Then came a distraction. An ARP warden came in to announce that the Heinkel had been shot down over South London with the loss of its entire crew. Silence followed. Then, my mother spoke. She had never travelled abroad and had had less formal education than my father, (himself a product of The Stationers' School in the City). But she was naturally – as we all were – patriotic. At one stage, during my school hours, she had worked part-time to support the war effort in the local munitions factory in Whetstone (where she had a narrow escape—it was hit, after she had gone off shift). So what did she say about the shot-down

bomber? “All right, everyone, there’s a war on , for all of us. But don’t forget that each one of those airmen was some German mother’s son!”

I quoted that, in the address at my mother’s funeral in St Lawrence’s Ludlow, 20 years ago, in 1999. Before then, I had thought of it quite often, when working as a Director in the European Commission in Brussels in the 1970s. One of my three Division Chiefs was a brilliant, newly promoted, young German. He spoke fluent English (if with a slight American accent), had married a charming French girl, and evidently very much liked and respected the Brits.(His father, in the Imperial German Navy in World War I, apparently used to tell him that the superiority of the Royal Navy over their own was down to the quality of British officers!)

I discovered in due course that Guenther came from Hamburg, where, as a baby, he had narrowly escaped the attentions of the RAF’s carpet bombing. In my turn, I told him about my own experience in Barnet. He thought about it for a little, then said: “Boss, I guess that’s why we’re both working like crazy here in Brussels, for a united Europe, and an end to civil wars!” The chap’s dead now, so I haven’t had to tell him about BREXIT. It would have shattered him.

We Brits were right to feel, after 1945, a keen sense of pride that our democratic sovereign institutions had survived unscathed through the most perilous years in our country’s history, just as we had come through the Napoleonic wars and World War I. But we do well to recognise that, as President Macron said quite recently, the EU has helped banish war from a continent historically prone to bloodshed, allowing prosperity to flourish in its stead .And, to do us credit, it deserves to be mentioned that the EU’s present shape owes a great deal to the British. We were the driving force behind the Single Market’s creation, and the enlargement of the bloc into Central and Eastern Europe, after the Cold War. To be candid, in our day, we Brits (Yes- me and my mates too!) did as much as any to reconcile a devastated continent in an unprecedented project of peace

I find this a consoling thought, today, when I look back at the Blitz on London I lived through, as a kid. It is what I, as a Remainer, prefer to think about it all, however grim, these days, our probable British future- and however enfeebled the EU will be without us..