

Chapter 5.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

THE PHONY WAR: - Appeasement - Imperial Defence – Sirens – Evacuation – Shelters – Black Out - Allotments – Dig for Victory – Make do and Mend – Rationing – The Blitz – Sand Bags – Air Raid Precautions.

The Committee for Imperial Defence agreed that a subcommittee should be instigated to look into the organization for a war: of civil and home defence, censorship, and war emergency legislation. This group was called the Air Raid Precautions subcommittee, eventually to be run by General Ismay. In 1933, local authorities were chosen as the agency to be responsible of local organization. The ARP was organized as a department of the Home Office under the control of Wing Commander E J Hodsall in 1935. The same year Germany re-established her air force. It was this action which drove the ARP to start issuing instructions to the local authorities, merchant shipping lines and fire services.

In September 1935 local authorities were invited to make plans for the building of shelters. These were made out of brick and roofed with reinforced concrete. We had one built at the bottom of the road only being used for the first few air raid warning gradually neglected and left damp, dark and very uninviting!

Gradually, the possibility of war increased to the extent that in 1937 the ARP issued an appeal for volunteers. A year later the ARP Act came into force, compelling all local authorities to set up schemes to enrol: wardens, first aid and ambulance services, gas precautions: The Auxiliary Fire Services, including rescue, repair and demolition: there would be first aid posts, gas decontamination and casualty clearing stations. That year, in 1938, the service was put on standby and trenches dug in all London parks and sand bags filled to protect doorways.

The duties of the police were increased, unable to carry out all the tasks a band of Police Reserves took over some of their jobs. Later, in 1938, the Women's Voluntary Services was formed to help the ARP. They did most of the tasks asked of the men including being responsible for children, providing food and medical support. Sir John Anderson started to distributed one and a half million shelters made out of six curved steel plates – as a roof, sealed at either end by further steel plates. It measured 6' 6" by 4' 6" – meant to accommodate six people. The shelters were supposed to be half buried. In the even they became filled with water or at best extremely damp. These shelters were free to the poor or cost seven pounds to the well paid. Morrison shelters were issued three years later and represented a heavy steel table with wired sides, to sleep two adults.

Our ARP man cycled around on his bike in his normal clothes with a black and white ARP armband. He was a part-time volunteer. When the 'blackout' restrictions came into being the Auxiliary Fire Service was too... it was the start to all the other emergency arrangements put into place. The early air raid warning siren droned its message - warning of an approaching enemy aircraft. The wardens were trained in all aspects of rescue work, first aid, bomb protection and supervised the use of road shelters. The Civil Defence services did not get their uniforms until 1941.

After Neville Chamberlain became prime minister in May 1937 the topic of the country's newspaper's was politics – international rather than home. The main point of discussion was about stopping Italy and Germany from expanding their economies by armament production and, seeking to enlarge their territories by force. The new prime minister elected to do this by giving in to their demands in a spirit of cooperation and reasonableness – to win them over by friendliness. Chamberlain acted desperately to stop the progression towards this aggressive behaviour. This period of 'appeasement' lasted over a year. Towards the end the inevitability of war became apparent

and national defence took the place of the previous concessions. It was the Foreign Secretary Edward Halifax who realised the extent of German ambitions when Hitler occupied the final part of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. He did an about face pushing Chamberlain to offer a guarantee to the Polish Nation - that Britain would support them if threatened by an outside force. The Prime Minister lost all creditability when Norway fell to a German invasion... supported Halifax to succeed him as leader. Halifax realised that he did not have the full support of the Conservative Party. Churchill was asked by the King to form a coalition with Labour and Liberal participation.

IMPERIAL DEFENCE

War was declared on the 3rd September 1939. The following day The Committee for Imperial defence started England's war machine. The defence team included: Major Leslie Hollis, Wing Commander William Elliot, Major Ian Jacob, and Lieutenant Lord Coleridge. This was late combined into a single War Cabinet Secretariat under Sir Edward Bridges and the military side under General Ismay. It was Ismay who informed Churchill of suggestions and decisions made. Britain entered the war supplying only forty per cent of the country's needs. The Ministry of Food was formed on the 8th September under William Morrison as its head.

In July 1940 the Local Defence Volunteers had their name changed to the Home Guard. This force stayed in existence until December 1944. During their operational service they manned guard posts, observation posts and coastline defences, whilst acting to combat parachutists and spies... some were trained to act as guerrilla units behind enemy lines.

SIRENS

Stanley, my brother, started school for the first time that week, and I followed on a year later. We expected German planes to fly over immediately, but none arrived. The air-raid sirens were sounded for the first time to alert people to their sound. The local Air Raid Protection Officer cycled round on his bike blowing his whistle shouting out that when we heard the sirens we should 'take cover'.

EVACUATIONS

In London the evacuations started. Queues formed outside main line stations for children to be lead off to their appointed trains. Sand bags were being hurriedly filled and placed at door entrances and directions posted telling people where their nearest air raid shelter sited. Volunteers were asked for to fill the vacancies for jobs on the Home Front – as Air Raid Wardens, ambulances and fire service. Women too were not excluded manning fire fighting posts, enrolled as bus conductors and ambulance drivers.

My parents did not consider it necessary for us boys to be evacuated. Whether or not they would have joined the scheme if we had lived closer into the heart of London I do not know. It was never mentioned even after the largest raids during The Blitz.

ALLOTMENTS – DIG FOR VICTORY

The Government's slogan 'Dig for Victory' emblazoned posters and hoardings. The charismatic Minister of Food Lord Woolton instigated this call to the nation which became a great success. He promoted various schemes to improve plant growth printing books and leaflets detailing

the importance of compost heaps and plant care. This was done using cartoon pictures of two characters Doctor Carrot and Potato Pete. Carrots were considered necessary 'to help see in the dark', promoted by a fighter pilot describing how he managed to shoot down a German plane in the dark. On the radio there was much talk about happening 'on the home-front' keeping the population alive to the need for self help.

Woolton's slogans and posters were first used in September 1939, extolling everyone to consider every plot of ground - to grow fruit and vegetables - to be self sufficient. The majority of our neighbours did so in various degrees. My father dug out some plots in the lawn built a large chicken run stocked with laying boxes and kept a rabbit. Some neighbours produced their own vegetables, others kept chickens and ducks, and some chose to keep both. There was a scheme to breed more pigs. A special pig food collection scheme was put into place for shopkeepers and the general public to contribute to. Local parks and recreation grounds were ploughed up for wheat production as was spare railway land, and roadside verges.

All these schemes were put into place - certainly at the start of the war with Government leaflets and booklets giving instructions on all aspects of planting, one was entitled Allotments and Garden Guide published in 1943. The production of kitchen gardens and allotments was so successful that natural fertilizers and manure ran out. A National Growmore fertilizer, made out of balanced chemicals was made available by George Monro & Sons. Gradually, these petered out, as the war progressed - as it became obvious that the war was being won.

Eighty per cent of all allotments were to be found in urban areas. The Ministry of Agriculture promoted a scheme for the unemployed in conjunction with the Society of Friends, the National Allotments Committees, and a number of Benevolent Societies.

Dig for Victory was a huge success begun without any idea that it would have such a long lasting effect upon the community. Imports of food dropped by fifty per cent, and the acreage of land ploughed increased by eighty per cent. Once the habit was formed and the people caught on to its worthwhileness it became something to be proud of - became a talking point with ones neighbours.

MAKE DO AND MEND

The effort to become less reliant on imports ran with the national effort to 'Make do and Mend'. This was to stop people wastefully buying new things, many of them being imports. Schools and local social groups collected scrap metal and ran jumble sales to collect money to help buy an aeroplane. Other groups knitted socks or gloves for the military. Merchant ships were commissioned to transport war materials, troops and the few items that the country was incapable of producing for itself. Before the war Britain imported fifty-five million tons of food mostly from America and Canada.

As children we carefully collected bottles to take back to the shop for the payment of a halfpenny. Newspapers and magazines carefully hoarded, and old iron, aluminium pots and pans ended up on the scrap heap. The rag and bone man circled the streets with his horse and cart as did the scrap metal collector. Iron railings were offered up and the pig cart arrived to take away kitchen scraps for the council pigs.

Household baths could only be filled to four inches, rags sewn together to make rugs. Wool wound on sticks then cut to size - knotted on hessian - to make wool rugs. Bricks placed at the back of the fire to save room for the scarce coal... and mothers always knitting for the family or for the army. Jig saws entertained the family on long winter night, whilst listening to ITMA and Tommy Handley, or 'Have a Go' with Wilfred Pickles.

RATIONING

It did not take the Government long before food had to be rationed. Clothing, coal, and petrol soon added to the list. Game birds, rabbits, hares, horse meat and chickens were not rationed. Ration Book was issued in September 1939 in readiness for the start date of January, the following year.

The rationing 'points' system was put into place to regularise distribution. Pregnant women, young children, and those on a diet had their special needs met. There were no objections to rationing as everyone thought it equitable. As for any 'black market', it was talked about but we were never involved and I am sure my mum would not have known where to go to get it! Householders had to declare where they were going to shop when they filled in the ration book.

Healthy eating was not mentioned at home, it wasn't thought about, or planned for. We ate exactly what we had always eaten— the diet we were used to – that did not require great changes to be made or thinking about to plan for. Any deficiencies like the lack of sugar was made up by saccharine, lack of fresh milk – by adopting powdered, the same as eggs and potatoes. The dried eggs were tried but only used in cooking. The dried potatoes were simply awful and never eaten. Mum was a wonder at 'making do' making meals look appetising even if they were lacking in quality. Rabbit and fish were eaten more times than before the war; mince was liberally bulked out with bread, onion and carrot. Spam was fried or made into toad-in-the-hole. Milk puddings, apple pie, blackberries from the country hedge, rhubarb, bread and butter puddings, suet puddings and dried fruit with junket. Only very occasionally mum borrowed sugar from next door.

London County Council organised a Meals Service which started in September 1940 and from this evolved into the British Restaurants, designed for emergency eating, especially for those 'bombed out'. By mid 1941, there were two hundred working, one of them built at the bottom of the road, on Station Road.

It was that September, 1940, that Germany began fifty-eight consecutive nights of bombing – this was The Blitz... the first time that we saw, felt and appreciated the seriousness of the situation. I was five, and going to school...!

THE LAST DAYS OF 1939.

We were all quite disappointed. When we heard our Prime Minister declaring war we believed the guns would start firing and bombs would be dropped. [This wasn't to be. Despite the country's guarantee to Poland the government had no plans in place to conduct a war. This was known as The Phoney War and lasted for nine months. It is just as well for we were ill prepared and nine months would give us some chance to catch up and show our metal. My father was the Regiment's longest serving non commissioned soldier. As regimental sergeant Major his task was to instil discipline and act as a sort of policeman making sure standards were kept and routines upheld. He was decommissioned as a major becoming the second in command, detailed off to start planning for the supposed German invasion. One of his tasks was to develop a corps of individuals to lay low after an invasion to act as a behind an invasion gorilla force. His task was to plan and staff a number of secret hideaway locations in and around Epping Forest – only to surface after the Germans had passed by - to attack them from the rear.

I do hope this account has made the picture clear. These are not jaundiced or romantic views but drawn from reliable sources and my own memory of times lived and observed. If you read 'In The First Fifteen' you will complete the picture with a bit more colour.