My memories of WW2

It’s appropriate that today Eric, Stewart and I reminisce on our memories of WW2 as it’s exactly 80 years ago today that our government declared war against Germany. I believe it must have been a Sunday as I recall the Minister of my Church in Norwich interrupting the Service to tell us this incredibly sad news.

But, I was only 4 years old and clearly I was in no position to appreciate the significance of the announcement. No one could imagine that this was the beginning of a war which would cost 50 million lives.

So, when did I become involved? Probably the first thing was that I had to carry a gas mask with me to school AND I had to know how to use at a moment’s notice. We must remember that one of the biggest killers in WW1 was gas in the trenches and it had been anticipated that gas bombs would be used on our civilian population.

Next to affect me was the tape stuck on all our windows plus the blackout curtains. I had a much older brother who was a local authority official and he became responsible for Norwich’s Air Raid Precaution staff and he had to leave our house and ensure that the ARP staff were in place and doing their job. Since bombing was either in progress or lots of Luftwaffe aircraft were overhead, I realised that he was in danger of being killed or injured.

My journey to school was through a timber company building nissan huts and suddenly deep concrete tanks were being built with the walls about 12 inches above ground level. Soon these were full of creosote so that hut sections could be immersed in them.

Very often we were woken in the night by the ordinary alarm followed by the Crash alarm which meant that enemy aircraft were expected any minute. Usually they were overflying us en route to the factories in the Midlands but we still had to get up and go down to the bottom of the garden where we had a specially built air raid shelter. The 80 yards to the shelter was alongside lots of lavender bushes which I still recall when I smell their pungent odour. There we stayed until the morning unless the Crash alarm had not been cleared.

In 1943 I went to my Secondary school next to Norwich Cathedral and this meant that I was taken by car from the village where I lived through the centre of Norwich where I became used to the sight of firemen clearing up the bomb damage from the previous night’s incendiary attacks. We had to be careful that we didn’t drive over the hose lines as these were in short supply.

One of the school buildings had been destroyed by an incendiary bomb about 2 months earlier and the smell of burnt wood lingered for several years.

Our school field was a short distance from the school buildings but on all sides there were decoys to persuade the Germans not to use this large grass area on which to make a landing. In one corner was a barrage balloon unit and in others were mock-ups of tanks, aircraft, and gun emplacements.

I had joined the school choir and on Christmas Day 1943 we were invited to a huge American airforce base to sing to the airmen. So we were excited to get closer to the large bombers which flew over us all the time. We were asked to be at school by 1 pm to be picked up in one of the trucks – enormous compared with anything then used on our roads. This was all fine except for the pick-up time as our parents had gone to a lot of trouble to give us our Christmas Dinner at an early hour.

However, we duly arrived at the airbase and were asked to sing a couple of carols before we would be sitting down for ‘the meal’!

The meal was in a vast mess hall and because it was Christmas the officers joined the other ranks for the most comprehensive meal I had ever then seen.

Remember that rationing had come in in 1940 and by 43 we were on very meagre meals. We certainly did not have turkeys or ice cream or bananas and what’s this jam-like stuff called Cranberry sauce. New to us all.

Despite having had a meal at home we tucked in with relish but were reminded by our choir master that we would also be singing later in the day.

The Yanks were marvellous hosts and mentioned that even the Hun might not be paying them a visit on Christmas Day.

Life wasn’t always good for the Americans who had invaded Norfolk and less than a mile from our house a Liberator bomber went straight into the ground creating a hole several yards deep.

On reflection my war was heavily influenced by the Yanks in our area. They had the equivalent of their Naafi – the PX – in the Bishop’s Palace which was next to the School and dropped chewing gum wrappers all over the Close – a Cardinal sin.

In late May 1944 I was cycling to school one day and was amazed to find a main road into the City absolutely crammed with American vehicles of all types and sizes – each with a newly painted white star on each side. They stayed there for 2 or 3 days and disappeared as quickly as they had arrived. D-day was a few days later and doubtless most of these vehicles would have ended up in France except for those still resting on the bottom of the English Channel. Perhaps one or two are now in the care of our Caen friend Jean-Pierre Benamou!

The news reports on the BBC Home Service kept us reasonably up to date as to what was happening in the war but there were also graphic accounts in the cinemas from Pathe News and it was there that we learned of the successes and failures of our servicemen. It was there that I first saw the horrors of the Concentration camps. I was still aged only 10.

By 1945 food was slightly more available partly because the Dig for Victory campaign was bearing fruit and we had a supply of eggs from our own hens and ducks; also, honey from our beehives. But all these birds and insects had to be looked after and by now my Father was 74 and not very fit. So I was more than busy.

By late April of that year we learned that Hitler had committed suicide and that was an enormous relief to everyone. Rather like I imagine will be the case when and if the Brexit problem is solved. The bogey man had gone.

May 8th duly arrived and war in Europe was over. So all seamed well until local people reminded us that many of the soldiers had joined the Royal Norfolk Regiment and were still fighting the Japs in the Far East. Also that many had been taken prisoners and that little had been heard for some time. By August 15 the atomic bombs had been dropped and that war was also over. But then came the news of the terrible state of many of the prisoners and soon these emaciated men were to be seen in the City wearing their light blue Recovery uniforms. Whilst they largely recovered, many of my friends had relatives who never fully regained their full weight and vitality.

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