

Jean Hughes

War-time Memories

These are a few of my memories of growing up in Kent during world war two.

The picture you can see above is a party for the 'Cogs'. Both my parents were in charge of the salvage operations for the estate, which meant a collection point outside our house for paper, metal and (probably) glass. Is recycling anything new?! The 'Cogs' were children, and our job was to go around collecting recyclable material. Once a year, as a thank you, my mother organised a party for all salvagers in our garden. In this picture, I'm the girl in the white dress in the middle of the picture. Mum is directly behind me, right at the back. She wasn't as severe as she looks there! And my brother is to her left. We didn't get any money for our efforts, only the glory! In the summer holidays before the war started, I remember us children going round to the school, filling sandbags. They were also digging trenches for the air raid shelters. We had a field at the back of the school and they dug into that for some of them. The term started with us having half day schooling at private houses, not at the school. We weren't allowed to congregate at a school at that time. Eventually we went back to normal schooling.

I was in the North East part of Kent, the Beckenham Borough, in the West Wickham area. We were probably only about three miles from Biggin Hill fighter station, so we saw a lot of the dog fights during the Battle of Britain. I can remember standing in our own garden, watching the planes weaving in the air. As children, we weren't scared. We didn't really appreciate what was happening. But we did pick up some of the shrapnel.

On our estate, all the empty houses were taken over by the military to house firstly British soldiers, and then Canadian soldiers, which we loved, because we got chewing gum and comics! The Canadians used to come to our house for a decent bath. That was because they would billet ten Canadians in a three bedroomed house. They also had a little Lewis gun, which they fired off occasionally, but to little purpose. The one time I noticed it, was when a Spitfire pilot had to bale out, and was machine gunned by a German. That's why the Canadians really went mad at that time with the Lewis gun, because they felt so helpless.

A lot of the Canadians on our estate eventually went over to Dieppe (for the Dieppe raid). They lost a lot of lives there. There was one Canadian who befriended us, and his brother came over and he was on the Dieppe raid. That really affected him.

My brother is 18 months older than me, and there were four boys in his year at school who got hold of a grenade from somewhere. It must have been after some of the soldiers had been on manoeuvres or something, I'm not sure. It went off in someone's front garden and killed all four of them.

When the raids were going on, I used to try and get to sleep by seven in the evening. Any later, and I would have heard the bombers going to London. Though we didn't get bombed intentionally in our area, we did get any bombs that were being off-loaded to lighten the planes on their way back to Germany. The only time we ever got any kind of attack was during the Battle of Britain, when the Germans targeted all three air fields around us. Once the raids were over, life went on pretty much as normal at home. I went on to the grammar school, and even though I had to cycle the three or four miles there and back, I didn't feel threatened. We didn't have too many after-school activities though. We used to play netball, tennis and cricket, but that became more restricted. Though life was reasonably OK, there were occasions when the war was brought home to us. Like the time that my mother was shopping in the local shops and a lone German fighter flew straight down the middle of the road, machine gunning as he went. Luckily no-one was killed. But it left me very, very nervous if my mother was out. Before the war, my mother had been a nurse, so she became a Lady Superintendent in the British Red Cross. My father was a warden, and he worked up in London for the London Hydraulic Power Company, which was in charge of Tower Bridge. You weren't supposed to go up there, but he took me up to the pedestrian way at the top.

Life went on pretty much as normal, until the doodlebugs arrived. I can remember that that started in June 1944. I was coming home from Girl Guides on a Thursday evening, and I saw this bomb-shaped thing in the sky with wings, and a tail of fire. It went over us, and we didn't know what it was. It must have exploded somewhere nearer London. With the doodlebugs, you didn't get any warning- no sirens or anything. They came too quickly for that.

That was when my father decided that we had to be evacuated. My mother and I came up to Birmingham. My school did get evacuated, but I didn't go with them, so my mother and I were on our own.

I started school in Birmingham. There were only six of us Southerners in the school, and we became well known

for being 'the evacuees'. We stayed there for six months, coming home around March 1945. We thought it was clear by then, but there were still one or two stray V2s coming down.

I can remember watching the V2s, because we were just on the end of the balloon barrage around London. In the beginning, when the V2s came over, they would catch the cables on the barrage balloons but, in time, the Germans devised anti-magnetic V2 bombs, and these would weave their way through the cables. Then, the second line of defence was the fighters, and they used to shoot them down.

We didn't travel around very much during the war. We didn't have a car. We'd go to my Aunt's in Surrey sometimes, but that meant going in to Croydon, and then catching a Green Line bus out again.

At the beginning of the war, my mum and dad thought my brother and I would be safer with my Aunt and Uncle in Reigate in Surrey. My brother was playing with a friend, and swore. I don't know why really, as we didn't swear at home. But that was it! My aunt and uncle were strict chapel goers, and said they couldn't have him living there. I assume that they probably would have let me stay (goody goody!) but my mother said 'Well if he's coming home, so is she.'

I remember going to the greengrocers to get bananas, which we didn't see very much of. This was obviously towards the end of the war, when things were starting to get through. The person I'm referring to as my father was actually my step father, and I had kept my father's name, so that was the name on my ration book. My mother was about six people behind me. She went in the queue with her ration book, which would have had my step father's surname. Obviously the greengrocer didn't look too hard at the addresses, so we managed to get double rations!

On at least one occasion, because the trains weren't running, my step father had to walk about twelve to fifteen miles home from London. A lot of people would do that, walking down the railway line, as it was easier than walking on the roads. Because they were steam trains, nothing was electrified, so it was perfectly safe.