

My memories of the war, 1939-45

I was born in 1937. At the beginning of the war I lived on the outskirts of London at 46 Burleigh Road, Sutton. The family consisted of my mother, father, grandmother, grandfather and elder brother (by eight years, since a brother had died in between). My mother had two more children, both boys, during the war. My father had a garage and taxi business in the North End Road, Fulham.

There was (and still is, I think), a Territorial Army Centre a few hundred yards away at the end of Burleigh Road, which at that time contained an anti-aircraft battery.

My earliest identifiable memory is of my father and Alan Jenkins (my 16 year old cousin), digging a hole for the air raid shelter in the back garden. I fell down the hole they were digging and gashed my right hip; I have the scar to this day. (Alan, who was in the Cadet Corps at school, joined the RAF when little more than 17; he was subsequently trained as a pilot in Canada, under the British Commonwealth Air Training Scheme. Because of his ability he was kept on as a flying instructor, but was killed within months in a training crash in 1943. In 2007 I was able, for the first time, to visit his grave at Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.)

Initially my father was an Air Raid Warden. I have a memory of my mother, during an air raid, clinging to him and begging him not to go out; he carefully explained that that was precisely what he had to do. Later he was an officer in the Home Guard for the duration of the war. He was awarded the Defence Medal.

Another memory is of everyone else having already got out of the house into the shelter and my mother pushing me under the heavy oak dining room table and covering me with her body as the house shook.

Mainly because of the shells from the nearby ack-ack battery, I was later able to collect a fair amount of shrapnel. My mother wouldn't allow it in the house and so I hid it in the garden until she discovered it.

In the late summer of 1944 my elder brother and I were sent up to friends in the country near Spalding, Lincolnshire, while my mother gave birth to my youngest brother. During our stay we worked in the fields with German and Italian prisoners of war (who had large yellow patches on the backs of their shirts), bringing in the harvest. I have strong memories of the horse drawn hay

cart (on which I was allowed to ride), and of fruitcake (a huge treat), eaten by the hedgerow at the end of the final day.

Later that same year, back at home, my younger brother (born 1941), and I - bored with being down the shelter - climbed up to the entrance, only to see a V1 "flying bomb" skim over the roof of our house. As it did so, the engine cut out, and it glided down into the next road (Ash Road), where it destroyed a house. After the explosion there was a huge plume of pale smoke, full of fluttering sheets of paper; suggesting that it must have been a house containing many books.

Victory in Europe (VE) Day involved a huge bonfire at the crossroad junction of Burleigh Road and Ash Road. The local chimney-sweep got fairly inebriated, which was probably my first experience of a person "under the influence". I happened to be in that area a few years ago, and one could still see on the surface of the road where the bonfire had been.

I saw the newsreel of the liberation of Belsen, which had a profound effect on me.

David Rumsey

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