

Written by Jean Gordon (nee Morton)

MEMORIES OF WAR (Home Front)

During the summer of 1939 my mother rented a flat in Albion Place, Ramsgate, Kent. My Nan was staying with Mum and me and when war was declared in September we already had practice with the air raid sirens. Soon after we had gone to bed that night the siren went off and my Mum got me up and dressed and was urging my Nan to "come on" because we had to walk down a lot of steps to the seafront to the old railway tunnel for shelter. My Nan kept saying "Wait 'til I've done me 'air" (she had to make two plaits and then do a circle of the plait to cover each ear! By the time she had achieved this the all clear sounded as it had been a "false alarm".

On September 7th 1939 I had my thirteenth birthday. I had been a pupil at Fort Pitt Day Technical School for Girls in Chatham where we had lived as my Dad was in the Royal Navy. When war was declared he was on HMS Cornwall covering the China Station and had been at sea for over a year. My school was evacuated to Wales but my Mum didn't want me to go, so we stayed in Ramsgate and my Nan returned to Hounslow in Middlesex where she lived with my Mum's sister. I went to St. Georges School for one term and in January 1940 we moved to Sittingbourne, Kent as Fort Pitt School had joined Sittingbourne Girls Grammar School. In September 1940 we moved back to Chatham as Fort Pitt had reopened.

We always rented a house and I recall my teenage years when my Mum worked as a Cook/Supervisor at a school in Rochester. Food rationing was very frugal and so we had our own chickens and rabbits and I was encouraged to 'dig for victory' so that we could grow our own 'spuds'! I also remember having a row with my Mum when she killed the first of our chickens and I said that I wasn't going to eat any of it. She responded by saying "Just wait until your father comes home; I won't have this sort of behaviour from you!"

We occasionally had letters from my Dad but he wasn't able to give any details of where he was or had been as all letters had to be checked before they were sent to us.

And so, with the Japanese declaration of war, it was necessary for my Dad's ship, HMS Cornwall, along with a number of other ships to be moved to the Indian Ocean and on 5th April 1942 my Dad's ship was dive-bombed and began to sink very quickly. They had orders to abandon ship and many of them, including my Dad, clung to rafts and debris for over 30 hours in the sea before ships appeared and picked up the survivors who were taken to Durban, South Africa.

Of course, at the time we had no idea what had happened to my Dad and I recall going with my Mum to a public phone box near the Town Hall in Chatham where my Mum had to ring the Admiralty in Bath to see if they had any news for us. We did this over a period of nearly four weeks and my Mum would come out of the phone box shaking her head which I knew meant "No news". The day she came out crying and ran to hug me I knew that Dad was O.K.! In those days it cost 1/- to make the phone call and I can well imagine that the Admiralty in Bath, Somerset were inundated with calls from families.

The survivors were taken in by families in Durban and I know that my Dad kept in touch with them for many years but, unfortunately, I don't know their name.

As you can imagine it was wonderful to have Dad with us for a while before he was posted to HMS Uganda and they were based in the Mediterranean Sea. He was a Chief Petty Officer and when they were just off the coast of Sicily they were torpedoed and would have sunk if he had not given orders to close all the bulkhead doors. HMS

Uganda had to go to Charleston, S. Carolina, USA where it was repaired and eventually transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy.

Later, as a result of my Dad's action he was awarded a Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) and my Mum and I went to Buckingham Palace where King George VI presented it to him!