

Written by Pamela Netherstreet

My memory of the war started in Ladywell, Lewisham. I was ten years old. In August 1939 my father was called up, he was a member of the T.A. at Catford. The 60th City of London Regiment H.A.A. They went to France at the very beginning of the war with 1914-18 guns. I remember so well the night he went – we had been on holiday in Broadstairs when a telegram came from home to tell him to report at once. We had only been there four days – so back we went. To this day I can see him standing by my bed that night in his uniform saying good-bye and Mum, my aunt and I crying our eyes out. I was eventually evacuated with my school to Tonbridge, where I stayed until near to Christmastime, but as everywhere was quiet I pleaded to come home. My Mother gave in and was glad to have me back. I went to Royston House School in Catford, one of the few still open and everything seemed quite normal, until the fall of France and Dunkirk. Thank God my Father was saved on the 31st May on a naval ship – HMS Whitehall. Later on that summer the ‘blitz’ started and about the end of September our furniture was put in store and we went to Oxford to stay with the parents of someone in my Father’s regiment.

We stayed for two months then moved to Harpenden to be near my uncle. By January 1941 the longing to come home was too much. We stayed with one of my aunts who lived at Crystal Palace, while Mum looked for a house to rent. We moved into 17 Grosvenor Road, West Wickham in February. The next two months were spent cleaning and getting things ‘ship shape’. Aunt Gladys, Mum’s sister and Uncle Harold, their brother, came with us. My school was arranged – St. David’s College. Then came the 16th April. The siren went about 9pm and very soon the whole area was completely ringed with flares, it was a most amazing sight. Quite soon we had an incendiary bomb land at the bottom of the garden. That was quickly dealt with. Things got worse and Mum and I took shelter in the cupboard under the stairs. Uncle, who hated being confined in any way, stayed in the kitchen, so that he could go in and out. Auntie wanted to go to the loo and was on her way upstairs, but Mum pushed her into the downstairs toilet and then came back to me. We didn’t hear a thing when the bomb hit. All we felt was the sensation of a lift rushing down, but of course we had been lifted up first. Eventually everything settled down and there, right in front of us was a perfectly shaped tunnel, but unfortunately my right leg was pinned down by a beam, so I could not move. Mum was alright apart from a wound to her head. Gas was escaping so I insisted that we put on our gas masks which I religiously carried everywhere. Of course they were no good for coal gas.

We called ‘HELP’ and soon the Home Guard came. Their station was near to the bottom of our garden, so we were very lucky. Corporal Thew crawled down our tunnel to rescue us. He had an awful job to remove the beam from my leg, but he did. He was a very brave man, while he was working something hit him on the head and he reeled back but carried on. He received a medal for his bravery that night. When we came out of the tunnel we found ourselves on the edge of an enormous crater that spanned three gardens and was not far from the Home Guard’s ammunition store, which fortunately remained intact. A very kind neighbour opposite us took us in. Mum had to go to hospital with her head wound, Auntie, who had been pushed into the downstairs loo, was rescued by a Canadian soldier, and was unhurt, but Uncle, who had been trapped in the kitchen, was several hours

before he was rescued. He was badly crushed and was many months recovering. When the morning came we were told we could go to the church hall for breakfast. I remember having tea, bread and butter and strawberry jam but the thing I remember most – I found a wasp in the jam! The demolition men soon came to clear the site and find what was left of our home and possessions.

Our dear Mrs Craigen put us up so we would be on the spot to supervise. Not a lot came out but the things that were saved were put into store and we went off once again. This time to Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham, where my father was stationed, but after three months we returned, this time to The Avenue, Beckenham. Mum had the choice of two flats, in Copers Cope Road or The Avenue. As luck would have it she made the right choice as the other one was destroyed in a subsequent air raid. We loved Beckenham. It was still called 'the village'. Mr Hagger owned the butchers shop by the railway bridge. He was an enormous man. Every night he would pack up his belongings and go off to the Chislehurst Caves for safety. There were a lot of small shops at the beginning of Albemarle Road. I believe two ladies ran the sub-post office and there was a jewellers shop and I think a haberdashers. The pub on the opposite corner of the road had been bombed and an old lady used to sell her papers by the ruins. Underwoods the green-grocers on the corner of Manor Road was a family run business. Mum used to go in for her vegetables quite regularly, so a bag full of goodies was occasionally produced from the back of the shop. It was quite exciting to see the surprises she had when she got home. As the air raids got a little less severe – we still had them but not as bad as 1940 and 41 – the schools began to open up again and I went back to my original school the Prendergast in Catford, having had a whole year off. Mum went to work at Muirheads factory making wireless sets for submarines which she enjoyed, she also did fire watching for which she was given a tin hat. Then in March 1943 we received news that my cousin Peter was missing. He was a wireless operator in a Lancaster bomber. It was a time when our raids on Germany were very heavy and many of our planes were lost. We hoped and prayed that he had been taken prisoner but regretfully that was not to be. Life went on with all its ups and downs and occasional air raids. Then on June 6th 1944 the D-Day landings in Normandy. I think it was the end of June or early July we had the first flying bombs over. The first night we heard this roar of a low flying plane and looking out saw the flames coming from the tail, thinking our guns had brought it down we were delighted. But not for long when more followed and as soon as the engine stopped we dived for cover. That was a very bad time as they came down day and night and caused a lot of damage and many casualties. As the troops over-ran the launching sites it eased a lot only to be followed by the V2 rocket. Dreadful things because there was no warning, they just dropped out of the sky. Many people were killed by them. It was just wonderful when VE-Day came, but even better when VJ-Day came in August. That was the end of the war.