

## **Evacuation to Wiltshire – Wartime memories**

**Written by Sid Jones**

### **BACKGROUND**

The British Government (The Department of Health) had been planning Child Evacuation from major cities in the UK in the event of war since 1938. The wheels were set in motion on September 1st 1939, the day before my third birthday, and just two days before the declaration of war. During the first few months of the scheme the Government were disappointed at the response, with just a small proportion of the children eligible being sent to rural areas. This was probably due to the nine month “phoney war” so named because very little happened that directly involved the UK, although there was certainly a fear that The Germans would eventually invade mainland Britain. This fear heightened after the fall of France in June 1940. The Dunkirk evacuation campaign was made to look like a victory, (and in many ways it was) but in military terms it was a humiliating defeat for The British Army. The enemy was now just across the channel, and the Luftwaffe bombing campaign started in earnest.

“The Blitz” started in September 1940 (The Battle of Britain) and the Bombing of London and other major British cities continued without let-up until the summer of 1941 (when it started to ease rather than stop) and Hitler turned his attention to the Invasion of Russia. When this event happened, it stunned the western world (Germany and the USSR had a non-aggression pact) The British War Cabinet felt confident that the invasion of Britain was now unlikely and plans were put in motion to aid the Russians as much as possible, but real meaningful aid didn’t get to the Soviets for at least another year (The Russian Convoys). We were very short of maximising our war economy despite having a colonial empire to call on; by this time we were openly receiving war aid from the USA, but it was a difficult scenario for President Roosevelt, as he had to deal with a Congress that were (mainly) against getting involved in another war in Europe.

After Pearl Harbour we now had a mighty ally, and the British War leaders knew that the outcome of the conflict was not in doubt. Once the huge American economy got itself onto a war footing, Hitler’s (and Japan’s) fate was sealed. It is interesting to note that the American war leaders decided on a “Germany First” Policy, where most of the resources would go to the European Theatre, as opposed to the Pacific Campaign. This decision was made easier as Hitler declared war on the USA after Pearl Harbour, and US shipping was targeted all along the eastern seaboard..

### **EVACUATION**

Writing about events that happened more than 70 years ago is a precarious affair.

There is always the temptation to “polish” the memory of an event, but I hope that the recollections laid out here are as accurate as possible. Childhood memory can also be very fickle in times of stress, especially at a very early age

It is likely that I was evacuated from London in the autumn of 1942 (although it *may* have been earlier) I remember nothing of parting from my family. I have a sketchy memory of the train journey from Paddington, which was crowded with school children. We were all identified with a large cardboard label attached to our coat with our personal details, and we carried a gas mask: I hated the practice sessions of putting this on, as it had a very distinctive and unpleasant rubbery smell.

How the authorities decided who should go where and with whom goodness only knows, but I have a distinct memory on our arrival in All Cannings of lining up in a small village school hall, and being picked out by a kindly looking young couple. I must have been very shy, as they told me years later that when they took me from the school I didn't say anything, nor did I cry: they thought this very strange. Their names were George and Vera Gay. At that time they had no children. They lived in the village of All Cannings, near Devizes in Wiltshire, and for the rest of the war, this would be my home. They lived at 3, Prospect Cottages only about 100 yards from the school, and it was here, in their small kitchen, with a blazing coal fire throwing shadows across the walls, that I have my earliest distinct childhood memory. My Mother must have knitted (or bought) a Balaclava (which makes me think this must have been winter or autumn. I doubt I would have worn such a thing in the summer.) Vera helped me take off this Balaclava, and I remember them both laughingly remark that they had (so they thought) chosen a Girl, and they had come home with a Boy! I often wonder what Freud would have thought of this memory!

Many years later, I read about some other London evacuees having a torrid time with some families, being ill treated and beaten or semi-starved of proper food, (thankfully, this was quite rare) but I must say I was extremely fortunate to have had such wonderful people looking after me. Obviously, it made a huge difference that I was the only child, but there were other evacuees in the village (and at the village school) and I soon made friends. The village of All Cannings had a small Bakery, and this shop delivered bread to many local villages in the area. George Gay was employed by them as a delivery driver (a small Austin van) and I assume that this was marked as a "reserved occupation" as George was never conscripted into the forces. Life in the village was pretty much the same as it had been during the last 100 years before the war. No houses or cottages had any Electricity or gas or mains water or sewerage. Not long after my arrival the Gays moved into another house in the village, No 26 The Street, where Vera and George's adopted Son Eric and his wife Judith now live. Eric will be Seventy this year. Looking back now, the conditions seemed very harsh to modern eyes, but I didn't think so at the time. The "Privy" was a small wooden moveable shed in the vegetable patch in the garden. All human waste went into this garden, and this little wooden toilet was moved around from time to time. All during the war, George was very proud of his "Veg Patch" and it made a valuable contribution to our diet. This was *real* recycling! They owned a number of Chickens, and so a fresh egg at Breakfast wasn't the luxury it must have been for people living in the cities. The only time I remember Vera in tears happened when she showed me the result of a Fox getting into her chicken run. Seeing all the blood and the headless chickens strewn around made an impression on me, and I came to realise how these people relied on animals to survive, even more so with severe food rationing. All fresh water came from a well just behind the house, and Vera would stand me on a

wooden box to help her turn the handle to draw the water. Fresh milk was delivered by a farm just along the lane. This didn't come in bottles. The Dairyman would bring a metal churn to the door, and use a scoop to measure the milk into a jug.

Paraffin was a very precious commodity in the village, as it was used to light the houses at night. Electricity wasn't available in the area until 1947. We used lamps at sunset, and I can still recall the smell as Vera would trim and light the wicks. There was a strict black-out during the war, so lighting at night was used very sparingly. Candles during the war years were not expensive, but at times could be hard to come by. At a very young age, the true impact of war was hard to grasp, but I do remember the unmistakable drone of German bombers at night. On many such nights, Vera would sit and sew by the lamplight, and when I asked her what the noise was, she would point upwards with one finger and say in her wonderful Wiltshire accent "That be the German's Sidney!" During the "Blitz" of 1941/42 Germany made many attacks on West of England targets like Bristol and Plymouth, and when some were damaged over their targets, they would crash into the countryside around the village while trying to get back to France.

On one such evening, I was woken by a louder engine noise than usual, and as the heavy throb got nearer and nearer I jumped out of bed and went to the window just in time to see a large (as I found out later) German bomber pass over the rooftop in flames. It was getting lower and lower and eventually crashed into a field close to The Kennet and Avon Canal near All Cannings. The next morning we went with other villagers to see the charred wreck. It was surrounded by Home Guard Soldiers. George Gay's Father also lived in the village. He worked as a railway porter at Patney and Churton Station a few miles away: he would cycle to work each morning, and on this occasion came across some parachutes on the road at about half mile intervals. These covered the bodies of the dead German Pilots who had tried to bail out of the stricken bomber, but they were too low. As far as I recall, there were no survivors of the plane. During times when the skies were clear enough, I recall seeing the con trails of fighter aircraft during battle, and I did see one crash. It came down trailing black smoke, but not in a gentle dive, but in a 90 degree angle to the ground and landing with such explosive force that the earth shook. This was some distance from where I stood, and I ran (goodness knows how far) following the plume of smoke until I reached the scene. There were a few villagers and service personnel standing at the edge of a field with wreckage strewn everywhere. A police constable was asking people to stand back. The thing I remember most was the heat. The fighter had come down in a field populated with several Haystacks and they had caught fire. When I arrived at the scene, they were white hot. When crashes occurred, the authorities were worried about unexploded bombs or ammunition, but nothing could have survived that impact. Whether the pilot got out before it crashed I never knew.

We grew a lot of our own vegetables and fruit when in season, and any surplus was bartered in the village in exchange for something else or just given away rather than it go to waste. Any food waste would go to feed the local pigs (pig swill) and it was impressed on people how important it was not to waste any vegetable matter. On some summer mornings, Vera would take me for walks into the fields

and show me how to pick wild mushrooms. Their taste when griddled with a little butter was unsurpassed.

It was while on one of these trips, as we sat under a tree at the edge of a large field that a small Lysander aircraft came down and landed within 100 yards of us. The pilot did no more than rev the engines, turn the plane round and take off again. I cannot recall what Vera thought of this, but I thought it was very exciting. Many years later, when reading a History of the SOE (Special Operations Executive) in France that I realised we had probably witnessed a training exercise for a mission to supply the French resistance. Lysanders were STOL (Short Take Off Landing) and were often used in this role.

We did have a very large radio in the house, although I don't recall listening to it. It was powered by an accumulator battery, which had to be re-charged at the village shop, I assume by some generator system. No. 26 The Street was a semi detached house. On the other side lived Mr Potter and his family, who kept a couple of pigs which rooted around in their back garden. I do remember a lot of squealing when Mr Potter decided it was time to dispatch an animal, but I don't recall seeing the demise of the poor creature, although I remember it's carcass at the top of a slide contraption, with a wooden bucket at the bottom to catch the blood. Nothing was wasted!

Wandering around the countryside for me seemed quite normal. I don't recall Vera asking me where I was going or warning me not to talk to strangers. In season, one could easily eat from the wild, especially hazelnuts and wild berries. Near the village was an Italian POW camp, and on one occasion the prisoners played a local team (of mainly old men and teenagers) at Football on the village green. The "Dad's Army" Guards who were meant to be watching these prisoners all disappeared to The Bull, the one pub in the village, as nobody ever assumed that the Italians wished to escape, and as far as I am aware, none did. These men were very attractive to the young women in the village, and there were many, as a lot of WLA (Women's Land Army) were working in the fields round about. The Italians had a lucrative sideline making Women's rings and jewellery from plexiglass taken from crashed aircraft.

"The Bull" is still the only pub in the village, and is to this day very much as I remember it. Obviously, it has changed a lot inside. A parcel of land is attached to the pub, and last year a Rock Concert was held in the grounds. Brian May, the "Queen" guitarist made an appearance, and there are now pictures of various rock band members lining the walls in the pub restaurant. During the war, George would give me a shilling and ask me to go to the pub and get him some cigarettes. (No rules about not selling tobacco to minors then!) I would go into a small *off licence* and Mrs Maslen the Landlady would look over the counter at me. She would reach over and pick me up and place me on the counter while she went to get the cigarettes. She wore an apron that smelled of beer. Talking to the landlord recently, he told me that Mrs Maslen lived to a ripe old age and died just a few years ago.

The lovely old Church in the village at that time was the centre of all social life, and although George and Vera were not regular Churchgoers, they always attended on high days and holidays, especially

Harvest Festival, a very important date in the calendar. On the few times that I attended with them, I remember the musty smell, and in the winter the chilling cold of the place. Unlike today, the Church had its own Vicar who was the spiritual leader of this small farming community. When it was time to bring in the Harvest, I travelled with the local farmer's son, who was about my age, and we helped (more likely hindered) in any way we could. I do remember the Farmer (who's name escapes me) giving me a shilling as payment. On Market Day Vera took me into Devizes to spend it! In Summer months one of the jobs that the farmer's Son and I often helped with was gathering eggs. We were given a bucket each and we would walk around the farm buildings and sheds to find where the hens had laid eggs. It reminds me now of Easter Egg hunts that children enjoy today. I remember this farmyard being a real menagerie!

Despite his occupation as a delivery man, George must have been someone of influence in the village. He and Vera owned a very small Austin car (quite rare in village life), and when Petrol rationing allowed, they would take me to visit Vera's relatives who lived near Devizes. This little car was very carefully garaged when not in use.

One of my difficulties in writing something like this so many years after the event is that I cannot correctly put things into a chronological order. The actual *dates* when these events happened remain very sketchy, but it must have been later in the war when we saw actual troops training in the village. I had never seen rifles before, and we children were warned to stay out of the way while they ran to and fro from house to house training for the coming invasion (although I don't remember any actual firing). On some days I saw many Parachutes along the skyline, as we were not all that far from Salisbury Plain, where a lot of the training for US and British Airborne troops took place.

I have a very vivid memory of June 6th 1944 (D-Day).

Some friends and I were playing on the village green, when we heard the noise of engines approaching, and looking up saw large aircraft towing Gliders. All were painted with three white stripes on their wings. There were so many that we lost count. They seemed to be going over for hours. The next day we heard the news that the Allied Landings in Normandy had begun.

It must have been around this time, that I had an accident at the local school. I remember falling over and bruising my leg quite badly, but I don't think it worried George and Vera too much, as I was always falling over and grazing my knees, but they told me in later years that I suffered persistent pain in my right leg and soon my right knee started to swell alarmingly. It was then that I was admitted to Bath Orthopaedic Hospital and operated on for Osteomyelitis

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osteomyelitis>]. In those days before antibiotics, this could be a very serious bone infection, especially in children. My recovery was slow and at times very painful, as I visited this hospital on two or three occasions to have fresh surgery. My parents would visit me whenever possible. For two or three years afterwards, I wore an iron calliper on my right leg, and I was not well enough to discard this until late 1947.

My Father would often tell me the story of how he “saved my right leg” and it has some elements of truth, as I certainly was in danger of an amputation. How life threatening my condition was I am not certain, but I recall being in a lot of pain and discomfort. My Father was not above embroidering a story, but according to him, he received a telegram from Bath Hospital asking for his permission to let the surgeon remove my right leg above the knee. Of course, my parents knew I was very ill and this telegram alarmed him so much that he took more than a day to get to Devizes from London rather than reply to the telegram in the affirmative. By the time he arrived the hospital were able to procure some early antibiotic drugs from a US Air Force base Hospital, and I responded to this treatment very quickly. He swore this drama was true, and he would tell me about it again and again over the years. It was because of this ongoing treatment at Bath Orthopaedic, that I didn't go back to my parents immediately after the war. I remember joining a school in Kilburn, London while still wearing my Caliper sometime in 1947. My Mother told me that I became very distressed at leaving All Cannings and George and Vera. By the time I left, they were raising a small child they had adopted (Eric, mentioned above).

It must have been during one of my respites from hospital, that the war ended, as I have a vivid memory of seeing an elderly man, who lived in the cottage opposite us, waving a paper at me. (As an interesting footnote, that cottage is still there today and is now owned by an ex-evacuee, who came back to the village after the war and married a local girl.) The old man's habit (in most but the severest of weather) was to sit on a bench in his front garden and read his “Daily Mirror”. He was quite elderly, but became very agitated and I crossed the road to see what he was so excited about. He kept shouting “The War is Over, The War is Over!

And so it was. I would be nine years old next Birthday.

I have related here a few sharp memories, but they only fill in a very small part of the picture. Using this analogy, the broad brushstrokes of memory are easier to come by. Most of all I remember George and Vera's kindness to what must have been a very frightened and disorientated child. I always knew that they were *not* my parents, but they were always there for a hug when I needed it. More than anything, they taught me the huge difference between living in a city, and a small village in the countryside. I was free to roam wherever I liked and realised at an early age about the pace of life and how people coped with adversity. Very few villagers locked their doors. Neighbours were trusted friends and all lived and worked in a close knit community. The War made this community even closer and I had the feeling even then that this was OUR war, and we would overcome it's hardships and sacrifices together.

Over the years I have visited All Cannings fairly regularly, and am in touch with Judith and Eric and their family. My Wife and I spent our Honeymoon in Devizes, and I am pleased that Myra met Vera before she unfortunately passed away in 1969. During my time in the Merchant Navy in the 1950's I wrote to George and Vera and George kept a couple of the letters. In his early eighties he asked me if I would like them back as a keepsake, and I accepted. When George died in 1995, I was very touched and honoured when his family asked if I would like to be a pall bearer at his funeral. Along with some

of his friends and relatives, I helped carry his coffin into the Church which was full of people from the village, and I became very upset, not just because George had died, but because I never felt that I had fully repaid the debt that I owed to George and Vera Gay.

Then again, that would have been impossible.