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DICKY BLOOD'S WAR

by

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Synopsis

Nearly 2 million children would be evacuated from industrial cities and ports in Britain at the start of World War Two. Some would be lucky. Some would not. Many would die directly due to enemy action. Most would return home. Many would not. Some would not want to. Some had nothing and no family to return to. Some would be abused. Some would be used as cheap labour.

One thing was for sure, it would be an unforgettable experience for all the survivors, including 2 brothers evacuated from Birmingham, 10yr old Richard Blood and 7yr old Douglas. Dicky Blood's War is a wonderful collection of stories, each one describing an incident, accident, escapade or adventure.

Introduction

“What did you do in the war daddy?” The voice was piercing, demanding immediate attention.

Richard Blood looked up from the newspaper he was reading, to see his seven year old daughter Emma standing there, teetering on one leg, her other foot held by her hand up behind her back and her free hand using the nearby table as a support.

“Mmm, she’s probably a stork this morning” surmised Richard to himself, not at all surprised by her pose. Emma was an imaginative, lively, inquisitive bundle of everything that makes a girl of her age such a joy. What did surprise Richard, apart from her unusually quiet entrance to his study, was her question. Granted, it was that time of year again, Remembrance and the media did seem to be making a big issue of it this year. Emma though was a busy, busy child, very like her mother, not given much to television and reading, apart from a few children’s favourites.

“Well! Dad! What did you do? Were you a soldier? Did you smoke then? Did you kill anybody? Did you have to wash all that mud off before tea?” Emma had now become an aggressively playful big kitten, down on all fours, her head on his knees, rocking side to side on her chin and smiling, like Alice’s Cheshire cat. Richard half expected to see her head rise bodiless and hover before him grinning.

They were very close. Despite his work taking him away a lot, Richard was very aware of the father/daughter special arrangement. He had three older sons. They were special to him too. All different and all getting on with life along their chosen paths. When he could be, he was there for them all.

“Alright! Alright!” he said to the crocodile, now lying full length on the carpet, its jaws tugging at the slipper dangling from his swinging foot. “I’ll tell you”. There was a joyful squeal and the crocodile quickly metamorphosised back to the big kitten, now expectantly quietly attentive, both arms folded across his knee, her chin resting on her hands, her large eyes intent on his face, waiting.

Richard Blood carefully closed and neatly folded the newspaper he had been reading. He wasn’t a particularly fussy or tidy person, in fact he would be the first to admit to being fairly disorganised and impulsive. But, he did like a newspaper to be neat, tidy and in its correct order of pages. A two-page cricket report should be continuous, not interrupted by pages of uninteresting scandal and it irked him considerably when it happened. Emma of course, knew this and aided and abetted by her mother, would make a great play of missorting and neatly folding the pages when the opportunity presented itself. Later, she would offer to help Richard to sort them out by laying the pages all over the floor and making helpful comments like ‘look dad, 2 and 79, 4 and 77, 6 and 75. As the numbers on the left of the page go up, the numbers on the right of the page go down. Can I cut all the numbers off one day and see if you can read it better?’

Richard would fix her with a stone faced look and with his forefinger trace a path across his neck. ‘Do that and I will have to cut your head off’ he’d say. Emma would erupt with delight. The newspaper, of course, would be forgotten.

Richard Blood put the paper down, plumped up and adjusted the cushions behind his back and gave a long and contemplative sigh.

“Well”, he began, “I wasn’t in the first big war called the Great War, now known as World War 1. I was in the next big war, known as World War 2, but I wasn’t a soldier or anything like that. I was only a few years older than you are now when it started. I was an evacuee.”

Richard paused. The kitten shuffled its bottom, its gaze firmly fixed on its quarry.

“What’s an evacuee Dad?”

Do you want to go to Canada?

“Richard! Do you want to go to Canada?” Mrs Blood’s voice, the tone and pitch shaped and honed by years of coping, mostly on her own, with now five very lively boys, *pierced the valley*, but not Dicky’s totally absorbed imagination, *and echoed through the rolling hills where the bandits, about 20 of them, were furiously galloping south, away from the small town bank they had just robbed, towards the safety of the border, oblivious of the trap ahead set by the Canadian Royal Mounted Police, waiting patiently out of sight*. At the given signal, a wave by Dicky’s right arm, the red and white marbles rolled out from their place of cover, an upturned old upholstered footstool, spread out and encircled the ordinary green, blue, brown and white striped marbles, the ‘baddies’. The swift moving hands of 10 year old Dicky Blood orchestrated the ambush, the culmination of another exciting episode in the uninterrupted, continuous struggle to maintain law and order in the vast, untamed new world. Dicky’s accompanying ‘yips’ whistles and bugle noises further embellished the action, all taking place under the old solid dining room table on the linoleum prairie.

“RICHARD!” Again the voice rang out, this time a few pitches higher and with the note held a bit longer. “Do you want to go to Canada?”

Dorothy Blood knew exactly where Dicky was and what he was doing. She always seemed to know, even when Dicky and his elder brother Maurice, were up to no good elsewhere. ‘Queen of the fairies, that’s what I am’ she’d yell, whilst walloping their backsides and legs with the dreaded wooden mixing spoon.

“I always know where you are and what you are getting up to, you little sods!”

What’s more, she usually did and the boys and their pals, some of whom had felt the weight of her hand, readily agreed. ‘Dynamite Dolly’, Roy Lines called her, not to her face of course and Alf Lines, Roy’s older brother once said, ‘A few like Dolly Blood at the front line with their wooden spoons would have sorted Hitler out.’

‘CANADA!’ The message finally pierced Dicky’s fantasy world. He was well used to the varying pitch and tone and normally ignored it as long as possible, usually until the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps galvanised him into action. ‘CANADA.’ The name itself was just magic, conjuring up an immediate picture of mountains, forests, snow, bears, wolves and of course his beloved Royal Mounted Police, the ‘Mounties’, his fertile imagination serviced by weekly visits to the ‘flicks’, the local cinema on Saturday afternoons.

“Mom” he yelled, his knees and feet scuffing the floor as he, almost maniacally, sought to clarify this amazing possibility. Marbles, baddies and goodies, now completely forgotten were rolling, unimpeded everywhere across the linoleum square, on which the table and chairs sat, like an island surrounded by a sea of brown painted floor-boards. If you couldn’t afford a square of lino’ for your rooms, you were considered poor. Some people up in Hall Green, where Dicky and Maurice used to go ‘odd-jobbing’ for pennies, had real carpets on the floor; the hall as well.

“And pick up those marbles” yelled Mrs Blood, “if I come in there and break my bloody neck, I’ll tan your arse until you can’t stand up”.

When riled, Mrs Blood often shouted contradictions, which sometimes upset her even more, but being of natural good humour, usually quickly realised what she had just said and readily laughed, which was fortunate for those within her reach.

Dicky quickly gathered up the marbles and put them in their box, an old battered Oxo tin, square with a hinged lid, and raced into the kitchen where Mrs Blood was busy ‘dollying’ the huge weekly washing. She paused, her face wet with steam and sweat and red from her exertions. Mrs Blood didn’t just ‘dolly’ the washing, with her it was more a fight; an almighty battle to knock, screw and squeeze every bit of dirt and stain out of whatever was in the copper gas-fired tub. God help any kid who fell into the tub while she was dollying and she was often heard to shout to her brood returning home from play, ‘Christ Almighty! I’ll ave to dolly you little sods clean.’

Her neighbour and admirer Mr Towler, usually standing outside his house watching the world go by, would shout ‘eh up Dolly! Been at the blue bag again?’ and laugh, as would Mrs Blood as she patted her hair and attempted to smooth her rumped worn out frock.

“Go on George, be off with you”.

Although naturally shy, she did love these harmless encounters, which did not happen often enough in her hardworking life.

She looked across the kitchen where Dicky was jumping up trying to reach the top of the doorway, at the side of which, on the wall, were the pencil marks registering his and Maurice’s height. All his pals could reach the top of their doorways with a jump, which greatly upset him. It wasn’t as if he lacked energy and ability. He could run faster, jump

wider parts of the local river Cole and climb more difficult trees down the Dingles, than his pals. He just lacked height.

“Cut out to be a jockey, I reckon Bill”. He'd heard that sort of comment made to his father more than once when up at the club where he and Maurice, his elder brother by two years, were sometimes taken out of Dolly Blood's way on a Sunday morning.

There, Dicky and Maurice would craftily help themselves to the lumps of bread, cheese and slices of onion, put out for the snooker players including, more often than not, their father, William Thomas Blood, founder-member of the Yardley Wood Social Club in Birmingham and who, over the years, had fulfilled various duties. Sometimes secretary, sometimes Master of Ceremonies, sometimes treasurer and, according to Dolly Blood when talking to friends, ‘all-time bloody nuisance!’

“Christ!” Dolly Blood shouted at Dicky, “can't you keep still, just for two minutes?” She sat down on the old wooden stool which was never far from her side in the kitchen, or when in the garden hanging out the washing. Her varicose veins which traversed the backs of her legs like black and blue mountain ranges, were a constant painful reminder to rest as frequently as possible, not easy for a mother of five lively boys and with no regular income from a mainly absent father, a commission salesman, who fortunately, was now a reasonably healthy person, after many years of poor health in the early 30's when there was little or no income. She spoke again, partly through her apron with which she was wiping her sweaty red face.

“Would you like to live in Canada for about a year? Lots of kids are going so you won't be alone and you can take Douglas with you.”

Dicky was aware of evacuation. It had been on newsreels, like Pathe Gazette, shown at cinemas frequently since 1939, the year the war started and it looked fun to him. It often showed queues of kids from the cities; their gasmasks in containers slung around their necks and name-tags pinned to their topcoats. All were usually well-dressed and waving goodbye to their equally well-dressed families. Maybe it was untrue, but to many people and not a few politicians, it seemed evident that the class system was operating, as normal, in favour of the privileged and wealthy and that somewhere along the line the millions of poor would be considered. Ironically, many of the wealthy families, who had left London as complete families to stay with relatives and friends in 1939, returned as a result of the ‘phoney war’ period of little activity and hastily removed themselves again when the bombing of Britain began in earnest.

“Yeah mom!” Dicky had no hesitation or concern.

At last, it was going to happen. He might even get a bed to himself and 7 year old Duggie was no problem. Dicky already looked after little Duggie most of the time and regularly looked after all three younger brothers when Mr and Mrs Blood went to the club on Saturday nights, taking Maurice with them to help Dolly Blood with the catering she prepared and served on that night. Sometimes Dicky would go instead and Maurice would take his turn minding the kids. For Dicky and Maurice, it was a big night out and the opportunity to meet up with children of other club members. After all, it was a ‘social club’ and just one of many that mushroomed in working class areas in the late 30's and early 40's.

“Yeah mom!”

Dicky was now grabbing at Mrs Blood's apron, jerking it to accentuate his words and undoubted interest.

“When do we go? Can I take my marbles? Is the school going?” As many private schools had gone very early on. “Do you know who we'll be living with? Can I go out and tell my pals?”

“Now just calm down a minute will you? Chrissake! Nothing has been decided yet and it might not happen. It's just that the government are asking for people to put forward their names for consideration.”

“Oh!” Dicky gloomily replied. “It's not definite then.”

Dicky went into the garden and threw stones in the direction of the Anderson air raid shelter,^[1] which was erected about 12 metres from the house. No one minded him throwing stones or anything else at the shelter, in fact Billy Blood once yelled at him to include plenty of earth, mud and turf, if he could scrounge any. Anything that would add extra protection.

Being grown up and a veteran of the first world war, Billy Blood was only too aware that a direct hit on an Anderson shelter would be curtains for any occupants, so any extra covering would, at the very least, make him feel better. The Anderson shelters were delivered in sections complete with fastenings. The responsibility for erection lay with the occupiers and most got put up, one way and another. The first job was to dig a rectangular pit at least 500mm deep. This required, apart from basic tools, muscle, and the Bloods' and their neighbours were fortunate enough to have the eager help of 'Jan,' a refugee who had the looks and deeply tanned figure of a Kirk Douglas look-alike. Never mind that hardly anyone knew or was aware of the real Kirk Douglas at that time, most would later agree the resemblance was there. All the women, young girls and boys were enamoured of him, for different reasons of course. His power packed muscular body, stripped to the waist. His steady rhythmic working of whatever tool, spade, pickaxe, shovel or rake. His ready grin and broken English. Jan was a revelation!

Most kids and many adults, especially womenfolk, had never seen a foreigner close up, so to speak. The older women wanted to mother him. The younger wives and girls just wanted to be near him, the closer the better, and the boys all wanted to be him. The men were a bit jealous of course, but hid it well behind jocular comments about him and various activities. Jan would always laugh and nod his blond wavy haired head

“ja! goot! very goot! I like,” and chuckle away. Rationing might be a problem, but the womenfolk always made sure that Jan's stomach was regularly replenished.

The Bloods' shelter was erected and all the local families came round to inspect it. Mr Towler bent down and poked his head through the narrow entrance, taking care not to catch his head on the sharp edge of the metal surround.

“Jesus Christ!” he shouted. “There's more room in our lavatory! I'll never get all my family in one of these.” He withdrew his head, a concerned look on his face. Jan tapped the side of the shelter with his shovel.

“Not worry,” he said, now leaning on his shovel. “When bombs come, many peoples get in this, sure t'ing”. Jan nodded his head. He wasn't smiling and for the first time looked sad and older. He'd survived German Blitzkriegs and knew what was coming.

“Come!” Jan picked up his pickaxe and shirt, “next shelter, ja!” Jan would only stop for refreshment. Every garden site was already marked out for him and his gang of ready helpers. Men, women and children were always at hand to help when necessary. Some men, either unfit or too old for active service, also those deemed essential for munitions production, were also quite able diggers etc. But no one was like Jan, the instant, in the flesh, technicoloured real hero for all the kids. The local families, once he'd finished the necessary digging, never saw Jan again. Some displaced people, like him, would go to special camps. Some would enlist in military units comprising of particular nationalities like the Polish Brigade. All wanted to kill Hitler.

The Blood's shelter would eventually be moved several times because of rising water from the clay soil the rows of houses were built on, an ongoing problem for many years for most of the houses themselves, until improved technology, found a cure many years later. Many families, like the Bloods,' would eventually erect the shelters inside the house, where, of course, they were a nuisance, except during one of the frequent air raids. There were several types of individual shelters that would accommodate a family when necessary, the most popular being the Morrison shelter, which was more robust, smaller, and only held 2 or 3 people. Not very comfortable, especially if there were infants encased in their Mickey Mouse look-alike gas protection containers, complete with hand operated pump providing the necessary air to breathe. Some people, those used to doing things for themselves, would make the interior tolerably comfortable by putting wooden slatted flooring on top of concrete, make and fit wooden bunk beds both sides for children, narrow and neat, the bunk beds not the children. The children were usually narrow, rarely neat. 'Don't you know there's a war on?' Fat people of any age were rarely seen.

Modern day people, especially youngsters, when seeing a Anderson shelter in a museum for the first time, will wonder how families, some with large numbers of children, coped with the 'all night raids' of 12 hours and more. Many shelters, in the gardens for the duration of the war, resembled grassy mounds, the shelter below protected by several feet of sandbags covered with earth and turf and remained so for many years to come, now doubling as extra storage for a variety of purposes. Private house owners and men, who earned more than £5 weekly, had to pay £7 for a family size shelter. Council tenants were provided with shelters, as were schools etc. The latter were usually brick and reinforced concrete and could hold upwards of 40 people. Any seating was fixed wooden along the sides and down the centre, two classes and two teachers to each shelter.

Temporary lighting had to be carried in as no services of any kind were provided. Toileting was an adventure and when necessary, supervised by a teacher complete with bucket and sometimes the two times table by the kids, with little ad-libs of course. It was rarely dull and in the early days of the war, air raid drills were a regular event. At the first sound of the warning siren, all the children would sling the container holding their gasmask over their shoulder and walk, supervised in class groups, to their nominated shelter, where they would put on their gasmasks, practice their arithmetic tables and sing songs, much to the joy of those boys who, with a little practice, could make rude sounds through the rubber side flaps of the face mask.



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