



THE MEMOIRS OF A WARTIME TEENAGER by F.O. DYKE

Synopsis

Many accounts of life as a wartime teenager, or young soldier have been written over the years, each offering a different insight into a time we can never and should never forget.

This delightful book offers a heart-warming and fascinating insight into a little known, but most important aspect of the Second World War. Quite unknown to much of the general public, the British Racing Pigeon played a vital role in aiding communication and on many occasions the life saving exploits of the humble pigeon in wartime Britain could not be more greatly revered.

Told through the eyes of one of those young soldiers, who not only worked with and cared for the pigeons, but who dedicated much of his life to his birds, this book will endear many to those Winged Messengers we all too often refer to as vermin.

Chapter One

Plane Crazy

Living near Castle Bromwich Aerodrome I used to spend many hours as schoolboy and a teenager, watching the civilian and military pilots flying the older type of Bi-planes that was the norm for that particular time of pre-war days. Every year there were displays of aerial acrobatics during Empire Air Days, which the general public enjoyed during these open shows. The Auxiliary Air force as it was known by that name before it was merged with the Royal Air force just before the outbreak of the Second World War. This squadron was the 'COUNTY of WARWICK' [605] Bomber squadron, and flew a number of various planes that were the standard models of the day. These included the Hawker 'Hind' and the plane that replaced this model was the Hawker 'Hart' Bomber. I recall one particular display of low level bombing on the field marked with a target circle and the planes flying in at about 400ft and dropping 'Bombs' on the target which were just bags of flour. As these bags of flour struck the field they did appear to look like an exploding bomb and was marked by a white deposit left on the grass. The bomb aimer was the second member of the crew of two, who released the bag from his hand, aiming at the target circle but more missed the target than

those that scored hits. I was enthralled by all this, as it was something that I had never seen before from a low flying aircraft and I found it so exciting to watch.

These Empire Air days used to bring large crowds to witness these events and in 1935 some 10,000 people attended, and in 1936-7 attendance totalled near 12,000. In 1937 the Prince of Wales arrived at the British Industries Fair which was located lower down the Chester Road 3/4 of a mile or so from the Airfield. After leaving the Fair he was then able to carry out an inspection of the [605] Squadron after they had won the Esher trophy for the third time. The County of Warwick [605] did over the previous years did fly different types of planes including the Bristol 'Bulldog' Gloucester 'Gladiator' and the Hawker 'Hart'. It did seem unfortunate that the squadron would lose its bomber roll and become a fighter unit just prior to the start of the war. Perhaps it was valuable foresight on the part of the Air Ministry as the events at a later date were to prove so successful for the newly formed fighter unit. I shall be writing more in a later chapter on the progress of the [605] fighter squadron. To continue my youth experiences at Castle-Bromwich in pre-war days, I remember one particular episode, which I shall never forget, when during a visit with two other lads and myself met up with a group of elder lads, one of which was Horace, the elder brother of 'Ginger' Peverill who was with me. Now Horace was renowned for his passion for stone throwing and could throw a cricket ball with some accuracy over 100yds or more. On this particular day what was about to happen was a complete shock to us younger lads and what I later realised as a stupid and dangerous prank. As we watched a number of planes taking off and landing a 'Tiger Moth' biplane came in to the wind to land, directly where Horace stood. He suddenly picked up a large stone and flung it at the plane passing overhead, it struck the undercarriage with an almighty clang, of course everyone scattered including us younger ones, I felt sure that the plane would surely crash on the field but did not wait to see if it did. Knowing that Horace's brother was with us and we would be partly to blame and involved, I was so scared I ran all the way home. Later I learned from other school friends that the plane had landed safely. Thankfully the stone had bounced off the undercart, but when I thought about what could have happened if the stone had injured the crew, or pierced the wing or the bodywork and the canvas stretched over the framework, I fully realised the spur of the moment act was so stupid and could have had fatal results. It was a lesson well learned by me as in future visits to the drome I always kept clear of Horace when I knew he was around. The problem was soon solved as he was a dab hand at playing the 'Wag' truant from school, and not having a father his mother was unable to do anything with him as he was always a law unto himself, and showed little respect for anyone else.

The Education department had already warned his mother that his bad attendance record would result in severe measures, and I think she was rather glad when he was sent to an approved school for a period of twelve months for correction and discipline he came home and he was a changed lad for the better. After a short time at home he did express a wish to join the Army, which he did just before war, was declared. Over the past few months, things were beginning to change as the threat of war was on people's minds, particularly as the Germans were not satisfied with the amount of territory they were gaining in Europe and Hitler wanted more. I think it was obvious to most people, yet they did not want to discuss such a worrying thing fearing the consequences of a second world war as they just ignored the signs and carried on normally with the routine of their daily lives. Perhaps it was a good sign as it might not happen anyway and was just a scare. We all hoped it could not happen again as the 1914-18 war was the war to end all wars, as my father often said 'I have two sons of near military age and I hope the leaders can see some sense before anything happens.' We just carried on as the working days became busier

and disregarded the situation, but time was not on our side as events were to prove in a very short space of time.

Chapter 2

Becoming a Worker

It is the 23rd of July 1937 and I am about to embark on the great event of leaving school and joining the working mans world. Friday the 23rd of July I leave school and on Monday the 26 of July. I attain that wonderful age of being 14 years old. I start work on this Monday as the tea lad mashing tea for the moulders and coremakers of the Aluminium foundry at Heritier and Co. in Tyburn Road, Erdington, Birmingham. My father and brother Bill worked on the shop floor and I found it a great experience to be working alongside them. The company later changed their name to the Aeroplane and Motor' co Ltd and moved from Tyburn road to Wood Lane, Erdington, B'ham. I brewed the tea in Billy cans by a piped gas flame and tipped each mans' tea and sugar into the boiling water from little paper packets, made up by the wife or mother as part of their daily lunch pack with sandwiches. [There was no canteens at that time in 1937] but they became a necessity at all factories later on. I did a weeks work before the factory closed for the summer holidays and the men doubled up on their tea tips as they would be away for two weeks on holiday. Their holiday allowance was only one week as that was the maximum paid at this time, knowing this most of the men worked at a piecework rate and had larger pay packets than the normal weekly rate. For me the ones that paid me 3 pence a week now paid 6 pence, and the ones that paid 6 pence gave me a shilling, this double up amounted to a total of 19 shillings so this was a great start to my first week at work, and a welcome present for my 14th birthday. I formed many friends during the early years and was very happy at work. One friend in particular was Bob Barnes a true 'Cockney' who came to work alongside me and my brother Bill. Bob and I spent 2 days in Colwyn Bay on holiday but could not get bed and breakfast accommodation overnight, so we decided to sleep rough in the wooded area overlooking the Bay as it was a nice warm evening. As we settled down the conditions altered and it became windy and colder, as we were unable to sleep we looked forward to daybreak as a mist now covered the whole area. We began the morning search hoping to find somewhere we could have a wash and brush up but everywhere was closed leaving two disappointed lads to rue that first holiday together. Bob decided to go home to London and finish his holiday there, he invited me down to meet his folks but I felt that I had enough and being rather hungry and scruffy, arrived back in 'Brum' whilst Bob caught the train home.

We worked for the next year with the war clouds beginning to gather as Hitler had already annexed the Rhineland and Austria, and was now putting pressure on Czechoslovakia. Our work at [A.M.A.C.] Aero and Motor was beginning to increase and I was now apprentice Coremaker and I handed my tea making duties to a new young starter. The company now moved to its new factory in Wood Lane, which was much larger premises and was now classed as a 'Shadow' factory like many more springing up in various other areas around the country.

Some serious news broke which was rather a disturbing item, this being the loss of the Navy Submarine HMS 'Thetis' carrying out her diving trials in Liverpool Bay. She was overdue and only discovered after many hours of waiting, her rear hull sticking out of the

water at low tide. She had nose dived into the seabed and was stuck in an almost vertical position which allowed just 4 seamen to escape. After desperate methods were tried to rescue the remaining crew it proved impossible as the rising tide again covered the stricken submarine. We later learned that she was grossly overweight; she should have been carrying 69 crew yet had on board a total of 103 which included officials of the makers Cammel Laird. The radio and press gave full coverage of this event showing photographs of the Sub. Sticking out of the water at low tide. She was later salvaged after rolling over and renamed, this event was a blow for the Royal Navy as war was very near.

'THETIS' under her new name which I can't remember after all this time did take part on active service but was lost due to enemy action, I think it was in the Mediterranean. The war now looked a certainty as Premier Neville Chamberlain acceded to Hitler's demands and back from his visit to Munich, waved his little piece of paper and exclaimed 'Peace in our Time'. He had given away a country that did not belong to us [Czechoslovakia] by agreeing to the Fuhrer's demands, but it did give our country a respite of twelve months in which we were able to prepare for the war that was soon to start. Germany was in the strongest position of the whole of Europe as they had been building up massive armed forces over the previous years. It seemed the best we could offer was a very poor attempt by Leslie Hoare Belisha to modernise the British Army by the introduction of the 'Bren Carriers' to replace the cavalry regiments a year or two before. The A.M.A.C. were now producing Crankcases, Cylinder Blocks and gearboxes for the Rolls Royce [Merlin] engines but at this time we were not sure if they were being fitted to the 'Spitfire' or 'Hurricanes'. Other castings were being made for various war dep't and I was making cores for the Sperry bombsight. At last the final crunch came on Sunday the 3rd of September as we were working overtime 7 days a week when our foreman Arthur Massey came on to the shop floor and announced "Well that's it lads we are now at war with Germany, so now lets get stuck in." It was no great shock as this was to be expected after the invasion of Poland by the German armed forces on Sept 1st 1939. Most people seemed to think it would be over in 2-3 weeks time as the French with its mighty 'MAGINOT LINE' would be more than a match, coupled with the British Expeditionary force [B.E.F] once fighting commenced. This theory was based on the trench warfare of the 1914-18, yet how wrong it turned out to be. Things soon began to take shape as many conditions imposed by the government came into force, volunteers were required for Civil Defence, Air Raid Wardens, Firemen, Ambulance Crews, Rescue Squads, there seemed to be no shortage of volunteers as most were only too glad to have a go at Hitler and the 'Nazis.'

The Blackout was total and it was pretty difficult to find your way around at night unless you had a torchlight, it was a money spinner for the shops and the makers. Being a racing Pigeon fancier along with my father, all owners were ordered to register their birds at the local police station and obtain a permit for the keeping of these birds. If this was not done all birds that were unregistered had to be disposed of or killed. Certain members offered their birds to the National Pigeon Service, which involved having these birds ready to be available for service with the Armed forces as required. We were gladly accepted as members of a service that had proved the capability of the Pigeon in 1914/18 war. This allowed us a corn ration that was only available to its members with a small fee of 5 pounds to be paid yearly if your birds were called for by the Air Ministry.

The first 6 months of the war was termed the 'Phoney War' as little or no fighting was taking place after the armed might of Germany had overrun little Poland when they surrendered to the 'Jerries'. However, the war at sea was a different matter as we suffered a very nasty shock as after some 6 weeks or so a German 'U' boat penetrated the defences at the Royal Navies stronghold at Scapa Flow, and torpedoed the 'Royal Oak' killing hundreds of sailors. I later learned of two friends from earlier schooldays who had been

sent to Liverpool to a centre for 'Bad Boys' for their part in a factory break in. They were members of a so called 'Black Hand' gang, staying together and joining the Navy and the crew of the 'Oak' so ending their young lives. I mention no names, as it could be a sensitive issue for their relatives. I am sure every 'Brit' was more than pleased when the news came through that the Royal Navy had forced the German pocket battleship 'Admiral Graff Spee' into a neutral harbour in South America [Montevideo] this powerful ship had been at sea as a raider against our merchant shipping bringing supplies to the U.K. and sunk a number of our ships. In the battle with the Navy, three of our cruisers the 'AJAX' 'ACHILLES' and the 'EXETER' damaged the 'Spee' and along with other Royal Navy ships awaited the sailing of Hitler's ship for further battles. The captain of the 'Spee' knew he had no chance against the Navy's superior forces and it was a hopeless task, he then scuttled his ship just outside the harbour to save his crew from any further injuries. IT was great elation when we heard that the Admiralty had received news of the sinking of this pride of the German fleet, a one up for the sinking of the 'Royal Oak'. We now had taken delivery of our Anderson steel air raid shelter, and Bill and I began to set about the erection of this puzzle with determination and energy. After digging the pit for the base girders to support the steel sections it was finally erected. The next job was to cover the whole fixture with soil over the top and sides to make it as safe as possible from falling shrapnel, and any bombs that were a near miss. After a week we had the whole shelter covered with most of the soil from the garden, sandbags placed in a dog leg fashion to protect from blast, and now this large sloping mound appeared to be the safest shelter in the district. Although these shelters gave us some protection during the early raids they had not a very good record against a direct hit. They did prove a very useful shelter from a near miss and a lot of protection from falling shrapnel and incendiary bombs.

This was of course a better way of being safer than hiding under the stairway or the dining table in your living room as a lot of people had to do if they had no Anderson Shelter erected in the garden, or in some cases no garden at all and could not reach a community shelter before a raid developed. In the early days of the air raids some times the bombs were already dropping when the sirens sounded, as Jerry had managed to escape detection from the Observer Corps spotter units on the coastal observation posts, and any Ack- Ack sites they passed over on their way to targets in the industrial Midlands. I remember many instances when the 'All-Clear' was being sounded and the Jerries were still over the target dropping his load, it was something we had to get used to as these early raids were a bit of a 'Cock Up' and the communications between the Observer Corps, Anti-aircraft gunners, and the Civil Defence units needed some time to get more efficient in locating enemy aircraft and their possible targets. We had some times on occasions, Bombs and no warning, the All-Clear and bombs falling, or the warning sirens and no raid developing, which was always the better of 'Hobson's Choice'.

As for the Anderson shelters they did have quite a disadvantage because they were partly below ground level and after a short time water seeped in leaving inches of water that you needed to bale out before taking shelter. The local Councils did get to grips with this problem by concreting the base and partly up the walls inside which reduced the amount of space inside. As the raids increased another kind of shelter became available which was the Morrison reinforced brick and concrete shelter, that was a surface shelter and did not need any excavation, these proved quite good and were easier to get into and out of quickly and did not have the water problem of the Andersons.

There was another type of Morrison shelter that could be assembled indoors and could be erected to give the occupants a fair amount of protection should a near miss occur after a raid. This was a steel shelter that was like a reinforced box that had steel mess sides and had rigid upright supports at the corners that supported the steel sheets that were the roof

and floor. The approximate size was about 8 X 6 and was 4ft high, and did in fact give effective cover for any one that stayed indoors and could not get to larger shelters outdoors. They did save a number of lives when the roof and ceilings had collapsed from bombs that were a near miss and the occupants were inside. All these shelters served a very useful purpose in protecting the civilian population at the time that we suffered the 'Jerry' blitz.



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