

Memories of War – Grace Bradley nee Jackson

Sunday, 3rd September, 1939 war was declared on Germany. It was a hot summer's day, and the news was to change everyone's life.

All lights went out, no street lighting, car headlights were screened, curtains were lined with blackout material, windows were taped with masking tape. Street and town signs were painted out, and railway station names went. Air Raid Wardens (A R P) patrolled the streets after dark and if any light was visible through windows you could be fined.

Gas masks were issued to all men, women, children and babies. They fitted into a cardboard box about 6" square, a tape was attached and worn like a shoulder bag, taken on all outings – long and short.

Air raid shelters were built in gardens, known as 'Anderson Shelters', made of corrugated iron and reinforced with concrete, in front of the doorway was a baffle wall for protection, inside a bunk bed at either side for sleeping or sitting on. Large community shelters were built on streets in built up areas for pedestrians or local inhabitants.

Ration books were issued for meat, sugar, fats, bread, jam, cheese, sweets, bacon, tinned meat, dried fruit etc. Offal was off the ration, so too was fowl and game, but extremely scarce and kept under the counter for special customers. Fish also was free of rationing, but scarce as trawlers were requisitioned by the Government for mine sweeping. Imported fruit and veg also disappeared. Coal and petrol was also rationed. Large water tanks stood at ends of roads and in central reservations together with stirrup pumps and bags of sand.

Everyone was issued with an Identity Card giving name, address, date of birth, religion and next of kin.

Dockets were issued for furniture, clothing and knitting wool could only be purchased by producing clothing coupons.

Children were evacuated away from dock and industrial areas and billeted on families in the country, some even went to Australia and New Zealand.

Adults 17-45 years of age, male and female, were conscripted into the Armed Forces, Army, Air Force, Navy and Women's Land Army. Those not medically fit were enrolled into War Effort work – munitions, aircraft and ship building and repairs etc. Some people were exempt such as farmers, doctors, dentists, miners – known as Bevin Boys and many others in key industries and dock work.

Large balloons, known as 'flying pigs' could be seen floating in the sky – these were to keep enemy aircraft from flying below a certain height. There was a site on Priory Road and others were dotted around the city. They were manned by both men and women, cannot remember whether army or air force. Gun sites were scattered around, a large one in this area being Costello Playing Fields.

When enemy aircraft were spotted flying across the Channel and making their way to bomb some city or dock, air raid warnings were given – a loud wailing noise, whether it be night or day everyone rushed to the nearest shelter, when danger was over 'wailing willy' sounded the 'all clear' and it was either back to bed or work.

I vividly remember the Blitz on Hull, at that time I was still a civvy employed in a timber importer's office opposite Alexandra Dock. Most of the night was spent in our shelter with my parents and neighbours. Over the years we had Buzzer nights well organized – flasks of tea, sandwiches, biscuits etc, a pack of cards, cushions and blankets, oil stove and lamp. Planes were buzzing overhead, guns and anti-aircraft blasting away, the ground vibrating as bombs contacted buildings and ground. It was frightening, when the final all clear blew none of us knew what was in store – fortunately our houses were still standing, Boothferry Road, Hull.

After a change of clothes, a cuppa and toast, I made my way to the office. No public transport was running so the only alternative was to walk, the sight along Anlaby Road was devastating, fires, bombed buildings, broken glass, rubble everywhere, fire engines, ambulances, nurses, wardens and police helping injured and directing pedestrians – all the lovely shops in the town centre were burning piles of rubble. Many hours later I arrived at the office which was badly damaged. Staff salvaged as much as possible in the way of books etc; managers took them home. Within a few

days we evacuated to a house in Coniston for a short while until better accommodation was found.

In 1943 I volunteered for the WAAF and in April of that year was posted to Gloucester for 6 weeks to be kitted out, do square bashing (marching, PE etc.), oh our poor feet did suffer with hard, heavy shoes. We were billeted in Nissen huts, ten or so beds each side, a shelf placed over the beds on which to put our mugs, tools (knives, forks and spoons), mirror, tooth brush and small items. A metal wardrobe, like a filing cabinet was placed beside each bed for hanging our uniform, and at the foot of each bed was a heavy wooden box (ex bomb boxes), these were for all our personal possessions, underwear etc. The mattress was in 3 sections, known as biscuits, we had 3 rough dark blankets each plus 2 sheets, each morning the biscuits had to be piled on each other, the blankets and sheets folded and stacked on top, each bed space had to be polished, the floor shone like glass. Heating was a coke-fired affair with a long pipe going out of the roof, this had to be blackened. After breakfast in the cookhouse, we had to stand by our beds at attention and a corporal and officer would make an inspection, poking around at our bed making, checking on clean shoes and buttons, making sure our hair was clear of our collar. After 6 weeks of initial training we were posted to various stations and training courses.

Penarth in Wales was my destination for a couple of months, a clerical course. What heaven, I along with others were housed in a large holiday guesthouse, glorious area, wonderful food. The course was far from easy, at the end of which Driffild was my new station, Bomber Command. It was a dream come true.

Driffild was a Bomber Station in 4 Group – 2 squadrons of Halifax and Lancasters – 466 and 462, many of the aircrew and ground crew were Australian. Airmen were housed in barrack blocks on the station and WAAFs in Nissen huts in Driffild. The WAAF site was about 2½ miles from the station and we were issued with bicycles for travel. A cycle club was formed so we were able to enjoy visiting country villages, sometimes going to Brid, ending up at a village pub to quench our thirst.

Entertainment was very good – plenty of dances on camp and the Town Hall, we also had invitations on occasions from the large country houses, such as Sledmere Hall when a buffet and dance was laid on. Our mode of travel used to be RAF lorries, rough but it was fun.

Wakey Wakey was 7am – a dash to the bath huts in dressing gowns – greatcoats in the winter, generally the water was cold – back to the hut – dress and stack beds in regulation fashion, rush to the dining hall for breakfast, tea, toast, cereal, scrambled egg (dried egg of course) then collect cycle and race to camp – to be late was a crime.

Mid morning we had a break and tramped to the NAAFI for a cuppa and maybe a rock bun, a chat with friends then back to work until dinner. Food on the whole, being wartime shortages, was good.

Farmers in the area were very generous giving fruit from orchards, also surplus salad, toms and lettuce. Being near Nafferton strawberries were sometimes on the menu.

At night we laid in bed hearing aircraft going on bombing raids, we uttered a silent prayer for a safe return. The next day sadly we heard of casualties – something we did not get hardened to.

Monday was domestic night – all were confined to camp to clean living quarters. Often there would be a pedicure later in the evening, or suggestions made for improvement in camp life. The night would be rounded off in the NAAFI chatting to friends over tea and coffee, maybe a sandwich, and a sing-song round the piano.

Ten days' leave was granted every 3 months and a free travel warrant was given.

Pay parade took place every fortnight, had to queue of course and wait for your name to be called, a service number given – then you would march smartly to the desk and salute the officer when your pay would be handed over.

A time came when it was obvious the war was coming to a close. We were kept in touch with the latest news from the Air Ministry, which was relayed over the tannoy. Postings were coming through thick and fast, sadly we had to say our goodbyes to friends. I was lucky, my move being to Leconfield only a few miles away and in the same Group.

When peace was declared it was wonderful – dancing and singing, everyone in a joyful mood. Stand down was announced for all stations in the country and we were free for the next 24 hours.

After VJ Day things started to move slowly for release into civvy street.

It was a long time before release came through, some decided to sign on for 6 or 12 months more, but most of us wanted out and try for a job. We were drafted to a release centre for medicals etc, then "oh boy" release. Before travelling home I stayed with a friend in Birmingham, it was great.

Happy times are remembers, sad and bad fade gradually away, but I shall never forget the very hard winter when at Driffield, the runways were snowed and iced up, all had to clear the snow away and chip at the ice, it was cruel. Never liked snow and ice since.

The comradeship during the war years was unforgettable and discipline made us all better people.

Grace Bradley bn 19.4.1920