

From a Different Perspective

By Marian Polack #31029

When war was declared on September 3, 1939, I was a child of seven and living in a London suburb. The British Government decided to get all the children out of London because of the expected bombing.

Evacuation Day finally arrived. My sister, Jan, and I were put on a big red double-decker bus, with a label pinned to our coat with name and identity number and a pillowcase full of clothes.

Parents had no idea where their children would end up. Jan and I were picked out by Mr. and Mrs. Small, who lived in Six Bells, Abertillery, in Wales. Mr. Small worked in the local coal mine, and they had two children, three and four years old. A wonderful, loving family who took such good care of us.

In 1988 I managed to track down Mary, who was three years old when we moved in, and who had had to give up her bed (she still remembers that!).

After about one year, my young sister got terribly homesick, so it was thought best to bring us back home to London, and, in any case, bombing had been very light up to that point.

As soon as the war was declared, each family was issued an air raid shelter. Ours was an Anderson shelter eight feet by six feet.

Father dug a huge ditch at the bottom of the garden and then installed the heavy aluminium shelter, then covered it with earth to be totally camouflaged from above. He put a double mattress on the floor, and a bunk bed each side





for the two girls.

People who couldn't dig down the necessary six feet because of the water table were issued Morrison shelters—large iron tables that sat inside the home. My mother dreaded that thought: if the house fell on top, you would have to wait to be rescued, or be buried alive!

At first we would go to sleep in our beds until the siren went off, then Mother would wake us and walk us down in our sleep to the shelter.

Once bombing was almost nightly, we went straight to the shelter at bedtime. I remember it being very damp and spiders falling on my face!

Bombs would fall all around us. My best friend, Margaret, who was 10 years old and lived next door, was killed along with her mother.

One game that children would play during the bombing was to be able to boast about who had the biggest pile of shrapnel.

A piece of a shot-down German plane that landed in your garden was shown off with pride to other kids.

I remember we had no windows throughout the war—just a heavy material to keep out the rain and let in light. Ceilings came down with each blast, so we spent the war without any.

As the Germans only bombed us at night, we were able to go to school and our father to work. He was an iron worker and put iron plates over the hulls of ships that had been torpedoed.

I cannot imagine seeing my children go off in a bus at that age, having no idea where they were going or whom they would live with. Our mother must have suffered terribly. We have since learned that many evacuees were abused (Ben Wicks, *No Time To Wave Good-bye*).

My father was an air-raid warden. After the sirens went off at night, his job would be to walk up and down the street looking for the slightest ray of light coming from anyone's window.

Everything had to be totally blacked out—no street lights. Those of us who

had no shelter would go to a public shelter or sleep in the London Underground stations. The Battle of Britain in London was terrifying—fires were all around us.

I recall a wonderful camaraderie among the people.

Army convoys, both British and American, would drive down our road, and we cheered them as they passed the house, waving our Union Jacks.

Toward the end of the war, a German prisoner-of-war camp was set up across the street in a field. Mother told us that they were not bad people—that they were husbands, brothers, sons, the same as our men and didn't really want to kill us.

Children would poke cigarettes or candies through the chain-link fence and anything that we could scrounge, as we were heavily rationed.

Then came the V-1, known as the Doodle Bug—the pilotless plane carrying a bomb. We could hear the low-pitch hum long before it came toward us. Suddenly the noise stopped—the engine had cut out and it glided to the ground and exploded. Apparently the RAF let very few get through from France into England.

Then the Germans invented the V-2 rocket—no sirens for these—they were just shot from the French coast straight to London, day or night, with no warning.

The BBC was our lifeline. We got the news, our comedies, plays and the voice of our beloved prime minister, Winston Churchill, who instilled such a spirit in us all. We just knew we were going to get through it.

Recently I went to the war rooms in London where Churchill ran the war operation. I was given the usual tape recorder and earphones to explain the exhibits. As I turned mine on, I heard the sound of the siren! All these years later, my stomach churned and I threw off the earphones!

It was hard to believe when V-E Day came, as we celebrated in the streets, that we would never hear that sound again.

But there were some positive aspects for me. We had to grow our own vegetables in the garden, breed our own chickens and rabbits—all organic—walked everywhere as petrol was impossible to buy and heavily rationed. We had very little sugar for candy, two ounces a week per person. We were allowed one egg a week each, 1/4 pint of milk a day, four ounces of meat each week per person, so we saved that up and bought a one-pound roast of beef for Sunday dinner. With Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes and a fresh vegetable from the garden, it was the highlight of the week for us. But all that exercise and healthy food has served us well, and I now reap the benefit with good health.

When I first located my evacuee family, I was living in the Cayman Islands. On a visit to England, I drove to the village of Six Bells, located the Small

family and two years later I sent them airline tickets and gave them a two-week holiday in Cayman to say thanks and to let them know how much I appreciated their parents' love and caring in those wartime days. They still live to this day in that little coal-mining village in Wales.